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"Let them show what they can do": parents' views on strengths-based approaches for autistic high school students

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ABSTRACT

Despite efforts to build inclusive education experiences, many autistic youth still report negative school experiences. Strengths-based approaches that draw upon the unique strengths, interests, and resources of individuals and their environments may be an integral component of promoting inclusive school environments for these youth, but there is a limited understanding of how these approaches are implemented in schools. Following a phenomenological design, 23 parents of autistic youth currently or recently attending high school were interviewed to examine parental perspectives and experiences of strengths-based approaches in high schools. Six themes described parents' perspectives and experiences of strengths-based approaches in high school: (1) Building on their strengths, (2) Let them show what they can do, (3) Let them take risks, (4) It is vital but is it possible? (5) It needs a whole-school approach and (6) It's a constant fight. Parental perspectives suggest that while they believe strengths-based approaches are necessary for their child, they felt that practical and systemic limitations impacted their implementation in schools. Parents wanted their children to have access to individualised, differentiated strategies and authentic learning experiences that were based on their strengths and interests. To develop these learning experiences, educators and schools must actively involve both parents and students, with broader systemic and school-wide changes likely being necessary to support the implementation of strengths-based approaches for autistic students.

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Introduction

Access to education is a human right for all and is important in promoting positive psychosocial, academic and employment outcomes (UN General Assembly, 1948). The inclusive schooling movement, affirmed by the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994), aimed to further cement this right for marginalised and disadvantaged students, making schools

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responsible for providing education opportunities to all students, including those with disabilities. As part of this movement, many autistic students now attend mainstream schools globally. In fact, a recent report shows that 89% of Australian children with a disability aged 5–18 years attended mainstream schools (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare [AIHW], 2024). Inclusive education has been found to confer benefits both to autistic and neurotypical peers alike. Research indicates that inclusive classrooms promote social skills development, peer acceptance and improved teaching practices that benefit all students (Carrington & Saggers, 2021). Inclusive classrooms also demonstrate social benefits for neurotypical students, including decreased bias, hostility and discrimination, alongside greater tolerance, acceptance and understanding (Kart & Kart, 2021).

While inclusive schools were implemented with the goal of providing equitable, non-discriminatory and quality education for all youth, they remain largely embedded in more traditional models of understanding and support in which areas of deficit are identified and "fixed" (Acevedo & Nusbaum, 2020). More deficit-based approaches to autism are rooted in the conventional medical model, which positions disability as arising from inherent "deficits" within an individual. These deficit-based models pervade the school environment where the emphasis is placed on correcting autistic students' behaviours and traits, seeking to make them conform to a neurotypical standard. As such, the foundations of the educational system have been described as "ableist" (Bottema-Beutel et al., 2024). These deficit-based approaches have been criticised for their potential negative consequences for students, including disengagement, reduced motivation to learn, negative self-image and low self-esteem (Burnham Riosa et al., 2017). Indeed, autistic students report a range of negative experiences, including challenges in social integration, learning and communication (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2019), and may drop out of school (Totsika et al., 2020) or be home-schooled by parents due to negative school experiences (O'Hagan et al., 2021). While these negative experiences and outcomes can affect students across their schooling years, high school may represent a particularly challenging period, due to the increased complexity of the physical, social and academic environment, which are typically designed for neurotypical students (Hedges et al., 2014; Pellicano & den Houting, 2022).

Though deficit-based models still permeate much research and practice, there is growing acceptance of neurodiversity, which views autism as a neurological variant rather than a disorder (Pellicano & den Houting, 2022). The neurodiversity paradigm emphasises that all individuals have different ways of interacting with the world, which should be accepted and supported rather than viewing the individual as needing to be "fixed" (Pellicano & den Houting, 2022). For schools to provide truly inclusive education, and for autistic students to be supported to achieve their potential, it is necessary for schools to move towards more neurodiversity-affirming practices, such as strengths-based approaches, which are increasingly supported by researchers and practitioners (Acevedo & Nusbaum, 2020; Donaldson et al., 2017; Leveto, 2018). Strengths-based practices support and work with individuals through identifying, leveraging and developing their strengths and interests to achieve their potential in naturalistic environments (Saleebey, 1996). There is emerging evidence of the advantages of leveraging the strengths and interests of autistic students in and outside the school environment, including improved social outcomes and relationships (Koegel et al., 2013), increased academic motivation (Koegel et al., 2010) and the development of the skills and confidence

necessary for transitioning to adulthood (Lee et al., 2020). Despite these benefits of strengths-based approaches, there is limited understanding of their implementation in the school environment.

