Flinders University

Social Communication Planning: the Experiences of Autistic Young People Transitioning from School to Employment

By

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ABSTRACT

Transition planning is not robust enough to meet the social communication needs of autistic young people moving to adulthood. Schools and policy makers need to address the social communication gap to ensure inclusionary educational practices and prepare autistic young people with the life skills required to thrive in tertiary education, employment and community life.

The transition from primary to secondary school is understood by the community as a huge step for autistic young people, however, there appears to be less transition planning supports, moving from middle school to senior secondary school. Even less is known about how transition planning works in preparing autistic senior secondary students for tertiary education, employment and community life.

As autistic young people transition into senior secondary school, the social and communication expectations of their peers, their teachers and the wider community increases. For many autistic young people this creates further challenges, as they may struggle with making social communication connections in tertiary education settings and in the community which may lead to less employment opportunities.

My original contribution to autism research and inclusive education is to make heard the voices of autistic young people in relation to the social communication skills they want and recognise are critical to be an active part of society. Secondly, to convey to policy makers and schools that the key to inclusion and capacity building in schools relies on building teachers' knowledge and increasing policy makers' commitment and support of planning beyond school for autistic young people.

This research investigated the lived experiences of thirteen autistic senior secondary students and autistic young adults in relation to their social communication transition planning from school to work. In gathering an in-depth picture, twelve parents of autistic senior secondary students and autistic young adults and twenty-seven educators who taught autistic senior secondary students were interviewed as well, with the purpose of developing an understanding of how autistic young peoples, transition planning had prepared them for tertiary education, employment and community life.

Using an interpretive method to unpack the autistic voice, their parents' and educators' views, and applying a case-study design, each case was investigated separately, and similar findings were linked between the participants. In doing so, key indicators for investigating what successful transition planning looked like, focused on student-centred transition planning, self-determination, social communication core skills for work and supports available over a person's life span.

Reflections from the autistic senior secondary student and autistic young adults revealed that they all struggled at school, experienced limited peer and teacher connections at school, found difficulties in mainstream education due to social communication barriers, and were unsure about what conversations they had about their plans after school and what they did at school to help with transition to tertiary education or work. They recognised that social communication skills development occurred out of school through mentors and expressed their willingness to learn social communication skills.

Parents rely on external funding models to support transition and life skill development and want to see a shift in schools' support to a range of social communication life skills rather than just academic ones.

Educators suggested that more work is needed to meet the transition need of students and wanted to know how other schools are meeting this need. Educators indicated that the key to inclusion and capacity building in schools relies on building teachers' knowledge and increasing policy makers' commitment and support of planning beyond school for autistic young people.

Transition planning in schools is not meeting this need. As the social communication gap widens for autistic young people moving into adulthood, so does the gap in tertiary education engagement and success, employment and fulfilment in community life.

Key Words

Transition planning, inclusive education, autism, social communication, schools, tertiary education, employment

DECLARATION

I certify that this thesis:

1. does not incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any University

2. and the research within will not be submitted for any other future degree or diploma without the permission of Flinders University; and

3. to the best of my knowledge and belief, does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

4. has been completed without the use of generative artificial intelligence tools.

Signed *Leanne Gerekaroff.*

Date 17 September 2025

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ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

ABS – Australian Bureau of Statistics

ASD – Autism Spectrum Disorder

CICA - Career Industry Council of Australia

CSfW - Core Skills for Work

COAG - Council of Australian Governments

DEET - Department of Education and Training

ESO's - Education Support Officers

FLO - Flexible Learning Options

IEP - Individual Education Plan

ILP - Individual Learning Plan

ITP- Individual Transition Plan

MECCTYA – Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians

NCES - National Career Education Strategy

NDIS - National Disability Insurance Scheme

NLTS-2 - National Longitudinal Transition Study-2

PPC - Professional Practice Committee (Autism SA)

PPL – Personal Plan for Learning

REPIM - Reciprocal Effects Peer Interaction Model

SBREC - Social and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee (Flinders University)

SDCDM - Self-Determination Career Design Model

SDT - Self-determination Theory

SEN - Social Emotional Needs

SSO’s - Student Support Officers

TAFE SA – Technical and Further Education South Australia

VET – Vocational Education and Training

CHAPTER 1 – INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

Transition from school to adulthood continues to be difficult for many autistic young people and presents unique challenges for post-school employment (Wehman et al., 2014). Autistic people have lower rates of tertiary engagement, workforce participation and poorer employment outcomes which may be due in part to the social and communication difficulties inherent to autism (Pratt et al., 2017; Rosenthal et al., 2013). Post-school transition planning addressing the development of social and communication skills prior to leaving school is essential to improving outcomes in employment and tertiary education participation for autistic young people (Wehman et al., 2014). Autistic senior secondary students in mainstream education require greater participation in transition focused education programs to develop their social and communication skills in preparation for life beyond school (Newman et al., 2009). This thesis will focus on researching the perspectives of autistic young people, their parents and educators on current experiences of social communication transition planning and recommendations for future actions in this critical area.

1.2 Understanding Autism Characteristics: Difficulties with Social Communication

The medical model of disability depicts autism as a life-long neurodevelopmental condition which affects the brain's growth and development, (American Psychiatric Association, 2022a), however strengths-based approaches to autism focuses on positive attributes and strengths inherent to neurodiverse conditions (Fung & Doyle, 2021).

Typically appearing in early childhood, the main areas of difficulty are in social communication, social interactions and restricted or repetitive behaviours (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, 2018; Autism Spectrum Australia, 2025). According to the medical model of disability, the social communication difficulties include:

(a) the difficulty to interact in/with or respond to shared social communications.

(b) social pragmatic language difficulties.

(c) restricted or repetitive interests/activities and stereotypical patterns of behaviour that impact on social interaction with their peers.

(d) auditory and visual sensitivities.

(e) executive function impairments (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; Pratt et al., 2017).

Social, communication and learning difficulties have been identified as impacting on education and associated employment participation (Wehman et al., 2014). The most common difficulties reported to be experienced by 52-63% of autistic young people in schools include fitting in socially, learning difficulties and communication difficulties (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2016). In addition, almost 40% of autistic people require assistance with communication, approximately 50% require assistance with cognitive or emotional tasks (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2018) while 91% require some assistance with interactions, relationships and supervision in working life (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2016, 2017). This data indicates that to meet the needs of autistic young people, significant supports are required during the school years and potentially immediately beyond to achieve positive school and post-school outcomes.

The capacity to process information and behave accordingly, is a significant prerequisite to effectively functioning in social groups; it is essential for developing peer and school relationships, along with work and community participation (Martin, 2011; Pratt et al., 2017; Rosenthal et al., 2013) and impacts on an autistic young person's ability to prioritise, make decisions and participate in transition planning at school. Developing social and communication skills in autistic young people is an essential component of preparing for post-school employment and/or tertiary education (Kohler et al., 2016). The inherently social context of schooling provides an ideal environment to support the development of social communication skills, particularly with the availability of trained educators who may be able to teach these skills explicitly within a safe school environment (Saggers et al., 2015).

1.3 Social and Communication Skills required for Tertiary Education and Employment.

Research indicates that a greater number of autistic young adults remain unemployed or underemployed compared to their peers without disabilities and experience social communication difficulties in tertiary education, including struggling to interact with lecturers, peers and tertiary support services (Anderson & Butt, 2017; Blackorby & Wagner, 1996; Cai & Richdale, 2016; Landmark et al., 2010; National Organization on Disability, 2004; Wagner et al., 2005). Supporting the development of social participation and communication skills for work during the transition to adulthood is essential to enable autistic young people to engage in employment and tertiary education (Howlin et al., 2004; Kohler et al., 2016; Liptak et al., 2011; Shattuck et al., 2012).

Embedded in career/transition planning and critical for employment are the Core Skills for Work (CSfW), identified as: navigating the world of work, interacting with others, getting the work done and other influencing factors. The performance features of interacting with others are: communicating for work; connecting and working with others; recognising and utilising diverse perspectives, including building rapport, collaboration, listening skills, understanding and managing

conflict (Commonwealth of Australia, 2013). Key competencies for successful participation in work and tertiary education are (a) the capacity to effectively communicate ideas and information in a variety of verbal and non-verbal settings and (b) to interact effectively with others including understanding and responding appropriately both one-on-one and in groups (Commonwealth of Australia, 2002; Curtis & McKenzie, 2002). These skills are key personal attributes employers require and are common to all facets of community and work life (Overtoom, 2000; Rosenberg et al., 2012; Tertiary Education Commission, 2024; The University of Sydney, 2018). Employment research indicates that the most important skill required for work, and the most deficient, is communication (Curtis & McKenzie, 2002; Overtoom, 2000) and this skill is a particular challenge to autistic people (Pratt et al., 2017; Rosenthal et al., 2013). As autistic young people transition into adulthood, social demands become greater (Autism Awareness Australia, 2019; Hendricks & Wehman, 2009; Wehman et al., 2014). Schools are considered ideal contexts for developing the social communication skills of young people (Hart et al., 2010; Roberts, 2010; Wehman et al., 2014).

Schools could be the primary drivers of integrated social skills programmes, leading to the improvement of communication and other core skills required for work for all student and especially autistic students. Starting in middle school and required as part of curriculum development in senior secondary school, career and transition planning is a process that should prepare young people with the skills and attributes required to be an integral part of the emerging workforce (Chiang et al., 2017; Masters, 2016; Wehman et al., 2014; White et al., 2017).

The problem and the unknown lie in the extent to which these critical post-school skills are being addressed in transition planning and taught in schools. There is evidence that autistic students are not getting access to transition planning or are not involved in their own transition planning (Blackorby & Wagner, 1996; National Organization on Disability, 2004; Wagner et al., 2005). Further examination of transition programs in senior secondary schooling is necessary, particularly from the perspective of the autistic young person.

1.4 Transition Programming in Schools

Transition planning, participation and identifying transition goals while in high school is associated with an increase in opportunities for engagement in tertiary education and/or employment post-school, especially for autistic young people (Wehman et al., 2014; White et al., 2017). Transition focused education provides a vehicle for developing essential work skills and is the fundamental basis for student-centred planning (Kohler et al., 2016; Mazzotti et al., 2014; Test et al., 2009). The taxonomy for transition programming provides the foundation for effective transition through student focused planning involving (a) student development, (b) families, (c) program structure and (d) interagency services (Kohler, 1996; Kohler et al., 2016). The Taxonomy for Transition Programming model includes a collaborative approach in working with (a) families, focusing on empowering and developing self-determination in autistic young people, (b) program structure, addressing the school environment, policies and resources that impact on transition planning and (c) interagency services within schools, post-school and community services which support the development of autistic young people across their life span (Kohler, 1996; Kohler et al., 2016; Mazzotti et al., 2014; National Secondary Transition Technical Assistance Center, 2010; Test et al., 2009).

Kohler's approach to student-centred planning, focuses on student participation, self-determination and development of the Individualised Education Plan (IEP) and links student development, specifically social communication and employment skills (Kohler et al., 2016) as critical components for positive, ongoing success beyond school (Cummings et al., 2000; Hendricks & Wehman, 2009; Wehman et al., 2014). Developing autistic students' life, social, emotional and occupational skills are critical components of Kohler's Taxonomy for Transition Programming and are determining factors in the successful engagement in post-school employment (Kohler et al., 2016; Rowe et al., 2014; Trainor et al., 2019; Wehman et al., 2014; White et al., 2017). The career development literature also emphasises the importance of social communication skills preparation, discussed in career development literature, as the basis for success in employment (Curtis & McKenzie, 2002; Masters, 2016; Overtoom, 2000). There is significant evidence of the necessity to teach these skills in transition preparation for autistic young people (Kohler, 1996; Kohler et al., 2016; Mazzotti et al., 2014; National Secondary Transition Technical Assistance Center, 2010; Test et al., 2009).

The IEP provides an effective mechanism to program for transition skills teaching (Grigal et al., 1997; Zhang & Stecker, 2001) promoting 'best practice', shared responsibility and self-determination as vehicles for post-school education or employment success. School-based intervention strategies promoting a self-directed IEP, assists autistic young people to actively participate in their career planning and develop self-determination (Kelly, 2006; Martin, Van Dycke, Christensen, et al., 2006; Seong et al., 2015; Test et al., 2009). Autistic young people who have higher levels of self-determination are more likely to participate in goal setting, problem-solving and

decision-making at school and express their transition interests and employment goals (Seong et al., 2015; White et al., 2017).

Generally, autistic individuals have not experienced independence and autonomy expected of youth their same age. Statistics from the United States of America indicate, 67.3% of autistic youth reported little or no participation in their transition planning and 29.4% of autistic individuals did not receive instruction on transition planning or have an Individual Transition Plan (ITP) (Cameto et al., 2004; Shogren & Plotner, 2012; Wehman et al., 2014). The National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS-2) report indicated that autistic young people participate in their transition planning at a lower rate than any other cohort (Cameto et al., 2004; Shogren & Plotner, 2012). As many schools struggle to meet the needs of autistic students, one of the biggest challenges for educators is addressing transition needs (Autism CRC, 2017; Humphrey & Lewis, 2008; Symes & Humphrey, 2010). This indicates that there is inconsistency in guidelines and policies for schools to follow.

1.5 Current Policies and Practices

In response to poor post-school outcomes for autistic young people, transition related practices, incorporating the IEP and ITP have been shown to improve post-school lives and opportunities to participate in employment (Mazzotti et al., 2014; National Secondary Transition Technical Assistance Center, 2010; O'Neill et al., 2016; Test et al., 2009). Despite significant transition-related research and international agreements such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 2006) and statements in national policies such as the National Partnership Agreement on Youth Attainment and Transitions (Council of Australian Governments (COAG), 2011a) there is no Australian legislation that explicitly mandates IEPs or ITPs as a requirement in transition planning for post-school success (Cumming et al., 2014; O'Neill et al., 2016). Although Australia is a signatory to international conventions and has compliance obligations to young people with disabilities under the Disability Standards for Education 2005, transition planning varies (O'Neill et al., 2016). Research conducted by Little (2020), indicates that Australia is a signatory to international treaties pertaining to obligations in providing effective transition support, identifying critical features of transition planning and recommended a central policy and approach for schools (Cobb & Alwell, 2009; Little, 2020; O'Neill et al., 2016; Riches, 1996). Therefore, there is a need to understand the local experiences of autistic young people, their parents, and teachers, in the planning of social communication skill development, which includes self-determination and skills for employment. Currently, these experiences remain unknown.

1.6 Purpose and Significance of the Research

Key messages from the literature reveals gaps in social communication transition planning for autistic young people. The problem and unknown are: (1) inconsistency in transition planning practices for autistic young people, (2) the extent to which critical post-school skills are being addressed in transition planning and taught in schools, (3) the extent to which transition programming is implemented in senior secondary schools in South Australia, (4) inconsistency in guidelines and policies for schools to follow and (5) limited data on student participation in transition planning in Australia. Investigating the lived experiences of autistic young people will enable others, such as parents, educators and other services to understand their experiences in the context of transition. Critically, what remains unknown, is how autistic young people experience social communication skills within transition planning and the extent to which transition planning is implemented in South Australian senior secondary schools.

Underpinned by a qualitative approach, this investigative research sought to understand autistic senior secondary students' and autistic young adults' engagement in, and experiences of, transition to employment programs, and how the development of social communication skills may facilitate preparing for transitions to employment and/or further education.

1.6.1 Preparation Beyond School

The National Longitudinal Transition Research-2 (2010) (NLTS-2) measured practices in transition planning for youth with disabilities, including those who are autistic. The findings indicated that many autistic students, once leaving senior secondary school, were ill-prepared for tertiary education, employment and community life and experienced poorer employment outcomes compared to the general population (Blackorby & Wagner, 1996).

Transition programming in the secondary schooling years is recognised as good practice in preparing students with disabilities for post-school life, and improving their employment outcomes (Wei et al., 2016) and is an ideal mechanism to promote students' social communication skills required for work and further research. Best practice in transition planning emphasises student and family involvement, and the development of Individual Transition Plans (ITP's) focusing on post-school outcomes (Cooney, 2002; National Secondary Transition Technical Assistance Center, 2010; Test et al., 2009). The extent to which transition planning is implemented in senior secondary schools in South Australia is unknown, and there are inconsistent school transition practices (Shogren & Plotner, 2012) despite its potential to improve life outcomes for autistic young people. Limited research has been conducted to how autistic senior secondary students experience transition programming, and develop social and communication skills in preparation for employment and/or tertiary education (Hart et al., 2010; Kohler et al., 2016; Mazzotti et al., 2014; National Secondary Transition Technical Assistance Center, 2010; Roberts, 2010; Test et al.,

2009; Wehman et al., 2014). Understanding this phenomenon provides an insight into how these essential skills for work are developed for pre-employment and/or engagement in tertiary education.

1.6.2 Exploring Social Communication Transition Planning.

While transition programming includes multiple elements related to preparation for post-school life, the focus of this research is on the transition planning for social communication skills developed during senior secondary schooling relating to school supports and specifically to ITP and IEP.

The focus of this research was at four levels:

1) at the classroom level, exploring how teachers plan for and teach communication and social skills in an integrated way.
2) at the broader school level, where autistic students were supported by special education teachers or targeted programs and experiences to develop their social and communication skills.
3) at the individual level, specifically the IEP and ITP, where communication and social goals were identified by the teacher, the families, or the student and
4) autistic young adults who have left senior secondary school and were between ages of 18 – 24. They were either employed, unemployed or enrolled in tertiary education in South Australia or a combination of the three.

Clear aims were established to support this research. Firstly, to examine how the development of social communication skills in transition planning, prepared autistic senior secondary students and autistic young adults for tertiary education and/or employment. Secondly, to gain insight into how educators in mainstream senior secondary schools, plan for and facilitate transition planning support. Investigating this phenomenon from multiple perspectives enabled an in-depth understanding of the issues raised pertaining to the development of social and communications skills during transition planning. In this context parents of autistic young people and educators were included.

1.7 Research Question

How are autistic students supported to develop social and communication skills in their senior secondary years, to prepare them for transition to tertiary education and/or employment settings?

1.7.1 Sub Questions

How do autistic senior secondary students and autistic young adults experience and develop social communication skills in readiness for transition to post-school settings?

How do parents of autistic senior secondary students and autistic young adults see school systems or other supports assisting their child to develop social communication skills, and self-determination and participate in their employment and/or tertiary education goals?

How do educators in mainstream senior secondary schools identify and facilitate the development of social and communication skills in transition programs for autistic senior secondary students?

1.8 Language use in the Thesis

The use of language discussed in autism research can create or be reflective of beliefs and practices that may directly or indirectly discriminate against individuals (Bottema-Beutel et al., 2021). “Language is a powerful means for shaping how people view autism. If researchers take steps to avoid ableist language … society at large may become more accepting and accommodating of autistic people” (Bottema-Beutel et al., 2021, p. 19). Language shapes ideologies and is used as a construct of social life, creating power imbalances, attitudes and perceptions of social groups. Ableist language used to describe autism is bound in the medical model of deficit, thus creating a divide between autistic and non-autistic individuals within society (Bottema-Beutel et al., 2021; Kapp, 2019). How language is used shapes the outcomes for autistic people and creates barriers to engagement in employment, and community life.

There has been a significant shift in autism language (Botha et al., 2023; Coghill & Coghill, 2020; Monk et al., 2022; Shakes & Cashin, 2019) influencing autistic people, autism communities’ and non-autistic communities’ perceptions and acceptance of language. The determining factors and choice of language in this research is reflective of most participants responses to identify-first and person-first references during the interviews. As noted in the finding’s chapters, the senior secondary students referred to autism in the person-first, however most of the autistic young adults, parents and educators referred to identity-first, hence the use of identity-first language throughout this research: autistic senior secondary students, autistic young adults, parents/caregivers of autistic senior secondary students and autistic young adults and educators of autistic senior secondary students. This choice is consistent with the use of language and current policy directions of the South Australian Government’s Draft State Autism Strategy 2024 – 2029

(South Australian Government, 2024) and supported by the Autism Co-operative Research Centre (Autism CRC, 2024).

1.9 Theoretical Framework: An Overview

Improving secondary and post-school outcomes for autistic individuals can be complex and challenging (Humphrey & Lewis, 2008; Symes & Humphrey, 2010). Transition literature highlights various factors associated with increasing post-school outcomes for young people living with disabilities, in the areas of tertiary education, employment and community engagement (Kohler, 1996; Kohler et al., 2017; Kohler et al., 2016). This research focuses on four main theoretical streams, (1) Kohler (2016) Taxonomy for Transition Programming (2.0), (2) Wehmeyer et al (2003) Self-Determination Theory, (3) Trainor et al (2019) A Framework for Research in Transition: Identifying Important Areas and Intersections for Future Study and (4) The Commonwealth of Australia (2013) Core Skills for Work Developmental Framework.

Kohler ‘s (2016), Taxonomy for Transition Programming 2.0 focuses on successful transition of youth living with disabilities within five practice areas; (1) student-focused planning, (2) student development, (3) interagency collaboration, (4) family engagement and (5) program structure. The Taxonomy for Transition Programming 2.0 model highlights critical elements for student-centred transition planning, specifically self-determination, social communication skill development and skills for employment and presents other domains which support transition planning such as family and interagency engagement and program structure. The taxonomy brings together a comprehensive framework that is situational (Kohler et al., 2016). For example, schools can use components to improved processes for transition for autistic students, through community and family interventions, individualised student development, school policies and practice (Kohler et al., 2017).

The theoretical frameworks underpinning self-development (Kohler et al., 2016) and self-determination (Wehmeyer, 2003) is most relevant to this project. Self-Determination Theory (SDT) is characterised by an individual’s capacity to be an agent in one’s life and improve one’s quality of life. Self-determination is a means to empowerment, including right to independence and self – governance within a developmental context and is a critical milestone during adolescence (Wehmeyer et al., 2011). SDT specifically strengthens the self-development component of the taxonomy addressing: (1) self-determination, incorporating self-advocacy, developing sense of self, autonomy, participation in decision making, engagement in transition planning, setting goals and developing problem solving skills required for successful employment and incorporates (2) interpersonal skill development, specifically social communication skills for successful participation in life, employment and community: and (3) occupational employment skills, including career planning, occupation-specific skill development, soft skills development and developing the core skills for work.

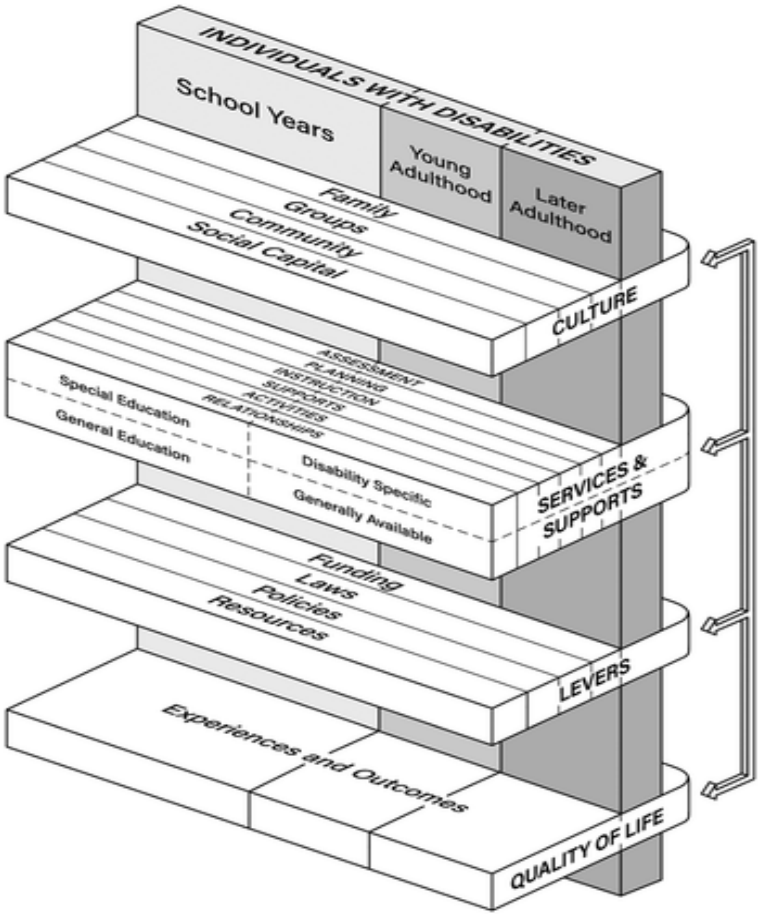
Trainor et al s' (2019) multi-layered transition framework extends the work of Kohler (2016) beyond school planning and presents transition planning over an individual's life span. This framework identifies elements that shape experiences and outcomes for an individual with a disability (see Figure 1) and is of interest to the researcher who is examining how autistic young people develop social communication skills in preparation for employment and/or tertiary education. The framework presents a multi-layered approach with integrated elements and is represented by four layers: (1) culture, (2) services and supports, (3) levers and (4) quality of life. The second and fourth layers, services and supports and quality of life set the theoretical framework of this research. Central to the framework is an individual's quality of life (the fourth layer), including experiences and outcomes that emerge for transition planning, specifically relating to employment, self-determination and social communication development (Trainor et al., 2019).

Elements of the second layer represent the substance of transition planning, including activities that support teaching and relationships. These elements represent the formal and informal experiences associated with learning how to meet the demands of adulthood. The fourth layer - 'quality of life'- represents the key transition indicators for success, more specifically employment opportunities, access to tertiary education, the degree of inclusivity, self-determination, friendships, community engagement and belonging. The first and third layers – 'culture and levers' - are instrumental in shaping transition services and provide the basis for further exploration into legislation specific to transition practices in Australia.

This research focused on services and supports for autistic senior secondary students at school that were relevant to preparation for post-school transition into education and/or employment. This included formal and informal experiences designed to assist autistic senior secondary students develop key competencies in social communication and other relevant areas. While services and supports and quality of life, depicted by Trainor's theoretical framework as the second and fourth layers, are most relevant to the research questions, other elements of the model relevant to transition planning, such as culture (first layer) specifically family and community and levers (third layer), including funding, laws, policies and resources, were drawn upon.

Figure 1

Framework depicting aspects of transition warranting additional research attention



(Trainor et al., 2019)

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The fourth framework elates to work ready skills necessary for success in employment. The Core Skills for Work Developmental Framework (CSfW), discusses ten skills area, grouped under navigating the world of work, interacting with others, and getting the work done (Commonwealth of Australia, 2013). The components relating to interacting with others is central to the difficulties autistic young people experience with connecting with others, communication and understanding diverse perspectives. Other factors which impact on the capacity of individuals to successfully participate in employment opportunities are (1) existing skills and knowledge, (2) understanding of the context and task, (3) supports, (4) level of autonomy and motivation, (5) self-belief and self-determination and (6) values and the environment (Commonwealth of Australia, 2013, p. 3). Many of the elements are also depicted within the theories of Kohler (1996, 2016), Wehmeyer et al (2003) and Trainor et al (2019).

1.10 Meet the Participants

1.10.1 Autistic Senior Secondary Students

Seven autistic senior secondary students from years ten to thirteen, between the ages of fifteen and eighteen, volunteered to participate in the research. The criteria for participation, excluded autistic senior secondary students with additional intellectual, hearing, visual or physical needs. All participants attended mainstream schools and engaged in mainstream schooling, combined with one or more of the following: special education support, in-class support, learning centre support, or attended support classes as alternatives to some of the mainstream classes.

1.10.2 Parents/carers of Autistic Senior Secondary Students and Autistic Young Adults

Ten parents of autistic senior secondary students and autistic young adults volunteered to participate in the research. Five parents spoke about their autistic senior secondary child, ranging from year ten to year twelve and five spoke retrospectively about their autistic young adult's past school social communication transition experiences. Parent background information was not disclosed or relevant for this research.

1.10.3 Autistic Young Adults

Six autistic young adults between the ages of eighteen and twenty-four volunteered to participate in the research. The criteria for participation, included autistic young adults who were either employed (part-time or full-time), not employed, in part or full-time tertiary education or a combination of tertiary education or work, and, excluded autistic adults with additional intellectual, hearing, visual or physical needs.

1.10.4 Senior Secondary School Educators

Twenty-seven senior secondary school educators volunteered to participate in the research, across the three schooling sectors: Government, Catholic Education and Independent. The educators were a combination of mainstream teachers, special education teachers, student services officers or educators and career coordinators who engage with autistic senior secondary students.

1.11 Personal Position

As an educational counsellor, my connectedness to individual stories reflects a strength-based practice when listening, engaging and understanding personal positions and working collaboratively with clients who seek support. In unpacking their stories, clients can develop an understanding of themselves, how they feel others view them, how they view the world and the role they play in managing their own world. Individuals may experience a feeling of control, belonging, increased confidence and a sense of independence, and improved relationships and connections to family and community (Caiels et al., 2023; Stevens et al., 2024). Using this approach has positive outcomes for individuals, their families and for their engagement in community life.

Aligned with my social constructivist view (Adams, 2006), appreciative inquiry supports the use of this positive approach to problem-solving (Hung et al., 2018). In a shared reflective process, I assist the client to explore their ways of thinking to assist in the interpretation of issues or events that are impacting on them. My person-centred approach focuses on understanding the capacity and opportunities an individual has to navigate their social communication needs in an educational setting, through self-determination, providing social communication tools and empowerment (Pulla et al., 2012).

Strength-based approach in Autism research is a newly adopted approach, focusing on strength-based language, including language that describes communication as difference not deficits (Urbanowicz et al., 2019), focusing on the recognition of strengths, skills and interests of autistic individuals as an approach to self-determination. This approach, although developing in research, has supported my ethical stance as a counsellor and flows throughout my practice, challenging the constraints of the traditional deficit models relating to working with autistic people (Urbanowicz et al., 2019; Wehmeyer et al., 2010).

In working with autistic people within a tertiary education setting, as an outsider (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009) to their lived experiences, I started to develop an understanding of the challenges faced and wanted to know more about their experiences as they embarked on further education. According to my observations, autistic people engaged in the tertiary education setting as, (1) school-leavers, and (2) young adults who have experienced short/long term underemployment/unemployment.

In working with many autistic young people with complex needs, one area that kept challenging the autistic young people and myself as the support person who negotiated on behalf of many students, was communication and social interaction. Hence, my interest in the social communication skills development of autistic young people. Tension sits within traditional models of education and inclusive education within mainstream settings (Carrington et al., 2024), not only within schools but also evident within tertiary education, where students with complex needs are often provided with adjustments, however mainstream educators struggle with the application of

the adjustments and often autistic students are still expected to ‘fit’ into the teaching styles or feel they need to adjust their behaviours and learning styles to meet the environmental expectations (Hillier et al., 2019) . The narrative needs change (Bruck et al., 2021; Urbanowicz et al., 2019).

One of the largest barriers to success in tertiary education is the capacity for autistic young people to communicate with their peers (White et al., 2019) and teachers (Esqueda Villegas et al., 2024; Hillier et al., 2019). The double empathy problem described by Milton (2012, 2020), refers to the disconnect between autistic or neurodiverse and non-autistic or neurotypical people when engaging in common experiences, labelling what is considered a breakdown in interaction and communication.

I have had many conversations with autistic young people in relation to communication support strategies and how students who find this difficult can develop confidence, independence and self-determination to communicate their educational needs and further their employment prospects. These experiences in the tertiary sector, prompted me to seek further understanding about what supports they received in their senior secondary school years and were the driver to know more, with the aim of hopefully contributing to better outcomes for autistic young people.

1.12 Thesis Structure and Chapter Overview

This thesis consists of seven chapters including the introductory chapter which introduces the significance of the research, the thesis aims, the research questions and highlights key messages from the literature revealing gaps in social communication transition planning research and provides an overview of theories underpinning this research.

Chapter 2 explores four major literature streams of relevance to the research aims: autism: difficulties with social communication; tertiary education and employment: essential social communication skills; Transition planning and participation in schools and current policies and practices, including but not limited to discussions on self-determination, self-advocacy, career and transition planning, core skills for work, schools as communication dense environments, student-centred planning around IEPs and ITPs and student participation in transition.

Chapter 3 explains the methodology and methods which shaped the research, the multi-case research design and cross-case analyses (Stake, 2006; Yin, 2014) . Drawing on constructivism, the naturalistic approach and in-depth interviews enabled an intensive exploration of personal perspectives, and an understanding of individual social communication transition experiences (Stake, 1995; Stake, 2006). This chapter also reports on key recruitment strategies, ethical considerations, data analyses based on deductive and inductive frameworks and establishing trustworthiness.

Chapters 4, 5 and 6 report key findings from the semi-structured interviews undertaken by the participants. Findings are reported under three main chapters: Chapter 4 reports on the voices of the autistic senior secondary students and autistic young adults; Chapter 5 describes the parent understanding of their child's lived experiences of social communication transition and Chapter 6 explores educators' understanding of social communication transition in schools. The findings are presented thematically and include unique perspectives on transition planning, preparation for social communication interactions, the school environment, school supports, and post-school supports.

Chapter 7 provides an in-depth discussion of the key findings of the research in relation to the literature pertaining to the four theoretical frameworks. Reflecting on the lived experiences as reported by the participants, the development of new knowledge pertaining to social communication transition experiences of the participants supported the development of the social communication transition journey: from school to tertiary education and employment model.

Chapter 8 concludes the thesis and synthesises the key findings of the research in relation to the research questions. The chapter also discusses the potential implications for policies and practice, the contribution to scholarly literature, the implications for further research and provides final reflections on the research.

CHAPTER 2 - LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

A review of the literature indicates that transition to adulthood and employment presents unique challenges for many autistic senior secondary students (Wehman et al., 2014). People with disabilities, specifically those who are autistic, experience lower rates of engagement in tertiary education and participation in the workforce, resulting in poorer employment outcomes (Pratt et al., 2017; Rosenthal et al., 2013). According to ABS data, 38% of autistic people participate in the workforce compared to 84.1% participation of non-autistic people. Autistic adults experience higher rates of unemployment (43.1%) compared to 4.6% who are non-autistic (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2018). Critical skills defined in career development literature provide a framework for understanding workforce participation. Key attributes of this framework, include performance criteria directly related to social communication skills at work (Commonwealth of Australia, 2013). Social communication difficulties experienced by autistic people, (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, 2018) impact on education and associated employment participation (Wehman et al., 2014), therefore developing social communication skills at school is essential for improving employment outcomes (Wehman et al., 2014).

The method used for reviewing the literature was narrative in nature, and supported the qualitative interpretative approach of this research (Ferrari, 2015; Paré & Kitsiou, 2017). The primary research question was divided into three sub-questions forming four major categories: (1) autism, (2) social communication, (3) transition programming/planning, and (4) inclusive education. These categories were also linked to four theoretical frameworks relating to Transition Planning, Self-Determination, and the Core Skills for Work.

Relevant databases, such as PubMed, ProQuest, ERIC and Google Scholar, were accessed via the Flinders University library website and the external database, Scopus. Grey literature was accessed through a general internet search via Google. The main sources of information were evidence-based peer-reviewed publications, however, grey literature such as government reports, working papers and policy literature were also accessed (Welch Medical Library, 2024).

Snowballing and citation chaining were the method used to increase the volume of literature, and were a vehicle for identifying other relevant materials (Wohlin, 2014). Overall, four theoretical frameworks, scholarly papers from peer-reviewed journals, books, systematic reviews and grey literature have contributed to this research.

This chapter reviews research literature investigating key learnings based on transition and self-determination; social communication challenges autistic senior secondary students and autistic young adults experience, school-to-work transition planning, critical skills required for workforce participation, policies and practices that shape the transition experience.

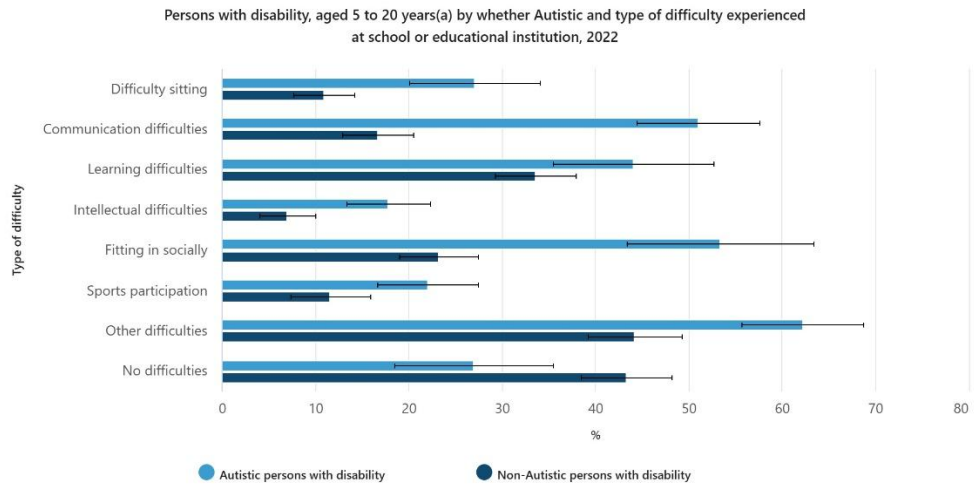
2.2 Social Communication Challenges: Medical Model of Autism

Autism can be described as neurological differences, that affects how a person thinks, feels, communicates, and interacts with others and the world around them (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, 2018; Autism Spectrum Australia, 2025). According to the American Psychiatric Association, autism is a group of complex neurodevelopmental conditions that are typically manifested in difficulties in social communication, social interactions and challenging behaviours (American Psychiatric Association, 2018). Social communication challenges include: (a) the capacity to interact and respond to social communication situations, (b) the use of verbal and nonverbal language, (c) limited or repetitive interests and activities impacting on social interactions with peers, (d) environmental sensitives and (e) executive function (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; Pratt et al., 2017).

The data set in Figure 2.1 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2022a) shows the percentage of autistic young people between 5 to 20 years of age, who are challenged by social communication at school and in tertiary education. As noted in Figure 2.1, over 50% of this cohort have difficulties with communication and nearly 60% have difficulties fitting in socially.

Figure 2.1

Persons aged 5 to 20 years with autism who are attending school or educational institution, by type of difficulty (a), 2022.



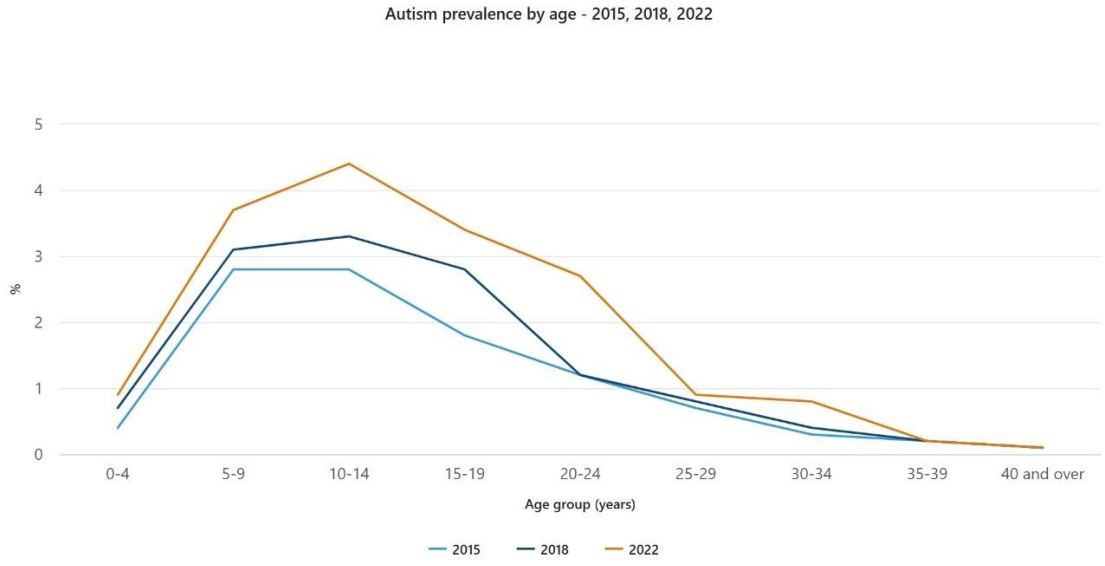
a. Living in households and who are currently attending school or educational institution.

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, Autism in Australia, 2022 11/10/2024

Furthermore, key statistics from finding in 2022 by the Australian Bureau of Statistics indicate an increase in the number of Autistic Australians, a 41.8% increase from 2018, 0.9% higher for males than females, with three-quarters or 73.0% of Autistic Australians with profound or severe disability. The significant increases may be due to a growing awareness of autism and changes to diagnostic criteria (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2022a). The graph (Figure 2.2) below demonstrates the increase in prevalence by age over the past eight years with significant increase in age from 5- 40 years of age.

Figure 2.2

Autism prevalence by age – 2015, 2018, 2022

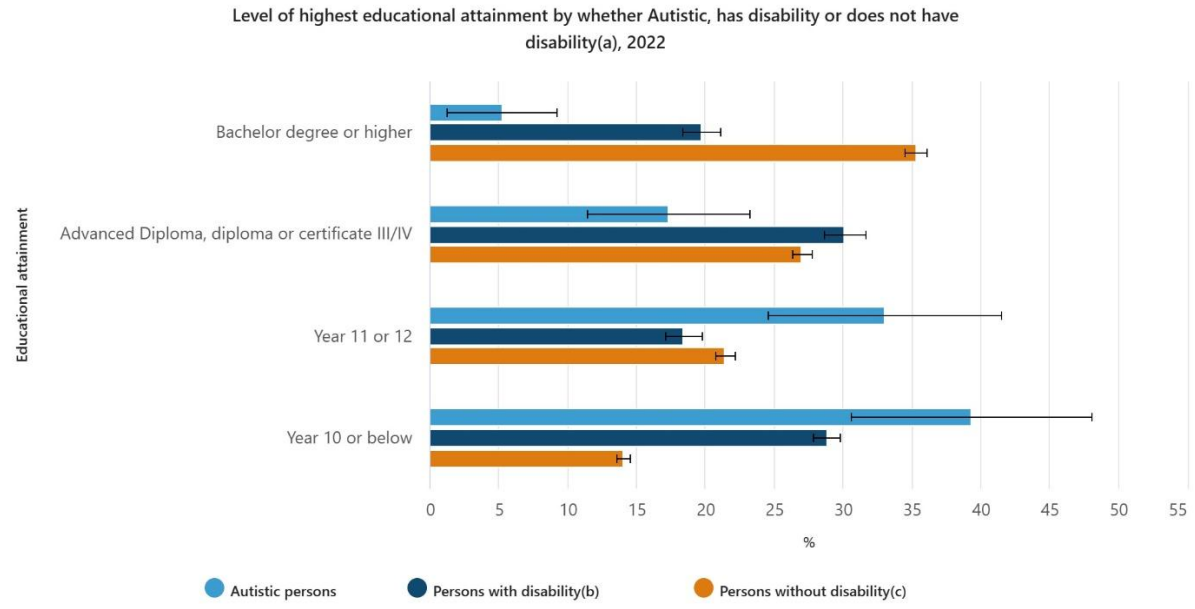


Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, Autism in Australia, 2022 11/10/2024

This increase has implications for education, schools and transition planning. Autistic people are less likely to engage in further study beyond school, with poorer educational outcomes, having significant implications for employment and fulfilment in community life (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2018, 2022a). Educational attainment decreases as Autistic young people transition from school to tertiary institutions compared to peers identified without disability or persons with disability, with significant comparisons that are reflective of reduced employment outcomes and possible quality of life. There is a significant difference in post-school attainment, noting approximately a 30% attainment difference for autistic young people compared to non-autistic young people for Bachelor degrees and above and approximately a 10% difference in qualifications within the vocational education and training sector (Certificate 3, 4, Diploma and Advanced Diploma) (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2022a) Figure 2.3 demonstrates the level of highest educational attainment.

Figure 2.3

Level of highest educational attainment by whether Autistic, has disability or does not have disability (a), 2022.



a. Aged 15 years and over living in households.
b. Persons with disability includes Autistic persons with disability and non-Autistic persons with disability.
c. Persons without disability includes Autistic persons without disability and non-Autistic persons without disability.

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, Autism in Australia, 2022 11/10/2024

Based on prevalence studies conducted from 2019- 2024, Aspect (2025, cited 30/3/2025), estimates that 1 in 40 people are Autistic. In these facts sheets, Aspect presents an understanding of autism, indicating that autism impacts on individual's brain development and function in relation to sensory awareness, communication preferences, and strengths and interests (Autism Spectrum Australia, 2025). Largely autistic is defined by social communication and interaction challenges, that for some autistic young people manifest in fundamental difficulties, including responding to others, interpreting body language and basic communication needs, and making appropriate social decisions within changing environments (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; Wynn et al., 2025).

2.3 Social Communication Challenges: Social Model of Autism

Although the medical model of disability, including autistic individuals, refers to a deficit-based discourse, there has been a shift in literature towards a strengths-based approach to a social model of inclusion.

Haegele and Hodge (2016), present a comparative description of the medical and social models of disability discourse, showing the differences between the two schools of thought. The medical model presents disability as individual impairment that should fit into society, in comparison to the social model of disability which promotes difference, uniqueness, social change, and inclusion (p.194).

In constructing a social model of disability, Milton (2015) argues that impairment is constructed through normative categories embodied within cultural experience. Therefore the presentation of autism may be seen as a set of behavioural and cognitive deficits within a given context (Milton, 2019).

Dwyer et al (2024) present the challenges of community views in reference to neurodiverse models of disability and autism intervention. Contrasting and comparable results indicated a diverse range of ideas that moved from the medical model of disability to the social model and 'strong' social model- aligned to the Neurodiversity Movement. The study found that in supporting social models of inclusion, reforms could include individual-focused interventions, teaching adaptive skills due to difficulties with reforming society and advocating for societal reforms that encourage difference and diversity (Dwyer et al., 2024).

What appears paramount in the social model of disability research are the ideas of reducing barriers, customised supports based on need, intervention tools are developed with autistic individuals and with support from family and mentors, supports are meaningful for autistic young people, and individual goals are met through practice in specific environments. Teaching employability skills such as social communication may be acceptable for autistic young people when accomplished with autistic partners, who have the professional knowledge and skills in supporting autistic young people (Dwyer et al., 2024; Milton, 2012; Milton, 2019).

Based on the ideas of Oliver (1996) the social model (1) focuses on the disabling nature of environment, barriers and cultures, (2) sees specific environmental engagement challenges as the problem, for example, autistic young people experience higher levels of unemployment than their peers, this may be due to the social organisation of work, including but not exclusively of the labour market, transport, education and culture and (3) individually based interventions may or may not be productive (Oliver, 2004).

“Shifting autism research away from causes and biological effect onto services and social issues will also assist autistic individuals by exploring the impact of living in Predominant Neurotype society” (Woods, 2017, p. 1091). Levitt (2017) argues for ways to reframe the social model of disability to meet the needs of autistic young people. (1) Autism labelling or the negative language discourse requires change to decrease social barriers, (2) reducing income discrimination, (3) enabling autistic self-advocacy and self-regulation, (4) a cultural and societal change to the view of neurodivergence as complementary to other theoretical models and (5) refocussing on societal change and acceptance of difference (Woods, 2017). Embedding a social model is a powerful tool to create a positive societal attitude towards autism and shift the imbalance of responsibility to change from the Autistic community to society.

2.4 Developing Self-Determination

Self–Determination Theory (SDT) originates within concepts of human motivation, human agency, foundations of rewards and the capacity to integrate knowledge into physical and social environments (Deci & Ryan, 2012; Ryan & Deci, 2000). SDT is viewed by Deci and Ryan 2012, as growth-oriented and proactive, aimed at determining actions that would lead to the achievement of goals and desired outcomes through the discovery of an individual’s strengths and weaknesses. The origins measure internal goal setting, motivation, reality perceptions, self-confidence and internal regulation (Adams et al., 2017).

According to SDT, there are three fundamental concepts intrinsic to growth and development in social environments, (1) competence: the need for competence reflects the effective mastery of the social environment, (2) autonomy: the need for autonomy where an individual experiences choice in their daily lives and (3) relatedness: which is associated with social belonging (Adams et al., 2017; Deci & Ryan, 2012; Ng, 2023; Ryan, 2023; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Self-Determination Theory constructs rely on the capacity of an individual to autonomously regulate and determine their goals and life while interacting with the world around them (Wehmeyer et al., 2012). It is the progression from care, guidance and dependence to self-care, self-direction and independent living and functioning in society, (Shogren et al., 2006; Sigafoos et al., 1988) and is a crucial component of individual development (Damon, 1983) which subsequently, influences individual capacity (Ryan & Deci, 2002). Self–Determination Theory (Kohler et al., 2016) incorporates the notion of self-advocacy, participation in decision-making processes, engaging in transition planning at school, setting personal and career goals and learning to problem-solve. It is an enabler for financial independence, independent living, and life satisfaction outcomes (Trainor et al., 2019).

Teachers can create an autonomous supportive environment that fosters self-determination development for autistic young people within a safe school setting that may assist in nurturing functionality and wellbeing. Possible implications for fostering student autonomy, competence and relatedness to their peers and surroundings, encouraging self-regulated learning, fostering student motivation and interest and promoting important social-emotional skills (Ng, 2023).

SDT as a macro-theory aims to foster social emotional learning (SEL) (Kurdi et al., 2021), recognising the alignment between SDT and SEL in the development of autistic young people early, may foster the development of critical life skills, such as managing emotions, problems solving, social communication skills, making decisions building positive relationships (Ng et al., 2015; Ng, 2023; Ragozzino et al., 2003).

Wehmeyer et al (2011) and Walker et al (2011) present a social-ecological approach to promoting self-determination within the field of developmental disability, with the aim of improving the quality of life across an individual's lifespan. The approach draws on literature from Wehmeyer, Abery, Mithaug, & Stancliffe (2023) proposing a model of intervention that promotes self-determination. Drawing on the philosophy of determinism, free will and agency (Bandura, 2001; Walker et al., 2011) the social-ecological model for promoting self-determination emphasises on the complex interactions between an individual and their environment with a focus on capacity and opportunities to communicate, make choices, self-advocate and participate in their community.

Critical aspects of the models reference a strength-based person-centred approach to the interventions applied to individual needs within given environments, with a reliance on individualised supports that increase an autistic person's capacity, this includes, mentors, parent involvement in education and targeted curriculum (Walker et al., 2011). Variables discussed in the model indicate the variances in person-specific interventions and ecological-specific interventions that support the development of self-determination in autistic young people. These variables are depicted in Table 2.1 and adapted from the Social-ecological approach to promote the self-determination model (Walker et al., 2011, p. 17).

