

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Stakeholder Experience Evaluating Whole-School Practice Designed to Improve Educational Outcomes for Autistic Students[†]

Helen McLennan¹, Jacqueline Roberts¹ and Greer Johnson²

¹Autism Centre of Excellence, Griffith University, Australia, and ²Griffith Institute for Educational Research, Griffith University, Australia

Corresponding author. Helen McLennan; Email: helen.mclennan@hdr.qut.edu.au

(Received 19 October 2022; revised 25 March 2023; accepted 30 March 2023; first published online 02 May 2023)

Abstract

Team participation in whole-school action research can assist the educational reform required for autistic students. Little is known about the experience of school community stakeholders engaged in the first stage of an implementation science process: evaluation of current practice. This study was designed to explore stakeholder experience and knowledge gained following a process of evaluation of whole-school practice related to the education of autistic students. A collective case study was employed across two Australian secondary schools, with team meetings designed to provide an opportunity for the self-evaluation process to take place and the data for the study to be generated. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the dialogue between participants during focus group discussions with each team. Findings are represented through six themes that provide insight for future practice. Both stakeholder teams reported that the evaluation process was a positive experience to engage in and resulted in a strengthening of knowledge about good practice for autistic students. Findings provide encouragement to other school teams engaging in a similar process; however, future teams may need to feel ready for this work and might benefit from the structure of a wider action-research cycle aligned to implementation science processes.

Keywords: autism; evaluation of practice; whole-school practice; inclusive education; implementation science

There is a high priority for school teams to reflect upon and improve the practices in their schools to educate autistic students.¹ This follows local and international movement towards inclusive education (e.g., Queensland Department of Education, [n.d.](#); United Nations, [2016](#)), an increase in the number of autistic students in regular schools (e.g., NSW Department of Education, [2020](#)), and an ever-present concern from various stakeholders that autistic students are not always receiving the specialised support they require at school (Mitchelson et al., [2021](#); Roberts & Simpson, [2016](#); Starr & Foy, [2012](#)). School reform, however, is a complex process (Fullan & Miles, [1992](#)). Both Fullan ([2016](#)) and Guldberg et al. ([2017](#)) have advocated for collaborative practice in school reform, with Fullan specifically recommending school systems ‘use the group to change the group’ (p. 544). Further, engaging school leaders to cooperatively lead the process of school reform is considered important (Roberts & Webster, [2022](#); Trimmer et al., [2021](#)). Associated with this collaborative approach to facilitating school practice change, Roberts and Webster ([2022](#)) suggested that employment of whole-school action

[†]This manuscript was accepted under the Editorship of Umesh Sharma.

research, aligned with implementation science processes (Fixsen et al., 2013), holds promise for guiding the school reform required for autistic students.

Whole-School Action Research and Implementation Science

Whole-school practice refers to the overall educational program in a school (Lipsky & Gartner, 2012). This includes systems, policies, environments, and ways of working. Taking a whole-of-school approach involves considering all stakeholders in a school community and requires a focus on consistency across classrooms and general school environments (Fox et al., 2019; Roberts & Webster, 2022). Employing a collaborative whole-school action research process typically includes the participation of stakeholders from within a school community to plan for and actively implement good practice across a school system. *Implementation science* provides methods that align with an action research process through four implementation stages, which are (1) the identification of good practice and exploration of a system's current practice; (2) resource acquisition and staff capability building; (3) initial implementation of new practice; to (4) full implementation of new practice with fidelity (Fixsen et al., 2013). Three 'drivers' (Fixsen et al., 2013, p. 220) represent components of successful implementation: (a) competency (e.g., staff confidence in the practice); (b) organisation (e.g., structure for implementing practice over time); and (c) leadership (e.g., involvement in the implementation process). For the current study, stakeholder participation was investigated in one of the early implementation activities — exploration of current whole-school practice. This stage provides opportunity for reflection on practice strengths and determination of priorities for change (Fixsen et al., 2013).

Evaluation of current whole-school practice was considered by Webster and Roberts (2022) to be a key component of school reform for autistic students in a pilot study across three Australian schools. Similarly, a recent study by Carrington et al. (2021) included a period of school practice exploration to guide a school connectedness improvement journey in another Australian school community. In both studies, the overarching action research processes were detailed in the articles. There is less information provided, however, about the stakeholder experience of engagement in the evaluation-of-practice processes.

