Should we stay or should we go? Parent experiences of moving or considering moving their autistic child between mainstream schools

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Abstract

The majority of autistic students experience numerous difficulties at school, which may contribute to frequent moves between mainstream schools. Despite this, no studies have examined the reasons why autistic students are making non-essential mainstream school moves. The aim of this study was to explore the experiences which led parents to consider moving their child between mainstream schools and the decision-making processes in choosing whether to stay or leave. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 parents. Thematic analysis generated three major themes: (1) Parents’ increasing concerns around their child’s school placement, (2) Choosing to stay or leave, and (3) Living with the choice to leave. Parents identified that problems leading to consideration of leaving were largely systemic, highlighting the interaction between push (to leave) and pull (to stay) factors which differed in their intensity across time and personal circumstances. The role of school principals, as well as the parents’ feelings of undermined agency and advocacy, also influenced the decision-making process. This study found that parents’ decision-making around moving their child to another mainstream school is a complicated process; however, the results indicate that there are multiple opportunities for intervention from schools and education departments to prevent a move from occurring.

Keywords: autism, non-essential transitions, exclusions, mainstream school mobility

Introduction

Autism is a lifelong neurological condition, characterised by differences in social communication and the presence of restricted and repetitive behaviours and interests (American Psychiatric Association 2013). Although the majority of autistic children do not
have an intellectual disability (Baio et al. 2018), many experience challenges at school. Almost half of parents consider their autistic child’s inclusion within the mainstream unsuccessful (Roberts and Simpson 2016) and students themselves report feeling misunderstood and unsupported (Brede et al. 2017, Goodall 2019), experience bullying and social isolation (Humphrey and Hebron 2015), and feel anxious whilst at school (Adams, Simpson, and Keen 2020). Given this, it is unsurprising that autistic students are moving schools frequently (S. Jones et al. 2018).

Emerging evidence from Australia has found that students with a disability are up to 7% more likely to move schools than their non-disabled peers (Deloitte Access Economics 2017). This increased movement may be particularly high for autistic students, where as many as four out of five experience difficulties in the areas of learning, socialisation and communication (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2017). A survey conducted by an Australian charity supporting autistic people and their families found that one in four students had moved schools, which was more common amongst secondary students (44%) than primary students (19%; S. Jones et al. 2018). However, the report did not state the types of schools they were moving between and the only explanation provided for leaving their placement was a lack of school support. Other Australian and international qualitative studies have also raised the possibility that parents may be moving their autistic children frequently. Rubenstein et al. (2015) reported that ten of the 13 autistic students in their study had made multiple non-essential moves. Similarly, Lilley (2015) found that 40% of the 21 mothers in her broader study had moved their autistic child between different educational settings between two and four times, within the first 3 years of primary school.

Although the issue and impact of moving between mainstream schools has not been reported for autistic students, the broader research on school mobility has found that students’ short- and long-term educational outcomes can be negatively affected (Boon 2011). A school
move is associated with setbacks in academic learning and in developing social networks (Boon 2011). Highly mobile students are also more likely to experience anxiety, exhibit challenging behaviour, and have higher suspension rates (Boon 2011; Welsh 2018). In the long term this can increase the risk of dropping out of school (Grigg 2012; Welsh 2018). For autistic students, who already experience multiple challenges within mainstream school environments, the breakdown of their placement and having to move to another mainstream school is likely to lead to greater problems. Therefore, this is a critical issue that needs to be further understood.