Table 2.1

Adapted from the Social-ecological approach to promote Self-Determination (Walker et al., 2011, p. 17)

What Intervention Practices are Important According to theses Variables?	
Person-Specific Intervention Practices	Ecological-Specific Intervention Practices
Promote goal setting, decision-making, problem-solving, and related causal capacity skills	Educate family members, professionals, support staff, and the general public on practices to promote self-determination
Promote self-regulation, self-advocacy, coping, self-management and other agentic capacity skills	Promote choice-making opportunities
Promote independent living, self-sufficiency, personal-social responsibility, social competency, and other adaptive behaviour skills	Maximize experiences leading to the identification of preferences
Link interventions to preferences to enhance motivation	Maximize opportunities to utilize and practice person-specific skills
	Ensure access via universal design
	Design funding and systems to promote greater choice-making and consumer control

Wehmeyer et al (2011) view on the ecological model of self-determination indicates the primary drivers of self-determination are thoughts, feelings and behaviours, “it may involve, but is not synonymous with, independence and autonomy” (p.21). It focuses on the capacity of an individual to determine appropriate behaviours and attitudes using their social communication skills and knowledge developed over time. Autistic young people’s level of self-determination may be based on the opportunities they have experienced within an environmental context and is a critical milestone for autistic adolescent development (Wehmeyer et al., 2011).

The results of a study by Chou (2017) indicated that there was evidence to support that autistic senior secondary students have difficulties with social and communication skills which may limit autonomous functioning, social interaction and self-determination (Carter et al., 2006; Chou et al.,

2017; Pierson et al., 2008). In general education settings, autistic senior secondary students, have fewer opportunities to engage in social communication skills development and skill practice than their peers (Wehmeyer et al., 2010). They also have less opportunities to learn these skills in general education settings than students with other disabilities (Burton-Hoyle, 2011), leading to a reduction in self-determination and the development and practice of social communication skills (Shogren et al., 2008).

Fostering self-determination and self-development in autistic senior secondary students at school is seen as a vehicle for positive post-school outcomes, providing casual evidence that high levels of self-determination are linked to positive education, employment and community opportunities and supports teaching and developing these skills while still at school (Chou et al., 2017). Self-determination literature recommends that autistic senior secondary students need to build capacity, knowledge and skills, including self-regulatory and self-management (Shogren & Plotner, 2012), that enable them to address their goals and lead to self-advocacy (Wehmeyer et al., 2012). Investigative studies by Wehmeyer et al 2013 and Shogren et al 2015, indicated that higher levels of self-determination at the end of high school resulted in more positive career and employment outcomes and community inclusion in adulthood. Therefore, it is important for educators to create meaningful learning opportunities for autistic senior secondary students by fostering student's self-determination in mainstream education (Chou et al., 2017)

2.4.1 Self- advocacy

Self-advocacy literature suggests that young people who have higher levels of self-determination and self-advocacy are more likely to engage in post-school education and employment than other students with disabilities who have not had the opportunity to develop the skills (National Secondary Transition Technical Assistance Center, 2010; Test et al., 2009; Wehmeyer et al., 2012).

Self-advocacy is one component of self-determination (Getzel & Thoma, 2008; White et al., 2014), and has been defined as, the ability to communicate one's needs, acquire information, effectively communicate, negotiate, assert one's own interests and rights (Balcazar et al., 1991). It is a critical skill that has been discussed as a process in educating students about their rights and responsibilities (Pocock et al., 2002). The ability to speak up for oneself, is not only required but expected within post-school tertiary environments and in employment (Gerber & Price, 2003). Two basic elements are self-awareness and self-realisation which suggest an understanding of one's strengths, abilities and limitations and knowing how to use those attributes including social communication to enhance one's quality of life (Doll et al., 1996; Schreiner, 2007).

Students who lack self-awareness and self-advocacy skills have limited opportunities post-school (Schreiner, 2007; White et al., 2014), as self-advocacy and self-determination have both been identified as critical in relation to successful post-school education and employment outcomes for

students with disabilities, specifically autistic senior secondary students and autistic young adults (Carter et al., 2011; Schreiner, 2007; Test et al., 2005; Wehmeyer & Palmer, 2003).

The interconnectedness of self-determination and self-advocacy assumes one has the capacity to make decisions and choices that positively impact on and shape one's life (Ryan & Griffiths, 2015; Test et al., 2009). Autistic senior secondary students can be inherently challenged or not included in decision-making processes and be disadvantaged during transition programming (Wehmeyer et al., 2010). Self-determination and self-advocacy are associated with enhanced empowerment and increased independence (Heller et al., 2011) and are essential characteristics of self-regulation, autonomous functioning and increase the quality of life post-school.

Training and education programs may be the most effective way to teach students with disabilities to become more autonomous, enhance self-advocacy skills, including social communication development and become more engaged and successful in the transition to post-school education and employment (Ryan & Griffiths, 2015). Within this space, designing appropriate programs within the IEPs for autistic students becomes critical from years 8-12, where teachers engage in individual instruction engaging autistic young people and their parents in the foundations of social communications skills development for readiness in the transition years and beyond school, with this systematic planning including self-advocacy as part of self-determination (Schreiner, 2007).

The importance of self-determination or learning to make choices for oneself is a key prerequisite for self-advocacy and serves as a key aspect of the social-ecological perspectives of recognising the role the environment plays in one's choices and how one may interact with the environment, placing an emphasis on the interdependence of the environment and self-advocacy (Ryan & Griffiths, 2015; Walker et al., 2011). Hence engagement in building self-advocacy within transition planning increases the capacity for autistic young people to adapt the changing environments.

2.4.2 Engagement in Transition Planning

Self-determination and self-advocacy are a vehicle for autistic senior secondary students to make choices pertaining to their goals, values and interests, and is an enabler for engagement in transition planning (Stancliffe et al., 2020; Wehmeyer et al., 2003). Transition planning literature emphasises the role of student engagement in planning and acknowledges the challenges autistic senior secondary students experience with planning beyond school (Griffin et al., 2014). Although there is a desire for the student voice to be heard in transition planning, autistic senior secondary students may attend but not participate and it is often the families in consultation with the school transition teams guided by the student's individual education plan (IEP) that determines the course of action and planning for life after school (Cameto et al., 2004; Griffin et al., 2014; Martin, Van Dycke, Christensen, et al., 2006). The literature also suggests that autistic senior secondary students are less likely to attend or participate in transition planning meetings due to their social communication challenges (Griffin et al., 2014; Snell-Rood et al., 2020; Wagner et al., 2012),

however their participation and engagement levels depend on a variety of influences, (a) parent or family involvement in supporting their child's social communication development, (b) participation in mainstream schooling environments, (c) peer interactions, and (d) school programs supporting social communication skills all support the development of self-determination and self-advocacy (Griffin et al., 2014; Kohler et al., 2016; Test et al., 2005; Trainor et al., 2019; Wagner et al., 2012).

Providing a school environment that facilitates engagement in transition planning, self-determination, making choices, problem-solving, and self-advocacy is considered best practice in schools (Mazzotti et al., 2014; Test et al., 2005; Wagner et al., 2012) and can be the ideal mechanism for autistic senior secondary students to develop social communication skills required for employment and tertiary education.

2.4.3 Interpersonal Skill Development

The construct of self-determination throughout literature (Kohler et al., 2016; Ryan & Deci, 2002; Trainor et al., 2019), refers to a composite of interpersonal skills. Interpersonal skills are defined by the Collins Dictionary as "skills that contribute to dealing successfully with other people" (Collins, 2023). Autistic senior secondary students and autistic young adults who experience expressive and receptive language difficulties may have limited skills and less opportunities to engage in interpersonal skill development at school (Test et al., 2014).

A key component of effective transition planning is the student-centred approach to IEP/ITPs that enable inclusive educators, families, and autistic students to base education on student interests and goals, during middle to senior secondary schooling (Test et al., 2014; Trainor et al., 2019). Within the student-centred approach (Kohler, 1996; Kohler et al., 2016), and the Framework for Transition Research (Trainor et al., 2019), school supports championed through culture, policy, and funding all influence the capacity of schools to prepare autistic senior secondary students with social communication skills for post-school employment or tertiary education.

The social communication complexities autistic young people experience with peers as they move towards adulthood, may be due to inconsistent social environments and interpersonal skill requirements (Carter et al., 2011; Lee & Carter, 2012). Although peer relationships may foster interpersonal skills development, many autistic senior secondary students, in school struggle in this space, due to the complexities of interactions required to operate independently in the social context (Lee & Carter, 2012). Due to the developmental nature of autism, (American Psychiatric Association, 2018) cultivating strong linkages across interpersonal skills fostering social communication, self-determination and independence is essential and autistic children and youth should be provided with every opportunity to practice social communication skills earlier than in senior secondary school (Carter et al., 2005; Lee & Carter, 2012; Shea & Mesibov, 2005; Test et al., 2014).

Interpersonal skill development, specifically social communication skills is critical for successful participation in tertiary education, employment, and community life. Social- communication related challenges may impact on employment opportunities or tertiary engagement for autistic youth. Social interests and increasing demands for reciprocal responses and rules of social communication inter-change often create difficulties (Carter et al., 2005; Lee & Carter, 2012; Shea & Mesibov, 2005) and barriers to success in employment and tertiary education.

2.4.3 Independence

Associated with self-determination is empowerment, health and psychological wellbeing and increased independence (Heller et al., 2011) coupled with self-awareness, autonomy and the ability to communicate within given contexts with limited or no supports (Ryan & Griffiths, 2015; Wehmeyer, 2003).

Hume & Odom (2017) define independence “as an on-task engagement in an activity in the absence of adult promoting” (p. 1172). Wehmeyer (2000) and Zimmer-Gembeck & Collins (2003) consider the concept of independence to require an individual to demonstrate self-regulation, the capacity to behave on their own, act in one’s own best interests and ability to function effectively in a variety of environments without intervention.

The growth of independence correlates to the diverse developmental theories of Piaget (1936) and Vygotsky (1962). Both theorists are similar in their constructivist approach, indicating children construct their own understanding and knowledge through experience and reflection, while emphasising the importance of peer interaction, communication and social interaction in developing independence.

The challenges autistic young people experience with independence in early adulthood and within transition planning has been documented throughout literature (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2022a; Hume et al., 2014; Ryan & Griffiths, 2015; Smith et al., 2012). Within this context, Smith et al (2012) and Taylor& Seltzer (2011) discuss the impact and expectation as young people move into adulthood, indicating that there is a societal expectation of independent skills, coupled with autonomous behaviour, however functional independence may be a challenge for many autistic young people and may plateau or decline when compared to their peers (Hume et al., 2014; Smith et al., 2012).

Significant difficulties with social communication contribute to the inherent challenges autistic young people face with developing independence, as many autistic senior secondary students struggle to understand and respond to the increasing expectations of peers, teachers, and society. This is further exacerbated by the complexities of changing environments at school, in tertiary education and in the workforce (Harter, 1999; Hume et al., 2014; Test et al., 2009; Wynn et al., 2025).

The shift from conformity to independent decision making from middle school to senior school and beyond and the increase in demands in independent behaviours in socials setting such as in tertiary education and employment places significant demands on the independent functioning of autistic young people as they transition from school to work (Hume et al., 2014). According to Hume et al (2014),

“Secondary settings offer a great deal of freedom and opportunities for behavioural autonomy and independence, but these opportunities may involve potentially contradictory expectations for behaviour and little adult guidance and support to ensure that [autistic] students develop the capacity to engage in adaptive, independent behaviour” (p. 103).

In doing so, social communication transition planning is critical in the senior secondary school years allowing for structured and non-structured peer to peer interactions, teacher interventions and guidance and parent and family support.

2.4.3 Confidence

According to Cambridge University Press & Assessment (2025, cited 19th April 2025), refers to confidence as “a feeling of having little doubt about yourself and your abilities, or a feeling of trust in someone or something” (p 1). Compte and Postlewaite (2004) consider confidence to be a “feeling of assuredness and a lack of anxiety” (p.1539).

Confidence is the belief is oneself that you will be successful and make the right choices in specific situations and incorporates the notion of resilience, which helps individuals to reassess a situation when things have not worked out according to plan. Self-confidence is considered a dynamic feeling, that changes over time, and is based on past and new experiences and impacts on one’s ability to cope (Oney & Oksuzoglu-Guven, 2015).

Autistic young people’s confidence can be impacted by the difficulties they experience with social communication within varied environments. Their self-confidence may be lower than some of their peers due to self-insecurities, levels of distress, and feelings of non-acceptance and difference. The lack of self-confidence may then have adverse impacts on how they perform and learn within the classroom and how they interact with their peers, teachers and the community (Akbari & Sahibzada, 2020).

Taylor & Mackenney (2008) view the act of self-confidence in learning by the level of the participation in activities, the interaction with peers in shared experiences and the connections made with teachers. Autistic senior secondary students and autistic young adult’s engagement in building self-confidence in school may increase their belief in their strengths, increase feelings of security, increase self-advocacy and self-determination and have positive outcomes in relation to

future goals, building trusted relationships, increasing engagement in transition planning and increase independence (Akbari & Sahibzada, 2020; Wright, 2009).

Heselton (2023), research presents the notion of building resilience for autistic young people as a positive intervention to increase self-confidence. Through the implementation of explicit teaching of skills such as positive self-talk, managing emotions and problem-solving, autistic young people were found to increase self-confidence, their social communication skills, coping skills, and their ability to self-regulate (Mackay et al., 2017).

Autistic young people's self-confidence and resilience may benefit from schools that have supportive communities, such as positive student-teacher relationships, safe and inclusive learning environments, peer inclusion and supportive family involvement (Gartland et al., 2019). They also have in increased sense of belonging when communities engage in social inclusivity with social communication support from family and social domains such as support from friends, peers, tertiary institutions and employers.

School-based interventions could create the safe environments relevant for autistic young people to practice building self-confidence and resilience. In doing so, an autistic senior secondary school student's IEP could include clear strategies for increasing self-confidence and resilience through targeted programs which include an individual's strengths, special interests and goals building social communication independence.

2.5 Social Communication Connections

Social communication behavioural literature suggests that improving social communication abilities for autistic students is one of the most important intervention goals for schools (Sutton et al., 2019). Teaching across schools and tertiary institutions embrace vital social communication skills for engagement in learning in the classroom (Lloyd et al., 2016; Sutton et al., 2019). Peer-to-peer learning though projects, cooperative learning and making the learning authentic may create educational disadvantage for autistic senior secondary students and autistic young adults, who find difficulty with developing positive peer relationships (Sutton et al., 2019). The inability to establish meaningful social relationships, at school often leads to withdrawal and further challenges in further education, (Bellini et al., 2007) employment and community life (Bellini, 2006; Martin, 2011; Pratt et al., 2017; Rosenthal et al., 2013). The importance of social communication in transition planning can further be supported through data provided by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, where common social communication challenges are reported by autistic senior secondary students and autistic young adults depicting over 90% will require some assistance with interactions, relationships and supervision in working life (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2017). In 2022, the Australian government reported that, "73% of people with autism

reported having profound or severe core activity limitations" (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2022a, p. 1).

Schools are the ideal environments for autistic senior secondary students, who require greater participation in social communication transition planning (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2022a; Newman et al., 2009) to safely build social communication capacity and practice or learn in a safe, regulated environment with specialised educators (Saggers et al., 2015) who can support development and prepare autistic senior secondary students for tertiary education, employment, and community life beyond school (Newman et al., 2009; Wehman et al., 2014).

2.5.1 Peer Relationships

The school-aged years present a continuum of dramatic shifts in social contexts which presents social communication challenges for autistic young people as they transition from middle school to senior secondary school and beyond. During social communication transition, there is an increased focus on social interactions with peers and reliance on social communication independence (Rubin et al., 2008; Sutton et al., 2019).

As peer relationships have greater importance in the lives of all young people, autistic young people who have difficulties with social communication skills, understanding social contexts and responding appropriately within given environments may have concerns about acceptance into peer groups (Ladd, 1990).

Creating peer relationships within the school environment may be an important source of support for autistic young people as they transition into new situations within senior secondary school, such as multiple classrooms, teachers and social expectations. Peer relationships may be a predictor for positive adjustments in the school environment, critical for feelings of belongingness and a lever for perceptions of interpersonal competence, confidence and independence (Ladd, 1990; Sterrett et al., 2017).

Evidence-based literature relating to peer relationships indicates the correlations between peer acceptance in building social communication connections and peer rejection as impacting on self-esteem, confidence and a reduction in social competence (Ladd, 1990; Rubin et al., 2008; Symes & Humphrey, 2010). There is also evidence that autistic young people may experience higher levels of peer rejection than their non-autistic peers, experience fractured peer-relationships, experience limited social networks due to social communication challenges and spend less time interacting with their peers, may experience more loneliness and social detachment (Chamberlain et al., 2007; Humphrey & Lewis, 2008; Symes & Humphrey, 2010).

Lee et al (2024) reflected the findings of Bushing & Krahe (2020), and Sinclaire et al (2019), supporting the notion that positive peer connections increase school and classroom participation, social communication skills, inclusion and ability for autistic young people to communicate in different settings (p. 214). According to Lee et at (2024), “peer interactions and acceptance are critical to any school aged child… it is important to provide opportunities for [autistic] students to gain these skills” (p. 215).

As autistic young people transition from school to a tertiary setting, the demands for social interactions and understanding multiple perspectives increases immensely. Autistic young adults face numerous challenges in developing strategies to recognise unspoken academic and social expectations, interpret social signals in peer and professional relationships, function in dynamic groups during collaborative learning environments and develop and maintain productive peer connections (Kocurova-Giurgiu & Loffelmannova, Special Issue - 2024).

Anderson et al (2017), Dijkhuis et al (2020) and Van Hees et al (2015), discuss social cognitive abilities and social motivation as key agents of academic success in a tertiary setting, supports the notion that students who enhance their social understanding engage better academically, developing stronger peer relationships, experience increased social learning and feel more confident. The challenges autistic young adults may face are difficulties in interpreting the social cues, inappropriate responses and resistance to different viewpoints (Kocurova-Giurgiu & Loffelmannova, Special Issue - 2024). Based on these challenges educational setting may incorporate inclusivity through peer partnerships, explicitly stating the communication expectations and designing a ‘safe space’ for learning.

2.5.2 Teacher Relationships

Esqueda Villegas et al., (2025), research reported that there are differences in teacher- autistic senior secondary student relationships in schools. These findings are consistent with the work of Snikkers-Mommer et al., (2024) and Domen et al., (2020), in that there appears to be missed opportunities for autonomous support, and a mismatch in learning preferences for autistic school students.

The quality of teacher-student relationships predicts engagement in learning and teacher and peer interactions (Esqueda Villegas et al., 2024; Esqueda Villegas et al., 2025). The critical nature of the teacher-student relationship may have either positive or negative impacts on engagement in and outside of the classroom environment and on an autistic young person’s social status with peers and has been linked to the level of social inclusion integrated into formal classroom structures (Robertson et al., 2003).

Teachers generally, create positive relationships with autistic students, however the relationship reduces with the higher rate of behavioural problems in the classroom and tends to be a predictor of the effectiveness of the teacher-autistic student's relationship, subsequently having a negative impact on peer relationships and social inclusion at school (Bolourian et al., 2022; Robertson et al., 2003; Roorda et al., 2017).

Skinner et al., (2009), describes the impact of a teacher-student relationship in relation to building student engagement saying, "the quality of a student's connection or involvement with the endeavor of schooling and hence with the people, activities, goals, values, and place that compose it" (p.494). Engagement can be behavioural (academic and social participation), emotional (describing positive and negative feelings and reactions to teachers, peers and the school) and cognitive (the mastery of difficult skills and understanding complex ideas) (Fredricks et al., 2004). Autistic young people may find difficulty with some of the skills and struggle to engage in teacher and peer relationships.

Senior secondary school students have several teachers on a daily basis, which may impact on teacher-student relationships, creating a less personal and positive experience for autistic young people. Student relationship literature indicates that senior secondary school students become less dependent on teachers and more reliant on their peers for support. For autistic young people, this may create concerns as they may have not developed the social communication skills expected of their neurotypical peers (Bergin & Bergin, 2009; Bolourian et al., 2022; Hargreaves, 2000; Roorda et al., 2017; Roorda et al., 2021).

The quality of the teacher-student relationship can be improved through strong partnerships with paraeducators who also support autistic senior secondary students. As paraeducators play an important role in the school experiences of autistic senior secondary students, it is critical for their mainstream teachers to develop a strong rapport with paraeducators. Paraeducators support autistic school students build social communication skills, address challenging behaviours, improve academic skills and help build life skills (Hamsho et al., 2024; Morin et al., 2022; Walker et al., 2020). The knowledge and relationships paraeducators have with autistic students assist mainstream teachers to make meaningful connections with their students and increase positive school, peer outcomes. Therefore, there is a strong association with quality teacher-autistic student relationships when they are included in social environments in the classroom and involved in building relationships with mainstream teachers, paraeducators and their peers (Robertson et al., 2003).

2.5.3 Family Support

Parents and families have been identified as enablers for increasing the independence of autistic young people and a vehicle for teaching and role-modelling social communication adaptability within social contexts. Positive family social communicative interactions from an early age, throughout schooling and support into young adulthood all serve to support the developmental stages of autistic young people beyond school as they transition into tertiary education and employment (Athbah, 2024; Pinem et al., 2024).

Family communication models described in Pinem et al., (2024), (a) focus on open and supportive communication styles, (b) adjustments to communication methods, (c) family behavioural modelling and (d) child-centred supports (p.459). Within these models, families encourage expression, practice non-judgement, provide positive feedback, adjust to the communication style of the autistic young person, model appropriate behaviours in social interactions and assist in the development of social communication skills by focussing on the interests of the autistic young person (Pinem et al., 2024).

Safi et al (2023), and Kumm et al (2022), suggest family interventions are a lever for improving social communication independence in autistic young people. Indicating, families who engage in open and supportive communication, acceptance and understanding of adjustments that autistic young people may require to feel ‘safe’ and encourage self-expression, may help autistic young people better understand the world around them, positively impacting on building confidence and motivation.

The connections between families and schools in developing autistic young people’s social communication adaptability, independence and confidence with peers and varied social environments have a critical role to play in transition planning. Family-centred transition planning supported through the school environment increases the likelihood of active participation and post-school outcomes for autistic young people. Preparation and accommodations to assist individuals to express their important life preferences is necessary for participation in meaningful social communication transition planning and a part of this may be documented in the IEP (Hagner et al., 2012).

2.6 Transition Programming in Schools

Various models of transition planning for students with a verified disability, including autistic senior secondary students have been implemented in schools focusing on student development, parent and family involvement, integrating external services, self-determination, policies and practices within the school environment, career planning and post-school employment outcomes across a life span (Commonwealth of Australia, 2013; Kohler, 1996; Kohler et al., 2016; Trainor et al., 2019; Wehmeyer et al., 2003).

Kohler's (1998, 2016), Taxonomy for Transition Programming is directed towards post-school outcomes, and is delivered through academic, career and extracurricular instruction and activities, across a variety of services (Kohler & Field, 2003). Transition-focused education should be contextualised to a student's learning and support needs and be based on capacity, opportunities, and self-determination (Deci & Ryan, 2012; Kohler, 1998; Kohler & Field, 2003; Kohler et al., 2016; Trainor et al., 2019).

Trainor's framework (2019), focuses on strengthening the interrelationships between schools, industry, external support agencies, parents, culture, policies, resources, and quality of life (Carter et al., 2009; Carter et al., 2010; Trainor et al., 2019). This framework reflects the need for connectedness within all facets of transition programming, indicating that "transition is a process-oriented, results-based approach young people experience as they prepare for, and move from, adolescence to adult life" (Trainor et al., 2019, p. 3). Transition for autistic senior secondary students is complex and multidirectional. Trainor's framework focuses on the fluidity and multidirectional notion of transition, and depicts this as an interconnected core, layers and elements representing the flexibility of the framework to meet the individualised needs of autistic students (Trainor et al., 2019).

Successful transition planning programming, even when supported by inclusive frameworks, depend on the implementation of student-centred planning (Kohler & Field, 2003). Positive transition outcomes may be in part dependant on autistic senior secondary students' interest, goals, self-determination, and engagement in transition planning, hence the importance of schools providing opportunities to develop social communication and self-determination early (Wehman et al., 2014).

Self-Determination Theory supports the idea that individuals have intrinsic motivation, the capacity to choose and make choices and the skills to manage the interaction of oneself and their environment (Deci & Ryan, 2012, 2022; Wehmeyer et al., 2003).

Self-determination literature suggests that students who spent more time in mainstream education, with their peers, engaged in explicit transition planning instruction and that had supportive schooling and home environments that provide more opportunities for practising social

communication skills were more likely to experience higher levels of self-determination (Morán et al., 2021; Wehmeyer et al., 2011; Wehmeyer & Palmer, 2003). Morán et al (2021) suggest, "personal factors that are associated with specific needs of ASD, such as social skills and level of communication, were identified as influential on self-determination" (p.903) and impact on peer, school and community engagement.

Findings indicate that targeted student-centred transition programming developing self-determination with a focus on social communication is essential within the school environment to enable autistic senior secondary students to have a positive school experience, increase their engagement in transition planning and experience better employment and life outcomes (Kim, 2019; Morán et al., 2021; Shogren et al., 2008; Wehmeyer et al., 2010; White et al., 2018).

2.6.1 Schools as Social Communication Dense Environments

"School is an important social environment where children learn to interact with their peers, a task people with autism may find difficult" (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2015, p. 3). As autistic senior secondary students transition into adulthood the social demands become greater and they face increasing barriers to participation in social settings, further education and employment (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2015; Autism Awareness Australia, 2019).

In the report by the Autism CRC (2017), educators indicated that "schools are social settings where students learn communication and life skills " (Saggers et al., 2015, p. 44) This setting holds many challenges for autistic students, as classrooms and the school environment rely heavily on an individual's ability to interact, socialise and communicate effectively with others (Martin, 2011; Pratt et al., 2017; Rosenthal et al., 2013).

Classrooms are communication-dense environments based on social interactions. (Baker et al., 2001; Hume et al., 2014; Martin, 2011). The senior secondary school structure with multiple classrooms and teachers, complex social structures and instructional and non-instructional design supports the need for independent behaviours (Baker et al., 2001; Hanbury, 2011; Hume et al., 2014). An autistic senior secondary student who experiences social and communication difficulties in a dynamic school environment where there are inconsistent social rules, shifts within classroom culture and social role expectations may struggle (Baker et al., 2001; Martin, 2011). The explicit teaching through a student-centred transition planning approach, should be navigated through individual education plans (IEP) throughout middle to senior secondary school, and is essential for school and post-school outcomes (Autism CRC, 2017; Kohler & Field, 2003; Kohler et al., 2016; Wehman et al., 2014).

2.6.2 Social Skills Education in Schools

Schools are ideal environments for effectively guiding social skills development within transition planning for autistic senior secondary students. The programs should include preparation for independent functioning and adaption as well as learning positive behavioural supports designed to prepare them for post-school challenges. Evidence-based practice applications focus on promoting skills acquisition, independence and interventions that aim to reduce challenging behaviours. As the high school environment becomes more complex it is important for these practices to consider the increased numbers of teachers, teacher expectations, and peer interactions inside and outside of the classroom (Hume et al., 2014).

The development of social communication skills for autistic young people within schools may depend on the school structure, the learning spaces, the learning activities, curriculum, inclusion in mainstream education and the role of the teacher or the education support officer. There is a myriad of intervention strategies or programs aimed at improving social communication skills such as Mesibov's & Howley's (2010) TEACCH method, Lovaas's (1987) applied behaviour analysis and Gray's & Garand's (1993) social stories modelling methods of instruction. These programs are all based on positive reinforcement, practice, clear instruction, support and modification (Fortuny-Guasch et al., 2024).

Targeted interventions should foster positive and authentic interactions with peers (Zeedyk et al., 2024), however social interactions for autistic young people can be influenced by adults who support, teach and facilitate inclusive experiences within the classroom, which may lead to a decrease in peer social interactions and peer group belonging. "Support should be conceived as support for learning rather than support for participation" (Fortuny-Guasch et al., 2024, p. 308).

According to Xue (2025), there are four pillars that influence successful social communication growth for autistic young people. (1) individualised intervention strategies such as targeted teacher interventions through the IEP, (2) peer support strategies such as building friendships and peer support networks through cooperative projects and buddy programs, (3) environmental adjustment strategies, creating a safe and supportive environment and (4) family-school collaboration, focussing on joint support is agreed upon.

By fostering inclusive school environments, autistic young people may have greater opportunities to increase social interactions, develop self- determination and build social communication skills required for peer and teacher interactions in and outside of the classroom. Inclusive education has a twofold approach, (a) building self-confidence and the sense of belongingness for autistic young people and (b) increasing the acceptance, and understanding of diversity within the school community, with the aim of preparing all young people for employment and community life (Xue, 2025).

2.6.3 Student-centred Planning – IEP/ITP

Kohler's (2016), approach to student-centred planning, focuses on student participation, self-determination and development of the IEP and links student development, specifically social communication and employment skills (Kohler et al., 2016) as critical components for positive, ongoing success beyond school (Cummings et al., 2000; Hendricks & Wehman, 2009; Wehman et al., 2014). Developing life, social, emotional and occupational skills are critical components of Kohler's taxonomy for transition programming and are determining factor in the successful engagement in post-school employment (Kohler et al., 2016; Rowe et al., 2014; Trainor et al., 2019; Wehman et al., 2014; White et al., 2017).

The IEP provides an effective mechanism to program for transition skills teaching (Grigal et al., 1997; Sale et al., 1991; Zhang & Stecker, 2001) promoting 'best practice', shared responsibility of schools, parents and families and self-determination as vehicles for post-school education or employment success. School-based intervention strategies promoting a self-directed IEP, assists autistic students to actively participate in their career planning and develop self-determination (Kelly, 2006; Martin, Van Dycke, Christensen, et al., 2006; Seong et al., 2015; Test et al., 2009). Autistic senior secondary students who have higher levels of self-determination are more likely to participate in goal setting, problem-solving and decision-making at school and express their transition interests and employment goals (Seong et al., 2015; White et al., 2017).

Generally, autistic senior secondary students and autistic young adults have not experienced independence and autonomy expected of youth their same age. Utilising data from the NLTS-2, The Office for Special Education Programs United States of America, Department of Education report 'Transition Planning for Students with Disabilities'(Cameto et al., 2004) indicated that, 67.3% of autistic young people reported little or no participation in their transition planning and 29.4% did not receive instruction on transition planning or have an ITP (Cameto et al., 2004; Shogren & Plotner, 2012; Wehman et al., 2014). The NLTS-2 also reported, autistic young people participate in their transition planning at a lower rate than any other cohort (Cameto et al., 2004; Shogren & Plotner, 2012). As many schools struggle to meet the needs of autistic senior secondary students, one of the biggest challenges for educators is addressing transition needs through the IEP/ILP (Autism CRC, 2017; Humphrey & Lewis, 2008; Symes & Humphrey, 2010).

2.6.4 Educator Challenges of Social Communication in the ILP/IEP/ITP

Transition planning typically involves social communication skills, complex processing of thoughts and expectations of communication by others (Mulvey & Jenkins, 2021; Vlachou, 2016), consequently, autistic senior secondary students may find participation challenging, resulting in less involvement in their transition planning (Griffin et al., 2014; Wagner et al., 2012).

IEPs should provide autistic senior secondary students with transition opportunities based on their strengths, interests, and goals. Although educators and families may experience multiple challenges regarding engaging autistic senior secondary students in their individual transition meetings, there is a growing body of knowledge supporting positive student outcomes when students are taught the skills to successfully participate in IEP meetings (Griffin et al., 2014; Martin, Van Dycke, Greene, et al., 2006; Mazzotti et al., 2014; Seong et al., 2015; Wagner et al., 2012).

As autistic senior secondary students become more self-directed in IEP meetings, they practice self-determination and develop their social communication skills. IEP literature indicates that student-directed IEP meetings increase equality in the meeting, the student voice is heard as is the teachers and families, ensuring greater student participation and IEPs that reflect student's interests and transitional needs (Martin, Van Dycke, Christensen, et al., 2006; Test et al., 2005; Wagner et al., 2012).

Explicit instructional activities, taught in schools that promote self-determined behaviour such as goal setting and decision-making, have been shown to be effective in teaching autistic senior secondary students the critical skills required to participate in their IEP/ITP (Algozzine et al., 2012; Chou et al., 2017; Pierson et al., 2008; Wehmeyer et al., 2010). Wagner et al (2012) indicated that autistic senior secondary students who developed better social skills, participated more actively in transition planning (IEP development) (Griffin et al., 2014; Wagner et al., 2012).

The design of the IEP includes the social communication domain within transition planning based on the learning developmental needs of an autistic student (Department for Education, 2023). The IEP document shares information relevant for transition learning, identifying resources needed to assist a young person to achieve their goals, providing a mechanism within schools for teachers, students, families and external supports to develop a plan for post-school transition during middle and senior secondary schooling (Department for Education, 2023).

Vlachou (2016), conceptualises the construct of 'social skills' in the education environment indicating that the lack of consistency to what this means and how implementation occurs within different schools. As social skill development is seen as a "multidirectional process"(Vlachou, 2016, p. 83) and involves complex strategies such as imitation, modelling, coaching and empowerment to meet the social communication developmental needs of autistic students. Mainstream teachers may not have the capacity, knowledge or appropriate professional

development to meet the social communication needs of autistic senior secondary students, while meeting academic demands of the school curriculum, creating IEP implementation and execution challenges (Vlachou, 2016).

Inclusive education best practice supports social communication ITP within mainstream schooling where autistic senior secondary students can develop positive school and post-school outcomes alongside their peers. In this space, inclusive education teams, special education teachers or student support officers play an important role and may be responsible for delivering strategies to meet the social communication IEP/ITP goals of autistic senior secondary students. This in part may be due to their student-centred social dimension focused role (Pavri & Monda-Amaya, 2001; Sansosti, 2010; Vlachou, 2006; Vlachou, 2016). Research indicates, there are difficulties in meeting this need, reporting poor employment outcomes, lower engagement in education post-school and reduced social participation for autistic young people (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2018; Elias et al., 2019; Martin, Van Dycke, Christensen, et al., 2006; Martin, Van Dycke, Greene, et al., 2006; Sutton et al., 2019; Vlachou, 2016; Wagner et al., 2012; Wehman et al., 2014).

2.6.5 Family-centred Transition Planning

Parents and family members provide life-long supports, act as teachers and advocates for many autistic senior secondary students and autistic young adults (Bianco et al., 2009; Test et al., 2014; Wagner et al., 2012). Transition literature relating to parent and family involvement in their autistic child's transition planning, and IEP/ITP development indicates the dependent nature of the relationship and the influential role parents and families have in preparing their autistic child for employment and community life. (Bianco et al., 2009; Griffin et al., 2014; Hagner et al., 2012; Harrison et al., 2017).

Parents and families play an important supportive role in the challenges autistic senior secondary students experience with social communication in transition planning (Test et al., 2014), and parent and family involvement in transition planning are significant predictors of student attendance and participation (Wagner et al., 2012). In supporting the social communication development of autistic senior secondary students, schools should have a collaborative approach to transition planning (Test et al., 2014). During family-centred transition planning parents and families should have the opportunity to be fully informed and prepared for transition planning and school meetings, so that they can assist their autistic child to participate in post-school planning (Carter et al., 2012; Test et al., 2014), and schools should identify relevant resources required and provide the steps to meet postschool goals (Hagner et al., 2012).

Family-centred transition planning and active participation in IEPs directly relate to positive school and post-school outcomes, enabling families and autistic senior secondary students to identify post-school goals and the resources required to achieve those goals. In this context, school transition planning is relevant and meaningful (Hagner et al., 2012; Test et al., 2014), and provides

autistic senior secondary students with opportunities to engage in higher social skills development, demonstrated through self-determination (Wagner et al., 2012).

In supporting parents and families and autistic senior secondary students transition planning and IEP development, schools should align school and home IEP resources, that support communication and reflect the goals of a young person (Griffin et al., 2014). This may strengthen the school parent and family relationship, and encourage post-school transition conversations between parents, families and their children (Griffin et al., 2014). Family-centred transition planning, involving structured training for autistic senior secondary students, parent and family preparation, individualized and targeted goals in the transition plan, and follow-up support for implementation and exploration resulted in significant increases in autistic senior secondary students' self-determination, their capacity to communicate needs and make career decisions (Bianco et al., 2009; Hagner et al., 2012). As described in literature, "family-centred transition planning is a straightforward, readily implementable intervention that has the potential to have a significant positive effect on the transition of students with ASD from high school to adult life" (Hagner et al., 2012, p. 47).

2.7 Career Development Models within Senior Secondary School Transition Planning

Career development research indicates that career education and development, which is student-centred, and supported by a school-wide approach has an impact on student participation, transition planning and life success post-school (Keele et al., 2020; McCowan et al., 2023; MECCTYA, 2008; Steinbrenner et al., 2024; Wehmeyer et al., 2019; Wong et al., 2025). National youth attainment and transition partnerships across Australia have provided a more comprehensive approach to transition from school to tertiary education and employment. (Career Industry Council of Australia, 2020). The agenda focused on increasing youth employment, wellbeing and positive school engagement in preparing senior secondary school students for life beyond school (Council of Australian Governments (COAG), 2011a; Keele et al., 2020; MECCTYA, 2008).

According to MECCTYA (2010), career development describes the broader process of managing learning, and work over a life span and career education is the lever that develops the knowledge, skills and attitudes through school planning. School programmes should provide a safe and nurturing environment that enables all young people, especially autistic young people, to develop the necessary skills and acquisition of knowledge and appropriate behaviours, that not only increase engagement in their transition planning, but also increase their self-determination and confidence (Career Industry Council of Australia, 2020; Keele et al., 2020; Wehmeyer et al., 2019; Wehmeyer et al., 2017). Narrow and limited approaches to transition planning may leave autistic young people ill-prepared. Employment statistics support this claim, as autistic young people

experiences lower rates of tertiary engagement and employment post-school compared to their peers (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2022a, 2022b; Department of Education and Training, 2019).

The National Career Education Strategy (NCES) released in Australia in 2019 by the Department of Education and Training (DEET), describes the shared responsibility for career education and development in schools, bringing together career practitioners, teachers, school leaders and parents as components of an effective career development model (Department of Education and Training, 2019; Keele et al., 2020). Furthermore, a tailored approach to services that were student-centric, based on individual needs, interests and goals with a focus on self-determination and building confidence through autonomy, competence and relatedness within this model, may further support the development of the critical skills autistic senior secondary students need for successful transition (Deci & Ryan, 2022; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Wehmeyer, 2003; Wehmeyer et al., 2019).

According to DEET (2019), “every school student will have access to high quality career education … it builds resilient individuals who can adapt to the evolving nature of work and manage multiple careers in their lifetime, according to their circumstances and need” (p. 5).

Career development frameworks should be inclusive and consistent and build meaningful relationships and discussions with parents who support their autistic child’s career decision-making process (Curtiss et al., 2021; McCowan et al., 2023). Career education and development frameworks also demand a commitment from policy makers, schools and practitioners and mainstream teachers in preparing autistic young people for a future that supports them to manage and respond to their own career experiences across their lifespan (Dean et al., 2022; Keele et al., 2020; McCowan et al., 2023).

2.7.1 Career Design for Autistic Young People

Career design in school transition programs is critical for shaping decisions and the direction of autistic young people’s lives. The opportunities to engage in mainstream classes with peers, work experience, internships, volunteering and part-time jobs, assist in transition to adult life. However, the social communication challenges autistic young people experience may result in restricted opportunities to gain the experiences needed to make transition decisions (Roux et al., 2015; Wei et al., 2015). Poor preparation and access to appropriate experimental transition experiences at school may have long-term negative impacts when autistic young people do not have opportunities to develop their career identity during school (Carter et al., 2010).

Wehmeyer et al (2019), Dean et al (2019), and Savickas et al (2019), approaches to postsecondary transition services focus on career design, involving career-related identity through the participation in senior secondary school in employment and life activities. Through participation

in social communication life skills related to individual interests, autistic young people develop self-determination and confidence (Dean et al., 2022).

The Self-Determination Career Design Model (SDCDM) discussed by Dean et al (2022), is one approach to career development. The focus is on instructional self-determination in schools and in a community context, promoting individualised goal attainment based on person-centred interventions. Autistic young people may require repeated opportunities to engage in social communication employment-related activities with support from parents, schools, family and involve peers to increase the concepts learnt through the SDCDM. Within senior secondary school autistic young people may increase self-confidence in vocational decision-making if they have the opportunities to develop social communication employability skills over a longer time and pairing with peers, family, internships and placements that are supported by the community (Dean et al., 2022; Dean et al., 2020; Hagner et al., 2012).

Other career design interventions implemented within schools have been the development of Individual Education Plan (IEP), also known as Personal Learning Plans, One Plans, and Individual Support Plans developed in consultation with families and autistic individuals through inclusive education teams, and school counsellors. Additional career services are based on individual goals, interests and needs, such as transition planning meetings, career development workshops, opportunities to practice social communication employability skills with peers, work experience, and vocational training (Wong et al., 2025).

Findings from Wong et al (2025), indicated that school-based internships, combined with independent mobility supported positive post-school employment outcomes to a greater extent than basic school career services. “Providing employment immersions opportunities to autistic young adults appears to be critical for a successful transition to the workforce, and equipping students with independent transportation skills helps them to access these opportunities more readily” (Wong et al., 2025, p. 5). Ashworth et al (2023), and Vigna et al (2023), suggest that social communication skills strengthen when autistic young people interact with other workers in short-term internships or low-pressure work environments, increase their confidence in navigating workplace challenges and support their transition from school to employment.

2.7.2 Social and Vocational Activities for Autistic Senior Secondary School Students

Autistic young people experience less involvement in activities that prepare them for adulthood compared to their peers with differences across tertiary education, employment opportunities and social participation (Anderson et al., 2018; Shattuck et al., 2012).

As young people move into senior secondary school there is an increased importance in social activity and vocational participation. Peer relationships, building friendships, social activities, and identifying skills and interests become critical components of developing transitional skills for

successful engagement in tertiary education and employment (Mazzotti et al., 2021; Steinbrenner et al., 2024). “Providing practical work opportunities … autistic young adults can gain the necessary experience to realize their potential and contribute to society” (Wong et al., 2025, p. 6).

In part autistic young people’s engagement is reliant on school educators, policy makers and family support. Ochs and Roessler (2001) suggest, “Educators … must intensify their career-related assessment and instructional efforts. These efforts include . . . increased school and community-based career education and work experience programs … and involvement of students in the development and direction of their own educational … plans” (p. 175).

Measures of social activities and interactions include in-person social participation (getting together with friends and peers), technology-based social participation (internet, gaming, texting), while vocational activities included job exploration, jobs around the school, unpaid work and work experience and paid employment in the community (Steinbrenner et al., 2024). The quality of school programs, inclusivity of mainstream classes, teacher support, and parent involvement in promoting interactions with peers and vocational activities, all have a bearing on autistic young people’s participation in developing social communication skills related to the workplace and in tertiary education settings.

Social activities and vocational experiences in senior secondary school are a predictor of adult outcomes for autistic young people (Mazzotti et al., 2021; Mazzotti et al., 2014). Prioritising vocational experiences through career exploration, courses of interest, and extracurricular activities aligned with educational and future goals are enablers for successful transition and should be included in an autistic young person’s transition planning and their IEPs (Steinbrenner et al., 2024).

2.8 Workplace and Tertiary Education, Social Communication Skills.

The development of social communication skills during primary to middle school is well documented through the Australian Curriculum: Foundation to Ten - General Capability - Personal and Social Capability (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2023). The tapering off in the Australian Senior Curriculum, suggests that there is an expectation that the critical social communication skills have been mastered, this creates challenges for autistic senior secondary students who may struggle in building the foundational personal and social capabilities for independent learning and citizenship. Social-emotional learning focuses on developing self-awareness, self-regulation and interpersonal skills necessary for school, tertiary education, work and life (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2023). Under five broad skills, the model integrates key learning areas (1) self-awareness, (2) self-management, (3) social awareness, (4) relationship skills, and (5) responsible decision-making and provides key competencies within each area, including but not exclusive of, cooperative learning, peer relationships, problem-solving, conflict resolution, communicating effectively, working

independently and making decisions (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2023; New South Wales Government, 2023).

Career development literature defines a clear framework for understanding workforce participation (Allen et al., 2017; Commonwealth of Australia, 2002, 2013; Curtis & McKenzie, 2002). Critical for employment are the Core Skills for Work (CSfW), featuring performance criteria that directly relate to social and emotional learning at school (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2023), social communication skills at work (Commonwealth of Australia, 2013), and are key attributes for employment and community life (New Zealand Government, 2024; Overtoom, 2000; Rosenberg et al., 2012; The University of Sydney, 2018). The career development framework presents a set of soft skills that convey the importance of social communication interrelatedness (Commonwealth of Australia, 2002, 2013) in the workplace.

Social communication skills are also necessary for engagement in Tertiary Education, where current teaching and learning focuses on the student's role in learning, such as learning from peers, self-directed learning, and teacher interactions. Learners are active participants in the learning which may involve: (a) small group work, (b) discussion, (c) problem-solving, and (d) cooperative learning (Charles Sturt University, 2023; Killen, 2015). Social communication development, and transition for autistic senior secondary students needs to take place at school, and be supported by parents and families (Bianco et al., 2009; Test et al., 2014; Wagner et al., 2012), so they are prepared for employment and post-school education, otherwise they will continue to have lower rates of participation in work, lower-skilled or paid positions, which impacts on their capacity to be independent and engage in community life (Wehman, 2006; Wehman et al., 2014). This is also supported by Scott et al (2017), quantitative research indicating that 1 in 5 autistic candidates presented at employment interviews with significant challenges in social interaction skills (Scott et al., 2017), limiting their opportunities for employment and independence.

2.8.1 Core Skills for Work/Key Competencies

Key competencies as indicated by the Core Skills for Work framework (CSfW) (Figure 2.4), unpack the three areas, that are critical for the world of work. Although the three areas intersect, critical to this research is **interaction with others**, specifically communicating for work, connecting and working with others, and understanding diverse perspectives (Commonwealth of Australia, 2013). The framework was developed as a guide, conceptualising skills, knowledge and understanding that underpin work, as identified by Australian employers. The intention of the framework was to make non-technical skills and knowledge explicit, within a framework that enabled the development of the skills and knowledge over a series of stages (Commonwealth of Australia, 2013).

Figure 2.4

Core Skills for Work: Developmental Framework

Adapted from Commonwealth of Australia. (2013) www.deewr.gov.au/csfw

The developmental approach was based on the work of Dreyfus et al (1986), “Skills Acquisition” model, which encompasses five stages of performance: (1) Novice, (2) Advanced Beginner, (3) Capable, (4) Proficient and (5) Expert (Commonwealth of Australia, 2013; Dreyfus et al., 1986). The CSfW also recognises that progression is dependent on governing rules such as instruction, procedures, processes, conventions and expectations, and intuitive applications of knowledge, including practical experience, motivation, judgement, reflection and supports (Commonwealth of Australia, 2013; Dreyfus et al., 1986).

The CSfW framework has been designed to be implemented in different contexts, so that learning and mastery of the skills and knowledge for work can be developed over time and in a variety of settings, including schools, other education and training settings and in the community (Commonwealth of Australia, 2013). This places schools as an ideal setting for explicit teaching and enables novice learners to safely practice the skills required for post-school education and employment.

2.8.2 Building Pro-social Communication Employment Skills

Autistic young people need to understand expectations according to the world of work, such as flexibility, innovations, communication, collaboration and analytical skills. Career educational frameworks schools operate within are benchmarked on career-education resources underpinned by the standards and theories of the Career Industry Council of Australia (CICA) (Career Industry Council of Australia, 2020). Career education and development is a shared responsibility. As career pathways become more complex it is critical that autistic young people have workforce skills, and the capacity to adapt to changing workplace environments (Keele et al., 2020; White et al., 2018).

Keele et al (2020), review of career development literature indicates clear themes of best practice for Australian school delivery of career programs for senior secondary school students, including autistic young people. Themes included (a) contextualising career practice for autistic senior secondary school students, (b) a whole school approach led by school leaders, teachers, families and community, (c) curriculum embedded career education from primary school, (d) career experiential learning opportunities, and (e) one-on-one access to career counsellors (Keele et al., 2020, p. 57).

Developing autistic senior secondary school students' employability or soft skills and workplace language, expectations and attitudes through work-based learning activities built into school curriculum provides students with the skills critical to securing employment beyond school. Securing meaningful employment enables autistic young people to make social connections, promotes independence, which leads to an individual achieving their personal goals and aspirations (Griffiths et al., 2024; Trainor et al., 2020; Young & Rooney, 2023).

Drawing on the unique strengths autistic individuals demonstrate, career counsellors and teachers preparing senior secondary students to enter the workforce, should understand the desired skills required for employment. The most frequent skill sought by employers included collaboration, communication and problem-solving skills that autistic young people find a challenge, hence the need to master the skills while in senior secondary school transition planning (Young & Rooney, 2023). "Understanding [Autistic] individuals' skills and interests in all potential [employment opportunities] considering employability skills (e.g. communication and critical thinking) and technical skills is essential in formulating an individual and relevant transition plan" (Griffiths et al., 2024, p. 573).

Incorporating school-based and home-based activities that focus on soft skills and employability within specific careers may provide a mechanism for autistic young people to explore their future strengths and goals within safe environments, and develop the social communication skills required for employment and engagement in tertiary education and community life beyond school (Griffiths et al., 2024; Young & Rooney, 2023).

2.9 Current Policies and Practices

An understanding of policies and practices that guide how schools plan for and implement social communication transition planning for autistic young people is a critical component of this research, and was influential in how autistic young people experienced social communication transition planning, how parents understood their child's social communication and transition support and how educators understood social communication transition in their school.

The implementation of inclusive educational practices globally raised questions regarding the social integration of citizens living with disability, specifically autism. This has led to policy change at the International, Australian and local level, sparking the move towards government – led national policies with the aim of improving well-being, education, employment, social inclusion and citizenship of autistic individuals. Several countries, including Malta, England, and the United States have such national strategies (Interagency Autism Coordinating Committee (IACC), 2023; Singal et al., 2025) and currently Australia has a South Australian Autism Strategy in place (South Australian Government, 2024).

2.9.1 International Context

The literature demonstrates the changes to international legislation and policy over the decades, which have led to laws that protect the rights of all children to experience and be included in education, including planning for employment opportunities beyond school (Cameto et al., 2004; Šegota et al., 2022). The US Department of Education's 'Individuals with Disabilities Education Act 1997 (IDEA)' supported bridging the gap between education for children with disabilities and standard curriculum. Reauthorization of the IDEA 2004 and current work through 'The Office for Special Education" – Department of Education in the United States, broadened the concept of transition planning to include transition from elementary to middle and high school to college or post-secondary and was further strengthened by 'The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) 2015, commitment to equal opportunity for all children (Cameto et al., 2004; National Association of Special Education Teachers, 2024; U.S. Department for Education, 2017).

The education of autistic students in Croatia, North Macedonia and Poland have traditionally been grounded in 'defectology' (Šegota et al., 2022; Smagorinsky, 2012). The policy position in these countries is changing to one of educational inclusion for all children. These changes rely on legislation, that strengthens the position of inclusive teachers and promotes teachers' professional development. According to Segota et al (2022), "Croatia, North Macedonia and Poland are committed to educational inclusion. However, though legislation and policy identify and endorse the rights of all children with special educational needs, successful educational inclusion of children with autism has yet to be achieved, and families report high levels of social and educational exclusion" (Šegota et al., 2022, p. 22).