Stakeholder Views of Whole-School Evaluation of Practice

Education stakeholders may include school leadership members, teachers, support staff, parents, and students. Research has been published about stakeholder experience in evaluation processes related to education broadly, as well as in the field of inclusive education. The perceived benefit of whole-school self-evaluation processes has been attributed to the opportunity to clarify school effectiveness goals and alignment of school communities towards meeting these goals (Karagiorgi et al., 2015; Mann & Smith, 2013). Positive stakeholder views relating to collaborative reflection opportunities and usefulness of an evaluation tool have been recorded in studies detailing use of the Index for Inclusion (Booth & Ainscow, 2011) to guide review of a school's inclusive culture, policy, and practice (e.g., Carrington & Duke, 2014; McMaster, 2015). Although most reported experiences of self-evaluation in these studies have been positive, McMaster (2015) suggested that stakeholder experience during a 'renegotiation of meaning' (p. 244) throughout school reform has led to discomfort at times.

Evaluation Processes Specifically Relevant to Autistic Students

Although some argue inclusive education reform will encompass the required school practice change for autistic students (e.g., Lynch & Irvine, 2009), the specialised needs of autistic students (Saggers et al., 2016) indicate there is scope for a detailed evaluation-of-practice process specifically relevant to this cohort. Research about the use of autism-specific evaluation tools has mostly been quantitative and

investigated use of the tools to measure change in educator practice or knowledge following application of professional learning programs (e.g., Maddox & Marvin, 2013; Odom et al., 2013, 2018). These studies included reference to team collaboration and use of a guiding tool in the exploration phase of implementation of good practice in schools. There remains a research gap, however, investigating stakeholder experience and knowledge gained from engaging in an evaluation of whole-school practice in relation to autistic students. The current study was undertaken to address this research gap. The aim of the current study was to investigate stakeholder team engagement in a process of evaluation of whole-school practice relevant to autistic students. The two research questions were as follows:

1. What is the experience of two teams of school community stakeholders engaged in a process of evaluation of their whole-school practice relevant to the education of autistic students?
2. What knowledge is gained by stakeholder teams relating to (a) priorities for school improvement, (b) strengths of current school practice, and (c) good practice for educating autistic students?

Methods

A collective case study design (Stake, 1995) was employed for this study. This provided opportunity for generating both shared and unique perspectives of two stakeholder teams about their experience evaluating autism practice in their respective schools. Data analysed from focus groups with the included teams, alongside research field notes, comprised the two cases.

Participants

Purposive sampling was used to recruit education teams who had an interest in improving the processes and supports for autistic students in their schools. Recruitment was assisted by a not-for-profit state autism agency, in addition to email communication with school leaders suggested to the research team by known contacts. From 19 school teams approached, two independent Catholic schools situated in an Australian capital city readily agreed to participate. Leaders from the schools who chose not to participate cited competing school priorities or that their school teams were not ready for a self-evaluation process at that time. The first school that participated, School 1, is a school for male students consisting of an upper primary school (Years 5–6) and a secondary school (Years 7–12). School 2 is a smaller co-educational secondary school (Years 7–12). Demographic details for both participating schools are included in Table 1.

To participate in this study, schools were required to work in teams comprising a group of stakeholders of their choosing. The research team provided suggestions for the composition of this group, including involvement of at least one school leadership (administration) member, members of the special education or inclusion team, classroom teachers, and other members of the school community (see Webster & Roberts, 2022). All team members had to be over the age of 18 in accordance with the ethical clearance provided for the study. The individual participants selected for each school team are listed in Table 2.

An autism consultant employed through the state autism agency and who had an existing working relationship with School 1 participated in the study with this school team. School 2 prioritised student participation in their team. However, the autistic student whom they had hoped would be able to take part in the meetings had competing commitments preventing their participation at the last minute. The student representative who took part in the study for School 2 was a student leader and not an autistic student. The elected stakeholder teams differed somewhat to the recommended composition, particularly with respect to the lack of classroom teachers without leadership or case management roles and limited student participation (hampered by ethical stipulations).