Despite the reported high rate of mobility and the recognised impact of school moves on students, the experiences which lead to autistic children moving from one mainstream school to another is an underexplored area. To date, the limited research on school moves in autistic students has focused on movement between different types of educational settings such as moving away from the mainstream and into special schools (Lilley 2015; Mann, Cuskelley, and Moni 2018), homeschooling (Bower 2019; Hurlbutt 2011; Kendall and Taylor 2016; Kidd and Kaczmarek 2010; McDonald and Lopes 2014; Simmons and Campbell 2019) or other alternative provisions (Brede et al. 2017; Goodall 2019; Sproston, Sedgewick, and Crane 2017), or from restricted to inclusive placements (Kluth et al. 2007; Lilley 2015). Across these mainstream to specialist move studies, a range of school and child factors were reported as reasons for leaving, including a lack of inclusive practice (e.g., Mann, Cuskelley, and Moni 2018; Rubenstein et al. 2015), inadequate protection from bullying (e.g., Brede et al. 2017), an overuse of reactive approaches to behaviour management (e.g., Brede et al. 2017), and obstacles to parental involvement (e.g., Kendall and Taylor 2016). A decline in the child’s mental health and well-being was the most frequently reported issue (e.g., Lilley 2015; McDonald and Lopes 2014). Each type of move also had its own unique features. For instance, the move into alternative provisions was most often associated with suspensions and
exclusion (Brede et al. 2017), whereas a lack of inclusive practice was noted most frequently when moving into special education (Mann, Cuskelly, and Moni 2018). However, movement between mainstream schools has not been investigated, even though the majority of autistic students attend mainstream schools, and this is likely the most common move made. The purpose of this study was therefore to explore the experiences of parents which led to consideration of moving their autistic child between mainstream schools and their decision-making process in choosing whether their child should stay in their current placement or leave. This is important given the emerging evidence that a breakdown in placements is more frequent for autistic than for neurotypical students, and that mainstream school mobility in neurotypical students is associated with negative outcomes. The results of this study will provide parents and educators with an understanding of factors associated with a breakdown in mainstream placements. It is also hoped that the results will inform education departments of potential areas in which there may be a divide between inclusive education policy and practice, as well as developing a more systemic response to addressing these difficulties to reduce or prevent unnecessary and potentially damaging moves for autistic students (see further discussion on inclusive education in the Australian context in Boyle and Anderson 2020; Mavropoulou, Mann, and Carrington, 2021).

Method

Ethics

Ethical consent was granted for this study by Griffith University prior to the commencement of this study. All requirements as outlined under the University’s human research ethical guidelines and procedures were met throughout the study.

Recruitment and participants
Parents of school-aged autistic children who had considered moving or had moved their child between mainstream schools for non-essential reasons (i.e., not due to a house move or to transitioning from primary to secondary school) from across Australia were invited to participate in this interview study. Children must have received the majority of their education in the regular classroom and have a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder, Level 1. This decision was made as this group of children have lower support needs and are more likely to be included in the regular mainstream classroom. The study was advertised through social media posts and parents were able to follow a link to an information sheet and an informed consent sheet.

Thirty-three parents registered their interest in the study, and 23 parents were able to be contacted by phone or email. Ten mothers met the inclusion criteria for this study, and all consented to participate in an interview. An overview of the participants is presented in Table 1. Students had a range of co-occurring conditions, with anxiety disorder being the most prevalent. There was a range of student ages represented; however, the school year levels at which students moved schools was mostly during primary school, with only one parent (Rebecca) having moved her child during secondary and another parent (Tracey) considering a secondary school move (see Figure 1). Figure 1 shows all non-essential moves made by children, although this study focuses upon mainstream to mainstream moves after the breakdown of a school placement, as represented by the red diamond.
### Table 1

**Participant Demographic Information**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parent</th>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Student's age (years)</th>
<th>ASD Level 1</th>
<th>Anxiety Disorder</th>
<th>Vision Impairment</th>
<th>Obsessive Compulsive Disorder</th>
<th>ADHD</th>
<th>Sensory Processing</th>
<th>Depression</th>
<th>Other</th>
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</thead>
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<tr>
<td>Megan</td>
<td>Sam</td>
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<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Sally</td>
<td>Henry</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Liz</td>
<td>Daniel</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rebecca</td>
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<td>Sharon</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Emily</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Pseudonyms have been used to protect the identities of parents and their child. Other includes dyslexia, dysgraphia, verbal tics, and oppositional defiance disorder.
History of Non-Essential Moves (note moves of focus in this study – non-essential mainstream to mainstream moves, and consideration of moving are in red diamonds and blue squares respectively).

**Procedure**

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants by the first author. An interview schedule was developed (available from the authors on request) which asked parents about (a) the history of their child’s school experiences and moves, (b) their decision-making process in choosing to stay or leave, and (c) the impact on the child and family. Interviews ranged from 25 – 60 minutes, with a combined total of 7 hours. Nine parents chose to be interviewed over the phone, with one parent (Nadine) preferring video conferencing. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim by a professional service. Parents
were emailed a copy of the transcript and were invited to amend or add to the information they had provided.

**Data analysis**

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the transcripts using Braun et al.’s (2019) six-step process. An iterative approach was used to code and analyse the data through familiarisation with the transcripts, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing the themes, defining and naming themes, and writing a report (Braun et al. 2019).

