

Autism Acceptance, Peer Belonging, and Mental Health in U.S. High Schools

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Abstract

This study explores the relationship between autism acceptance, peer belonging, and mental health among autistic students in U.S. high schools. Despite growing advocacy for neurodiversity, autistic students continue to face stigma, isolation, and mental health challenges within school settings. Drawing on the social model of disability and the neurodiversity paradigm, this conceptual review synthesizes research from education, psychology, and disability studies to examine how peer attitudes, school policies, and inclusion practices shape autistic students' experiences. The study highlights gaps in current practice, identifies promising interventions such as peer mentoring and Universal Design for Learning, and considers policy implications under IDEA and ADA frameworks. The findings suggest that fostering autism acceptance in schools is critical for improving peer belonging and mental health outcomes.

Keywords

Autism Acceptance, Peer Belonging, Mental Health, Inclusive Education, High Schools

1. Introduction

Across the United States, high schools are increasingly diverse spaces where students bring varied cultural, linguistic, and neurological identities. Among them, autistic adolescents represent a rapidly growing population. Current estimates suggest that 1 in 36 children in the U.S. is diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2023). As these students enter adolescence, a critical period marked by heightened social demands and identity formation, the question of how schools foster belonging and well-being becomes especially urgent.

Autism acceptance is emerging as a vital concept in this context. Distinct from “awareness”, which often frames autism through deficit or medicalized narratives, acceptance emphasizes respect for neurodiversity, recognition of autistic voices, and the dismantling of ableist school structures (Kapp, 2020; Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2017). Acceptance shifts the conversation from what autistic students lack to what they contribute, promoting environments where difference is normalized rather than stigmatized. This reframing is not only ethical but also tied directly to mental health outcomes: studies show that stigma and exclusion exacerbate anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation among autistic adolescents (Botha & Frost, 2020; Hedley et al., 2018).

Peer belonging is equally critical. Peer belonging refers to the extent to which students feel accepted, valued, and included within their peer group (Allen et al., 2021). Recent research also defines it as a fundamental need to feel connected to and supported by peers in everyday school life (King & Swenson, 2022). Research in educational psychology consistently demonstrates that a sense of belonging, defined as feeling accepted, valued, and connected within one’s school community, is a robust predictor of both mental health and academic achievement (Goodenow & Grady, 1993; Walton & Cohen, 2011). For autistic high school students, peer belonging may buffer against the negative effects of stigma, reduce feelings of isolation, and promote resilience (Morrison et al., 2019). Yet evidence suggests that autistic adolescents often report lower levels of belonging than their non-autistic peers, due to social rejection, bullying, or exclusion from extracurricular and leadership opportunities (Humphrey & Symes, 2010).

High school thus represents both risk and opportunity. On one hand, social hierarchies, academic pressures, and entrenched stereotypes may deepen marginalization. On the other, supportive peer relationships, teacher advocacy, and inclusive practices can significantly enhance well-being and mental health outcomes (Carter et al., 2014). Despite this potential, research at the intersection of autism acceptance, peer belonging, and mental health remains limited in the U.S. high school context. Much of the literature has examined these domains separately, leaving a gap in understanding how they interact to shape autistic students lived experiences. Therefore, the objective of this article is to address that gap by synthesizing current research and situating it within broader frameworks of inclusive education, the neurodiversity paradigm, and social justice. The article also seeks to highlight the urgent need for U.S. high schools to move beyond legal compliance toward cultivating communities of acceptance and belonging that safeguard the mental health of autistic adolescents.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Autism and the Shift from Awareness to Acceptance

Over the past two decades, discourses surrounding autism have increasingly shifted from an emphasis on *awareness* to a call for *acceptance* (Kapp, 2020). Awareness campaigns have traditionally focused on recognizing the existence of

autism and its prevalence, often highlighting deficits or medicalized views of autistic individuals (Ne'eman, 2021). While such initiatives have raised public knowledge, they have also been critiqued for reinforcing stereotypes and deficit-based narratives that frame autism primarily as a disorder to be managed or cured (Broderick & Ne'eman, 2008). Acceptance, in contrast, reflects the principles of the neurodiversity paradigm, which recognizes autism as a natural variation of human diversity rather than a pathological deviation (Kapp, 2020). Within this framework, the emphasis shifts toward valuing autistic voices, reducing stigma, and promoting inclusive practices that affirm autistic identities.

Research consistently demonstrates that autistic individuals experience significantly higher levels of stigma and misunderstanding than other disability groups, particularly in adolescence (Mazumder & Thompson-Hodgetts, 2019). This stigma is often perpetuated by educational environments where teachers and peers lack accurate knowledge about autism or rely on deficit-oriented frameworks (den Houting, 2019). When we advance acceptance, schools can counteract these misconceptions and create climates where autistic students to be both present and affirmed. The concept of acceptance moves beyond tolerating difference to actively celebrating diversity and creating equitable opportunities for participation (Botha & Frost, 2020).

Acceptance is also linked to mental health outcomes. Botha and Frost (2018) found that experiences of autism acceptance predicted lower levels of depression and stress among autistic adults. They noted that social environments that affirm autistic identities can act as protective factors. In adolescence, where identity formation and peer relationships are central to development, the absence of acceptance may worsen vulnerability to anxiety, depression, and social withdrawal (Maddox & White, 2015; Tierney et al., 2016). Schools that adopt acceptance-based approaches, such as peer education programs, neurodiversity-informed curricula, and student-led initiatives, play a crucial role in promoting positive mental health trajectories (Kapp, 2020; Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2017).

Importantly, autistic self-advocates and scholars have argued that acceptance cannot be tokenistic but it must be embedded into daily school practices and policies (Eun, 2025; Ne'eman, 2021). This includes rethinking disciplinary systems that disproportionately penalize autistic behaviors, challenging peer bullying, and ensuring autistic perspectives are centered in educational decision-making (Robertson, 2010). As Connor (2013) emphasizes, rethinking disability through a social justice lens means shifting responsibility from the individual to the systems and structures that produce exclusion. Acceptance, then, is not only an interpersonal attitude but also a structural commitment to equity within schools.

In U.S. high schools, where academic achievement and social conformity are often prioritized (Jelovac, 2025), autistic students face unique challenges in negotiating belonging. Framing inclusion through acceptance rather than awareness can help mitigate these challenges and align educational practices with broader social justice principles. This conceptual shift provides the foundation for exam-

ining how acceptance, belonging, and mental health intersect in the daily experiences of autistic students.

2.2. Peer Belonging and School Experiences

A central developmental task of adolescence is achieving a sense of belonging within peer groups and school communities (Goodenow & Grady, 1993; Walton & Cohen, 2011). Belonging refers to feeling accepted, respected, and included by others. Research has consistently shown that a strong sense of belonging is associated with improved academic engagement, self-esteem, and mental health outcomes among students (Allen & Bowles, 2012; Slaten et al., 2016). For autistic students, however, belonging is often fragile, undermined by stigma, bullying, and exclusionary practices within schools (Humphrey & Symes, 2010; Maïano et al., 2016).

