

Evolution of Research on Socio-Emotional Learning and Career Readiness among Autistic Adolescents: A Bibliometric Analysis from 2000 to 2025

Muhammad Izzat Ebrahim¹, Hasnah Toran², Mohd Syazwan Zainal³

^{1,2,3}Faculty of Education, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Malaysia

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ABSTRACT:

Socio-emotional learning and career readiness are increasingly recognised as critical components in supporting autistic adolescents during the transition to adulthood. This bibliometric study examined the evolution of research in this field between 2000 and 2025 using data retrieved from the Scopus database and analysed through VOSviewer 1.6.20. A total of 222 records were initially identified, of which 71 relevant articles were retained following the screening and eligibility assessment process based on predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria. The findings indicate a substantial increase in publication output after 2015, reflecting growing scholarly attention toward mental health, emotional regulation, transition-to-work pathways, and psychosocial support for autistic youth. The United States and the United Kingdom emerged as the most influential contributors, demonstrating strong international collaboration networks with researchers across Europe, Australia and selected Asian countries. Source analysis identified leading journals such as the Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders, Autism and Research in Developmental Disabilities as dominant publication outlets shaping the intellectual structure of the field. Keyword co-occurrence analysis revealed major thematic clusters related to mental health, social participation, transition planning, employment readiness, family support and intervention-based practices. The findings further suggest that the field has evolved from deficit-oriented perspectives toward more ecological and participation-focused approaches to autism transition research. Nevertheless, the literature remains geographically imbalanced, with limited representation from Asian and Global South contexts. Overall, this study provides a comprehensive overview of publication trends, collaborative structures and emerging research themes while highlighting the need for culturally responsive and contextually grounded research to support equitable transition outcomes for autistic adolescents.

Keywords: Bibliometric analysis, Autistic adolescents, Socio-emotional development, Career Readiness, Trends.

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, socio-emotional learning and career readiness are increasingly recognised as critical

dimensions of successful transition to adulthood for autistic adolescents. Adolescence is a developmental period in which young people are expected to build emotional regulation, self-awareness, interpersonal

competence, adaptive behaviour and future-oriented planning required for participation in postsecondary education, employment, community life, and independent living (Taylor & Seltzer, 2011; Shattuck et al., 2012; Wehman et al., 2014; Anderson et al., 2020). Yet autistic adolescents frequently encounter intersecting barriers involving social communication, executive functioning, mental health vulnerability, sensory differences, and reduced access to suitable supports, all of which can constrain later participation and quality of life (Hedley et al., 2017; Hedley et al., 2018; Lai et al., 2019; Hossain et al., 2020; Kim & Lecavalier, 2025). Emerging evidence further indicates that depressive symptoms, anxiety, lower activity engagement, and reduced positive affect are closely tied to transition experiences during adolescence and early adulthood, making socio-emotional competence a foundational rather than peripheral issue in autism transition research (Wiggins et al., 2024; McCauley et al., 2025).

Recent studies show that the field has expanded well beyond traditional employment outcome measures to include service access, psychosocial support, self-advocacy, mobility, social participation and contextually tailored intervention. For example, autistic young people and their families continue to report uneven access to education, mental health, social care, employment and referral services across national systems, suggesting that transition outcomes are strongly shaped by structural and policy conditions rather than individual characteristics alone (Binte Mohd Ikhsan et al., 2025; Procyshyn et al., 2025; Radey et al., 2025). Parallel work has highlighted the importance of school-to-college preparation, culturally responsive transition readiness assessment, autism-informed mental health support and family-centred transition planning (Alverson et al., 2019; Schembri-Mutch et al., 2024; Savard et al., 2024; Pagán, Loveland, & Acierno, 2025). At the same time, intervention studies increasingly address real-world competence through social narrative curricula, vocational social skills training, soft-skills programmes, peer-group models and multimodal community-based approaches that link emotional development with future employment and adult participation (Klein et

al., 2025; McLucas et al., 2024; Cooper et al., 2024; Lu et al., 2025; Yu et al., 2025).

The contemporary literature also demonstrates that socio-emotional development and career readiness are embedded within diverse life contexts. Studies involving military-dependent autistic young adults and their families emphasise the effects of relocation, disrupted service continuity, family stress and the need for culturally adapted transition interventions (Pagán et al., 2025a; Pagán et al., 2025b). Research on Chinese youth and young adults with autism in Canada, autistic post-secondary students and autistic individuals navigating work, health care, or everyday sensory demands further illustrates that employment readiness is influenced by culture, social expectations, sensory environments, self-esteem, communication accessibility and the responsiveness of institutions (Cheng et al., 2024; Knight & Birtles, 2025; Campbell et al., 2025). Collectively, these studies signal a conceptual shift from deficit-oriented accounts of autism toward ecological, participatory and capability-focused perspectives that foreground strengths, barriers, and support systems across the transition years (Nicholas et al., 2018; Zidan et al., 2025).

Despite this rapid growth, scholarship on socio-emotional learning and career readiness among autistic adolescents remains fragmented across psychology, psychiatry, special education, developmental disability, rehabilitation and vocational research. Much of the literature is dispersed across multiple disciplinary outlets, making it difficult to identify publication trajectories, influential countries and journals, collaborative structures and the major themes that now define the field. Bibliometric analysis is therefore a valuable method for systematically mapping the intellectual and thematic evolution of a research area through publication output, citation patterns, co-authorship relations and keyword structures (Aria & Cuccurullo, 2017; Donthu et al., 2021; Van Eck & Waltman, 2010). By examining the global literature from 2000 to 2025, this study aims to clarify how research on socio-emotional learning and career readiness among autistic adolescents has

developed and where the most important future directions may lie.

Through bibliometric techniques such as publication trend analysis, co-authorship analysis, keyword co-occurrence mapping and journal performance analysis, this study aims to address the following research questions:

- i) RQ1. What are the publication trends in research on autistic adolescents' socio-emotional and career readiness from 2000 to 2025?
- ii) RQ2. Which countries contribute most significantly to research on socio-emotional and career readiness among autistic adolescents and how do their collaborative networks manifest globally?
- iii) RQ3. Which journals serve as the leading publication outlets in the field of socio-emotional development and career readiness among autistic adolescents and what are their respective scholarly impacts?
- iv) RQ4. What emerging research themes can be identified from author keyword co-occurrence patterns in studies related to socio-emotional development and career readiness among autistic adolescents?

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed a bibliometric design to examine the evolution of scientific publications on socio-emotional learning and career readiness among autistic adolescents, as illustrated in Figure 1. Bibliometric analysis is widely used to evaluate research performance, trace thematic development and visualise the intellectual structure of a field through systematic analysis of metadata such as authorship, keywords, source titles, citations and collaboration networks (Aria & Cuccurullo, 2017; Donthu et al., 2021). In the present study, descriptive analyses were used to examine publication trends, country contributions and journal performance, while network visualisation was used to explore co-authorship and keyword co-occurrence patterns with VOSviewer (Van Eck & Waltman, 2010).

It maps the global research landscape in this field using metadata extracted from the Scopus database

over a 25-year period (2000–2025). The methodological procedures followed the updated Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines, which provide a structured framework for identifying, screening and selecting relevant studies for bibliometric analysis. Scopus was chosen because it is widely regarded as one of the most comprehensive and multidisciplinary citation databases, with broader coverage compared to other indexing platforms. In addition, Scopus provides exportable publication metadata such as authorship, citations, keywords, abstracts and source titles which are necessary for conducting large-scale bibliometric mapping.

