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REVIEW PAPER

School Anxiety Experienced by Autistic Children: A Systematic Review of Contributing Factors

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Abstract

Anxiety about school is becoming increasingly recognised among Autistic learners, yet the term is often applied in essentialist ways that obscure its underlying contributors. Our systematic review aimed to identify and evaluate research examining demographic and psychosocial factors contributing to school anxiety among Autistic learners. We included studies which reported a relationship – without attributing it to a non-contributing reason – between school anxiety and a potential contributing factor among Autistic learners. We searched PsycINFO, Medline, ERIC, and Scopus through March 2025. Eight papers (N=767 participants) met the inclusion criteria, including three qualitative and five quantitative studies. We conducted a narrative synthesis and assessed quality using STROBE and CASP. Three studies investigated individual-level factors (e.g., age, gender) with mixed significance. Five identified microsystemic, or school-based, contributors, including social expectations (n=4), academic and cognitive expectations (n=2), and the physical and structural design of school environments (n=4). Using a critical realist lens, we propose a layered ecological framework in which neuro-normative epistemic injustice shapes the microsystem through school-based contributors, or affordances, that manifest as individual differences. Most eligible studies were limited in epistemic depth, overlooking interrelations and deeper macrosystemic mechanisms. Despite generally moderate to high quality, key limitations included reliance on service-based recruitment, underrepresentation of marginalised identities, and dominance of non-Autistic informants – reinforcing epistemic injustice by sidelining Autistic perspectives. Our findings highlight the need for inclusive, participatory methods capable of capturing the complex, macrosystemic realities of Autistic learners' experiences of school anxiety.

Keywords School anxiety · Autism · Epistemic injustice · Attendance · Neuro-Normativity · School policy

Introduction

Currently, 1 in 18 Autistic children and young people (CYP) in England are absent for 50% or more of school—a 189% increase since 2017 (Gov.UK., 2025a). In comparison, among CYP without an identified special educational need (SEN), the rate is substantially lower, at approximately 1 in 77. Similar patterns of increasing non-attendance are observed internationally, including in Australia and the United States (US), where rates of chronic absenteeism are approximately 10% higher among disabled than non-disabled students (U.S. Department of Education., 2025; ACARA, 2024). A key contributor to non-attendance is the emotional toll of school, particularly anxiety and distress (Adams, 2022; Connolly et al., 2023). These responses are deeply intertwined with isolation (Ambrose et al., 2024), academic challenges (Ambrose et al., 2021), low self-esteem (Billington et al., 2024), and suicidality (Diogu et al., 2025).

Neuro-Normative Epistemic Injustice in Education

Despite the scale of these harms, research examining the emotional consequences of school attendance for Autistic

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CYP remains underdeveloped (Adams et al., 2018; Fielding et al., 2025). Autistic distress has long been framed through deficit-based, behaviourist language largely contested by Autistic communities. For instance, terms such as *challenging* or *disruptive behaviour* or *school refusal* risk misinterpreting distress as deliberate defiance (Adams et al., 2022; Bitsika & Sharpley, 2016; Bottema-Beutel et al., 2021). These framings underpin a range of widely used behaviourist interventions within education focused on enforcing compliance and suppressing perceived defiance. Notably, this is reflected in the increased enforcement of full-time attendance expectations in policy (Lissack and Boyle, 2022). In England, there has been a 396% rise in fines issued to parents for their CYP's non-attendance since 2009 (Gov.UK., 2025b). Such approaches prioritise behavioural compliance, while failing to address the environmental factors that render attendance untenable (Fisher et al., 2025a). This reflects the same behavioural logic that has historically underpinned the mainstream, deficit-based application of Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA), which has a well-documented history of promoting 'normalisation' and punishing Autistic traits (Anderson, 2023; Suckle et al., 2025). These practices are described by many Autistic adults as deeply traumatic and damaging to their sense of self (Cumming et al., 2020; Kirkham, 2017; Kupferstein, 2018; McGill & Robinson, 2021). Most concerningly, these deficit-framed interpretations place an essentialist burden on Autistic CYP—positioning poor educational outcomes, distress, and anxiety as fixed traits of 'autism' to be corrected—while deflecting attention from the structural conditions that generate distress in the first place (Jorgensen et al., 2023; Fisher et al., 2025b).

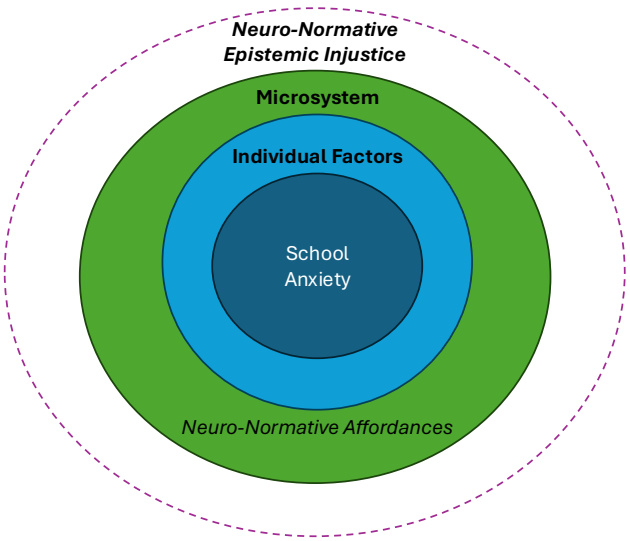


Fig. 1 Interpreting school anxiety through macrosystemic neuro-normative epistemic injustice: a layered ecological model of contributing factors

Such misinterpretations are rooted in dominant knowledge systems that only recognise Neurotypical ways of thinking, communicating, and coping—a form of epistemic injustice (Jorgensen et al., 2023; Scully, 2018; Legault et al., 2021). Grounded in neuro-normativity, these systems can only understand Autistic traits as deficits, systematically mispresenting and dismissing Autistic knowledge and experience (Catala et al., 2021; Legault et al., 2019). As we argue elsewhere (Fisher et al., 2025a), epistemic injustice manifests within education through neuro-normative affordances: possibilities for action and interaction within environments structured for Neurotypical CYP to more intuitively navigate (Legault et al., 2019; Omodan, 2023). These affordances operate across various levels of the system, from macrosystems, or broader norms, cultures, and policies, down to micro-level immediate school environments (see Fig. 1; Bronfenbrenner, 1994; Legault et al., 2024).