Bullying and peer rejection are particularly salient concerns in U.S. high schools. Studies reveal that autistic students are two to three times more likely to experience bullying compared to their non-autistic peers (Schroeder et al., 2014; Sreckovic et al., 2014). Such experiences erode not only students' sense of belonging but also their willingness to engage academically and socially (Cappadocia et al., 2012). For example, in a study conducted by Humphrey and Lewis (2008), one of the participants, referred to here as described sitting alone in the cafeteria and feeling invisible. "It was like I did not exist to them" (p. 34). This account emphasizes the deep sense of exclusion that many autistic students face in everyday school contexts. In another study, Milton (2012) documented the lived experiences of autistic youth navigating mainstream classrooms. One participant explained that when a peer chose to sit with him in science class, he felt for the first time that he might truly belong. "When someone sat next to me, it made me feel like maybe I belonged here after all" (p. 51). Such moments, although seemingly small, carry powerful psychological meaning because they affirm presence and worth. More recent qualitative research supports these insights. For instance, Botha and Gillespie-Lynch (2022) interviewed autistic adolescents about peer relationships and found that belonging was described not only in terms of acceptance but also of shared joy and mutual recognition. One participant reported that inclusion felt real only when peers invited him into group activities without hesitation, rather than treating him as an afterthought. Similarly, Goodall (2019) found that autistic students often framed belonging through small, consistent gestures such as being greeted by name or included in informal conversations. These lived accounts and narrative studies emphasize that belonging, or the lack of it, is not an abstract concept. It is experienced daily in cafeterias, classrooms, and hallways, and it shapes the mental health trajectories of autistic students. They also demonstrate that interventions promoting acceptance must address policies or accommodations and the subtle, everyday interactions that communicate recognition and respect. Belonging, therefore, is not simply an abstract concept but a tangible factor that influences whether autistic students thrive or struggle within inclusive educational settings.

The school environment plays a significant role in shaping these experiences. Classrooms that prioritize cooperative learning, peer mentoring, and inclusive group activities are associated with stronger belonging for autistic students (Koenig et al., 2010). Conversely, rigid classroom structures or an overemphasis on individual performance often marginalizes students whose learning or social styles differ from neurotypical norms (Goodall, 2019). Teachers and administrators, through their responses to bullying, disciplinary practices, and recognition of student strengths, can either reinforce exclusion or cultivate inclusive belonging (Lynch & Irvine, 2009).

Peer attitudes are equally critical. Research shows that neurotypical students' understanding of autism significantly influences their willingness to form friendships with autistic peers (Campbell & Barger, 2014). Educational interventions such as peer education programs have been found to improve acceptance and reduce stigma, ultimately increasing opportunities for authentic friendships and group participation (Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2017). However, these initiatives are not yet widespread in U.S. high schools, leaving many autistic students without systemic supports to foster belonging.

Belonging also intersects with identity development. Adolescents are in the process of negotiating who they are and how they fit into broader communities (Erikson, 1968; Meeus, 2011). For autistic students, limited opportunities for acceptance and belonging can disrupt this process, contributing to heightened feelings of isolation and poor self-concept (Cage et al., 2018). In contrast, when autistic students report feeling that they belong, studies show lower rates of depression, anxiety, and loneliness (Tobin et al., 2014). This suggests that belonging serves as a protective factor for mental health, mediating the effects of stigma and exclusion. In U.S. high schools, where peer networks and social hierarchies are powerful (Raabe & Stadtfeld, 2019), autistic students' belonging is not guaranteed but contingent on school climate, peer attitudes, and leadership practices (Sheridan, 2025). Building cultures of peer belonging requires deliberate efforts to dismantle stereotypes, normalize diversity, and create environments where autistic students can form meaningful connections. These insights emphasize the importance of examining belonging not as an individual trait but as a relational and structural phenomenon embedded in the daily fabric of schools.

2.3. Mental Health Outcomes among Autistic Adolescents

Adolescence is a vulnerable developmental stage for mental health, and autistic students experience disproportionately high risks compared to their peers. Numerous studies have documented elevated rates of anxiety, depression, and suicidality among autistic adolescents, often attributed to social exclusion, stigma, and lack of acceptance in school environments (Hedley et al., 2018; Maddox & White, 2015; Mayes et al., 2013). For example, Hedley and Uljarevic (2018) found that autistic youth reported significantly higher levels of depressive symptoms than neurotypical peers, with social isolation cited as a key predictor. These find-

ings suggest that school environments, as primary social spaces for adolescents, are central to understanding the mental health trajectories of autistic students.

One consistent pattern is the relationship between peer victimization and mental health difficulties. Bullying, rejection, and social exclusion increase the likelihood of anxiety disorders and depressive symptoms among autistic students (Humphrey & Symes, 2010). Sreckovic et al. (2014) reported that nearly half of autistic adolescents in inclusive schools experienced bullying, with long-term consequences for self-esteem and mental health. When schools fail to address these experiences, they risk compounding the vulnerabilities of students who already navigate complex social and academic demands.

At the same time, belonging and social support have been shown to buffer against poor mental health outcomes. Studies indicate that when autistic students perceive higher levels of acceptance and peer belonging, they report greater psychological well-being and reduced symptoms of depression and anxiety (Cage et al., 2018; Tobin et al., 2014). Belonging functions as a protective factor, mediating the relationship between stigma and mental health, and highlighting the importance of inclusive school practices that go beyond physical placement (Botha & Frost, 2020).

The school context also introduces unique stressors that affect mental health. Academic pressures, rigid assessment systems, and environments that privilege conformity can worsen mental health challenges for autistic students, particularly when accommodations are limited or inconsistently applied (Goodall, 2019). Furthermore, educators often lack training in recognizing mental health needs among autistic adolescents, leading to underdiagnosis or misdiagnosis of conditions such as anxiety and depression (Maddox & Gaus, 2019). This lack of recognition contributes to inadequate support and reinforces cycles of marginalization.

Critically, autistic adolescents themselves emphasize the psychological toll of exclusionary practices. Studies have revealed that many autistic students describe feeling invisible, misunderstood, or “othered” in their schools, experiences that erode both mental health and academic engagement (Humphrey & Lewis, 2008; Milton, 2012). These accounts emphasize the importance of centering autistic voices when designing school interventions aimed at improving mental health.

2.4. Intersections: Autism Acceptance, Belonging, and Mental Health

The constructs of autism acceptance, peer belonging, and mental health are not discrete phenomena but deeply interconnected in shaping autistic students’ school experiences. Research suggests that acceptance is a precursor to belonging, and belonging, in turn, is a critical determinant of mental health outcomes (Botha & Frost, 2020; Cage et al., 2018). When autistic students feel accepted by peers, teachers, and school leaders, they are more likely to experience authentic inclusion, leading to stronger social connections and improved well-being (Galea, 2025). Conversely, environments where acceptance is absent often foster exclu-

sion, bullying, and stigma, which erode belonging and exacerbate anxiety, depression, and social withdrawal (Humphrey & Symes, 2010).