Policies supporting inclusive educational practices in the United Kingdom (UK), and France, agree that inclusion requires school transformation and systematic changes that incorporate teacher professional development in inclusive education (Malet, 2023). Although there are similarities in UK and French policies, how inclusion is conceptualised in teacher education programmes differs, with the UK model focusing on citizenship and contribution to society as an outcome of inclusive educational practices and France modelling national integration and cohesion as an ideological outcome of inclusive educational policies and practices.(Malet, 2023, p. 227). Although the international context supports inclusive educational policies, more is needed to support the professional practice of mainstream and inclusive educators (Malet, 2023; Šegota et al., 2022; Smagorinsky, 2012; U.S. Department for Education, 2017).

Inclusive education policies within the Asia-Pacific regions, vary depending on educational systems. The Maldivian educational system regulated by the Ministry of Education, in 2022 ideal education system would include all students with complex needs across private and public schools' systems. In 2013 the Inclusive Education Policy declared, all students to have equal educational opportunities which is supported by the inclusive education strategic plan (2020-2025), despite this funding sources need to be developed at a national level to ensure according to need (Beamish et al., 2022).

Singapore, like many of its regions indicates a move in government vision and legislation that incorporates strengthening inclusive education in mainstream schools and education for all students. China, Hong Kong, and the Republic of Korea, move towards inclusive education stems from international trends towards social inclusiveness, not government mandates for providing inclusive education in all educational settings. Although special schools have been retained, there has been an increase in students with additional educational needs to be included in mainstream education. The problem and ongoing challenges for policymakers and educators is the effectiveness of inclusion of students with special education needs (Beamish et al., 2022).

2.9.2 Australian Context

Australia's stance on inclusive education is embedded in the nation's legislative and policy commitment to the educational rights of children with disabilities, especially autistic and intellectually disabled persons (Commonwealth of Australia, 2016; Mavropoulou et al., 2021; United Nations, 2006, 2016). Australia, as a signatory to the Salamanca Statement (Ministry of Education and Science Spain, 1994), and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 2006), commitment to inclusive educational practices is similar to other nations and have similar concerns with the divide between policy and practice. Carrington et al's (2024), inclusive education policy review, reported that Australia's inclusive education policies and guidelines have been developed in alignment with international policies.

In the Australian context, the implementation of inconsistent practices throughout the country and within each state with the addition of different funding and support models for students with disabilities create exclusionary practices, increasing the divide between disabled persons and their counterparts (Mavropoulou et al., 2021). This is due to Australia not having a national inclusive education policy with responsibility for developing and implementing inclusive educational policies within federal, state and territory governments (Carrington et al., 2024).

Mavropoulou et al (2021), present a model depicting the divide between inclusive education policy and practice, demonstrating the challenges Australian schools encounter when working with inclusive policies. This includes obstacles and challenges that discuss systematic incoherence, the discrepancies between bureaucracy and alignment with inclusive educational practices and clarity around the meaning of inclusive education (Mavropoulou et al., 2021, p. 45). The proposition for bridging these gaps include: (a) teacher professional development in inclusive practices, (b) systematic accountability, (c) alignment of inclusive education attitudes and (d) adjustments in mainstream schooling, all of which are also recognised in the international context (Commonwealth of Australia, 2016; Iacono et al., 2019; Malet, 2023; Mavropoulou et al., 2021; Šegota et al., 2022; Szumski et al., 2017).

Anderson & Boyle (2019), reflective article on Australia's positioning in inclusive educational practices suggest, there is a need for establishing a national understanding of inclusive education and developing an Australian Framework for Action based on inclusive educational commitments of the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education (1994). A part of that commitment should include the perspectives of parents, students with disabilities, and to increase school and community understanding of successful inclusion (Carrington et al., 2024; Iacono et al., 2019; Mavropoulou et al., 2021; Ministry of Education and Science Spain, 1994).

The 'Inclusive Education in Australia policy review' report by Carrington et al (2024), further supports actions for inclusive education policy and practice change to enhance autistic students' opportunities within education settings, restating the past challenges and presenting an optimistic analysis of what is considered best inclusive education practice moving forward. Twenty recommendations included policy (shared understanding and systematic reforms), research (focusing on parent, student and teacher perspectives) and practice (support for learners and families, leadership, increased support, increased collaboration with parents, government and community, transparency and access, greater resourcing, and an increase in professional development opportunities for educators), were documented to enhance inclusive education in Australia (Carrington et al., 2024).

The Council of Australian Governments, (COAG, 2009), representing all Australian states and territories established a national policy direction for inclusive education. The Disability Royal Commission (2023), recommended the implementation of a national roadmap for inclusive

education, with the phasing out of segregated education by 2051 as part of the National School Reform agreement (2025 – 2029). Resulting in “raised awareness about the importance of inclusive education and its relationships to a more equitable society” … leading to positive academic and social emotional outcomes for all students …”(Carrington et al., 2024, p. 25).

Federal, state and territory government implementation of inclusion policies shape social justice, inclusionary educational practices and societal acceptance of diversity. Agreements between governments and educational institutions through the national inclusive education roadmap, inclusive frameworks and approaches, may be an enabler for schools, educators, parents and communities to better understand the social communication transition planning needs of autistic young people.

2.10 Summary

This review provided an examination of literature relating to the social communication challenges autistic young people experience as they transition to adulthood (Wehman et al., 2014). It considered how educators and schools supported social communication transition planning for autistic senior secondary students and presented four theoretical frameworks (Commonwealth of Australia, 2013; Kohler et al., 2016; Trainor et al., 2019; Wehmeyer et al., 2003), which were key contributors to this body of knowledge.

Autism described as neurological difference, impacts on communication and social interactions, thus creating challenges that may reduce the capacity of individuals to relate within school, education, employment and community expectations (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, 2018; Autism Spectrum Australia, 2025; Pratt et al., 2017). The literature reported strong linkages between interpersonal skills, social communication, self-determination, and independence, as determining factors to engagement and successful outcomes of transition planning (Carter et al., 2005; Lee & Carter, 2012; Shea & Mesibov, 2005; Stancliffe et al., 2020; Test et al., 2014; Wehmeyer & Palmer, 2003).

To assist autistic senior secondary students to prepare for adult life, schools and families have significant roles to play in supporting transition planning (Test et al., 2014; Wagner et al., 2012). Within this space, schools provide student-centred planning through IEP/ITPs, targeted career development based on autistic young people’s goals and interests in collaboration with families (Carter et al., 2009; Carter et al., 2010), and provide safe spaces for social communication capacity building within the school environment (Newman et al., 2009; Saggers et al., 2015; Wehman et al., 2014).

Finally, the review provided an overview of International and Australian literature pertaining to inclusive educational policies and practice, which influence how countries have, and are

responding to, the inclusion of all students within educational settings (Carrington et al., 2024; Iacono et al., 2019; Mavropoulou et al., 2021; Ministry of Education and Science Spain, 1994). The theoretical frameworks and literature review provides impetus for ongoing research on autistic senior secondary student's experiences and development of social communication skills in readiness for transition to post-school settings and the roles played by educators and families in these processes. The following chapter explains the methodology and methods shaping the research design.

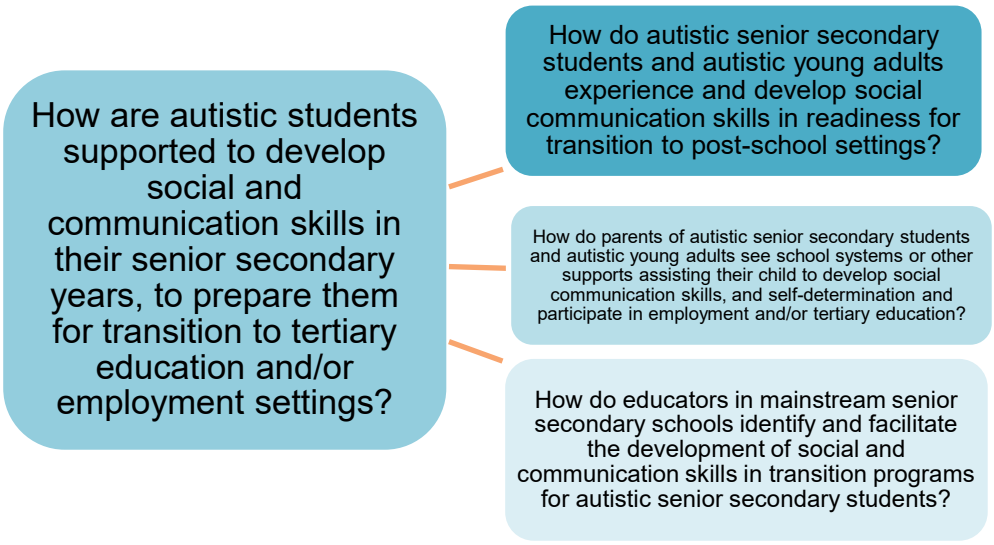
CHAPTER THREE - METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

The purpose of this research was to understand the experiences of autistic senior secondary students related to support for the development of their social and communication skills in preparation for the transition to post-school education or employment. The research included the perspectives of current autistic senior secondary school students, and autistic young adults reflecting on their senior secondary experiences. In addition, the research explored the perspectives of educators and parents of autistic young people to gain a more comprehensive understanding of how senior secondary students are supported in transition planning. To achieve this understanding the following research questions were utilised:

Figure 3.1

Research Questions



The research questions and theoretical frameworks discussed in chapters one and two provided the basis for shaping the qualitative research design.

This chapter describes the interpretive research paradigm, the narrative inquiry methodology underpinning the research, provides the ethical processes undertaken, discusses the methods used for recruitment, describes the instruments used, provides a detailed account of the participants, describes the process of thematic data analysis, and discusses trustworthiness of the research.

3.2 Overview of the Research Paradigm

Embedded in the foundations of social research, is the ontological and epistemological philosophies of social constructionism and interpretivism. Anti-positivists or Interpretivists hold the view that social research should focus on understanding social realities and the meanings individuals attach to their actions (Crotty, 1998), allowing for a deeper understanding of social interactions.

Taking an anti-positivist stance in this research, enabled the participants to explore their individual experiences, interpretations and meaning which shaped their perceptions of reality within social practices. These perspectives were critical in understanding how knowledge was developed within a given social context and supported the qualitative research methods utilised.

One of the key strengths of this approach was the capacity to uncover hidden meanings experienced by individuals, which enabled me to gain a deeper understanding of social communication transition planning for autistic young people, their families and their educators.

In support of this research, social constructionism underpins how perceptions of reality are constructed by individuals through cultural and social practices (Crotty, 1998). Building on the work of Vygotsky (1978), social constructivist theory takes the approach that individuals actively create knowledge through experiences within social contexts (Hirtle, 1996), while the social view of learning also enables an exploration of how individuals make sense of their experiences within a broader context. Social constructivists analyse the construction of knowledge through step-by-step processes which collect, characterise, organise and coagulate knowledge and experiences (Pfadenhauer & Knoblauch, 2018).

Delanty (1997), explains understanding hidden meanings in individual experiences through an interpretive approach, where meaning is given to the social world by understanding the perceptions of individuals who engage in society. Truth and knowledge are subjective, influenced by different social contexts, life experiences and social interactions (Pervin & Mokhtar, 2022). The interpretive approach in this research finds answers to qualitative questions, that focus on understanding the how and why questions relating to the research phenomena (Berryman, 2019), supporting the researcher's ontological stance, who incorporates subjective ideas and beliefs while exploring human behaviour and meaning (Carey, 2012; Myers, 2008).

This research paradigm is based on social interaction and reality. It is shaped by the way individuals experience social narratives within social-cultural contexts (Rehman & Alharthi, 2016; Vygotsky, 1978), and applies to this research because this research identifies the in-depth life experiences of autistic young people, their parents and educators, where an exploration of expressed thoughts, beliefs and experiences of the participants is needed in order to reconstruct their intended meaning (Pervin & Mokhtar, 2022).

The theoretical perspective supporting the ontological and epistemological stance in this research is Sociocultural Theory. The origins of Sociocultural Theory recognise the role social interactions and culture play in developing social communication skills. The theory focuses on behavioural development such as thought, language and higher order thinking skills over an individual's life span (Allman, 2020). Three fundamental ideologists pertaining to human behaviour exist: (1) the relationship between humans and their environment, (2) the activities which support how humans establish meaning to nature and the psychological consequences of such meaning and (3) the relationship between tools and the development of speech (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 19).

Vygotsky wrote: "Every function in the child's cultural development appears twice: first, on the social level, and later, on the individual level; first between people (interpsychological) and then inside the child (intrapsychological)" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 57). Vygotsky (1978), elaborates on the role of learning within social contexts, reiterating that social communication development occurs within interactive environments where individuals and peers collaborate in different social contexts. Based on Lev Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, cognitive development is influenced at the social level, through family and the community, and at the individual level (Vygotsky, 1978), and is reflected in transition models developed by Trainor et al (2019) and Kohler (2016).

Language within culture is seen as an essential tool for learning, as a means for social interactions, and a communication facilitator in social settings. According to Vygotsky (1978), language supports the construction of meaning, social communication development and social adaption (Allman, 2020). Furthermore, speech or language is used as a tool to facilitate cognitive processes and development, becoming self-directed and self-regulating over a lifespan (Allman, 2020; McLeod, 2024a; Vygotsky, 1978).

Sociocultural Theory supports and strengthens this research at the individual, classroom, broader and post-school level, acknowledging that autistic individuals are not isolated in their environment. Their social communication development is supported through their IEPs, parents, teachers and peers. According to Watson & Reigeluth (2016), student centred learning focuses on the individual, and effective learning practices in a social-cultural context with the aim of facilitating learning through interaction, negotiation and collaboration to develop skills and knowledge important for school, employment and community life (Allman, 2020; Driscoll, 2000; Watson & Reigeluth, 2016).

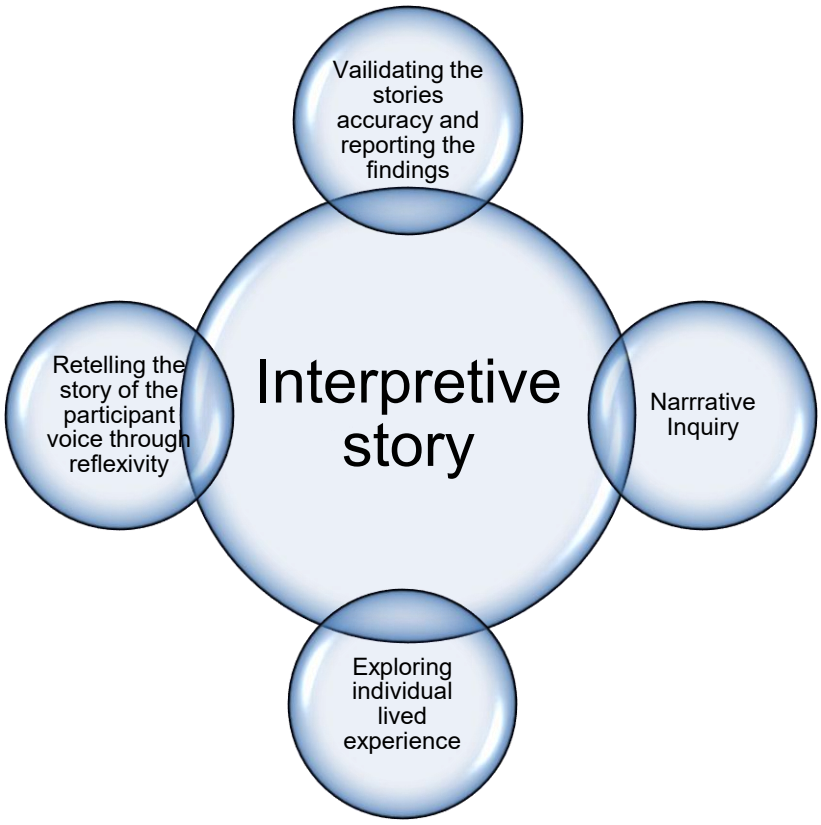
From the researcher's (my) perspective, hearing the lived experiences of the participants was paramount to the methodological approach. Applying a narrative inquiry and qualitative method, provided a means to exploring meaning and developing an understanding of how social communication transition planning occurred from the views of autistic young people, their parents and educators. Figure 3.2 represents the framework for understanding the Anti-positivist approach and Figure 3.3 represents the Interpretive Story framing this research.

Figure 3.2

Framework for understanding the Anti-positivist approach

Figure 3.3

Interpretive Story Framework



3.3 Social Constructivism and the Interpretive Paradigm

Underpinning the narrative inquiry in this research is the ontological and epistemological perspectives that inform social constructivism and the interpretive paradigm. Interpretivism in this research models the ontological approach, describing the narratives, stories, perceptions, interpretations and realities of diverse participants, within epistemological constructs of multi-meanings, interpretations and experiences, supported by in-depth investigations, and qualitative methods (Saunders et al., 2019).

Grounded in social constructivism philosophy, understanding the human experience and the construction of knowledge through social interactions was critical to understanding and interpreting the participants' constructs of their lived experiences (Adams, 2006; Charles, 2018; Tsulaia, 2023). Braun and Clarke (2022), state, "a social constructivism paradigm… acknowledges that subjective meanings are formed through interactions with others and historical and social norms in the lives of individuals" (p.57). This methodology views knowledge as a social construct, where participants are active in the research process (Pfadenhauer & Knoblauch, 2018).

As reflected in qualitative research literature, "individuals construct new knowledge based on prior knowledge and experiences" (Tsulaia, 2023, p. 228), "interpretivist research creates a richer understanding and interpretation of … social contexts" (Saunders et al., 2019, p. 149), and facilitates an exploration of experiences within specific contexts (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Kalu & Bwalya, 2017; McLeod, 2023). The nature of this exploratory research considered a variety of lenses, allowing for multiple views to be understood, reflecting personal perspectives, relationships and essential teaching practices.

Social constructivism models a social view of learning, and enabled an exploration of how participants make sense of their experiences (Adams, 2006). As a social constructivist researcher, I sought to understand the participants' truths and perceptions, solidifying, and ascertaining knowledge step by step through the process of reflexive thematic analysis (Charles, 2018; Pfadenhauer & Knoblauch, 2018).

The interpretative ideology guided my practice as a counsellor and teacher, and is critical to the methodological framework of this research. Social constructivism seeks to understand the lived experiences of the participants to discover their truth or perceptions (Thompson, 2017), starting with broad questions and enabling participants to direct the research. Although subjective, the process of reflection increases clarity and meaning to the lived experience (Husserl, 1970). The interpretive philosophy in this research was committed to describing the voices of the participants, telling a story with the aim to make meaning of expressed thoughts (Braun & Clarke, 2022b), relevant to social communication transition experiences and knowledge.

3.4 Narrative Inquiry

A narrative inquiry in this interpretive paradigm was chosen, as it enabled a deeper exploration and understanding of real-world experiences, and allowed the voice of the participants to be heard (Andrews et al., 2013; Ugwu & Eze, 2023). Asking open ended questions was essential in describing the social communication transition experiences of autistic senior secondary students and autistic young adults, offering a rich picture of their experiences and enabling an investigative approach (Teherani et al., 2015), for example: How did you develop your communication skills at school? (Appendix D, Question 2). Based on a social constructivism philosophy and interpretive lens (Adams, 2006; Charles, 2018; Stake, 1995), this research empowered the participants to explain in their own words how they experienced social communication transition and why they had this unique view of their world.

The position of narrative inquiry as depicted by Bruce et al (2016), and Pino Gavidia & Adu (2022), views narrative inquiry as a social construct of storytelling. Pino Gavidia & Adu (2002) states "… storytelling is the expression of living, telling and retelling experiences" (p.2). Individual lived experiences shape their lives, and the stories told reflect these experiences, are interpretive and reflective of personal meaning. Individuals' experiences reflect their personal narrative (feelings, reactions), and engagement in social interactions (environment, surroundings) within a specific contexts (Bochner & Riggs, 2014; Clandinin et al., 2007; Dewart et al., 2020; Pino Gavidia & Adu, 2022).

Using a narrative inquiry framework encouraged participants to describe their stories in their own words, enabling a free flow of information and increasing the understanding of the human experience (Foxall et al., 2021).

3.4.1 Narrative Inquiry through a Multiple Case Study Design

A multiple case study design was central to this research as it explored multiple lived experiences bound in different contexts (Braun & Clarke, 2022b; Creswell, 2013; Stake, 1995; Stake, 2006). Set within a qualitative research paradigm, a multi-case study design provides a deeper understanding and vivid picture of the phenomena under investigation, enabling an exploration through multiple lenses, allowing for a variety of information to be revealed and understood (Zach, 2006).

Stake (1995, 2006), associates case study designs within research with knowledge and experiences of the participants and researcher, and aligns human experience within specific contexts with interpretation, meaning and understanding. Stake also emphasises the researcher's skillset and intuition as central to constructing and executing effective multiple-case study inquiry within naturalistic settings (Adams et al., 2022; Stake, 1995; Stake, 2006). The motivation behind my selection to undertake this design was to understand the social communication transition of

lived experiences from different perspectives. This design supported the theoretical frameworks indicative to this research and guided the development of the research questions while providing a mechanism for exploratory research within different cases (Priya, 2021; Zach, 2006).

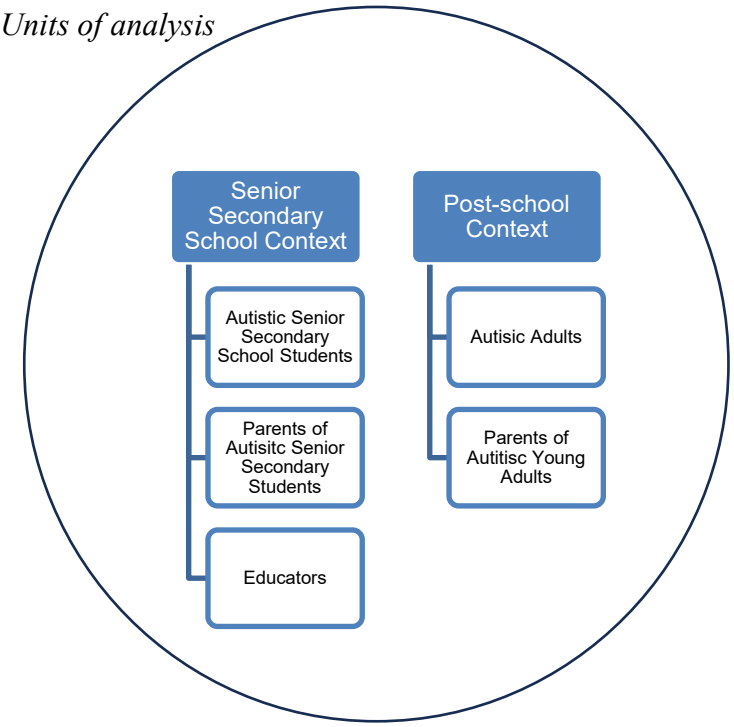
The purpose of employing the multi-case study design and semi-structured interviews as a tool, in this research, was to develop an understanding of the social communication transition experiences based on individual cases: defined in this research as units of analysis. The participants' individual perceptions and interpersonal interactions, and a multi-case study design enabled me to gather participants' realities within their lived experiences (Cohen et al., 2007), and explore similarities and differences (Baxter & Jack, 2008), to answer questions related to the social communication transition experiences of autistic youth and young adults, their parents and educators. Creswell (2014) provides a definition of the case study design.

"Case Studies are a qualitative design in which the researcher explores in depth a program, event, activity, process, of one or more individuals. The case(s) are bound by time and activity, and researchers collect detailed information using a variety of data collection procedures over a sustained period of time" (Creswell, 2014, p. 241)

The cases or units of analysis were embedded within the boundaries of the two specific contexts, (1) senior secondary schools in South Australia and (2) post-school contexts including (a) Tertiary Institutes in South Australia and (b) Employment, as shown in figure 3.4.

Figure 3.4

Units of analysis



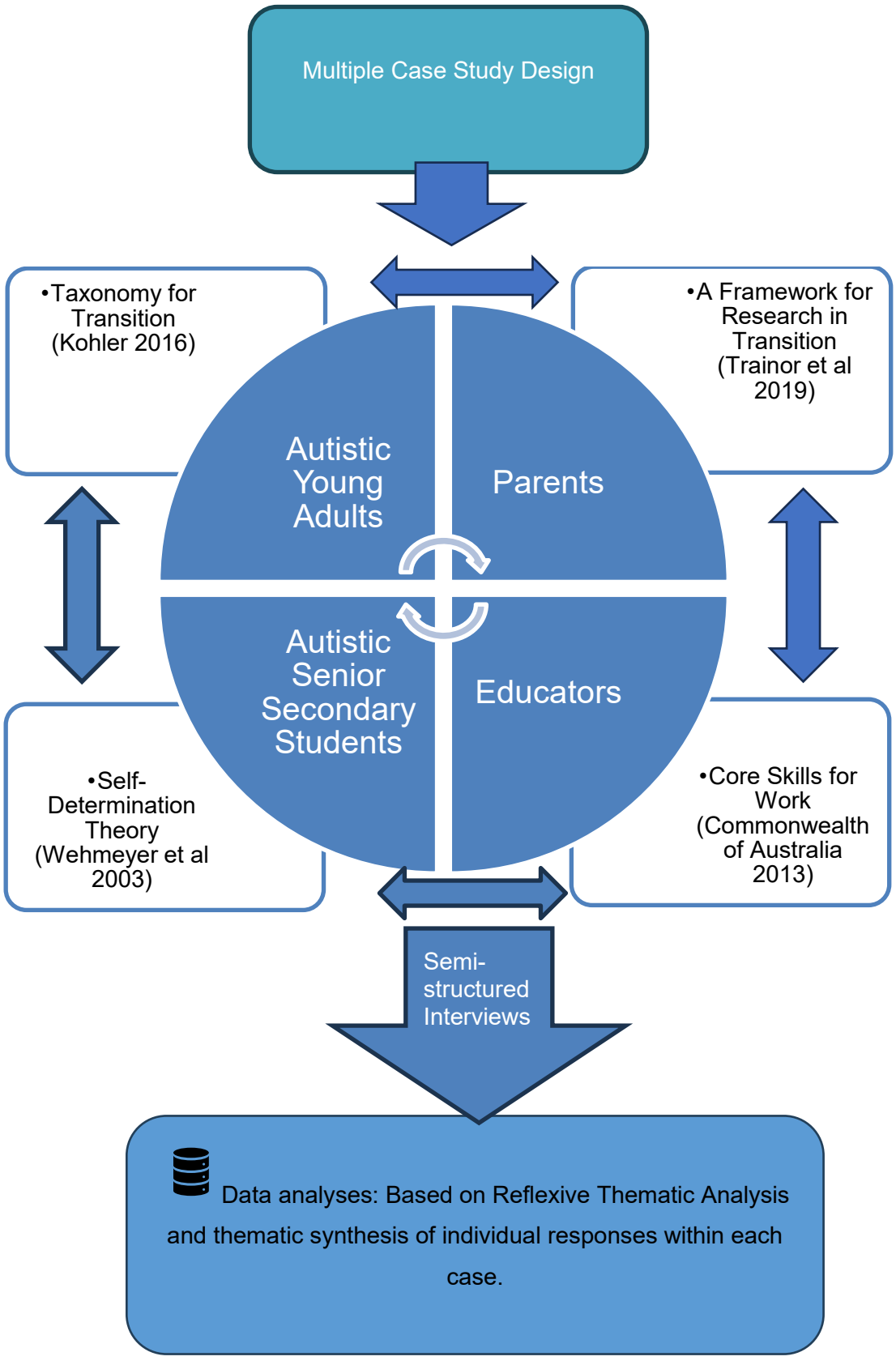
The cases were selected from the three schooling sectors in South Australia (Government, Independent and Catholic Education Senior Secondary Schools), Tertiary Institutions in South Australia and employment providers and include (a) both autistic senior secondary students and parents or carers reflecting on their current social communication transition and preparation experiences, (b) autistic young adults reflecting retrospectively on these experiences, offering perspectives on what would have been useful and (c) perspectives from educators who teach social communication transition skills to autistic students in senior secondary school.

The qualitative research design utilised reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019, 2021; Byrne, 2022; Etherington, 2004) and was interactive and continuous, allowing refinement and synthesis of the data. The research design also incorporated a framework matrix analysis, developed in NVivo, which provided a structured approach to determining codes based on the theoretical frameworks (Goldsmith, 2021; Ritchie & Spencer, 1994). In this research, a hybrid data analysis approach, included deductive reasoning based on theoretical frameworks and inductive reasoning based on new discoveries (Braun & Clarke, 2022b; Crinson & Leontowitsch, 2006).

As the findings chapters will indicate, each case was studied independently to gain specific understanding of the lived experience in its context. Word tables in excel were used as a tool, including memos while reading case transcripts and framework matrices for generating themes-based assertations from the case findings through reflexive thematic synthesis. Figure 3.5 provides an overview of the multiple case study design, integrating the theoretical frameworks with the cases.

Figure 3.5

Overview of the Research Design



3.4.2 Instruments

3.4.2.1 Semi-structured Interviews

In supporting the research design and the qualitative approach, semi-structured interviews were conducted to elicit the personal perspectives of the participants within each case. Key questions were used to guide and enable each participant group to describe their lived experiences of social communication transition planning (see appendix B – F). During the interviews I noted that some of the participants (parents and educators) were offering their perspectives which covered future questions. During the interviews, I changed the sequence of the questions to accommodate and encourage participants to disclose their social communication transition experiences without hesitation. The questions were open-ended, and I used probing techniques encouraging and empowering the participants to discuss their opinions and views (Ryan et al., 2009). Probing questions were designed in this research to encourage deep thought and reflection about how autistic young people currently in senior secondary school and autistic young adults post-transition experienced social communication planning. It also provided an opportunity for parents to reflect on what was occurring with their child currently or reflect on what occurred previously. Educators could explore their current school practices and provided thoughtful insights into socio-cultural practices that influenced the implementation and success of autistic young people in planning for social communication transition. Allowing for genuine dialogue was critical for understanding the lived experiences of the participants and supported my ontological and epistemological approach to this research.

Ten pilot interviews were conducted across the four participant cohorts, incorporating three autistic young people across senior secondary school and post-school participants, three parents and four educators. This was conducted to support the interview processes, test question integrity and to reduce any loss of meaning due to standard questioning (Crinson & Leontowitsch, 2006), determining the appropriateness of the original questions. In doing so, this process identified that some questions for the autistic senior secondary students required minor changes in language during the interviews to assist the autistic young people's understanding of the questions.

Interview protocols were developed to support a multi-case study approach, based on the theoretical frameworks of Kohler's taxonomy for transition programming (Kohler, 1996), focussing on self-determination and the transition framework for research (Trainor et al., 2019), concentrating on services and supports that develop social and communication skills. Protocols included short case study interviews, established around a maximum of one hour time limits, with a focus on building rapport and adapted to the needs of each participant (see appendix A - F for Interview protocols and Interview questions).

3.4.2.2 The Researcher as an Instrument

The researcher's capacity to self-reflect was critical to understanding the narratives of the participants and as Stake (1998, 2016) indicates, essential to the design of the research. The knowledge and experiences of the researcher as an instrument for unpacking the lived experiences of others in this research was one measure of how meaning was applied to understanding the social communication transition experiences of the participants.

In taking a reflective approach, I used a reflective journal, gathering my thoughts of the interview process, how the participants engaged in the interviews and what the individual participants required to be able to reflect on their own experiences without distraction or interruption. Some of the Autistic young participants wanted confirmation of their understanding, so I used reflective techniques, using their words to reiterate what they had said in response to specific questions. This process also allowed for free thought and promoted opportunities for the participants to freely speak.

As the principal investigator for generating data and being instrumental in translating and interpreting responses into meaningful information, I used reflexivity to strengthen my understanding of the social communication transition experiences of the participants. This approach enabled me to (a) recognise my epistemological stance that may result in bias, (b) accurately present participants' perspectives, (c) present clear, transparent and comparable findings and (d) acknowledge that the research methods utilised and findings may have intrinsic links to my own experiences and perspectives (confirmability) (Pezalla et al., 2012; Xu & Storr, 2012).

The use of reflexivity in this research, involved self-awareness and self-reflection (Mortari, 2015), and a self-conscious appraisal of how the researcher possibility influenced and was influenced by the research process and findings. Accounting for subjectivity in this research aimed to contribute to a more accountable and trustworthy contribution to scholarly research (McLeod, 2024b).

Personal and interpersonal reflexivity was used where I reflected on my background beliefs and knowledge in working with autistic young people in my counsellor role and the impact of any power dynamics when shaping my research interpretations (Walsh, 2003). Methodological and contextual reflexivity (Walsh, 2003) was also incorporated into evaluating how my choices aligned with the social-cultural research paradigm and theoretical frameworks underpinning this research (Commonwealth of Australia, 2013; Kohler, 1996; Kohler et al., 2016; Trainor et al., 2019; Wehmeyer, 2003).

Success in conducting semi-structured interviews relied on how I elicited confidential information from participants. This was influenced by my knowledge and skills in facilitating the flow of communication, observing body language of participants during the interviews, the interviewing techniques (Poggenpoel & Myburgh, 2003) and my ability to openly reflect on the meaning of the data. The art of hearing, relationship building and communicating to people to create a confidential space where participants are willing to share rich stories about their lives (Pezalla et al., 2012) is a skill that I have developed over fifteen years of knowledge and experience as a teacher and counsellor employed in tertiary education institutions.

3.4.3 Interview Procedure

Each participant was invited to engage in one interview with the researcher, with interviews being between 45- 60 minutes. The interview locations were varied, depending on the cohort of participants:

- Autistic senior secondary students, enrolled in general education in South Australian mainstream schools were interviewed at their school, in a quiet location recommended by the school.
- Parents of autistic senior secondary students and autistic young adults were interviewed at either their child's school, a public space of their choice or by audio conference.
- Autistic young adults were interviewed at a public space of their choice or online using the Microsoft TEAMS platform.
- Senior secondary educators were interviewed at their school or by video/audio conference.

At the introduction of each interview, I reiterated the meaning of consent and informed how each participant's data would be used, offered opt out at any time, during the interview or refusal to answer specific questions. The participants were also informed that they could ask for parts of the interview not to be used if they wished and were informed that they would receive a copy of their signed consent form via email within 1 week of the interview and could request their transcript to review as they saw fit. No participants requested a copy of their transcript. One participant did ask in the interview that a section of the transcript be deleted, and although they felt it necessary to provide the context, they did not want it transcribed. I noted the section during the interview and followed their instructions. The participants were informed that the interviews were confidential. All interviews were audio-recorded, and three interviews were video-recorded, using the online Microsoft TEAMS platform, which enabled me to revisit the data and check the verbatim extracts, while reflecting on the participants' accounts.

3.4.4 Pilot Interviews and Outcomes

Reflection on the interview questions occurred once 20% from each cohort had been interviewed. Educators, parents, and autistic young adults indicated their understanding and were able to answer the questions and there were no changes to the interview questions. All the autistic senior secondary students either asked for clarification on one or more of the questions or asked if the questions could be repeated. One student required a modified version of the questions to be sent to their parent. This individual wrote responses and drew pictures. Although the questions were written in easy English, I modified the language used in the questions so that the participants felt they understood what they were asked. I also added another question, asking the autistic senior secondary students who participated in an interview - “Did someone help you prepare for the interview?” to determine if the participants had discussed the questions with parents or caregivers (see 3.8 research bias).

3.5 Ethics process

This research required multiple levels of ethical approval, consisting of obtaining permission from Flinders University in the first instance, South Australian Department for Education, Catholic Education South Australia and Autism SA.

3.5.1 Flinders University

Complying with the standards of academic integrity described in the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Research Involving Humans (National Health and Medical Research Council, 2023), this research was approved by Flinders University Social and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee (SBREC) (Project ID 2588) (see appendix O Letter of approval).

Once Flinders University approval occurred, I applied to the Department for Education and Catholic Education to conduct research in their Senior Secondary Schools and Autism SA for conducting research with autistic young adults.

3.5.2 Government Schools

The ethics application to the South Australian Department for Education (Application for Data Or Research form) focused on the benefits and risks to the young people. The Department ethics application was approved (see appendix P Letter of approval DfE reference number 2021 – 0025), however I still required individual approval from the Principal/Director/Site Manager of each school to conduct the research. A letter of introduction (appendix Q Introductory Letter DfE schools) was sent with all applicable consent and information documentation so that the Principal/Director/Site Manager could make an informed decision as to whether the research should be conducted in their school.

3.5.3 Catholic Education

Within the same timeframe of writing to the Department for Education, I applied to the Director of Catholic Education for permission to contact Catholic schools in South Australia. Approval occurred within 6 weeks, and the approval was Research Request Reference 202111. The approval referred to conditions and requested a copy of the research findings (see appendix U Catholic Education approval).

3.5.4 Autism SA

I applied to Autism SA Professional Practice Committee (PPC) for permission to recruit and advertise my research, supplying the flyer, consent and information sheet for autistic young adults and providing my details so that they could contact me by email directly to set up a time to be interviewed. The PPC approval number PP2021004 and a request for a summary of the research is included (see appendix R PPC approval notice).

3.5.5 Other Ethical Considerations

Confidentiality of the participants who responded was paramount. Those who wished to provide their contact details did so voluntarily and no individuals have been identified separately in the discussion of the findings, with pseudonyms used to protect the participants' identity.

Informed consent and fully informed participation have been critical in this research as the interviewing of vulnerable cohorts such as autistic senior secondary students and autistic young adults occurred. Information sheets and consent forms were written in Easy English (see appendix I and H Information sheets and consent forms), so that the vulnerable participants had the capacity to fully consent (David et al., 2001).

A secure response portal has been used for the upload of data collected from the participants and data storage has been kept on the Flinders University password protected One Drive.

I acknowledge there have been ideological commitments that may influence the interpretation based on theoretical knowledge bound by literature, indicating social communication challenges inherent to autism (American Psychiatric Association, 2018, 2022b) and declare a conflict of interest being employed as a Counsellor within a tertiary institution in South Australia and the potential power imbalances in (a) knowledge and (b) the participant relationship (Ortlipp, 2008). In addressing the potential power imbalances as a Counsellor I drew on my extensive counselling techniques such as listening, empathy, understanding a participant's experience, authenticity, facilitating exploration, and non-judgemental methods of interaction, to ensure participants felt heard, valued and respected (Sutton, 2021).

3.6 Data Collection

3.6.1 The Recruitment Process

The recruitment and data collection period took eight months from initial contact to data analysis. The recruitment started at the school level, where an introductory letter, including the recruitment flyer, the information sheet and consent forms were attached to an email introducing the research and the context to the Principal of each school. The reference below pertaining to this research refers to the geographical location of schools within South Australia, including school zones and catchment areas, where regional is considered over 100km from the Adelaide City.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines regional as, “An administrative division, a subdivision of a larger geographical … unit, … specifically created to form part of a system of local government or administration, or defined for the purposes of demographic surveying, planning …” and metropolitan as “relating to or denoting a metropolis or large city” (Oxford English Dictionary, 2024).

My initial plan was to recruit senior secondary schools (years 10 – 12/13) within a 50 km range of Adelaide, but due to the impact of Covid19 on schools and teacher availability, recruitment was ongoing. Within the recruitment process the selection criteria changed to encompass, metropolitan and regional secondary schools (years 7-12/13) across South Australia. At the end of recruitment, eleven metropolitan schools and two regional schools agreed to participate in the research. Table 3.1 provides a summary of the school recruitment process.

Table 3.1

Summary of the School Recruitment Process

Population Pool	Round One	Round Two	Round Three
83 senior secondary schools (years 10 – 12/13). (Future Media, 2019)	10 Catholic Senior Secondary Schools 8 Independent Senior Secondary Schools 10 Government Senior Secondary Schools	0	0
83 Secondary Schools (years 7 – 12/13)	0	10 Catholic Secondary Schools 8 Independent Secondary Schools 10 Government Secondary Schools	0
78 Secondary Schools (years 7 – 12/13)	0	0	26 Catholic Secondary Schools 19 Independent Secondary Schools 33 Government Secondary Schools

Through purposeful sampling (Snowballing technique, see 3.6.2) recruitment extended to parents and autistic senior secondary students through the participating schools. Autistic young adults were recruited through parents, Tertiary Institutions within South Australia and through Autism SA. Each participant cohort will be explained in detail below (see 3.6.3).

3.6.2 Purposeful Sampling (Snowballing Technique)

In reference to the detailed participant recruitment process for each case below, purposeful sampling and snowballing techniques were used in this research. Purposeful sampling is a non-probability sampling technique used to select units or cases that have specific characteristics defined by the research (Naderifar et al., 2017; Patton, 1990). Each case or unit needed to meet the following specific criterion:

- Autistic senior secondary students aged between 15-18 and in years 10 – 12 at school
- Autistic young adults aged between 18-24, who may be employed, unemployed and/or engaged with Tertiary education.
- Parents of autistic senior secondary students or autistic young adults
- Educators in senior secondary schools who engaged with autistic senior secondary students.

Recruitment was challenging, due to the specific nature of the criterion, so I employed a snowballing technique. Snowballing is a flexible technique that enabled me to recruit through referral (Patton, 1990). As snowballing is a gradual process (Naderifar et al., 2017), the recruitment process occurred over eight months. Once referrals were initiated, interviews with the different cases occurred within shorter timeframes, usually within a 2–3-month period. Figures 3.6 – 3.8 demonstrate how the snowballing technique gathered participants who, on recommendations made a choice to be involved in my research. Snowballing started within the schools where Principals approached their assistants and inclusive education teams, who then disseminated the research invitation to mainstream educators, student service officers and parents of autistic senior secondary students. Parents of autistic young people either participated in the research or discussed the research with their autistic child or children (some of whom were still at school or had left school).

Figure 3.8 demonstrates how autistic young adults were recruited to participate. Permission for recruitment was sought through the three South Australian Universities (Flinders University, Adelaide University and University of South Australia), TAFE SA and Autism SA and dissemination for the opportunity to participate in the research occurred directly through TAFE SA student services staff, University Disability Officers and directly through an advertisement through the Autism SA website. Snowballing occurred though the Tertiary institutions where autistic young adults were directly informed about the research and had the choice to participate or not. One participant indicated they heard about the research through Autism SA and passed on the information to their friends in their support group.

Figure 3.6

Snowballing within Schools

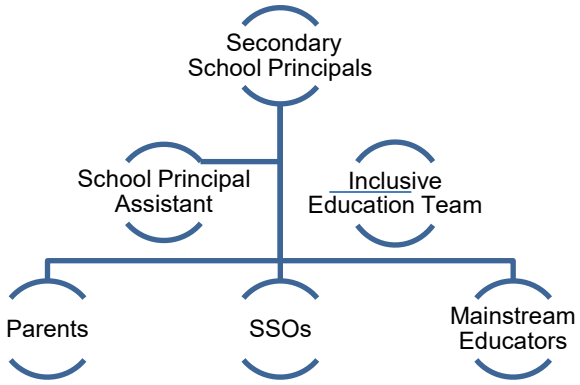


Figure 3.7

Snowball sampling Autistic Senior Secondary Students and Autistic Young Adults (parent guidance)

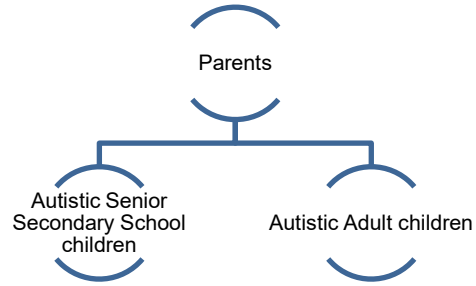
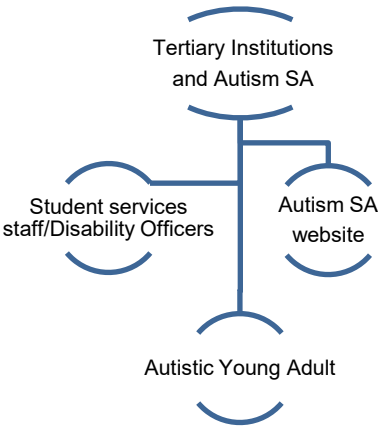


Figure 3.8

Snowball sampling Autistic Young Adult (dissemination through Tertiary Institutions)



3.6.3 Participants

3.6.3.1 Educator Interviews: Recruitment Processes.

In receiving an email response from the school Principals, acknowledging that their school would participate in the research, the Principals' personal assistants were the gatekeepers who then distributed the information to the schools' inclusive education teams. The inclusive education staff consisted of mainstream teachers who worked with autistic students, inclusive education managers and teaching staff, student support officers (SSO's)/education support officers (ESO's) and career coordinators.

Twenty-seven senior secondary educators participated in an Interview. Six from Catholic education, fifteen from Independent Schools, six from Government schools, three of which were Regional schools. Six of the educators were SSO/ESO within their schools and 20 were a combination of mainstream educators who also worked in the Inclusive units, and one was a senior school career coordinator.

The gatekeepers approached the school teaching staff, gathered consent, and set up interview times for the staff and researcher. In other schools the individual staff member contacted the researcher to set up an interview. Twenty-four of the twenty-seven interviews occurred at the schools and in person. Three regionally based school staff were interviewed online using the Microsoft TEAMS platform. Most of the educator interviews occurred between August and October 2021.

Table 3.2

Educator Demographics

Educator Type	**Schooling Sector**	**Educator Pseudonyms**	**Number of Schools**
Mainstream Educators in the Inclusion team	Government Metropolitan	Stacey, Tim, Ibrahim	3
	Government Regional	Elsie, Lily, Amelie	3
	Catholic Metropolitan	Anthony, Sam, Kathy, Gemma	4
	Independent Metropolitan	Randal, Damien, Vicki, Peter, Holly, Georgia, Alessandro, Matt, Gorgan, Simon	10
School Support Officers (SSOs/ESOs)	Catholic Metropolitan	Kate, Penny	2
	Independent Metropolitan	Paul, Tammy, Sean, Nardia	4
Career Coordinators	Independent Metropolitan	Ruby	1

3.6.3.2 Parent Interviews: Recruitment Processes.

The principals' personal assistants and the inclusive educations team managers/coordinators were the gate keepers for distribution of the research information and consent to the parents at each school. Parents were invited to participate and directly responded to the school. The schools set up the interview times with the parents and invited the researcher into the school for the interviews. Twelve parents participated in the interviews. Six had current senior secondary students at the schools and five were parents of autistic young adults who still had affiliation with the school through younger siblings. Five of the twelve parents had children who participated in the research as well. Eight of the twelve interviews occurred at the school, one was at the parent's place of work, one was conducted online using the Microsoft TEAMS platform and another one at a coffee shop. The parent interviews occurred during October – November 2021.

Table 3.3

Parent Demographics

Parent Pseudonyms	Parents with school aged autistic children	Parents with autistic adult children	Parent and child engaged in the interview process
Helen	yes	no	yes
Stefan	yes	no	yes
Shelley	yes	no	no
Nancy	no	yes	no
Joanne	no	yes	yes
Kamal	no	yes	no
Sophie	yes	no	no
Georgios	no	yes	no
Nick	yes	no	no
Petra	yes	no	no
Meredith	no	yes	yes
Azza	no	yes	yes

3.6.3.3 Autistic Young Adult Interviews: Recruitment Processes.

Post-school participants were sought through Autism SA, Community Bridging Services, Gold Foundation, Purple Orange, TAFE SA, Flinders University, University of Adelaide, and University of South Australia. I also approached via email the Prospect Centre Special School regarding passing on information to parents and youth over 18 and indicated that the school and educators did not need to be directly involved in the research.

Three South Australian universities were approached through the Disability and Inclusion teams. Flinders University advertised the research in "Ping", a student news bulletin and via Facebook through the Access and Inclusion team. The other two universities indicated that they did not advertise, so I went to the universities and put-up flyers on the student notice boards.

I sought permission to distribute the research flyers at the TAFE SA campuses from the Executive Director Student Services, and discussed my approach with the Manager of Student Services and the Senior Counselling team who were made aware of the research and were the gate keepers when discussing the research with potential participants.

The participants made contact directly by email and set up a time and place for the interviews. Six autistic young people participated in the interviews. Three had a parent to support them, one had a support worker for support and two participated in an independent interview.

Two of the autistic young adult participants were attending University (both worked under 5 hours a week), one was employed as a trainee (full-time), one was attending TAFESA (not employed), one had completed a VET qualification through TAFE SA (not employed), and another was not employed.

Three participants attended a TAFE SA campus to be interviewed, and one brought their parent with them. The three who requested an interview at a TAFE SA campus, had been TAFE students previously. One was known to the researcher. One interview was at a coffee shop with their parent present and two were interviewed online via Microsoft TEAMS, one with their parents for support. Four of the six, autistic young adults had a parent or mentor at the interview for support.

Table 3.4

Autistic Young Adult Demographics

Autistic adult pseudonyms	**Age range**	**Employment Status**	**Further education**
Jing	23-24	Part-time employment	University
William	21-22	Part-time employment	University
Isabelle	21-22	Employed	TAFE
Carmel	18-20	Trainee	TAFE
Lee	21-22	Unemployed	TAFE
Emma	18-20	Unemployed	No further education

3.6.3.4 Autistic Senior Secondary Student Interviews: Recruitment Processes.

The inclusive educators and the personal assistants to the school Principals were the gate keepers and sent the information to parents of autistic senior secondary students, so that parents and senior secondary students could make an informed decision to participate in an interview or not. Interview questions were also provided to the parents and autistic senior secondary students to make an informed decision and to feel more comfortable about participating. The educators indicated that they would be available to support senior secondary students in the interview if they

chose to participate. All school students were interviewed at the school in person and introduced by one of the inclusive education teachers. The interviews took place in the inclusive education units or learning centres at their schools. Seven autistic senior secondary school students from four different mainstream senior secondary schools participated. One student was in year 12, three were in year 11 and three were in year 10. All students elected to be interviewed without a parent or educator for support, however three of the year ten students were interviewed together (refer to table 3.5).

Table 3.5

Autistic Senior Secondary Students Demographics

Autistic school student pseudonyms	**School year level**	**Age range**	**School sector**	**School region**
John	12	17-18	Independent	Metropolitan
Omari	10	15-16	Catholic education	Metropolitan
Michael, Ben	10	15-16	Government	Metropolitan
Luciana, Karen, Toni *(group interview)*	11	16-17	Government	Metropolitan

3.6.3.5 Autistic Senior Secondary Student Group Interview: Ad hoc Occurrence.

At one of the Government schools three year ten autistic senior secondary students agreed to participate in a semi-structured interview once they had discussed participating with their parents. I met one of the young people in the reception area of the school and they escorted me to the learning centre. In the learning centre there were other students, two other young people told me that they were all going to participate in the interview. The three autistic senior secondary students indicated that they "felt more comfortable doing the interview together and all agreed to do this together". As three senior secondary students were willing to participate with each other's support, I agreed to interview the three at the same time, hence an ad hoc group interview occurred. I set the ground rules, where I asked questions and enabled each person to individually provide their answer without comments from the other young people in the room. They all agreed to do this.

3.7 Data Analysis

Social constructivist epistemologies underpinned this exploratory research. By adopting this approach, I acknowledged that participants' social communication experiences were interconnected with meaning, and meaningfulness is produced and reproduced within social contexts and central to the coding process (Byrne, 2022).