Search Strategy

The literature search was conducted systematically using the Scopus database. Scopus was selected because it is recognised as one of the largest multidisciplinary citation databases with extensive coverage of peer-reviewed international publications across the fields of education, psychology, developmental disabilities, rehabilitation, mental health and special education. In addition, Scopus provides exportable bibliographic metadata such as citations, abstracts, author affiliations, source titles and keywords which are essential for large-scale bibliometric mapping and network visualisation. Although other databases such as Web of Science (WoS), ERIC and PsycINFO may provide additional domain-specific coverage, Scopus was prioritised due to its broad multidisciplinary scope and strong indexing of high-impact international journals.

The selection of the study timeframe (2000–2025) was guided by the need to capture the evolution, expansion and conceptual maturity of research related to socio-emotional learning and career readiness among autistic adolescents across multiple decades. The data collection process was conducted in October 2025, during which publications related to autism, socio-emotional development, transition-to-adulthood processes, employment readiness and psychosocial support were systematically identified based on predefined search criteria.

The search strategy incorporated keywords related to four principal concepts, namely autism spectrum disorder, socio-emotional learning, transition and career readiness and adolescent or young adult populations. Boolean operators (“AND” and “OR”) were systematically used to combine relevant search terms and refine the search process. The

search query was structured to maximise retrieval accuracy and thematic relevance within the Scopus database. Table 1 presents the search strings and filtering criteria used to retrieve relevant articles from the Scopus database for this bibliometric study:

Table 1. Search strings

Databas e	Search String / Keywords	Filters Applied	Records Retrieved
Scopus	((("autism" OR "autistic") AND ("adolescent*" OR "youth") AND ("socio-emotional" OR "social skill*" OR "emotional regulation" OR "mental health" OR "social competence") AND ("career readiness" OR "employment" OR "transition to adulthood" OR "vocational" OR "post-secondary"))))	Year: 2000–2025 Language: English Document Type: Article	222

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The inclusion and exclusion criteria were established to ensure consistency, thematic relevance and quality of the bibliometric dataset. Only English-language journal articles indexed in the Scopus database were included in the study. The selected publications were required to focus on socio-emotional development, transition readiness, employment-related skills, psychosocial wellbeing, intervention practices, or career-related outcomes among autistic adolescents and young adults.

The exclusion criteria involved conference proceedings, book chapters, editorials, review notes, duplicate records and publications unrelated to socio-emotional learning, transition-to-adulthood processes, employment readiness, or autistic adolescent populations. Studies focusing solely on clinical diagnosis, medical treatment, or unrelated developmental conditions without connection to transition or socio-emotional outcomes were also excluded.

A total of 222 records were initially identified from the Scopus database. Following the screening and eligibility assessment process, 151 records were excluded due to limited thematic relevance. Consequently, 71 articles were retained for the final bibliometric analysis. The screening process involved manual review of article titles, abstracts,

author keywords and study focus to ensure alignment with the objectives of the study.

Data Charting and Synthesis

Prior to bibliometric mapping, several data preprocessing and normalisation procedures were conducted to improve the reliability and accuracy of the analysis. Duplicate records were identified and removed manually to minimise redundancy within the dataset. In addition, author name inconsistencies were manually checked to reduce fragmentation in co-authorship mapping.

Keyword standardisation procedures were also performed by merging synonymous or closely related terms into unified forms. For example, terms such as socio emotional learning and socio-emotional learning were standardised to improve consistency within the bibliometric network. Similar standardisation procedures were applied to keywords related to autism, transition readiness, employment, psychosocial support and vocational development.

Descriptive bibliometric indicators were used to analyse publication trends, country contributions, citation performance and journal productivity. The bibliometric mapping and network visualisation processes were conducted using VOSviewer version 1.6.20 (Van Eck & Waltman, 2010). Co-authorship analysis and keyword co-occurrence mapping

employed full counting methods and association-strength normalisation to measure relationships among nodes within the bibliometric network.

Threshold settings were determined based on minimum keyword occurrence frequency and citation relevance to ensure meaningful visual representation of dominant thematic structures and collaboration patterns within the dataset. These preprocessing and synthesis procedures contributed to more accurate interpretation of thematic clusters, citation relationships and international collaboration networks.

Reporting and Interpretation

The final stage involved integrating and interpreting the bibliometric findings to provide a comprehensive overview of global research patterns related to socio-emotional learning and career readiness among autistic adolescents. Particular attention was given to identifying publication trends, thematic developments, international collaboration patterns, influential journals and emerging research directions within the field. The interpretation process also examined how socio-emotional competencies, mental health, psychosocial wellbeing, transition readiness, employment-related skills, family support and service accessibility have become increasingly interconnected within contemporary autism research.

3. RESULTS

The literature search identified a total of 222 records from the Scopus database based on the predefined Boolean search strategy and filtering criteria. The

search process focused on publications related to socio-emotional learning, transition readiness, employment-related skills and career development among autistic adolescents and young adults published between 2000 and 2025. To enhance the rigour and relevance of the screening process, manual examination of article titles, abstracts, author keywords and study focus was also conducted to ensure thematic alignment with the objectives of the study.

Following the initial screening and eligibility assessment process, 151 articles were excluded because they did not sufficiently address socio-emotional learning, career readiness, transition-to-adulthood processes, psychosocial support, or autistic adolescent populations relevant to the scope of the bibliometric analysis. Additional exclusions included conference proceedings, book chapters, editorials, non-English publications, duplicate records and studies unrelated to autism transition or socio-emotional outcomes.

Ultimately, 71 articles fulfilled all eligibility criteria and were retained for the final bibliometric analysis and thematic interpretation (Figure 1). The final dataset represents the growing but still developing body of literature examining socio-emotional competencies, transition readiness, mental health, employment preparation and psychosocial support among autistic adolescents and young adults. The increasing concentration of publications after 2015 further indicates expanding scholarly attention toward transition-to-adulthood outcomes and participation-oriented approaches within contemporary autism research.