Acceptance serves as both an interpersonal and structural condition. At the interpersonal level, peer acceptance reduces social isolation and creates opportunities for friendships that sustain belonging (Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2017). At the structural level, policies and practices informed by the neurodiversity paradigm (Kapp, 2020) reframe disability as difference, positioning autistic students as valued members of the school community. Without structural acceptance, interpersonal acceptance is difficult to sustain; for example, even well-intentioned teachers may struggle to foster belonging if the school culture prioritizes conformity and academic competition over diversity and equity (Goodall, 2019).

Belonging functions as a bridge between acceptance and mental health. Walton and Cohen (2011) demonstrated that belonging uncertainty undermines academic and psychological outcomes, particularly for marginalized groups. For autistic students, who already contend with stigma and misunderstanding, a lack of belonging can intensify vulnerability to mental health challenges (Cage et al., 2018). On the other hand, when belonging is cultivated through peer education, inclusive pedagogies, and affirming school climates, it acts as a protective buffer against depression, anxiety, and suicidality (Tobin et al., 2014; Botha & Frost, 2018). These highlights belonging not as a “soft” outcome but as a critical determinant of student well-being.

Furthermore, the intersection of acceptance, belonging, and mental health is shaped by broader sociocultural contexts. In U.S. high schools, peer networks and social hierarchies strongly influence identity development, thus, autistic students’ experiences of acceptance or rejection carry heightened implications for their sense of self and psychological resilience (Erikson, 1968; Meeus, 2011). A lack of autism acceptance within schools often translates into missed opportunities for belonging, which directly undermines mental health outcomes (Brennan Devine, 2022). Thus, examining these constructs in isolation risks overlooking their reciprocal and reinforcing relationships. The evidence suggests that advancing autism acceptance in schools is a matter of equity and a mental health imperative. Belonging emerges as the mechanism through which acceptance translates into improved well-being. It underscores the need for interventions that target both interpersonal relationships and systemic school practices.

2.5. Gaps in the Literature

Although research on autism acceptance, peer belonging, and mental health has grown significantly in recent years, several gaps remain that limit our understanding of autistic students’ experiences in U.S. high schools. First, most studies have examined these constructs in isolation. Research on autism acceptance often focuses on adult populations (Botha & Frost, 2018; Kapp, 2020), while studies of peer belonging primarily investigate general adolescent populations rather than autistic students specifically (Slaten et al., 2016; Walton & Cohen, 2011). Similarly,

mental health research highlights elevated risks among autistic adolescents (Hedley et al., 2018; Maddox & White, 2015) but rarely situates these outcomes within the broader school context of belonging and acceptance. Few empirical studies integrate these dimensions into a single framework, leaving unanswered questions about how acceptance fosters belonging and, in turn, promotes mental health among autistic students.

Also, autistic voices remain underrepresented in the literature. Many studies rely on parent or teacher reports, which provide valuable perspectives but risk overlooking the lived experiences of autistic adolescents themselves (Humphrey & Lewis, 2008; Milton, 2012). Autistic students frequently describe schooling as marked by misunderstanding, where their behaviors are often misinterpreted as defiance or lack of effort (Humphrey & Lewis, 2008). Many also report a sense of invisibility, feeling physically present in classrooms yet excluded from meaningful participation or friendships (Cage et al., 2018). Experiences of stigma remain pervasive, as deficit-based views of autism continue to shape how peers and educators respond to autistic identities (Botha & Gillespie-Lynch, 2022). Despite these challenges, autistic students' insights about belonging, resilience, and acceptance are invaluable, though too often marginalized in research and policy discussions (Milton, 2012). Centering autistic voices is critical to capturing how they perceive acceptance, negotiate belonging, and experience mental health challenges in real time.

Moreover, methodological limitations constrain the field. The majority of existing studies employ quantitative surveys or cross-sectional designs, which identify broad patterns but may fail to capture the nuanced and evolving nature of belonging and acceptance (Cage et al., 2018). Studies that do use qualitative approaches are often limited to small samples or narrow contexts, such as clinical rather than school-based settings (Botha & Frost, 2020; Humphrey & Lewis, 2008). Few adopt longitudinal or mixed-methods designs that could trace how experiences of acceptance and belonging shape mental health trajectories over time (Pellicano et al., 2014). This methodological gap contributes to fragmented understandings of autistic students' school lives.

Additionally, much of the literature on autism acceptance and belonging originates from contexts outside the United States, particularly the United Kingdom, Australia, and South Africa (Botha & Frost, 2020; Humphrey & Symes, 2010). Although these studies provide valuable insights, they do not fully capture the distinctive sociocultural and policy landscape of U.S. high schools, where standardized testing, racial and socioeconomic disparities, and limited mental health resources create unique challenges (Artiles et al., 2006; Goodall, 2019). The intersection of autism acceptance, belonging, and mental health remains underexplored within the institutional and cultural realities of American education. Few studies explicitly frame these issues through an equity or social justice lens, despite calls from Disability Studies in Education (DSE) to interrogate how race, class, and disability intersect in schools (Baglieri et al., 2011). Recent scholarship em-

phasizes that educational research often reproduces ableist and exclusionary assumptions, thereby neglecting autistic students lived experiences and broader systemic inequities (Erevelles & Minear, 2010). This gap limits the potential for research to generate transformative, justice-oriented approaches to belonging.

Another significant gap is the lack of intersectional analysis in existing research. Autistic students of color experience a double burden of racism and ableism that intensifies their risk of exclusion from peer groups and support systems (Crenshaw, 2011; Botha, 2021). For instance, Black autistic youth are disproportionately disciplined in schools compared to their White peers, often being labeled as disruptive rather than recognized as needing support (Annamma, Connor, & Ferri, 2016). This compounds the already high risk of social isolation. Gender also shapes experiences. Autistic girls frequently remain undiagnosed or misdiagnosed, as their coping strategies often mask traits that teachers and clinicians typically associate with autism (Loomes, Hull, & Mandy, 2017). Gender-diverse autistic youth report even greater rates of peer rejection and mental health difficulties, revealing how stigma operates at the intersection of neurodiversity and gender identity (Strang et al., 2018). Socioeconomic status is another overlooked dimension. Low-income students often face reduced access to evaluations, counseling, and inclusive programming, widening disparities in both diagnosis and support (Erevelles & Minear, 2010; Durkin et al., 2017). By contrast, students from more affluent families are more likely to access tailored interventions and private therapeutic services. Immigrant and linguistic minority autistic students face unique challenges as well, including cultural stigma, language barriers, and fear of institutional systems (Choi et al., 2020). These factors further discourage help-seeking and limit opportunities for peer belonging. These intersectional disparities highlight the urgency for future studies to examine autism not as a singular experience, but as one shaped by overlapping identities and social conditions. Only by addressing race, gender, class, and cultural context alongside disability can schools and researchers fully understand how belonging and mental health are produced or denied for autistic students.