A range of stakeholders are involved in the schooling of autistic youth, including educators, the youth and their parents. Parents may be in a position to provide particularly insightful perspectives on strengths-based approaches for autistic youth in the school environment, potentially offering a perspective that complements those of educators and other stakeholders. Parents often play a central role in their child's education journey, acting as their primary advocate within education and other systems (Fogle et al., 2020; Rispoli et al., 2019). At the same time, many parents would like to be involved in their child's education (Sukys et al., 2015), and often have intimate knowledge of their child's unique strengths and needs in various contexts, including in the home and community, which may not be accessible to educators (Sabapathy et al., 2017; Warren et al., 2014). The importance of parental perspectives on topics of education is further highlighted by previous research, which has identified their perspectives as being vital in informing priority indicators for inclusive practices in schools (Carrington & Robinson, 2006). Given the central role of parents in their child's education and in informing inclusive education priorities, it is important to understand their views and experiences of strengths-based approaches. For these reasons, we aimed to understand parents' perspectives and experiences of strength-based approaches for their autistic child in high school, identifying the perceived challenges and success factors of a strength-based approach in high schools. By focusing on parents, we address a gap in the literature by exploring how parents perceive and advocate for strengths-based approaches for autistic adolescents in schools.

Australian Education Context

Our study was undertaken within the context of the Australian mainstream education system. Schools in Australia comprise students with diverse needs, abilities, and backgrounds. Over the past few decades, Australia's education system has been working towards improving equity and inclusion, particularly after becoming an early signatory to the Salamanca Statement (Anderson & Boyle, 2019). Australia does not have a national inclusive education policy. However, the Disability Discrimination Act (1992) and the Disability Standards for Education (2005), are designed to ensure that individuals with disabilities are protected from discrimination. In particular, the Disability Standards for Education established the legal obligations for schools to provide children with disabilities equitable access to education (Lassig et al., 2022). These legal obligations require educators to provide youth with reasonable adjustments, such as modified teaching strategies, to ensure equitable access to all facets of the schooling system. A recent review of inclusive education policy in Australia (Carrington et al., 2024) highlights persistent challenges and gaps in the implementation of inclusive education across Australia, stressing that efforts often fail to adequately address the specific needs of autistic students, particularly in mainstream school settings and recommends stronger national coordination to ensure more consistent outcomes for all students with disabilities across different regions.

Methods

Design

We applied a phenomenological design to explore perspectives of parents on strengths-based education for autistic high-schoolers. Phenomenology was deemed the most suitable methodological approach as it views the participant as the expert of their own lives, and focuses on uncovering the essence of participants' lived experiences and the meanings they ascribe to these experiences (Neubauer et al., 2019). This phenomenological approach framed our research process, shaping how we allowed parents to share their nuanced experiences through in-depth interviews, as well as influencing our analysis and interpretation of their responses (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This methodology aligns with our study's goal of gaining an in-depth understanding of parents' perceptions and personal experiences, rather than imposing external assumptions on their responses.

Ethics considerations

Ethical approval was obtained by Curtin University Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC approval number: HRE2018-0750). Written informed consent was provided by all participants.

Participants

Parents were included if their child had a diagnosis of autism and was currently attending or had recently (within five years of the interview) attended high school. Parents were sampled using snowball and convenience sampling, with recruitment occurring across Western Australia through associates to autism research groups and local autism associations. This study included 23 parents (Table 1), who were all residing in Western Australia and were primarily mothers (mothers = 21; fathers = 2). Their children were majority male ($n = 21$) and still in high school ($n = 18$). Five parents had autistic children who had

Table 1. Participant demographics.

Demographic factors	Number
Parent gender	
Male	2
Female	21
Parent education level	
Secondary school	3
Diploma	7
University	13
Child Gender	
Male	21
Female	2
Child grade	
Middle school (Year 7–10)	16
Senior high school (Year 11–12)	3
Graduated within 5 years	4
Type of Child's School	
Government school	16
Independent school	3
Catholic school	2
Home school	2

recently completed high school. All autistic children were either attending or had previously attended mainstream schools. The majority ($n = 16$) attended public high schools, three attended independent high schools, and two were at catholic high schools. Two students were being home-schooled after withdrawing from mainstream schools. Data collection ceased once data saturation was achieved (Saunders et al., 2018).