Exploratory research requires clear data analysis processes to support rigor and demonstrate trustworthiness (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006), which led me to choose Braun & Clarke's six step reflexive thematic analysis. An overview of the processes involved in this approach to analyses is provided below. In the findings chapters, participants' reflections, depicted in their own words strengthen data rigor and credibility (Patton, 1990).

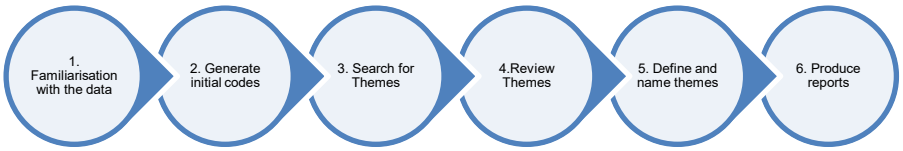
Reflexive thematic analysis is considered a reflection of a researcher's interpretations of patterns and meanings over a dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Byrne, 2022). The process of coding and thematic analysis in this research was flexible and organic (Byrne, 2022), developmental and interpretive, producing new patterns of meaning throughout the reflexive approach (Braun & Clarke, 2019, 2022a; Byrne, 2022).

Based on the Braun and Clarke model, (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019) (Figure 10), I sought to identify, analyse and report patterns and themes describing the data in rich detail (Boyatzis, 1998) and became familiar with individual experiences and views (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The six-step process involved:

1. familiarising myself with the data by reading, noting, and re-reading.
2. generating initial codes that related to my research questions.
3. searching for themes by examining the codes against the theoretical frameworks supporting this research and identifying themes that appeared to be different.
4. reviewing themes using deductive and inductive analysis.
5. defining and naming themes against theoretical frameworks and the discovered new themes.
6. producing reports through analytical narratives (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Figure 3.9

Braun & Clarke 2006 Reflexive Thematic Analysis Model



(Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019, 2022b)

Using thematic analysis in psychology. Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3(2), 77-101, © copyright Jul 21, 2008, reprinted by permission of Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group, https://www.tandfonline.com.

The method of analysis I adopted was a hybrid approach using both deductive and inductive methods to support the case study design. The hybrid approach can be described as a deductive, theoretical, analysis-driven process and a inductive, data-driven process (Swain, 2018). In the case of this research, data was not coded against a pre-set code-book, but openly-coded to best represent the social communication transition meaning provided by the participants (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Clarke & Braun, 2013). Deductive analysis contributed to open coding by producing themes that were similar to the theoretical frameworks and of significance to the research questions however, still representative of the meanings emphasised by the participants (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Byrne, 2022; Clarke & Braun, 2013).

The deductive framework linked theory derived from the review of social communication, transition, and employment literature, being Kohler's (1996) Taxonomy for Transition Programming, Wehmeyer et al (2003) Self-Determination Theory, Trainor et al (2019) Transition Framework for Research, and the Commonwealth of Australia's (2013) Core Skills for Work Development Framework, to generate data-driven codes and themes (refer to Tables 3.6 – 3.9, pp 91 - 92).

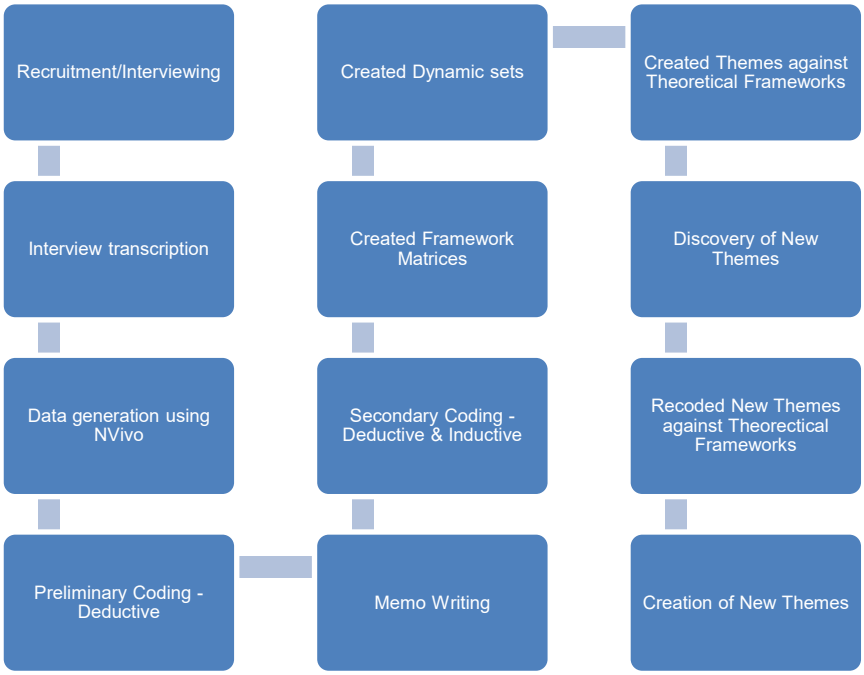
Inductive analysis was revolutionary in the sense that it enabled an organic analytical process during and following reflective thematic analysis. The progressive nature of inductive analyses facilitated a greater familiarity with the data, which resulted in new patterns of meaning (Byrne, 2022; Gibbs, 2007).

Differences between codes and themes in reflexive thematic analysis, have been discussed in the literature (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun & Clarke, 2021; Byrne, 2022) indicating that codes are often seen as more concise and themes are broader and form a pattern of information. In this research I used the terms interchangeably, as some of the codes became a theme and some of the themes were created out of several codes. Each were significant and relevant to answering my research questions.

A diagrammatic representation of the analyses processes is proposed in the Data Coding Model (Figure 3.10). The process of analysis described in this chapter, follows the Braun and Clarke (2006) six step reflexive thematic analysis model and integrates the stages of coding below. Although the model appears linear the process was not. Once codes were generated there was an integration of stages and processes, creating fluidity and correlations between data generated, deductive and inductive coding, reflective thematic analysis and the use of memos, spreadsheets, framework matrices, dynamic sets, and recoding in the creation of new themes.

Figure 3.10

Data Coding Model



3.7.1 Step One: Familiarises Oneself with the Data.

The interviews were recorded using a handheld recorder, and there were no handwritten or typed notes taken in the interviews. The initial transcription occurred under the consent of participants by using the transcription tool Otter.ai. The transcription service data was password protected and once transcription occurred the files were downloaded to the Flinders University One-drive password protected system and permanently deleted from the transcription service. I informed Flinders University Ethics Committee of the use of Otter.ai and received confirmation that an amendment to ethics was not required.

The process I used with the Otter.ai transcription service, was to upload the transcripts under participant's names in separate folders, each created as I uploaded individual interview data. I

then activated the transcription of the interviews and listened to the interviews as they were transcribed. Otter.ai technology voice activated software enabled transcription and listening simultaneously. Otter.ai software was able to identify work clouds for each transcript and samples will be provided at the end of this step (Figures 3.11 – 3.13-word cloud examples). The word clouds were kept in a separate document to the transcripts. I compared the word cloud results within each cohort. My purpose was to identify initial commonalities within each participant cohort, so that I could start to understand the data.

Once transcribed, I then re-listened to the interviews and checked the transcripts for accuracy, identified any content that referred to a person's name and removed any identifying material. Names were replaced in the content with the first letter of the name. Pseudonyms were created to deidentify the data/participants to ensure confidentiality. (refer to participant demographics (Tables 3.1- 3.5) for pseudonyms).

Figure 3.11

Word Cloud Educators

Figure 3.12

Word Cloud Parents

Figure 3.13

Word Cloud Autistic Senior Secondary Students and Autistic Young Adults

https://www.freewordcloudgenerator.com

3.7.2 Step Two: Generating Initial Codes: Theoretical/Deductive coding. – Initiating Inductive Coding

The transcripts were uploaded to NVivo version release number 1.6.1 (1137) for data analysis. File classifications were created under Imported data, File Classification, to reflect the four cohorts that were interviewed: (1) parents, (2) post-school students (referring to post-school autistic young adults), (3) school students (referring to autistic senior secondary students), and (4) senior secondary educators. Resources were also added in this section as a reference to the four theoretical frameworks used for deductive coding (1) A Framework for Research in Transition: Identifying Important Areas and Intersections for Future Research (Trainor et al., 2019); (2) Core Skills for Work Developmental Framework (Commonwealth of Australia, 2013); (3) Self-Determination Theory (Wehmeyer et al., 2003); and (4) Taxonomy for Transition Programming 2.0 (Kohler et al., 2016) and codes were established under each theoretical framework, initially to assist in the process of coding. Examples of deductive codes are provided below (Tables 3.15 - 3.18).

Cases and case classifications were established referring to (a) post-school tertiary education institutes and/or employment (autistic young adults), (b) senior secondary school educators and (c) senior secondary schools in SA, which included parents and senior secondary school autistic individuals. I reviewed the transcripts according to the theoretical frameworks, while looking for new and emerging themes and began recording what I thought were new codes. Examples of Inductive codes produced from my first round of coding included: confidence, safe spaces, school survival, mentors, and employer knowledge and resistance (see Table 3.14).

Table 3.6

Self-Determinations Theory codes (Wehmeyer et al 2003)

Theorectical basis - Self Determination Theory		
	Motivation = Compentence, Autonomy and Relatedness	
Competence	*effectiveness in dealing with the environment*	Problem-Solving
Autonomy	*control over their lives*	Choice
		Assertiveness
		Empowerment
		Self-representation
		Self-Advocacy
Relatedness	*need to have close, affectionate relationships with others*	Self-awareness
		Communication

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Table 3.7

Taxonomy for Transition Programming 2.0 codes (Kohler et al 2016)

"Removed due to copyright restriction"

Table 3.8

Transition Framework for Research (Trainor et al 2019)

Theoretical Framework - Transition framework for Research (Trainor 2019)	
Culture	shape transition - basis for legislation specific to transition in Australia
Services and Supports	*Transition Planning* Educational supports - special education, disability, mainstream education Assessment Planning Instruction Relationships
Levers	Law, funding and policies shape transition - basis for legislation specific to transition in Australia
Quality of Life = Experiences and Outcomes	*Key transition indicators for success* employment opportunities tertiary education opportunities degree of inclusivity self-determination friendships community engagement belonging

Table 3.9

Core Skills for Work Development Framework (Commonwealth of Australia 2013)

Theoretical Framework	**Supporting the Key competencies**
	Successful participation in work and tertiary education are:
	(a) the capacity to effectively communicate ideas and information in a variety of verbal and non-verbal settings
	(b) interact effectively with others including understanding and responding appropriately both one-on-on and in groups.
Navigate the world of work	
	Manage career and work life
	Manage work life
	Work with roles, rights and protocols
Interact with others	
	Communicate for work
	Connect and work with others
	Recognise and utilise diverse perspectives
Get the work done	
	Plan and organise
	Make decisions
	Setting work goals
	Identifiy and solve problems
	Create and Innovate
	Work in a digital world

During this initial stage I also created a code book in relation to the four theoretical frameworks utilised for deductive coding and to assist with identifying any new codes (Inductive coding).

1) Self-determination Theory (SDT) – Wehmeyer et al (2003)
2) Taxonomy for Transition Programming 2.0 – Kohler (2016)
3) Transition framework for research – Trainor et al (2019)
4) Core Skills for Work - Core Skills for Work: Development Framework: Commonwealth of Australia. (2013)

The purpose of the code book was to develop a deep understanding of the theories underpinning deductive coding and definitions in relation to this research. Tables 3.10 – 3.13 provide examples of the code book.

Table 3.10

Code Book Taxonomy for Transition Programming – Kohler et al 2016

Taxonomy for Transition Programming - Kohler et al 2016			
Theoretical Basis	**School Transition Planning**	**Codes**	**Definitions**
"Removed due to copyright restriction"		IEP	Document that identifies student interests, goals at school and post-secondary school
		PSTRAT	School's processes focusing on transition while meeting individual needs
		SP	Student and family engagement in planning and making decisions
		INV	Family involvement in the entire transition planning process: IEP, assessment, service delivery
		EMP	Structured school methods to identify specific family needs
		PREP	Family learning: advocacy, self-determination, empowerment strategies
		PC	Flexibility in the educational transition plan to meet the needs of the student
		PE	Data systems used to monitor and assess the individualised programs
		STRATP	Ongoing development of evidence-based practices in supporting individual and family needs
		PP	Alignment with performance and monitoring of evidence-based school practices
		RD	Teacher and support staff PD in supporting individuals and school funding allocations
		SC	School environment responsive to student and family needs
		CF	Interagency and cross-agency policy and process support
		CSD	Coordinated approach to planning and development of internal and external supports linking to family and student need
		A	Formative, summative, remedial, and multi-testing opportunities offered
		AS	Preparation of academic skills, strategies, and behaviours
		LSE	Self-determination, interpersonal, independent skills development

Table 3.11

Code Book Transition Framework for Research – Trainor et al 2019

Transition Framework for Research			**Trainor et al 2019**
Theoretical Basis	**Transition planning over the life span**	**Codes**	**Definitions**
Culture	Shapes transition	CUL	Families, internal school groups, external providers, community, and social capital influencing society, impacting on an individual's interconnectedness to societal interactions
Services and Supports	Transition planning	TP	Process and practices enabling an individual to move from school to postschool education or work and independent living
	Educational support – special education, disability mainstream education	ES	General and specialised school supports for young people living with disability and the engagement of educational and other supports
	Assessment	A	Formative, summative, remedial, and multi-testing opportunities offered
	Planning	P	An individual's capacity to think about activities required to achieve a desired goal
	Instruction	I	Co-curricular, extracurricular embedding universal design and community activities used to support an individual's needs
	Relationships	R	The capacity for an individual to connect and behave toward each other
Levers	Law, funding, resources, and policies shaping transition	LEV	Basis for legislation and policies and how transition is funded and resources in the Australian context
Quality of Life – Experiences and Outcomes	Key Transition indicators for success		How individuals flourish in life
	Employment opportunities	EO	Employability skills, opportunities and engagement in the workplace
	Tertiary education opportunities	TEO	The level of opportunity to engage in tertiary education
	Degree of inclusivity	DINC	Level of opportunity to be part of community, work, and life
	Self-determination	SD	An individual's capacity to manage self and think for themselves
	Friendships	F	Mutual trusted relationships between two or more people

Table 3.12

Code Book Self-Determination Theory – Wehmeyer et al 2003

Self-Determination Theory - Wehmeyer et al 2003			
Theoretical Basis	**Motivation**	**Codes**	**Definitions**
Motivation			Reasons behind a want or desire to achieve a goal
	Competence	COMP	Seeking to control an outcome
	Autonomy	AUTO	Desire to be an agent of one's own life
	Relatedness	RELAT	Willingness to connect to others
Competence			Effectiveness in dealing with the environment
	Problem-solving	PROBS	Capacity to find a solution to a situation
Autonomy			Control over their lives
	Choice	C	Capacity to choose between two or more possibilities
	Assertiveness	ASSERT	Capacity to stand up for self
	Empowerment	EMP	Capacity to become stronger
	Self-representation	SREP	Ability to stand up for self
	Self-Advocacy	SAD	Ability to speak up for self
Relatedness			Need to have close, affectionate relationships with others
	Self-awareness	SAW	Conscious knowledge of one's own character and feelings
	Communication	COM	Capacity to transfer information from one place, person, or group to another

Table 3.13

Code Book Core Skills for Work – Commonwealth of Australia 2013

Core Skills for Work - Commonwealth of Australia. (2013). Core Skills for Work: Development Framework (www.deewr.gov.au/csfw)			
Theoretical Basis	**Supporting Key Competencies**	**Codes**	**Definitions**
Participation	Successful participation in work and tertiary education:		(a) the capacity to effectively communicate ideas and information in a variety of verbal and non-verbal settings (b) interact effectively with others including understanding and responding appropriately both one-on-on and in groups.
Navigate the world of Work		NTWW	Understanding work performance
	Manage career and work life	MC	Identify work options, gain work, develop relevant skills and knowledge
	Work with roles, rights, and protocols	RP	Operate within legal rights and responsibilities. Recognised processes and procedures
	Manage work life	WL	
Interact with others		IwO	Understanding workplace interactions
	Communicate for work	CfW	Recognise and use workplace communication protocols
	Connect and work with others	CWO	Capacity to understand others and build rapport
	Recognise and utilise diverse perspectives	RDP	Recognise and respond to different values, beliefs and behaviours and manage conflict appropriately
Get the work done		GtWD	Completing work commitments
	Plan and organise	PO	Steps needed to undertake tasks and manage workloads
	Make decisions	MD	Capacity to make different decisions
	Setting work goals	WG	Capacity to set priorities with work tasks
	Identify and solve problems	ISP	Capacity to anticipate/identify issues and take steps to solve an issue
	Create and innovate	CIN	Capacity to challenge perceptions and recognise opportunities
	Work in a digital world	WDW	Capacity to understand and use workplace appropriatetechnologies

3.7.3 Step Three: Searched for Themes: Analysing through Memo-writing.

While reviewing and coding the transcripts, NVivo memos were used to record narratives according to developing themes identified through the theoretical frameworks, simultaneously identifying new and emerging codes. The memos were developed under four participant groups:

(a) Educator views
(b) Parent views
(c) Post-school autistic individuals
(d) Autistic school students

and three major areas that reflect and support the research questions.

(e) Self-determination and advocacy
(f) Social communication skills
(g) Transition planning

As I reviewed the transcripts, repeated ideas became apparent, and I added my thoughts and quotes from the participants that related to my research questions. As the process of memo writing, reflexive thematic analysis, and the use of spreadsheets continued, I started to see reoccurring patterns and themes in the data. I also developed a code book for the emerging themes (see Table 3.14) to assist in clarifying and bringing meaning to the data through definitions.

Table 3.14

Inductive Codes-Emerging Themes

Inductive Coding – Emerging Themes			
Discussions	**Emerging Themes**	**Codes**	**Definitions**
Employment in the Australian Context			
	Post-school funding	PSF	NDIS funding model
			Reduction in funding support at different ages/post-school
			Funding for post-school employability skills
	Employer knowledge and resistance	ENR	The employment system in Australia
			Structures to support autistic individuals
			Understanding of autism and how to support in the workplace
Investing in Transition	Parents employing mentors	PEM	Employment of external mentors in senior secondary school
			Post-school engagement/employment of mentors
School Survival	Autistic kids' view of survival at school	SS	Surviving socially/building friendships
			Surviving transition – movement from primary to secondary school
			Surviving transition – middle school to senior school
			Surviving transition – senior school - post-school
			Safe Spaces at school
Autistic Young Adults' view of work, life readiness	Confidence	CON	Belief in one-self – feeling secure in one's capacity
	Independence	INDEP	Making choices on their own
			NOTE: Not the same as autonomy, self-determination- maybe the lever for and supports theories but appears to be different in the context of these finding, especially for ASD individuals and to a lesser degree parents.
			NOTE: Relates to SDT- Relatedness - Self-awareness and Communication. Relates to Transition Framework - Quality of Life- Friendships, Belonging, Inclusivity, Community engagement

3.7.4 Step Four: Reviewing Themes/Collapsing Codes.

I used NVivo dynamic sets to assist in collapsing the codes and recoding. I reviewed the codes within the transcripts and used memos to assist and spreadsheets as a tool to clearly identify where key words and themes connected with the overarching theories. Simultaneously I relooked at the inductive codes, which were collapsed and re-collapsed until themes became evident.

Using NVivo version release number 1.6.1 (1137), fifteen Framework Matrices reflected key concepts developing from data analysis. The purpose of the matrices was to review themes according to different key concepts developed through deductive and inductive analysis. In this process key words were used to compare and analyse the data (Table 3.15).

Table 3.15

Framework Matric from NVivo Analysis sample

Framework Matrices
⊕ Name
::: Confidence Self-Determination Theory (SDT) and parents
::: Confidence SDT and educators
::: Confidence SDT and post school students
::: Confidence and Independence post-school
::: Confidence SDT and school students
::: Emotional regulation SDT transition taxonomy educators
::: Emotional regulation SDT transition taxonomy school students
::: Emotional regulation SDT transition taxonomy post school
::: Emotional regulation SDT transition taxonomy parents
::: Employer resistance parent view
::: Employer resistance- post-school views
::: Funding - Employment system parent views
::: Gap in teacher education
::: Mentors – parents' investment
::: Safe spaces school students
::: Safe spaces SSO ESO comments
::: Safe spaces teachers' comments
::: Student survival
::: Tension between school and preparing for transition
::: Transition Core Skills for Work

3.7.5 Step Five: Define and Name Themes.

I initially used theoretical frameworks to assist to define and name themes. Inductive codes were ascertained by recognising that the ideas and comments made by the participants did not fit with current theories and this initiated the development of new concepts. Using spreadsheets (see appendix W - X) and NVivo, similar ideas and concepts were grouped together to reduce repetitiveness and to enable an in-depth analysis of their meaning in the context of overarching ideas, for example: surviving school includes student survival and safe spaces at school.

I used several coding spreadsheets (refer to appendix W - X) to develop the overarching ideas into themes, sub-themes and singular ideas that may constitute a code. Some of these singular codes were a critical reflection of the participant's experience and during reflective thematic analysis. I have represented these in the three Findings chapters.

The Recoding (Table 3.16) below provides an example of the reflexive thematic analysis and naming conventions using NVivo. This was a critical part of understanding the data and identifying the gaps in literature this research sought to investigate.

Table 3.16

NVivo Recoding sample

All Codes
⊕ Name
::: Employability skills RECODED Taxonomy - student development-instructional context (partly Investing in Transition)
::: Tension between school and preparing for Transition RECODED Transition
::: Gap in Teacher Education RECODED Transition Framework Culture
::: ASD understanding of Transition RECODED (SDT, Taxonomy, CSfW and new concept-INDEPENDANCE)
::: Post school communication social interactions RECODED SDT Transition
::: Emotional regulation difficulties RECODED SDT- Taxonomy-Transition
::: Parents employing mentors (Investing in Transition) NEW THEME
::: Safe spaces (Survive School) NEW THEME
::: Student Survival (Survive School) - Transition - friendships NEW THEME
::: Employer knowledge and resistance (Employment Systems) NEW THEME
::: Funding for students (Employment System) - NEW THEME
::: Confidence (SDT and Transition) NEW THEME
::: Self-Directed Planning RECODED to Taxonomy - student support
::: Lack of post school supports RECODED Taxonomy Confidence
::: Transition facilitated by parent RECODED to Transition Family

3.7.6 Step Six: Producing Thematic Reports.

Thematic reports were produced in two ways to support the research aims and design. The utilisation of spreadsheets was essential in understanding the data, as this enabled me to breakdown the themes into what I called 'overarching discussion' and see which codes or sub-themes fit with each concept. I then sought to break the overarching themes into smaller themes and established evidence-based singular codes that were critical to establishing new knowledge. I have used themes and codes interchangeably for this purpose. The Findings for Discussion (Table 3.17) extract provides an example of the process to create emerging themes and new knowledge. Also see the Appendix W - X for detailed information on themes, findings and recoding.

Using NVivo version release number 1.6.1 (1137), findings tables were produced through queries, to further support understanding of the data, in relation to the theoretical frameworks and new knowledge. The outcomes and key findings are discussed in chapters four – six.

Table 3.18 is one example of how NVIVO was utilised to produce reports. The example provided referenced self-determination theory and the new theme of confidence discussed by autistic young adults. The purpose of the query reports was to determine the relationships between new and existing knowledge. Throughout this process overarching themes were identified for further discussion in chapter seven.

Table 3.17

Findings for Discussion extract

Discussion	Result	Research Question	Story for codes	Notes
Survive School	Safe Spaces (new theme)	YES answers: How senior secondary school students and recent school graduates with autism describe their experiences of support for transition to post-school settings	Senior secondary students having the availability of a space they can go to when overwhelmed, needing time to self-regulate, and feel that they are safe. Safe spaces mean a place where there is no judgement	Related to school environment - interoception rooms, student hubs, learning centres, learning pods (1st half refers to educator interviews describing what they see as a safe space at school). Then young ASD people talking about their experience.

Table 3.18

NVivo Query findings example– comparing Autistic Young Adult data of confidence against Self-Determination Theory.

	A : Confidence
1 : Motivation	47.36%
2 : Autonomy	25.93%
3 : Assertiveness	0%
4 : Self-Advocacy	0.12%
5 : Self-Representation	0%
6 : Problem-Solving	0%
7 : Relatedness	19.43%
8 : Communication	7.17%
9 : Self Awareness	0%

3.8 Research Bias

I am aware of my counselling experience in working with autistic young adults in a Tertiary setting, and used a reflective journal when listening and transcribing the interviews from autistic young adults so that any bias can be recognised. In reflection, I noted that the bias was reduced by the research focus which was to understand the experiences in senior secondary school social communication transition, rather than the tertiary education sector.

My major concern was the interviewing in the tertiary environment, specifically TAFE SA participants. All the previous TAFE SA participants chose to attend a TAFE SA campus to be interviewed, one brought their parent with them, and one had a mentor. They were all campuses I previously have been associated with. Confidentiality was ensured as a counsellor, as I work with clients all the time and others on site would not have been aware of the reason the participant had attended a meeting with me.

In reflection, I had some concerns about the senior secondary students discussing the questions with parents and how this may have influenced the students. To address this, I asked the senior secondary students as part of the interview if they had had a conversation with their parents about the questions and if so, noted this when writing up responses. As indicated by the senior secondary school participants there were none who discussed the questions, their discussions focused on what the research was and consent.

3.8.1 Trustworthiness

The process of data analysis in this research, demonstrates how interpretations and overarching themes, sub-themes and singular coding are supported by excerpts from the raw data to ensure rigor and direct links to participants' accounts of their social communication transition experiences (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). Whilst member checking is considered to increase validity of qualitative research (Crinson & Leontowitsch, 2006), in this research the participants were offered the opportunity to view their transcripts, and not one of the participants agreed to do so or requested a copy of the transcript at a later date.

In demonstrating rigor and trustworthiness, I acknowledge that I was not neutral in the process and came from the position of an agent interpreting the participants' realities (Swain, 2018) and in doing so, used reflective and reflexive thematic analysis to demonstrate a process of visibility and transparency. Likewise, discussions of the various processes within this research occurred with my supervisors who challenged my choices, with the aim to encourage in depth reflection.

In supporting the idea of transparency and critical self-reflection (Ortlipp, 2008), I managed and noted any bias, preconceived ideas and changes to the interview questions through reflexive (Janis, 2022), and reflective journaling (Rodgers, 2002). This enabled me to reflect on the data presented, the interview and analysis process, and consider the ethical implications of potential power imbalances in (a) knowledge and (b) the participant relationship (Etherington, 2004; Ortlipp, 2008). Many of the interviews for each cohort occurred within short timeframes, so reflective journaling occurred at the end each week or month of interviewing. I have attached an excerpt from my reflective journal as an appendix, as I thought it was important to demonstrate credibility through this process (see appendix V).

The concept of the insider/outsider (Breen, 2007; Gair, 2012), had significant bearing on this research also, as I support autistic tertiary students and in one case, had an awareness of tertiary participant's experiences. To manage the perceived power imbalance, there was a disclosure statement in the consent form so that participants could disclose the conflict of interest prior to any interviews. In such a case, I discussed the conflict of interest with the participant.

As an outsider to the human experience in this research and as a professional counsellor (Australian Counselling Association, 2024), where impartiality is a critical ethical component of my work, I was able to be more independent from the emotive responses of the participants and present a wider perspective (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009), in an authentic and accurate manner, showing an appreciation of the participants' lived experiences (Ortlipp, 2008). Table 3.19 lists different aspects of trustworthiness and how they were addressed in the method.

Table 3.19

Aspects of Trustworthiness

Aspect	Method
Rigor	Crystalising themes and codes (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006) Supervisor discussions Member Checking (Crinson & Leontowitsch, 2006)
Dependability	Reflexive journaling (Janis, 2022)
Credibility	Reflective journaling (Rodgers, 2002)
Professional Counsellor	Ethical practice (Australian Counselling Association, 2024)

3.9 Summary

This chapter described the qualitative research paradigm grounded in social constructivism which I used to explore the voices of autistic senior secondary students and autistic young adults, and the non- autistic voices of parents and educators who supported autistic young peoples' social communication transition planning from school to tertiary education and employment. It provided an overview of my ontological and epistemological stance, acknowledging multiple realities, interpretations and experiences from the various participants (Saunders et al., 2019). Participants for the current research were sourced through the Department for Education, Catholic Education, Independent schools, Autism SA, TAFE SA, Flinders University, University of South Australia and the University of Adelaide. The research included thirteen autistic young people, twelve parents and twenty-seven educators.

I used an interpretive method, (Adams, 2006; Charles, 2018; Tsulaia, 2023), and a case study design bound in different contexts (Braun & Clarke, 2022b; Creswell, 2013; Stake, 1995; Stake, 2006), to explore the multi-lived experiences. The qualitative research design incorporated both reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019, 2021; Byrne, 2022; Etherington, 2004), and framework matrix analysis, (Goldsmith, 2021; Ritchie & Spencer, 1994). The hybrid data analysis approach, included deductive and inductive reasoning (Braun & Clarke, 2022b; Crinson & Leontowitsch, 2006). Deductive coding was based on four theoretical frameworks (Commonwealth of Australia, 2013; Kohler et al., 2016; Trainor et al., 2019; Wehmeyer et al., 2003), in conjunction with inductive coding, exploring new and emerging themes. The following three chapters report the findings from the research process.

CHAPTER FOUR – FINDINGS: AUTISTIC SENIOR SECONDARY STUDENTS AND AUTISTIC YOUNG ADULTS

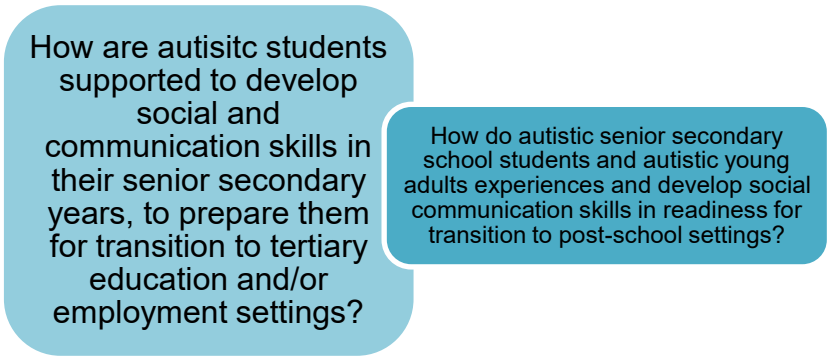
…“teach us how to live in the real world by ourselves. Most of the time, people my age don't know what to do” (Isabelle 3/11/21).

4.1 Introduction

The purpose of this research was to understand how autistic senior secondary school students and recent school graduates experience support for transition to post-school settings. This chapter presents findings generated from the lived experiences shared by thirteen autistic young people with a particular focus on social communication and transition to post-school settings. The findings provide insight and responses to the research questions as noted in Figure 4. In analysing the stories from the autistic young people, several recurring experiences emerged which served to generate six key themes. The themes are (1) Social communication experiences, (2) Developing confidence and independence, (3) Friendships and trustworthy relationships, (4) Preparing for Transition: Developing skills for work, (5) Mentors role in transition support, and (6) Employment experiences.

Figure 4

Overarching Research Question and Autistic Senior Secondary School Student question



4.2 Social Communication Experiences

A common theme emerging from the data concerned Autistic young people's experiences of their social communication development during secondary school. In the interviews the autistic young people were asked how they experienced social interactions with their peers, and what support they received from their teachers to help them learn to communicate with others. This type of inquiry aimed to understand their feelings towards how they communicated and the impact this had on their social interactions with others. One hundred percent of the autistic secondary students spoke about their social communication development as a necessary skill, but all reported having difficulties in developing these skills.

Autistic secondary students presented the idea, that social communication skills would somehow develop over time. One participant, Ben, (8/11/21) said,

> "I feel like I still have a lot of work to do regarding social connections, … but I feel like under pressure that I have to do something. Eventually, I would get them. Because eventually, I'm going to have to interact with people. So eventually, I'm going to develop these skills sooner or later".

Ben didn't elaborate on where the pressure to improve his social communication skills was coming from, himself or others, but he clearly sensed the need for ongoing interactions with people that required relevant communication skills. He hoped these would develop with time rather than having a clear sense of how he could develop such skills.

Several participants also discussed how they tried to interact and communicate with their peers at school and how the reactions of their teachers shaped their experiences within the classroom which translated to communication difficulties outside the classroom. Ben (8/11/21) said,

> "If you've interacted with your friends on your table and maybe ask them a couple questions…maybe because the teacher could not have made something very clear. But [the teacher] just simply tells us to stop talking. Or [the teacher] makes it uncomfortable to keep talking. And then it kind of affects outside of the class as well. My school teachers don't really put much of an effort into communicating with you unless you've done something horrible".

Ben didn't explain how his experience of communication with teachers in the classroom affected his communication external to the classroom but there is a sense he didn't feel comfortable about communicating with his teachers.

Another autistic senior secondary student, Michael, explained the reactions of his teacher when he tried to communicate through another means (writing an online query). The teacher's reactions generated a feeling of being scared which may subsequently lead Michael to experience doubt

about how to best communicate with the teacher in the future. Michael's experience also highlighted how the teacher's communication preferences were prioritised over his own.

Michale (8/11/21) said, "And if I had a question, [the teacher] would be very forceful and say, come outside, I need to talk with you. And [the teacher would] say, I don't want you sending that online day map message, you have to ask me a question in person. To me, that was all very scary".

Half of the autistic senior secondary students interviewed discussed their social communication difficulties, indicating that they preferred not to communicate but, if they were required to, it was limited. The participants' responses below may suggest a reluctance to engage in social communication with others, especially with unfamiliar people but, confidence in how to communicate with others may also be an influencing factor in their preferences and this is discussed further in the following section. Toni, Karen, and Luciana commented on their responses to how they communicate at school. Toni (17/11/21). said, "I most likely won't [communicate]". Karen (17/11/21) used written language to communication, "I just type. I text in very big text and bold" and Luciana (17/11/21) indicated "well, I don't talk a lot, when I'm in a group".

Participants aged in their early twenties also reflected on their experiences during their final school years indicating that social communication skills were not developed to a sufficient level to be effective communicators after leaving school. Jing (27/9/21) said, "there wasn't a lot of the social communication development - not really, there could have been … but because I wasn't diagnosed, I was put into the mainstream".

Others noted they were "catching up" with the social communication norms required post-school with William (15/10/21) saying: "I've been catching up now, … but back then very, very socially unaware, I think we're unaware".

The social communication experiences of the autistic senior secondary students and autistic young adults generated a feeling that they did not have the necessary social communication skills for transitioning into post-school employment and study and many felt they were not fully supported by their senior secondary teachers to develop such skills. This finding is supported by other research (Alexander & Bissaker, 2023; Brownlow et al., 2021), in which student-teacher relationships are often compromised by misunderstandings of communication support needs. For example, Brownlow et.al. (2021) stated,

> "Effective communication was considered a two-way process, with the need for teachers and others to suspend some of their previous assumptions concerning the capabilities of autistic people and listen and respond to students as individuals according to the needs for support" (p.6).

The social communication experiences of the participants in this research suggested they may have been too anxious to communicate their needs to teachers due to negative experiences and therefore an opportunity to focus on improving their social communication skills was missed.

4.3 Developing Confidence and Independence

As autistic senior secondary school students and autistic young adults explored their social communication experiences, the expression of highly emotive feelings pertaining to confidence and independence emerged as a critical theme.

Most of the autistic senior secondary school students spoke about confidence, more than independence as they indicated that most decisions were under the direction of parents and teachers. They also commented that they were not the final decision-makers and relied on their parents and families and to a lesser degree their teachers for guidance on decisions. Ben indicated that his family were supportive of his interests but still made the final decisions and he was comfortable with this. Ben (8/11/21) said, “Usually, I just say that I want to do this. And then my parents or my teacher’s kind of do something. And then after that told me whether my decision is reasonable”.

There is a large body of knowledge that supports these findings highlighting the reliance on families by autistic young people when making decisions (Bianco et al., 2009; Kohler et al., 2016; Test et al., 2014; Trainor et al., 2019; Wagner et al., 2012; Wehman et al., 2014). Wehman et al (2014) suggests, “in general, individuals with ASD do not experience the autonomy or independence expected of youth transitioning to adulthood… Individuals with ASD continue to be dependent on their families” (p.31).

Michael (8/11/21) referred to his own confidence as a ‘lack of courage’ and reflected on his engagement with class group activities indicating, “I guess I didn't really have the courage to speak up and have as much input as I could have had”.

Participants in their early twenties revealed what they perceived as limitations concerning their own confidence and independence post-school, indicating they were not ‘independent enough’ and struggle in adult life. Isabelle (3/11/21) said, …teach us how to live in the real world by ourselves. Most of the time, people my age don't know what to do”. Isabelle’s experiences and statement proposed that confident and independent skills were not developed to a sufficient level during senior secondary school to support post-school employment and community life.

William presented his feelings concerning independence, indicating school and family support had positive and negative connotations post-school. William (15/10/21) said,

> “Like I think most of us, are not independent enough, me included, we rely too much on our families … they help us out a lot and this has influenced us, [this maybe] a deficit, and now we are 20 or 21, and [we] don’t have independent skills, those skills need to be there”.

Emma and Carmel described the impact of their secondary school experiences, which limited their capacity to build confidence and independence during their transition planning. Emma linked her lack of confidence with feelings of being judged and feeling inferior to her peers. Emma (7/11/21) said,

> “if I said my answer, [other students] would always look at me very strangely. Like I was being judged, and that just made me feel inferior. I would have liked to spoke with more confidence … because [my confidence is low], it's always been very low. I would have liked to practice more social [skills]”.

Carmel described her struggle to communicate in mainstream education and how moving into smaller groups with explicit teaching of social communication skills built her confidence and learning capacity. Carmel (7/11/21) said,

> “I originally was in, mainstream school, but I struggled with it too much, I went into a Flexible Learning Options program. And they kind of just helped me be able to communicate, but within small social groups … Once I was more confident, I went back to mainstream school”.

Other participants in their twenties discussed confidence and independence required in the University environment and how they were “forced” to gain social communication skills post-school to achieve their goals. One participant perceived school assistance as a positive and negative approach to getting secondary students through the school system. William (15/10/21) said,

> “I think I've got a lot more independence [than in] high school, I had amazing support [at school] … at times [the school] probably supported me a bit too much to the extent that I didn’t really learn … they [the teachers] spoon fed me.”.

William explained that he felt too much support, affected his level of education and social communication transition development in a negative way, as he struggled at University communicating with peers and teachers.

A common goal of all participants was to be more confident and independent with the social communication skills required for a smooth transition to adulthood. Most of the findings in this research inferred that secondary schooling potentially failed to support the development of social communication and transition skills. The extent to which their senior secondary experiences

prepared them with the confidence and independent skills that would help them in transitioning into post-school employment and study will be considered further in the discussion chapter.

4.4 Friendships and Trustworthy Relationships.

A common theme autistic senior secondary students indicated as a priority at school, was to survive the daily routines and struggles with fitting into the school culture and norms. The participants described in detail how supportive friendships made the differences to building social communication skills in school and how extended periods of time away from social interactions impairs relationship building skills.

Home schooling was discussed by some of the participants as an alternative to trying to fit into the school environment, however the participants indicated this created more barriers to social communication transition. Lee (17/11/21) described her feelings towards home schooling stating, “[I was] home schooled for six years” and was concerned that [she] “wouldn't be able to understand … other teenagers. It's very daunting”. Carmel (7/11/21) said, “I ended up moving to home schooling, which deteriorated my social skills, because I [wasn’t] with people all the time”.

Although only one of the six participants directly used the language pertaining to the word “survival” (John 19/11/21), the theme was strongly embedded in the secondary students described experiences. John’s account, although short, was emotive and compelling when describing his experiences at school. John (19/11/21) said, “[My] first goal, [was to] survive”. In describing ‘survival at school’, John named a close group of friends as the key and indicated that friendships were built on mutual interests, and these mutual interests were the catalyst for social communication development at school. John (19/11/21) said, “I have a very close group of friends I don't socialise with many other people … I guess we just melted together…five of us mobbed together over a tabletop game… over our shared obsession”.

Other autistic senior secondary school participants indicated that avoiding situations at school was easier than social communication engagement and if they engage it is usually with a select group of friends. Michael (8/11/21) said, “A lot of the time, I just stay indoors, because I … avoid social interaction. But sometimes when I do go outside, it's often with a friend”.

Michael explained that his friendship was critical for social communication support at school, and he only felt comfortable with his trusted friend.

Two of the seven autistic young adult participants in their twenties described their struggles at school and how the lack of friends at school made social communication development difficult. William (15/10/21) said,

> "It was tough. And then like, in [year] 11 [and] 12. Well, I just couldn't really [have] conversations [with] kids not on the spectrum. I still struggle today, trying to work out how I'm going to find friends". Jing (27/9/21) said, "[It] was difficult being around people, like students, and not one of them really taking any notice of you unless they had to. It was a rather challenging time".

Participants explained the value of friendships in the school environment as creating the difference to social communication development at school. Participants in their twenties inferred supportive friendships made the difference to communication and building relationships within adult life. Isabelle (3/11/21) said, "I formed a connection with them [and] became friends".

Other research supports these finding, suggesting that friendships are indicative of acceptance, create comfortable environments and increase social communication participation (Boutot, 2007; Test et al., 2014). Test et al (2014) states, "the relationships students forge with peers during adolescence and early adulthood can have a powerful influence on their learning, skill development, sense of belonging, and overall well-being" (p.85).

Several autistic senior secondary students commented on why they and their friends decided to participate in this social communication transition research. The decision was based on feeling comfortable to participate in a safe environment with the support of a trusted friends and with whom they felt would be a trustworthy person. Michael (8/11/21) said,

> "Well, I thought, like you're in University. I can trust you…. One of my friends is also doing this, I was able to convince him to do it, because I was like, I'll do it if you do it [participate] as well".

Karen (17/11/21) said, "When it comes to new people, I usually either avoid or avoid talking too much because I don't know them and unsure if they're friendly or not".

Although many of the participants spoke about the importance of building relationships, they inferred that they have a heightened sense of distrust in new situations and have had negative experiences in the past, creating a fear of talking to people they are not familiar with. Ben (8/11/21) said, "There's no point in trusting too many people".

The feelings of distrust and being uncomfortable included the secondary school environment where autistic senior secondary student's experience multiple teachers in a changing environment. Michael (8/11/21) said,

> "I came to high school, It was a bit daunting, you have a different teacher for everything, and it's a bit hard to get used to them. I find it hard to get used to teachers, if I want to get comfortable with them, and be able to ask questions".

Other research supports these findings (Baker et al., 2001; Hume et al., 2014; Martin, 2011) indicating classrooms are rich communication environments with multiple classrooms and teachers, with complex social structures. (Baker et al., 2001; Hanbury, 2011; Hume et al., 2014). In this context, the quality of teacher-student relationships are critical (Brownlow et al., 2021), and in particular for social communication skill support within transition planning. This area will be explored further in the discussion chapter.

4.5 Preparing for Transition: Developing Skills for Work.

An emerging theme from the data concerns the perceptions of autistic young people's feelings and experiences towards meeting school requirements and the school preparing them for social communication and transition requirements for work. The participants presented a variety of positive and negative views on their preparation for adult life. Almost half of the autistic adults interviewed thought social communication skill preparation was essential and felt that schools could have prepared them better.

William acknowledged that schools have a set curriculum inherent of the education system however, in reflecting on his experiences, he did feel that schools could have been more proactive in the social communication domain. William (15/10/21) said,

> "[Social skills], I think it's not a part of the curriculum. I don't know how much effort schools put into it. But I think it's important they do … kids in [my] social group, a lot of them, could benefit from that, including myself".

Luciana viewed school as a 'place to learn subjects' that may or may not be helpful for social communication and transition planning. Luciana (17/11/21) said, "I feel, the school focus[ed] on subjects more than your ability".

One participant in their twenties described their senior secondary schooling years, 'as meaningless activities' that were not conducive to preparing for transition to employment or study. Emma explained the teacher-student relationship as 'one-way', 'like she was a child being told what to do'. Emma felt that there was no preparation for study or employment post-school and that teachers were 'baby-sitting' and meeting the criteria of the school but not the individual student. Emma also described her experience of education and felt that she did not receive appropriate education particularly in her final years of schooling, and she would have liked to be better prepared for adult life. Emma (3/11/21) said,

> "In [year] 12, I've felt more like a child in daycare. Because [I realise] we weren't getting the proper education. Once I left school, and I came [to TAFE], I realise[d] I've never learned much [about] work. And I didn't even get to learn more literacy … which I know I need. And

> I kept complaining to the teacher like we need to, like I feel like a kid in daycare or kindergarten, please can we do something, and [the teacher said] don't talk back. … I felt like, I really wanted to get actual education, [something] that you could use".

In preparing for work Jing described her school experiences, as one where you were left to secure work experience, yourself. Jing indicated there was a lack of school support in teaching how to approach employers and the social communication skills required for transition to work. Jing (27/9/21) said, "you're left on your own to find your own work experience. I found one at a local post office [who agreed to provide work experience]. I guess there I learned, how to communicate with strangers and about, transitioning into the workforce". Jing inferred learning social communication skills occurred through authentic work-experience.

Lee, a participant in his twenties spoke about one of his teachers as a positive influence in social communication transition development in senior secondary school. In Lee's case the teacher's interactions helped shape his post-school transition. Lee described the teacher-student relationship (Brownlow et al., 2021), and mutual interests as the basis for the positive interaction. Lee (17/11/21) said,

> "I've been influenced by my science teacher. Because we (teacher and I) just both like science. … I was being home-schooled, Distance Ed. … the phone call that we would have would lead to an hour or so because we're both passionate about science".

Lee described his post-school tertiary education, as being fostered through his and his teacher's passion for science. Lee (17/11/21) said,

> "[I] "started going to TAFE, [studied] literacy. I've done my Certificate 3 in Laboratory Skills and planning to do the Certificate 4 in Laboratory Techniques next year. I want to try and go to University and study molecular biology".

Other research supports the findings that positive and negative teacher-students relationships impact on social communication development and transition decisions post-school (Alexander & Bissaker, 2023; Brownlow et al., 2021), and requires further discussion.

4.6 Mentors Role in Transition Support

An emerging theme from the data related to the use of mentors as supporting autistic young people with social communication and transition to adult life. Mentors, in Emma's case, provided a supplementary service to support social communication transition post-school. Participants in their twenties described mentors as a trusted person in their lives, like a 'trusted friend'.

The mentor-autistic person relationship was built on mutual respect and as one participant indicated, similar personalities. Isabelle and Emma spoke about their mentors as more than support people who assisted with life skills, both participants suggested their mentor was a friend. Emma (3/11/21) said, "when it comes to planning [my] goals, I will [ask] my mentors, and they will help me write it down and try researching it. I only stick with my mentor and one friend" and Isabelle (3/11/21) said, "My mentor, helps me to shop, tidy around the house and cook. We [have]very similar personalities. I [find] it quite easy to talk to her. She's just there, I think for company as well". Emma and Isabelle both spoke about the value of a mentor in adulthood and this relationship will be discussed in chapter seven. Empower Autism (2024) supports the value of the mentor relationship saying, "mentors help to build healthy and trusting relationships…. [providing] the opportunity to build confidence, engage in personal growth, work towards personal goals" (p.1).

4.7 Employment Experiences

Autistic participants in their twenties were asked questions about their employment experiences and their preparation for further study or the workforce. A variety of experiences were described with outcomes that reflected the work environment, employer inclusion, financial renumeration and impact on social communication development and confidence. Fifty percent of the participants described their experience as negative, discouraging them from further engagement in the workforce. One participant described the reaction of her employer once they became aware that she was autistic. Others described positive experiences and felt accepted in the workplace.

Carmel describes her first job and the actions of the employer once they became aware that she was autistic. Carmel indicated that when the employer did not know she was autistic, she was given the same opportunities as all other employees, but once they became aware, they started to change her duties and even restricted duties. Carmel felt discriminated against once sharing she was Autistic. Carmel (7/11/21) said,

> "I had my old job at Foodland. And because [they] found out I'm autistic, they treated me poorly. Originally, I was treated as an equal there. But then the moment they found out I was autistic; they started cutting my shift back. And they didn't want me working in front anymore. And they wouldn't let me work with cigarettes [or the] front counter. They [the

> employer] said wouldn't let me work in that [area] because I am mentally incompetent to do it. And I was doing the job before. They wouldn't let me do anything that involves talking to people. I was kind of pushed to the back. And I ended up leaving because I was being treated so bad, [I was] facing discrimination".

Three of six participants felt their experiences were positive, however, most reported they were being underpaid for their work, or they were volunteering. All did however describe their positive experience as an opportunity to build social communication skills, increase confidence and learn about the work environment within a supportive environment. One participant said she worked with a sole trader and did not have many opportunities to work with the customers, but she felt supported. She left due to being underpaid. Emma (3/11/21) said,

> "There was no one else just me and my boss, one on one. I didn't really deal with customers; she would deal with the customers. I would make the batches of cake mixtures and make the cookies …It was fun. I was forced to quit my job because they weren't treating me [well]. They weren't paying me properly".

Two of the participants said they were volunteers and unpaid. Carmel and Isabelle both described their volunteer experiences as a positive place of employment and spoke about the inclusivity of the organisation and the other employees. Carmel and Isabelle also describe their increased confidence in social communication. One participant indicated that after 2 years she started to be paid for some of the work, after showing an interest in animals and completed a Certificate in Animal studies at TAFE. Carmel (7/11/21) said,

> "I work … as an animal assistant. I've [completed] my Certificate 2 Animal studies and Certificate 3 in Companion Animal Services. I didn't start off paid. I started off at 'another' Animal Hospital. I wasn't paid for work experience. I got paid for 3 hours on a Saturday. [I have been] there for six years, they're just very inclusive".

Isabelle (3/11/21) explained how her volunteering experience enabled her to develop social communication skills, "answer the phone, talk to everyone and that was huge". Isabelle indicated that this was due to a friendship with another worker, who had an autistic son, so she felt understood.

Jing described her employment experience as confidence building and supportive, with co-worker who were 'nice' and willing to teach what was required. Jing also spoke about her challenge with new environments and people she did not know. Jing (27/9/21) said,

> "Meeting new people and getting used to the place and trying to communicate with customers confidently … was always a challenge at first, but then when you get used to

your, coworkers and they teach [and] give you some tips about how to handle the situations".

The Core Skills for Work Framework (Commonwealth of Australia, 2013), and the skills acquisitions model (Dreyfus et al., 1986), support these findings, the impact of employment experiences on social communication skill development and confidence building will be considered further in the discussion chapter.

4.8 Summary

The research findings in this section contributed to understanding the social communication transition experiences of autistic senior secondary students and autistic young adults. Thirteen autistic young people provided insights into how they experienced and perceived social communication transition planning and how senior secondary schooling prepared them for transition to post-school tertiary education, employment and community life.