Within this landscape, Autistic CYP must expend disproportionate effort to access and respond to educational affordances, creating heightened anxiety (Krueger & Maiese, 2018; Fisher et al., 2025b). For example, teacher understanding constitutes a relational affordance—one that can enable or constrain communication, learning, and wellbeing (Kotzee, 2017). However, this is often structured by neuro-normative knowledge systems shaped by epistemic injustice, where teachers lack the frameworks to recognise or meet Autistic needs (Billington et al., 2024; Gomez-Mari et al., 2021). When behaviourist framings dominate, Autistic distress is disproportionately less likely to be legitimised or supported, and more likely to be punished and dismissed as behavioural defiance (Day, 2025; Kourti, 2021; Sproston et al., 2017). This institutionalised knowledge—itself a neuro-normative affordance—produces widespread exclusionary practices (Blackwell, 2024). For example, attendance becomes enforced under the assumption that Autistic CYP *won't* attend, rather than *can't* (Fricker, 2023; Mullally & Connolly, 2025). Consequently, Autistic pupils are three times more likely to be unlawfully removed from schools in England—via exclusions that do not follow statutory procedures—a rate rising sharply, with the rate of increase nearly 15 times higher than for pupils without a SEN (Guldberg et al., 2022; Tomaskova et al., 2024). Meanwhile, families are left to manage the emotional and financial fallout (Cleary et al., 2024; Goodall, 2019; Gray et al., 2023).

Reframing School Anxiety: Understanding Context through Investigating Contributors

The terminology and knowledge we construct, therefore, carries tangible implications across education (Omodan, 2023). One such term, *school anxiety,* may more precisely

foreground the future-oriented emotional states associated with anticipated negative school experiences—which disproportionately affects Autistic CYP (Adams et al., 2019a; Connolly et al., 2023; García-Fernández et al., 2008). It is commonly clustered into generalised, social, and academic anxiety (Adams et al., 2018; García-Fernández et al., 2014; Lyneham et al., 2008). The term is widely used; Adams et al.'s (2019a) systematic review identified 32 studies examining school anxiety among Autistic CYP. More broadly, one in three Autistic CYP experience clinically significant anxiety (Thiele-Swift & Dorstyn, 2024).

However, much of this research can be criticised for failing to acknowledge context. Instead, anxiety is frequently framed as a stable, essentialist characteristic—something the child brings into school, where differences are attributed to individual, within-child factors—equated to teacher-reported anxiety (Adams et al., 2019a) or assumed treatable solely through therapy (Bueter, 2019; Pilgrim, 2013; Reaven et al., 2022). Given that Autistic CYP are disproportionately likely to experience school anxiety (Adams et al., 2019a), this framing also risks extending essentialism further by implying that the vulnerability lies in Autism itself, rather than in the conditions that generate school anxiety. Notably, some studies still explicitly position Autistic traits as causal to school anxiety or associated contributors, like victimisation (Junttila et al., 2024; Whelan et al., 2021). As with terms like *challenging behaviour,* these framings legitimise essentialist interventions focused on reducing Autistic traits and promoting neuro-normative 'skills'—while leaving the anxiety-provoking conditions of schooling unexamined (Chapman & Carel, 2022; Fisher, 2023).

Meaningfully disentangling *school anxiety* from generalised anxiety — and from assumptions that it is inherent to Autism or individual CYP — requires investigating its contributors: the factors that trigger and exacerbate it (Fisher et al., 2025a; Botha, 2021a). This recentres attention from implicit or explicit essentialism towards specific mechanisms that shape experiences of school anxiety. In doing so, it builds an evidence base for more effective interventions that move beyond modifying Autistic traits or removing non-conformity to neuro-normativity (Mansfield & Soni, 2024; Perrelet et al., 2025; Poed & Fox, 2023; Rajotte et al., 2024). This is also a matter of epistemic injustice, demanding the decentralisation of neuro-normativity within research (Chapman, 2021; Russell & Wilkinson, 2023). Studies which have meaningfully included Autistic voices highlight the need to identify specific neuro-normative contributing factors that predict Autistic distress—or hostile and invalidating micro-level affordances, including sensory environments, curricula, and teacher understanding (Billington et al., 2024; Fielding et al., 2025; Costley et al., 2021; Price & Romualdez, 2025).

Without contextual analysis, research continues to narrow understanding of the factors that can change anxiety—risking reductionist interventions with limited success (Adams et al., 2018; Clark & Adams, 2020; Rodgers & Ofield, 2018). Notably, there remains a dearth of research into macrosystemic contributors that shape the microsystem and school anxiety (Fisher et al., 2025a). From a critical realist perspective, which underpins our review, such interpretations lack epistemic depth by focussing solely on observable phenomena while neglecting underlying causes (Pilgrim, 2014; Botha, 2021a; Bhaskar, 1998). Consequently, interventions risk proving unfeasible or counterproductive by failing to address structural barriers—such as conflicting policies or institutional norms (Williams-Brown et al., 2024). Reflecting this, only 9% of parents of Autistic CYP in England report any benefit from their child's mental health support (Ashworth et al., 2025).

More recently, some researchers have proposed replacing the term *school anxiety* with *school distress* in the hope of fostering greater understanding of the qualia of CYP's school lives, earlier recognition of distress and better recognition of systemic drivers of this distress (Connolly et al., 2023; Fielding et al., 2025; Mullally & Connolly, 2025). While promising, the construct of *school anxiety* remains dominant within autism research (Adams et al., 2019a), thereby warranting critical scrutiny of its conceptual application. To date, several systematic reviews have addressed related school-related topics among Autistic CYP —including the academic consequences of anxiety (Ambrose et al., 2021), school-based interventions (Perihan et al., 2023), wellbeing (Carroll et al., 2025), transitions (Stack et al., 2021), and general experiences (Horgan et al., 2023) —but none have specifically interrogated contributors to school anxiety. This omission is concerning given that anxiety is one of the most reported outcomes of schooling for Autistic CYP, yet far less so among Neurotypical CYP with comparable attendance difficulties (Adams et al., 2019a; Connolly et al., 2023; Horgan et al., 2023).

Our Present Review

Given the conceptual and applied dominance of school anxiety, a systematic review is needed not to reproduce existing deficit framings, but to critically interrogate and map the assumptions embedded within them. By identifying which contributors to school anxiety are represented across the literature, our review aims to expose how research practices and measurement tools sustain—or challenge—essentialism, neuro-normativity, and epistemic injustice. We explicitly address this by evaluating studies according to the involvement of Autistic people in the research process and the use of language developed and widely valued by

Autistic communities. Synthesising this evidence provides a foundation for reframing school anxiety as a product of interacting individual-, micro- and macro-level factors — an evaluation essential for redirecting future research and intervention design towards structural, rather than individual, change. This has significant implications for support: interventions will continue to target the downstream consequences of distress — in symptoms and behaviours — unless they are grounded in a non-neuro-normative understanding of *how*, *why*, and *where* school anxiety arises. We therefore asked:

(1) How is school anxiety measured in Autistic CYP and what assessment tools or informants are used?
(2) Which factors or characteristics are proposed to contribute to school anxiety in Autistic CYP? What is the quality of this evidence?
(3) How has neuro-normative epistemic injustice shaped this evidence base?

Method

Our protocol was registered with PROSPERO, an international register of systematic reviews (registration number: CRD42024552410). We followed the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines at all stages of this systematic review (Page et al., 2021).