3. Theoretical Framework

The Social Model of Disability and the Neurodiversity Paradigm provide the central theoretical grounding for this study. Both frameworks reject deficit-based approaches to autism that locate “problems” within the individual and instead highlight the role of societal structures, cultural attitudes, and institutional practices in producing exclusion. Together, these lenses enable a more nuanced analysis of how autism acceptance, peer belonging, and mental health intersect in U.S. high schools. The Social Model of Disability, originating from disability activism in the 1970s and 1980s, posits that disability arises not primarily from individual impairments but from the barriers, physical, social, and attitudinal, erected by society (Shakespeare, 2014). From this perspective, the exclusion of autistic students in high schools is less about their neurological differences and more about inflexible

curricula, untrained teachers, inaccessible communication modes, and peer cultures shaped by stigma (Goodall, 2019). For autistic adolescents, whose experiences of belonging are mediated by school environments, the Social Model underscores that it is the school system, not their neurology, that must change to promote equity.

The Neurodiversity Paradigm complements and extends this model. Pioneered by Judy Singer (1999), neurodiversity emphasizes that neurological variations such as autism are part of normal human diversity, akin to variations in race, culture, or gender. Kapp (2020) and colleagues highlight that neurodiversity challenges deficit-based clinical narratives and instead affirms autistic identities as valid and valuable. This paradigm pushes beyond access and inclusion toward cultural change, insisting that acceptance requires reconfiguring educational practices to recognize autistic strengths, perspectives, and agency (den Houting, 2019).

In the context of U.S. high schools, the Neurodiversity Paradigm invites us to ask: Are autistic students seen as fully legitimate members of the school community? Do policies and practices affirm their ways of communicating, learning, and socializing? Or do they implicitly pressure autistic students to conform to neurotypical norms in order to be accepted? These questions link directly to the study's focus on peer belonging and mental health. When schools embrace neurodiversity, autistic students are more likely to experience affirmation and belonging, which in turn support positive mental health outcomes (Botha & Frost, 2020). Conversely, when neurodivergence is pathologized, students internalize stigma, leading to heightened anxiety, depression, and alienation (Cage et al., 2019).

The integration of the Social Model of Disability and the Neurodiversity Paradigm offer three analytical insights for this study. First, it shifts attention from "fixing" autistic students to transforming school environments through policy, pedagogy, and peer culture. Second, it reframes belonging as a collective responsibility: peers, teachers, and administrators share accountability for creating inclusive climates. Third, it highlights acceptance as a structural as well as interpersonal process, requiring systemic shifts in school culture alongside attitudinal change.

This dual framework therefore guides the study in interrogating not just whether autistic students are included in U.S. high schools, but *how* schools operationalize inclusion: whether it reproduces tokenistic awareness or advances genuine acceptance that affirms neurodiversity and dismantles barriers. It positions autism acceptance and peer belonging as central to social justice in education, situating mental health not as an individual vulnerability but as an outcome profoundly shaped by school environments.

4. Methods and Materials

This study is conceptualized as a conceptual and integrative literature review, designed to synthesize existing scholarship on autism acceptance, peer belonging, and mental health in U.S. high schools. Unlike systematic reviews that focus exclusively on cataloging evidence (Gies et al., 2025), conceptual reviews aim to in-

interpret and connect diverse findings into a coherent framework that highlights theoretical, policy, and practice implications (Snyder, 2019). This approach is particularly appropriate given the emergent nature of research on autism acceptance and peer belonging, where conceptual clarity is still developing, and where insights from multiple disciplines, including education, psychology, disability studies, and sociology, must be woven together.

4.1. Scope and Focus

The review is bounded in scope by three key parameters. First, the population of focus is autistic adolescents between the ages of 14 and 18, corresponding to the typical U.S. high school years. This age group is particularly significant because adolescence is a critical developmental stage for identity formation, peer relationships, and mental health (Steinberg, 2017). For autistic students, peer belonging during this stage often directly shapes self-esteem, social confidence, and emotional well-being (Cappadocia et al., 2012).

In addition, the setting is U.S. high schools, which are pivotal institutions for academic preparation, socialization, and identity development. While much research has explored autism and inclusion at the elementary or college level, comparatively fewer studies have examined the high school context, despite its unique challenges such as heightened peer pressures, academic competition, and transitional planning for adulthood (Wei et al., 2013).

Also, the conceptual focus is on the intersection of autism acceptance, peer belonging, and mental health. While each of these areas has been studied independently, their intersections remain underexplored, particularly in high school contexts (Mezzatesta-Gava et al., 2025). This study therefore seeks to integrate insights across these domains to show how acceptance and belonging, or their absence, impact autistic students' mental health outcomes. Although this review focuses on U.S. high schools, international studies were integrated to address gaps in domestic research. For example, Botha (2021) examined autism acceptance in the United Kingdom, finding that peer belonging was shaped by broader cultural attitudes toward neurodiversity. Humphrey and Symes (2013) documented similar dynamics in inclusive classrooms in England, where school-wide acceptance programs improved autistic students' sense of safety and belonging. These global perspectives do not replace U.S.-based evidence but enrich it, helping to highlight how differences in culture, policy, and practice influence outcomes. Since U.S. research remains limited, especially on the direct links between acceptance, belonging, and mental health, including international literature strengthens conceptual clarity and provides comparative insights that sharpen the implications for American schools.

4.2. Data Sources

This review drew on a combination of peer-reviewed journal articles, policy documents, and advocacy reports to provide a comprehensive understanding of au-

tism acceptance, peer belonging, and mental health in U.S. high schools. Peer-reviewed sources were primarily identified from leading journals in education, psychology, and disability studies, including *Autism*, *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, *Exceptional Children*, and *Teaching Exceptional Children*. Policy documents included the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004), the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA, 2008), and federal guidance on inclusive education. Because lived experience and advocacy perspectives are often underrepresented in academic research (Hawke et al., 2022), the review also incorporated reports from organizations such as the Autistic Self Advocacy Network (ASAN), Autism Speaks, and the National Autistic Society, which provide critical insights into how policy and practice are experienced by autistic students and their families.

The search strategy combined terms related to autism acceptance (e.g., “*autism acceptance*”, “*neurodiversity*”), peer belonging (e.g., “*peer relationships*”, “*school connectedness*”), and mental health (e.g., “*well-being*”, “*depression*”, “*anxiety*”), cross-referenced with school contexts (e.g., “*high school*”, “*secondary education*”, “*inclusive education*”). Searches were conducted across major databases including PsycINFO, ERIC, and PubMed, supplemented by manual searches of key journals and backward reference tracking. To ensure relevance, sources published between 2000 and 2024 were prioritized, with earlier foundational works included where necessary to establish historical and theoretical context. Although the primary focus was on U.S. high schools, international studies were incorporated to address gaps in domestic research and to highlight comparative insights across cultural and policy contexts (Botha, 2021; Humphrey & Symes, 2013).

