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## Research Associate Summary Report

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# Reaching out, reaching in

Implications for leaders of mainstream schools and their support service providers in supporting children with an autistic spectrum disorder

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## Background

The National Autistic Society (Batten et al, 2006, p 13) estimates that there are now 1 in 110 children with an autistic spectrum disorder (ASD) in our schools. It is likely, therefore, that a great many mainstream schools will be looking to provide positive and appropriate inclusion for their ASD pupils, frequently in conjunction with specialist support services.

The focus of my research was to identify:

- the key features of successful inclusion support services for children with an ASD in mainstream schools
- the leadership practices applied within these contexts to ensure effectiveness

I hope that this study, both in summary and full versions, will be of interest to school leaders in both special and mainstream schools as a starting point for reflecting on existing practice, to promote discussion on their future roles and to gain practical ideas for supporting children with an autistic spectrum disorder.

## Methods

My research encompassed providers of inclusion support services from maintained special schools, independent special schools, resource bases within mainstream schools and support services provided centrally by local authorities.

Sources of data included:

- interviews with headteachers and leaders of inclusion support services
- email conversations with a range of professionals
- discussions with headteachers, special educational needs co-ordinators, staff of mainstream schools and parents

## Findings: leadership

The findings related to leadership can be grouped under the headings: attitude, communication, approach and development.

### Attitude

- **Vision:** the most successful work was achieved when there was a shared and clear idea of what meeting individual need might look like. This could, in part, be achieved through:
  - collaborative practices focused on analysing situations and thinking about possible ways forward
  - articulating agreed strategy and communicating this to stakeholders

Service leaders believed it was essential that they themselves had a clear vision and were able to inspire others.

- **Commitment:** all leaders emphasised their commitment to inclusion and that their modelling of this was a key factor in influencing the attitudes of others.

### Communication

Service leaders emphasised the importance of:

- building the confidence of mainstream teachers in applying strategies; central to this was establishing a culture of trust developed through, for example, showing professional empathy for the situation and being able to communicate knowledge and strategies from an external perspective
- negotiating and mediating in situations where participants were often facing significant challenges
- listening carefully to problems

*Really listen – so that you are not providing something that they have already had or haven't got the resources to implement.*

**Support service leader**

## Approach

- **Innovation:** support service leaders were adept at developing creative approaches to problems through seeing things differently. Specialised approaches that were perhaps unknown to mainstream staff were modelled and implemented.
- **Partnership:** leaders of support services based at special schools recognised their role in developing greater partnership work owing to its benefits for both mainstream children and those in their own schools. This included:
  - shared staff development and training
  - joint mainstream and specialist working opportunities, for example, for moderation and the use of P level assessments
- **Organisation:** managing both workload and staffing required substantial organisational skills, especially in providing the wide range of outreach support.
- **Flexibility:** all leaders emphasised the importance of flexibility – the ability to change and adapt their provision to suit individual needs, matching provision to context.

*You need to be flexible, you need to be able to communicate and find out what are the core needs to put in a package tailored to the individual.*

### Support service leader

- **Collaboration and distribution:** leading in isolation was seen as detrimental to the sustainability of the service leader's work. They needed to acknowledge the limit of their personal capacity and to seek collaborative solutions. Distributing leadership, including developing people's skills in the team to become experts in particular fields, was described as a long-term strategy for many of the services.