Selection Criteria

We included studies if they met the following criteria: (a) the study focussed on Autistic CYP, identified as such by the informant—either as direct participants or as target participants in informant-report data (e.g., parent- or teacher-report); (b) participants were school-age (4–19 years) or enrolled in school; (c) school anxiety was measured using a school anxiety measure, subscale, or qualitative method designed to capture anxiety about school, or via school-based factors identified as contributing to or exacerbating anxiety; (d) contributors were assessed through statistical or thematic relationships between school anxiety and explanatory individual, interpersonal, or contextual factors; (e) for factors to be considered contributors, the original authors either (i) explicitly interpreted them as contributing to increased school anxiety, or (ii) presented them neutrally and descriptively, without at any point explicitly interpreting any as reflecting alternative phenomena (e.g., a psychometric artefact, measurement error, or response bias); (f) constructs entangled with school anxiety — as definitional components or through diagnostic or conceptual overlap (e.g., other anxiety subtypes, attendance, and distress)— were not eligible contributors to avoid circularity and limited utility in identifying distinct, causal mechanisms; (g) if the study included ineligible additional factors or participants, results relating to Autistic participants, school anxiety, and its contributors were reported separately; and (h) studies were required to be empirical, peer-reviewed, and published.

Only studies published from 1994 onwards were included, corresponding to the publication of the DSM-IV, which introduced the 'Pervasive Developmental Disorders (PDDs)' framework and substantially revised the diagnostic criteria for autism (American Psychiatric Association, 1994). These revisions broadened the conceptualisations of autism and established greater consistency across international clinical, research, and educational contexts (Rosen et al., 2021). This timeframe aligns with other systematic reviews investigating related topics (e.g. Adams et al., 2019a; Ambrose et al., 2021). Reviews, opinion pieces, dissertations, brief reports, editorials, conference papers, book chapters, single case studies, case series designs, and studies not published in English were excluded. Criteria (e) and (f) were essential to minimise bias in the interpretation of non-causal relationships.

Search Strategy

We initially searched the PROSPERO database to ensure no registered systematic reviews addressed the same questions. Following consultation with a medical sciences librarian, we searched PsycINFO, Medline, ERIC, and Scopus in November 2023. To ensure our review remained up to date, we conducted a follow-up search on March 28th 2025. Our strategy combined keywords and controlled vocabulary terms (see Table 1), adapted for each database (see supplementary material). We also screened reference lists of included studies, relevant systematic reviews, and the publications of authors of included studies (Adams et al., 2019a; Ambrose et al., 2021).

Table 1 Key words used in the search strategy

Autism	Anxiety	School
Autis*, ASD, ASC, Asperger*, pervasive developmental disorder, PDD	Anxi*, mental health, wellbeing, internali*, distress, stress, worri*, barrier	Teacher, school*, educat*, academic, student, pupil, 'school anxiety', 'school refusal', 'school avoidance', 'school distress'

*Was used as a truncation or wildcard symbol in the search strategy. This allows retrieval of any word that begins with the specified root. Terms within each search string were connected by Boolean operator "OR". Search strings were connected by the Boolean operator "AND"

Review Strategy

Our initial database search ($n=9001$) and follow-up search ($n=1541$) returned 10,542 records (see Fig. 2), which were imported into EndNote. We identified ten additional records through manual searches using Google Scholar. Following removal of duplicates, all titles and abstracts were screened against the inclusion and exclusion criteria by the lead author (EF). 218 articles were retrieved for full-text screening, of which a random 20% ($n=44$) were independently screened by a second rater (PR). Inter-rater agreement was 100%. All studies meeting inclusion criteria were double rated.

Data Extraction and Synthesis

Data were extracted by EF and cross-checked by PR using a structured data-charting form developed for this review in line with PRISMA guidelines (Page et al., 2021). The form was created in Microsoft Excel to systematically capture key information from each study, including authorship, year of publication, and country; study design and setting; informant type and sample size; participant demographics; school type; measures and analyses used; and contributors to school anxiety investigated (including significance levels where reported). Both quantitative and qualitative data were extracted, enabling integration of findings across methodological approaches. No assumptions were made about missing or ambiguous data.

Due to high heterogeneity among eligible studies, we synthesised findings narratively (Popay et al., 2006). Extracted data were collated and compared to identify patterns and divergences across studies, which informed the subsequent synthesis. Where percentages were synthesised across studies for participant and informant variables, calculations were weighted by sample size. Our interpretation was guided by a critical realist epistemology, which recognises that both autism and school anxiety are ontologically real, but that our understanding is shaped by fallible, socially situated knowledge (Bhaskar, 1998; Kourti, 2021). This lens enabled us to conceptualise findings in relation to underlying mechanisms of neuro-normative epistemic injustice contributing to school anxiety (Botha, 2021a; Fisher et al., 2025b). We maintained reflexivity through regular team discussions and journalling to ensure interpretations were grounded in the data and traceable to included studies (Rosqvist et al., 2023).

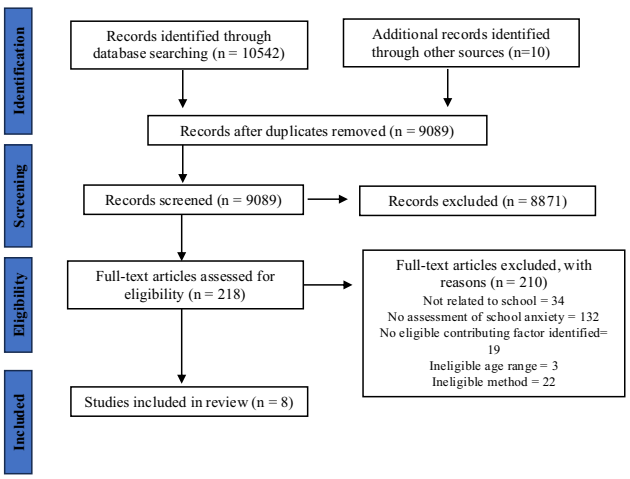


Fig. 2 PRISMA flow diagram of review process

Critical Evaluation

To comprehensively assess the included studies, we utilised the Strengthening the Reporting of Observational Studies in Epidemiology (STROBE) guidelines (Von Elm et al., 2007) for quantitative studies and the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) checklist for qualitative studies. We assessed mixed-methods studies using both frameworks. STROBE was chosen for its structured yet flexible evaluations of research completeness and transparency (Adams et al., 2019a; Cuschieri, 2019), whilst CASP supported ethical and epistemological evaluation relevant to autism research (Kourti, 2021; Long et al., 2020). Unlike prior systematic reviews that applied inclusion cut-offs (Adams et al., 2019a), our approach was inclusive to capture the full scope of existing eligible research.

To ensure uniform application across studies, EF and JR first standardised the scoring framework. EF and PR then met to align their understanding of criteria before independently appraising all studies. Initial inter-rater agreement was 84.5%, rising to 100% after resolving discrepancies.