Two researchers (HM and KS) undertook multiple readings of the transcripts to familiarise themselves with the data. The first researcher then used an inductive approach to analyse each line of the data to generate initial codes. These codes aimed to organise the data into distinct ideas. KS reviewed the codes and identified codes for refinement and possible additional codes. Following this, HM and KS worked collaboratively to create secondary codes and generate initial themes. Themes were refined and named, and meaningful data from the interview transcripts were identified and placed under the themes. Summaries of each theme were then created by the first author to ensure that they reflected the data accurately. The themes, data and summaries were reviewed by all authors to further refine the analysis.

**Results**

Eight of the 10 parents had moved their child between one and four times, with one of these parents also considering another move. Two parents had never moved their child but were considering moving at the time they were interviewed. A linear narrative was used by all parents to explain experiences which led to consideration of moving. This generated themes which reflected this timeline of events. Three major themes were identified: *Increasing*
concerns around school placements, Choosing to stay or leave, and Living with the choice to leave. These and seven subthemes were identified and are presented in Figure 2.

**Figure 2**

*Themes and Subthemes Generated From the Thematic Analysis of Parent Interviews.*

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**Theme 1: Increasing concerns around school placements**

Parents described how their child’s school experiences, as well as their own experiences with their child’s school, led to increasing concerns around school placements. Two subthemes (each with three topics) relating to parents’ feelings of concern emerged: The child’s school experiences and Parents’ experiences with their child’s school.

*The child’s school experiences*
Parents had concerns about their child’s school experiences which were coded into three topics: *The effect of the school experience on learning*, *The effect of the school experience on social experiences*, and *The effect of the school experience on mental health and behaviour*.

**The effect of the school experience on learning.** Six parents spoke about receiving ongoing negative feedback from teachers regarding their child’s underachievement and disengagement; however, parents believed that their child’s learning was being impacted by a lack of classroom support and teacher understanding. For example, Tracey felt that Mitchel’s potential and intelligence were not well understood and consequently he was streamed into a lower ability class. She considered his underachievement was stemming from teachers not using alternative methods to assess his knowledge and understanding. Tracey had approached the principal about differentiating the curriculum for Mitchel but was informed: ‘He’s already in the foundation class, so there’s not really anything else I can do.’

**The effect of the school experience on social experiences.** Half the parents considered there was not enough support for their child’s social challenges. For example, Catherine was frustrated that teachers – and especially the principal – were dismissive of Olivia’s ongoing anxiety regarding friendships and conflict between her peers. She had suggested that the school did not understand how Olivia’s comprehension of social dynamics was ‘obviously different to someone who’s not ASD.’

Bullying was an issue raised by almost all parents. Anne and Tracey spoke of bullying that was persistent and identified that this was verbal, physical and emotional. For instance, Tracey said that Mitchel had been ‘pushed to the ground from behind, stomped on, punched and kicked.’ Both parents had initiated ongoing meetings with principals to find a resolution but were left feeling their child was not believed and that the school was unwilling to address the other children’s behaviours.
Causes and impacts of systemic failure on mental health and behaviour. Every parent reported that their child’s mental health and behaviour were affected by their experiences at school. Parents explained that their child experienced anxiety before, during and after school, which presented as meltdowns, inattention, irritability, withdrawal and school refusal. Parents believed this was a result of staff not understanding their child, as well as a lack of support for transitions, learning and social experiences (i.e., bullying, social comprehension). For example, Rebecca identified that inadequate support for Luke’s transition into his new school each morning, as well for as helping him to develop friendships, resulted in developing severe school refusal.

Parents felt that the teachers’ responses to their child’s internalising and externalising behaviours could exacerbate their child’s anxiety. Parents described incidents where teachers had used humiliation in response to behaviours. Tracey described how Mitchel’s Prep teacher had seated him on a ‘naughty chair, it was actually labelled the naughty chair, and the teacher explaining to all the other children what Mitchel had done wrong and why Mitchel was a bad kid for doing it.’ Tracey noticed this had triggered ongoing school refusal.

