

## A review of research into stakeholder perspectives on inclusion of students with autism in mainstream schools

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### ABSTRACT

Increasing numbers of students with autism are being educated in mainstream schools. However, outcomes for students with autism are poor when compared to typical students and students with other developmental disabilities. In order to better understand facilitators and barriers to success at school for students with autism, research into the attitudes of key stakeholders, educators, parents, people with autism, to inclusion in mainstream schools for students with autism, was reviewed. Key themes emerging included attitudes to inclusion, the characteristics of autism and social communication in particular and interaction with the school environment, and consequent student problem behaviour. Level of knowledge and understanding of school staff emerged as the primary issue with all stakeholders identifying the need for more training. Other support needs identified included the need for structural support, resources and funding. Parents, in particular, identified the need for a collaborative approach to the education process. The findings highlight the need to translate theory into practice to increase capacity in schools to provide effective educational programmes for students with autism.

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### Introduction

Autism is a neurodevelopmental condition that affects social communication in particular. People with autism also have difficulties with restricted or repetitive behaviours and for many this includes sensory problems (American Psychiatric Association 2013). Autism makes it difficult to make sense of the world, disables conventional insight and results in difficulty understanding and communicating about internal and external states and behaviour (self and others). The way these characteristics manifest and impact on the person with autism and those around them in both the short and long term depends on the social and environmental context (Prizant 2015). The term autism is used to refer to all individuals on the autism spectrum.

Since the mid-90s, UNESCO's Salamanca Statement (United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation 1994) commitment to inclusive education has increased for all regardless of disability resulting in a steady rise in the relative numbers of students in mainstream schools identified with a disability (Snyder and Dillow 2013). Inclusion involves 'the incorporation of all children and youths as active fully participating members of the school community' (Lynch and Irvine 2009, 286). Adherence to a rights-based perspective is associated with increasing numbers of students with disabilities, including autism, in mainstream classrooms. In the USA, there were 31.7% students with disabilities in mainstream classes in 1989 and 56.8% in 2007 (Snyder and Dillow 2013), while in

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