To assess the extent to which included research reproduced or challenged neuro-normative epistemic injustice, we also conducted a supplementary evaluation of aspects of research quality valued by Autistic communities (Bottema-Beutel et al., 2021; Cascio et al., 2020; Janiszewski et al., 2025). Our evaluation focused on the (1) involvement of Autistic people in the research process, and (2) the use of language commonly preferred within Autistic communities. Challenging epistemic injustice requires research that includes Autistic people in study development, decentralises deficit-based conceptualisations of autism, and engages with knowledge and language developed and widely valued by Autistic communities (Botha et al., 2024; Grant et al., 2025; Legault et al., 2021; Russell & Wilkinson, 2023). Specifically, we, therefore, assessed whether Autistic individuals were involved in study development; whether autism was framed as a pattern of deficits; whether person-first language was used (Botha et al., 2021); and whether any outdated terminology (e.g., *Asperger's syndrome*) appeared at any point. We summarised findings descriptively, which did not influence inclusion or formal appraisal scores.

Results

We found a total of eight studies which met the inclusion criteria, summarised in Table 2.

Study Characteristics

The eight included studies were conducted across five countries: Australia (n=2), the UK (n=3), Greece (n=1), Spain (n=1), and the US (n=1). Publication dates ranged between 2015 to 2025, with most (n=7) published after 2018. All employed observational designs, including cross-sectional (n=7) and prospective cohort (n=1).

Five studies explicitly interpreted factors as contributors to school anxiety. The remaining three made no explicit claims about causality but did not attribute the relationship to alternative explanations (e.g., psychometric error), and were, therefore, deemed eligible (Adams et al., 2019b; Bermudez et al., 2015; Syriopoulou-Delli et al., 2018).

Methodologies included quantitative (n=3), qualitative (n=2), and mixed-methods (n=3) designs. In line with our eligibility criteria, three contributed qualitative data, while five contributed only quantitative data.

Sample and Participant Characteristics

Quantitative sample sizes ranged from 25 to 291; qualitative from 18 to 72. Three studies employed a single recruitment strategy, whilst five utilised multiple. All recruitment methods necessitated engagement with clinical or governmental support, school enrolment, and/or parental motivation. The most common recruitment sources were schools (n=5), followed by social media (n=4), clinics (n=3), and autism community groups (n=3).

Informants

Four studies adopted a multi-informant approach, though only two included multiple eligible informants. In all studies, the same informants provided data on both school anxiety and its identified contributors. Parents were the most common eligible informants (n=5), followed by CYP (n=3), and professionals (n=2). 70% of the eligible research, therefore, came from non-Autistic, or unspecified, informants.

Parent informants ranged from 23 to 173 participants (total N=331); where reported (n=3), 68.7% were mothers. Additionally, among those reporting parental education (n=3), 83.3% had completed tertiary education. CYP informants (M_{age}=12.8) ranged from 18 to 72 participants (total N=128); where reported, most were male (67.2%) and all attended mainstream schools. CYP represented 16.7% of all informants. Professional informants ranged from 17 to 291 participants (total N=308); where reported consistently, most were female (77.3%). Only Reyes et al. (2022) included non-teacher roles, such as psychologists (29.4%) and occupational therapists (5.9%).

Child Characteristics

One study (Reyes et al., 2022) focussed solely on teachers and parents' perspectives on school anxiety and, thus, did not collect any CYP demographic data. Among the remaining seven studies, 73.8% were male, with 26.2% identified as female or another gender.

CYP ages spanned 4 to 25 years. In one study, a minority (4.8%) were aged 15–25 but still educated in schools in Greece (Syriopoulou-Delli et al., 2018). The mean age across studies was 11.5 years. Only two studies reported CYP ethnicities: of those, 88.7% were White (Atkinson et al., 2025; Sideropoulos et al., 2024). IQ and/or verbal ability were reported in two studies, with 49.9% identified as non-speaking, monosyllabic, or having a 'language delay' (Clark & Adams, 2020; Syriopoulou-Delli et al., 2018).

Three studies reported clinical anxiety cutoffs, with 51.4% of participants scoring above threshold. Two reported anxiety diagnoses (42%; Adams et al., 2019b; Clark & Adams, 2020), and two reported broader co-occurring diagnoses (79.4%; Clark & Adams, 2020; Sideropoulos et al., 2024).

Only one study (Atkinson et al., 2025) accepted participants without a formal diagnosis, allowing self-identification as Autistic. The remaining seven required a diagnosis via informant-report (57.1%), documentation (28.6%), and/or formal assessment tools (28.6%).

Among four studies reporting school type, one study examined the primary to secondary transition (Sideropoulos et al., 2024); two studies (Atkinson et al., 2025; Costley et al., 2021) focussed exclusively on secondary school students; and one study included a mixed sample of primarily primary students (Syriopoulou-Delli et al., 2018). Of five reporting provision, 87.8% of CYP participants attended mainstream schools, while 9.4% attended specialist provision.

Methods of Assessing School Anxiety and Contributors

Quantitative Data

All five quantitative studies assessed school anxiety and its contributors using questionnaires. Two used validated school anxiety scales or subscales: the School Anxiety Scale—Teacher Report (SAS-TR) (Lyneham et al., 2008; Syriopoulou-Delli et al., 2018), and school anxiety subscale from the Screen for Child Anxiety Related Disorders (SCARED) (Bermudez et al.,

Table 2 Summary of study characteristics and extracted data, arranged alphabetically

Author (year), location	Informant(s) (n)	Child age & gender	Co-occurrences	School (%)	Eligible measure(s) & analysis	Eligible contributors investigated
Quantitative & mixed						
Adams et al., (2019b), Australia	Parents ($n=173$)	Range 6–13 M (80.3%), F (19.7%)	Anxiety Diagnosis (36.4%), Anxiety Medication (15.6%)	Mixed (% NR)	Demographics, Study-Specific Questionnaire, ASC-ASD, Chi-Squared	*Non-Significant:* Gender *Significant:* Age Cohort (Older)***
Atkinson et al. (2025), UK	CYP ($n=72$)	Range 11–16 M (54.2%), F (34.7%) & Non-Binary/ Other (11.1%)	Reading age > 8	Mainstream (100%), Secondary (100%)	Adapted CAT-Q, ASC-ASD, Simple School Belonging Scale, Correlation, Mediation Analysis	*Significant: (Correlation)* School Belonging**, Camouflaging** *(Mediation Analysis)* Direct: School Belonging*, Camouflaging*** Indirect: School Belonging—>Camouflaging—>Anxiety
Bermudez et al (2015), Spain	Parents & CYP ($n=38$)	Range 8–17 M (94.7%), F (5.3%)	Clinical Anxiety[b] (68.4% - PR)	NR	Demographics, SCARED, Correlation	*Non-Significant:* Age
Sideropoulos et al (2024), UK	Parents ($n=25$)	Mean Age 11 M (72%), F (28%)	Co-occurring diagnoses (68%), Clinical Anxiety (44%)[c]	Pre-transition: Primary (100%), Mainstream (88%), Special (8%) Post-transition: Secondary (100%), Mainstream (68%), Special (12%)	SCAS, Repeated Measures ANOVA	*Non-Significant:* Primary to Secondary School Transition
Syriopoulou-Delli et al (2018), Greece	Teachers ($n=291$)	Range 4–25 M (73.5%), F (26.5%)	IQ 50–150. Non-Speaking (13.7%), Monosyllabic Speech (44%), Advanced Speech (42.3%) Clinical Anxiety[a] (49.8%)	Primary (93.8%), Secondary (4.1%), Centres of Creational Occupation (2.1%)	Demographics, SAS-TR, Pearson r, Independent samples t-test, Kruskal Wallis test	*Non-Significant:* Gender; Age *Significant: SAS-TR GA:* Higher IQ*** *SAS-TR SOA:* Higher IQ**; More Developed Speech*** *SAS-TR Total:* Higher IQ**; More Developed Speech**
Qualitative & mixed						
Clark and Adams (2020), Australia	Parents ($n=72$)	Range 5–17 M (70.8%), F (29.2%)	Co-occurring diagnoses (83%), Anxiety Diagnosis (55%), ADHD (46%), Language Delay (18%)	Mainstream (79%) Special (21%)	Study-Specific Questionnaire, CA	*Overstimulation, Unpredictability, and Demands at School:* Change, Unpredictability, and Transitions; Noise, Chaos, and Overstimulation; Task Demands, Expectations, and Time Pressures; Not Enough Downtime, Breaks, or Access to Quiet Spaces *Social Communication and Personal Challenges:* Needs Are Not Supported; Social Relationship Issues and Difficulties; Communication and Learning Difficulties; Stress, Burnout and/or Fatigue; Fear of Failure