The findings focused on six major themes, (1) Social communication experiences, (2) Developing confidence and independence, (3) Friendships and trustworthy relationships, (4) Preparing for Transition: Developing skills for work, (5) Mentors role in transition support, and (6) Employment experiences. All autistic young people reported difficulties with social communication skills at school and post-school, interactions with their teacher and peers, found making friends a challenge and indicated more is needed to support social communication transition during senior secondary school. The lack of confidence and independence created challenges for autistic young people as they transitioned into adulthood, indicating that social communication planning and preparation was critical for engagement in adulthood and created barriers to social interactions and friendships.

Knowing social communication were essential for successful transition to employment and community life, many of the autistic young people felt ill-prepared and relied on mentors to assist in helping to develop social communication skills. This was reflected in the accounts of autistic young adults who voiced both positive and negative employment experiences. Leading on from the voices of autistic young people, chapter five discusses parental understanding of their child's social communication and transition support.

CHAPTER FIVE– FINDINGS: PARENTS UNDERSTANDING OF THEIR CHILD'S SOCIAL COMMUNICATION AND TRANSITION SUPPORT

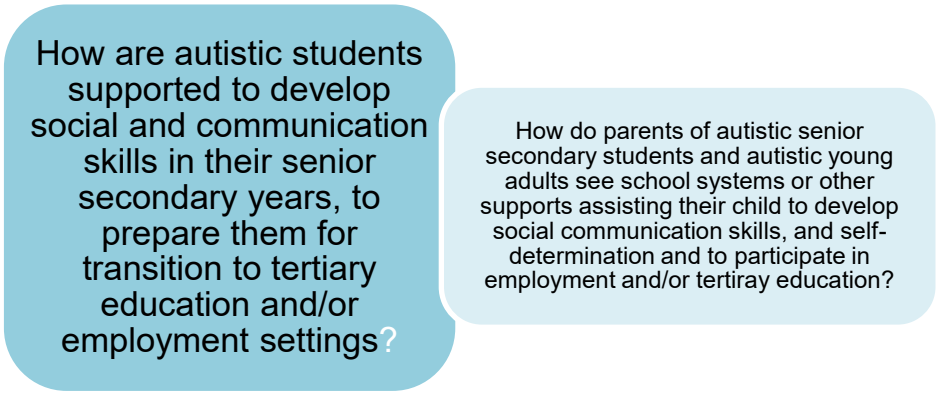
"[He] hasn't had as much support in schooling in the last three years, they [the school] reckon [it's] because he's a senior, he doesn't need the support" (Nick 18/11/21).

5.1 Introduction

The aim of this chapter was to understand how parents perceived their child's social communication experiences and transition planning for the post-school setting. This chapter presents findings generated from twelve parents, reflecting on their child's social communication and transition planning support during senior secondary school. Six of the twelve participants were parents of current autistic senior secondary students and six were parents of autistic young adults. The findings provide insight and responses to the research questions as noted in Figure 5. In analysing the stories from parents, several common experiences emerged which served to generate seven key themes. The themes are (1) Social communication challenges, (2) Building confident and independent children, (3) School supports and linkages to school funding, (4) Transition support through Individual Education Plans (IEPs), (5) Planning for transition, (6) External transition supports: Mentors and Funding, and (7) Post-school employment opportunities.

Figure 5

Overarching Research Question and Parents of Autistic Senior Secondary School Student and Autistic Young Adult question



5.2 Social Communication Challenges

A common theme concerning all parents interviewed was the social communication barriers their children encountered at school. Some of the descriptions were emotive as parents related to the social communication difficulties, they witnessed their child experience with trying to fit into the school environment.

Petra described her son's lack of communication skills and his difficulties with engaging at school. Petra (18/11/21) said,

> "[His] lack of communication skills, lack of executive functioning skills, like for planning. He fatigues very easily, [experiences] sensory overload, he lives in a very anxious state 24/7… It is exhausting for him. And it would be exhausting for many ASD kids". Petra said that communication is still difficult and that as a parent she needs to intervene to enable her son to communicate, "he still lacks [communication skills], … today, even just email, he has to have a lot of prompting and a lot of reminders to do that".

Meredith and Nancy also said that social communication difficulties and emotional regulation impacted on their child's capacity to engage at school. Meredith (7/11/21) stated, "because of lack of communication [development] and the stress and anxiety social communication creates for her, she never turned up for school because she just didn't like to communicate".

Nancy stated that her daughter found communication challenging at school and described her daughter's capacity to self-regulate. Nancy (18/10/21) said,

"Social and communication are the two areas that my child struggled with the most. And still does. Communication around emotions is big, and we're still working on that big challenge for her. She has very heightened anxiety and can have very severe emotional meltdowns".

Sophie also spoke about her son's communication challenges at school, with a focus on teacher interactions in the classroom resulting in her son "shutting down". Sophie (18/11/21) said the

> "more people put pressure on him to answer those questions and communicate the more he withdraws, and the quieter he gets, the more stressed he gets. He then shuts down completely and ends up either teary, or just one point he was under the table".

Nick related his son's communication difficulties to future challenges where he felt that there will be a "massive issue" in workforce engagement. Nick (18/11/21) said, "[my son] has a lot of communication issues with strangers and people he doesn't know. So, [the school] think[s] there'd be massive communication issues with working in a lot of workplaces for him". Parent concerns regarding the social communication difficulties their autistic child experiences and the impact on

their capacity to engage in school and future planning is well supported by other research literature (American Psychiatric Association, 2022b; Pratt et al., 2017; Wehman et al., 2014).

Wehman et al (2014) state, “individuals with ASD continue to have significant challenges in all environments related to social interaction and communication into adolescence and adulthood” (p.30).

The social communication difficulties described by parents highlighted the impact of some of the challenges autistic young people face at school and the concerns parents have for their child’s post-school outcome, consequently further discussion is required to address these concerns.

5.3 Building Confident and Independent Children

An important emerging theme discussed by parents was building confident and independent young people. At least three-quarters of the parents related their child’s support needs to a struggle with independence, confidence, belonging, and how the lack of confidence and independence impacts on adult life.

Family support was indicated in this research and by others (Kohler et al., 2016; Trainor et al., 2019) as essential support for an autistic young person’s development. Georgios said he felt that his son lacked confidence, and his son felt like he did not belong. Georgios (18/11/21) described the home setting saying, “In social settings [my son] requires constant reassurance. He's just started [to] come out and sit on the couch, [at family dinners] but not at the table”.

Nick and Kamal linked confidence and independence with self-advocacy and described the support needs of their children. Both parents spoke about different post-school experiences where parent support was required. Nick (18/11/21) said, “[my son] struggles with advocating for himself. Every time he comes to try and advocate for himself, he will come to me to give assistance. We've recently had meetings with Centrelink. And he couldn't even do any of that for himself. I had to be there. He's got no confidence in himself”.

Kamal (18/11/21), described the post-school tertiary experiences of his child and said,

> “…she struggles with independence - you see this huge lack of confidence. With TAFE, she wouldn't just go and talk to her lecturer. She'd [text] me crying. And then I'll be like, you need to talk to [your lecturer]. Either I would encourage her or push her to go and do that. Or I would have to instigate her having those conversations. Communicating that kind of stuff, she doesn't do easy”.

Most of the parents felt that they struggled with encouraging independence in their children. One parent, Georgios, described this as hindering and a juggle between being supportive and being an enabler of independence. Georgios (18/11/21) said, “That would be me hindering and I held him quite tight. Looking back now that most probably didn't do him any favours”.

Shelley felt, as a parent it was difficult to provide the right level of support her child required at the right time and knowing when to enable independence. Shelley (18/10/21) said

> “I suppose it's the juggle between support and independence or becoming self-determined. How far do you go between backing off, so he's still having that ability to do things for himself, but also not get to the point where he has a meltdown. And then it just disrupts everything for him”.

Nancy described her feeling of hope for her daughter’s future, connecting to social communication “groundwork” involving the school, family intervention and supportive friendships. Nancy (18/10/21) said,

> “She has lots of goals, she has recently made some friends who are not, special needs. I've met them. They don't seem to have any kind of alternative motive other than they just love being around her because she loves life. And I wish more people were like that. Seeing her make some friendships outside of those school and work kind of special needs circles has been amazing. And I think the groundwork from school [and] from what we did at home from family and friends has allowed her to be able to do that”.

Nancy (18/10/21), also provided examples of her daughter’s confidence and the impact of a supportive environment. “[She’s] confident, she's got married, that's what she wanted to do. She wants to get a licence, that's probably not realistic, [but] she's trying, [and] we're not holding her back from that”.

Azza, also describes her son’s confidence as being attributed to friendships. Azza (19/11/21) said, “[her son] speaks up for himself and pushes his own goals quite well, I would say quite confident within his own. … his newfound confidence, he did say was quite recent and has come from having a secure circle of friends”.

Findings from this research indicate that school teaching of social communication skills and family interventions are essential elements for building confident and independent Autistic young people. Other research findings are similar and indicate the schools are ideal environments to teach social communication skills (Lloyd et al., 2016; Newman et al., 2009; Sutton et al., 2019), and families have a critical role to play in the development of confident independent autistic children (Kohler et al., 2016; Trainor et al., 2019). The extent to which teaching social communication in senior

secondary school and family support impact on successful transition planning, employment and educational outcomes post-school, will be further investigated in the discussion chapter.

5.4 School Support and Linkages to Funding

Parents discussed the type of school support their children received during their senior secondary school years. A common theme emerged from the data, concerning school support, partially linked to school funding, but also linked to student-teacher relationships and a misunderstanding of communication support needs discussed in the previous chapter.

Some of the parents interviewed provided negative accounts of their child's support, and others described what could have been different. Nick (18/11/21) explained his child's support in senior school, saying that his son, "hasn't had as much support in schooling in the last three years, they reckon because he's a senior, he doesn't need the support".

Joanne, was emotive in her response and described how a teacher's negative reaction to her daughter's social communication difficulties during class, impacted on her daughter's capacity to engage in learning. Joanne (3/11/21) said,

> "[the teacher] kicked her out of class. She was looking at her shoes, and so the teacher told her to give her eye contact, … told her to speak up. The more you challenge her she ends up nonverbal if she gets quite upset. She wouldn't look at the teacher. In the end, she wouldn't even talk so the teacher kicked her out the class, said get out class, don't come back".

Joanne, also described her experiences of teacher parent interviews concerning supports for her child. Joanne (3/11/21) said, [she] "had trouble with some teachers around communication and the fact that [her daughter is] on the spectrum, and they [the teachers] didn't get that and [I had] quite heated parent teacher interviews around that".

Joanne, also described how teachers lack autism understanding and make assumptions when supporting their child's education. Joanne (3/11/21) said,

> "She got put into what she called 'dummy' maths. And it wasn't until quite recently that she said to me, Mum, I could do the maths, they just didn't give me time to understand, process and then put something down. [The school] weren't helping her reach her full potential because they were looking at her as a neurotypical child instead of an ASD child. [She needs] scaffoldings, step by step. And there needs to be someone available if she gets a bit stuck, that someone could come and help her. It almost never happened".

Another parent, Petra, reflected on her son's support in senior secondary school and said that more explicit teaching in social communication skills would have made a difference in her child's independence. Petra (18/11/21) said, "If he had been able to be in a life skills program, I think it would have made a difference. And I think it would make him a little bit more independent".

The social communication difficulties parents perceived their children experienced at school in this research suggests that teachers may not understand the social communication needs of autistic young people and make assumptions about support needs and capacity. This perception is supported by other researchers who acknowledge teachers experience many challenges in supporting autistic students in mainstream classrooms (Cook & Ogden, 2022; Esqueda Villegas et al., 2024; McDougal et al., 2020). This proposition will be explored in more detail in the discussion chapter.

One-third of parents described their experiences with obtaining access to support through school funding, that was available if their child had a formal medical diagnosis. Some schools did recognise imputed disability and provided support however this was limited. Kamal (18/11/21) said, "we had funding for her because, she got diagnosed when she was … four".

Parents also said, and believed, they were not listened to when trying to advocate for their child. Parents talk a lot about labelling and the impact that this may have on their child, and they make it very clear that it's not about labelling their child, but accessing funding, getting help and support. Families find that no diagnosis blocks a child social and communication skill development. Sophie (18/11/21) said,

> "The OT told us [she] couldn't do anything to help with [my son] back then. Diagnosis only happened because I have pushed them to happen. Same with the middle boy, he's nearly 15, [he was] misdiagnosed. Parents don't seem to be listened to. We just want labels for our kids, not to label our kids, just to get the keys to open doors. So, we can help and get support".

5.5 Transition Support Through Individual Education Plans (IEPs)

Another theme emerged as parents were asked questions about how support was implemented at their child's school. Parents had varying views and commented on when their child's IEPs worked well and when they did not work.

Nick (18/11/21) indicated that the IEP did not work in senior secondary school and made the following comments,

> “Up until about year nine, it was working [well]. Everything was in place; everything was done for him. But the 10,11, 12 the education side of it was pretty on par. None of that was really put in place in his individual education plan”.

Many parents also commented on the lack of their own knowledge about the purpose of the IEP’s and what they meant for their child’s social communication development and transition support. Nancy (18/10/21) said, “I'm actually not 100% sure what her IEP looked like”.

Most parents interviewed also indicated IEPs were documents they just signed and never saw again and questioned how they really worked for their child in planning for transition. Georgios (18/11/21) said, “lots of people haven't heard about the IEPs or they just sign because half the time they don't even understand what's in it… The reality is, is it really used? And what does it mean for people who are supposed to be using it or know about it or understand it?”.

Sophie (18/11/21) had similar thoughts about IEPs saying,

> “Honestly, IEPS [I] never understood them. Rarely even see them. I don't think I've signed many in my life. … Most of them are so full of jargon, we have no idea how to read them what they mean. A lot of it is goals that are very much surrounded around with schoolwork”.

Shelley, and Kamal, presented their views on what they experienced when working with teachers and their child’s IEPs in senior secondary school. They commented that the IEPs were subject-focused and not about building social communication skills and not focused on transition planning post-school.

Kamal presented an emotive response to how a teacher did not know that his child had an IEP. Kamal (18/11/21) said, “I spoke to the teacher about her, IEP, and the teachers [said], what IEP? And I'm just like, [you’re] kidding me, you've had [the IEP] for this long, and you don't even know that she is student [with] an IEP”.

Shelley (18/11/21), offered her perspective on what she thought the school could do better with transition planning and said,

> “From my perspective, I think that's an area that the school can do a lot better in. And [I] don't think that they [are]. I mean, we've [I and the school] been talking about transitioning for him, we've been talking about picking the subjects, you know, right from year eight, picking the subjects that will help him get to the type of place he wants to be. That's sound practice, but I don't think the school really [does it] well, they don't use structures”.

Shelley did not elaborate further in her explanation of what could be ‘done better’, by schools and further discussion is required to understand IEP development, implementation and improvement.

5.6 Planning for Transition

Parents had strong positions when it came to preparing their child for transition beyond school. Indicating several perspectives on what planning for transition looked like for their child as they prepared for post-school employment and study. Within this theme of planning for transition, earlier themes emerged such as social communication skills, confidence, and families teaching their children skills. Other transition planning literature supports similar themes emerging in this research (Kohler et al., 2016; Trainor et al., 2019; Wehman et al., 2014), and highlights the role of families in preparing their children for transition, and the need for social communication skill development for employment and tertiary education (Commonwealth of Australia, 2013).

Most parents felt that there were gaps in transition planning in senior secondary school and described their child's experiences as "missing" (Shelley 18/10/21) this critical part of their preparation for employment, tertiary engagement, and community life beyond school.

Petra (18/11/21) said, "there's a huge gap between year 10 and, year 12. I think something needs to be done during the senior years, to help them have a bit smoother transition through to whatever they choose, … I think there needs to be some transition". Petra (18/11/21) also gave some suggestions on what she thought may work in the transition space saying,

> "…there needs to be maybe a day, every three weeks or something out of the classroom where they actually go, … visit TAFE and sit in on a lesson for that whole day, or Uni or an apprenticeship, so that they get used to the idea that this is what's happening, instead of getting to year 12. And going, I don't know what I want to do".

Another parent, Shelley (18/10/21), felt that transition planning was not 'robust enough' to be effective, "I think we're missing a transition planning function to really help those children step into adult roles". Shelley spoke about transition planning as a tool for developing life skills rather than a school focus of academic subjects and provided an example of education mandates for transition that she felt would be better. Shelley (18/10/21) said,

> "I think people get confused between transition and hand over, whereas the transition, takes two years when you start to unpack it. I wonder how many of those have had a robust enough transition so that they know where they're going next or feel comfortable with what they can do next? I think that's where we need to have a shifting focus that it's around developing a whole range of life skills rather than just academic ones. America, it's mandated that the transition matrix [must] start from age 14." I think there needs to be a programme across the high school setting where we, have touch points along the way of starting to develop a plan revising, shifting as the as the young person grows and has a clearer perspective on where they want to go".

Parents described their child's transition planning at school as sufficient for teaching essential life skills for home, but insufficient for preparing their child for transition into the workforce and the community. Nick (18/11/21) said,

> "[we] haven't [discussed] a future for him, … maybe supported employment. He was part of what they [the school] called a life skills class, and that has taught him a lot of skills to help in life. But not in the sense of gaining employment in the future. It was more life skills for the home.".

Nancy also spoke about pathway programs, and indicated the program helped her child prepare for post-school engagement as she developed social communication skills, Nancy (18/10/21) said "whilst she [my child] was learning life skills, she was also learning how to interact with strangers".

Shelley explained further and related life skills and pathway programs to social communication skills development during primary and early high school and described the lack of social communication programs in senior secondary school. Shelley (18/10/21) said,

> "…[The] long-term outcomes of increasing social skills and social connections, is for the participants to make their own social connections with others. Social skills development programmes, [are completed] in primary school, and then we [schools] don't tend to do them, again, in high school. And the dynamics in high school are just so confusing for our children on the spectrum".

Petra, expressed her thoughts on transition planning in senior secondary school and felt that schools do not focus on pathways and skills post-school, suggesting that school could be doing more social communication preparation. Petra (18/11/21) presented her views on teachers and schools' attitudes to transition and said,

> "…you're in year 12… See you later, you're on your own, you're almost an adult now, go out to the real world. Good luck with it. That's my thing. For our kids, we need to take it back, way back. I don't think year nine, I don't think they're quite ready. But year 10 I think, from year 10 to 12, I think we certainly could be doing more for them. We could put things in place, which just gives them a bit more confidence as well and helps to increase their communication skills, [and] their social skills".

Shelley, discussed the National Disability Coordinating Office transition planning framework and suggested that schools could do better linking into this space. Shelley (18/10/21) said,

> "I think that as a school system, [schools] could do a lot better with linking in [and] … do all those transition functions that need to occur before [autistic senior secondary students are] fully-fledged adults. And to help [autistic senior secondary students and parents] look at

> what links [are] in the community [that] can support [transition] … into TAFE, a degree program, or into open employment or supported employment".

Shelley felt that school missed the opportunity to link into other agencies, and this should occur while autistic young people are in senior secondary school. She also felt that there was a lack of transition planning for adult life and greater linkages between school and post-school opportunities should be explored while autistic young people are still in senior secondary school.

Parents presented very strong views about transition planning and provided ideas on what should occur in senior secondary school to assist autistic young people with a smoother social communication transition to post-school employment and study. Parents views require a deeper exploration.

5.7 External Transition Supports: Mentors and Funding

An emerging theme concerned families stepping in to provide supplementary services through mentors to support their child's social communication skills. Parents indicated mentor support was not occurring at school. Although not directly related to the research questions, there were noticeable differences in the use of mentors by parents reflected by social demographics and social capital of the parents.

All the parents who mentioned mentors in their interviews, referred to the critical role mentors played in their Autistic child's development. Parents stated the focus of their child's mentor was to improve (1), increase independence, (2) social communication, and (3) assist with transition.

Petra (18/10/21) said, "Mentors are working with him towards independence… They help him. [They are] absolutely, fantastic with him. They are nurturing, they explain things to him. …They involve him in doing". Shelley (18/10/2021) said, "I think working [on social communication skills] explicitly with his mentor who has a good understanding of social communication [helps]".

Georgios (18/11/21) also said,

> "His [child's] mentor helps with developing life skills and independence" and explained that the relationship was built on mutual respect noting, "[the mentor relationship] started as a mutual learning, [and his mentor said] they we're going to learn from each other. His mentor [was] very clear that [he was] not looking after [him] … I see a confidence in him".

Parents perceived their child's mentors as social communication skills advisors, support people, and significant people in the lives of autistic young people.

Nick (18/11/21) said,

> "[His mentor] takes him to places he wants to go and encourages him to go to places that he loves, … she's been over the years slowly pushing that comfort zone further and further. And like she taught him how to catch public transport, which we never thought would happen. She's got him in crowded places now.".

Helen felt that mentors need to be compatible and trustworthy to be an effective support. Helen (15/10/21) said, "you know, sometimes it's also a tricky one to find a really good mentor. Somebody that he would trust to get on well with, is really important". The findings concerning mentors as supports, and social communications skills advisors will be explored further in the discussion chapter.

In most cases, parents felt that external funding was required to enable the employment of mentors, and without funding their autistic child would miss out on opportunities for social communication development. Half of the parents referred to external funding through the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) as the financial mechanism for supporting their autistic child's-mentor relationship. Helen (15/10/21) said, "as he is transitioning out of school he might need, NDIS funding, … so he can get mentors". Another parent, Georgios (18/11/21), referred to the mentor's role, as "all [about] social participation and that's what the money [NDIS funding was] for".

Parents felt that once an autistic young person was 18 or left school, the support and funding changed. These changes impacted on what people could access and how they access the information and support that they needed for adult life. Parents of autistic young adults referred to NDIS funding as the key to employing mentors who supported social engagement beyond school.

5.8 Post-school Employment Opportunities

Post-school employment options were a common theme emerging from the data, and highlighted parents' experiences of employment systems and structures to support autistic young people moving into the workforce. Parents commented on employers understanding and inclusion of their child in the workforce, what supports were available to their autistic child, parents, and employers, what their autistic child may need to participate and feel accepted in the workplace and employer resistance or knowledge about adjustments in the workplace.

Parents had mixed feelings about their child's workplace experiences with negative and positive opportunities for engagement in employment. One parent relied on a disability employment provider to assist in finding his autistic daughter work and explained the negative impact when she was not supported. Kamal (18/11/21) said,

> “she got that job through disability employment provider. But that job fell through because the employer wasn't paying, it was just a bit of a nightmare. So once that finished, she shut down quite a bit. We've been encouraging her to get out and do things”.

Four other parents described similar situations of ‘underpay’ and the employers not understanding or not willing to understand their autistic child support needs.

Conversely, Nancy, described her daughters’ experiences in supported employment where post-employment preparation and discussion occurred on what support needs maybe required. Nancy reiterated that work experience for her adult-child was one critical factor that provided her child with the confidence and knowledge to participate in the work environment. Nancy did say there were some issues, however the employer “handled it really well”. Nancy (18/10/21) said,

> “…she walked into a job at Bedford. She'd been doing her work experience for two years there. She felt super confident, there were some teething issues, as you would imagine. But, you know, she felt super confident to go in and do that”. [There were] a couple of issues, but she's just, they've managed it really well. And she's learned from that. And she's been there for six years now”.

One parent spoke about her autistic adult child’s goals and how post-school supports, such as mentors, were the key to her child’s success. Joanne (3/11/21) said, “She [has] goals, and she really loved to join the Army Reserves. That's a massive goal, not only fitness, but communication. It's still a work in progress. We're thinking maybe next year, we might try and go down the interview process and see how she goes with it”. Joanne indicated that if the right supports are in place, then her child would be successful in her goals. Joanne also spoke about her adult-child’s workplace and how their understanding of her child’s support needs made the difference for successful workplace participation, Joanne (3/11/21) said, “she's got a brilliant boss at work”.

Most parents felt that their adult-child’s transition to work was a process, which required nurturing and ongoing social communication support by families. They also felt that there were missed opportunities during their child’s senior secondary schooling which could have prepared their child better for transition to work and study. Transition planning and career development literature supports parent findings in this research, indicating that social communication skills development and planning for transition at school are the key to employment and participation in community life (Commonwealth of Australia, 2013; Kohler et al., 2016; Trainor et al., 2019; Wehman et al., 2014).

Parents did not comment on how the employment system could better support inclusive work environments; however, they were clear on what worked for their child. Parents also explained what social communication transition planning supports looked like for their child and these findings will be developed further in the discussion chapter.

5.9 Summary

The research findings in this section provided an outsider, non-autistic parent perception of how autistic young people in senior secondary school and post-school have experienced social communication transition planning. Twelve parents discussed their current and retrospective insights into how their child was preparing for, or had prepared for, post-school life. The findings generated seven key themes, (1) Social communication challenges, (2) Building confident and independent children, (3) School supports and linkages to school funding, (4) Transition support through Individual Education Plans (IEPs), (5) Planning for transition, (6) External transition supports: Mentors and Funding, and (7) Post-school employment opportunities.

Parents were emotive while discussing the challenges their child encountered as they witnessed the social communication difficulties impacting on their child's capacity to make friends, participate in school, tertiary education, employment and community life. Parents referred to how they perceived their interactions with schools and perceived there was a lack of understanding when it came to the social communication needs of their children. Parents reiterated that school systems, including the IEP's, teacher relationships and their own knowledge about transition planning had negative outcomes for their children. Kurth (2020), describes parents' perspectives of their involvement in the development of the IEP for their autistic child, while Akcin (2022), and Mohd (2022), identifies the challenges encountered in developing and implementing IEPs.

Parents felt there were gaps in social communication transition planning and wanted to know what could be done differently to support their child's preparation for employment, tertiary engagement, and community life beyond school. They described their child's barriers to employment and presented both positive and negative employment experiences. Leading on from the outsider perspectives of parents, chapter six discusses educators' understanding of social communication transition support in schools.

CHAPTER SIX– FINDINGS: EDUCATORS UNDERSTANDING OF SOCIAL COMMUNICATION TRANSITION IN SCHOOLS

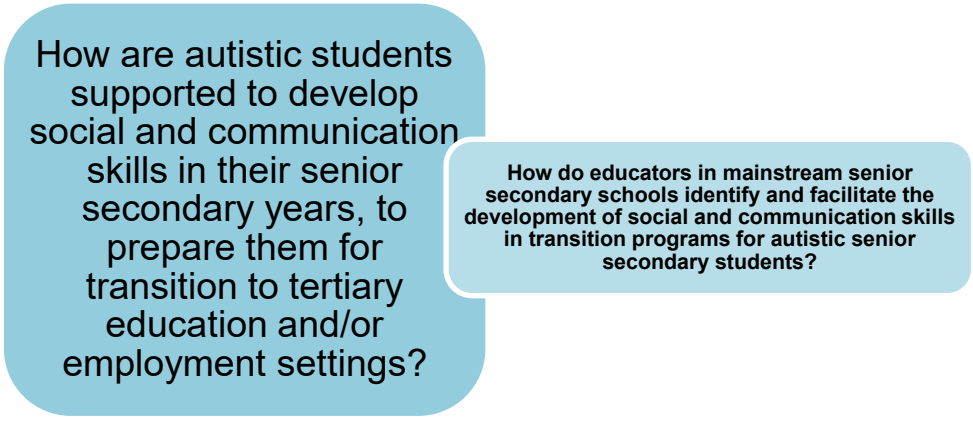
“It's preparing them from school to adulthood pathway. We get them for such a short time that we've got to work with the families and their support teams to make whatever works” (Gordon 18/10/21).

6.1 Introduction

The aim of this chapter was to understand how educators in senior secondary schools perceived the development of social and communication skills in transition programs for students. This chapter presents findings generated from twenty educators, six student support officers and one career coordinator reflecting on autistic senior secondary school students’ social communication and transition planning support during senior secondary school. The findings provide insight and responses to the research questions as noted in Figure 6. In analysing the stories from educators, several common experiences emerged which served to generate seven key themes. The themes are (1) Transition planning: self-determination, confidence, and independence, (2) Formal planning supports (3) Planning for transition sooner than senior secondary school, (4) Teaching social communication skills for job readiness, (5) Linking with post-school opportunities (6) Teacher professional development, and (7) Preparing for transition: policies and practice.

Figure 6

Overarching Research Question and Educators who teach of Autistic Senior Secondary School Students question



6.2 Transition Planning, Self-determination, Confidence, and Independence.

A common theme concerning all educators interviewed was the development of autistic students' self-determination and confidence during transition planning. Educators discussed their observations and experiences when working with autistic senior secondary students, and described the difficulties young people experienced with self-determination, confidence, and independence. Alessandro, (24/9/2021), like many other educators, said "most of the time, they [autistic students] really struggled to communicate on a social level, and can be quite withdrawn". The social communication challenges educators referred to the engagement of autistic school students indicated a lower level of self-determination and confidence. Reference to confidence is limited in the research literature and for the purpose of this research is discussed as different to self-determination and independence.

Wehmeyer et al (2010) states, "self-determination status has been linked to the attainment of more positive academic and transition outcomes, including more positive employment and independent living… and more positive quality of life and life satisfaction" (p. 476). Wehmeyer et al (2011), views self-determination as a determiner for experiences of thoughts, feelings, and behaviours, however this may not be the same as experiencing independence for autistic individuals.

Elsie and Kathy associated social communication challenges with self-confidence. Elsie (5/8/21) said,

> "…comes with self-confidence. Like some of our students, self-confidence is so low, that it's, you know, it's really debilitating for them … just communicating at all is a struggle. And, you know, they're scared, [thinking] they're going to say the wrong thing, … sound too dumb [and] worried that their peers are going to judge them if they have SSO support".

Kathy (26/8/21) linked self-confidence to peers and friendships saying, "Socialising amongst their peer group is difficult … I think [there are] similar sorts of issues with the friendships". Gemma (16/9/2021) agreed with Kathy and Elsie and described the lack of confidence, as creating a barrier which was difficult to break down. "The barrier is his own thinking or not being allowed to ever try and have a go at something, … it's just built up over time …like confidence and he won't take a risk".

In supporting the educators' views and the findings in this research the Reciprocal Effects Peer Interaction Model (REPIM) presented by Humphrey and Symes (2011) will be examined and discussed further in the next chapter, in relation to what building relationships meant to the participants and how social communication interactions are developed.

Educators also spoke about their role and responsibilities in assisting social communication skill development and how this intervention had positive and negative connotations for future independent skill growth. Some of the teachers interviewed were inclusive educators whose role was to support autistic senior secondary students with communication in mainstream classrooms. Sam (20/8/21) said,

> "[Autistic students have a] real inability to speak out for themselves and say, you know, I don't get this, I don't understand it. Can you make some adjustments for me? And I guess that's where … I must communicate that to teachers for them. In an ideal world, I'd like them to do that themselves, … [autistic students] just struggle to communicate with us, in terms of how [they are] coping".

Randal and Peter provided their feelings and observations regarding their thoughts on developing self-determined, confident, and independent autistic senior secondary students. Randal (10/9/21), felt that educators need to know when to provide in class support and at what level so that autistic senior secondary students can develop independence rather than dependence.

> "Without [in class] support, they can gain more independence, rather than having someone with them or monitoring. This has grown their competence enormously. And that has been successful, [as] they don't want to be seen to be different in any way".

Peter believed that autistic senior secondary students would prefer to have more independence and questioned how significant support, and interventions really prepare young people for life post-school. Peter (3/9/21) said, "I would imagine they require greater independence than what we allow. So how are we preparing them for tertiary education, we're obliged to be overly nurturing, to nurse them through". Peter (3/9/21), then described his experience as an educator and referred to a responsibility to parents who have expectations for their autistic child and of the school to help their child become ready for post-school options.

> "We're in [a] private school, parents are paying money, they want outcomes, and the outcome isn't [to] fall over at the last hurdle, because we want them to be independent. I guess that's something that we wrestle with, and we tend to [be] on the side of being nurturing".

In this research the focus on social communication development in preparation for post-school life, in tertiary education, employment and community, suggests that social communication skills may not be predictable or constant in nature and therefore impact on autistic senior secondary students building confidence and independence. This may also explain the difficulties educators have in determining the intensity and duration of social communication development in transition planning,

meeting the needs of autistic individuals, parent expectations, and school requirements. How educators encounter the competing challenges will be discussed further in chapter seven.

Many of the educators expressed strong thoughts about safe spaces within the school environment. This was described as extremely important for autistic senior secondary students in building self-determination. Educators felt, having the availability of a safe space where autistic senior secondary students could go when overwhelmed, or needing time to self-regulate and feel safe, without judgement, was an enabler for building confidence.

Kate, Stacey, and Ibrahim all described their schools “safe space[s]”, and how such spaces enabled autistic senior secondary students to engage in schooling. Kate (16/9/21) said, “supporting them socially, emotionally, mentoring, [through] counselling, they use the Learning Support classroom at recess and lunch, as like a safe space”. Stacey (6/8/21) said, “The pod is a safe space for those neurodiverse kids. Often in schools, it's the library. That's the safe place to get recess and lunch, read a book”. Ibrahim (27/8/21) said,

> “This is a place where the kids can be safe, be okay. …We promote conversations. But always in the sense of trying to make the environment safe and decrease the sensory load, increase their ability to take some risks in a safe environment”.

Saggers and Ashburner (2019), refer to the design elements of the learning environment, including the sensory environment, social expectations, and changing within transition, as essential elements to be addressed in designing safe spaces for supporting learning and wellbeing at school. These elements are supported by the findings in this research, and support the safe spaces referenced by educators within the context of developing social communication skills, confidence, and independence, and will be considered further in the discussion chapter.

Educators spoke about the programs that they felt helped to support social skills during years 10 to years 12. Tim (26/8/21) said, “[there is a] programme called I’m social [at the school], which is for senior school students developing social skills”. Holly (24/9/21) said,

> “[The] future focused pathway planning programme focuses on building that confidence of becoming independent… during the programme, they do different challenges. … the whole goal of the programme is just to build confidence and independence. We have seen … improvements.”.

Anthony’s (5/8/21), view on pathway programmes, centralised work experience as the key to transition, however he reiterated that all planning and support needs to be determined by an autistic students’ strengths and goals.

> "I think it's about getting an understanding of interests. I think for a lot of our students with autism, they've got such an intense, strong drive for something. [We] find that that's where a lot of their skills lie, so identifying their strengths, and then identifying different jobs that they could do in that area. I think that really helps them to build their determination to go out and work. But we also run work experience programmes every year with them, and we go to various places. We go to supported employment, and open employment".

Other educators related social skills programs in their school as meeting the personal and social capability learning continuum in the Australian Curriculum (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2023). Elsie (5/8/21) said, "[for] students [on the] autism spectrum, those communication sections are a little bit bigger than [for] other [students], we know that the majority of them want to work on that social skill". Kathy (26/8/21) agreed and said, "they're doing a programme and developing their social skills, then that would be documented [as a] social skills programme once per week". The development and implementation of social skills programs and how these programs are meeting social communication transitional needs of autistic senior secondary students and autistic young adults will be discussed further in chapter seven.

6.3 Formal Planning Supports

The development and implementation of Individual Support Plans (IEP), (including Personal Plan for Learning (PPL) and/or One Plans**)** emerged as a common theme, connecting educators' experiences of working with IEPs, families, and autistic senior secondary students. Kartika et al (2018) indicated IEPs as "an essential component … for individuals with special needs, as the IEP will guide the implementation of the education service" (p. 682).

Educators spoke about the IEP as a document that represents a written statement of adjustments, goals, and individual educational needs for reaching a young person's potential. Educators discussed three main challenges with IEP engagement: (1) parents' understanding , (2) student involvement (Wagner et al., 2012) and (3) educator understanding of social communication skills development.

6.3.1 Parents' Understanding

Lilly (19/8/21) felt that the IEPs in her school,

> "still lack[ed] the parent involvement and [the school] was trying to get more student involvement in the plans" and believed that "[the school] hasn't involved the students as much in the plans as they could, [the school is] not really supporting self-determination" … we currently use one plans; we don't have formal meetings. A lot of our students don't know that they have a disability…there's a big gap in the family understanding. They don't talk about [IEPs] at home. They don't really understand they have one, we have a gap".

Consistent with the findings in this research, Ilik & Er (2019) indicate,

> "the importance of parents in the education process is in the legal foundation of special education services. Although laws require parents to participate in the education process, it is stated in most studies that parents do not actively participate in this process" (pp. 76-77).

Matt (29/9/21), presented the opposite view and spoke positively about his school's inclusive education team, who supported families and autistic students to participate in IEP meetings. Matt said, [the school] "meets with every family, [including] students on the spectrum". Matt did not elaborate on his or his autistic child's understanding of the IEP after the meetings nor the implementation of the IEP.

6.3.2 Student Involvement

Vicki and Tim perceived the development of the IEP with an autistic student as an enabler for self-determination and independence. Vicki (3/9/21) said,

> "…self-determination in transition [relates] to the older cohorts. In younger levels, plans are created with their parents as the student advocate, [although there is] a section for [the] student voice … as we move up into the secondary school [the] student voice becomes their voice, [although] they're still really grappling with what it means to advocate for themselves in their plans".

Tim (26/8/21) spoke about how [he] would "pull them in and write a goal in [their] plan" in consultation with the young person.

One educator related the IEP to the Australian Curriculum (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2023), and described the community subjects that support social communication development. Elsie (5/8/21) said "in the community subjects, … they talk about [social communication] capabilities and how they've developed them. They're made to self-reflect".

6.3.3 Educator Understanding of Social Communication Skills Development.

Educators' findings clearly indicated differences between schools and educator experiences when working with IEPs. Educators describe how the IEPs are shared within their schools and the impact this had on family and a young person's engagement.

Gordon, Elsie, and Gemma, spoke about the limitations they have experienced with the development and implementation of IEPs in supporting social communication skills with autistic senior secondary students. Gordon (18/10/21) said "we've got 150 kids on IEP s, out of 390. We haven't got the capacity as teaching staff to sit one on one with every single student to write goals is just, it's...it's too difficult". Karita et al (2028) states, "Even though teachers understand the

benefits of IEP, …teachers consider the preparation of the IEP or IEP paperwork as an administrative burden" (p. 683).

Kartika et al (2018), also discusses how IEPs are developed, indicating that teachers need to be knowledgeable in the development and implementation of IEPs, novice teachers may find difficulties with IEPs and support the idea that there is a risk that the IEP is used to meet administration requirements and not the needs of the student.

Elsie's experience reiterated that IEPs/One Plan needed to be used differently in some schools as they were a living document that should be adaptive. Elsie (5/8/21) said "One plan goal, once they were done, they were done. And people forgot that they were an active document and needed to be reviewed, changed, and adapted to what the students' actual needs are". Elsie also said a high turnover of staff impacted on the effectiveness of the One Plan and on autistic student support. "I think we have a high turnover of staff, [and] we forget that not everybody knows what we're talking about".

The findings of Kartika et al (2018), and Koßmann (2022), supports Gemma's experience who reiterated that the IEP is a document that may be completed due to compliance and not individualised to meet the needs of autistic students. "IEP specifications are never on there. It's very generic, it's very general, it's 99% of the time copy and paste. Or we get, … the format, and then there's the things you can copy and paste and put on it." Gemma (16/9/21) then explained how [the school] used pastoral care notes instead of the IEP saying, "people are actually using it... IEP have generic recommendations".

Other educators had a more positive view of the IEP and described how their schools utilised the IEP documents to support social communication skills when working with autistic youth. Kathy (26/8/21) said,

> … "[the school] look[s] at the support that [is] available to them [and] their actual form, what adjustments [there are and] we update each year. That provides us with a way of sharing with the teachers what that child really needs to help them in the classroom. We review at least once a year, usually for children with autism, we review more frequently [and] that review, is with parents and our school counsellor psychologist".

Damien, Stacey, and Matt had similar thoughts on how their schools used the IEP to engage families and autistic senior secondary students and reiterated the importance of information sharing and accessibility to the individualised learning plans. Damien (20/9/21) said,

> … "we use [personal plans for learning], it's very accessible for all our teachers. [The school] makes sure that it is very clear on who may need that support. The PPLs are [based on] a range of different things from a student's interests, positive attributes [and]

> specific ways [the student] learns, the most beneficial teaching methods, and any other information that will enhance the opportunities for that student in the classroom, and for the teacher to be able to deliver …[and] get them to prepare, in the best way possible".

The engagement of families, parents, and autistic students in the development and implementation of the IEP is noted in literature as essential to successful planning for transition during senior secondary school and impacts on post-school tertiary and employment outcomes (Griffin et al., 2014; İlik & Er, 2019; Roy, 2023; Snell-Rood et al., 2020; Wagner et al., 2012). How schools and teachers develop and use the IEP to engage families, and autistic senior secondary students will be further examined in the discussion chapter.

Matt discussed his schools process when working with autistic senior secondary students and the sharing of IEP information. Matt (29/9/21) said, "we have staff meetings, and [the IEP] will [be] put in our pigeonhole [with a description of] what goal we're going to be working on with that student. [We would discuss this further] at staff meetings".

Stacey described how the school briefed new staff, to enable continuity in understanding, support, and a student-centred approach to working with autistic senior secondary students and the IEPs. Stacey (6/8/21) said,

> "we have IEP meetings with the staff, where we get their observations at the end of the year. At the start of the new year, we'll brief the new staff on the key kids. Normally [they consist of] brief meetings at recess when we call an IEP meeting and [discuss] the learning profile. This is what works".

The challenges mentioned by educators in this research are further supported by Mohd Rashid & Wong (2022), who indicate "challenges include lack of separate and adequate time for preparation of an IEP, not knowing how to prepare an IEP, and lack of a variety of materials in IEP implementation" (p.17). As schools continue to struggle with procedural and substantive requirements of IEPs, (Blackwell & Rossetti, 2014), and parent and student engagement (Kurth et al., 2020), the challenges experienced by teachers requires further investigation and discussion.

6.4 Preparing for Transition earlier than Senior Secondary Schooling.

Social communication transition planning in years 8 – 10, emerged as a key theme. Educators expressed their concern for earlier transition planning and suggested preparing autistic senior secondary students for post-school transition earlier than senior secondary school. Tim suggested that without social communication transition support early in middle school, difficulties with autonomy may be experienced in senior secondary school and may be a predictor of social communication difficulties as autistic senior secondary students transition into life beyond school. Tim (26/8/2021) reflected on primary school to secondary school transition preparation saying,

> "… [there is] support when transitioning from Primary school [and] heavy support in 8-10, [but] struggle in senior years where [they are] expected to be autonomous … they are going to struggle for ever in their life. [The students] may as well take all the stumbles and falls earlier [in] 8, 9 and 10, then [rather than] later in life. In high school, suddenly, [there is a] level of autonomy expected, and they struggle".

Tim also alluded to social communication transition conversations occurring in senior secondary school were too late, and this did not create a [school] culture conducive to positive and relevant transition, especially for autistic senior secondary students. Tim (26/8/2021) said, "I have started to have those conversations, but we can't suddenly expect in year 10, or year 11, for them to make the wisest subject selections, if we haven't created that culture".

Kate (16/9/21), described the need for social communication transition planning to occur throughout high school, continuing into the senior school years. "Start right from year seven, try to get them to be as independent as possible at the start. We don't want them to wait until they finish year 12". Kate also described the school ethos, saying:

> "…we always look at it [in a specific way where], mum and dad or school can't be there to hold their hand once they're finished school and they're in a workplace. They need those skills before; they've got to have enough time to practice them and understand what's the best way".

Gemma (16/9/21), agreed and said "we [the school] believe the right thing is to… teach the kids to be independent. The transition to University or work would be a completely different discussion. If your discussion starts in year 11, you've missed the boat". In supporting the ideas of the educators in this research, MECCTYA (2008) indicates,

> "The middle years are an important period of learning, in which knowledge of fundamental disciplines is developed, … student motivation and engagement in these years is critical, and can be influenced by tailoring approaches to teaching, with learning activities and

> learning environments that specifically consider the needs of middle years students … effective transitions between primary and secondary schools are an important aspect of ensuring student engagement" (p. 12).

Educators concern regarding the lateness of social communication transition planning creating challenges and impacting on positive post-school outcomes for autistic young people will be explored further in the discussion chapter in relation to transition planning literature.

6.5 Teaching Social Communication Skills for Job Readiness.

Job readiness emerged as a significant theme from participant interviews. The concerns educators stated questioned teacher and autistic senior secondary student awareness and knowledge of what job ready meant. Job readiness can be described through components of the Cores Skills for Work: (a) getting the work done, (b) planning and organising, (c) making decisions, (d) identifying and solving problems and navigating the world of work, including managing career and work life as essential skills (Commonwealth of Australia, 2013). How these essential skills were perceived and developed varied between schools and educators.

Amelie and Ibrahim, indicated that staff were not familiar with the Core Skills for Work and described what they perceived as gaps. Amelie (10/9/21) said, "I don't think … too many staff are familiar with the Core Skills") and Ibrahim (27/8/21) added, "I still feel that there's a big gap [in schools]". However, Lilly (19/8/21) said, "[In our school the] Core Skills for Work employability skills, are taught in my class, and they are taught in our youth engagement strategy centre".

Educators indicated that linkages to external agencies were a critical component of transition planning and described some of the options available. Kathy described how her school implemented what they perceived as Core Skills for Work into an IEP and described one student's experience. Kathy (26/8/21), explained the interactions with external agencies in the social communication transition planning process.

> "We set him up with job prospects. He had sessions with them right throughout year 12. He still sees his worker two years later from job prospects. They still catch up. I think it's fortnightly, and they go to the local cafe near his house. For him, I knew that it was going to be vital that we had another service provider in the mix ready for when he left, because this was incredibly important for him".

Ibrahim (27/8/21), also provided his experience of external supports for students.

> "The other thing that happens in schools, including this one, is FLO, Flexible Learning Options, where a student [has] a case manager. The school gets paid money, which then

> they give to the FLO providers. And those people are supposed to be support workers and help them find jobs and all that sort of stuff that an educational institute can't do".

The notion of job readiness as it relates to social communication development in autistic senior secondary students during transition planning should be reflected in the IEPs (Akçin, 2022; Roy, 2023), is considered good educational practice (Blalock et al., 2003; Villasenor et al., 2018), and supports the insights in this research. Further exploration in the discussion chapter is required to understand how schools develop job readiness in the context of social communication transition planning for autistic students.

6.6 Linking with Post-school Opportunities.

Linked to social skills for job readiness is the theme of transition-based preparation for tertiary or employment opportunities. Following on from teaching social communication skills for job readiness, educators discussed employability skills in relation to transition-based experiences, employability skills and linkages with post-school options.

Elsie (5/8/21) said,

> "…[we] talk about employability skills. It becomes part of our language, [supporting] capabilities for literacy, numeracy, critical thinking, personal and social, intercultural relationships, and an ethical understanding. We embed in the community subjects, … the personal and social capabilities, [relating] to working in a team or working with people. [The students] developed that skill through assessment".

Amelie (10/9/21), discussed life skills development within transition planning with a focus on experiencing the world of work, saying, "It's about life skills and working with [organisations like] the Salvation Army and linking with other providers". Simon (18/10/21), spoke about linking to potential employers during social communication transition planning, through "opportunities to experience environments".

Educators further discussed transition planning in relation to potential employment. Key findings indicated that there were concerns for autistic senior secondary students when preparing and engaging in suitable employment opportunities. Anthony related this to suitable options for employment and the role educators play in this space. Anthony (5/8/21) said,

> "I think for us, the main thing we can do better is just find out what other options are out there. I think we're really struggling [to assist] our autistic students [and find] suitable open employment. Finding an employer that will be willing to give them a go, is really challenging, even with support".

Anthony then added his thoughts about why this is so challenging and said, “I think there's probably a few things, potentially a bit of a lack of knowledge around autism and probably a bit of fear”. The findings from this research supports further investigation into social communication transition-based preparation linking to readiness for tertiary or employment opportunities for autistic senior secondary students, with reference to the relationships between schools, industry, and external support agencies (Carter et al., 2009; Trainor et al., 2019).

6.7 Teacher Professional Development

Teacher professional development in relation to supporting autistic children and adolescents in schools emerged as a strong theme. Educators spoke about their experiences, challenges, gaps, and opportunities for developing skills to support autistic senior secondary students in schools. Paul, Stacey, Anthony, and Randal, had similar views on the challenges educators face and discussed the lack of knowledge pertaining to autism, bridging the gaps between mainstream school teachers and the support provided by student support officers in schools and the challenge of upskilling teachers.

Paul (3/9/21) said,

> “…the biggest challenge is bridging the gap between teachers and utilising the SSOs. And we are having [on] going conversations around that and how to meet the needs of the students more effectively. The teachers pitch a lesson at the mainstream. How does that look in a classroom for day-to-day lessons and how does that look, when it comes to modifications on tasks. Students that are on individual learning plans don't always have modifications made”.

Stacey (6/8/21) said,

> “we suggest things, but our knowledge base as a staff isn't strong”. Randal (1/9/2021) said, “it is a challenge in upskilling the teachers because teachers are busy. My role is not only supporting students, … [but] supporting teachers, working with them, and training them about how to support the students in their class”.

Tim presented a different view of what he considered was required in schools and how the gap in teacher education may be addressed. Tim also indicated there were differences in the level of teacher knowledge between mainstream educators, special education teachers and student support officers. Tim (28/8/21) said,

> “… we are trained to work with people with disabilities, … we can look at the [student] behaviours and interpret if [the issue] is a [social] communication [barrier] or something else, other [mainstream teaching] staff, [don’t have the same knowledge] so that's a gap in

> teacher education. Inclusive education has become one of the core courses in teacher qualification, but a lot of the staff are old-school, for them, anything with disability was someone else's work, [and] responsibility and they don't have the training, the law changed …, but the training hasn't caught up".

Tim spoke further about his perceptions of the 'gap in professional development' saying,

> "… we teach all the [autistic] children in our mainstream schools. How do you bridge the gap? ... like staff training, changing attitudes and the legal mandate. Teachers are not prepared and need support from trained inclusive teachers. This was a gap that was identified by the executive leadership. [Inclusive educators] are completely immersed in capacity building, because they see such high level of disability, whereas in mainstream schools, it's more about improving education outcomes and better grades".

Tammy's experience of mainstream teachers reflected Tim's views. Tammy spoke about the divide between inclusive educators, student support officer and mainstream teachers. Tammy (3/9/21) said,

> "…some teachers will do the modification, some of the teachers think it's the SSOs job to [do] the modifications. We're currently trying to do some professional development in the area for staff [regarding] roles, responsibilities, who does what… and working collaboratively with SSOs, and [changing] teachers' expectations that someone will do that for me".

Randal (1/9/21) said, "upskilling teachers, … it's a real journey, I think the challenging part of my role is getting teachers on board".

Stacey and Kathy spoke about the changes in their school's ethos and how inclusive education is seen as critical in supporting autistic students. The United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (2020) published a policy paper (43) indicating,

> "An important element of inclusive education involves ensuring that all teachers are prepared to teach all students. Inclusion cannot be realized unless teachers are empowered agents of change, with values, knowledge and attitudes that permit every student to succeed" (p. 1).

Stacey (6/8/21) said,

> "…we've just changed our terminology, from special education to inclusive education. That was my imperative. We're about to double in size as a team. We're on the beginning of our inclusive journey, and part of that journey is becoming experts in neurodiversity. We're

> good at teaching the Ignite kids [gifted children, in accelerated programs] we need to be good at teaching the kids with additional needs and keeping them in the classroom".