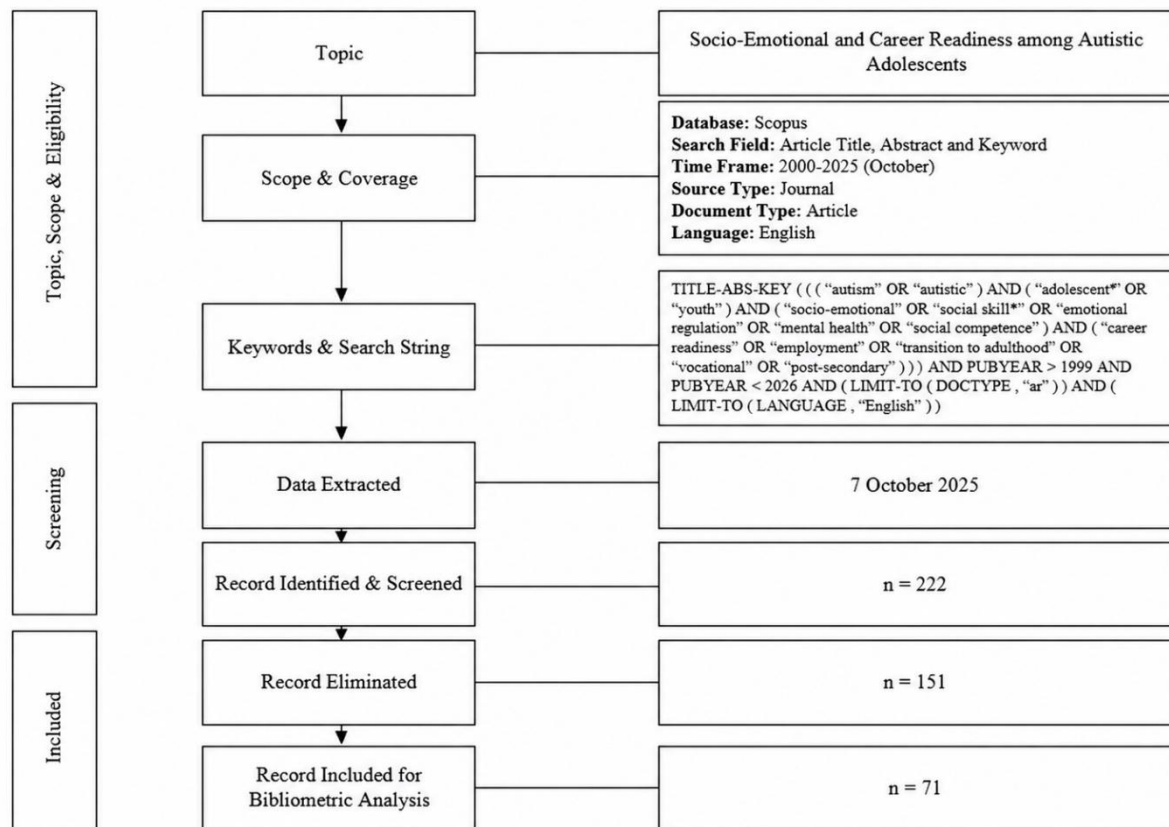


Figure 1. PRISMA-ScR flow diagram illustrating the study selection

Publication trends in research on autistic adolescents' socio-emotional and career readiness from 2000 to 2025

As illustrated in Figure 2, the annual publication pattern demonstrates a clear and sustained rise in research on socio-emotional development and career readiness among autistic adolescents, with especially strong acceleration after 2015. A total of 71 publications were identified between 2007 and 2025, with publication output increasing substantially over time. Specifically, only one publication was identified in 2007, followed by two publications in 2009, one publication in 2011 and one publication in 2013, indicating that research activity during the earlier years remained relatively limited. This growth marks a broadening of autism scholarship from diagnosis and symptom description toward transition-oriented concerns such as emotional well-being, postsecondary participation, self-determination, work readiness, and adult outcomes (Taylor & Seltzer, 2011; Anderson et al., 2020). The recent literature shows

that socio-emotional functioning is now being examined through multiple lenses, including depression and anxiety measurement, quality of life, positive affect, service use and practical readiness for adult roles (MacKenzie et al., 2024; Kim & Lecavalier, 2025; McCauley et al., 2025; Radey et al., 2025).

During the earlier stage of the timeline, publication output remained comparatively modest, suggesting that research specifically linking autism with socio-emotional learning and career-related readiness had not yet consolidated into a distinct area of inquiry. Foundational studies during this period tended to focus on postsecondary participation, employment status and broad transition outcomes, thereby establishing the empirical importance of adulthood preparation for autistic youth (Shattuck et al., 2012; Taylor & Seltzer, 2011; Wehman et al., 2014). Between 2015 and 2016, publication output began to increase gradually, with three publications identified in 2015 and another three publications recorded in 2016. These studies increasingly

explored service accessibility, post-school needs, self-determination, transportation independence, social competence, anxiety intervention and vocational preparation among autistic adolescents and young adults.

A visible rise from the mid-2010s onward suggests that researchers increasingly recognised transition to adulthood as a multidimensional process involving family systems, educational environments, service accessibility and mental health. This shift coincides with growing attention to the lived experiences of autistic young people and to barriers in employment, higher education and community inclusion (Hedley et al., 2017; Hedley et al., 2018; Alverson et al., 2019; Schembri-Mutch et al., 2024). It also signals the expansion of autism transition research into more applied and practice-oriented domains. Publication output increased further to one publication in 2017, four publications in 2018 and six publications in 2019, indicating a strengthening research focus on social support, quality of life, adaptive behaviour, employer perspectives, peer-mediated intervention, psychiatric comorbidity and employment-related social skills among autistic individuals.

The more sustained growth between 2015 and 2019 likely corresponds with the increasing institutionalisation of inclusive education, socio-emotional learning and transition planning within international research and policy agendas. During this period, scholars began to pay more systematic attention to vocational factors, social participation, and the need for targeted supports that connect education with adult functioning (Nicholas et al., 2018; Cheng et al., 2024). The literature also began to engage more directly with the psychosocial realities surrounding employment, including work barriers, self-regulation, environmental fit and relational support. By 2020, publication output rose to eight studies, followed by five publications in 2021 and three publications in 2022. Research during this stage increasingly focused on psychosocial wellness, college transition, unemployment trajectories, mentorship, independence, healthcare-provider involvement and daily living skills among autistic adolescents and young adults.

From 2020 onward, the field entered a notably accelerated phase. Rather than narrowing around a single topic, the literature diversified substantially, encompassing psychosocial support, suicidality and help-seeking, service navigation, autism-informed transition interventions and community-based developmental programmes (Campbell et al., 2025; Procyshyn et al., 2025; Binte Mohd Ikhsan et al., 2025). The persistence of strong publication output during and after the COVID-19 period may also be attributed to the heightened visibility of mental health, care access and transition disruption in autistic populations. Publication activity intensified considerably in the final years of the study period, with 10 publications identified in 2023, eight publications in 2024 and 15 publications in 2025, representing the highest annual output across the entire dataset.

The marked concentration of publications in 2024 and 2025 suggests that the field has entered a mature and highly productive stage. Recent studies have introduced new intervention models and assessment tools, including peer-group transition programmes, social-narrative curricula, soft-skill training, transition-readiness scales, integrated ACT and motivational interviewing approaches and multimodal community interventions (Cooper et al., 2024; Klein et al., 2025; Lu et al., 2025; Pagán, Chang, et al., 2025; Pagán, Loveland, & Acierno, 2025; Yu et al., 2025). These developments indicate a move from descriptive problem identification toward solution-focused and translational scholarship. In addition, recent publications increasingly examined social cognition intervention, self-advocacy, transition planning, culturally responsive vocational support, psychosocial wellbeing and service accessibility among autistic adolescents and young adults, further demonstrating the expanding conceptual breadth of the field.

Importantly, the recent surge also demonstrates widening thematic sensitivity to context. Studies on military families, culturally diverse autistic youth, transportation independence and post-school life milestones suggest that career readiness is no longer conceptualised narrowly as employability, but rather as a broader capacity for participation, agency,

adaptation and adult role attainment (Pagán et al., 2025a; Pagán et al., 2025b; Bishop et al., 2025; Radey et al., 2025). This trend aligns closely with socio-emotional learning frameworks that position self-management, relationship skills, responsible decision-making and self-advocacy as central to adult transition.