Table 2 (continued)

Author (year), location	Informant(s) (n)	Child age & gender	Co-occurrences	School (%)	Eligible measure(s) & analysis	Eligible contributors investigated
Costley et al (2021), UK	CYP ($n=18$)	Range 12–17 M (61.1%), F (38.9%)	Anxiety identified by teacher (100%)	Secondary (100%), Mainstream (100%)	Semi-Structured Interview, TA	*Uncertainty; Assessment; Other People's Behaviour; Bullying* *Demands of School:* Managing Academic Work, Not Getting into Trouble *Transitioning to Secondary School*: Physical Space, Number of People, Change from Primary *Negotiating Social Relationships & Fitting in:* Fear of Judgement, Anxiety About Saying/Doing the Wrong Thing and Causing Offence, Avoiding Support *Managing Concentration:* Noise and Distraction *Pressure of Performance:* Test Anxiety, Failure, Presentations *Other Children's Behaviour:* Unpredictability, Disruption, Breaking Rules, Physicality (pushing and fighting), Isolation, Exclusion
Reyes et al (2022), USA	School Staff ($n=17$) & Parents ($n=23$)	NR	NR	NR	Semi-Structured Focus Groups, TA	*Demands; Social Situations; Role of Political Climate for diverse students* *Change:* Changes in Routine *Mainstream Classroom:* Sensory Experiences, Phobias *Intersectional Anxiety:* Racism, Politics *Social interactions:* Class Presentation, Group Project or New Peer Group *Other Children's Behaviour:* Unpredictability, Breaking rules

CYP, children & young people; M, male; F, female; TA, thematic analysis; CA, content analysis; NR, not recorded; PR, parent report; ASC-ASD, anxiety scale for children with autism spectrum disorder

*Significant at 0.05 level, **Significant at 0.01 level, ***Significant at 0.001 level

[a]SAS-TR = school anxiety scale-teacher rating, [b]SCARED = screen for child anxiety related emotional disorder, [c]SCAS = spence children's anxiety scale, CAT-Q = camouflaging autistic traits questionnaire

Table 3 CASP and STROBE scores of included studies, arranged alphabetically

References	STROBE score	CASP score
Adams et al., (2019b)	16	5
Atkinson et al., (2025)	19	6
Bermudez et al., (2015)*	10	–
Clark and Adams, (2020)	15	5
Costley et al., (2021)	–	6
Reyes et al., (2022)	–	5
Sideropoulos et al., (2024)	15	–
Syriopoulou-Delli et al., (2018)	17	–

*Scores below 12 indicate that conclusions should be interpreted with caution.—indicates the study was not assessed using this tool

2015; Birmaher et al., 1999). One study (Adams et al., 2019b) used a binary question asking parents whether their child was anxious at school.

Two studies inferred school anxiety by correlating school-related factors with general anxiety scales: the Anxiety Scale for Children—Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASC-ASD) (Rodgers et al., 2016; Atkinson et al., 2025) and Spence Children's Anxiety Scale (SCAS) (Sideropoulos et al., 2024; Spence, 1998).

Contributors were most commonly assessed via demographic questionnaires ($n=3$). Other tools included the Camouflaging Autistic Traits Questionnaire adapted for the school setting and Simple School Belonging Scale (Atkinson et al., 2025). One study examined anxiety change between primary and secondary school (Sideropoulos et al., 2024).

Analysis included between-group comparisons ($n=4$), correlational analysis ($n=3$), and one mediation analysis.

Qualitative Data

All three qualitative studies explored school anxiety and its contributors. Two employed semi-structured interviews or focus groups, using thematic analysis with at least two independent coders to identify key themes (Costley et al., 2021; Reyes et al., 2022). One (Clark & Adams, 2020) used a researcher-designed questionnaire to analyse barriers in managing anxiety at school, analysing parent responses using content analysis.

Quality Assessment

Three studies were assessed using STROBE (max score=22), two with CASP (max score=10), and three with both (Table 3). Based on appraisal scores, the highest-quality studies were Atkinson et al. (2025) and Costley et al. (2021). One study (Bermudez et al., 2015) scored below the STROBE cut-off of 12 and should be interpreted with caution (Adams et al., 2019a; Fortin et al., 2012).

STROBE scores ranged from 10 to 19, with a mean score of 15.3. Most (83.3%) scored 15 or above, indicating moderate to high quality. All clearly reported participant criteria, study outcomes, and data sources. However, transparency indicators were inconsistently reported: 66.7% failed to report missing data, 50% omitted study dates, and only one reported how study size was determined (Atkinson et al., 2025).

CASP scores ranged from 5 to 6 (binary scale: 1=yes, 0=no/can't tell), indicating medium quality. No studies explicitly addressed the research-participant relationship or reflexivity. Ethical considerations were inconsistently reported; while one study (Reyes et al., 2022) did not report ethical approval, others did not detail how ethical guidelines were upheld.

Beyond checklist assessments, critical reflection on language and framing revealed further quality concerns and the reproduction of epistemic injustice (Table 4). Three studies framed Autism as a disorder of deficits and/or impairments; only two used consistently identity-first language (Atkinson et al., 2025; Sideropoulos et al., 2024). One included outdated terminology for Autism: 'Asperger Syndrome' and 'High Functioning Autism' (Bermudez et al., 2015). Only two studies incorporated community involvement: one adopted co-construction, whilst the other consulted community members (Costley et al., 2021; Atkinson et al., 2025).