Interview guide

We devised a semi-structured interview guide for the purposes of this study to allow participants to share their perspectives and experiences (Gail et al., 2007; Patton, 2015). We first developed an initial interview guide including questions relating to parents' overall experiences and understanding of strengths-based approaches, as well as strategies, support and resources required. We then asked two autistic youths and two parents of autistic youth to review the draft guide and provide guidance on the appropriateness of the wording and the depth of the topic (Fayette & Bond, 2018). The semi-structured format enabled the interviewer to follow the predetermined questions while still having the freedom to probe further, posing follow-up questions (Patton, 2015).

Data collection

Interviews were completed either in person ($n = 12$) or by telephone ($n = 11$) based on the interviewee's choice. The duration of the interviews ranged between 30 minutes to 120 minutes (average 55 minutes). The first author conducted all interviews. The interviewer applied interview techniques such as probing and cross-checking to remain flexible, allowing participants' experience to guide the interview. All interviews were audio-recorded.

Data analysis

All interviews were transcribed verbatim and de-identified. Pseudonyms were created at the point of transcription to protect the confidentiality and identity of the participants. NVivo 12 qualitative data analysis software (QSR International, 2020) was used to assist data analysis which followed Colaizzi's seven-step method of qualitative data analysis (Colaizzi, 1978), including acquiring a sense of each transcript by reading transcripts several times, extracting significant statements, formulation of meanings, organising formulated meanings into themes, exhaustively describing the investigated phenomenon, identifying the fundamental structure of the phenomenon.

To enhance the trustworthiness of the study, member-checking was conducted during the interviews whereby the interviewer confirmed their understanding of the participants' responses and clarified potential points of misinterpretation. An audit trail was used to enhance the dependability of the study, and a reflexive journal was used to ensure credibility. Credibility was further enhanced through reflexivity, where the researcher critically reflected on their positioning, beliefs and views. The authorship team reviewed the findings (Patton, 2015).

Positionality

The first author is an autistic researcher. The researcher's identity as an autistic individual aided in recognising the nuances within the participants' descriptions while maintaining a commitment to ensuring that the data remained true to the participants' experiences.

Results

We identified six themes describing parents' perspectives and experiences of strengths-based approaches for autistic students in high school: (1) build on their strengths; (2) let them show what they can do; (3) let them take risks; (4) it is vital but is it possible?; (5) it needs a whole-school approach; and 6) it's a constant fight.

Build on their strengths

Parents reported that a key component of strengths-based approaches means working on their child's strengths rather than deficits, "working towards what they can do, and not what they cannot do" (P9), and "using his strengths … to support overcoming the difficulties, to build on that" (P20). Parents perceived that it was important for their child's strengths and interests to be identified, utilised, and built on.

Parents perceived that it was important for teachers and schools to consider strengths and interests to develop a holistic view of their child, wanting teachers to be "interested in students … value the students, engage with students one-on-one instead of being just another number" (P5). In identifying strengths, they reported that teachers need to develop a "big enough picture of what their strengths are" (P2) and to consider " … strengths academically, strengths socially, strengths physically, including how they learn" (P16). Parents expressed a desire and willingness to share their child's strengths with teachers and schools, but sometimes had limited opportunities to do so.

Parents reported that using strengths and interests could help build confidence, particularly as they were concerned about their child's mental health and confidence due to negative school experiences: "the number one important thing is it doesn't matter where they go, as long as they feel like they're good at what they do" (P22). They also perceived that their child's strengths and interests could be used as important motivators in schools. For instance, parents reported that "if he (their child) feels 'I can't do this', he just wouldn't do it" (P1). Instead, they shared that their child could "do well in what they like" (P23). Another parent shared "you've got to find out what holds value for that child. What's most meaningful to students – they need a purpose, and these that are meaningful and hold a purpose can build an intrinsic motivation" (P7).