Kathy (26/8/21) described her school ethos and said,

> "…we've got a strong inclusive education department here. And we do advocate strongly for those kids. A lot of professional development goes on with the teachers who are going to be responsible for teaching the students we have with autism at the end of the year before the [students] commence. We target professional development for those teachers. So at least when they start their lessons the following year, they've got a little bit of a toolkit, and a bit of an understanding so that they can establish a positive relationship early".

The differences in teacher professional development and school ethos within schools highlighted some of the gaps and challenges schools, and teachers, face in supporting the social communication transition planning and development of autistic senior secondary students. This aligns with Petersson-Bloom et al (2023), who concluded that, "teachers should be provided with research-based knowledge on developing the necessary skills to teach students with autism across society" (p. 10). The challenges and gaps in teacher professional development will be further examined in the discussion chapter.

6.8 Preparing for Transition: Policies and Practice.

The disparity between school outcomes, and meaningful social communication transition planning for autistic senior secondary students developed as a theme. Stacey identified the tension between school and meeting the social communication transition needs of autistic senior secondary students. Stacey (6/8/21) said, "I'm really interested in transitions, because I think, there's a tension between schools and what we do for students. .... We need to sit with that tension and understand that we need to do … better prepare kids for the transition". Georgia agreed and referred to limited resourcing. Georgia (24/9/21) said, "there are some frustrations around resourcing inclusive education, and there's some deep frustration around what happens in this space".

Ibrahim and Damien described their experiences of the school systems that impact on supports for autistic children and adolescents. Ibrahim (27/8/21) said, "our experiences up until recently, [is that] this has been a very, very flawed system for students on the spectrum". Hasson et al (2024), supported the findings in this research and referred to funding and resource issues regarding the inability to meet the needs of autistic senior secondary school students saying, "financial restrictions hinder … appropriate provision, … impacting on … resources … staff seemed aware of the flaws in the system, and the impact this had on appropriately meeting children's needs" (p. 206).

In discussing the tension between school needs and autistic senior secondary students' needs within transition planning educators expressed their concerns regarding school systems and clarity around roles and responsibilities of educators. Damien spoke about transition planning as a 'grey area' and clarity is needed within schools to enable the support of social communication transition planning for autistic students. Damien (2/9/21) said,

> "…it's really that transition from school, and beyond, it's still a really grey area. I think that it doesn't seem to have landed in anyone's responsibility over the years, but it's always highlighted as a massive need. I think that there's a lot of schools that don't have the capacity".

Ibrahim (27/8/21), felt that social communication transition is not supported enough in the school and said, "It's not supported. I suppose in [years] 10 to 12 is where [students are] building the social communication skills in preparation for post school transitions, employment, or the tertiary sector. I don't think we do it particularly well, overall, yet". In support, Folostina et al (2022) state, "teachers' needs …remain low, confirming the need for appropriate teacher education regarding theory, relevant practical strategies, and coaching to enable them with the necessary tools to work with children with ASD" (p. 3).

Simon provided his views on social communication transition planning for autistic senior secondary students in senior secondary school and compared his experiences regarding transition support, funding models and employment opportunities from the United Kingdom and Australia. Simon (18/10/21) said,

> "I think the real significant difference between the Australian schools that I've worked in, and the UK schools that I worked in, has been the level of funding that goes to those schools. In the sense that, in the special education sector, in the UK, there's a significant number of finances available to schools, to be able to work with students who are recognised, with high levels of need. Since I've been in Australia, I'm not aware of many schools who can [provide that] kind of support to a student to that level of need. … I think that programmes could be put in place if the funding [was] more directed".

Literature supports the apparent disparity of provisions for autistic senior secondary students, teacher professional development and evidence-based practices that support efficiencies pertaining to school and therefore life outcomes in many countries (Folostina et al., 2022; Kossewska et al., 2021; Listiakova & Preece, 2020; Šegota et al., 2022). A cross-section analysis of the local, Australian, and International views on transition planning support, highlight the challenges schools, teachers, and policy maker face in supporting the social communication transition planning and development of autistic senior secondary students will be debated in chapter seven.

6.9 Summary

The research findings in this section sought to unpack educators' understanding of social communication transition planning for autistic senior secondary students. Twenty educators, six student support officers and one career coordinator reflected on the processes of transition planning in relation to social communication development in their school. The findings provided insight into seven key themes, (1) Transition planning: self-determination, confidence, and independence, (2) Formal planning supports, (3) Planning for transition sooner than senior secondary school, (4) Teaching social communication skills for job readiness, (5) Linking with post-school opportunities (6) Teacher professional development, and (7) Preparing for transition: policies and practice.

Educators explained how they supported autistic senior secondary students' in developing social communication skills through transition planning within a school system that many educators perceived was inadequately resourced to meet the needs of a robust transition for autistic senior secondary students. Other educator experiences indicated the need for social communication development that could support positive teacher and peer relationships. Building confident and independent autistic young people at a younger age and increasing the engagement of parents and their autistic children in the transition planning process was recommended by educators.

Educators felt the tension between school policies and practices and meeting the social communication transition needs of autistic senior secondary students, expressing complexity in the school systems that may or may not support the development of educators' knowledge and skill, or bridge the gaps between schools, educators, parents, autistic senior secondary students and transition planning.

Chapter 7 discusses key findings within the context of the four theoretical frameworks, in response to the views of autistic and non-autistic participants and proposes a model depicting the social communication transition journey: from school to tertiary education and employment.

CHAPTER 7 – DISCUSSION

7.1 Introduction

This research explored the perspectives on, and experiences of thirteen autistic senior secondary students and autistic young adults, twelve parents, and twenty-seven educators regarding support provided for the development of autistic young people's social communication skills in senior secondary schools to assist with successful transition to tertiary education and employment.

This chapter proposes a new model presenting ways forward to more effectively support the development of social communications skills in secondary schools. The Social Communication Transition Journey: from School to Tertiary Education and Employment Model will be discussed in detail, reflecting key findings, supported by theoretical frameworks and perspectives, and provides a reflective view of the autistic and non-autistic voices.

7.2 Overview of the Social Communication Transition Journey: from School to Tertiary Education and Employment Model

Reflected in literature, transition focused education, including social communication development provides a vehicle for meeting social communication needs post-school (Kohler et al., 2016; National Secondary Transition Technical Assistance Center, 2010; Wehman et al., 2014; White et al., 2017). However, there are many factors of influence on the design of successful social communication programs for autistic senior secondary students as identified in this research. Drawing on the research findings, the following model is proposed as a potential approach to ensure social communication transition planning is prioritised for autistic young people, so that future cohorts' experiences are in more supportive contexts than those students who participated in this research.

This thesis drew on multiple participants' perspectives to understand how autistic senior secondary students and autistic young adults are prepared, or not prepared, for social communication transition. The autistic voice was an essential part of the research and provided an authentic autistic view of the lived social communication transition experience. Figure 7 is a visual representation of the research findings highlighting the interrelationships of internal and external connectors that were reported as influential on the lived experiences of the autistic senior secondary students and autistic young adults. The proposed model acknowledges the key factors identified as themes in the findings that require close attention in designing successful social communication transition experiences for autistic senior secondary students and autistic young adults.

Central to this proposed model, The Social Communication Transition Journey, is the social communication transition experiences of autistic senior secondary students and autistic young adults. These experiences are influenced by 'internal connectors', which reflect specific states of being for the autistic young people including having a sense of confidence, independence and feeling socially connected. These states of being are supported through genuine friendships, supportive mentors, and trustworthy relationships. The internal connectors require strong reciprocal interactions between the autistic young people and others in their lives. While the autistic young people may be deemed as having control over their sense of confidence, independence, and social connections, these are highly influenced by the quality of the relationships with those around them including parents, peers and educators. Finding self through building confidence, independence and social connections was indicated as critical to success at school, in tertiary education, employment and life. Finding self was further supported by quality friendships with peers, trusted relationships with teachers and significant others, and individual relationships with mentors outside the school environment. These six key internal connectors were identified by participants as fundamental to acquiring social communication skills and subsequent successful transition to tertiary education and/or employment.

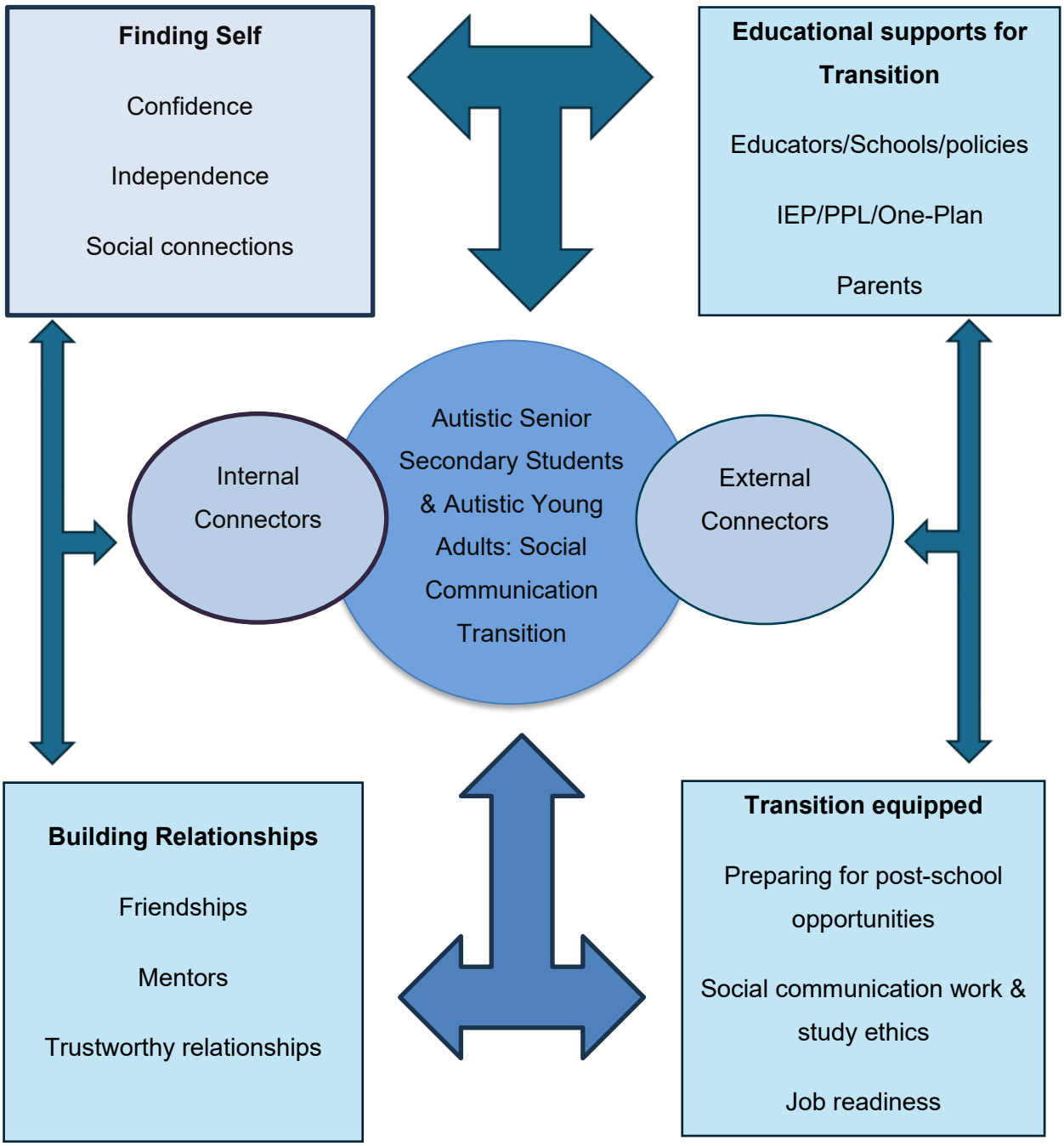
The 'external connectors' identified in the model, were informed by the parents of autistic children, and educators who teach autistic senior secondary students, and reflected their perspectives on critical elements that influenced social communication transition experiences and outcomes. The external connectors have been divided into two key areas, (1) Educational supports for transition and (2) Transition equipped. Findings from the research highlighted the significant role played by educators, the school context and its policies and parents in providing quality social communication support for autistic students. There was also significant attention paid to the role of the IEP/PPL/One Plan by both parents and educators noting its importance, but also the many challenges associated with its relevance to authentically support the development of social communication skills. Educators and parents noted the value of early preparation for post-schooling opportunities and a need to focus on social communication skills required in the workforce or tertiary settings. These factors have been labelled as 'external connectors' as they reflect the context in which the autistic young people exist, but over which they have far less personal control.

While the proposed model in Figure 7 identifies four key themes and twelve sub-themes of importance to a successful 'Social Communication Transition Journey' it is critical to note that the success of the model lies in the reciprocal interactions between the internal and external connectors. For example, high quality educators, and quality relationships between educators, students and parents are foundational to developing individual education plans to prioritise student-driven goals for social communication development. However, for successful achievement of such goals, autistic senior secondary students require a voice and a context in which they can achieve

their goals, including practicing social communication skills with mentors, peers, parents and educators and in authentic post-school settings. Success in any of these contexts should lead to enhanced confidence and a sense of independence. To build experiences of success, carefully orchestrated experiences may be initially required, with roles of responsibility clearly identified. Such detail should be central to an IEP and a student's social communication transition journey. The elements of the model will be explained further in 7.2.1 and throughout the remainder of this chapter, referencing the models' connections to literature.

Figure 7

The Social Communication Transition Journey: from School to Tertiary Education and Employment



7.2.1 Elements of the Social Transition Journey: from School to Tertiary Education and Employment Model

7.2.1.1The Autistic Lens and Connections to the World

The Autistic lens and the translation to meaning provided the foundations of this model. Through reflection autistic senior secondary students and autistic young adults' voices were recognised. Their voices provided insights into their lived experiences within a social cultural context, focussing on social aspects and communication within their transition to post-school education, employment and citizenship.

How autistic young people interpreted their experiences offered insights into what they saw as important for 'surviving' school and building 'hope' for their futures beyond school. In explaining their current social communication transition in senior secondary school and what transpired post-school, autistic young people reflected on what they thought they needed (internal connectors) and what they needed to support them (external connectors).

Autistic senior secondary students experienced varying levels of self-determination (Wehmeyer et al., 2012), and understanding of transition. They focused on their friendships, engaging with peers and relied on the trusted relationships (Jahromi et al., 2021), for guidance and support when socialising and communicating within the school environment. Their world revolved around the survival of school and some thought was given to where they may 'fit' within and outside of the school environment. One autistic senior secondary student had a clear picture of their social communication journey, indicating external mentors (Mullen & Klimaitis, 2019), and interests enabled the building of social connections, independence and confidence. Autistic young adults reflected with hindsight on their social communication transition planning experience. Their experiences on what transpired within social communication transition planning, impacted on their current engagement in tertiary education, employment and community life. Central to these experiences was their self-awareness of their current level of confidence, and independence. They also commented on how they build social connections, many recognising the limitations within social communication development at school.

7.2.1.2 Internal Connections: What We Need

Self-acceptance, and self-confidence play a pivotal role in building meaningful social connections. Serving as the foundations for effective social communication development, confidence and independent skills, combined with self-determination (Wehmeyer et al., 2017; Wehmeyer et al., 2010), and the capacity to practice such skills with peers, friends (Jahromi et al., 2021), and mentors increases the likelihood of successfully navigating social situations at school, in tertiary education, employment and in the community.

Internal belief about one's capacity to build strong connections resonates within an individual's self-awareness, about the social communication needs required to navigate and build internal

networks. In this research autistic young people recognised the elements of finding self, that is confidence and independence (Akbari & Sahibzada, 2020), as the key to making social connections. Within these social connections autistic young people wanted to feel 'safe' in their environment, (Muraleedharan et al., 2021), and related safety to feelings of acceptance by others such a peers and friends. In-turn, these trusted relationships were linked to influencing autistic young people's confidence and independence in a positive and supportive manner.

There were strong correlations between mentors, 'safe' social connections, and autistic young people. Mentors were seen as safe and trusted relationships that increased confidence and encouraged independence within community engagement (Banerjee-Batist et al., 2019). Confidence and independence were also seen as fostering effective communication, and an enabler for further proactive socialising and establishing meaningful connections (Oney & Oksuzoglu-Guven, 2015).

The model clearly shows the connections between the internal elements, autistic young people indicated they needed to be self-determined and build their capacity to independently and confidently communicate within different social contexts. Learning opportunities though reciprocal support, exposure and participation in social communication skills within school transition planning is one vehicle for supporting the development of the critical social communication skills required by autistic young people as they move into employment, tertiary education and citizenship.

7.2.1.3 External Connections: What Supports Us

Links between the internal self and external support mechanisms were depicted by autistic young people as areas that were less familiar, and they lacked awareness of how the educational supports valued added to their development of social communication skills. Autistic young adults and their parents discussed their lack of understanding of the school supports, including the IEPs/PPLs/One Plans and questioned the outcomes of school interventions (Koßmann, 2022). This lack of understanding impacted on their engagement and the investment parents (Kurth et al., 2020) and autistic young people perceived was required in supporting the development of social communication readiness for tertiary education, employment and community life.

Educators had varied views on their roles and responsibilities in supporting autistic senior secondary school students' social communication development. Mainstream educators expected that students at a senior level already had the skills necessary to participate in social communication encounters with their peers and their teachers within the classroom environment, and relied on the inclusive education teams, including SSOs to assist in social communication development and support beyond mainstream expectations (Esqueda Villegas et al., 2024). Educators also have varying views on the success of IEP/PPL/One Plan development and implementation for autistic senior secondary students, reiterating that school policies and procedures impacted on implementation and parent/student buy-in. Autistic senior secondary

students relied on their mainstream teachers working closely with the inclusive education teams to support their social communication development and their parents to guide transition supports (Kurth et al., 2020; Wagner et al., 2012; Wei et al., 2016).

Parents, were seen by autistic young people, as the key to assisting their development of social communication in and out of the school environment (Nuzhat & Suzanne, 2024). Autistic senior secondary school student's relied on their parents to help them navigate the world around them, provided critical support in working with teachers and schools (Steinbrenner et al., 2024), and assisted their transition to adulthood (Curtiss et al., 2021). Although autistic young people recognised the assistance, they need from others, they also had a level of self-awareness that the level of assistance may and did have implications for their development in social communication confidence and independence as they transitioned from the school environment to employment, tertiary education and citizenship.

Autistic young adults focused on their social communication transition experiences retrospectively, indicating they were underprepared for life beyond school. Considering the social communication challenges (American Psychiatric Association, 2018), they experienced post-school, they thought schools could have done more to prepare them to be transition equipped. Within this space, job ready skills (Sung et al., 2024), work and study ethics (Commonwealth of Australia, 2022), greater experience in the workforce while at school and increasing independence and confidence were seen as critical for successful transition into employment and society. Although these skills are depicted in the model as external connectors for autistic young people, there is a strong correlation between all elements as critical to the successful social communication transition experiences of autistic young people's social communication confidence and independence.

7.3 Finding Self: The Models Connections to Theoretical Frameworks

In this research the construct of finding-self was discussed by the autistic senior secondary students as 'fitting in' to school. Although the autistic senior secondary students did not specifically reflect on all self-development skills, they were unanimous in the response to recognising they needed social communication skills to 'survive' school and be successful in tertiary education, employment, and community life.

7.3.1 The need to Socially Connect and Communicate

In describing their social communication experiences autistic senior secondary students reported having difficulty with social connections and communicating with others, and "hoped" they would obtain the necessary skills "somehow over-time" (Ben 8/11/21). They did not know how this would occur, but understood they needed to be effective communicators to be able to 'fit' into school and community life. Literature pertaining to autism, references this neurological difference as social communication pragmatics and describes the social communication challenges (American

Psychiatric Association, 2013, 2022b; Autism Spectrum Australia, 2025; Lam, 2014; Pratt et al., 2017), typically expressed as difficulties in the capacity to interact and respond in social communication situations. The social communication transition challenges highlighted in literature and experienced by the autistic senior secondary students and autistic young adults established the need for school-based interventions and the reliance on teachers, and significant others to guide social communication transition planning (Cameto et al., 2004; Cobb & Alwell, 2009; DeLeo, 2017; Kohler et al., 2016; O'Neill et al., 2016). Transition-focused education supports this ideology in principle; however, the experiences of autistic senior secondary students and autistic young adults indicate there is a gap in social communication skills development in senior secondary school.

7.3.2 Am I Confident Enough?

The definition of confidence provided by the Oxford Dictionary (2024,) indicates that confidence is, "the feeling that you can trust, believe in and be sure about the abilities or good qualities of somebody/something" (p.1). Literature suggests confidence is different from self-determination and trust of others, and has conceptualised confidence as a person's feelings of assuredness and lack of anxiety (Compte & Postlewaite, 2004). Furthermore, as a person's ability to work out what needs to occur and how to do the task, the belief or the capacity to develop the belief that they can do the task, formulate a positive outlook while engaging in the task and demonstrate resilience when required (Edward 2005; Stajkovic 2006). Confidence can be emotional and cognitive in nature (Earle, 2009), and is based on past experiences associated with expected outcomes (Oney & Oksuzoglu-Guven, 2015). The participants in this research referred to this as; belief in self, their own abilities, and qualities they perceived they needed.

Confidence was a strong focus for autistic senior secondary students, and they indicated that they were not confident in approaching teachers for help or associating with peers. Autistic young adults felt this was not addressed in senior secondary transition planning and they indicated they 'lacked confidence' which impacted on their capacity to make social connections and communicate with others while at school and in life beyond school. All autistic young people interviewed indicated that social communication skills were missing. They wanted these skills and felt change was necessary within schools to support successful transition to post-school life.

While transition planning literature suggests that educators should teach specific skills such as self-determination and social skills (Anderson et al., 2003; Blalock et al., 2003), there appears to be a disparity between the social communication experiences of autistic senior secondary students and autistic young adults, and how the literature proposes preparation within and beyond school. The extent to which senior secondary experiences prepared them with confidence for transition in post-school in this context requires further investigation.

Literature specifies best practice for transition planning for autistic young as people including a student-centred approach to the development of individual needs, considering personal interests, specific instruction, and the development of community and employability skills (Bassett & Kochhar-Bryant, 2006; Blalock et al., 2003; Kohler & Field, 2003; Kohler et al., 2016; Trainor et al., 2019). Over the past decades social facilitation skills training for inclusive educators and paraprofessionals (Feldman E K & Rosy Matos R, 2012; Koegel et al., 2014; Laugeson et al., 2014), including social skills programs have been integrated into the transition planning (Kohler et al., 2016; Mazzotti et al., 2014; Test et al., 2009; Trainor et al., 2019), however autistic senior secondary students and autistic young adults in this research still expressed a lack of confidence in their social communication capacities. A call to action could incorporate a deeper investigation into how autistic young people build confidence and how this may translate into the school environment, where they can practice building confidence in a safe environment with familiar educators and peers.

The concept of confidence was reiterated by parents and teachers of autistic senior secondary students and autistic young adults. In this research confidence was recognised as one of the main barriers to building social communication skills at school, and to successful transition to tertiary education, employment, and community life beyond school.

As parents discussed the social communication challenges, they described their autistic child's lack of confidence, as feelings of a lack of connection, not belonging (Jahromi et al., 2021), high anxiety (Askell-Williams & Lawson, 2015), and internal doubt in oneself. Supported throughout literature pertaining to autism, these feelings and beliefs are reflective of social communication and self-regulation difficulties (American Psychiatric Association, 2018, 2022b). Parents also struggled with their own ideas about how to help their child develop confidence, indicating they were not sure how much assistance/intervention should be provided in various situations as they wanted their autistic child to flourish, not struggle (MacCormack et al., 2020; Marshall et al., 2018).

Educators also expressed the associated challenges for autistic senior secondary students who demonstrated low self-confidence, with debilitating consequences in their social communication with peers, teachers, friends, their schooling and transition to tertiary education or employment (Akbari & Sahibzada, 2020; Askell-Williams & Lawson, 2015), acknowledging that trying to break down the barrier to autistic senior secondary students' feelings of self-doubt and the fear associated with potential peer ridicule was difficult (Bierman, 2004; Chamberlain et al., 2007; Symes & Humphrey, 2010).

7.3.3 Searching for Independence

Independence has been defined as " not influenced or controlled by other people, but free to make your own decisions" (Cambridge University Press and Assessment, 2025). Furthermore, self-development and self-determination theory (Wehmeyer et al., 2010; White et al., 2018) refers to building independence, examining internal processes of self-motivation and social integration, and well-being. The accounts of the autistic young people in this research suggested that preparation for independence during transition planning was not adequate.

Autistic senior secondary students clarified their experience of decision-making, reiterating that decisions were made under the direction of their parents and to a lesser degree their teachers, as they felt they had a lack of courage to make decisions. They did not discuss independence but had an awareness of reliance on others and were influenced by parents, educators, and peers, to the extent that hindered their capacity to learn skills associated with becoming independent. Shogren & Plotner (2012), and Wehman et al (2014), point out that autistic senior secondary students and autistic young adults experience more transition goals relating to increasing functional independence, and social communication relationship development, although they still experience lower success rates in tertiary education and employment than their non-autistic peers. Research-based principles in self-determination and social interactions as stated by Wehmeyer et al, (2010a), indicated "many students with autism have been, in essence, taught to depend on other people because they have not been provided with opportunities to engage in self-determined behaviour" (p. 478).

Autistic young adults reflected on their senior secondary school transition and felt they experienced low levels of independence and indicated they struggle in adult life. They felt they were not prepared in transition planning to become independent or had the capacity to make independent decisions but acknowledged they needed family and school support which led to a shortfall in independence required to engage in tertiary education or employment. Other research echo these findings restating that adults with disabilities want to become more independent as they transition from adolescence to adulthood, including independence in their post-school education, career/employment, and relationships (Bianco et al., 2009; Marshall et al., 2018). Evidence in this research has shown a level of self-awareness and the capacity for autistic young people to reflect on their independence. This phenomenon suggests there is scope for targeted programs within schools in earlier years, so the opportunity to develop independence can occur over time and at a similar level to their peers in senior secondary school, leading to a higher level of independent decision-making and engagement in post-school opportunities.

Parents perceive autonomy and independence as critical skills for successful social communication development at school (Wehman et al., 2014), and family intervention as necessary to help their children develop confidence and independence. Parents clearly indicated the sense of belonging, the capacity to advocate and the struggle with independence as key barriers for their autistic child's transition from school to tertiary education, employment, and community life. Many parents also felt torn between enabling or hindering independence, as they struggled with the need to protect and nurture their child, and the appropriate level of intervention required for successful transition beyond school.

Parents spoke about peers and friendships as the key to their child developing confidence and independence post-school, linking the success of independence, to family support, friends at school and groundwork in transition planning during schooling. This research suggests that families (Camarena & Sarigiani, 2009; Marshall et al., 2018), and friendships (Rubin et al., 2008; Symes & Humphrey, 2010), are instrumental in supporting independence. Parents did not reiterate the level of social communication development in transition planning or what the interventions were, hence, the difficulty in ascertaining the extent to which transition planning in senior secondary school prepared autistic senior secondary students and autistic young adults with independence.

Educators also indicated that autistic senior secondary students want a higher degree of independence, and expressed concerns of the extent transition planning prepares autistic senior secondary students for independence necessary to participate in post-school tertiary education and employment. Although evidence-based practices indicate that self-determination and developing independent skills (Kohler & Field, 2003; Kohler et al., 2016; Sutton et al., 2019; Trainor et al., 2019; Wehmeyer et al., 2003; Wehmeyer et al., 2012), are key factors in developing social communication readiness for post-school challenges, educators encountered various challenges when developing and implementing transition plans that supported independence in autistic senior secondary students in school. This was in part due to the competing roles and responsibilities of educators, who were required to meet school and parent expectations and the individual needs of students in transition planning (Test et al., 2018; Trainor et al., 2020), and the inconsistent nature of social communication situations. Educators recognised the disparity between enabling independence and confidence and (1) knowing when and how to implement the required level of interventions, (2) meeting expectations of parents who desire positive educational outcomes for their autistic child, (3) fulfilling a set of standards within schools and (4) preparing for tertiary education, employment, and community life. These barriers are depicted in literature under the banner of social skills development, indicating poor teacher preparation and development in addressing students' social needs, teacher work profiles, tailored social skills interventions, school-wide approaches and investment in the implementation of social skills programs, (Battalio & Stephens, 2005; Bellini et al., 2007; Dobbins et al., 2010; Lesley Abbott 2011; Vlachou, 2006).

They do not specifically address building confidence and independence, however, do support the challenges and barriers experienced by educators in this research.

7.4 Building Social Connections and Relationships

Social emotional support models throughout inclusion literature strongly suggest that universal interventions, social learning programs and the responsiveness of teachers all play an essential role in the social communication development of students with social, emotional, and behavioural challenges (Corcoran et al., 2018; de Leeuw et al., 2018; Harris et al., 2022; Knight et al., 2019), and especially for autistic senior secondary students who struggle with developing social communication skills required at school and beyond (Bauminger, 2002; Bellini et al., 2007). A community of practice model depicted by Botha & Kourkoutas (2016), reiterated the importance of adequate communication and social skills in academic and social relationships with peers and teachers within the school environment, concluding, “schools [need to] ensure the effective socialisation of all children” (p.796). In this sense, their research aligns with the relationship challenges identified by the autistic senior secondary students and autistic young adults experienced in this research.

7.4.1 Friendships

Literature supports the importance of peer relationships in mainstream education (Boutot, 2007), and the impact positive experiences have on building social communications skills and confidence in autistic adolescents (Boutot & Bryant, 2005; Rubin et al., 2008), however there is a growing body of evidence suggesting autistic students experience negative social outcomes , have limited social networks , fewer friends and experience more rejections from peers. This may be due to their lack of confidence and difficulties with communication.

The Reciprocal Effects Peer Interaction Model (REPIM) presented by Humphrey and Symes (2011), describes a peer support model for understanding the interpersonal relationships between students with and without autism and provides a diagrammatic representation for understanding negative social outcomes. The literature depicts the relationships as critical to social communication development and supports the internal factors that autistic senior secondary students and autistic young adults described in the research. Although peers were not a group interviewed in this research, autistic senior secondary students and autistic young adults, parents and educators all referred to the importance of peers in social communication development at school. The REPIM model also supports the educators’ views and the findings in this research and offers an explanation to understanding negative social outcomes amongst autistic students and their peers at school, pointing out the social cognition difficulties and poor social and communicative skills as the driver for the outcome.

One determiner for successful integration and participation at school was peer-friend relationships. Autistic senior secondary students discussed their peer-friend relationships as a critical component of building social communication skills at school and relied heavily on these relationships for support within the school environment. The notion of surviving the daily routine and social communication challenges of senior secondary school was the focus of the participants and there were limited connections to successful transition planning or life beyond school, however there were connections to participation at school and building capacity in social communication skills. In support of these findings there is a growing body of work that reiterates the importance of peer-friendships for social communication development and the detrimental impact of negative peer-friendships during schooling (Boutot, 2007; Sutton et al., 2019; Test et al., 2014; Young et al., 2015). Educators and parents should be aware of the significance of positive peer-friend relationships and seek to support, and where possible, nurture these. A greater understanding of how autistic young people socially interact and communicate with their peers within the wider school environment, may support the development of a school-wide approaches supporting autism-friendly school environments and building inclusive communities.

7.4.2 My Mentor

Autistic young people and their parents depended on external mentors, whose role was to support social communication interactions and skill development, build mutually respectful relationships, and encourage community engagement. Parents explained that extra funding for private mentors was reliant on the NDIS approvals and their personal/family social-economic capacity, thus creating another barrier for autistic young people from lower social-economic positions.

Mentoring literature suggests that there are various definitions of mentoring due to changing ideologies over decades. Mentoring relationships described in this research reflect the work of Kram (1983), and Mullen (2019), as relational, developmental, and instrumental for social communication skills development and assisting in transitioning to community life. Mentoring can involve advising, befriending and instruction, with the purpose of increasing confidence, self-empowerment and independence (Banerjee-Batist et al., 2019; Kram, 1983; Mullen & Klimaitis, 2019).

Social communication capacity building appeared to be limited in schools and depended on the quality and nature of student-teacher relationships. Evidence in this research indicated that successful mentoring occurred outside of the school environment for autistic senior secondary students and autistic young adults. There may be potential to create a similar model in schools with older students acting as mentors to younger autistic students. This could also provide skill development for both mentors and mentees given oversight from educators.

7.4.3 Trustworthy Relationships (Teacher-student Connections)

Just as critical as the peer-friendship relationships for autistic young people's social communication independence are the teacher-student connections built during the senior secondary school years. These relationships are an essential part of building trusting relationships and learning the essential social communication skills for life beyond school. Literature supporting these relational findings indicate the essence of connections throughout the social communication learning process, as autistic senior secondary students prepare for adult life (Bolourian et al., 2022; Magro et al., 2023; Roorda et al., 2017). Bolourian et al (2022), examination of the student-teacher relationship reported, "teachers tap into the relational strengths to facilitate the social acceptance of autistic students in mainstream classrooms" (p.3978). A meta-analysis on effective student-teacher relationships in primary and secondary school suggests that there is an increasing need for positive relationships for student engagement and achievement at all levels of schooling (Robertson et al., 2003).

School practices are an important component of building teacher awareness of the impact of their investment in effective student-teacher relationships (Roorda et al., 2017). In this space, there is a growing body of knowledge supporting safe spaces in schools, with key aspects focusing on the wellbeing (Hughes et al., 2019; Muraleedharan et al., 2021), of autistic senior secondary students as they transition into the different levels of schooling (Saggers & Ashburner, 2019). Saggers and Ashburner (2019) suggested that, "creating learning spaces that promote participation, engagement and wellbeing are especially significant for students on the autism spectrum" (p.140). Incorporating social communication development within wellbeing program at school could positively impact peer-to-peer and teacher-student relationships and on safety at school.

Correlations between positive student-teacher relationships in mainstream classrooms and peer social inclusion for autistic senior secondary students are evident in literature, suggesting that there is an increase in inclusivity with peers (Robertson et al., 2003). A significant factor in increasing the autistic-student-teacher relationship was the connections between SSO's, special education teachers and mainstream teachers who shared responsibility for supporting autistic senior secondary students in mainstream classrooms (Robertson et al., 2003; Sobeck & Robertson, 2019). Although there is a large body of evidence offering a multitude of comprehensive frameworks for supporting the development of social communication and emotional behaviours by specialist educators within mainstream schooling, there is limited research on mainstream educators' role and responsibilities in supporting social communication development (Lindsay et al., 2013; Parsons et al., 2011; Reichow & Volkmar, 2010; Walton & Ingersoll, 2013; Wong et al., 2015).

7.5 Educational Support for Transition

Transition planning ideologies are well described in literature as supportive, capacity building and inclusive of the needs of all young people (Kohler et al., 2016; Mazzotti et al., 2014; Trainor et al., 2019; Wehman et al., 2014), however evidence in this research supports a different story from the perspectives of the autistic senior secondary students, autistic young adults and parents. This research revealed that transition planning is not meeting the social communication needs of autistic young people. Although IEPs are developed, extra support through school funding arrangements is available, including support from inclusive education teachers (SSOs/ESOS), a disparity in practices still exists, widening the social communication gap as autistic senior secondary students move into adulthood.

7.5.1 Individual Support Plans (IEP, PPL, One Plans)

The Australian Curriculum clearly acknowledges the importance of social communication skills with its personal and social capacity learning continuum, which references communication, working with others, making decisions, and understanding relationships as critical to the development of school aged children and adolescents (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2023). Evidence based research in transition planning supports the development and implementation of individual education plans, discussing best practice for support for students with complex needs, specifically autistic students (Department for Education, 2023; Kohler et al., 2016; Martin, Van Dycke, Christensen, et al., 2006; Mazzotti et al., 2014).

Transition principles described in transition planning literature support the inclusion of activities developed in a student's IEP, focusing on the movement from school to the post-school environment and should include preparation for tertiary education options and integrate employment, independent living, and community participation (Anderson et al., 2018; Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2023; Bassett & Kochhar-Bryant, 2006; DeLeo, 2017; Hendricks & Wehman, 2009; Kohler et al., 2016; Trainor et al., 2019).

Evidence in this research suggests that IEPs when done well, can support social communication transition planning (Grigal, 2011 ; Zhang & Stecker, 2001), however there are many barriers that impact on the development and implementation for autistic senior secondary students and their families. IEP development barriers as identified by the educators in this research revealed that the lack of time to develop and then disseminate the meaning of the IEP for autistic senior secondary students created a gap in knowledge for mainstream teachers. The research also identified a lack of parental and autistic senior secondary student engagement in, and understanding of, the IEP. They inferred that the IEP was either not effective in meeting the social communication needs of autistic senior secondary students, nor reflective of their needs. In parallel to the literature the need for autistic student and parent engagement is paramount for successful IEP interventions (Carter et al., 2012; Cooney, 2002).

Family barriers such as parents/caregivers not understanding the IEP, not being involved in the development and sharing of what this meant to their autistic child also made the IEP less effective for social communication transition planning (Bianco et al., 2009; Griffin et al., 2014; Harrison et al., 2017).

Autistic senior secondary student's lack of self-determination (Seong et al., 2015; White et al., 2017), confidence and understanding of the purpose of the IEP in transition planning was also evident in the research, highlighting that all participants reported a lack of knowledge of what the IEP was. Autistic senior secondary students and autistic young adults reflecting on their experience, hoped that their parent/caregiver knew and could associate transition planning with life beyond school. They did however know that they needed to have social communication skills and hoped this would occur somehow. Creating a model of practice within schools that envisages IEPs as a critical component of successful transition for autistic young people and their parents may be one approach to policy change and increasing knowledge and interaction with the IEP.

7.5.2 Teacher Engagement

Student support literature presents the challenges educators face when developing and implementing IEPs with students with complex needs, determining that teacher, knowledge, skills and resources impact on successful integration of families, schools and autistic students (Akçin, 2022; Mohd Rashid & Wong, 2022). Linked to school funding models is the capacity to build teacher knowledge in relation to teaching autistic students in mainstream classrooms. Findings in this research clearly indicate this requires more attention.

Mainstream classrooms are communication dense environments, with complex social structures, that require strong interpersonal skills (Baker et al., 2001; Hanbury, 2011; Hume et al., 2014). Within these changing classroom environments teachers play an important role in supporting autistic students through strong student-teacher relationships, understanding the social communication needs of autistic senior secondary students and supporting peer-to-peer connections through inclusive educational practices.

Educators need support in this space, and current practices in this research suggest that there is not enough professional development, time and funding provided to support autistic senior secondary students in mainstream classroom activities. Teachers in mainstream education felt that there are too many competing and non-negotiable requirements that impede their responses to building autistic student-relationships and supporting peer relationships within the daily routine of teaching. These challenges include curriculum requirements, classroom behaviour, individual needs, parents' expectations of their autistic child's education outcomes, IEP and student goals, autistic senior secondary students' wellbeing, social communication needs and school policies. Peter (3/9/21), one of the educators interviewed revealed "parents are paying money, they want

outcomes…we want them (autistic students) to be independent … that's something that we wrestle with, and we tend to [be] on the side of being nurturing".

Teacher preparedness, knowledge and supports create challenges in inclusive education classrooms (Gable et al., 2012; Petersson-Bloom & Holmqvist, 2022; Petersson-Bloom et al., 2023). In a study conducted by Kossewska et al (2021), the relevance of specific programs to develop special education and mainstream inclusive educators refers to six modules for improving knowledge and skills, and within the modules are communication and social skill autism specific training. Kossewka et al (2021) indicate, "teachers recognise that the education of children with ASD requires highly specialised competencies … teachers in mainstream schools in particular do not feel sufficiently prepared to work with this group of students" (p.32). These challenges were raised as concerns within this research and supported within literature that explores mainstream educators role, knowledge and professional development, the paraprofessionals that support autistic senior secondary students and the inclusive educators (Bertuccio et al., 2019; Bolourian et al., 2022; McDougal et al., 2020; Petersson Bloom, 2021).

Teachers rely on and collaborate with inclusive education teams, SSOs/ESOs and career development coordinators to support transition planning. Forbes (2007), argues that mainstream teacher professional knowledge and expertise is needed to support social communication for students with disabilities (Butt, 2016). Petersson Bloom & Holmqvist (2022) said, "a lack of professional development on autism understanding is identified as a barrier for inclusive education and is important for developing strategies to modify and adapt to the learning environment" (p.8). Joint planning time should be a priority for mainstream and inclusive education teams so that the dissemination of the IEP, support plans and curriculum requirements are all met according to the needs of the autistic young person (Symes & Humphrey, 2010).

7.5.3 Parents

The goals and aspirations of autistic senior secondary students when developing school-based transition plans that encompass social communication needs should prioritise family engagement. Parents are key advocates in their child's lives, especially when their child might lack the confidence to share with educators their preferences for IEP goals and/or challenges they are facing. Evidence in this research, revealed that collaboration is still a concern and that although policy reiterates the requirements for successful transition planning including family engagement, practices in schools are not meeting this need (Bruck et al., 2022). Parent voices supported this concern, saying there were heated arguments about working with their autistic child and their IEP (Joanne 3/11/21), and that teachers lacked understanding of autism, (Bruck et al., 2021; Roberts & Webster, 2022). Parents also felt there were limited supports in senior secondary school suggesting that senior secondary students were expected to be independent learners with the social communication capacity level required to participate in the socially complex senior school

environment (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2023; Grapin et al., 2016; Lane et al., 2003).

Funding models in schools were briefly discussed by one-third of the parents interviewed as a method for accessing support for their autistic child, noting that without a diagnosis the recognition of imputed disability was limited. Misdiagnosis had similar negative connotations for funding support and added barriers to their child's communication skill development. Diagnosis and labelling were seen by families as the key to opening the doors to school funding and educator support.

What remains clear from this research is that parents' voices are still not prioritised by schools in the development of social communication transition planning and yet they are fundamental to supporting the success of their autistic child's transition to post-school life.

7.6 Transition equipped

Transition planning research describes the act of self-determination, like making decisions on one's own and following through on goals as a vehicle to achieve confidence and independence, where the individual is in control of their lives (Kohler & Field, 2003; Kohler et al., 2016; Trainor et al., 2019; Wehmeyer et al., 2003).

The purpose of transition planning is to support autistic senior secondary students to achieve their goals, a level of independence and have the social communications skills that enable participation in tertiary education, employment and community life. Conversely, a lack of critical social communication development impacts on the capacity of autistic young people to successfully integrate into employment and societal expectations (American Psychiatric Association, 2022b; Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2022b). Evidence in this research indicated that autistic young people and their parents recognised the gap in preparedness of social communication transition planning and wanted to see changes in the school practices. Shelley (18/10/21) said,

> "I wonder how many of those have had a robust enough transition…we need to have a shift in focus that it's around developing a whole range of life skills rather than just academic ones, …touch points along the way … as the young person grows and has a clearer perspective on where they want to go".

7.6.1 Do I have the Job Ready Skills I need?

Critical soft skills such as social communication readiness, problem solving, working independently, understanding others and making decisions are essential for successful participation in employment (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2023; Commonwealth of Australia, 2013). Reflections from the autistic young adults indicated that the important social communication and independent skills were not effectively developed during transition planning and did not adequately prepare them for tertiary education and employment.

The intention of the Core Skills for Work Framework is to support the development of employability skills as well as technical skills necessary for employment (Commonwealth of Australia, 2013). In relation to autistic senior secondary students' social communication transition planning their experiences were limited in developing these skills. Parents expressed concerns that schools focused on academic knowledge and wanted to see changes to the current practices so that life skills were incorporated and seen as equally important for successful transition to adult life. Educators noted that many did not have knowledge of the Core Skills for Work Framework and certainly did not incorporate such skills in mainstream education.

Conversely, literature indicated that employability skills are a part of the curriculum (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2023), and explicitly taught in schools, however mainly by inclusive education teachers for students with disabilities (Young & Rooney, 2023). Some of the inclusive educators identified social communication skill development for autistic senior secondary students as part of their IEP (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2023; Grigal et al., 1997; Kohler et al., 2016; Trainor et al., 2019). Evidence in this research shows that there are challenges within current practices that limited the level of exposure autistic senior secondary students received to feel confident and independent with their social communication preparation for successful participation in tertiary education and employment.

7.6.2 Teach me Social Communication Work Skills?

Social communication behavioural literature suggests that social communication complexities impact on participation in education and employment (Wehman et al., 2014), and reduced social communication capacity may result in lower employment engagement (Cummings et al., 2000; Pratt et al., 2017; Rosenthal et al., 2013). Social skills programs in schools involved in this research varied, with differences reported by educators' and parents' reflections on what social communication support within transition planning looked like for their autistic child during the senior secondary school years.

Mainstream teachers expected that all senior secondary school students had the necessary social communication skills and concentrated on delivering the academic curriculum in readiness to meet standards for education in South Australia. They thought that life skills such as social

communication were taught to students who had been identified as requiring upskilling in this area and relied on inclusive education programs to teach autistic senior secondary students these skills. This view aligns with other researchers who have also identified that many mainstream teachers believe it is not the role of secondary school teachers to provide life skill supports to students with autism (Šegota et al., 2022; Stuart, 2019). Such school ideology promotes the role of inclusive education teams, including SSOs/ESOs in developing and implementing social learning programs.

These programs were designed in what educators depicted as ‘safe spaces’, where ‘like-minded’ students could practice social communication skills within an inclusively designed environment, for example, learning centres, learning support classrooms, often the library, and study pods. They were also areas that supported well-being and where autistic senior secondary students could self-regulate (Muraleedharan et al., 2021; Roley et al., 2015; Scanlan & Novak, 2015). However, mainstream classrooms are where authentic social interactions occur, and they can serve as an important context in which autistic students can practice their developing social communication skills. This would require classroom teachers to recognise the value of supporting autistic students to build confidence in using social communication in a safe and supportive environment.

Parents’ primary concern was for their autistic child’s well-being. They believed areas where their child felt safe, accepted and could make friendships at school were critical. However, by continuing to place autistic students in ‘safe spaces’, opportunities to engage in authentic ‘real life’ situations are lessened. There appears to be a need to build skills in safe places, scaffold these in mainstream class and reduce the scaffolding as the student develops confidence in mainstream contexts. A supportive mainstream educator can play an important role in such scenarios.

Parents also expressed limited understanding of the importance of the IEP in training planning and expressed that social communication programs at school were more effective in primary school, than secondary school and had little positive impact for their autistic child in senior secondary school. They noted the most effective social communication development occurred out of mainstream education via the support of mentors.

Autistic young adults did not believe that their social communication preparation was sufficient as they struggled in post-school settings. Both autistic senior secondary students and autistic young adults relied on external mentors to help build the skills they believed they needed to function effectively beyond school, reiterating that what occurred within the school environment was limited. Isabelle (3/11/21) said, … “teach us how to live in the real world by ourselves. Most of the time, people my age don't know what to do”. Real world skills appeared not to be developed within the school environment, due to barriers beyond the limits of inclusive education. These barriers often incorporated finding appropriate opportunities for practising the appropriate social communication skills, including work experience and placements while autistic senior secondary students were still at school.

7.6.3 Too late in the Transition Planning Process

Transition planning literature supports this research, indicating that transition where successful post-school, begins with transitional supports in secondary school, starting from middle school and continuing into senior secondary school and beyond where preparation for engagement in tertiary education, employment and the community life begins (Cobb & Alwell, 2009; Cummings et al., 2000; Department for Education, 2019; Ebersold, 2012; Hendricks & Wehman, 2009; Kohler & Field, 2003; Kohler et al., 2016; Trainor et al., 2019).

Educators focused on why they thought transition planning in senior secondary school occurred too late for autistic senior students and alluded to school culture shaping these practices. Influenced by the South Australian school curriculum, transition planning begins in year 10, however independent decision- making and goal setting is expected in year 11 and 12 and was a contributing factor in transition preparation.

Educators referred to the high level of social communication transition support in primary school and how this translated in middle school and was limited in senior secondary school, reiterating that middle school is where social communication transition planning for life beyond school should start. This is supported by Goal 2 of the Alice Springs (Mpatntwe) Education Declaration (2019), which focuses on creating confident communicators, independent collaborators and successful learners, indicating the middle years are a critical transition period that supports fundamental social communication skills and develops motivated learners who are engaged in goal setting and pathway development (pp.6-8).

Educators challenged current school ethos, voicing that current practices do not prepare autistic senior secondary students for social communication transition and employment as they need to have earlier preparation, time to practice the essential skills, build confidence and independence to be prepared for adulthood. Gemma (16/9/21) said, “if your discussion starts in year 11, you've missed the boat”; Kate (16/9/21) said, “start right from year seven, try to get them to be as independent as possible … they need those skills before [leaving school], they've got to have enough time to practice them” and Tim (26/8/21) said, “they struggle in senior years where [they are] expected to be autonomous”.

Reinforced by transition planning literature the necessity for earlier transition planning is essential for building employability social communication soft skills and is an enabler for autistic young people to participate in tertiary education, employment and community life at the same or similar rate as their peers (Cummings et al., 2000; Ebersold, 2012; Hendricks & Wehman, 2009; Kohler & Field, 2003; Kohler et al., 2016; Trainor et al., 2019).

7.7 Employment, Tertiary Education, Inclusion and Remuneration

The purpose of transition planning is to support the goals and aspirations of all young people as they move from school to tertiary education and work (Kohler & Field, 2003; Kohler et al., 2016; Trainor et al., 2019). Autistic young people experience social communication difficulties (American Psychiatric Association, 2022b), and are less likely to participate in transition planning (Cameto et al., 2004; Griffin et al., 2014; Martin, Van Dycke, Christensen, et al., 2006), however the voices of the autistic senior secondary students and autistic young adults in this research suggested that they have post-school goals and aspirations, want to participate in transition planning, but do not have the social communication skills or the understanding of transition planning to do so effectively, in turn impacting on their successful integration to the tertiary environment or employment.

Evidence in this research depicted barriers to engagement in post-school education and employment. These barriers were internal and external to the school environment and relied on the effectiveness of teacher, parent, and student collaboration (Botha & Kourkoutas, 2016), the schools' connectedness to internal and external supports, collaboration between schools and vocational education and training institutions (PwC's Skills for Australia, 2018), employment agencies (National Disability Insurance Agency, 2017), and industry. Creating a model within schools that replicate the social communication skills required to successfully participate in diverse workplace environments could be considered. This could incorporate support from teachers, peers and integrate industry partnerships and vocational learning opportunities in a school environment. The model could be used as a transition tool, exposing autistic students to post-school environments in secondary school with the aim of supporting transition in senior secondary school to work experience in industry and tertiary education while still at school, promoting a scaffolding of social communication development.

7.7.1 The Journey from School to Tertiary Education and Employment

Autistic young adults referred to their social communication transition planning as not conducive in preparing for tertiary education and employment beyond the school environment. Contrary to best practice in transition planning literature (Blalock et al., 2003; Carter et al., 2010; Kohler et al., 2016; Trainor et al., 2019), and the goals of the Australian Curriculum (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2023), many of the autistic young adults indicated that a portion of their senior secondary years were spent in separate classes engaging in tasks that did not promote employability skills, independent learning nor confidence in their abilities.