Contributors Analysed

Three studies examined individual-level demographic contributors to school anxiety, while five explored micro-level school factors. Among quantitative studies, three assessed child demographics, including age ($n=3$), gender ($n=2$) and

Table 4 Evaluation of research studies for autistic participation and use of community-preferred language, arranged alphabetically "Framed as deficit" indicates whether autism was conceptualised at any point as a disorder or set of impairments. "Outdated terms" includes use of labels such as *Asperger's* or *high-functioning autism*

References	Participatory input	Language used	Framed as deficit	Outdated terms
Adams et al., (2019b)	None	Mixed	No	No
Atkinson et al., (2025)	Consultation	Identity-First	No	No
Bermudez et al., (2015)	None	Person-First	Yes	Yes
Clark and Adams, (2020)	None	Person-First	No	No
Costley et al., (2021)	Co-Construction	Mixed	No	No
Reyes et al., (2022)	None	Mixed	Yes	No
Sideropoulos et al., (2024)	None	Identity-First	No	No
Syriopoulou-Delli et al., (2018)	None	Person-First	Yes	No

IQ/speech development ($n=1$) (Adams et al., 2019b; Bermudez et al., 2015; Syriopoulou-Delli et al., 2018).

Two studies with eligible quantitative data examined school-related contributors, including school belonging and camouflaging within school (Atkinson et al., 2025) and the primary-to-secondary school transition (Sideropoulos et al., 2024). All three qualitative studies exclusively identified school-related contributors (Clark & Adams, 2020; Costley et al., 2021; Reyes et al., 2022).

Individual Contributors

Neither of the two studies that examined gender differences reported significant results. Similarly, two of three age-focussed studies found no significant relationship (Bermudez et al., 2015; Syriopoulou-Delli et al., 2018). However, Adams et al., (2019b) identified a significant moderate effect, with older CYP (aged 12–13) reported to have higher school anxiety than younger CYP (aged 6–8). Syriopoulou-Delli et al. (2018) also found a significant positive correlation between school anxiety and IQ, both in total scores and across all school anxiety subscales. Additionally, CYP with 'well developed' speech showed the highest school anxiety levels across all subscales—except generalised anxiety—compared to those with monosyllabic or no speech.

School Contributors-Neuro-Normative Affordances

At the micro-level, five studies identified school-based contributors (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). We conceptualise these as neuro-normative affordances—structures and expectations that privilege Neurotypical functioning and marginalise those whose needs fall outside dominant norms (Fisher et al., 2025a). Although the macrosystem was not directly examined within eligible studies, we understand these micro-level affordances as manifestations of neuro-normative epistemic injustice. As Clark and Adams (2020) noted, when 'needs are not supported', school anxiety is worsened. Across the studies, the neuro-normative affordances are grouped into three domains: social expectations, academic and cognitive demands, and the physical and structural design of school environments. Importantly, these affordances intersect and are co-constructed through wider systems shaped by neuro-normative epistemic injustice—creating layered, compounding contributors to school anxiety for Autistic CYP (Legault et al., 2024; Fisher et al., 2025b).

Social Expectations

Four studies identified implicit social pressures—to communicate and behave in neuro-normative ways to gain safety and acceptance – as contributors to school anxiety. A key contributor to school anxiety was the absence of school belonging, defined as the sense of being accepted, included, and safe to be one's authentic self. One study examined this relationship directly, revealing a significant negative correlation and direct negative effect between school belonging and anxiety (Atkinson et al., 2025). Notably, reduced school belonging predicted increased camouflaging within school—the hiding and adapting of Autistic traits to fit in—thereby increasing anxiety.

Over time, the expectation of negative social outcomes—including social relationship issues and difficulties—became a contributor to school anxiety (Clark & Adams, 2020). Costley et al. (2021) found that social relationships provoked anxiety, due to fear of causing offense or conflict. This anticipatory social fear extended into specific school activities, with Reyes et al. (2022) reporting that entering new peer groups, participating in group projects, and delivering class presentations were common anxiety triggers.

A hostile social environment also heightened anxiety through fear of judgement. CYP worried about saying the wrong thing or being perceived negatively (Costley et al., 2021). Notably, this was the only study to explicitly identify bullying as a contributor to school anxiety, with students often targeted for visibly deviating from neuro-normative standards—such as attending a support unit. Reyes et al. (2022) further identified intersectional challenges among those who experienced racism.

Finally, a lack of social safety was also influenced by the unpredictable and disruptive behaviours of other students. Both Costley et al. (2021) and Reyes et al. (2022) reported that rule-breaking and physical aggression from other CYP heightened school anxiety.

Academic and Cognitive Demands

Autistic students also faced academic and cognitive expectations—rooted in neuro-normative expectations of what, how, and when students are expected to learn and behave to be academically successful—as contributors to school anxiety (Costley et al., 2021; Clark & Adams, 2020). In Clark & Adams (2020), parents cited several barriers directly tied to these expectations. The most frequently reported academic and cognitive barriers were task demands, expectations, and time pressures, followed by communication and learning difficulties, and fear of failure. Costley et al. (2021) similarly found that academic pressures contributed to anxiety, from everyday classroom tasks—such as answering a question—to more intense stress during formal assessments or exams. Importantly, cognitive pressures extended beyond academic tasks and involved aspects of the 'hidden curriculum', including demands for punctuality. These pressures were often exacerbated by difficulties concentrating in class.

Physical and Structural Design

Four studies identified the physical and structural design of school environments—including spatial layouts, schedules, and environments that scaffold daily school life—as contributors (Clark and Adams., 2020; Reyes et al., 2022; Costley et al., 2021; Sideropoulos et al., 2024). Overwhelming sensory environments were prominent contributors across three qualitative studies (Clark & Adams, 2020; Costley et al., 2021; Reyes et al., 2022). In Clark and Adams (2020), 62.5% of parents selected "overstimulation, unpredictability and demands at school" as the primary barrier to managing school anxiety, with 'noise, chaos, and overstimulation' commonly cited. Similarly, Costley et al (2021) and Reyes et al (2022) reported excessive noise in school as a key cause of school anxiety. Large crowded secondary school environments were particularly anxiety-provoking, where sensory demands intensified (Costley et al., 2021). 'Not enough downtime, breaks, or access to quiet spaces', reported by Clark and Adams (2020), compounded this anxiety by removing opportunities for sensory regulation.

Beyond sensory stressors, change, unpredictability, and transitions emerged as key causes of school anxiety (Clark & Adams, 2020). Students experienced anxiety in response to unexpected change in routine, unfamiliar social environments, and new teaching staff (Costley et al., 2021; Reyes et al., 2022). The transition to secondary school was identified by two studies as a contributor. Costley et al (2021) identified that environmental and structural issues worsened in secondary school—including sensory overload and uncertainty about what the new environment would entail. However, Sideropoulos et al. (2024), in a longitudinal study, found no significant change in anxiety scores across the transition.

Discussion

Our novel systematic review identified and synthesised research examining contributing factors to school anxiety among Autistic CYP. Examining contributors is critical to avoid framing anxiety as inherent to Autism, and instead move towards understanding the contexts that create or worsen it (Chapman & Carel, 2022; Clark & Adams, 2020). For comparison, Adams et al (2019a) conducted a broader review (n = 32 studies) using similar criteria—but without requiring studies to identify contributors—and found 12.5% of included studies adopted genetic and biologically essentialist explanations (Gadow et al., 2008, 2009, 2010; Roohi et al., 2009).