Parents also spoke about school responses to their child’s behaviour. Parents gave detailed accounts of their child being dragged by the arms or feet by staff in reaction to behaviours such as shutting down, hiding under a desk or perceived misbehaviour. Nadine alleged finding ‘bruises on his [Adam’s] chest at one time and he told me his teacher had hit him there’ and that one staff member had filmed him during class ‘using her personal phone whilst another staff member restrained Adam.’ Three parents reported their child had been placed in isolation as punishment for their behaviours (e.g., running away), with Sharon stating that her child’s school had a specific isolation room which could be locked. Tracey described Mitchel’s response to being locked in an empty classroom after he had been too anxious to attend his maths lesson and went missing in the school grounds:
The head of special ed unlocked the door and she said, ‘I haven't spoken to him yet. I wanted to wait until you got here before I spoke to him about his actions.’ I’ve never seen him look so petrified. And he was standing in the corner with his back to the room. He was just locked in there by himself, and he was so distressed. He actually was mute. He was actually mute for probably about 4 hours after they [staff] found him.

For some students, principals responded to behaviour by imposing flexible enrolments and suspensions. Nadine had reluctantly agreed to Adam attending school part-time after being informed that the school ‘did not have the resources to look after Adam.’ Children were also informally suspended. Sharon said that Luke ‘might be at school for half an hour and then he’d come home. Almost every single day I’d be at the school bringing him home.’ Three children had experienced multiple, formal suspensions, with parents reporting their child had missed between 4 and 8 weeks of school in a single year. All parents believed that such approaches increased their child’s anxiety and that principals did not understand the stress this created. As Sally stated, the suspensions ‘do nothing, they just increase anxiety. Then they also affect their self-esteem because they start thinking they’re a bad kid and that’s what we’re really worried about.’

Parents’ experiences with their child’s school

Parents had concerns about their own experiences with their child’s school, which will be explored in three topics: Parents’ feelings of disempowerment, Financial cost to the family, and Parents’ emotional well-being.

Parents’ feelings of disempowerment. Parents often engaged with their child’s school and advocated for inclusion. As Megan stated: ‘I’ve had to do a lot of work basically’ but she felt her ongoing contribution was improving outcomes for her son: ‘They’ve changed because
we’ve given the information.’ However, parents were often left feeling as though their knowledge of their child was being undervalued. This was illustrated by Tracey, who had undertaken postgraduate study in autism: ‘I’m just mum. Never mind what study I’d undertaken or anything. I was just always just treated as mum…. Didn’t even get called by my name.’

Parents became increasingly concerned by inadequate home-school communication from all levels of staff, especially leaders, which led to further feelings of disempowerment. For example, Nadine was astonished by a lack of timely communication about Adam’s mental health, stating: ‘The HOSE [Head of Special Education] emailed once informing me that Adam had said he wanted to kill himself, but the email was a week after the incident had happened.’ Parents also highlighted the marginalising effect a lack of support from the principal can have when they are the final option in resolving issues, with Catherine commenting on principals as being ‘very much closed doors’ and Tracey noting that one principal ‘didn’t even make himself available for an appointment to discuss anything.’

Financial cost to the family. Parents’ concerns with their child’s school experiences led to seeking external professional support. Megan spoke of her financial input as being an ongoing investment: ‘So we’ve had psychologists, OTs, everything going in. Along the way, we’ve put all this money into the school.’ Despite this, parents discovered therapists’ recommendations or reports were not always utilised or transferred to the child’s new teacher.

Children’s school nonattendance (suspensions, flexible enrolments and school refusal) impacted parents’ ability to work and generate income. Catherine was being asked to collect Olivia from school with such regularity that this prevented her from seeking employment. Nadine was impacted by Adam’s flexible enrolment and suspensions, noting her struggle with trying to keep her job whilst having to collect Adam early and place him in childcare.
Parents’ emotional well-being. Parents were personally affected by interactions with schools and described their experiences using words such as ‘upsetting’ (Anne), ‘stressful’ (Liz), and ‘a rollercoaster of emotions’ (Sally). These feelings stemmed from the regularity with which they were being contacted by their child’s school, their child’s suspensions, their personal relationships with staff and dealing with their child’s declining mental health. They also described the difficult experience of advocating for their child, with Megan describing this as ‘a long battle’; however, she added this has led to her becoming ‘a better advocate and parent for him [Sam].’

Theme 2: Choosing to stay or leave

The second theme highlights the complexity of the parent decision-making process. The three subthemes that emerged included: Pull: a difficult decision, Push: reasons to leave, and Finding a new school.