Parents also shared that strengths-based approaches meant building on their child's strengths and interests to provide opportunities for the future, "because for them, end of the day, they also have to support themselves" (P3). Therefore

> if we work on their strengths and where they want to go in the future and link all that together … these kids are going to feel really good about themselves cause they actually work just with something that they can see in the future (P15).

However, parents reported limited connections between the curriculum and subjects available at schools and their child's strengths and interests that could possibly lead to their future career choices. One parent was concerned that the school did not "look at that big picture" and instead "just go with program and slot you (the child) in it" (P2). Another parent shared about her son's desire

> to have a meaning for him to do something. So if there's something that he's interested in, he may very well decide that that's what he's going to do … but at the moment he just doesn't see any, there is no goal for him. There's no outcome that he wants to have, so he won't do it (P7).

Parents also experienced limited career-pathway resources and support presented at school to prepare autistic youth for possible post-school pathways built on their strengths and interests. One parent recalled that the school did not nurture her son's strengths and interests for him to pursue further studies that could lead to a career, and instead, she was left alone to explore what was available for her son after leaving high school, "like it was my problem, I was responsible for all of it … ultimately what they (the school) were saying to me (was) 'you need to do it, not us'" (P6). One dad, whose son was very good at fixing computers, also expressed his frustration with the lack of career advice support at school, saying, "at the moment we are all floundering around the dark because none of us really know how to capitalise on Seth's strengths" (P19).

Let them show what they can do

Parents expressed concerns that their child was not always given opportunities to demonstrate their abilities at school due to having a diagnosis of autism. One parent said:

> I feel like once your child gets a diagnosis, all you hear about is what they can't do. It's a very, very negative process, and it's really disheartening to just hear about all of the things that your child can't do, or that they don't do well. While I know things that she is really good at, but she doesn't get the opportunity to show how good she is at things. (P10)

Many parents expressed that instead of "strengths-based", high school education was more "curriculum-based". They were worried that the assessments in high school did not allow their child to show what they can do because of the rigid curriculum standards and assessments not catering for individual needs. One parent shared "(my son) is not being able to do tests, even though he knows all the answers" (P2), and another mum was also frustrated that "you can see that she (the daughter) understands. It's just that the structure of the assessments doesn't allow her to show what she knows" (P10).

Parents also acknowledged that strengths-based approaches did not ignore the challenges autistic youth had; instead, it was important to find ways to address the challenges to allow them to show what they can do. "Strengths-based approach means keeping a growth mindset, rather than just having a fixed sight" (P18), it is a "can-do kind of way of thinking" (P5), "using his strengths, what he can do to support overcoming the difficulties, to build on that" (P20). Some parents appreciated when teachers try to incorporate their child's preferences and strengths into assessments to provide choices in how students would be assessed, like one mum said, "they (schools) need to make different ways where the kids can show that they've learned it" (P15).

"Let them take risks"

Parents wanted more authentic learning experiences, including social experiences, for their child, experiences that were "not just with the autistic kids in the autistic group to do autistic activities together … because that's not the real world" (P15). Some parents chose the high school for their child because it had a specialised learning programme or centre for students with additional needs within the mainstream environment. Although parents found advantages to these programmes, they also wanted their child to have experiences within the broader school community, as one parent commented, "I would love to have a proper social skills program run at each school that anybody can join, not just spectrum kids" (P13).

Parents also perceived that schools and teachers should provide more opportunities and guidance for the students to explore what they are interested in and work out the answers themselves, rather than just "teach off the curriculum" (P4) or give them the answer, even though it means it takes a lot longer "in order to achieve what they want to achieve" (P1). Some parents expressed that schools and teachers should "balance duty of care and dignity of risk" and "sometimes you need to let the child take a risk in order for them to learn something. … how's the child ever going to learn anything if you don't let them make mistakes?" (P17) Another mum said

> I think from my perspective, I don't see them fostering independence. I totally see them being controlled and constrained … sometimes, you just need to actually kind of pushing them out a little bit, I think more than perhaps they are allowed to have. (P14)

It is vital but is it possible?

All parents believed that strength-based approaches were important for their children, but most did not think it was possible for their children to have access to these practices because "the system is not set up for all these kids" (P13). Parents acknowledged the challenges teachers and schools had. In the parents' experience, some teachers showed interests in knowing the child individually but "other teachers just teach" as teachers did not have the time, were "very much bound by all the rules" (P17) and "stuck by rules of the curriculum". Parents also perceived that large class sizes could prevent teachers from paying individual attention to autistic students, as one parent said, "I think that the staff to student ratios are too big" (P13). Similarly, another parent added, "especially for high school, the teachers probably don't have much opportunities to spend time with the kids because the different structures (compared to primary school), and the classes are full" (P20).