Although school anxiety is widely explored, only eight studies met our inclusion criteria. Yet, these gaps illustrate why a critical synthesis is needed: not only to map what is known, but to reveal how neuro-normative epistemic injustice has constrained what is knowable about school anxiety, and to identify how future research can redress these limitations. Notably, the comparatively low number of eligible studies indicates that most existing research does not investigate *why* Autistic CYP experience school anxiety, creating a high risk of implicit or explicit essentialist framings within the current evidence base (Botha, 2021b). The absence of contextual analysis is particularly striking given elevated anxiety rates and growing recognition of associated school-based contributors among Autistic CYP (Clark & Adams, 2020; Connolly et al., 2023; Thiele-Swift & Dorstyn, 2024). In contrast, contributor reviews among Neurotypical populations with narrower search pools identified 26 studies on teacher-student relationships (Salter et al., 2024) and 44 on academic achievement (Brumariu et al., 2023).

This dearth of school anxiety research in Autistic populations reflects a deeper epistemic problem: neuro-normative epistemic injustice, defined as a macrosystemic culture of institutional norms, assumptions and epistemic practices (Legault et al., 2019; Catala et al., 2021; Fisher et al., 2025a). Yet, this macrosystemic context was also entirely absent from reviewed studies. From a critical realist standpoint, this absence represents a fundamental limitation (Botha, 2021a; Bronfenbrenner, 1994; Lawani, 2021). Critical realism posits a stratified ontology: the *empirical* (observable experiences), the *actual* (events that occur irrespective of observation), and the *real* (causal mechanisms) (Bhaskar, 1998). While individual- and micro-level studies offer insight into the empirical and actual domains, it is only through theorising the macrosystem—situated within the real—that we can understand the generative mechanisms producing and sustaining these surface patterns and, thus, school anxiety (Wiltshire, 2018; Fisher et al., 2025b).

When macrosystemic factors are unexamined, causal explanations default to what is most visible and measurable at the individual- or micro- level (Fisher et al., 2025a). This conflation of reality with what is observable—the epistemic fallacy—leads research to mistake symptoms as causes (Bhaskar, 2008). Without examining the mechanisms within the *real*, school anxiety, therefore, often becomes positioned as residing within the Autistic CYP, rather than within the systems that constrain them (Perrelet et al., 2025). As a result, recommendations risk being ineffective and reinforcing the essentialist assumption that school anxiety is a property of the Autistic individual—an inherent vulnerability to be corrected by changing the individual rather than the systemic design (Brunson et al., 2023; Cook, 2024; Perrelet et al., 2025; Stahmer et al., 2023).

These epistemological limitations are evident in the pattern of findings across studies. Inconsistencies or

non-significant individual-level findings may reflect misalignment between observed variables, like gender and age, and deeper causal mechanisms (Bhaskar, 1998; Botha, 2021a). Even significant findings lack explanatory meaning if confined to the empirical. For example, Syriopoulou-Delli et al. (2018) reported significant correlations between school anxiety, IQ, and speech ability, but 'fluent speech' may simply increase detection of anxiety via neuro-normative measures (Perihan et al., 2023). Similarly, apparent age effects may reflect comprehension bias (Adams et al., 2019b), rather than genuine developmental change (Schiltz & Magnus, 2021). In open and complex systems, isolating surface-level variables without interrogating their macrosystemic roots yields tentative and potentially misleading insight (Wiltshire, 2018).

Five studies explored micro-level contributors, framed here as neuro-normative affordances. These may underlie individual-level differences observed empirically (Archer, 2003; Bhaskar, 1998); for example, 'older age' (Adams et al., 2019b), as a contributor, may reflect distinct demands associated with secondary school (Costley et al., 2021). Though these studies engaged Autistic CYP's lived experiences, none included macrosystemic theorisation—limiting explanatory power.

Only two studies examined academic and cognitive demands—a concerning gap given elevated exam anxiety and fear of failure among Autistic CYP (Simpson et al., 2020; Wood & Happé, 2023). Similarly, the hidden curriculum—unspoken behavioural norms students are assumed to intuit—appeared in just one study, despite its disproportionate impact (Costley et al., 2021; Moyse & Porter, 2015; Poed & Fox, 2023). None situated these demands within broader macrosystemic contexts such as rigid, neuro-normative academic standards and curricula, limiting the feasibility of practice suggestions within systems that constrain teacher and school actions (Williams-Brown & Jopling, 2021; Fisher et al., 2025b). Future research must interrogate how these academic macrosystems contribute to anxiety.

Social affordances appeared in four studies, reflecting patterns of bullying, negative peer interactions and identities, and unsafety among Autistic learners (Billington et al., 2024; Cohen et al., 2022; Pearson et al., 2025; Williams et al., 2019). Camouflaging—adapting or suppressing Autistic traits to meet neuro-normative expectations (Mullally et al., 2024)—was identified in just one study, despite its well-established association with unsafe environments and poor mental health (Atkinson et al., 2025; Howe et al., 2023; Chapman et al., 2022; Ai et al., 2024). Moreover, only one study provided a theoretical lens, framing school belonging—feeling accepted, respected, and included—as central to anxiety (Atkinson et al., 2025). Given emerging evidence that systemic rejection legitimises interpersonal exclusion (Fisher et al., 2025b), the absence of macrosystemic analysis signals a pressing gap for future research.

Finally, four studies identified physical and structural affordances. Although school sensory environments are well-documented to cause distress, through sensory overload and disrupted learning (Acker et al., 2018; Howe & Stagg, 2016; Jones et al., 2020), only three studies directly linked this to school anxiety. Unpredictability—particularly around school transitions—also emerged as a key contributor, with its role in fuelling Autistic anxiety well-established in wider literature (Boulter et al., 2014; Jenkinson et al., 2020; Nuske et al., 2019; Yates et al., 2024).

Crucially, all studies examined affordances in isolation, detached from their macrosystemic context. This fragmented approach oversimplifies schools as static rather than dynamic, interdependent systems in which anxiety is co-produced by interacting mechanisms (Fielding et al., 2025; Fisher et al., 2025b). Without a macrosystemic lens, research risks reductionism—applying closed-system logic to a complex, open system—and overlooks systemic inertia (Williams-Brown & Jopling, 2021; Fisher et al., 2025a; Bhaskar, 1998). Such epistemological limitations may underlie findings like Sideropoulos et al. (2024), who reported no change in anxiety during school transitions despite multiple interacting mechanisms. To generate meaningful recommendations for policy and practice, our review found it is not simply *more* research that is needed; future research must move beyond surface correlates to interrogate the deeper macrosystemic drivers of school anxiety (Fisher et al., 2025a; Brunson et al., 2023).