Pull: A difficult decision

Seven parents identified factors that ‘pulled’ them toward remaining at their schools or made moving away from the school a difficult process. This is explored under four topics: The child’s well-being, Considering what was best for the whole family, Limited school options and Choosing to stay despite uncertainty.

The child’s well-being. Parents expressed concerns about the impact that transitioning to a new school would have on their child’s well-being, stating this would be ‘more pressure’ (Megan), ‘harmful’ (Tracey), ‘hard’ (Anne and Sally) and ‘too much for him to handle’ (Liz). Parents also felt pulled toward staying at their schools based upon their child’s preferences, such as not wanting to leave their friends.

Considering what was best for the whole family. Considering the impact of moving on family members further complicated their decision-making process. Both Liz and Sally had
daughters who were thriving at their schools and were resistant to moving, while Tracey had to deliberate about moving either one or all four of her children. Liz worried about needing to establish herself at a new school, stating ‘you’ve got no support for … if you’d like them [other parents] to pick up your kid or just different things when you know other families at the school.’

**Limited school options.** A lack of alternative options created a barrier to moving to a different school. This included factors such as living in a regional town with limited school options or finding a suitable government school within their catchment zone.

**Choosing to stay despite uncertainty.** At the time of the interviews, three parents had frequently considered moving but had not made the decision to leave, identifying factors which pulled them toward staying. Sally and Megan had both considered private schools which offered specialised support, but they were concerned about affordability. Megan also cited her time and financial investment into making positive changes for Sam at his school. She conceded, ‘it’s like better the devil you know. We don’t know what we’ll get elsewhere.’

**Push: Reasons to leave**

Eight parents had changed schools for their child, sometimes multiple times. Factors pushing parents toward moving are explored under three topics: **Choosing to leave after ongoing problems,** **Choosing to leave after a shift in support,** and **Choosing to move or being made to move after a catalyst point.**

**Choosing to leave after ongoing problems.** Most parents described a push toward leaving their schools after ongoing negative experiences over time. This included difficult experiences for their child and problematic relationships parents had with staff. Catherine came to the gradual realisation that a move was needed after her concerns over issues affecting Olivia’s mental health were being constantly dismissed by the principal. Nadine had
felt pushed toward moving after her child had experienced numerous problems, including frequent suspensions. However, negative responses from the HOSE, such as commenting that ‘Adam was a monster and he didn’t belong in school and that I should look at taking him out of school and home-schooling’ led to her decision to leave.

**Choosing to leave after a shift in support.** Three parents identified feeling pushed toward leaving after a reduction or removal of support for their child. Parents spoke of having positive experiences until there had been a change in teacher and/or principal. This was exemplified by Tracey, who moved Mitchel after a new school principal had changed a previously flexible environment and removed support. She realised that support would never be returned after Mitchel’s access to a safe space was removed when the principal advised her that Mitchel ‘needs to learn to integrate with the other children.’

**Choosing to move or being made to move after a catalyst point.** Three parents discussed defining events, or a catalyst point, which pushed them toward moving their child to another school. Ingrid had made the decision to remove William from his school after he had been threatened with suspension for retaliating against a teacher’s use of physical force. She said, ‘If the school principal chooses to take the side of his teacher rather than his student, that doesn't bode well on a school community as far as I'm concerned.’

Sharon and Rebecca revealed the decision to leave had been made by school leaders who had cancelled their children’s enrolments in the private (non-government) schools they attended. Both parents reported that they had not been notified that a cancellation was being considered, and that their schools had not attempted to find a resolution to problems they were experiencing. Sharon’s son, Jake, was only 4 weeks into his first term of Prep when she was told, ‘We don't have a space for Jake anymore’. Although she had been ‘asked to take him home from school due to his behavioural issues off and on’ she felt the school had not provided Jake with any support. Rebecca’s son, Luke, had only been attending his secondary
school for one semester when his enrolment was cancelled due to his severe school refusal. She said that instead of the principal offering support, she handed her a completed enrolment application for distance education and stated, ‘I’ve made this his last day today.’ Rebecca had not been expecting a cancellation and was ‘in shock’ after realising ‘we’ve been shafted.’