4.3. Analytical Approach

This review employed thematic synthesis as a strategy for integrating evidence, informed by approaches in health and education research (Toye et al., 2014; Major & Savin-Baden, 2010). Thematic synthesis was selected because it extends beyond description to generate interpretive insights (Naem et al., 2023). This makes it well suited for conceptual reviews that span varied contexts. In particular, it allows the construction of higher-order themes that connect individual study findings to broader theoretical frameworks, such as the neurodiversity paradigm (Khan et al., 2023). The process unfolded in three iterative stages.

- First, coding of findings involved systematically extracting descriptions of peer belonging, barriers to acceptance, and mental health outcomes. Codes were applied inductively to ensure sensitivity to the language and meanings embedded in each study.
- Second, descriptive themes were developed by grouping related codes into categories, such as “peer rejection and bullying”, “teacher facilitation of belonging”, and “acceptance and identity affirmation”. These categories provided a structured foundation for identifying cross-cutting issues across studies.
- Lastly, analytical themes were generated by interpreting these categories through

the lens of the social model of disability and the neurodiversity paradigm. This interpretive step reflects the argument of [Toye et al. \(2014\)](#) that synthesis should move beyond surface-level aggregation toward the creation of new conceptual understandings. In this review, such insights included the role of school climate in shaping acceptance, the mediating function of belonging for resilience, and the cumulative mental health consequences of exclusion ([Cage et al., 2018](#); [Goodall, 2019](#)). This iterative synthesis allowed the review to go beyond summarizing findings, instead offering integrative insights into how autism acceptance, peer belonging, and mental health are interconnected in high school contexts.

5. Positionality and Reflexivity

It is also important to acknowledge the positional stance of this review. As an integrative review, the study does not generate new empirical data but instead interprets existing evidence through the theoretical lenses of the Social Model of Disability and the Neurodiversity Paradigm. This framing intentionally challenges deficit-based perspectives in autism research by centering autistic voices, advocacy positions, and equity-oriented frameworks ([Kapp, 2020](#); [Botha, 2021](#)). Reflexively, the review situates itself within disability studies and educational justice scholarship. It recognizes that interpretations are influenced by these epistemological commitments.

6. Discussion

6.1. Autism Acceptance and Peer Belonging

One of the strongest themes to emerge from the literature is that autism acceptance in schools directly shapes peer belonging. Belonging is not merely about physical presence in the classroom but about being valued, recognized, and socially connected ([Goodenow & Grady, 1993](#); [Walton & Cohen, 2011](#)). For autistic students, who often experience heightened risks of bullying, peer rejection, or social isolation, acceptance becomes the foundation for psychological safety and participation in school life ([Hebron & Humphrey, 2014](#)).

Studies consistently demonstrate that when peers adopt an accepting stance, such as inviting autistic students into group activities or affirming their communication styles, students report higher levels of school connectedness, lower anxiety, and stronger mental health outcomes ([Cappadocia et al., 2012](#)). Equally, when autistic students are tolerated at best or excluded at worst, the lack of belonging predicts loneliness, depression, and disengagement from learning ([Mazurek, 2014](#); [Maïano et al., 2016](#)).

The concept of acceptance must also be distinguished from mere awareness. Autism awareness campaigns often emphasize deficits or “cures”, unintentionally reinforcing stigma ([Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2017](#)). In contrast, acceptance emphasizes valuing autistic ways of being, for example, recognizing stimming as self-regulation rather than misbehavior, or affirming alternative communication strat-

egies as equally valid forms of expression (Botha & Frost, 2020). Acceptance thus fosters environments where autistic students can authentically participate without masking or suppressing their identities.

From a developmental perspective, adolescence is a period in which peer belonging becomes central to identity formation (Steinberg, 2017). For autistic adolescents, experiences of belonging, or exclusion, can shape not only short-term academic motivation but also long-term mental health trajectories (Totsika et al., 2020). When students are excluded, they may internalize negative societal messages about autism, leading to diminished self-esteem and higher risk of depression and suicidal ideation (Cassidy et al., 2018). By contrast, peer belonging grounded in acceptance can build resilience, promote self-advocacy, and enhance well-being (Petrina et al., 2017).

Within U.S. high schools, the role of peer culture is particularly salient. School climates that emphasize competition, conformity, or narrow definitions of “normal” often exacerbate exclusion. On the other hand, schools that intentionally cultivate cultures of diversity, inclusion, and respect report stronger social outcomes for autistic students (Ostmeyer & Scarpa, 2012). Peer mentoring programs, lunch-buddy initiatives, and structured cooperative learning have been shown to foster both acceptance and belonging (Carter et al., 2015).

Thus, the evidence suggests that autism acceptance is not simply an attitudinal preference but a structural and cultural determinant of whether autistic students feel that they belong in their schools. Belonging, in turn, is a critical mediator of mental health and academic outcomes.

6.2. The Role of Teachers and Peers in Shaping School Connectedness

While peers play a central role in shaping belonging, teachers are equally critical architects of school connectedness for autistic students. Teachers’ attitudes and practices often signal to peers how to interact with autistic classmates, either reinforcing exclusion or modeling acceptance (Symes & Humphrey, 2010; Roberts & Simpson, 2016). For instance, when teachers visibly accommodate autistic students, by validating alternative communication modes, supporting sensory breaks, or implementing Universal Design for Learning (UDL) strategies, classmates are more likely to perceive these practices as normal and to extend acceptance (Burgstahler, 2015).

Also, teachers who exhibit low expectations or deficit-oriented views of autism may unintentionally legitimize peer exclusion. Research suggests that when educators frame autistic students as “problems” or “burdens”, peers often replicate these perspectives, resulting in heightened bullying and marginalization (Humphrey & Lewis, 2008; Cage et al., 2018). These dynamics illustrate how school connectedness is co-constructed through the interplay of adult practices and peer cultures.

In addition to modeling acceptance, teachers also mediate social opportunities for autistic students. Structured group work, cooperative learning, and peer-as-

sisted interventions have been shown to enhance both social participation and academic engagement (Carter et al., 2015). For example, Carter et al. (2015) found that structured peer networks increased not only the social interactions of autistic students but also their sense of school membership and perceived social support. By contrast, unstructured settings such as lunchrooms or hallways often remain exclusionary zones unless educators actively scaffold inclusion (Locke et al., 2016).

Peers themselves are not passive recipients of teacher influence; their own beliefs, knowledge, and social norms significantly shape autistic students' experiences of belonging. Interventions that target peer attitudes, such as disability-acceptance workshops, peer mentoring, or participatory action projects, have been shown to shift perceptions from tolerance to genuine inclusion (Swaim & Morgan, 2001). For example, Lindsay et al. (2014) reported that peer-led interventions fostered empathy and understanding, reducing stereotypes and improving the quality of friendships between autistic and non-autistic students.