Limitations of Existing Research

The limitations of the reviewed studies reflect not only gaps in *what* is examined, but *whose* knowledge is recognised and *how* it is generated. A key issue is testimonial injustice—the systemic devaluation of Autistic perspectives due to presumed incredibility (Fricker, 2007; Legault et al., 2024). Non-Autistic informants outnumbered Autistic voices by approximately 2.5:1 across the included studies. Only two studies incorporated Autistic community input; three used deficit-based terminology. Yet, Autistic people are uniquely positioned to access the actual and real domains of their lived experience (Fletcher-Watson et al., 2021; Kourti, 2021). Autism is embodied: while a meltdown may be empirically observable, only the Autistic person can understand its internal (actual) experience (Rosqvist et al., 2023). Ethically grounded participatory research is essential to understand macrosystemic factors underlying school anxiety (Russell & Wilkinson, 2023). However, no study demonstrated reflexivity regarding the researcher-participant

relationship, risking shallow interpretation and missed causal depth (Botha, 2021a).

Intersecting epistemic injustices were also rarely acknowledged (Botha & Gillespie-Lynch, 2022; Omodan, 2023). All studies recruited via services or schools, and only one allowed self-identification without diagnosis—excluding those most marginalised by school anxiety, such as those not enrolled in school, unable to attend, or those awaiting diagnosis (Adams, 2022; Children's Commissioner, 2024a, 2024b; Connolly et al., 2023). These CYP also face systemic barriers to support, with only one in four receiving support when sought (Ashworth et al., 2025; Doherty et al., 2022). Recruitment practices likely compounded participation disparities: male-to-female ratios approached 3:1, reflecting chronic under-identification of Autistic girls (Daniel & Wang, 2023; Milner et al., 2024). Ethnicity was rarely reported; where it was, White participants were over-represented, reflecting racial disparities in diagnosis and service access (Lindsay et al., 2025; Lovelace et al., 2021). Such oversights narrow the epistemic lens, risking partial understandings of school anxiety that neglect intersectional identity-based marginalisation (Cohen et al., 2022; Reyes et al., 2022). Future research must centre under-represented CYP through participatory and inclusive recruitment (Cascio et al., 2021).

These shortcomings are rarely within the remit of individual studies, nor are they captured by typical quality assessments. Only one study fell below the STROBE cut-off; the remainder were deemed moderate to high quality. This highlights a deeper hermeneutical injustice—a lack of conceptual tools to recognise, evaluate, and interpret Autistic and intersectional experiences (Catala et al., 2021; Fricker, 2007). This is evident in the near-exclusive focus on Autistic participants without intellectual disabilities in mainstream education. Across the broader field, nearly 80% of studies disproportionately exclude Autistic CYP with intellectual disabilities due to inaccessible methodologies (Catala, 2020; Mingins et al., 2021; Russell et al., 2019). Greater inclusion demands flexible, adaptive methods (Lewis et al., 2023) built through epistemic inclusion of Autistic CYP with intersecting marginalisations (Hofmann, 2023).

Measurement was another site of injustice. Three studies used scales developed for Neurotypical populations (e.g., SCARED and SAS-TR; Lyneham et al., 2008; Garcia-Fernandez et al., 2014; Adams et al., 2019a), embedding neuro-normative assumptions about anxiety expressions (Perihan et al., 2023). These measures risk pathologising Autistic traits, overlooking non-neuro-normative expressions, and conflating observable behaviour with presumed internal states—an epistemic fallacy (Kerns & Kendall, 2012; Brunson et al., 2023; Rapaport et al., 2024; Schiltz & Magnus, 2021; Stern et al., 2014). For example, limited speech may be misinterpreted as social anxiety within neuro-normative measures, despite its alignment with Autistic traits within the Autism Quotient (Baron-Cohen et al., 2006; Gupta et al., 2025; Lyneham et al., 2008). In contrast, scales developed for Autistic populations—like the ASC-ASD, used in two studies—more effectively capture anxiety among Autistic CYP (Goulding et al., 2024). As highlighted in prior reviews (Adams et al., 2019a; Ambrose et al., 2021; Perihan et al., 2023), future research must prioritise the development of measurement tools capable of disentangling Autistic traits from anxiety to evade pathologising and essentialist narratives.

Limitations of Our Review

The internal validity of our review is open to critique. The small number of included studies, combined with high heterogeneity, limited the feasibility and coherence of advanced synthesis methods (Popay et al., 2006). Inter-rater reliability was also not feasible across all stages, increasing vulnerability to human error and subjectivity (Belur et al., 2021).

Our review is not intended to be generalisable to broader research on negative school experiences among Autistic learners. To ensure conceptual precision and methodological rigour, eligibility criteria were restrictive, excluding studies without an explicit focus on anxiety (Dekkers et al., 2019). Terminological inconsistency further complicated this, with several studies examining conceptually overlapping but differently labelled phenomena—including school experiences (Billington et al., 2024; Goodall, 2018), identity (Cohen et al., 2022), wellbeing (Danker et al., 2019), emotionally based school avoidance (Hamilton, 2024), and inclusion (Lebenhagen, 2024). Other Neurodivergent groups, such as ADHD (Mansfield & Soni, 2024) and dyslexia (Novita, 2016), were also excluded despite frequent diagnostic and experiential co-occurrence (Astle et al., 2022).

The exclusion of growing literature using the term *school distress* also limits our scope. We excluded this body of work due to its relative novelty and less established conceptualisation (Adams et al., 2019a; Connolly et al., 2023). While conceptual distinctions remain underdeveloped, it is likely that distress both contributes to, and is shaped by, anxiety. Notably, contributors identified—including poor support, unpredictability, unsafety, sensory distress, and bullying—appear to precede both constructs (Fielding et al., 2025; Mullally & Connolly, 2025).

This presents a central limitation: by narrowing our scope, our review risks replicating the very criticisms levelled at the included studies—fragmentation and limited theoretical depth. As such, while our findings offer a

valuable foundation for understanding the limitations of the current school anxiety evidence base and identifying directions for future research, they must be interpreted with caution and an awareness of these exclusions.

Conclusion

Our novel review highlights significant gaps in the evidence base on what contributes to school anxiety among Autistic CYP. Despite the term's widespread use, only eight studies explicitly investigated contributing factors—suggesting its popularity may be shaped by essentialist understandings and longstanding epistemic injustice. Crucially, no studies interrogated the deeper, macrosystemic conditions—rooted in neuro-normative epistemic injustice, and embedded within culture, policies, and dominant knowledge systems—that make school anxiety-evoking for Autistic CYP. These structural conditions produce the identified micro-level hostile social experiences, academic expectations, and environmental constraints that may manifest as individual-level differences in school anxiety across IQ and age.

Without theorising macrosystemic context, research offers only superficial insights, leaving effective, feasible interventions out of reach. Most concerningly, current approaches risk reinforcing the assumption that anxiety is inherent to Autism, rather than a product of systemic failure.

Future research must urgently expand the field's epistemic scope. This includes amplifying Autistic voices—particularly those facing intersecting epistemic injustices—and interrogating the macrosystemic context. It also requires moving beyond standardised tools rooted in neuro-normative assumptions, and towards participatory, inclusive methodologies that centre lived experience. Only through such depth-oriented, epistemically just inquiry can research begin to develop meaningful, implementable interventions that reflect and respond to the lived realities of school anxiety among Autistic CYP.

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