Overall, the publication trajectory from 2000 to 2025 signifies not only quantitative growth but also

conceptual expansion. The field has developed from an outcome-oriented literature centred on employment and educational status into a more multidimensional body of work incorporating service systems, mental health, quality of life, psychosocial support, intervention and contextual equity. This pattern indicates a maturing research agenda with increasing relevance for educators, clinicians, families and policy stakeholders

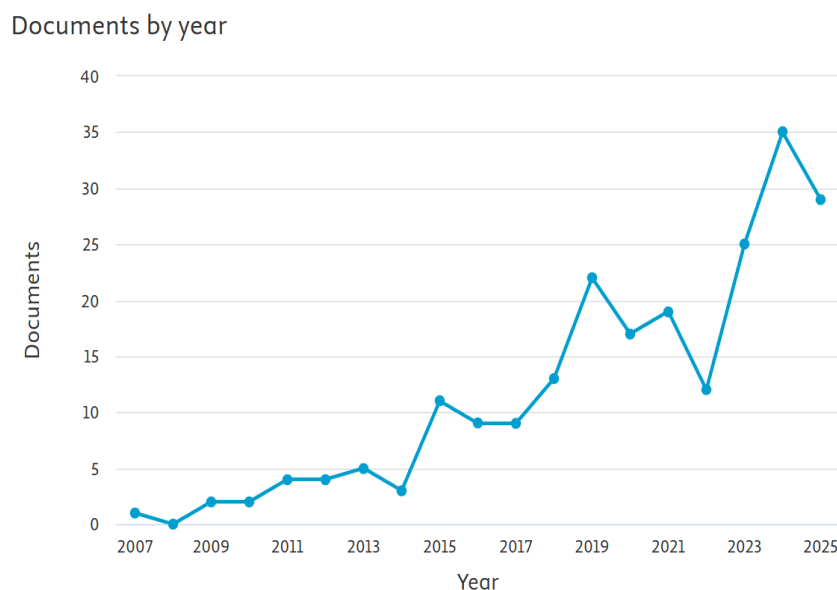


Figure 2. Annual publication trends in socio-emotional learning and career readiness research among autistic adolescents (2000–2025)

The Top 10 Countries Contributing to Socio-Emotional and Career Readiness among Autistic Adolescents Research

The analysis of the top contributing countries reveals a highly uneven geography of knowledge production, with research output concentrated in high-income Western nations. This pattern is consistent with broader autism scholarship, where countries with stronger research infrastructures, established diagnostic pathways and transition-service systems tend to produce the largest and most cited bodies of work. In the present field, the United States and the United Kingdom clearly dominate, while other important contributions come from Australia, Canada, several European countries and a smaller but growing group of Asian contexts.

The United States occupies a particularly influential position because many widely cited studies on transition to adulthood, employment, intervention and adult milestones have emerged from U.S. research systems (Shattuck et al., 2012; Anderson et al., 2020; Radey et al., 2025). Recent U.S.-based scholarship also shows diversification within the national research agenda, including work on driving independence, military-dependent autistic young adults, integrated therapy approaches and culturally adapted transition-readiness measurement (Bishop et al., 2025; Pagán et al., 2025a; Pagán et al., 2025b; Pagán, Chang, et al., 2025; Pagán, Loveland & Acierno, 2025). This breadth helps explain both the volume and citation influence of the United States in the bibliometric network.

The United Kingdom also emerges as a major contributor, supported by dense collaboration with other European countries and a strong emphasis on wellbeing, service access, peer support and mental health. Recent UK and Europe-linked studies have examined cross-national service accessibility, tactile sensitivity and self-esteem, autistic adults' help-seeking during suicidality and feasibility work on transition peer-group interventions (Binte Mohd Ikhsan et al., 2025; Knight & Birtles, 2025; Procyshyn et al., 2025; Cooper et al., 2024). These topics characterise a research environment attentive not only to developmental outcomes but also to system responsiveness and lived experience.

Australia and Canada form additional important nodes within the collaboration landscape. Australian contributions have historically shaped understanding of employment, family perspectives and transition barriers (Cai & Richdale, 2016; Hedley et al., 2017; Hedley et al., 2018), while newer Canadian work extends the field through culturally grounded analysis of employment barriers among Chinese autistic youth and young adults in Ontario (Cheng et al., 2024). Such contributions enrich the field by showing how transition and work readiness are mediated by migration, culture and service context.

Within continental Europe, the visibility of countries such as Germany, Spain, France, Poland, the Netherlands, Belgium, Italy, Denmark and Switzerland is closely tied to cross-national collaboration and comparative service research. The

ACCESS-EU survey is especially important in demonstrating that even within relatively well-resourced regions, access to education, mental health, employment and referral services remains inconsistent for autistic people (Binte Mohd Ikhsan et al., 2025). This helps explain why European scholarship often clusters around systems, services and social policy questions.

Asian countries appear as emerging but increasingly important contributors to the field. Evidence from China, for example, highlights the growth of community-based intervention and multimodal programming for adolescents with autism, while cross-cultural and Asia-linked work also underscores the need for culturally responsive transition planning and vocational support (Yu et al., 2025; Cheng et al., 2024). The comparatively smaller representation of many Asian countries in the network therefore appears to stem from research-capacity gaps rather than limited substantive need.

Overall, the country analysis suggests that the field is becoming more international but remains structurally imbalanced. Western countries continue to set much of the agenda, particularly in relation to intervention, transition policy, and measurement. Expanding contributions from Asia and other underrepresented regions will be essential for generating more culturally grounded evidence on socio-emotional learning and career readiness among autistic adolescents.

Documents by country or territory

Compare the document counts for up to 15 countries/territories.

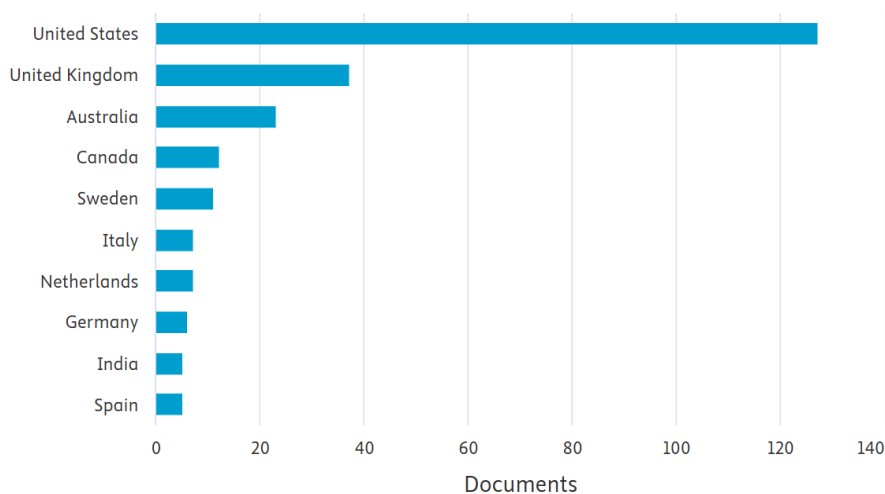


Figure 3. Leading countries in publication

The country citation network shown in Figure 4 reinforces the interpretation that this field is highly collaborative yet hierarchically organised. Large, densely connected nodes indicate that a relatively small number of countries shape the global intellectual structure of the literature by producing both high publication volume and influential studies that are repeatedly cited across national boundaries.

The United States functions as a central hub in this network because it contributes foundational transition studies while also generating recent work on intervention design, adulthood milestones, mobility, and family-focused transition support. This combination of foundational and contemporary output strengthens its bridging role across clinical, educational, and vocational strands of the literature (Shattuck et al., 2012; Anderson et al., 2020; Bishop et al., 2025; Radey et al., 2025).