Importantly, connectedness extends beyond academic participation to emotional safety. Research highlights that autistic students who report strong teacher-student relationships experience lower anxiety and higher well-being (Becker et al., 2014). Similarly, peer friendships, particularly when grounded in authenticity rather than superficial inclusion, act as protective factors against depression and loneliness (Bauminger & Kasari, 2000). This shows that school connectedness is not only an educational outcome but also a mental health determinant.

In sum, both teachers and peers jointly construct the ecology of school connectedness. Teachers establish the cultural and instructional climate, while peers reinforce or resist those norms. When both groups work synergistically toward acceptance, autistic students are more likely to thrive academically, socially, and emotionally. When teachers neglect inclusive practices or peers perpetuate stigma, the school environment becomes a site of risk rather than resilience.

6.3. How Lack of Acceptance Contributes to Social Isolation and Poor Mental Health

A growing body of evidence shows that lack of acceptance in school settings profoundly impacts the mental health of autistic students. When peers exclude, tease, or ignore autistic classmates, these experiences often accumulate into chronic social isolation, which is strongly linked to elevated rates of anxiety and depression (Hebron & Humphrey, 2014). For example, Humphrey and Symes (2010) found that autistic adolescents in mainstream schools were significantly more likely than their non-autistic peers to experience loneliness and peer victimization, both of which predicted poorer psychological adjustment.

Social exclusion operates through subtle as well as overt mechanisms. Beyond explicit bullying, autistic students often report being left out of group activities, ignored during social interactions, or stereotyped as "different" (Cappadocia et al., 2012; Humphrey & Lewis, 2008). Such micro-exclusions may appear less severe than direct harassment, but their cumulative impact erodes self-esteem, be-

longing, and trust in others (Cage et al., 2018). This aligns with the concept of “camouflaging”, whereby autistic students mask their identities to fit in socially; while sometimes successful in avoiding stigma, camouflaging is strongly correlated with exhaustion, anxiety, and suicidal ideation (Hull et al., 2017).

Importantly, these negative experiences are not confined to peer interactions. Institutional barriers, such as rigid classroom expectations, deficit-based teacher attitudes, and lack of accommodations, also function as forms of exclusion (Goodall, 2019; Robertson, 2010). For instance, autistic students who are penalized for sensory needs (e.g., leaving class due to noise) may internalize the belief that their needs are illegitimate, leading to shame and self-blame (Botha & Frost, 2020). Thus, lack of acceptance at the institutional level compounds peer rejection, creating a layered ecology of exclusion.

The mental health consequences of this exclusion are striking. Research indicates that autistic adolescents are up to four times more likely than non-autistic peers to experience clinical depression and six times more likely to have suicidal thoughts or behaviors (Hirvikoski et al., 2016). In schools, these risks are worsened when students lack supportive peer relationships or do not perceive teachers as allies (Sterzing et al., 2012). Conversely, when autistic students report even one genuine friendship or one supportive teacher, their risk of severe mental health challenges declines significantly (Mazurek, 2014; Carter et al., 2015). This illustrates the protective function of belonging and the profound psychological costs when acceptance is absent.

In addition, lack of acceptance undermines not only emotional well-being but also academic performance. Students who feel alienated are more likely to disengage from learning, avoid school, or drop out entirely (Goodall, 2019). Exclusion from collaborative learning opportunities limits the development of social and cognitive skills critical for long-term success (Locke et al., 2016). Thus, exclusion creates a cycle in which academic struggles reinforce stigma, deepening both social and psychological difficulties.

When schools fail to cultivate autism acceptance, they inadvertently become sites of harm rather than growth. The consequences extend far beyond adolescence, shaping long-term trajectories of mental health, employment, and social participation. Breaking this cycle requires addressing bullying or stigma directly and embedding systemic practices that normalize difference, promote peer belonging, and affirm autistic identities.

6.4. Examples of Promising Practices in Inclusive High Schools

While barriers remain significant, research and practice across the U.S. and internationally highlight several promising strategies that foster autism acceptance, peer belonging, and positive mental health outcomes in high schools. These approaches show that when schools shift from deficit-oriented models to strengths-based, inclusive frameworks, autistic students are more likely to thrive socially, emotionally, and academically. A summary of these practices across different lev-

els, peer, classroom, teacher, school-wide, family, and community, is presented in **Table 1**.

Table 1. Levels of promising practices for autism acceptance and belonging in high schools.

Level	Promising Practice	Evidence and Impact
Peer-based	Peer mentoring, peer buddy systems, <i>Circle of Friends</i> , structured peer groups	Enhances friendships, reduces loneliness, and builds empathy among peers; autistic students report greater confidence and belonging (Carter et al., 2015; Locke et al., 2016; Kasari et al., 2012; Humphrey & Symes, 2013; Koenig et al., 2010; Shmulsky et al., 2022).
Classroom-based	Universal Design for Learning (UDL), flexible curricula, sensory-friendly materials, digital accessibility tools	Reduces stress and improves participation through multimodal, predictable, and accessible formats; benefits all learners including autistic, ADHD, and ELL students (Meyer et al., 2014; Rao et al., 2017; Al-Azawei et al., 2017; Göransson et al., 2021; Dell'Anna et al., 2023).
Teacher-focused	Professional development (autism acceptance, trauma-informed practices, cultural competence); autistic-led PD	Improves teacher confidence and attitudes; autistic-led PD increases empathy and challenges deficit perspectives; culturally responsive PD addresses overlapping inequities (Syriopoulou-Delli et al., 2012; Lindsay et al., 2014; Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2017; Boscardin, 2021).
School-wide	Mental health integration (embedded counselors, safe spaces, SEL programs, mindfulness interventions)	Reduces anxiety, depression, and stress; improves emotional regulation, attention, and peer relationships; promotes resilience and school climate improvements (Rodgers et al., 2018; Cachia et al., 2016; Ridderinkhof et al., 2018; Durlak et al., 2011; Weissberg et al., 2015).
Family/Collaboration	Collaborative IEP planning including student and family voices	Ensures culturally responsive supports; student self-advocacy in IEP meetings builds agency; authentic partnerships improve sustainability (Chew et al., 2021; Dean et al., 2020; Test et al., 2014; Trainor, 2010; García & Ortiz, 2021).
Community/Advocacy	Partnerships with autistic-led organizations (e.g., ASAN) and local neurodiversity groups	Centers autistic voices in shaping policy and culture; co-created initiatives reduce stigma and promote acceptance; challenges stereotypes and affirms identity (Kapp, 2020; Botha & Gillespie-Lynch, 2022; Jones et al., 2020).