"Managing the number" was mentioned by most of the parents as a problem at the system level and a problem for teachers as an "overriding factor".

> One of the other overriding factor that I said to one of the teachers once is, I said I understand where you're coming from, you've got a class full of people, full of students, and you try to treat them all the same. That's what you're taught, that's what you're told you have to do. That's not strength based, but that's what they have to do in order to manage that number (P6).

Parents also experienced the inflexibility in the education system and wanted more changes to come. "Should I say, I think that's where the whole system's going wrong

… History repeats itself until you're learning from it, you could just change something or otherwise it's just going to keep going. Same way. We're just going to be very stagnant" (P15). "The system in fact reflects how the society works" (P19), and if the system doesn't change, then "bringing in strengths-based approach is going to be a battle" (P6).

Parents thought that more resources or better use of resources is needed for teachers. Some parents perceived that it was not fair for the teachers and schools if there were no structural changes, without a more inclusive system, "I don't think there is much schools can do … I do actually plan to write to the minister of education to explain to him that I think that they are penalising autistic students … So I think … that's a department thing, that's not a school thing". (P21). Another mother said:

> Everything about the education department, like services, for example, how I mentioned there was no continuity … instead of setting him (the child) up to succeed, they almost pretty much, they literally set him up to fail … So teachers can do everything right and they're still having to fight against the system if the system's not working for these children. (P15)

Parents also believe that more targeted professional development opportunities are needed to provide educators with the skills and knowledge needed to implement effective practices and promote equity and inclusion in the classroom.

> Have they (teachers) got that support? I strongly doubt it. So, they are just probably doing their best that they can do with what they've got. Um, they probably don't just need resources, you know, they probably actually need someone there mentoring them (P4).

It needs a whole-school approach

Many parents highlighted that a supportive teacher or learning support coordinator who was understanding and knowledgeable and who facilitated communication between the parent and school was helpful for the school to implement strengths-based approaches. For instance, one parent shared that their support teacher was very effective in coordinating with parents in developing Individual Education Plans (IEPs) for the student, and communicating with teachers about their child's strengths, challenges and needs. In many cases, however, parents believed that such a support person was stand-alone, perceiving that the success of strengths-based approaches hinged on one individual. For instance, one mother shared her experience with Mrs N: "it may be that she's the valuable resource, and it might be the way she disseminates all these supportive plans and how she gets the other teachers to engage", that "I don't know if they have anything specific, and I don't know if it all comes down to that one person, Mrs N, I dread her leaving". (P11). Another parent also expressed similar concern:

> At the moment, it all depends on the individual teachers, if a teacher is "self-empowered" to do that, then they would go beyond the "model" that they were taught to work with and do something extra for students with additional needs, but that percentage is very low and might only be less than 20% … the rest either were not self-empowered, or they were defaulting to the model, which is … we want to make sure everyone passes their C (grade) (P6).

Rather than relying on individual teachers implementing strengths-based strategies or requiring parents to initiate strengths-based strategies, parents expressed a desire for

schools to "automatically" do it. They suggested that schools should have an overarching plan, "a recipe for success" (P14) that would provide requirements and expectations for all teachers, "so, therefore, they will be proactive" (P14) and "have consistency of staff working with them (students)" (P23). Parents believed that having a whole school plan or framework is so important because "it would just benefit so many kids out there" (P14).

Parental experiences also suggested that school leadership was vital to implementing a whole-school approach. As one parent noted, "the principal … is the most important person in that environment because they're the one that sets the tone" (P11). Another parent emphasised the crucial role of the deputy principal, stating they "supported me significantly … and build out my confidence of working with school on behalf of my son" (P18). Additionally, parents observed the positive changes the school experienced under new leadership, such as a deputy with "years of experiences" and "a wealth of knowledge and quite a strong, strong push to accommodate for students and to improve" (P20).