Finding a new school

Once parents had started considering moving their child to another school, or had left, decisions had to be made about a new school placement. Two parents were exploring private schools which offered specialised support, with Sally having found a school which had a ‘reputation for dealing with kids with autism.’ Parents also chose schools after meeting with principals who were welcoming and offered their child support. However, three parents struggled with finding a new school. Rebecca had spent 6 months trying to find Luke a school after his exclusion, finding there was no support to help her navigate the process and encountering obstacles such as principals losing paperwork or appearing intimidating.

Theme 3: Living with the choice to leave

The third theme identifies the positive and negative outcomes of moving between mainstream schools. This resulted in two subthemes: Ongoing impact of a breakdown in school placement and Positive outcomes following the transition into the new placement.

Ongoing impact of a breakdown in school placement

Five of the eight parents who had made the decision to move found that their child had ongoing issues with anxiety and depression at the new school. Catherine said that there were ‘points where she [Olivia] was threatening self-harm and suicide.’ Tracey felt that Mitchel’s experiences across multiple schools have ‘had a massive impact on his self-esteem. He's really depressed. He's really anxious. He doesn't hold much hope for the future.’
All parents revealed that the breakdown of their child’s school placements was stressful. Tracey had been so affected by ongoing difficulties that her family appeared to be at crisis point:

I'm almost at the stage where I'm just going to have to quit my job and not work because it's just too much. It's too much. What that means as far as paying bills and things, we haven't worked out, but that's where we're getting to now, that it's just getting to the point where I can't keep doing everything.

Positive outcomes following the transition into the new placement

Six parents spoke of positive transitions their children had made into a new school. They spoke of principals who had an understanding of the impact their child’s negative schooling experiences had on their well-being and consequently implemented a supportive transition plan. Rebecca was told this was to help Luke ‘get established and feeling like there’s a connection there and everything’s not changing.’ Parents attributed positive changes in their child to the support they were receiving, such as Daniel’s learning outcomes improving after being provided with an individualised education plan.

Discussion

This is the first study documenting the process of parents’ decisions around moving their autistic child between mainstream schools. The decision to do so is not easy or straightforward, but rather a multifaceted and complicated process. All parents described experiencing a push toward leaving after developing ongoing concerns with aspects of their child’s school experiences. Parents also felt a pull to stay, which was typically based less upon satisfaction with their school placement but often involved personal issues that complicated the logistics of moving. Notably, parents considered their child’s viewpoints and
involved them in the decision making process, with any choice made being in the child’s best interests. Although there were other factors which affected the child’s school experiences, such as a lack of systemic accountability in safeguarding the child and protecting their rights, for the parents in this study the immediacy of the problems their child was experiencing at school was the critical factor that influenced moving.

One aspect of the decision-making process that emerged from the findings of this study was the push and pull felt by parents, an idea first explored by Lee (1966) in his paper ‘A theory of migration’. Lee theorised that people make decisions around migration after enough positive and negative forces at their places of origin and destination compel them to make decisions around staying or leaving. Additionally, intervening obstacles, which are barriers that stand between origin and destination, and personal factors can interact to influence their choices. Figure 3 represents the push, pull and intervening obstacles experienced by parents in this study.

**Figure 3**

*Diagram Representing Theory of Migration.*

![Diagram Representing Theory of Migration](https://doi.org/10.2307/2060063)

Parents reported an overwhelming number of problems which had pushed them to the point of considering leaving, suggesting that increasing systemic
concerns, predominantly around unsuccessful inclusion, ultimately influenced their decisions. In particular, they expressed concerns around educators’ level of understanding of autism and how it presents or impacts their child, which is a commonly reported issue resulting in leaving the mainstream education system (e.g., Brede et al. 2017; Kidd and Kaczmarek 2010). A lack of knowledge or expertise in autism has been previously identified as a barrier to inclusive educational placements (Roberts and Simpson 2016) as well as a barrier to accessing other supports or interventions (Adams and Young 2020; L. Jones et al. 2014). Improving knowledge and understanding of autism is therefore a critical research area which could have benefits across multiple domains.