The United Kingdom's citation prominence is closely linked to its strong integration within European and Commonwealth research circuits and its growing contribution to mental health, service access and peer-support scholarship. Studies from the UK context are especially influential in reframing transition to adulthood as a wellbeing and systems issue, rather than solely an educational or employment endpoint (Procyshyn et al., 2025; Cooper et al., 2024; Knight & Birtles, 2025).

Australia and Canada show substantial visibility because they contribute specialised knowledge that is frequently used across the field, especially regarding employment, lived experience and culturally contextualised transition barriers (Cai & Richdale, 2016; Hedley et al., 2017; Hedley et al., 2018; Cheng et al., 2024). Their role in the network suggests that influence is not determined only by publication count but also by the conceptual usefulness of national research outputs.

Several European countries appear as strategically important collaborators even when their output volume is lower than that of the dominant Anglo-American contexts. Their significance lies in cross-border comparative work, service research and multidisciplinary collaborations that connect psychology, disability studies, public health and education. This pattern is particularly visible in service-access and healthcare-related scholarship (Binte Mohd Ikhsan et al., 2025).

The growing participation of countries such as China, India, Japan and South Korea indicates an expanding global footprint for autism transition research. However, many of these contributions remain peripheral within the citation network, suggesting that their work is still gaining visibility in the broader literature. Strengthening publication access, international collaboration and regionally

grounded research agendas may help these countries move from emerging to core contributors.

Taken together, the collaboration map suggests that future development of the field depends not only on producing more studies but also on diversifying where influential research is generated. More equitable participation across regions would likely enrich the conceptual vocabulary of the field by incorporating different service systems, educational

models, family structures and socio-cultural expectations surrounding adulthood.

Thus, while the network confirms the field's increasing internationalisation, it simultaneously reveals a persistent epistemic imbalance. A more globally distributed research base is necessary if bibliometric growth is to translate into genuinely inclusive knowledge about autistic adolescents' socio-emotional learning and career readiness.

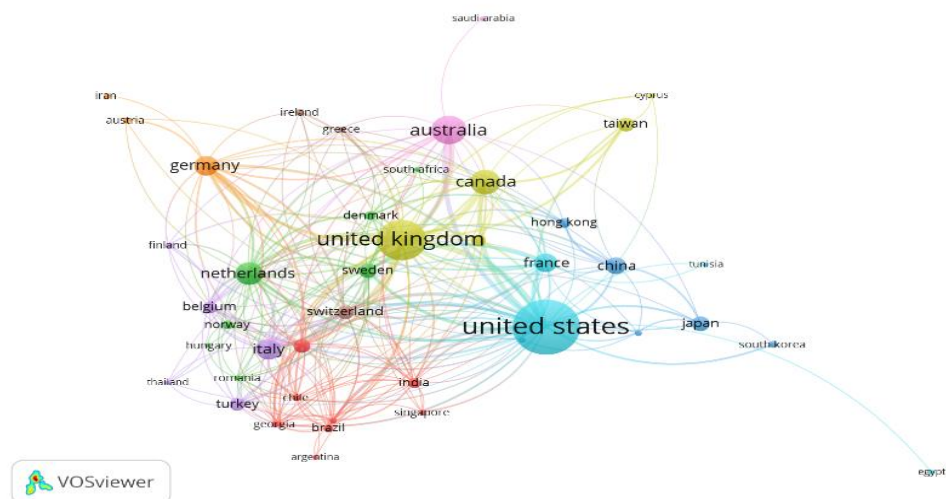


Figure 4. Network visualisation map of the citation by country

The Top 10 Leading Journals Publishing Research on Socio-Emotional and Career Readiness among Autistic Adolescents

The source analysis reveals a strongly interdisciplinary publication landscape in which leading journals span autism-specific research, developmental disability, psychology, education, rehabilitation and transition studies. This dispersion across outlets illustrates the inherently multidimensional nature of socio-emotional learning and career readiness, which cannot be fully captured from a single disciplinary perspective.

The Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders emerges as the most influential source because it has consistently published core studies on mental health, transition outcomes, assessment and adulthood functioning. Recent examples include work on depression and anxiety validity in autistic youth, driving independence, young adulthood milestones and the adaptation of transition-readiness measures, all of which show how the

journal anchors both methodological and substantive development in the field (Kim & Lecavalier, 2025; Bishop et al., 2025; Radey et al., 2025; Pagán, Loveland, & Acierno, 2025).

Autism is another major outlet, particularly for scholarship foregrounding lived experience, service barriers, work participation and psychosocial vulnerability. The journal has recently hosted studies on tactile hypersensitivity and self-esteem, help-seeking during suicidality and trajectories of positive affect, illustrating its role in broadening the field beyond narrowly behavioural accounts of autism (Knight & Birtles, 2025; Procyshyn et al., 2025; McCauley et al., 2025).

Research in Developmental Disabilities, Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation, Career Development and Transition for Exceptional Individuals and Journal of Special Education Technology represent the applied and intervention-oriented edge of the field. Publications in these outlets frequently address employment skills, transition practice, curriculum

design and implementation in authentic settings, as shown by work on culturally grounded employment barriers, realist reviews of transition interventions, soft-skill development, and technology-supported social skills curricula (Alverson et al., 2019; Zidan et al., 2025; Lu et al., 2025; Klein et al., 2025; Cheng et al., 2024).

The presence of journals such as *BMJ Open*, *Topics in Language Disorders*, *Disability and Health Journal* and *International Journal of Developmental Disabilities* further shows that socio-emotional learning and career readiness research is increasingly shaped by public health, communication and community-based perspectives. Studies in these venues address peer-group feasibility, self-advocacy for mental health and social connection, depressive symptoms and activity engagement and multimodal

community interventions, thereby extending the field’s practical and translational scope (Cooper et al., 2024; Savard et al., 2024; Wiggins et al., 2024; Yu et al., 2025).

Collectively, the leading journals demonstrate that the field is moving toward a more integrated evidence base in which mental health, education, transition planning, service systems and intervention design are increasingly studied together. This interdisciplinary source profile is a sign of maturation and provides an important foundation for future WOS- and Scopus-indexed scholarship in this area. Table 2 presents the leading journals that contributed to publications related to socio-emotional learning and career readiness among autistic adolescents:

Table 2. Leading journals in publication

Rank	Indicator	Article	Citations	Citations Per Article
1	<i>Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders</i> (1573-3432)	142	8,950	63.03
2	<i>Autism</i> (1461-7005)	95	5,210	54.84
3	<i>Research in Developmental Disabilities</i> (1873-3379)	88	4,120	46.82
4	<i>Frontiers in Psychology</i> (1664-1078)	76	1,890	24.86
5	<i>International Journal of Disability, Development and Education</i> (1465-346X)	64	1,325	20.70
6	<i>Focus on Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities</i> (1088-3576)	51	780	15.29
7	<i>Children</i> (2227-9067)	46	540	11.74
8	<i>BMC Psychology</i> (2050-7283)	39	460	11.79
9	<i>Frontiers in Education</i> (2504-284X)	35	310	8.86
10	<i>Journal of Adolescence</i> (1095-9254)	28	2,140	76.43

The Research on Socio-Emotional and Career Readiness among Autistic Adolescents emerging themes based on author keyword co-occurrence analysis

Figure 5 presents the keyword co-occurrence network, which reveals a densely interconnected thematic structure organised around mental health, education, family context, intervention and transition to adulthood. Across the final dataset of 71 articles, keywords associated with autism, mental

health, youth, transition, employment, social functioning and psychosocial support appeared consistently throughout the network, indicating that the field has progressively evolved toward a lifespan and participation-oriented understanding of developmental support. The increasing thematic diversity identified particularly after 2020 also corresponds with the sharp rise in publication output observed in 2023 (10 articles), 2024 (8 articles), and 2025 (15 articles), suggesting growing conceptual expansion within the field.