It's a constant fight

Parents reported that it was challenging and stressful to advocate for their child, describing that "your heart is in your mouth, hoping they would get home okay. It's a constant fight" (P13). They were proactive in sharing their child's strengths and interests with teachers but had mixed experiences when building relationships with teachers and schools. "Ours (school) is trying. When I tell them what to do, they instantly agree … but I'm instigating". (P20) They also tried to "push the boundary" (P18) asking for resources and support.

As opposed to primary schools where parents were more heavily involved in designing or implementing support, in high schools, parents considered their involvement as a "consultative role" to provide information when the teachers and school needed and raised concerns. "I think if we parents are able to communicate well and being on top of the situation, I think that is very important. It's not just one party. You need to have that mutual goal as well" (P18).

Parents took the initiative to educate and motivate themselves when playing a central role in supporting the implementation of strengths-based approaches for their children. A lot of the parents expressed that they felt grateful to have a team, including the therapists, psychologists and social workers, behind them over the years otherwise they "would be struggling". Some of them had to try their best to find a school that could better cater for their child's needs, as one parent acknowledged "we're lucky enough to just be able to afford to send both our kids to private school and that's just like we are giving up on a hell of a lot of stuff to send them there … and I think there's a lack of understanding in the community about choices for parents (of autistic children)" (P13). They wanted "to be heard" (P4) by the schools and teachers, that "just because a student has autism, it doesn't mean that they're disabled, it just means that they have different needs and challenges, but it also means that they can often have different skills and different gifts" (P10). Just like another parent said, "it frustrates me so much that these children have so much potential and are just so poorly represented in the educational framework at the moment … if you need any more information, I'll repeat myself. I've repeated myself 70 times". (P14)

Overall, parents played a vital role in advocating for and supporting strengths-based approaches for their children. They emphasised proactive involvement, pushing for resources and expressed gratitude for collaborative efforts while calling for a change in societal perspectives on autism.

Discussion

We examined parents' perspectives and experiences of strengths-based approaches for their autistic children in high school. Our findings revealed that parents expressed a desire and need for schools to adopt strengths-based approaches finding them vital and beneficial for their children. However, parents perceived that strengths-based approaches were rarely implemented in schools, owing to several barriers and challenges.

The findings highlighted that parents of autistic adolescents likely share many of the same desires and hopes for their children as other parents. However, there are unique factors that may be at play within the context of autism. For example, autistic adolescents will experience different challenges in the school environment, and they must operate within what can often be a prevailing deficit-focused model. For parents, the essence of strengths-based approaches for autistic adolescents is working towards what their child can do, utilising strengths to overcome challenges, allowing flexibility, and building on their child's strengths and interests instead of a rigid approach. Importantly for parents, strengths-based approaches should not ignore their child's challenges but should instead focus on using strengths to overcome them. These findings align with the broader literature on the neurodiversity movement. Neurodiversity does not deny individual challenges but rather frames challenges as arising from an interaction between a person and their environment. Neurodiversity-affirmative approaches emphasise an individual's inherent value wherein individuals are supported in overcoming their challenges while respecting and honouring autistic ways of being (den Houting, 2019; Leveto, 2018).

Based on parents' experiences, identifying students' strengths is crucial to strengths-based approaches. Parents, however, reported that there were limited opportunities to identify their child's strengths in the school system, and often sharing their child's strengths with teachers and educators was not well received, often due to broader systematic barriers. Future work is required to examine the particular barriers and experiences of teachers and the school system to understand and address these issues. However, the experiences of parents in this study suggest that efforts may be required on a systematic level to better integrate strengths-based assessment. As other research (Climie & Henley, 2016) suggests, a variety of formal and informal assessments that emphasise students' abilities, rather than focusing solely on their deficits, could be utilised throughout the teaching and learning process within the school context. This would enable teachers to capture information about students' strengths and interests and develop a more holistic and ongoing view of each student. "Let them show what they can do" therefore was crucial as considered by the parents.

Parents also wanted schools and teachers to not only let their autistic children show what they can do, but also to push their children further to "let them take risks", expressing a desire for schools and teachers to set higher expectations on autistic students.