When discussing the breakdown of their child’s placement, every single parent mentioned principals. This was especially notable for parents whose child had been pushed into a part-time enrolment, had experienced multiple suspensions, or had been excluded from their school. The role of the principal is considered essential to successful inclusive placements (e.g., Horrocks, White, and Roberts 2008) when they act as visionary or moral leaders as well as instructional or organisational leaders (see discussion in Roberts and Webster 2020). Despite this critical role, there is limited research exploring the views of principals around inclusion or about their strategies to promote inclusive practices in their school (Horrocks, White, and Roberts 2008). It is therefore unsurprising that across the literature on moving schools for autistic students there is little discussion of the role of principals in parents’ decisions to leave their schools, with the focus primarily on teachers’ ability to understand and support autistic students (e.g., Kendall and Taylor 2016; Kidd and Kaczmarek 2010). This study suggests that parents ultimately feel that the principal’s approach to creating an inclusive culture, coupled with their response to issues occurring for their child,
pushed them toward considering leaving. Such a compelling message from the parents in this study highlights the importance of school leadership for enacting educational inclusion and the need for more work in this area.

Parents noted concerns not only about their child’s school experiences, but also about their own experiences with all levels of staff and the wider education system. Despite efforts to advocate for increased awareness of their child’s abilities, support needs, and challenges at school, parents were often left feeling as though their agency was being undermined and their voices were going unheard. Parental advocacy and agency is widely discussed across the autism literature (e.g., Tucker and Schwartz 2013) and has been shown to lead to an increase in services (Kurth, Love, and Pirtle 2020), with collaborative partnerships, or lack thereof, influencing outcomes for the child (Saggers et al. 2019). Consistent with the findings in Lilley (2015), for the parents in this study, advocacy came at a financial and emotional cost and did not lead to a sustainable resolution to problems in schools. Eventually, parents’ sense of disempowerment was another factor pushing them toward seeking a mainstream school that would offer improved outcomes.

The decision to move schools was not a quick or easy process for parents in this study; the pull towards a new school only occurred after enough factors pushed parents to consider leaving. Choosing a school, at any point in the educational journey of an autistic child, is often a well-considered process. Parents seek schools with identifiable positive qualities that offer a flexible transition and specialised support that is balanced with an inclusive school culture that holds appropriate ambitions and goals for their children (Charman et al. 2011; McNerney, Hill, and Pellicano 2015). Multiple studies have reported that parents of autistic children do not feel that they receive sufficient information when initially selecting their child’s school (Parsons
and Lewis 2009; Waddington and Reed 2017), which may be even further exacerbated when selecting a different school to move to. For the parents in this study, the stakes appeared to be high when seeking another school, given that their child’s experiences had affected their mental health and trust in educators.

Parents’ experiences with their child’s school tended to fluctuate over time and led to a tension between push and pull, and an ongoing shift in their consideration of leaving. This aligns with Lee's (1966) theory of migration, where intervening obstacles, arising from issues such as a suspension, or personal factors including concerns around transitioning the child and siblings to a new school, act to complicate decisions. Similar difficulties have been reported previously in the literature on moving schools (e.g., Brede et al. 2017; Kluth et al. 2007), suggesting that such decisions place additional stress upon families, and especially upon parents who need to weigh the benefits and consequences of relocating, alongside experiencing the stress of the school placement breaking down. Given that the decision-making process is lengthy, there are multiple opportunities for additional support or intervention across time to ensure that the decision made is in the best interests of the child both short- and long-term. Additional research which explores the pathway from the perspectives of the schools and the teachers would help to further inform opportunities for intervention. Consideration could be given to studies which aim to improve school attachment for students with additional needs (see Cooper 2008) and to reduce school mobility (see Fiel, Haskins and Lopez Turley 2013).

Limitations

This study is the first in-depth exploration of the experiences of parents who have considered changing or have changed mainstream schools for their autistic child, and the findings contribute to new knowledge in this area. As qualitative studies rely upon
the collection of rich data from a limited group of participants, the sample size was only small \((n=10)\). Therefore, the results of this study may not reflect the diverse range of experiences of parents of autistic children who have changed schools, nor does this study represent students with higher support needs. Parents who volunteered for this research may have been motivated to participate based upon the extent of their experiences. In addition, the voices of autistic students, their fathers and teachers are notably absent. As there has been so little research on mainstream school moves in autism, there is a need for larger scale research to further understand the issue in order to develop a systemic response to reducing school mobility and address gaps in policy and practice.

**Conclusion**

This study raises awareness of some of the protracted and challenging experiences that parents and their autistic child encounter in mainstream schools that lead to either considering moving or being forced to move to another mainstream school. Each decision to stay or leave was not made lightly, with parents considering and balancing multiple factors before making their choice. Such processes may add additional strain or complexity to the home-school relationship and require further exploration from multiple perspectives.

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**Declaration of interest**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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