Autistic senior secondary students were unsure of how school was supporting them to learn social communication work ready skills. They recognised that the school curriculum focused on school subjects and felt it was not designed to support social communication development. William (15/10/21), believed it was important that schools put more emphasis on social communication

groups for autistic senior secondary students. Luciana (17/11/21), agreed and felt senior secondary school focused on learning subjects more than individual abilities. Jing's (27/9/21), experience of transition to the workforce, entailed learning social communication skills on the job, and Jing inferred that transition planning at school did not prepare for the social communication skills required for transition to work nor had taught them how to approach employers.

Parents agreed that education obligations for transition planning are not sufficient to prepare autistic young people for engagement in tertiary education and employment, although felt it was sufficient to teach life skills useful for home. Nick (18/11/21) said, "not in the sense of gaining employment in the future. It was more life skills for the home". Parents felt that transition planning is a journey and needs to start from years 8-9 to be sound in practice and felt that schools do not have the structures in place to support their autistic child's development over an appropriate timeframe.

These findings are reinforced by the Australian Curriculum where the social aspects of learning reduce as students move into senior secondary schooling (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2023). Although the IEPs are the vehicle for capturing the social communication developmental needs of autistic senior secondary students it is evident in this research and employment statistics (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2022b), that the social communication gap still exists. This gap indicates that there is a need to change practices within schools, which may include the policy direction schools take to implement programs that support the social communication needs of autistic young people, with a focus on post-school outcomes. Furthermore, policy makers, schools, parents and industry partners could have round table meetings discussing the implications for the future workforce if the social communication gap is not addressed for autistic young people.

7.7.2 Connecting with Post-school Opportunities

The notion of job readiness is positioned within career development planning, and supports the Australian Curriculum (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2023), and Core Skills for Work Frameworks (Allen et al., 2017; Australian Qualifications Framework Council, 2013). Within such frameworks lies the Australian Blueprint for Career Development (Commonwealth of Australia, 2022) and the Career Industry Councils (Career Industry Council of Australia, 2020), guide to meeting the needs of transition to tertiary education, employment and community life (Department of Employment and Workplace Relations, 2020).

The diversity of transition planning for post-school outcomes within schools, teacher knowledge and engagement in the transition process, teacher-student relationships, teacher knowledge of the Core Skills for Work Framework and engagement in employability skills development within their teaching loads and school reporting requirements, all impact on successful transition from school to work for autistic young people.

As described by the educators in this research, varied knowledge, engagement and implementation of an autistic senior secondary student's IEP by well-practiced and new teachers led both to positive and negative outcomes and varied levels of success in transition. Without the linkages to the Core Skills for Work Framework in transition planning, job readiness will be compromised, especially for autistic young people who require more opportunities to practice these essential social communication skills. The Core Skills for Work Framework (Commonwealth of Australia, 2013; Department of Employment and Workplace Relations, 2020), and the Australian Blueprint for Career Development (Commonwealth of Australia, 2022), sets out clear directives on what is considered in Australia and by Australian employers as critical skills for work. The intersect between communication for work, connection and working with others and understanding perspectives (Commonwealth of Australia, 2013), are associated with this framework and underpin why this research is critical in identifying the realities of the autistic experience of transition planning for work.

Educators provided different accounts of what their school's programs in association with an autistic senior secondary students IEP looked like. In these descriptions, Elsie (5/8/21) said, "employability skills… become a part of our language…we embed in the community subjects…the social capabilities". Amelie (10/9/21) said, "I don't think … too many staff are familiar with the Core Skills" and Ibrahim (27/8/21) said, "I still feel that there's a big gap [in schools]". Linkages with work experience and industry placements relied on school programs like Flexible Learning Options, supported employment opportunities and the willingness of employers to engage with schools, parents, and support the capacity building of autistic senior secondary students within their business.

Employer barriers or lack of understanding of autism reduced the availability and access of autistic senior secondary students and autistic young adults experience of the workplace. Employment literature suggests there are a variety of factors that impact on the employability of autistic young adults (Commonwealth of Australia, 2022; Lopez & Keenan, 2014; Newman et al., 2009; Qian et al., 2018). These barriers may include, vocational supports in the workplace, application and interview processes, limited workplace accommodations, employers' attitudes, business supports for employing autistic individuals, and employers' misconceptions of autism (Hagner & Cooney, 2005; Lopez & Keenan, 2014; Lorenz et al., 2016; Scott et al., 2017). Scott et al (2017), research findings of employer experience employing adults with ASD, reported autistic employees struggled with interacting with co-workers, and experienced limited interactions with other employees. These findings are consistent with the social communication challenges autistic senior secondary students and autistic young adults expressed in their transition to employment. Industry partnerships, community education and supporting difference in tertiary institutions and the workforce, although slowly changing, may require greater input from policy makers, to establish long term change in the community and employment opportunities for autistic young people.

7.7.3 Concerns of Post-school Outcomes

Autistic young adults and their parents expressed different concerns when discussing post-school employment experiences. Parents felt there were missed opportunities for their autistic child during senior secondary school transition planning which translated into limited employment opportunities, and challenges with accessing the right supports within the work environment and how autistic young people were perceived by employers. Parents explained, there was a lack of school connections with Disability Employment Service Providers (DES) and supported work or placement opportunities. Their autistic child's work connections occurred mainly post-school and were either through friends, family and DES providers. The delay in autistic students leaving school and transitioning to work or tertiary settings, particularly if needing additional social communication skill development, may increase the young person's social isolation and reduce financial resources. These outcomes may be avoided if autistic students engaged in a more effective and proactive social communication transition program in school.

Many parents indicated that although DES providers assisted in finding partial employment for their autistic child, there was limited success in support and ongoing engagement in the employment opportunity, due to social communication barriers, employer resistance, lack of employer understanding, and support of the autistic young adult needs and low or no financial remuneration.

Lorenz's (2016), study endorsed the idea, that successful engagement in employment for autistic young people is based on adjustments within the workplace, an appropriate employment setting and employers' and other employees' understanding of an autistic individual's needs. Scott et al (2017), relate the reduced employment opportunities of autistic young people to employers' knowledge of government financial supports for training, and environmental adjustments. Although Australian subsidies are available for employers employing people with disabilities including autistic young adults to support their ongoing employment, the rate of retention is lower (Department of Social Services, 2024).

Autistic young adults reflected on their employment experiences, including employer/workplace inclusion and financial remuneration, focusing on the impact on their social communication development and confidence building. Their lived experiences reinforced the concerns of parents and findings in employment-based literature (Hagner & Cooney, 2005; Lopez & Keenan, 2014; Lorenz et al., 2016; Scott et al., 2017).

Half of the autistic young adults described negative experiences as 'discriminatory in behaviour' due to lack of understanding of autism, lack of adjustments and supports and exclusionary attitudes to employing autistic people. Carmel (7/11/21) said,

> “because [they] found out I’m autistic; they treated me poorly. Originally, I was treated as an equal there. But then the moment they found out I was autistic; they started cutting my shift back. And they didn't want me working in front anymore”.

Other participants described their experiences as positive and an opportunity to build social communication skills and increase confidence but were not paid correctly, under paid or not paid, and all did not continue with the employment as they felt undervalued. These experiences and findings are comparable with the lower rates of employment discussed in employment statistics (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2022b), and transition literature (Pratt et al., 2017; Rosenthal et al., 2013; Scott et al., 2017; Test et al., 2018; Wehman et al., 2014).

7.8 Summary

The proposed Social Communication Transition Journey Model reflects the importance of all elements of the model being addressed if improved outcomes for autistic young people are to be achieved. The model reflects outcomes noted in other research on key components of transition planning including parent and family support, school transition planning and practice and government policies and funding models (Commonwealth of Australia, 2013; Kohler et al., 2016; Trainor et al., 2019; Wehmeyer et al., 2012), and the Reciprocal Effects of Peer Interaction Model (REPIM) developed by Humphrey and Symes (2011). However, the Social Communication Transition Journey: from School to Tertiary Education and Employment Model presented in this research, progresses the general models of transition planning and the peer model of Humphrey & Symes (2011), by incorporating additional information from autistic senior secondary students and autistic young adults, and parent and educator views expanding the body of knowledge pertaining to social communication transition planning literature for autistic adolescents and adults.

The final chapter provides a synthesis of the key outcomes from the findings, and a response to the research question and sub-questions. The chapter will conclude by addressing implications for policy and practice, contribution to autism research, strengths and limitations of the research, implications for further research and final reflections.

CHAPTER 8 – CONCLUSION

8.1 Introduction

This chapter concludes the thesis and synthesises the key findings of the research, providing responses to the core research question and three sub-questions, and synthesising outcomes from key findings shared in the previous chapters.

The chapter also discusses the potential implications for policies and practice, contribution to scholarly literature, the implications for further research, proposing recommendations for supporting autistic young people to develop the social communication skills through transition planning necessary for success in employment and community life, and provides final reflections on the research.

8.2 Research Questions

This research aimed to answer four questions, and the following provides a summary of the responses to these questions with more detailed discussion throughout this chapter. To clarify the overarching research question, I have purposefully started with the outcomes of the sub-questions.

8.2.1 How do Autistic Senior Secondary School Students and Autistic Young Adults Experience and Develop Social Communication Skills in Readiness for Transition to Post-school Settings?

The answer to this question is two-fold, as the social communication experiences of autistic senior secondary students focused on what was occurring for them currently within the school environment, while the autistic young adults were able to reflect on what occurred at school and associate these experiences with how prepared they were for transition to tertiary education or employment.

Autistic senior secondary students presented the idea of ‘hope’ when developing social communication skills and were aware that building social connections was a critical skill required to participate at school and after school. They did not know how this would occur but referred to their peers for social communication support, so they could ‘fit’ into the school environment. They found connections and interactions with mainstream teachers difficult in the classroom environment and relied on safe spaces, learning hubs and specialist teachers who they could connect with to help build social communication skills. Some spoke about their experiences in life skills classes as part of their transition planning, where they had opportunities to practice social communication skills in a safe space, but were challenged and felt uncomfortable when teachers forced social communication interactions in spaces, they did not feel safe, like being asked to communicate face-to-face in class instead of via online conversation (Griffin et al., 2014; Snell-Rood et al., 2020).

All autistic senior secondary students were unaware of their transition plans and assumed their parents knew what individual education plans were and that their parent would tell them what to do (Kohler et al., 2016; Trainor et al., 2019; Wagner et al., 2012). As post-school outcomes were not a priority for autistic senior secondary students, they did not focus on improving their social communication skills for life beyond school.

Autistic young adults reflected on their senior school social communication transition experiences and had clearly indicated that they felt their social communication skills were inefficient, and they were not prepared with the social communication skills required for successful engagement in tertiary education or employment. This was in part due to social communication difficulties they experience (American Psychiatric Association, 2022b), the lack of confidence and independence and their difficult student-teacher relationships. As illustrated in literature, autistic young adults felt misunderstood and not fully supported by the teachers to develop social communication skills in senior secondary school (Alexander & Bissaker, 2023; Brownlow et al., 2021). One relationship autistic young adults reported as critical was the link to their mentors (Empower Autism, 2024), who taught them important social communication skills within a variety of life situations including tertiary education and employment ethics and standards.

8.2.2 How do Parents of Autistic Senior Secondary Students and Autistic Young Adults see School Systems or other Supports Assisting their Child to Develop Social Communication Skills, and Self-determination and to Participate in Employment and/or Tertiary Education?

Parents perceived social communication skills and confidence (American Psychiatric Association, 2022b; Pratt et al., 2017; Rosenthal et al., 2013), as the major barriers to successful participation in post-school employment or tertiary education (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2018). Building these essential skills were seen as a challenge within the school environment and most parents reiterated that their child lacked the social communication skills required for successful employment. Other parents described their collaborative school/family partnerships (Hagner et al., 2012), and supportive friendships as contributing to their child's social communication development. Similar findings are also indicated throughout transition support literature indicating a collaborative approach to social communication development within transition planning for autistic senior secondary students (Kohler & Field, 2003; Kohler et al., 2016; Lloyd et al., 2016; Newman et al., 2009; Trainor et al., 2019).

The teacher-student relationship (Alexander & Bissaker, 2023; Brownlow et al., 2021), individual transition planning (Hendricks & Wehman, 2009; Wehman et al., 2014), and the purpose of individual education plans (Department for Education, 2023; Grigal et al., 1997; Seong et al., 2015), with its focus on subjects, not social communication development and readiness for life beyond school, was clearly indicated by the parents as failing to meet the needs of their child. They

perceived transition planning as not robust enough for the unique needs of autistic senior secondary students and questioned the school system (Grigal, 2011).

Parents indicated that the mentor-relationships development post-school were the major influencers of their child's social communication skill development. The mentors were sought by the parents external to the school system through the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) as the funding source and provided the mentorship and socialisation skills their child needed to become confident and independent.

8.2.3 How do Educators in Mainstream Senior Secondary Schools Identify and Facilitate the Development of Social and Communication Skills in Transition Programs for Autistic Senior Secondary Students?

Mainstream educators spoke about their observations of autistic senior secondary student behaviour in the classrooms. This included the development of individual education and transition plans, and the additional social communication support provided in the classroom. Safe spaces were indicated within schools, including student learning hubs, one-on-one sessions with Inclusive Educators or Student Support Officers. (Newman et al., 2009; Saggers et al., 2015). Educators indicated the challenges with their roles and responsibilities as a teacher. They referenced other stakeholders, parents, the school, autistic senior secondary students and peers as critical components to building social communication skills, self-determination, confidence, and independent skills for life beyond school (Lloyd et al., 2016; Sutton et al., 2019).

Educators mentioned the Australian Curriculum (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2023), as the basis for developing social communication programs. The implementation of such program were through Individual Education Plans/One Plans/Personal Plans for Learning (Department for Education, 2023). The purpose was to meet the social communication needs of autistic senior secondary students in preparation for transition to post-school opportunities.

There were noted differences in how the social communication programs operated within each school and how effective they were in preparing autistic senior secondary students for transition. Some programs were directly linked to the IEP and opportunities beyond school (National Secondary Transition Technical Assistance Center, 2010; Test et al., 2009; Trainor et al., 2019). Other programs focused on general social communication skill development within the school environment; limited programs were linked to readiness for tertiary education or employment.

Educators identified gaps in curriculum in relation to the lack of social communication skills preparation throughout high school (years 7-12/13), indicating that preparation in senior secondary school is too late for autistic senior secondary students' and needs to be earlier than senior secondary school (years 8 -10) and continue throughout their high school experience. Noting the

impact on disabled students in particular autistic senior secondary students, who would benefit from more support and social communication development over a longer time-period.

Inclusive education teams and Student Support Officers were relied on in most schools to undertake the role of teacher, in assisting autistic senior secondary students, in developing social communication skills and planning for transition. SSO's noted that social communication development was not directly incorporated into mainstream classes in senior school, describing the level social communication development expectations mainstream educators had when delivering curriculum for example engaging with peers in group projects. Complexities of leaving social communication development to inclusive teams and SSO's has implications for autistic young people as they could miss out on learning to engage with peers, teachers and others in the community (Chamberlain et al., 2007; Kasari & Rotheram-Fuller, 2007; Lee et al., 2024).

Teachers reflected on their professional development opportunities and their understanding of social communication transition planning at school in preparation for tertiary education and employment (Commonwealth of Australia, 2002, 2013). In this context educators made reference to current school systems in supporting teachers to develop the necessary knowledge and skills while working in this space and some referred to the changes in school ethos, in regard to the purpose of schooling, in preparing young people for life beyond school (Beamish et al., 2022; Corbett & Slee, 2000; Malet, 2023).

8.2.4 How are Autistic Students Supported to Develop Social and Communication Skills in their Senior Secondary Years, to Prepare them for Transition to Tertiary Education and/or Employment settings?

Limited research exists about how autistic senior secondary students are supported to develop social communication skills in transition planning or how prepared they are moving into tertiary education or employment. Theoretical perspectives suggest transition planning is the key to post-school successful outcomes (Deci & Ryan, 2022; Kohler & Field, 2003; Kohler et al., 2016; Trainor et al., 2019; Wehmeyer et al., 2012), however evidence-based data (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2018), indicates that autistic people participate in the workforce at a much lower rate than non-autistic people. One of the key factors identified as a key attribute to the world of work is social communication skills (Commonwealth of Australia, 2013), which is a difficulty associated with autism (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). While there are some government-focused initiatives designed to create more inclusive workplaces (Department of Human Services, 2025; Office of the Commissioner for Equal Opportunity, 2021), there is still a major expectation on individuals to meet workplace requirements rather than workplaces meeting individual needs. This suggests that social communication skills remain a priority for all young people including autistic young people.

The views of the participants in this research were varied, this maybe in part due to the differences in their lived experiences, how they perceived the world and their surroundings and the nature of neurodiversity. The autistic senior secondary students focus was 'school survival' through friendships (Kohler et al., 2016), and 'safe' connections as they relied on peers for social networks and teachers to help them to communicate appropriately in the school environment (Laugeson et al., 2014). Autistic young adults' views were more reflective as they looked back on their social communication transition experiences. Most reported that there was insufficient social communication skill development in the senior secondary years to prepare them for life beyond school. In parallel to the literature, they experienced difficulties establishing meaningful relationships in tertiary education and lower levels of success in employment (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2018; Pratt et al., 2017; Rosenthal et al., 2013; Wehman et al., 2014).

Parents and families of autistic senior secondary students and autistic young adults played a large role in the development of social communication skills outside of the school environment (Miller-Kuhaneck & Watling, 2018; Trainor et al., 2019), especially through employing NDIS funded mentors to assist in developing the skills needed beyond school. They expressed their concerns regarding the social communication barriers their child experienced in senior school and concerns regarding the future of their child post-school.

Educators discussed the implementation of transition focused education, specifically, life skills programs, individual social communication coaching, individual education plans, one plans, personal plans for learning and social skills support through additional services such as psychologists and speech pathologists to support the development of social communication skills (Blalock et al., 2003; Frederickson, 2016).

8.3 Implications for Policy and Practice

Schools are bound by policies and funding models that shape education, (Anderson & Boyle, 2019; Beamish et al., 2022; Corbett & Slee, 2000; Dally et al., 2019; Finkelstein et al., 2021; Malet, 2023), and within this context there seems to be a disparity between requirements of the school and the individual needs of autistic senior secondary students, when preparing them for transition after school. Beamish et al. (2022), report findings that support this research, depicting "four common challenges … namely, inconsistent government frameworks and policies, inadequate staff training, lack of support for teachers, and a scarcity of research into inclusive pedagogies and practice. These interconnected challenges need to be resolved in order for schools to provide quality educational experiences and outcomes for students with [Special Education Needs] SEN" (pp.201-202).

Systematic approaches to social communication transition planning in high school reflect policy declarations (Department for Education, 2019; MECCTYA, 2008), and curriculum design

(Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2023), however, there appears to be limitations to how this translates into explicit practice that meets the needs of autistic senior secondary students and autistic young adults as they transition into adulthood. In a systematic review of literature in the Australian context, Vlcek & Somerton (2023), support the findings in this research stating,

> "limited time, funds, and resources have been identified as a barrier to numerous inclusive and special education pursuits" and "professional development for pre-service teachers, as well as continuing professional development for in-service teachers, is a necessary feature of inclusive practices and support for the diverse needs of all students" (pp.11-12).

Outcomes of this research suggest that educator-parent engagement is essential in fostering goal setting and social communication development for autistic senior secondary students. The following three areas are of relevance to more effective collaboration and outcomes for autistic students and will be explored in more depth below: (1) additional social communication support, (2) earlier transition planning for autistic young people, and (3) revisiting a whole of school approach to transition for life.

8.3.1 Additional Social Communication Support

Findings from this research highlight how autistic senior secondary students and autistic young adults experienced social communication within transition planning. Participants believed that their social communication skill development in senior secondary school was not sufficient to support the critical social communication employability skills required for post-school success. They reported that they gained such skills through other means, such as external mentors, families and parents and experience in the workplace or engagement in tertiary education firsthand. In listening to their voices, policy makers and schools should consider these perspectives when designing school curriculum (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2023), and social communication practice models within school programs, (Kohler et al., 2016; Trainor et al., 2019). They should also review the purpose of targeted social communication skills programs in more specialised classes, and the role mainstream teachers play in successfully translating social communication skill development into daily interactions with peers within and external to the classroom.

The unique perspectives of autistic young people and their parents in this research, showcased how autistic young people navigate the world of work, the social communication barriers they encountered and their desire for more 'real world' social communication experiences with their peers. Earlier engagement in vocational education and work placement supported preparedness, self-determination, independence and increased confidence in participating with their peers and society.

Providing educators, schools and policy makers with a lived experience resource designed co-designed with autistic young people would seem a valuable initiative. Opportunities for stakeholders including autistic young people, parents, educators, employment support services and employees in designing social communication programs that engage autistic young people in meaningful and authentic opportunities to build job-readiness social communication skills while at school may serve to improve employment outcomes for autistic young people. Research on employment outcomes for autistic young people reports lower levels of educational attainment (Santhanam & Hewitt, 2021), and employment engagement (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2022b), therefore attention to how to address these statistics is critical for the emotional, physical and financial well-being of autistic young people and their families.

8.3.2 Earlier Transition Planning

The strengthening of transition planning policies through the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the Australian and International affiliation with the Salamanca Statement, the Australian Curriculum and transition planning literature including transition from elementary to middle and high school to college or post-secondary, all support transition planning for autistic young people (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2023; Cameto et al., 2004; Kohler et al., 2016; Ministry of Education and Science Spain, 1994; National Association of Special Education Teachers, 2024; Trainor et al., 2019; U.S. Department for Education, 2017; United Nations, 2006).

Unpacking social communication planning earlier in schools, through teaching of social communication skills, self-determination and goals setting earlier than senior secondary school could be seen as enabling and providing autistic young people with more opportunities to develop and practice these essential skills for success in employment and community life throughout secondary school.

Findings from this research revealed that transition for life beyond school needs to start before senior secondary school, as autistic young people were not prepared for the social communication expectations in tertiary education, employment and in social society, as reflected in employment statistics (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2018). Autistic young adults and their parents felt they lacked the social communication skills required by employers (Scott et al., 2017), or in tertiary education and wanted more from their school in addressing work readiness.

Educators and parents agreed that social communication transition planning needed to occur much earlier and continue throughout senior secondary school. This is consistent with Ebersold's (2012), description of quality transition, involving continuous transition planning, socialisation, communication and routines. Currently there is inconsistencies in the delivery of post-school transition planning practices across South Australian secondary schools and a reduction in social

communication transition planning supports due to higher expectations in independence and confidence of autistic senior secondary students as they move into adulthood.

8.3.3 A Whole of School Approach to Transition for Life

With the tapering off from social capacity building in the Australian senior secondary curriculum (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2023), practice in schools appears to meet policy requirements. The challenge for policy makers and school practice is to recognise that not all senior secondary school students would have mastered the critical social communication skills by senior secondary school, are not prepared for employment, nor have sufficient personal and social capabilities for independence and citizenship. This is specifically evident in the experiences of the autistic young people and parents of autistic young adults in this research.

The buy in of a school-wide approach (Lewis et al., 2016; Sugai et al., 2014), in developing social communication skills throughout secondary school, further supports the importance of, and connections to, employability skills in the senior secondary years. The feedback-down approach from industry to policy makers, and into school practices requires not only the buy in of policy makers, but also the buy in and understanding from teachers who deliver academic curriculum. Teacher knowledge of the importance of social communication and other essential skills for post-school success should be incorporated into teacher professional development programs or integrated at a minimum into secondary school teacher education programs.

The appointment of an Autism Minister in the South Australia, the funding of a National Autism Strategy, including autism inclusion teachers in primary schools are a welcome positive change (Autism CRC, 2024). Similar to the findings in this research, the National Autism Strategy, the South Australian Autism Inclusion Charter and the Minster for Autism focuses is on the lived experiences of the Autistic community and inclusion in all domains of life. This may mean moving the SA schooling system from a position of ‘luck or hope’ to a position of building knowledge and trained skilled staff (Government of South Australia, 2023; South Australian Government, 2024). However, according to the findings in this research one of the major challenges for autistic young people moving from school to adulthood is their preparation for employment throughout social communication transition planning and currently there appears to be limited government attention to this critical area.

Social emotional learning as performance criteria for successful participation in employment is featured in career development literature (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2023; Commonwealth of Australia, 2013; Curtis & McKenzie, 2002). This supports the development of mainstream teachers’ knowledge about transition planning for employability and life including critical social communication skills. As mainstream teachers implement and understand the purpose of what they teach and how this will assist a young person moving into adulthood, the importance of social communication skills need to be recognised as equal to

academic and technical skills, to ensure more successful outcomes for autistic young people as they transition to adulthood (Commonwealth of Australia, 2013; Department of Employment and Workplace Relations, 2020).

8.4 Contributions to Autism/Transition Planning Research

My original contribution to autism research and inclusive education is to make heard the voices of autistic young people in relation to their experiences of social communication transition planning, adding to the limited body of knowledge pertaining to the lived experiences of autistic young people. This research revealed that autistic young people, whether they were senior secondary school students who struggled with social communication interactions in the school context or autistic young adults who were trying to engage in tertiary education, employment and community life, they all wanted better social communication development within school that incorporates real world engagement and recognised that social communication skills were a critical component to be an active part of society.

Secondly, this research demonstrated the importance of external mentors in social communication skill development, for autistic young people. Parents of autistic young people felt an external mentor whether during senior secondary school or post-school was the key to helping their child develop social communication skills required for engagement in community life beyond school and indicated that this was not occurring at the school level. Autistic young people also said that they relied on their external mentors for social communication skill development as it related to and prepared them for social communication life challenges. They also wanted more authentic social communication skill development from schools earlier in their high school years which continued throughout senior secondary school so their confidence and independence in engaging with others was enhanced.

Thirdly, the research identified the disparity between policy and practice impacting on the social communication transition planning for autistic young people. Social communication transition planning in policy is reflected in the Australian curriculum (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2023), and throughout transition planning literature (Kohler, 1996; Kohler et al., 2016; Trainor et al., 2019; Wehmeyer et al., 2019), providing explicit components relating to personal and social capability with a reference to employability soft skills such as social communication skills (MECCTYA, 2008). The voices of the participants in this research revealed that policy is not translating into practice within schools, in a systematic way, as there were limited reports of how schools prepared autistic young people for social communication readiness during senior secondary school transition planning.

8.5 Recommendations for Practice.

This section presents practical recommendations for policymakers, schools, and parents involved in the academic and social inclusion of autistic young people to support their social communication transition into adulthood. These recommendations for practice align with transition planning literature (Kohler & Field, 2003; Kohler et al., 2016; Trainor et al., 2019) , Self-Determination Theory (Wehmeyer et al., 2003; Wehmeyer et al., 2012; Wehmeyer et al., 2010), and employment literature (Commonwealth of Australia, 2013; Department of Employment and Workplace Relations, 2020). Including a synthesis of the suggestions for practice in the previous sections (8.3 – 8.4) and 'The Social Communication Transition Journey: from School to Tertiary Education and Employment' model discussed in chapter 7.

Transition planning theory supporting this research (Kohler et al., 2017; Kohler et al., 2016; Trainor et al., 2019), and Self-Determination Theory (Wehmeyer et al., 2012; Wehmeyer & Palmer, 2003; Wehmeyer et al., 2017), connect evidence-based literature with the capacity to communicate, socialise within diverse contexts, advocate for oneself, autonomy and the engagement in making choices that impact on shaping one's life. Within this space, transition planning models indicate the many factors that support the process of developing such skills and independence within the school environment.

What the voices of autistic young people have shown in this research is the lack of translation of policy, the need for greater transition planning within the school environment and what is currently occurring in schools may suffice for some students but is not meeting the needs of autistic young people. Social communication planning appears to be in the early years of schooling (primary, into the first years of high school) and not continued into senior school due to curriculum delivery and shared expectations of independent development for all school students in mainstream education. In this space and supported within the skills for employment literature (Commonwealth of Australia, 2013, 2022), autistic senior secondary students post-school indicated they have missed out on building the necessary social communication skills. They are slowly building social communication skills through external mentors and families and developing what they consider necessary social communication skills for engagement in employment, tertiary education and community life.

Including a synthesis of the suggestions for practice in the previous sections (8.3 – 8.4), there is a greater need for a systematic approach in the implementation of policies that support social communication development earlier for autistic young people and continue this development throughout senior secondary schooling in preparation for life beyond school. In part the difficulty lies within the interpretations and implementation of national curriculum (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2023), funding allocations, teachers' roles, understanding, knowledge and professional development in relation to the social communication needs of autistic

young people. This problem is reflective of the challenges mainstream teachers encounter in the classroom with students who may have diverse needs, including autistic students.

Social capacity building should be considered within curriculum and tailored to individual needs (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2023; Curtis & McKenzie, 2002). Therefore, successful integration and implementation of such social communication capacity building for autistic young people requires the buy in of policy makers, industry and schools (Commonwealth of Australia, 2013). Within transition planning, the purpose of secondary education in schools needs to be considered when developing a school wide approach and resourced appropriately, so that autistic young people have sufficient opportunities during secondary school to practice and engage in social communication essential skills for work and community life before leaving school.

The Social Communication Transition Journey: from School to Tertiary Education and Employment' model discussed in chapter 7, is the foundation for the recommendations. Central to the model are the essential components autistic young people believe are essential for developing the necessary social communication skills in their preparation for employment, tertiary education engagement and community life. The model is also representative of how educators and parents of autistic young people perceive transition planning and social communication supports, providing the elements experienced by autistic young people in their 'Social Communication Transition Journey: from School to Tertiary Education and Employment'.

8.5.1 Summary of Recommendations

8.5.1.1 Student Engagement in their Social Communication Transition Planning is Critical

1. Senior secondary students must be involved in goal setting, developing their IEPs, and having an opinion about how they would like to increase their social communication skills in preparation for tertiary education, employment and community life.
2. They should be consulted in the decision-making processes, and their opinions valued as highly as educators and parents as they begin their transition to adulthood.
3. To enhance their self-determination, independence and confidence goal setting should commence in the early secondary school years.

8.5.1.2 Increased Social Communication Opportunities Within and External to the School Environment

1. Autistic young people should have greater opportunities to interact with peers in mainstream social settings earlier
2. Increased access to mentors, including school-based mentors, within and external to the school environment
3. Receive education that increases knowledge and understanding of social communication relevance to post-school outcomes

4. Experience earlier exposure to the social communication requirements of VET courses and workplaces.

8.5.1.3 Investment in Autistic Senior Secondary Students' Strengths and Personalise Capacity Building

1. Educators and parents need to understand and be enablers of individual strengths.
2. Support should enable empowerment, build independence and confidence not inhibit these essential work and community skills
3. Enabling an autistic young person to self- assess their own needs and communicate this to educators and parents. This may include providing safe spaces for individual regulation but avoid having autistic students isolated from the mainstream setting for lengthy periods of time.

8.5.1.4 Promote Neurodiversity within Schools

1. Taking a whole of school approach to understanding and increasing knowledge of neurodiversity in schools and what this means for educators and other students.
2. Ensure ongoing opportunities for educators to engage in high quality professional learning about neurodiversity and ways in which they can more effectively support improved outcomes for autistic students.

8.6 Reflecting on Strengths and Limitations of the Research

8.6.1 Strengths

The strength of this research was supported by the diverse cohorts of participants, who provided a variety of autistic and non-autistic experiences and voices. The findings reflected the age range of autistic young people from 15 – 24 who could share their current lived experiences of social communication transition planning and reflections of what the outcomes of their transition planning in senior secondary school looked like. The parent perspectives were also critical as the findings depicted how they perceived the social communication difficulties their autistic child experienced. Although they were an outsider to the lived experience these perceptions provided and, in many cases, supported the same or similar accounts of their autistic child, thus enabling a deeper understanding (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Cohen et al., 2007; Saunders et al., 2019; Thompson, 2017), of the social communication transition planning experience and the post-school barriers their child faced.

Educators also added another element to understanding how social communication transition planning occurred in senior secondary schools. This was strengthened by the breadth of the twenty-seven educators, including mainstream educators, inclusive educators, SSOs/ESOs and in one case a Career/Pathway Coordinator. The variety of the fifty-two accounts over metropolitan and regional South Australia strengthen rigor of the interpretive approach (Saunders et al., 2019; Thompson, 2017), and provided different perspectives, challenges but also many similarities.

8.6.2 Limitations

An initial limitation of the research was the criteria for recruitment was the recruitment of senior secondary schools (years 10 – 12) within a 50 km range of the Adelaide region. Due the impact of Covid19, closure of organisations, protecting the privacy of their clients, and limited resources to support this research, the findings may not represent the wider pool of participants, nor be reflective of a broader geographical area but only the ones where it was possible to recruit, as many of the recruitment sites were unable to consent to participate. The population pool was extended to secondary schools (years 7-12/13) within 100km of Adelaide to increase possible participation (see 3.6).

As this research invited vulnerable cohorts, parents were also involved in the recruitment of autistic senior secondary students and potentially some autistic young adults. Parents of individuals with disabilities are often strong advocates and protectors. As care-coordinators, life-supporters, parents filter information, in support of their child (Olli et al., 2012; Spiers, 2015). Therefore, autistic young people who participated in this research may have had conversations with parents about the question prior to the interview and although asked in the interview did not disclose if this was the case. Only one senior secondary participant disclosed parent intervention.

In response to the final number of autistic senior secondary students and autistic young adults who participated in this research, factors that may have influenced the lower numbers may be due to the inherent social communication challenges autistic individuals experience (American Psychiatric Association, 2018, 2022b). Another potential limitation may be the use of qualitative semi-structured interviews where autistic young people may have found difficulties with being interviewed by an unknown person which in turn inhibited participation.

Additionally, this research did not include perspectives of autistic young people with a diagnosis of intellectual difficulties (ID) and/or significant other complex or cognitive needs (American Psychiatric Association, 2022b). This cohort was restricted from this research to support comprehension of informal consent and capacity to response to interview questions. Nor did this research ensure the inclusion of culturally and gender diverse, socially disadvantaged, or remote populations, which is reflective of the wider community (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2017).

Potential research bias could occur, despite the ongoing self-reflection and reflexive approach undertaken during data interpretation and analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022b; Byrne, 2022), due to the nature of qualitative research. This research is based on unique opinions and judgements which challenges the replication of data (Lloyd-Jones, 2003; Queirós et al., 2017). Qualitative research is acknowledged as a useful approach to gaining a deep understanding of the human experience, providing rich descriptions of the findings, supporting my epistemological position within this research and increasing reliability (Saunders et al., 2019; Teherani et al., 2015).

8.7 Implications for Ongoing Research

The findings from this study indicate that more research is needed to increase policy makers, schools, industry and communities' knowledge about the social communication transition requirements of autistic young people. Limited lived experience data exists on social communication transition planning, and the implications for autistic young people moving into adulthood. However, employment data shows that autistic young people experience lower engagement in tertiary education, and employment than their peers (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2018; Pratt et al., 2017; Rosenthal et al., 2013), impart due to social communication difficulties (American Psychiatric Association, 2018, 2022b).

Dedicated research into autistic social communication skill development from a social cultural perspective could be an enabler for building appropriate resources that support senior secondary school transition planning, teacher professional development and school wide approaches to enhancing outcomes for autistic students within inclusive school communities.

Further longitudinal research is required to understand the social communication intervention programs autistic young people engage with throughout their schooling years, to determine best practices for developing effective social communication skills before transition planning in the senior secondary years. A deeper understanding of social communication intervention programs across Australian states, enabling the sharing of best practice would potentially offer policy makers and schools opportunities for expanding current programs and develop emerging programming.

Additionally, social communication development, in conjunction with the longitudinal tracking of development of self-determination programs and how autistic young people develop independent skills could provide further evidence to support social communication transition planning for life beyond school. Within this context, the notion of confidence was critical for social communication development for autistic young people. Research into how schools can include independence and confidence within curriculum and student's IEP programs could support autistic senior secondary students' journey into tertiary education, employment and community life.

Furthermore, research into school transition systems through industry experience, peer-to-peer projects, and independent learning earlier than senior secondary school could enhance the social communication transition experiences of autistic young people and provide a longer period of time to develop such skills. This may assist in developing peer to peer knowledge, inclusive school environments and policy change.

Investigation into implementing social communication programming integrating the notion of transition planning in years 8-9 was suggested in the findings and would require further research into programs that may suit the social communication needs of autistic young people while in the

safety of the school environment. One consideration could be to investigate how earlier transition planning may sit within current curriculum and educational policies.

Ongoing research in educators' knowledge in planning for life beyond school and how feedback down occurs within schools to enable educators to explicitly translate this into best practice requires further investigation. Within this space, consideration of the technologies autistic young people are using to make social connections, in education, and in daily living could be incorporated into curriculum as part of career guidance and mainstream education earlier than senior secondary school. How autistic young people use these technologies as communication devices and the implication for the classroom and how educators may need to successfully deliver programs that enhance social communication skills and life beyond school may require further study. Educators' knowledge about how on this translation into practice could be investigated and could include systematic approaches within schools and extend further to how tertiary education sectors support social communication development in preparation for the workforce.

Another recommendation could be the development and trialling of a stakeholder driven social communication program as noted earlier in this chapter. This may provide the opportunities that autistic young people and their parents are seeking as a meaningful approach to build job- ready social communication skills for the future. Industry and other stakeholder driven social communication programs in transition planning could have implications for policy makers, school, educators and curriculum delivery, which would require further research.

8.8 Final Reflections

Transition from school to employment is a significant developmental stage in young people's lives (Trainor et al., 2019), and in particular for autistic senior secondary students who may be challenged by social communication requires of changing environments (American Psychiatric Association, 2022b). The importance of transition planning meeting this need is essential to address the barriers experienced by autistic young people and is evident within employment outcome statistics (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2022a, 2022b).

The social communication challenges autistic young people experienced during transition planning and post-school in this exploratory research was evident, but so was the participants' self-awareness of the lack of social communication planning in preparing them for life beyond school, revealing meaningful insights of what autistic young people believe they need. Although there are noteworthy shifts in policies and supports for autistic students, this has generally been at the primary school level in Australia and addressing the need for earlier and more inclusive education in secondary and senior secondary school is required. This extends to building knowledge about autistic individual social communication difference within the wider community, providing greater opportunities for engagement in tertiary education, employment and community life.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A - Protocols enabling the Case Research Approach.

The researcher will:

- Build rapport with the participating schools and establish contact with special education/inclusion coordinators who may agree to participate in research and act as gate keepers for recruitment of autistic senior secondary students and their parents/carers (Stake, 2006).
- Establish credibility with organisations who will act as gate keepers in the recruitment of autistic young adults who have left secondary school and are between 18 – 24 years of age. They may be employed, unemployed or enrolled in tertiary research in South Australia.
- Support short case research interviews, establishing boundaries around time limits for the semi-structured interviews to a maximum of one hour.
- Use audio conference as the most common method for the semi-structured interviews, however, will use other methods to suite the participant needs (such as audio/video conferencing or face-to-face interviews).
- Pilot the case research approach and interview questions with 20% of the participants in each context and adjust the interview questions accordingly.
- Consider the interpretive nature of this inquiry and provide the participants with a copy of their interview transcript for verification of the information documented (Kvale, 1996).
- Analyse the data based on (1) the individual experiences and (2) transition processes
- Include an empty word table as a tool for data analysis (Yin, 2014).

Appendix B – Autistic Senior Secondary School Student Interview Questions

Note: parents may be present at the interviews and may interject with comments

1) What year are you at school? How long have you been at this school?
2) If you have moved schools in the last 2 years, why did you do this?
3) What social interactions do you participate in during classes or at recess and lunch? How do you experience the social interactions?
4) What support have you had from your school or teachers to help you learn to communicate with others?
5) How confident are you in social situations for example working with others on projects, playing sports in a team, talking to people?
6) Can you tell me how your IEP/ITP works for you?
7) What social and communication supports are in the IEP/ITP?
8) Tell me about the conversations you have had with your teachers about your transition after you finish school
9) How have you participated in making decisions and setting goals while in senior secondary school?
10) What plans do you have for education or employment after school?
11) What skills do you have or would like to have so you feel confident in moving into tertiary education or employment?

Appendix C - Senior Secondary School Student Interview Questions – Modified (Oct 2021).

1) What year are you at school?
2) What age did you start at this school?
3) What do you do to communicate with other people? (this could be speaking, watching, writing, drawing, using a computer to help you tell people what you are thinking)
4) What do you do at recess or lunch time?
5) What is your individual education plan?
6) What will you do when you finish year 12?
7) What do you need to be able to do when you finish year 12?

Appendix D – Autistic Young Adults Interview Questions

1) Are you in tertiary studies, employment or looking for work?
2) How did you develop your communication skills at school?
3) What supports did you have from your teachers to develop social and communicate skills?
4) What social and communication skills did you learn at school so that you could work with others on projects, in teams and connect with your peers?
5) Reflect, on your IEP/ITP at school, how did this prepare you with social and communication skills for your tertiary studies and/or employment?
6) How did you participate in decision making and goal setting in senior secondary school?
7) How confident were you in social situations in senior secondary school?
8) What do you think would have helped you in developing social and communication skills before leaving school?
9) How did you prepare in senior secondary school for transition into tertiary education and/or employment?

Appendix E - Parents of Autistic Young People Interview Questions

1) Can you tell me about your child's social and communication skills development over their schooling years?
2) What social and communication difficulties does your child experience?
3) What do you think has developed the social and communication skills of your child and why?
4) How do you see your child's IEP/ITP working?
5) How confident do you believe your child is in making decisions and setting goals?
6) How do you see your child's capacity for self-advocacy, participate in decision-making and set goals?
7) What areas of improvement would you like to see in the school systems or other supports to assist your child in the development of social communication skills, self-advocacy and participation in their future goals?
8) What do you see as barriers for your child moving into tertiary education and or employment?

Appendix F - Senior Secondary Educators Interview Questions

1) What type of social and communication difficulties have you observed that students on the autism spectrum present with?
2) What strategies have you identified as effective for addressing the social communication skill development of students on the autism spectrum?
3) How do the IEP/ITP's work in your school?
4) How does the IEP/ITP support the development of social and communication skills for students on the autism spectrum?
5) How does the IEP/ITP support the development of self-determination for students on the autism spectrum?
6) How do you support the development of communication skills of students on the autism spectrum?
7) Have other support people like psychologist, speech therapists or other supports recommending support strategies for students on the autism spectrum? If so, how have these strategies been implemented through the IEP/ITP?
8) What type of activities have been implemented to support the social and communication skill development for students on the autism spectrum in preparation for post-school transitions into either tertiary education or employment?
9) How are core skills for work taught in schools?
10) How are core skills for work taught in the IEP/ITP?
11) How are transition programs delivered in your school? How realistic do you believe these programs are in the employment setting?

Appendix G – Educator Information Sheet and Consent Form

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET AND CONSENT FORM

Educators

Title: 'Preparing for Employment and/or Tertiary Education: Social and communication transition experiences of young people with autism'

Chief Investigator
Ms Leanne Gerekaroff
College of Education, Psychology & Social Work
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Principal Supervisor
Dr Julie McMillan
College of Education, Psychology & Social Work
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Email: julie.mcmillan@flinders.edu.au

Associate Supervisor
Dr Jane Jarvis
College of Education, Psychology & Social Work
Flinders University
Email: Jane.jarvis@flinders.edu.au

Description of the study
This project will investigate how senior secondary school students and young people with autism experience social and communication skill development during their final three years at school, in relation to preparing them for work, University or TAFE. This project is supported by Flinders University, College of Education, Psychology and Social Work.

Purpose of the study
This project aims to understand the social and communication transition planning experiences of senior secondary school and post-school youth with autism, while exploring how educators perceive the development of social and communication skills in transition programs as students with autism prepare for tertiary education and /or employment.

Benefits of the study
The sharing of your experiences will help the investigator to understand how the Individual Education Plans/Individual Transition Plans assist teachers with social communication transition planning for senior

secondary students with autism, as they prepare for employment and/or tertiary education post-school. Understanding what is helpful to you or could be improved, could benefit South Australian school transition programming and future senior secondary students with autism.

Participant involvement and potential risks
If you agree to participate in the research study, you will be asked to:

- attend a one-on-one interview with a researcher that will be audio recorded
- respond to questions about your views on how young people with autism are supported to develop social and communication skills during your transition planning, in preparation for post- school employment or engagement in tertiary education.

The interview will take about 60 minutes and participation is entirely voluntary.
Interviews may take place by phone, online or in person at a public location of your choice. At a time, suitable for you.

The researchers do not expect the questions to cause any harm or discomfort to you. However, if you experience feelings of distress as a result of participation in this study, please let the research team know immediately. You can also contact the following services for support:

- Lifeline – 13 11 14, www.lifeline.org.au
- Beyond Blue – 1300 22 4636, www.beyondblue.org.au

Withdrawal Rights
You may, without any penalty, decline to take part in this research study. If you decide to take part and later change your mind, you may, without any penalty, withdraw at any time without providing an explanation. To withdraw, please contact the Chief Investigator or you may just refuse to answer any questions. Any data collected up to the point of your withdrawal will be securely destroyed.

Confidentiality and Privacy
Only researchers listed on this form have access to the individual information provided by you. Privacy and confidentiality will be assured at all times. The research outcomes may be presented at conferences, written up for publication. However, the privacy and confidentiality of individuals will be protected at all times. You or your school will not be named, and your individual or school information will not be identifiable in any research products without your explicit consent.

No data, including identifiable, non-identifiable and de-identified datasets, will be shared or used in future research projects without your explicit consent.

Data Storage
The information collected may be stored securely on a password protected computer and/or Flinders University server throughout the study. Any identifiable data will be de-identified for data storage purposes unless indicated otherwise. All data will be securely transferred to and stored at Flinders University for at least five years after publication of the results. Following the required data storage period, all data will be securely destroyed according to University protocols.

Recognition of Contribution / Time / Travel costs
If you would like to participate, in recognition of your contribution and participation time, you will be provided with a $25.00 gift voucher. This voucher will be provided to you electronically or face-to-face or on completion of the interview.

How will I receive feedback?
On project completion, a short summary of the outcomes will be provided to all participants via email

Ethics Committee Approval
The project has been approved by Flinders University's Human Research Ethics Committee – project number 2588.

Queries and Concerns
Queries or concerns regarding the research can be directed to the research team. If you have any complaints or reservations about the ethical conduct of this study, you may contact the Flinders University's Research Ethics & Compliance Office team via telephone 08 8201 3116 or email human.researchethics@flinders.edu.au.

Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet which is yours to keep. If you accept our invitation to be involved, please email this signed Consent Form back to me. If you are unable to provide an electronic signature, you can sign it at the interview, before we start.

CONSENT FORM

Consent Statement

☐ I have read and understood the information about the research, and I understand I am being asked to provide informed consent to participate in this research study. I understand that I can contact the research team if I have further questions about this research study.

☐ I am not aware of any condition that would prevent my participation, and I agree to participate in this project.

☐ I understand that I am free to withdraw at any time during the study.

☐ I understand that I can contact Flinders University's Research Ethics & Compliance Office if I have any complaints or reservations about the ethical conduct of this study.

☐ I understand that my involvement is confidential, and that the information collected may be published. I understand that I will not be identified in any research products.

I further consent to:

☐ participating in an interview
☐ having my information audio recorded
☐ my data and information being used in this project and other related projects for an extended period of time (no more than 10 years after publication of the data)
☐ being contacted about other research projects

Signed:
(If you are unable to provide an electronic signature, you can sign it at the interview)

Name:

Date:

Appendix H – Autistic Young Adults Information Sheet and Consent Form

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET AND CONSENT FORM

Individuals with Autism (Tertiary Students or Young People in Employment/Unemployed)

Title: 'Preparing for Employment and/or Tertiary Education: Social and communication transition experiences of young people with autism'

Chief Investigator
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Principal Supervisor
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Associate Supervisor
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Email: Jane.jarvis@flinders.edu.au

Description of the study
This project is about how senior secondary school students with autism experience prepare for work, University or TAFE. It focuses on the social and communication skills development in the final three years at school. This project is supported by Flinders University, College of Education, Psychology and Social Work.

Purpose of the study
This project has 2 goals.

1. To understand how senior secondary students with autism experience social and communication planning as they move into employment, University or TAFE SA.

2. To explore how teachers help senior secondary students with autism to develop social and communication skills as they plan for employment or University or TAFESA.

Benefits of the study

Sharing your experiences will help the investigator to understand

1. How senior secondary school students develop social and communication skills
2. How these skills assist senior secondary school students in planning for Employment, University or TAFE SA after school

Understanding what was useful or could be improved could be helpful to schools and teachers as they plan transition programmes for future senior secondary school students with autism.

Participant involvement and potential risks

If you agree to participate in the study, you will be asked to:

- attend a one-on-one interview with a researcher that will be audio recorded
- respond to questions about your experiences about social and communication planning before moving into employment, University or TAFE SA.

The interview will take about 60 minutes.
You may wish to have your parents at the interview. If you choose to have a parent at the interview, they will be an observer.
Interviews may occur in person, by phone or online. You or your parent/guardian can choose the public place if the interview occurs in person.
Your participation is entirely voluntary. This means you can choose to do the interview or choose not to do the interview.
You can stop the interview at any time.
Your information will not be shared with the tertiary institution or place of work.
You will receive an overall summary at the end of the project which will not identify your individual information. An overall summary will not be sent to your tertiary institution or place of work.

The questions should not make you feel upset. However, if you become upset, please let me know immediately. You can also contact the following services for support:

- Tertiary education counsellor
- Your family
- GP or Psychologist (if applicable)
- Kids Helpline – 1800 55 1800, https://kidshelpline.com.au/
- Lifeline – 13 11 14, www.lifeline.org.au
- Beyond Blue – 1300 22 4636, www.beyondblue.org.au

Withdrawal Rights

You may, decide not to do the interview. This will not have any impact on you. If you decide to do the interview and change your mind before doing the interview or during the interview you can stop or withdraw at any time. You do not need to explain why you do not want to do the interview or stop the interview. To withdraw, please contact the Chief Investigator (Leanne) or you may just refuse to answer any questions. Any information collected up to the point of your withdrawal will be securely destroyed.

Confidentiality and Privacy

Only researchers listed on this form have access to the individual information provided by you. Privacy and confidentiality will occur. The study outcomes may be presented at conferences or written up for publication. However, the privacy and confidentiality of individuals will always be protected. You will not be named, and your individual information will not be identifiable in any conferences or written papers without your explicit consent.

No information will be shared or used in future research projects without asking your permission.

Data Storage
The information collected may be stored securely on a password protected computer and/or Flinders University server throughout the study. Any identifiable data will be de-identified for data storage purposes unless indicated otherwise. All data will be securely transferred to and stored at Flinders University for at least five years after publication of the results. Following the required data storage period, all data will be securely destroyed according to University protocols.

Recognition of Contribution / Time / Travel costs
If you would like to participate, in recognition of your contribution and participation time, you will be provided with a $25.00 gift voucher. This voucher will be provided to you electronically or face-to-face or on completion of the interview.