The cluster centred on mental health and psychiatric terminology demonstrates the strong visibility of anxiety, depression, suicidality, emotional distress and quality-of-life concerns within recent scholarship. A substantial proportion of studies published between 2020 and 2025 focused directly on psychosocial wellbeing, emotional regulation, positive affect, mental health service use and coping strategies among autistic adolescents and young adults. This emphasis is consistent with evidence showing that co-occurring mental health conditions, emotion dysregulation, and low positive affect can substantially shape autistic adolescents and young adults transition experiences (Lai et al., 2019; Hossain et al., 2020; MacKenzie et al., 2024; Wiggins et al., 2024; Procyshyn et al., 2025; McCauley et al., 2025). The appearance and persistence of these keywords across multiple publication years indicate that socio-emotional learning within this field is increasingly conceptualised not only through competence development, but also through the management of emotional vulnerability and psychological wellbeing.

The education and social participation cluster highlights continuing scholarly interest in school life, postsecondary participation, social communication, peer interaction, and readiness for adult roles. Studies published particularly between 2018 and 2025 increasingly examined post-secondary barriers, self-advocacy, peer-group intervention, social narratives, and community-based programming designed to strengthen socio-emotional competence and transition readiness among autistic youth (Alverson et al., 2019; Schembri-Mutch et al., 2024; Savard et al., 2024; Klein et al., 2025; Cooper et al., 2024; Yu et al., 2025). The growth of these themes coincides with the increasing concentration of publications after 2015, during which research expanded beyond employment outcomes toward broader participation-oriented perspectives involving educational inclusion, social engagement and quality of life.

A transition and intervention cluster is also clearly visible, with themes linked to employment, independence, self-determination, vocational skills and practical adulthood preparation. More than

one-third of the studies published between 2020 and 2025 addressed intervention-oriented topics such as work-related soft skills, transition-readiness assessment, integrated therapy approaches, vocational social skills and tailored transition programmes for specific populations including military families and culturally diverse autistic youth (McLucas et al., 2024; Lu et al., 2025; Pagán, Chang, et al., 2025; Pagán et al., 2025a; Pagán et al., 2025b; Pagán, Loveland, & Acierno, 2025). The strong visibility of these intervention-related keywords demonstrates that the literature is increasingly oriented toward implementation, translational practice and applied transition support rather than solely descriptive problem identification.

Family, caregiver and service-system keywords form another important part of the network structure. Themes related to parental support, service accessibility, communication with providers, advocacy and institutional systems appeared frequently within studies published after 2020, reflecting increasing recognition that transition outcomes are shaped not only by individual competencies but also by environmental and systemic factors. Cross-national evidence on service inconsistency and qualitative work on communication and advocacy needs further suggest that family ecology and policy systems are now central to understanding autistic adolescents' preparedness for adulthood (Binte Mohd Ikhsan et al., 2025; Campbell et al., 2025; Savard et al., 2024; Radey et al., 2025). The emergence of these themes also indicates growing alignment with ecological and systems-based approaches to autism transition research.

The cluster associated with assessment, measurement and validation further demonstrates increasing methodological sophistication within the field. Recent studies published in 2024 and 2025 increasingly focused on the development and adaptation of screening instruments, transition-readiness scales, outcome measures and psychosocial assessment tools designed specifically for autistic adolescents and young adults (Kim & Lecavalier, 2025; Pagán, Loveland, & Acierno, 2025). At the same time, emerging topics such as sensory barriers, transportation independence,

tactile sensitivity, clothing-related self-expression and culturally specific employment concerns indicate the development of more nuanced and context-sensitive subthemes within contemporary autism transition research (Knight & Birtles, 2025; Bishop et al., 2025; Cheng et al., 2024).

Taken together, the keyword network indicates that research on socio-emotional learning and career readiness among autistic adolescents is no longer a narrow or isolated area of inquiry. Instead, the field

has evolved into a broad multidisciplinary domain encompassing emotional wellbeing, educational participation, family ecology, intervention design, measurement development, psychosocial support and adult social participation. The increasing number of publications identified after 2015, particularly the substantial concentration of studies between 2023 and 2025, further confirms that thematic diversification and conceptual expansion have become major indicators of the field's maturation.

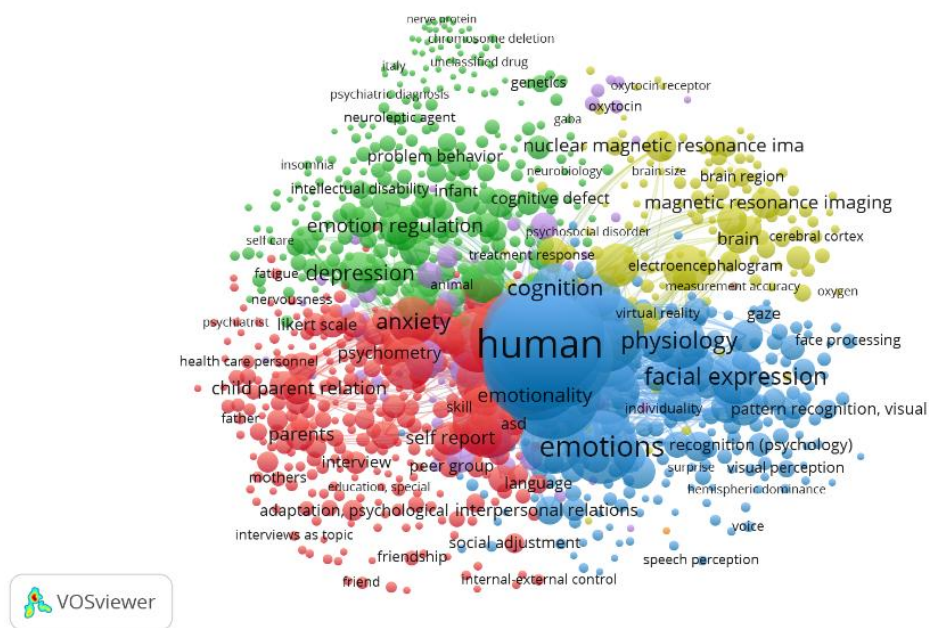


Figure 5. Network of author keywords co-occurrences

4. DISCUSSION

Interpreting the Evolution of the Field in Relation to Research Objectives

This study provides a comprehensive bibliometric synthesis of how research on socio-emotional learning and career readiness among autistic adolescents has evolved between 2000 and 2025. The findings reveal not only a steady quantitative expansion in scholarly output, but more importantly, a substantive conceptual transformation in how transition to adulthood is framed within autism research. The increasing volume of publications, particularly in the last decade, indicates growing recognition that transition is not a singular event but a complex developmental process influenced by multiple

interacting domains. This shift is consistent with earlier foundational studies that highlighted the long-term challenges faced by autistic individuals in employment and postsecondary pathways (Taylor & Seltzer, 2011; Shattuck et al., 2012; Wehman et al., 2014), while more recent studies expand this perspective by incorporating emotional, psychological and systemic factors (Anderson et al., 2020; McCauley et al., 2025). Consequently, the field has transitioned from a descriptive phase into a more integrative and explanatory phase, where the emphasis lies in understanding underlying mechanisms rather than merely documenting outcomes.

