

Transition to university for autistic students in Australia: A phenomenological study

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Background

- There has been an increasing focus over the past 30 years on widening participation of students from traditionally under-represented groups within higher education.
- Widening participation initiatives are underpinned by anti-discrimination and equal opportunity legislation.
- The first year of university is critical to student success and retention.
- An increasing number of autistic students are enrolling in universities, yet their completion rates remain lower than that of their peers.
- Autistic people also have higher rates of un/under employment than their peers with and without disability.



Research Question

What are the facilitators and barriers to transition to university for autistic students in Australia?

Objectives:

- To explore the experiences of autistic students during their transition to, and first year of university.
- To explore the experiences of family members supporting autistic students during their transition to, and first year of university.
- To explore the experiences of university staff supporting autistic students during their transition to, and first year of university.

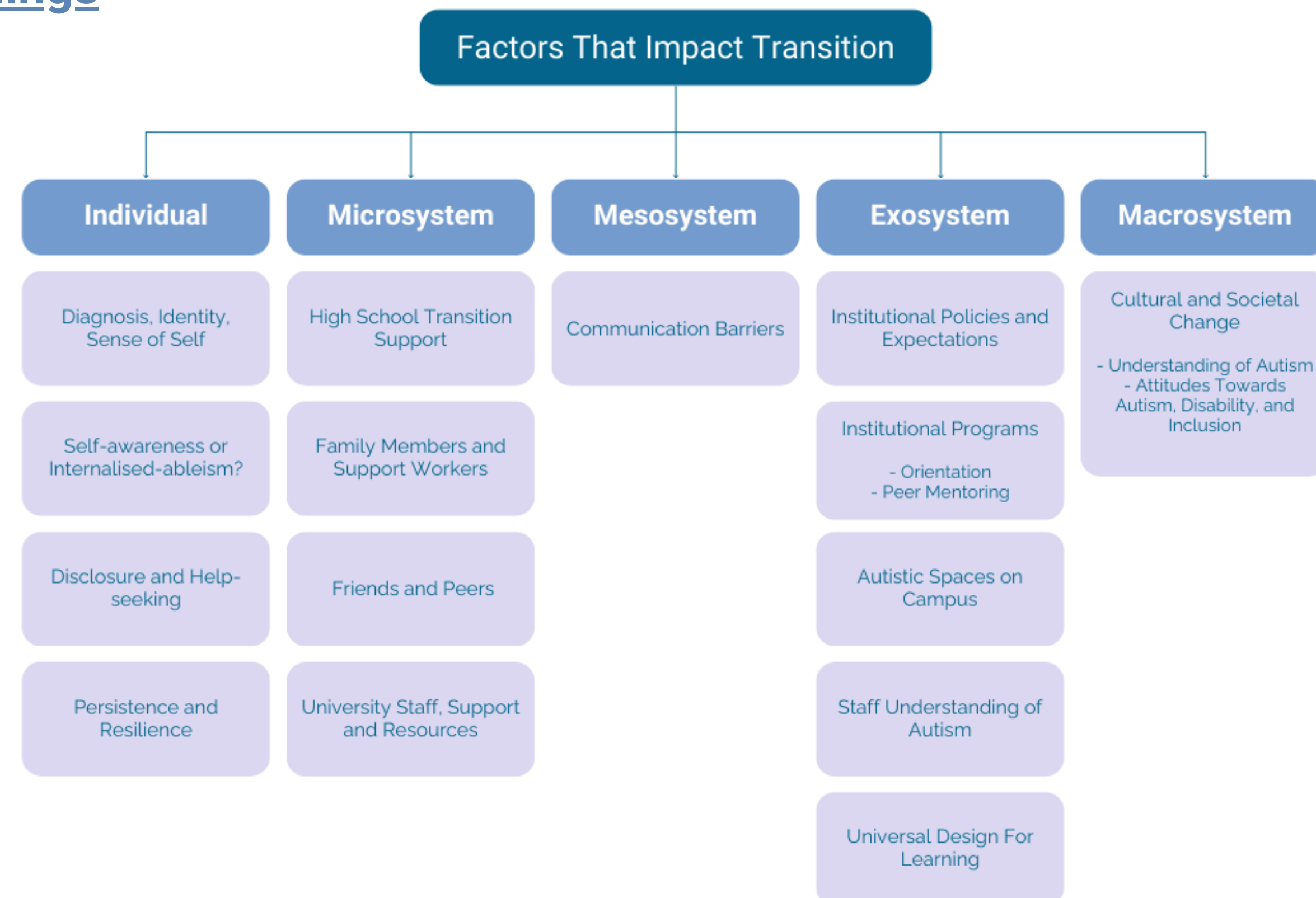
Methodology

- Interpretive phenomenological approach
- Data collected from students using semi-structured interviews.
- Student interview data analysed using Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis.
- Data collected from support network members (family, support worker, staff) using semi-structured interviews and surveys.
- Support network members data analysed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis.

Participants

- 8 students
- 9 parents
- 1 support worker
- 21 university staff

Findings



Bioecological Theory Model factors that influence the transition to and first year of university for autistic students.

Recommendations for Practice

- SUPPORT SKILL DEVELOPMENT**
Implement strategies that support autistic students to develop skills in help-seeking and disclosure.
- INFORMATION FOR FAMILIES**
Develop and promote resources which inform family members about students' rights and responsibilities at university.
- FLEXIBLE TRANSITION SUPPORT**
Implement strategies that are responsive to the potentially disrupted transition experiences of autistic students.
- ENABLE FAMILY SUPPORT**
Implement and promote mechanisms which enable autistic students to identify a family member or support worker as a key contact or advocate.
- ENGAGE PROSPECTIVE STUDENTS**
Implement and promote strategies which enable early engagement of autistic students who are considering attending university with relevant university disability or equity services.
- INCLUSIVE ORIENTATION PROGRAMS**
Implement strategies which support the attendance, participation, and inclusion of autistic students at orientation programs.
- INCLUSIVE CAMPUS CULTURE**
Create an inclusive and welcoming campus culture, which celebrates neurodiversity and encourages autistic students to embrace their autistic identity.
- UNIVERSAL DESIGN FOR LEARNING**
Adopt Universal Design for Learning approaches and inclusive teaching and learning practices.
- HOLISTIC APPROACH TO TRANSITION**
Develop and implement transition strategies which support a holistic approach to orientation and transition.

Conclusion

- This research privileged the voices of autistic students and highlighted the persistence and resilience demonstrated by these students during their transition to, and first year of university.
- Findings highlighted the facilitators and barriers to success for autistic university students.
- Findings also highlighted the importance of inclusive orientation and transition practices in supporting the first year experiences of autistic students.
- Findings also support the need for autistic spaces on campus and opportunities for autistic students to develop their sense of self and autistic identity.

Related Literature

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