How will I receive feedback?
On project completion, a short summary of the outcomes will be provided to all participants by email.

Ethics Committee Approval
The project has been approved by Flinders University's Human Research Ethics Committee – project number 2588.

Queries and Concerns
Queries or concerns regarding the research can be directed to the research team. If you have any complaints or reservations about the ethical conduct of this study, you may contact the Flinders University's Research Ethics & Compliance Office team via telephone 08 8201 3116 or email human.researchethics@flinders.edu.au.

Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet which is yours to keep. If you accept our invitation to be involved, please email this signed Consent Form back to me. If you are unable to provide an electronic signature, you can sign it at the interview, before we start.

CONSENT FORM

Consent Statement

☐ I have read and understood the information about the research, and I understand I am being asked to provide informed consent to participate in this research study. I understand that I can contact the research team if I have further questions about this research study.

☐ I am not aware of any condition that would prevent my participation, and I agree to participate in this project.

☐ I understand that I am free to withdraw at any time during the study.

☐ I understand that I can contact Flinders University's Research Ethics & Compliance Office if I have any complaints or reservations about the ethical conduct of this study.

☐ I understand that my involvement is confidential, and that the information collected may be published. I understand that I will not be identified in any research products.

I further consent to:

☐ participating in an interview
☐ having my information audio recorded
☐ my data and information being used in this project and other related projects for an extended period of time (no more than 10 years after publication of the data)
☐ being contacted about other research projects

I disclose that:

☐ I am currently known to the researcher
☐ I am previously known to the researcher

AND

☐ I consent to my de-identified data being revised by a secondary code

Signed:
(If you are unable to provide an electronic signature, you can sign it at the interview)

Date:

Name:

Appendix I – Autistic Senior Secondary Students Information Sheet

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Senior Secondary Students

Title: 'Preparing for Employment and/or Tertiary Education: Social and communication transition experiences of young people with autism'

Chief Investigator
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Associate Supervisor
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Description of the study
This project is about how senior secondary school students with autism experience prepare for work, University or TAFE. It focuses on the social and communication skills development in the final three years at school. This project is supported by Flinders University, College of Education, Psychology and Social Work.

Purpose of the study
This project has 2 goals.

1. To understand how senior secondary students with autism experience social and communication planning as they move into employment, University or TAFE SA.

2. To explore how teachers help senior secondary students with autism to develop social and communication skills as they plan for employment or University or TAFESA.

Benefits of the study
Sharing your experiences will help the investigator to understand

1. How senior secondary school students develop social and communication skills

2. How these skills assist senior secondary school students in planning for Employment, University or TAFE SA after school

Understanding what was useful or could be improved could be helpful to schools and teachers as they plan transition programmes for future senior secondary school students with autism.

Participant involvement and potential risks

If you agree to participate in the study, you will be asked to:

- attend a one-on-one interview with a researcher that will be audio recorded
- respond to questions about your experiences about social and communication planning before moving into employment, University or TAFE SA.

The interview will take about 60 minutes.
Your parent/s will be at the interview.
Interviews may occur in person, by phone or online at school or outside of school. Your parent/guardian will choose the public place if the interview occurs outside of school.
Your participation is entirely voluntary. This means you can choose to do the interview or choose not to do the interview.
You can stop the interview at any time.
Your information will not be shared with the school. Your school and parent/guardian will receive an overall summary at the end of the project which will not identify your individual information.

The questions should not make you feel upset. However, if you become upset, please let me know immediately. You can also contact the following services for support:

- School counsellor
- Your family
- Kids Helpline – 1800 55 1800, https://kidshelpline.com.au/

Withdrawal Rights

You may, decide not to do the interview. This will not have any impact on you. If you decide to do the interview and change your mind before doing the interview or during the interview you can stop or withdraw at any time. You do not need to explain why you do not want to do the interview or stop the interview. To withdraw, please contact the Chief Investigator (Leanne) or you may just refuse to answer any questions. Any information collected up to the point of your withdrawal will be securely destroyed.

Confidentiality and Privacy

Only researchers listed on this form have access to the individual information provided by you. Privacy and confidentiality will occur. The study outcomes may be presented at conferences or written up for publication. However, the privacy and confidentiality of individuals will always be protected. You will not be named, and your individual information will not be identifiable in any conferences or written papers without your explicit consent.

No information will be shared or used in future research projects without asking your permission.

Data Storage

The information collected may be stored securely on a password protected computer and/or Flinders University throughout the study. All information will be generalised for storage purposes. All data will be securely transferred to and stored at Flinders University for at least five years after publication of the study. After the data storage period, all data will be securely destroyed according to University protocols.

Recognition of Contribution / Time / Travel costs
If you would like to participate, in recognition of your contribution and participation time, you will be provided with a $25.00 gift voucher. This voucher will be provided to you electronically or face-to-face or on completion of the interview.

How will I receive feedback?
On project completion, a short overall summary of the outcomes will be provided to your parents or guardians via email.

Ethics Committee Approval
The project has been approved by Flinders University's Human Research Ethics Committee – project number 2588.

Queries and Concerns
Queries or concerns regarding the research can be directed to the research team. If you have any complaints or concerns about the ethical conduct of this study, you may contact the Flinders University's Research Ethics & Compliance Office team via telephone 08 8201 3116 or email human.researchethics@flinders.edu.au.

Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet which is yours to keep. If you accept our invitation to be involved, talk to your parent or guardian about your participation.

Your parent or guardian can consent on your behalf.

Appendix J – Parents of Autistic Young People Information Sheet and Consent Form

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET AND CONSENT FORM

Parents of Senior Secondary Students with autism

Title: 'Preparing for Employment and/or Tertiary Education: Social and communication transition experiences of young people with autism'

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Email: julie.mcmillan@flinders.edu.au

Associate Supervisor
Dr Jane Jarvis
College of Education, Psychology & Social Work
Flinders University
Email: Jane.jarvis@flinders.edu.au

Description of the study
This project will investigate how senior secondary school students and young people with autism experience social and communication skill development during their final three years at school, in relation to preparing them for work, University or TAFE. This project is supported by Flinders University, College of Education, Psychology and Social Work.

Purpose of the study
This project aims to understand the social and communication transition planning experiences of senior secondary school and post-school youth with autism, while exploring how mainstream educators perceive the development of social and communication skills in transition programs as students with autism prepare for tertiary education and /or employment.

Benefits of the study
The sharing of your experiences will help the investigator to understand how essential social and communication skills for work and study are supported during your child's transition planning in their senior secondary years, as they prepare for employment and/or tertiary education post-school. Understanding what was helpful to your child could benefit South Australian school transition programming and future senior secondary students so that educators better understand what you think was useful or could be improved.

Participant involvement and potential risks
If you agree to participate in the research study, you will be asked to:

- attend a one-on-one interview with a researcher that will be audio recorded
- respond to questions about your views on how you are supported to develop social and communication skills during your transition planning, in preparation for post-school employment or engagement in tertiary education.

The interview will take about 60 minutes and participation is entirely voluntary.
The interviews may take place by phone, online or in person at a public location of your choice. At a time, suitable for you.

The researchers do not expect the questions to cause any harm or discomfort to you. However, if you experience feelings of distress as a result of participation in this study, please let the research team know immediately. You can also contact the following services for support:

- Lifeline – 13 11 14, www.lifeline.org.au
- Beyond Blue – 1300 22 4636, www.beyondblue.org.au

Withdrawal Rights
You may, without any penalty, decline to take part in this research study. If you decide to take part and later change your mind, you may, without any penalty, withdraw at any time without providing an explanation. To withdraw, please contact the Chief Investigator or you may just refuse to answer any questions. Any data collected up to the point of your withdrawal will be securely destroyed.

Confidentiality and Privacy
Only researchers listed on this form have access to the individual information provided by you. Privacy and confidentiality will be assured at all times. The research outcomes may be presented at conferences, written up for publication or used for other research purposes as described in this information form. However, the privacy and confidentiality of individuals will be protected at all times. You will not be named, and your individual information will not be identifiable in any research products without your explicit consent.

No data, including identifiable, non-identifiable and de-identified datasets, will be shared or used in future research projects without your explicit consent.

Data Storage

The information collected may be stored securely on a password protected computer and/or Flinders University server throughout the study. Any identifiable data will be de-identified for data storage purposes unless indicated otherwise. All data will be securely transferred to and stored at Flinders University for at least five years after publication of the results. Following the required data storage period, all data will be securely destroyed according to University protocols.

Recognition of Contribution / Time / Travel costs
If you would like to participate, in recognition of your contribution and participation time, you will be provided with a $25.00 gift voucher. This voucher will be provided to you electronically or face-to-face or on completion of the interview.

How will I receive feedback?
On project completion, a short summary of the outcomes will be provided to all participants via email.

Ethics Committee Approval
The project has been approved by Flinders University's Human Research Ethics Committee – project number 2588.

Queries and Concerns
Queries or concerns regarding the research can be directed to the research team. If you have any complaints or reservations about the ethical conduct of this study, you may contact the Flinders University's Research Ethics & Compliance Office team via telephone 08 8201 3116 or email human.researchethics@flinders.edu.au.

Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet which is yours to keep. If you accept our invitation to be involved, please email this signed Consent Form back to me. If you are unable to provide an electronic signature, you can sign it at the interview, before we start.

CONSENT FORM

Consent Statement

☐ I have read and understood the information about the research, and I understand I am being asked to provide informed consent to participate in this research study. I understand that I can contact the research team if I have further questions about this research study.

☐ I am not aware of any condition that would prevent my participation, and I agree to participate in this project.

☐ I understand that I am free to withdraw at any time during the study.

☐ I understand that I can contact Flinders University's Research Ethics & Compliance Office if I have any complaints or reservations about the ethical conduct of this study.

☐ I understand that my involvement is confidential, and that the information collected may be published. I understand that I will not be identified in any research products.

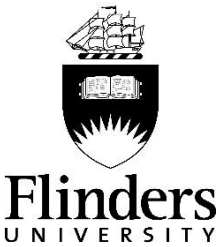
I further consent to:

☐ participating in an interview
☐ having my information audio recorded
☐ my data and information being used in this project and other related projects for an extended period of time (no more than 10 years after publication of the data)
☐ being contacted about other research projects

Signed:
(If you are unable to provide an electronic signature, you can sign it at the interview)
Date:

Name:

Appendix K – Parent Consent Form for Child Participation in Research



PARENTAL CONSENT FORM

FOR CHILD PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH

(by interview)

Preparing for Employment and/or Tertiary Education: Social and communication transition experiences of young people with autism

I ….....

being over the age of 18 years, hereby consent to participate as requested in the interview for the research project with the title listed above.

1. I have read the information provided.
2. Details of procedures and any risks have been explained to my satisfaction.
3. I agree to an audio recording of my child's information and participation.
4. I am aware that I should retain a copy of the Information Sheet and Consent Form for future reference.
5. I understand that:
   - My child may not directly benefit from taking part in this research.
   - My child is free to withdraw from the project at any time and is free to decline to answer particular questions.
   - While no identifying information about my child will be published, anonymity cannot be guaranteed
   - Whether my child participates or not, or withdraws after participating, will have no effect on his/her progress in his/her course of study, or results gained
   - My child may ask that the recording/observation be stopped at any time, and he/she may withdraw at any time from the session or the research without disadvantage
6. I understand that only the researchers on this project will have access to my child's research data and raw results, unless I explicitly provide consent for it to be shared with other parties. If the need to seek your consent to share your child's research data with other parties does arise, I will be contacted by the researchers via email

Parent / Guardian signature……Date……...

(If you are unable to provide an electronic signature, you can sign it at the interview)

I ….....

give my permission and, hereby, assent to participate as requested in the interview for the

research project with the title listed above.

Dependant/ Child signature……Date……...
(If you are unable to provide an electronic signature, you can sign it at the interview)

I certify that I have explained the study to the volunteer and consider that she/he understands what is involved and freely consents to participation.

Researcher's name…….…….....

Researcher's signature……..Date…….

NB: Two signed copies should be obtained (one for researcher; one for parent / guardian).

This research project has been approved by the Flinders University Social and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee in South Australia (Project number 2588). For queries regarding the ethics approval of this project please contact the Executive Officer of the Committee via telephone

Appendix L – Principal Letter

24 July 2021

School Name

RE: Letter of Introduction

Dear

I am currently undertaking a PhD at Flinders University. My research aims to investigate the challenges of transition that young people living with autism experience moving into tertiary education and/or employment. As part of this research, I would like your approval to be able to interview your Special Education Coordinators/teachers who work with senior secondary students living with autism and Senior secondary students living with autism, with consent of their parents/guardians, who will be given the option to participate with their child.

The basis for my research, **Preparing for Employment and/or Tertiary Education: Social and communication transition experiences of young people with autism**, stems from my experiences in working with young people in senior secondary and tertiary education with various capabilities. I currently work as senior counsellor within TAFE SA. My role supports students who have complex needs and present with a variety of challenges, many of the students are living with autism.

My research builds on this experience and seeks to explore how students with autism in South Australian senior secondary schools are supported to develop social and communication skills in order, to prepare them for post-school tertiary education and/or employment.

In your school, I would like to conduct a 60-minute interview with the Special Education Coordinators/teachers who support senior secondary students living with autism, senior secondary students living with autism and their parents/guardians.

The interview with the Special Education Coordinators/teachers will focus on, what type of activities have been implemented to support the social and communication skill development for

students with ASD in preparation for post-school transitions into either tertiary education or employment.

The interviews with senior secondary students and their parent/guardian will focus on, the social and communication supports at school and about their plans for transition.

Findings from this research will result in an increased knowledge of what supports young people living with autism require to develop the social and communication skills for transition to tertiary education or work.

Findings will be made public via a thesis, conference presentations and/or journal publication. However, no school will be identifiable in this research and all data will be aggregated such that the findings will not be attributable to any educational sector. A summary of the research will be sent directly to you.

All participation in the study is voluntary and may be withdrawn from at any time without risk or harm to the school, staff, or young person living with autism or their families. All personal information will be kept confidential and only my supervisors – Dr Julie McMillian/Dr Jing Jarvis and I will have access to de-identified data during the study.

I would be grateful for your support and can be contacted by email –to discuss my research further.

Best regards

Leanne

Leanne Gerekaroff
PhD Candidate
College of Education, Psychology & Social Work
Flinders University
Stuart Road, Bedford Park, South Australia, 5042
leanne.gerekaroff@flinders.edu.au

Appendix M – General Flyer

Flinders UNIVERSITY
College of Education, Psychology & Social Work

INSPIRING ACHIEVEMENT

Preparing for Employment and/or Tertiary Education: Social and communication transition experiences of young people with autism

Are you a young person on the autism spectrum between the ages of 15 and 24, in senior school, tertiary education or employment/underemployment; a parent of a senior secondary student with autism or a mainstream educator supporting young people with autism?

We are keen to speak with you about social and communication transition planning experiences.

If you are interested and willing to participate in a 60 minute phone, online or in person interview, please contact Leanne Gerekaroff for more information:

leanne.gerekaroff@flinders.edu.au

Thank you for your assistance!

The purpose of this research is to help us better understand how essential social and communication skills for work are supported during transition planning in the senior secondary years, as young people with autism prepare for employment and/or tertiary education post-school.

This study is being conducted to meet the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy by Leanne Gerekaroff under the supervision of Dr Julie McMillan (Flinders University), and Dr Jing Jarvis (Flinders University).

This research project has been approved by the Flinders University Social and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee (Project number: 2588). For more information regarding ethical approval of the project only, the Executive Officer of the Committee can be contacted by telephone on (08) 8201 3116, by fax on (08) 8201 2035, or by email to human.researchethics@flinders.edu.au

Appendix N – Tertiary Flyer

Flinders UNIVERSITY
College of Education, Psychology & Social Work

INSPIRING ACHIEVEMENT

Preparing for Employment and/or Tertiary Education: Social and communication transition experiences of young people with autism

Are you a young person on the autism spectrum between the ages of 18 and 24, in tertiary education?

Would you like to tell us about your social and communication transition planning experiences during senior secondary school?

If you are interested and willing to participate in a 60-minute phone, online or in person interview, please contact Leanne Gerekaroff for more information:

leanne.gerekaroff@flinders.edu.au

Thank you for your assistance!

The purpose of this research is to help us better understand how essential social and communication skills for work are supported during transition planning in the senior secondary years, as young people with autism prepare for employment and/or tertiary education post-school.

This study is being conducted to meet the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy by Leanne Gerekaroff under the supervision of Dr Julie McMillan (Flinders University), and Dr Jing Jarvis (Flinders University).

This research project has been approved by the Flinders University Social and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee (Project number: 2588). For more information regarding ethical approval of the project only, the Executive Officer of the Committee can be contacted by telephone on (08) 8201 3116, by fax on (08) 8201 2035, or by email to human.researchethics@flinders.edu.au

Appendix O – Flinders University – Human Research Ethics Committee Approval Notice

18 February 2021

HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE

APPROVAL NOTICE

Dear Ms Leanne Gerekaroff,

The below proposed project has been **approved** on the basis of the information contained in the application and its attachments.

Project No: 2588
Project Title: Preparing for Employment and/or Tertiary Education: Social and communication transition experiences of young people with autism

Primary Researcher: Ms Leanne Gerekaroff

Approval Date: 18/02/2021

Expiry Date: 15/03/2024
Please note: *Due to the current COVID-19 situation, researchers are strongly advised to develop a research design that aligns with the University's COVID-19 research protocol involving human studies. Where possible, avoid face-to-face testing and consider rescheduling face-to-face testing or undertaking alternative distance/online data or interview collection means. For further information, please go to https://staff.flinders.edu.au/coronavirusinformation/research-updates.*

RESPONSIBILITIES OF RESEARCHERS AND SUPERVISORS

Participant Documentation

Please note that it is the responsibility of researchers and supervisors, in the case of student projects, to ensure that:

- all participant documents are checked for spelling, grammatical, numbering and formatting errors. The Committee does not accept any responsibility for the above mentioned errors.

- the Flinders University logo is included on all participant documentation (e.g., letters of Introduction, information Sheets, consent forms, debriefing information and questionnaires – with the exception of purchased research tools) and the current Flinders
  University letterhead is included in the header of all letters of introduction. The Flinders University international logo/letterhead should be used and documentation should contain international dialling codes for all telephone and fax numbers listed for all research to be conducted overseas.

- the HREC contact details, listed below, are included in the footer of all letters of introduction and information sheets.

This research project has been approved by Flinders University's Human Research Ethics Committee (Project ID 2588*). If you have any complaints or reservations about the ethical conduct of this study, you may contact Flinders University's Research Ethics & Compliance Office via telephone on 08 8201 2543 or by email human.researchethics@flinders.edu.au.*

Annual Progress / Final Reports

In order to comply with the monitoring requirements of the *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research 2007 (updated 2018)* an annual progress report must be submitted each year on the anniversary of the approval date for the duration of the ethics approval using the HREC Annual/Final Report Form available online via the ResearchNow Ethics & Biosafety system.

Please note that no data collection can be undertaken after the ethics approval expiry date listed at the top of this notice. If data is collected after expiry, it will not be covered in terms of ethics. It is the responsibility of the researcher to ensure that annual progress reports are submitted on time; and that no data is collected after ethics has expired.

If the project is completed before ethics approval has expired please ensure a final report is submitted immediately. If ethics approval for your project expires please either submit (1) a final report; or (2) an extension of time request (using the HREC Modification Form). For student projects, the Low Risk Panel recommends that current ethics approval is maintained until a student's thesis has been submitted, assessed and finalised. This is to protect the student in the event that reviewers recommend that additional data be collected Page 1 of 2 from participants.

Modifications to Project

Modifications to the project must not proceed until approval has been obtained from the Ethics Committee. Such proposed changes / modifications include:

- change of project title; change to research team (e.g., additions,
- removals, researchers and supervisors) changes to research
- objectives; changes to research protocol; changes to participant
- recruitment methods; changes / additions to source(s) of
- participants; changes of procedures used to seek informed consent;
- changes to participant remuneration; changes to information /
- documents to be given to potential participants; changes to research
- instruments (e.g., survey, interview questions etc); extensions of time
- (i.e. to extend the period of ethics approval past current expiry date).
-
-

To notify the Committee of any proposed modifications to the project please submit a Modification Request Form available online via the ResearchNow Ethics & Biosafety system. Please open the project, then select the 'Create Sub-Form' tile in the grey Action Menu, and then select the relevant Modification Request Form. Please note that extension of time requests should be submitted prior to the Ethics Approval Expiry Date listed on this notice.

Adverse Events and/or Complaints

Researchers should advise the Executive Officer of the Ethics Committee on 08 8201-3116 or human.researchethics@flinders.edu.au immediately if:

- any complaints regarding the research are received; a serious
- or unexpected adverse event occurs that effects participants;
- an unforeseen event occurs that may affect the ethical

acceptability of the project.

Yours sincerely,

Hendryk Flaegel

on behalf of

Human Research Ethics Committee

Research and Development Support

Human.esearchethics@flinders.edu.au

Flinders University
Sturt Road, Bedford Park, South Australia, 5042 GPO Box 2100, Adelaide, South Australia, 5001

http://www.flinders.edu.au/research/researcher-support/ebi/human-ethics/human-ethics_home.cfm

ResearchNow
Ethics & Biosafety

Flinders University Research Development and Support
Proactively supporting our Research

Appendix P – Department for Education Research Approval Letter

Government of South Australia
Department for Education

System Performance
31 Flinders Street
Adelaide SA 5000
GPO Box 1152
Adelaide SA 5001
DX 541
Tel. +61 8 8226 1609
Education.ResearchUnit@sa.gov.au
www.education.sa.gov.au

Reference No: 2021-0025

Leanne Gerekaroff
College of Education, Psychology and Social Work
Flinders University

Dear Ms Gerekaroff

Your research project *"Preparing for Employment and/or Tertiary Education: Social and communication transition experiences of young people with autism"* has been reviewed by a senior officer within the Department.

I am pleased to advise you that your application has been approved, subject to the following conditions:

- That students under age of 18 yrs only participate on the basis of express written consent from parents/guardians.
- That a copy of any final reports, presentations or manuscripts accepted for publication be submitted to the Education.ResearchUnit@sa.gov.au mailbox 30 days prior to their publication.
- That the Department for Education is notified when findings are to be released to other government or nongovernment agencies or to participating sites.

Please contact Georgia in the Data Reporting and Analytics directorate for any other matters you may wish to discuss regarding your application (Tel. (08) 8226 1609 or email: Education.ResearchUnit@sa.gov.au).

I wish you well with your research.

Yours sincerely

Ben Temperly
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, SYSTEM PERFORMANCE

24 May 2021

Appendix Q - Department for Education Site Manager Approval

Government of South Australia
Department for Education

System Performance
31 Flinders Street
Adelaide SA 5000
GPO Box 1152
Adelaide SA 5001
DX 541
Tel. +61 8 8226 1609
Education.ResearchUnit@sa.gov.au
www.education.sa.gov.au

REFERENCE NO: 2021-0025
RESEARCHER: Leanne Gerekaroff
RESEARCH BODY: Flinders University

Dear Principal/Director/Site Manager

The research project titled *"Preparing for Employment and/or Tertiary Education: Social and communication transition experiences of young people with autism"* has been reviewed centrally and granted approval for access to Department for Education sites. However, the researcher(s) will still need your agreement to proceed with this research at your site.

The researcher(s) whose names appear below are the only persons permitted to conduct research on your site:

Name	Clearance Type	Expiry Date
Leanne Gerekaroff	DCSI WWCC	21/01/2022

Please contact Georgia in the Data Reporting and Analytics directorate for any other matters you may wish to discuss regarding your participation (Tel. (08) 8226 1609 or email: Education.ResearchUnit@sa.gov.au).

Yours sincerely

Ben Temperly
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, SYSTEM PERFORMANCE

24 May 2021

Appendix U – Catholic Education Ethics Approval Letter

Ms Leanne Gerekaroff
Flinders University
Email: Leanne.gerekaroff@flinders.edu.au

Adelaide Catholic Education Centre
116 George Street, Thebarton SA 5031
PO Box 179, Torrensville Plaza SA 5031
T +61 8 8301 6600 **F** +61 8 8301 6611
E director@cesa.catholic.edu.au
W www.cesa.catholic.edu.au

CEO ABN: 91 893 631 195
SACCS ABN: 84 572 437 441

Dear Leanne

Research Request Reference 202111 – Preparing for Employment and/or Tertiary Education: Social and Communication Transition Experiences of Young People with Autism

Thank you for your email dated 23 April 2021, requesting permission to conduct research in South Australian Catholic schools.

I am pleased to advise your research proposal has been approved, subject to the following conditions:

• any items ticked **"YES"** under **"Section 8 - Sensitivities"** in the National Projects – Application to Conduct Research in Schools form, should be highlighted in the Letter to Principal
• copies of any questionnaires or surveys will be provided to the Principal
• active consent of parents and teachers/school staff, if applicable, will be obtained
• the research complies with the ethics proposal approved by the University or the research organisation's generally accepted ethics requirements
• the research complies with any provisions under the Privacy Act, that may require adherence by researchers in gathering and reporting data. It is understood that the data will not be used for any purposes other than the stated research, without the written approval of the relevant data custodians
• no comparison between schooling sectors will be made
• where students are involved, the researcher will carry out the research within view of the class teacher or authorised school observer
• opt-In consent will be sought from teachers, if applicable, parents and students
• the University or research organisation will provide copies of Public Liability and Professional Indemnity Insurance documents to the Principal
• sector requirements relating to child protection and police checks are met by **ALL** researchers: o where researchers obtain information in relation to a student which suggests or indicates abuse, this information must be immediately conveyed to the Director of Catholic Education SA;
o all researchers and assistants, who in the course of the research interact in any way with students or student data, are required to provide evidence of an acceptable police clearance direct to the school

At the conclusion of the study, a copy of the research findings should be forwarded to:
The Director
Catholic Education Office
PO Box 179
Torrensville Plaza SA 5031 **or** director@cesa.catholic.edu.au
Best wishes for the research process.

Yours sincerely
Teresa Cimmino
Senior Education Advisor, Learning and Curriculum
17 June 2021

Appendix R – Autism SA Approval Letter

1 June 2021

Leanne Gerekaroff
Leanne.gerekaroff@tafesa.edu.au

Dear Leanne

Re: PP2021004 – Preparing for Employment and/or Tertiary Education: Social and communication transition experiences of young people with autism

I am pleased to confirm that approval has been granted by the Professional Practice Committee of Autism SA for support of the research project named above.

The Professional Practice Committee feels that this is an important research project and we wish you the best.

By utilising Autism SA services you are acknowledging the following:

- Contact details for researchers and supervisors that are provided to the Professional Practice Committee may be displayed on the Autism SA website and accessible by the public.
- Current and past research projects will be listed on the Autism SA website indefinitely.
- Autism SA requires one copy of the final report for inclusion in the Autism SA Resource Centre.
- A brief summary report of the outcomes and findings is required for distribution via the Autism SA website, Infomail and / or printed newsletter.
- Researchers may be requested by Autism SA to present their outcomes and findings at conferences and seminars hosted by Autism SA at no cost.

Yours sincerely

Niki Welz
Research and Training Manager

The Autism Association of South Australia ABN 98 164 545 215 trading as Autism SA

1/262 Marion Road, Netley, South Australia, 5037
PO Box 304, Marleston DC, South Australia, 5033
Infoline 1300 288 476 • **autismsa.org.au**
Phone (08) 8379 6976 • **Fax** (08) 8338 1216

Appendix S – University of South Australia Recruitment Approval Email

Research - Request to conduct research

MC

Maurizio Costabile <Maurizio.Costabile@unisa.edu.au>
Fri 14/05/2021 10:54 AM
To: Leanne Gerekaroff
Hi Leanne
Thanks for the details.
Approved.
Good luck with your research.
Maurizio
A/Prof Maurizio Costabile | Dean of Research, Education Futures (interim)
Associate Professor of Biochemistry and Immunology Education | AFHERDSA

UniSA: Education Futures|MH1-05a|Magill Campus
Tel +61 8 8302 2176 | www.unisa.edu.au

University of South Australia

UniSA - University of South Australia

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www.unisa.edu.au

|CRICOS Provider No. 00121B

LG

Leanne Gerekaroff
Wed 12/05/2021 11:16 PM

To: Maurizio Costabile <Maurizio.Costabile@unisa.edu.au>
Public Liability Insurance email confirmation 2021.docx
19 KB
_Flinders_MoI_Public Liability $20m_2020.pdf
351 KB
_Flinders_MoI_Professional Indemnity_2020.pdf
350 KB
Proposal LG2020.pdf
642 KB
Show all 4 attachments (1 MB)Download allSave all to OneDrive - Flinders
Dear Maurizio,

Please find attached a copy of the
- Confirmation of Insurance
- Proposal

Thank you for taking the time to consider my request

Best wishes

Leanne

Leanne Gerekaroff

PhD Candidate - College of Education, Psychology & Social Work

leanne.gerekaroff@flinders.edu.au

Flinders University

Stuart Road, Bedford Park, South Australia, 5042

LG

Leanne Gerekaroff
Sun 9/05/2021 10:52 PM
To: Barbara.Comber@unisa.edu.au
information-sheet-consent-form post-school individuals with autism 2021.pdf
210 KB
UNISA 2021.docx
48 KB
Flyer April 2021.pdf
71 KB

Dear Professor Comber,

Please find attached my request to conduct research through the University of South Australia.

I am a PhD student at Flinders University. The purpose of this research is to investigate the challenges of transition that young people living with autism experience moving into tertiary education and/or employment. My research aims to gain insight into how senior secondary school and post-school youth with autism experience transition in relation to social and communications skills, while preparing for employment/and/or for tertiary education, secondly, to gain insight into how educators in mainstream senior secondary schools, support transition planning.

As part of this research, I seek your approval through the Deans of research to recruit young people living with autism between the ages of 18 - 24 who are undertaking tertiary education, and may be employed, underemployed or not employed.

I would be grateful for your support and can be contacted via email
- leanne.gerekaroff@flinders.edu.au to discuss my research further.

Best wishes

Leanne

Leanne Gerekaroff
PhD Candidate
College of Education, Psychology & Social Work
leanne.gerekaroff@flinders.edu.au
Flinders University
Stuart Road, Bedford Park, South Australia, 5042

Appendix T – TAFE SA Recruitment Approval Email

RE: Request to conduct research

Stephen Manson <Stephen.Manson@tafesa.edu.au>

Wed 2/06/2021 1:35 PM

To: Leanne Gerekaroff <Leanne.Gerekaroff@tafesa.edu.au

Cc: Leanne Gerekaroff <leanne.gerekaroff@flinders.edu.au>

Thanks Leanne, all good!

Best wishes

Stephen

From: Leanne Gerekaroff<Leanne.Gerekaroff@tafesa.edu.au>**Sent:** Wednesday, 2 June 2021 1:06 PM

To: Stephen Manson <Stephen.Manson@tafesa.edu.au>**Cc:** Leanne Gerekaroff<leanne.gerekaroff@flinders.edu.au>**Subject:** RE: Request to conduct research

Hi Stephen

Further to the approval to recruit through TAFE SA and for further discussion:

Please consider the following:

Researcher to deliver a 5 – 10-minute presentation and discussion with SS staff at all of staff meeting on Monday 7th June.

SS staff to be the gatekeepers or conduits for awareness raising of the research to potential participants– this may present as flyers in the counselling spaces or student hubs or involve an expression of interest discussion with potential participants who meet the research criteria.

As the researcher – I would not engage in the recruit process, just have the flyer available.

Best wishes Leanne

From: Stephen Manson <Stephen.Manson@tafesa.edu.au>**Sent:** Thursday, 27 May 2021 12:49 PM

To: Leanne Gerekaroff<Leanne.Gerekaroff@tafesa.edu.au>**Cc:** Priya Kamineni <Priya.Kamineni@tafesa.edu.au>**Subject:** FW: Request to conduct research

Hi Leanne,

Your request to conduct research through TAFE SA has been approved with the proviso that promotion occurs via Information/Bulletin Boards and not through TAFE SA/work-related electronic mechanisms and identifying he project as a Flinders University student undertaking a research project. Happy to discuss and please keep me in the loop regarding your promotion and student engagement.

Best wishes Stephen

Stephen Manson | Manager: Student Services

Student Experience| TAFE SA

Ground Level, 120 Currie Street

T +61 (8) 7210 3096 | **M** 0428 029 262

From: Leanne Gerekaroff<leanne.gerekaroff@flinders.edu.au> **Sent:** Tuesday, 25 May 2021 12:46 PM

To: Student and Community Engagement <EDStudentCommunityEngagement@tafesa.edu.au>**Subject:** Re: Request to conduct research

Dear Ms Kamineni,

Thank you for your response and consideration.

Actions/Deadlines:

decision from the executive team to approve recruitment of TAFE SA students to participate in the research and most organisations are taking between 2 - 4 weeks to decide

If approved, the process will be:

recruit through the Student services team under the direction of Stefan Manson - Manager

have available a recruitment flyer within student hubs/student counselling spaces

Best wishes

Leanne

Leanne Gerekaroff

PhD Candidate/Casual Research Assistant

College of Education, Psychology & Social Work

leanne.gerekaroff@flinders.edu.au

Flinders University

Stuart Road, Bedford Park, South Australia, 5042

From: Student and Community Engagement <EDStudentCommunityEngagement@tafesa.edu.au>**Sent:** Friday, 21 May 2021 3:24 PM

To: Leanne Gerekaroff<leanne.gerekaroff@flinders.edu.au>**Subject:** RE: Request to conduct research

Dear Leanne,

Thank you for your email to Executive Director, Ms Priya Kamineni.

We will review the information provided and discuss it internally to see if we can assist with your research. Please allow us some time to follow this up on your behalf.

Can you please provide any actions/deadlines to assist with this?

Regards,

Sandra on behalf of Ms Kamineni

Sandra Mestros | Executive Assistant to the Executive Director – Student and Community Engagement

Executive Suites | TAFE SA

Adelaide Campus, 120 Currie Street

T +61 (8) 8207 8888 | **T** +61 (8) 7210 3090 (Direct) | **E** EDStudentCommunityEngagement@tafesa.edu.au

RTO Code: 41026 | CRICOS Provider Code: 00092B | HEP Code: PRV14002

From: Leanne Gerekaroff<leanne.gerekaroff@flinders.edu.au>**Sent:** Friday, 21 May 2021 10:52 AM

To: Priya Kamineni <Priya.Kamineni@tafesa.edu.au>**Subject:** Request to conduct research

To Priya Kamineni and the Executive team TAFE SA,

Please find attached my request to conduct research through TAFE SA.

I am a PhD student at Flinders University. The purpose of this research is to investigate the challenges of transition that young people living with autism experience moving into tertiary education and/or employment. My research aims to gain insight into how senior secondary school and post-school youth with autism experience transition in relation to social and communications skills, while preparing for employment/and/or for tertiary education, secondly, to gain insight into how educators in mainstream senior secondary schools, support transition planning.

As part of this research, I seek your approval through the Executive Team/Board to recruit young people living with autism between the ages of 18 - 24 who are undertaking vocational education and training, and may be employed, underemployed or not employed.

I would be grateful for your support and can be contacted via email-leanne.gerekaroff@flinders.edu.au to discuss my research further.

Best wishes

Leanne Gerekaroff

PhD Candidate/Casual Research Assistant

College of Education, Psychology & Social Work

leanne.gerekaroff@flinders.edu.au

Flinders University

Stuart Road, Bedford Park, South Australia, 5042

Appendix V – Reflective Journal

Post-school Autistic Participants

One post-school participant who was known to the researcher - researcher noted that it was more difficult to reduce bias with this one participant, due to the previous interactions and knowledge about the person. The interview questions were the same, however I noticed my thinking was answering the questions in my head, as the participant was telling their story. In reflection, I have a better understanding as a researcher why it is critical to not have a type of relationship past or present with a participant as it makes it very difficult to not have preconceived ideas. I selected not to interview any other participants who indicated that they were known to the researcher but noted that no-other participants indicated they were known. I did this by changing the criteria for selection, and would inform any potential participants, of this change as required.

I noted that with other autistic post-school participants I was able to listen to their stories without preconceived thoughts, which were recorded, I did not take notes at the interviews, as I wanted the participants to explain their stories in-depth, without distraction.

As a counsellor, I note in my sessions that individuals when telling their stories become distracted with my notetaking, as they have indicated they want to know what I am writing.

Senior Secondary Autistic Participants

The senior secondary participants, it was important to make the young people feel confident and at ease with the interview process and myself. Establishing rapport was critical to enabling the young people to tell their stories.

All the senior secondary participants indicated that they only agreed to do the interviews, because their friends said that would also. For this cohort, I needed to repeat the questions and modify the language, although written in easy English so that the participants felt they understood what they were asked.

Two asked if I could repeat the questions, one asked if they were on the right track with their answers, three from one school indicated that they would participate together, hence one focus group was undertaken.

The focus group occurred without prior knowledge to the researcher. In this case the three participants entered the room together and indicated they wanted each other's support, as they were friends and felt more comfortable to speak to me. I did not question this, and the interview took place.

In this interview, I set ground rules for answering the questions:

- I asked for their consent forms
- I asked if they remember agreeing to the interview
- I asked if they understood consent and what this meant to them
- I indicated that they don't have to answer every question
- One person to answer at a time
- Ask if you do not understand the question to ask and your friend can explain if you think will help you.
- Try not to say names
- Let each other speak

I noted that the three participants, engaged very differently, one was very open and wanted to provide as much information as they could, the second would answer the questions directly with a little context and the third participant was quieter and provided very short answers with mainly yes or no, some answers had more context.

Most the questions were answered, but the three participants soon lost interest and the researcher had to keep bringing them back to the questions.

Parents of Autistic Senior Secondary and Post-school Participants.

Parents were able to respond to the questions, with little clarity and spoke about their child's experiences of current and post schooling social communication transition experiences. In reflection – the research could have directed the participants back to the questions as this cohort expressed their need to be heard overall and this included some of their lived experience of the schooling system and the impact on their child social, communication transition needs and experiences.

Educators

Educators responded to the questions and added other information and experiences as they felt relevant. The responses varied depending on the experiences and roles – Mainstream educators, Special Education educators, Student support officers/Education support officers and Career guidance officers. Terms for the participant roles varied between schools, for example Inclusive education team. This cohort also wanted to be heard and expressed for some of what had been said to not be included in the research.

Note taking in the interviews did not occur at any level – all interviews were recorded for transcription and further analysis, on what was said.

Interview Questions

Senior secondary participants – interview questions were explained in a different way as some participants indicated they did not understand the question and asked for clarification –

One participant verbal communication was limited to yes and no answers and the parents helped the participant understand by breaking down the question to a simple sentence of 4-5 words. In this case the researcher, reworded the questions and sent via email the new questions to the parent, and participant who later sent back a few words and pictures to answer the modified questions

Appendix W - Findings for Discussion (Coding Spreadsheet)

Overarching Discussions	Findings	New knowledge	Relationship to research questions	Story for codes	Notes and Comments
		1. Employer knowledge and resistance	Research Question: How are students with autism supported to develop social and communication skills in their senior secondary years, to prepare them for		
		2. Funding for students - Australian context - NDIS	Sub Questions: How do senior secondary school students and recent school graduates with autism describe their experiences of support for transition to post-school settings? How do educators in mainstream senior secondary schools perceive the development of social and communication skills in transition programs		
Employment System (big picture focus - South Australian context) Discuss in literature review and as a introduction to world views in preliminary disucssion section and link to how this influences/impacts on employment and school views	Employer knowledge and resistance			Not about the individual this is about the employment systems and structures to support Autisic person and/or family to design a plan of support that covers all aspects of life, including medical supports, communciatin, social community engagement education and employment.	Not about the individual this is about the employment systems and structures to support Autistic individuals.
	Funding for students (Australian Context through NDIS			This is relation ot external funding that supports the development of the whole inidividual, the NDIS ia a recently new national funding scheme developed with the Autistic person and/or family to design a plan of support that covers all aspects of life, including medical supports, communciatin, social community engagement education and employment.	Look for post-school and employment planning only
	Lack of post school supports			As young people transition from school, there are significant changes to funding models and access to supports required for an Autisic person to fully engae in life, community, education and employment.	adulthood support changes relating to funding and future support

National and International context? (world focus) Discuss in literature review and as a introduction to world views in preliminary disucssion section and link to how this influences/impacts on employment and school views			**Discuss in literature review and as a introduction to world views in preliminary disucssion section and link to how this influences/impacts on employment and school views**		**Discuss in literature review and as a introduction to world views in preliminary disucssion section and link to how this influences/impacts on employment and school views**
	Funding for Students			Educators view who has worked in eudcation in the UK and Australia - specifically South Australia, comapring the different systems and funding used to support students living with a disability - related some of this funding to supprot teachers professioanl development - whre in the UK there are teachers with high levels of expertise in workign iwth studnets with compelx needs	Educator view
	UK and supportive employment opportunities			Discussion around UK compaines and small business schemes in the UK - called the Supported Employment Scheme - funding to the business to accommodate needs of a person living with complex needs	Employer knowledge and resistance
	AUSTRALIAN CONTEXT		**Discuss in literature review and as a introduction to world views in preliminary disucssion section and link to how this influences/impacts on employment and school views**	Discussion around Australian - South Australian context and the systems/ funding that support businesses to engage and employ/train Autistic individuals	Employer knowledge and resistance

National and International context? (world focus) Discuss in literature review and as a introduction to world views in preliminary disucssion section and link to how this influences/impacts on employment and school views			**Discuss in literature review and as a introduction to world views in preliminary disucssion section and link to how this influences/impacts on employment and school views**		**Discuss in literature review and as a introduction to world views in preliminary disucssion section and link to how this influences/impacts on employment and school views**
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	UK and supportive employment opportunities			Discussion around UK compaines and small business schemes in the UK - called the Supported Employment Scheme - funding to the business to accommodate needs of a person living with complex needs	Employer knowledge and resistance
	AUSTRALIAN CONTEXT		**Discuss in literature review and as a introduction to world views in preliminary disucssion section and link to how this influences/impacts on employment and school views**	Discussion around Australian - South Australian context and the systems/ funding that support businesses to engage and employ/train Autistic individuals	Employer knowledge and resistance

	parents employing mentors (new concept)		Yes - answers how parents percieve their childs social communciation skill develplnet in senito eecondary school	Families stepping in to provide supplementary services to support their childs social communication skills, as parents are indicating this is not occuring at school. This may decrease with the differences in social demographics and social capital of the parents	in transition and post-school (at school related to Taxonomy and Family Engagement)
	Employability Skills		Yes, parents views on employment after school or starting in senior school.	Families views on employment capacity and opprotunities for their child	0059 0060 - relationship to parent thoughts on their childs future in employment
	Lack of post school supports			As young people transition from school, there are significant changes to funding models and access to supports required for an Autisic person to fully engae in life, community, education and employment.	relates to funding, adulthood supports changes,
Investing in Transition (Parent focus)	Lack of post school supports			As young people transition from school, there are significant changes to funding models and access to supports required for an Autisic person to fully engae in life, community, education and employment.	relates to funding, adulthood supports changes,
	ASD understanding of Transition		Yes - answers how parents perceive their childs social communciation skill development in senior secondary school	Parents understanding of what their child may need for successful tranisition from school to teritary education or employment.	Taxonomy - family involvment
	Recognised Disability		Yes - answers how parents perceive their childs social communciation skill development in senior secondary school	Funding and support at school - disabilities not diagnosed early at school so lack of support due to lack of funding - some school recognised imputed disability. Parents recognising difference but no formal diagnosis and no funding or school support provided	Funding and support at school - disabilities not diagnosed early at school so lack of support due to lack of funding - some school recognised imputed disability. Parents recognising difference but no formal diagnosis and no funding or school support provided
	Recognised Disability		Yes - answers how parents perceive their childs social communciation skill development in senior secondary school	Funding and support at school - disabilities not diagnosed early at school so lack of support due to lack of funding - some school recognised imputed disability. Parents recognising difference but no formal diagnosis and no funding or school support provided	Young ASD adults experience of non-diagnosis at school or until year 12.

Survive School (Autistic s	Student survival (new concept but relates to Transition- Friendships)		YES - answers: How senior secondary school students and recent school graduates with autism describe their experiences of support for transition to post-school settings	at school is to survive the daily routines and struggles with "fitting" into the school culture and norms. There is a strong relationship with friendships and the difference this makes to	Related to friendships in Transition framework but mainly about survival at school
	Safe spaces (new concept)		YES answers: How senior secondary school students and recent school graduates with autism describe their experiences of support for transition to post-school settings	Senior secondary students having the availablity of a space they can go to when overwhelmled, needing time to self-regulate, and feel that they are safe. Safe spaces means a place where there is no judgement and a space which enables a student	Related to school environment - interoception rooms, student hubs, learning centres, learning pods (1st half refers to educator interviews describing what they see as a safe space at school). Then young ASD people talking about their experience.
	Home schooling	NOT A NEW THEME but	YES answers: How senior secondary school students and recent school graduates with autism describe their experiences of support for transition to post-school settings	Senior Secondary Students talk about homeschooling as an alternative to trying ot fit in and self-regualte where they feel it is to overwhelming. Parents and maybe schools see this as a way to protect the child, however young Autistic people inidcated this creates more barriers to social communication development.	impact on social skills
	Home schooling	NOT A NEW THEME but	YES answers: How senior secondary school students and recent school graduates with autism describe their experiences of support for transition to post-school settings	Senior Secondary Students talk about homeschooling as an alternative to trying ot fit in and self-regualte where they feel it is to overwhelming. Parents and maybe schools see this as a way to protect the child, however young Autistic people inidcated this creates more barriers to social communication development.	impact on social skills
	Bullying	NOT A NEW THEME but	YES answers: How senior secondary school students and recent school graduates with autism describe their experiences of support for transition to post-school settings	Parents raised their concerns regarding "bullying" of their autisic child, due to difficluties with social communication development.	concept raised by parents and young autistics - impact on social , communication

	ASD understanding of Transition		**YES answers: How do educators in mainstream senior secondary schools perceive the development of**	Austistic young people awareness and knowledge of what job readiness means: Cores skills for Work- Getting the work Done - Plan	Relates to beginning job ready - Cores skills for Work- Getting the work Done - Plan and organise,
			YES answers: How do educators in mainstream senior secondary schools perceive the development of social and communication	Austistic young people awareness and knowledge of what job readiness means: Cores skills for Work- Getting the work Done - Plan and organise, Make decisions,	Look at Confidence Framework Matric for references - Relates to ASD indivduals thoughts and want they think they
					Not the same as autonomy, self-determination - maybe the lever for and supports theories but
	ASD understanding of Transition			Austistic young people awareness and knowledge of what job readiness means: Cores skills for Work- Getting the work Done - Plan and organise, Make decisions, identify and solve problems and	Relates to beginning job ready - Cores skills for Work- Getting the work Done - Plan and organise, Make decisions
	Lack of post-school supports		**YES answers: How do educators in mainstream senior secondary schools perceive the development of social and communication skills in transition programs for students with autism?**	As young people transition from school, there are significant changes to funding models and access to supports required for an Autisic person to fully engae in life, community, education and employment.	Teacher view on confidence and developing the child ealry as years 9-10
	Recognised Disability		**YES answers: How do educators in mainstream senior secondary schools perceive the development of social and communication skills in transition programs for students with autism?**	Funding and support at school - disabilities not diagnosed early at school so lack of support due to lack of funding - some school recognised imputed disability. Parents recognising difference but no formal diagnosis and no funding or school support provided	Non-diagnosis until in later school years - lack of support. Noted the seperation of kids with complex needs versus mainstream kids even in senior school (see above quotes)
Confidence and Independence (Autistic young adult focus)	**Post-school communication**		**YES answers: How do educators in mainstream senior secondary schools perceive the development of social and communication skills in transition programs for students with autism?**	In this context, confidence and independence is not the same as self-determination and autonomy, although can be seen as a lever for developing self-determination and autonomy. Austistic individual have explained confidence as, belief in one self and feeling secure in ones capacity and Independance, as the feeling secure in the capacity to make own choices. Self-determination is seen as managing those choices or decisions and autonomy as an inidivdual then wanting to manage their own life.	**Critical social-communication views of young autistic people post-school.** Relates to SDT - Relatedness- Self-awareness and Communication. Relates to Transition Framework - Quality of Life - Friendships, Belonging, Inclusivity, Community engagement, to a lesser degreee self-determination, employment and teritary opportunities.
			YES answers: How senior secondary school students and recent school graduates with autism describe their experiences of support for transition to post-school settings	In this context, confidence and independence is not the same as self-determination and autonomy, although can be seen as a lever for developing self-determination and autonomy. Austistic individual have explained confidence as, belief in one self and feeling secure in ones capacity and Independance, as the feeling secure in the capacity to make own choices. Self-determination is seen as managing those choices or decisions and autonomy as an inidivdual then wanting to manage their own life.	**Critical social-communication views of young autistic people post-school.** Relates to SDT - Relatedness- Self-awareness and Communication. Relates to Transition Framework - Quality of Life - Friendships, Belonging, Inclusivity, Community engagement, to a lesser degreee self-determination, employment and teritary opportunities.
			YES answers: How senior secondary school students and recent school graduates with autism describe their experiences of support for transition to post-school settings	In this context, confidence and independence is not the same as self-determination and autonomy, although can be seen as a lever for developing self-determination and autonomy. Austistic individual have explained confidence as, belief in one self and feeling secure in ones capacity and Independance, as the feeling secure in the capacity to make own choices. Self-determination is seen as managing those choices or decisions and autonomy as an inidivdual then wanting to manage their own life.	**Critical social-communication views of young autistic people post-school.** Relates to SDT - Relatedness- Self-awareness and Communication. Relates to Transition Framework - Quality of Life - Friendships, Belonging, Inclusivity, Community engagement, to a lesser degreee self-determination, employment and teritary opportunities.
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			YES answers: How senior secondary school students	In this context, confidence and independence is not the same as self-determination and autonomy, although can be seen as a lever for developing self-determination and autonomy. Austistic individual	**Critical social-communication views of young autistic people post-school.** Relates to SDT - Relatedness- Self-awareness and

Appendix X - Coding Spreadsheet - Recoded

Notes (my new codes)	Recoded to exisiting theories			
	Self determination theory	**Taxonomy for transition**	**Transition framework**	**Core skills for work**
Recoded		Self Directed Planning to student support		
RECODED revisit the framework matrices - relates to 3 theory frameworks - **Some in Emotional Regulation**	Emotional Regulation	Emotional Regulation	Emotional Regulation	
Parts recoded			Student survival	
Educators recoded		development - instructional context		
Recoded parts	ASD understanding of Transition	ASD understanding of Transition		ASD understanding of Transition
Educators recoded		Lack of post-school support		
Recoded		Transition facilitated by parents - recoded to Family - Engagement - Involvement		
Recoded	Post school communication social interaction		Post-school communication social interaction	
Recoded parts to fit with theories		Tension between schools and preparing for transition - Program structure - Student development	and preparing for transition - Transition Framework - Service & Supports - Transition planning (Educational supports). LEVERS - policy and funding	
Recoded to fit with theories		Program structure - resource development, school climate and policies	Gap in Teacher Education - Culture and Levers	