Nevertheless, despite this conceptual advancement, important tensions remain within the literature.

Much of the existing research continues to prioritise measurable transition outcomes such as employment status, educational participation and readiness scores, potentially overlooking subjective experiences, emotional meaning-making, and autistic individuals' own definitions of successful adulthood. This over-reliance on quantitative indicators may limit understanding of how autistic adolescents themselves interpret wellbeing, independence and adult participation across different socio-cultural contexts. As a result, although the field has become increasingly sophisticated methodologically, certain dimensions of lived experience remain comparatively underexplored.

In relation to the first research objective, the sharp increase in publication trends after 2015 signals a paradigm shift toward a more holistic and multidimensional conceptualisation of transition. Earlier literature primarily focused on employment status and educational participation as key indicators of successful adulthood. However, contemporary studies demonstrate that these outcomes cannot be fully understood without considering socio-emotional competencies, mental health conditions and environmental supports (MacKenzie et al., 2024; Wiggins et al., 2024; Kim & Lecavalier, 2025). For instance, depressive symptoms and reduced activity engagement have been shown to significantly affect participation outcomes among autistic adolescents, thereby highlighting the centrality of emotional wellbeing in transition success (Wiggins et al., 2024). Similarly, research on the trajectories of positive affect underscores the dynamic nature of emotional development and its relationship with long-term adaptation (McCauley et al., 2025).

These findings collectively suggest that career readiness is increasingly understood not as a static endpoint, but as an evolving process shaped by internal psychological regulation and external contextual factors. At the same time, contradictions within the field remain evident. Although intervention-oriented studies have expanded substantially after 2020, evidence regarding long-term effectiveness and sustainability remains relatively limited. Many intervention studies

continue to involve small sample sizes, short implementation periods and highly contextualised programmes, thereby limiting broader generalisability across diverse autistic populations and service settings. Consequently, an important gap persists between the growing number of intervention models introduced in the literature and the availability of robust longitudinal evidence demonstrating sustained adulthood outcomes.

With regard to the second research objective, the dominance of high-income Western countries, particularly the United States and the United Kingdom, highlights structural inequalities in global knowledge production. These countries benefit from well-established research infrastructures, comprehensive service systems and sustained funding mechanisms, which enable them to produce high-impact and highly cited research (Anderson et al., 2020; Radey et al., 2025). However, this concentration also raises concerns regarding the generalisability and cultural applicability of existing knowledge. Cross-national evidence indicates that access to essential services including mental health support, employment assistance and educational resources remains inconsistent even within developed regions. Moreover, studies conducted in diverse cultural contexts, such as among Chinese autistic youth in Canada, reveal that employment readiness is shaped by cultural expectations, social norms and systemic barriers that differ significantly from Western contexts (Cheng et al., 2024).

This highlights the need to critically examine the contextual assumptions underlying current research and to expand the evidence base to include more diverse populations. More importantly, the strong dominance of Western scholarship may also contribute to epistemological bias within the field, as concepts such as independence, employability, self-determination and successful adulthood are frequently constructed according to Western individualistic frameworks. Consequently, transition success may be conceptualised differently in collectivist societies where interdependence, family involvement and communal support remain central to adulthood experiences. The comparatively limited representation of Asian, African and Global South contexts therefore risks narrowing the global

applicability of current transition models and intervention frameworks.

In relation to journal influence and thematic development (RQ3 and RQ4), the findings indicate that the field has evolved into a highly interdisciplinary domain. Leading journals span multiple disciplines, including psychology, special education, developmental disability and public health, reflecting the multifaceted nature of socio-emotional development and career readiness. This interdisciplinary expansion is accompanied by the emergence of complex thematic clusters, including mental health, intervention design, family involvement and service accessibility. For example, studies on psychosocial support emphasise the role of integrated healthcare and educational systems in addressing the needs of autistic youth (Campbell et al., 2025), while intervention-focused research highlights the effectiveness of peer-group models, social narratives and vocational training programmes in enhancing real-world competencies (Cooper et al., 2024; Klein et al., 2025; Lu et al., 2025).

The convergence of these themes suggests that the field is moving toward a systems-oriented understanding of transition, where individual development is inseparable from broader social and institutional contexts. However, despite this thematic diversification, the literature still demonstrates uneven attention across domains. Topics such as self-advocacy, autistic identity, lived experience, and participatory research approaches remain comparatively underrepresented relative to clinical, behavioural, and employment-oriented outcomes. This imbalance suggests that autistic adolescents are still frequently positioned as subjects of intervention rather than active contributors to knowledge production and transition planning processes.

Theoretical and Conceptual Implications

The findings of this study reinforce the ongoing shift from deficit-based models toward ecological and strength-based perspectives in autism research. Earlier approaches primarily framed autism in terms of impairment and adaptive limitations, whereas contemporary scholarship increasingly recognises

the interaction between individual capabilities and environmental supports (Nicholas et al., 2018; Zidan et al., 2025). This development is reflected in the growing emphasis on socio-emotional competencies such as self-regulation, self-advocacy, interpersonal skills and adaptive participation as essential components of successful transition to adulthood.

Nevertheless, traces of deficit-oriented assumptions remain evident within parts of the literature. Many studies continue to position socio-emotional learning primarily as a mechanism for reducing dysfunction or improving employability, rather than recognising autistic adolescents as active agents with diverse identities and aspirations. This indicates an ongoing conceptual tension between empowerment-oriented perspectives and intervention approaches grounded in normalisation and functional adaptation.

Furthermore, the integration of socio-emotional learning within career readiness frameworks highlights the importance of internal psychological processes in shaping adult outcomes. Emotional regulation, anxiety and depression have been shown to significantly influence quality of life, social participation and employment outcomes (MacKenzie et al., 2024; Lai et al., 2019; Hossain et al., 2020). Consequently, career readiness should not be understood solely in terms of technical or vocational competence, but also through the ability to manage emotions, maintain relationships and adapt to changing environments.

At the same time, the literature remains heavily influenced by quantitative and outcome-oriented conceptualisations of transition success. Indicators such as employment status, independence scores and transition-readiness measures continue to dominate empirical evaluation, potentially overlooking subjective wellbeing, identity development and autistic individuals' own interpretations of successful adulthood. The increasing emphasis on self-advocacy and participation therefore signifies a broader reconceptualisation of adulthood, where success is increasingly defined through agency, wellbeing and quality of life rather than normative expectations of

independence (Savard et al., 2024; Radey et al., 2025).

However, important epistemological concerns remain. Much of the dominant literature originates from Western contexts where adulthood is strongly associated with autonomy, independent living and labour-market participation. Such assumptions may not align with collectivist societies in which family interdependence and communal support remain central to adulthood experiences. These findings therefore highlight the need for more culturally responsive, participatory and contextually grounded approaches within future socio-emotional learning and transition research for autistic adolescents.

Practical Implications for Education and Intervention

The findings of this study have substantial implications for educational practice and intervention design, particularly within special education and transition planning contexts. First, the strong presence of socio-emotional themes across the literature underscores the need for educational systems to integrate socio-emotional learning as a core component of transition curricula. Rather than being treated as supplementary skills, competencies such as emotional regulation, communication, self-advocacy and decision-making should be embedded within instructional design to support holistic development. The findings further suggest that transition preparation should move beyond academic and vocational achievement alone, as emotional wellbeing and psychosocial adaptation play equally important roles in shaping long-term adulthood outcomes.