Peer-based supports. One widely recognized strategy is the implementation of peer mentoring and peer-mediated interventions. Programs such as *Circle of Friends* and peer buddy systems have been shown to enhance social interactions, reduce loneliness, and promote reciprocal friendships between autistic and non-autistic students (Carter et al., 2015; Locke et al., 2016). Evidence also shows that when autistic students are intentionally paired with trained allies in mentoring relationships, they report greater confidence and reduced isolation, while peers gain empathy and improved perceptions of autism (Kasari et al., 2012; Humphrey & Symes, 2013). Structured peer support groups extend this model further by providing safe spaces for autistic students to share experiences and build authentic friendships (Koenig et al., 2010; Shmulsky et al., 2022).

In addition to peer supports, schools can make a meaningful difference through curriculum design. Many have adopted Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles, which proactively structure curricula and classroom environments to

accommodate diverse learners (Meyer et al., 2014). UDL affirms neurodiverse ways of learning by embedding flexibility in how content is presented, how students engage, and how learning is assessed. Rather than treating accommodations as “add-ons”, UDL normalizes variation in learning styles from the outset. Recent evidence shows that autistic students thrive when they are offered sensory-friendly, multimodal formats such as visual supports, choice in assessments, and predictable routines (Rao et al., 2017; Al-Azawei et al., 2017). For example, studies conducted after the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted how digital tools, captioning, asynchronous learning modules, and adaptive platforms, allowed autistic students to reduce anxiety and participate more consistently (Göransson et al., 2021; Dell’Anna et al., 2023). Importantly, UDL also benefits all learners, reducing barriers for students with ADHD, learning disabilities, and English language learners (Courey et al., 2013). Thus, embedding UDL into everyday teaching not only affirms neurodiversity but also promotes equity across student populations.

Equally important is preparing educators to implement these inclusive principles. Teacher professional development has a powerful impact on school climate and student experiences. Training that emphasizes autism acceptance, trauma-informed practices, and cultural competence consistently improves teacher attitudes and confidence (Syriopoulou-Delli et al., 2012; Lindsay et al., 2014). Teachers who are well prepared to understand autistic perspectives are more likely to create classrooms that value difference, which in turn fosters peer acceptance and belonging. Recent studies confirm these trends. For example, Boscardin (2021) found that professional development in culturally responsive special education practices significantly improved teachers’ ability to address both disability and cultural identity. Moreover, PD programs that are co-facilitated by autistic trainers increase teachers’ empathy and willingness to adopt inclusive strategies (Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2017). In practice, this means shifting away from viewing autism through a deficit lens and instead recognizing the strengths, preferences, and voices of autistic students. Consequently, teacher learning is not simply about technique, but about cultivating inclusive mindsets that ripple through classrooms and peer groups.

Alongside academic and social inclusion, attention to mental health has become increasingly urgent. School-wide mental health supports offer proactive ways to foster resilience among autistic adolescents. Integrated models that embed mental health professionals within schools, provide safe spaces, and teach self-regulation skills have been linked to reductions in anxiety and depression (Rodgers et al., 2018). Emerging research highlights that autistic students benefit from programs that combine evidence-based therapies with universal wellness strategies. For example, mindfulness-based interventions like *MindUP* have been adapted for autistic youth, demonstrating positive effects on stress regulation, attention, and social-emotional functioning (Cachia et al., 2016). Furthermore, whole-school approaches that promote social-emotional learning for all students, such as Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) frameworks, have

been associated with better peer relationships and reductions in bullying (Durlak et al., 2011). Thus, integrating mental health initiatives into the daily fabric of schools ensures that belonging is tied not only to academic participation but also to emotional safety and wellness. A further dimension of promising practice is collaboration with families. Research consistently shows that when parents and educators work together, student outcomes improve (Chew et al., 2021). Collaborative IEP planning provides a structured avenue for such cooperation, ensuring that supports are culturally responsive and student-centered (Dean et al., 2020). Recent studies extend this argument, emphasizing the importance of including the student's own voice and peer perspectives in IEP processes. For instance, Test et al. (2014) found that self-advocacy training in IEP meetings significantly increased autistic students' sense of agency and belonging. Similarly, when families are engaged as partners rather than passive recipients, interventions are more sustainable and better aligned with cultural values (Trainor, 2010; García & Ortiz, 2021). These findings underscore that collaboration must go beyond compliance with legal mandates to become authentic partnerships that recognize the expertise of families and students themselves.

Finally, systemic change is most sustainable when schools collaborate with autistic-led advocacy groups. A growing number of high schools are building partnerships with organizations such as the Autistic Self Advocacy Network (ASAN) and local neurodiversity coalitions. These collaborations ensure that inclusion is not reduced to physical placement, but extended to cultural belonging and identity affirmation (Kapp, 2020). Current research supports this shift. Botha and Gillespie-Lynch (2022) argue that co-created initiatives, in which autistic advocates shape curricula or lead assemblies, reduce stigma more effectively than awareness campaigns designed by non-autistic educators. Similarly, Jones et al. (2020) show that involving autistic adults in teacher training not only enriches professional development but also disrupts deficit-oriented narratives. These partnerships emphasize authentic representation and model the principle of "nothing about us without us". By embedding autistic voices into school culture, institutions signal to students that their identities are valid, valuable, and worth celebrating.

6.5. Policy Implications: IDEA, ADA, and Inclusive Education Frameworks

The challenges and promising practices identified in U.S. high schools cannot be separated from the broader policy environment that shapes how inclusion and autism acceptance are enacted. Two major legal frameworks, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004) and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA, 2008), form the backbone of rights-based protections for autistic students in U.S. schools. However, the degree to which these policies are interpreted and implemented has significant implications for peer belonging and mental health.

IDEA mandates a Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) for students with disabilities, typically operationalized through Individualized Education Pro-

grams (IEPs). For autistic students, IDEA's promise is realized when IEP teams prioritize academic accommodations and also goals related to social interaction, peer relationships, and mental health support (Kurth & Gross, 2015). Yet, in many schools, IEPs remain narrowly focused on academic performance, overlooking broader aspects of student well-being and belonging. This gap often leaves autistic adolescents socially isolated, as it reinforces the very inequities IDEA was designed to mitigate (Morningstar et al., 2016). Similarly, the ADA requires schools to provide equal access and reasonable accommodations. While this has been instrumental in reducing overt forms of discrimination, it does not always guarantee the kind of cultural acceptance that is central to peer belonging (Shyman, 2015). Accommodations may grant access to classrooms, but without intentional efforts to foster inclusive peer cultures, autistic students may remain physically present yet socially excluded, a phenomenon Slee (2011) describes as "inclusive rhetoric with exclusive practices".

Although IDEA and ADA are critical, they often encourage a compliance mindset, where schools meet the minimum legal standard without transforming school culture (Zirkel, 2017; Shyman, 2015). In practice, this means autistic students may technically receive access, yet still face social exclusion and stigma (Slee, 2011). In contrast, systemic approaches such as Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) seek to embed inclusion and belonging into the daily routines, peer structures, and teaching practices of schools. MTSS integrates academic, behavioral, and mental health supports across three tiers. Thus, universal interventions for all students, targeted supports for at-risk groups, and intensive services for those with complex needs (Sugai & Horner, 2020; Freeman et al., 2017). This model does not wait for failure or rely only on accommodations; it proactively reshapes the entire school environment to foster acceptance and peer belonging. For autistic students, MTSS ensures that inclusion is not left to chance or dependent solely on legal rights but is cultivated through systemic, layered supports (McIntosh & Goodman, 2016).