## Development

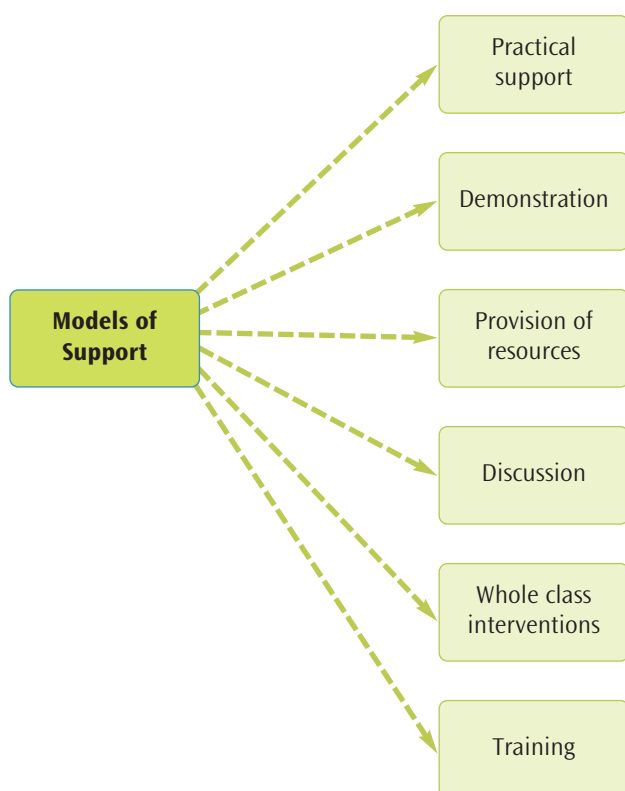
- **Strategy:** all service leaders considered it vital to be looking for more ways to work with mainstream schools in order to meet growing need. None seemed complacent about their current position, with all describing initiatives they were planning to implement. However, some reported that uncertainty around the future role of special schools had affected their development of mainstream support.
- **Self-evaluation:** service leaders constantly evaluated their provision to ensure individuals' needs were being met effectively within organisational capacity. Leaders focused on the following questions.
  - Who **can** provide the best support for the child?
  - What **does** that support look like?
  - **Where** is the best environment to achieve this?
- **Professional development**
  - Many service leaders felt it was their role to be at the forefront of research, for example, by attending national and international conferences on autism and accessing resources such as the National Autistic Society's website.
  - Service leaders equipped their staff to be confident in their outreach roles. Training and mentoring for this included a focus upon:
    - growing an extensive knowledge base about autism
    - developing interpersonal and consultancy skills
    - encouraging staff to participate in research activities
  - Most of the mainstream school leaders emphasised the importance of:
    - whole-school training by the support service, especially that which included all staff
    - tailoring their training to the situation
  - Service leaders supported these approaches as they built mainstream school capacity and reduced dependency.

## Range of interventions

All those interviewed promoted the use of an eclectic approach, choosing the best from a range of diverse strategies dependent on the situation, for example, Treatment and Education of Autistic and related Communication Handicapped Children (TEACCH), Social Use of Language Programme (SULP) and Social Stories.™ These were some of the strategies mentioned by leaders as being particularly beneficial for helping children to access learning (more detailed descriptions are in the full report).

Service leaders emphasised the need for early referrals and categorised the main ways in which they worked with mainstream staff as shown in Figure 1.

**Figure 1: Methods of working with mainstream staff**



## Implications for leaders of mainstream schools and their support service provider

From the interviews, the following leadership characteristics were identified as central to how effective service leaders conducted their roles. However, it is how these are combined with those of others, including mainstream school leaders, that lies at the heart of developing the best partnership-based support for the child with an ASD (Figure 2).

**Figure 2: The effective leader**



Consequently, implications for both are:

- making time for dialogue and co-working to build trust and develop shared:
  - understanding
  - partnerships that are mutually beneficial
  - good practice
  - vision
- enabling the development of knowledge in mainstream partner schools about ASD and effective strategies to support children and build capacity to:
  - develop mainstream staff confidence
  - aid translation of strategies for support to other contexts
  - reduce dependency
- promoting a can-do culture of partnership

## Final words: making a difference

Many service leaders stated that, in their work, successful inclusion did not just mean the placement of a child in a mainstream class. Some leaders described successful inclusion experiences undertaken by children attending special units and special schools.

However, all those interviewed judged support services to be making a positive difference to the inclusion of children with an ASD into mainstream schools, based on a wide range of data, both quantitative and qualitative:

*Huge difference – the impact for a lot of the children has been a better experience of learning and a better experience of being part of their school community.*

**Headteacher of mainstream primary school**

## References

Batten, A, Corbett, C, Rosenblatt, M, Withers, L & Yuille, R, 2006, *Make School Make Sense. Autism and Education: the reality for families today*, London, National Autistic Society

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