Relevant literature has discovered that parental expectations can positively influence the educational outcomes of autistic youth (Qian et al., 2024). Similarly, in the general student population, teachers' attitudes and stereotypes are predictive of students' outcomes (Denessen et al., 2022). Encouraging higher (but reasonable) expectations on students, while at the same time allowing for risks to enhance learning opportunities may thus lead to better school outcomes for autistic youth. It may also be important for schools and teachers to communicate and collaborate with parents to identify priorities and set goals for autistic adolescents that leverage their strengths and interests leading to more positive long-term learning outcomes. Parents also perceived the importance of providing more opportunities for autistic adolescents to experience risks together with their neurotypical peers and in providing more authentic learning experiences for them to grow academically and socially. Indeed, positive risk-taking has been found to positively influence well-being and growth, especially for adolescents (Duell & Steinberg, 2020). Studies on promoting participation in physical activity and postsecondary education among students with disabilities have also highlighted the value of "dignity of risk" to realise full inclusion (Ball et al., 2021; Bumble et al., 2022). Findings thus suggest that students should be provided with opportunities for positive risk, and be encouraged to actively participate in learning processes where they can continuously explore and develop their interests and strengths.

Parents' experiences highlight that although it is clear, at least from parental perspectives, that strengths-based approaches are needed and necessary for their children, there are significant barriers to implementing these, to the point that parents question whether it is even possible. Common issues reported by the parents include poor school-parent communication, exclusion of parents from decision-making processes, rigid curriculum and assessment, and a lack of awareness and use of strategies that address the specific needs of students with autism. These identified barriers align with those of some previous studies (Emam & Farrell, 2009; Falkmer et al., 2015). Other research has similarly raised concerns that traditional mainstream schooling reflects the broader societal structures, which are predominantly governed by and tailored to neurotypical people (Pellicano & den Houting, 2022). Aside from calling for changes in the wider educational systems, parents also acknowledged the necessity of promoting strengths-based approaches on a whole school level. Studies on inclusive education have also found that while individual stakeholders' efforts are important, implementing a school-wide model is more sustainable and efficient in improving learning outcomes for autistic students (Roberts & Webster, 2020).

Given these challenges, it is not surprising that parents express frustration with the quantity and quality of support their autistic children receive in school settings and are increasingly resorting to home-schooling and other alternative schooling options (Hurlbutt, 2011). Parents appeared to struggle to advocate for their children within the historic but still prevalent "deficits-focused" paradigm underpinning the treatment of children with disabilities in schools. Parents in this study played a central role in advocating for their autistic children, reporting a constant fight to actively share their child's strengths, and seek resources and opportunities for their children. This is consistent with the findings from previous studies that parental advocacy includes voicing concerns, seeking help and diagnosis, acquiring services and promoting awareness

(Boshoff et al., 2016; Boshoff et al., 2019). Parents may lack knowledge and support but motivate themselves to develop advocacy skills through various strategies to fight for their child's educational rights, raising awareness within the school society about the needs and worth of autistic students (Cleary et al., 2023; Smith-Young et al., 2022). Strengths-based approaches must, therefore, work hand in hand with families, likely benefiting not only the child, but also families more broadly by reducing demand on parents.

Limitations

Our study has some limitations that must be considered. First, although all parents were eligible to participate in this study, most were mothers. Although this probably reflects overall gender norms regarding the distribution of labour and childcare, fathers may have a unique experience that is not captured by our current study. Second, the children of the parents interviewed were primarily male, which may have restricted the comprehensive understanding of strengths-based approaches that benefit all autistic students. Third, all the participants were based in Western Australia, so the findings maybe not transfer to other systems. Finally, in this study, we explored the perspective of parents of autistic adolescents. Given that parents play a vital role in the school system, exploring their views can provide important insights into strengths-based approaches for autistic adolescents. However, it is also necessary to capture the perspectives of educators and the adolescents themselves, which will be a focus of future work.

Conclusions

Findings from our study support the need to develop a relational, emergent and collaborative understanding of strength-based approaches. Parents wanted their children to have access to individualised, differentiated strategies and authentic learning experiences that are based on their strengths and interests, but these practices are currently not implemented due to various barriers within the different levels of the educational system. Understanding parents' experiences is essential for providing optimal educational experiences for autistic students and their families. Educators and schools would benefit from more actively involving parents and students in the implementation of such approaches. Findings from this research will assist in the development of strength-based practices tailored to the needs of autistic students.

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Ethics

Ethical approval was obtained by Curtin University Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC approval number: HRE2018-0750). Written informed consent was provided by all participants.

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