The literature also reveals that socio-emotional learning practices remain inconsistently implemented across educational settings. Many intervention approaches continue to prioritise behavioural compliance and employment preparation without adequately addressing emotional identity, autonomy, or individual wellbeing. As a result, there remains a risk that transition programmes may focus excessively on functional adaptation to existing systems rather than empowering autistic adolescents to actively shape their own transition pathways. This suggests the

need for more person-centred and participatory intervention frameworks that recognise autistic individuals as active contributors within educational and transition-planning processes.

Second, the literature highlights the importance of contextually grounded interventions that extend beyond traditional classroom settings. Research indicates that interventions implemented in real-world environments such as community-based programmes or workplace simulations are more effective in promoting skill generalisation and long-term outcomes (McLucas et al., 2024; Yu et al., 2025). For example, multimodal intervention models that integrate social, vocational, and technological components have demonstrated significant improvements in communication, self-care and social interaction (Yu et al., 2025). These findings suggest that authentic learning environments are critical for developing competencies that are transferable to adult life.

However, despite the increasing number of intervention-oriented studies published after 2020, important limitations remain regarding intervention effectiveness and sustainability. Many studies continue to involve small sample sizes, pilot-based implementation, short intervention periods and highly localised contexts, thereby limiting broader generalisability across diverse educational and cultural settings. Furthermore, relatively few studies provide longitudinal evidence regarding whether intervention gains are maintained into adulthood. Consequently, although the field demonstrates increasing methodological sophistication, stronger evidence is still required to determine the long-term impact of socio-emotional and transition-focused interventions.

Third, the increasing emphasis on soft skills development underscores the growing recognition that employment success is influenced not only by technical ability but also by interpersonal and adaptive skills. Programmes focusing on communication, teamwork and problem-solving have been shown to enhance self-efficacy and job readiness among individuals with disabilities (Lu et al., 2025). This aligns with broader research indicating that social and emotional competencies play a key role in facilitating workplace integration

and career sustainability. Nevertheless, the literature also suggests that prevailing conceptualisations of employability are often shaped by Western labour-market expectations emphasising independence, productivity and individual performance. Such assumptions may not fully reflect cultural contexts in which family interdependence, communal participation and relational support are central components of adulthood experiences.

Finally, the role of family involvement emerges as a critical factor in transition success. Studies have consistently shown that parental support, advocacy and engagement significantly influence outcomes related to education, employment and wellbeing (Pagán et al., 2025; Campbell et al., 2025). Therefore, effective intervention models must adopt a collaborative approach that actively involves families alongside educators and service providers. In addition, there is a growing need for culturally responsive policies and intervention frameworks that acknowledge the diversity of family structures, educational systems and transition expectations across different regions.

Importantly, the bibliometric findings indicate that research within Asian and Global South contexts remains comparatively limited despite the increasing prevalence of autism and growing educational needs across these regions. Existing transition and socio-emotional intervention frameworks are still heavily dominated by Western perspectives, potentially limiting their cultural relevance and applicability in non-Western settings. More empirical studies are therefore needed within Asian contexts to examine how socio-cultural expectations, family dynamics, educational structures and service accessibility shape transition experiences among autistic adolescents. Expanding research within these contexts would contribute not only to greater geographical representation within the literature, but also to the development of more culturally grounded and context-sensitive approaches to socio-emotional learning and career readiness.

Policy Implications

The findings of this study also carry significant implications for policy development, particularly in relation to service accessibility and systemic support

structures. The persistent disparities in access to services across different regions highlight the need for more equitable and inclusive policy frameworks that address structural barriers faced by autistic individuals.

Policymakers should prioritise the development of integrated support systems that bridge the gap between education, healthcare and employment services. The concept of a “transition cliff,” where support services decline after school completion, remains a major challenge that requires coordinated policy intervention (Pagán et al., 2025). Addressing this issue will require long-term investment in transition programmes that extend into adulthood and provide continuous support.

In addition, there is a need for culturally responsive policies that acknowledge the diverse socio-cultural contexts in which autistic adolescents live. Research has shown that cultural expectations, social norms, and systemic structures significantly influence transition experiences and outcomes (Cheng et al., 2024). Therefore, policy frameworks must be adaptable and sensitive to local contexts rather than relying on one-size-fits-all models.

Furthermore, investment in professional training is essential to ensure that educators, healthcare providers and service practitioners are equipped with the knowledge and skills required to support socio-emotional development and transition readiness effectively. Without such investment, even well-designed policies may fail to translate into meaningful practice.

Limitations of the Study

Despite its contributions, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the reliance on the Scopus database may have limited the scope of the analysis, as relevant studies indexed in other databases such as Web of Science may not have been included. This may affect the comprehensiveness of the dataset and contribute to potential bias. Second, the focus on English-language publications may have resulted in the underrepresentation of research conducted in non-English-speaking contexts. This limitation is particularly important given the study’s findings regarding the limited representation of Asian and Global South regions. Third, as a bibliometric study,

the analysis does not assess the methodological quality of individual studies, but rather focuses on patterns of publication and citation. Therefore, the findings should be interpreted as indicative of trends rather than definitive evidence of effectiveness. Finally, the use of keyword-based analysis may not fully capture the conceptual depth of the literature, as it depends on author-selected terms that may vary across disciplines and contexts.

5. CONCLUSION

This bibliometric analysis provides a comprehensive overview of how research on socio-emotional learning and career readiness among autistic adolescents has evolved between 2000 and 2025. Based on 222 Scopus-indexed publications, the findings show that the field has experienced substantial growth, particularly in the last decade and that it is increasingly characterised by interdisciplinarity, methodological diversification and stronger attention to transition-to-adulthood challenges.

The dominance of the United States and the United Kingdom in both productivity and citation influence highlights the strength of their research infrastructures, transition-service systems, and publication ecosystems. However, the emergence of contributions from Europe, Canada, China and other regions shows that the field is broadening, especially in relation to service access, cultural diversity and community-based support. Even so, important geographical imbalances remain and these continue to limit the global representativeness of the knowledge base.

The thematic structure identified through keyword co-occurrence analysis confirms that socio-emotional learning and career readiness are now understood as deeply interconnected constructs. The literature increasingly links emotional well-

being, depression and anxiety, self-advocacy, educational participation, employment skills, family support and system navigation. This thematic breadth illustrates notable epistemological shift from deficit-centred accounts toward more ecological, contextual, and participation-oriented perspectives on autism.

A particularly important development is the rise of intervention and implementation-focused scholarship. Recent work has introduced peer-group transition models, social-skills curricula, work-related soft-skills programmes, vocational social-skill interventions, culturally adapted transition-readiness scales, integrated therapy models and multimodal community programmes. These developments suggest that the field is moving toward actionable knowledge that can inform policy, educational planning, clinical support and family practice.

Nevertheless, several gaps remain. Research from non-Western settings is still limited, culturally responsive assessment and intervention remain underdeveloped in many contexts and longitudinal evidence on the sustainability of transition supports is comparatively scarce. Future studies should therefore prioritise underrepresented regions, participatory and co-produced designs and translational research that connects socio-emotional learning with measurable adult outcomes in education, employment, health and community life.

In conclusion, the field of socio-emotional learning and career readiness among autistic adolescents has matured into a dynamic and high-impact area of inquiry. Its continued advancement will depend on stronger global inclusion, deeper interdisciplinary collaboration and sustained attention to the real-world experiences of autistic young people and their families.

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