Beyond IDEA and ADA, policy discussions increasingly emphasize the role of inclusive education frameworks such as Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and MTSS. These models shift the emphasis from individualized accommodations to systemic design. It aligns with calls from scholars and advocacy groups for more equity-driven approaches (CAST, 2018). When properly implemented, UDL and MTSS can help normalize diversity and reduce stigma by ensuring that all students, including autistic learners, have flexible pathways to participation.

Policy implications also extend to mental health services within schools. While IDEA and ADA address access and rights, neither explicitly guarantees robust mental health supports. The shortage of school-based mental health professionals, combined with uneven state funding, means that autistic adolescents often struggle to access timely care (Whitaker et al., 2018). Strengthening federal and state policies to integrate mental health into special education services could directly improve outcomes for autistic students by addressing the high prevalence of anx-

xiety, depression, and suicidality documented in this population (Mazurek, 2014; Hedley et al., 2018).

Policy reform should therefore move schools beyond compliance and toward systemic transformation. Legal protections remain essential, but they are not sufficient for belonging. Integrating MTSS with UDL principles creates environments where diversity is normalized, peer acceptance is fostered, and mental health is addressed as a shared responsibility. Such systemic approaches align with neurodiversity perspectives that call for cultural change rather than deficit correction (Botha & Gillespie-Lynch, 2022; Kapp, 2020). In this way, MTSS offers a blueprint for moving from “inclusive rhetoric” to authentic, lived inclusion.

Finally, the gap between policy and practice is widened by accountability pressures in U.S. schools, which often prioritize standardized test outcomes over inclusive culture and student well-being (Artiles, 2011). This tension highlights the need for policy reform that explicitly links equity, mental health, and peer belonging to measures of school success. Without such shifts, policies risk remaining compliance-driven documents rather than instruments of transformation.

7. Implications and Recommendations

The findings of this conceptual review reveal the urgent need for U.S. high schools to move beyond policy compliance toward systemic practices that foster autism acceptance, peer belonging, and mental health. While IDEA and ADA provide legal safeguards, implementation at the school level often falls short of creating environments where autistic students feel included, valued, and supported. Translating research insights into action requires school-wide, policy-driven, and practice-based reforms.

7.1. School-Wide Practices

One powerful avenue lies in adopting Universal Design for Learning (UDL). UDL emphasizes flexible learning environments that proactively address learner variability rather than reacting to deficits (CAST, 2018). Applied to autism, UDL can normalize the use of varied communication modes, sensory supports, and differentiated instruction, making classrooms more accessible to all students. Additionally, peer-based initiatives such as structured peer mentoring and *buddy systems* can cultivate belonging and reduce stigma. Evidence from inclusive schools shows that structured peer support enhances social connectedness for autistic youth and also builds empathy among neurotypical peers (Carter et al., 2015).

7.2. Mental Health Supports

Integrating school-based mental health services tailored to autistic adolescents is essential. Many autistic students experience heightened anxiety, depression, and social stress due to exclusion or bullying (Mazurek, 2014). Embedding counselors, social workers, and psychologists trained in autism-specific sup-

ports within schools ensures that early interventions are accessible. In addition, building multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) that link academic and social-emotional interventions can help schools address issues proactively. These services should also acknowledge the critical role of family-school partnerships in sustaining student well-being.

7.3. Teacher Professional Development

Teachers are gatekeepers of inclusive culture. Yet, many report feeling underprepared to support autistic students in general education classrooms (Kuyini et al., 2020). Professional development should move beyond technical accommodations toward equity-oriented training that emphasizes autism acceptance, culturally responsive pedagogy, and strategies to promote peer belonging. For example, workshops can include role-playing scenarios to challenge deficit-based perspectives and introduce strengths-based approaches. Training should also equip teachers to integrate social-emotional learning (SEL) into everyday practice, positioning it as a universal, not supplemental, aspect of education.

7.4. From “Awareness” to “Acceptance”

Public campaigns in schools often focus on autism awareness, but research shows that awareness alone does not shift attitudes or behaviors (Kapp, 2020). Schools must instead foster autism acceptance, emphasizing respect, belonging, and appreciation of neurodiversity. This involves classroom discussions that highlight autistic voices, curricula that normalize neurological differences, and school events that promote inclusion as a shared community value. Acceptance campaigns can transform school culture, moving beyond tolerance toward celebration of diversity.

7.5. Policy Recommendations

At the systemic level, U.S. education policy must reinforce the integration of autism acceptance, belonging, and mental health into inclusive education frameworks. This includes:

- Expanding IDEA mandates to explicitly incorporate mental health supports for autistic students.
- Providing federal and state funding to support UDL implementation and peer-mentoring initiatives.
- Incentivizing teacher preparation programs to embed autism acceptance and equity-focused training.
- Strengthening accountability measures that evaluate not only academic outcomes but also school climate, peer belonging, and student well-being.

Moreover, aligning education policy with broader mental health initiatives, such as the National Strategy on Children’s Mental Health, could ensure more comprehensive support for autistic adolescents.

8. Conclusion

Autism acceptance, peer belonging, and mental health are deeply interconnected dimensions of inclusive education. While U.S. high schools operate under legal frameworks such as IDEA and ADA, the lived realities of autistic students reveal persistent gaps between policy promises and school practice. Too often, inclusion is treated as placement rather than transformation, leaving autistic students physically present but socially marginalized. This disconnection has significant consequences: diminished well-being, increased risk of anxiety and depression, and weakened school engagement. The insights from this review emphasize that acceptance, not just awareness, is foundational to fostering environments where autistic students thrive. Acceptance reframes autism from a deficit to a dimension of diversity, affirming the strengths, identities, and potential of autistic adolescents. Peer belonging, meanwhile, is not an optional add-on but a core component of educational equity. When autistic students feel connected to peers and supported by teachers, their academic and emotional outcomes improve, and school becomes a place of genuine growth rather than exclusion. Schools therefore hold both a moral and professional responsibility to create cultures that value neurodiversity. Promising practices such as Universal Design for Learning, peer mentoring, and integrated mental health supports demonstrate that equitable inclusion is possible when leadership, policy, and community commitment align. Yet, these practices require sustained investment in teacher professional development, family engagement, and policy enforcement to be fully realized. Looking forward, more empirical, school-based research is urgently needed to examine how autism acceptance can be systematically cultivated in high schools and how peer belonging contributes to long-term well-being. Comparative studies across national contexts will further illuminate how cultural, policy, and institutional frameworks shape experiences of autistic students worldwide. Advancing autism acceptance in U.S. high schools is not simply a matter of compliance but of justice.

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