Table 1. School Demographic Details

Demographic	School 1	School 2
Number of students in the school	1,700	500
Year levels catered for	5–12	7–12
Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) percentage — 2019 data	90th percentile	40th percentile
Indigenous students enrolled in the school (% of total population)	3%	5%
Students who have a language background other than English (% of total population)	10%	70%
Autistic students (% of total population)	2%	10%
Of the autistic students:		
Male	100%	85%
Female	0%	15%

Note. ICSEA percentage is based on background data for families of students enrolled in the school. The ICSEA percentile refers to the level of socio-educational advantage in comparison to schools across Australia. For example, the 90th percentile rating for School 1 indicates the students in this school are considered more educationally advantaged than 90% of the schools in Australia and more disadvantaged than 10% of the schools in Australia (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2020). Non-binary gender was not reported.

Table 2. Stakeholders in Each School Team

School 1	School 2
School leader	Principal
Year-level leader	Assistant principal
Leader of inclusion	School leader
Case manager 1	Leader of inclusion
Case manager 2	Case manager 1
Case manager 3	Case manager 2 ^a
Admin support inclusion team	Student representative (school leader)
Autism consultant	Parent of two autistic children at the school

Note: Some of the role titles have been changed to protect confidentiality of the schools and provide consistency across the two cases. *School leader* refers to school leadership roles (e.g., whole-school curriculum implementation), *leader of inclusion* refers to a leadership role related to enhancing inclusion and learning outcomes for students with disability in the school, *case manager* reflects a teaching role including facilitation and organisation of adjustments for individual students, *admin support* provided operation and office assistance to the inclusion team, and *autism consultant* was an external stakeholder contracted from the state autism agency.

^aCase manager 2 attended the first meeting only. They were unavailable for the second meeting.

Ethical Clearance

Ethical clearance was obtained through the Griffith University Research Ethics process (ref. 2019/690), together with a signed principal consent form for each school to participate. A gatekeeper letter was also obtained from the chief executive officer of the state autism agency, confirming consent for the autism consultant to take part in the project with School 1. All participants were invited to participate in the study on a voluntary basis, and individual informed consent was obtained from each participant before the meetings took place.

Study Design

Two 2-hour meetings, scheduled one week apart, were held with each school team for the purpose of conducting the research. The meetings took place in person at the location of the respective schools during the 2020 Australian school year.

First team meeting

The purpose of the first 2-hour meeting at each school was for the team to engage in the process of evaluating their current school practice relevant to the education of their autistic students. An adapted version of the School Profiling Tool presented by Roberts and Webster (2022) was used to guide this reflection process; hereafter it will be referred to as the Whole-School Profile (WSP) Tool. The selection of this tool was made based on the short time frame required for implementation and its inclusion of current, evidence-informed practices for facilitating positive outcomes for autistic students (Roberts & Webster, 2022). The flexible nature of the WSP tool, including the fact there is no specific training requirement to use it, was considered another advantage for its use in the current study.

During this first meeting at each school, the WSP tool was delivered in a step-by-step manner, with the state agency autism consultant leading the process with School 1 and the first-listed author leading the process with School 2. The evaluation process required each school team to first determine if individual elements of practice listed in the tool were *fully in place* in their school, *partly in place*, or *not in place*. Subsequently, each team determined whether that same element of practice was a *low*, *medium*, or *high priority* for focus — that is, for improvement or maintenance of practice in coming months or years (see Appendix A for the full WSP tool). The first author emphasised the study aim related only to stakeholder experience and knowledge gained through this process and therefore results of the evaluation process itself would not be analysed or shared by the research team. This was to reduce stakeholder concern about potentially negative researcher judgement and facilitate an authentic evaluation process.

Second team meeting

The second 2-hour meeting at each school was held one week after the first, with the same group of participants from each school taking part. The purpose of the second meeting was to conduct the focus group and to provide the teams with opportunity to reflect upon the process they had been part of collectively. The main dataset for the study was generated in this second meeting with each team. The focus group consisted of semistructured interview questions drawn from the research questions guiding the study (see Appendix B). The first-listed author led the focus group with each team and mitigated potential for group bias through meeting protocols emphasising value in diverse opinions and actively inviting quieter participants into the conversation. The interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed verbatim. Other sources of data included observation notes taken from the meetings.

Researcher Positionality

The first-listed author does not identify as autistic, but has knowledge of good practice for autistic students and experience leading education stakeholder meetings about whole-school practice. This researcher was positioned as both a knowledgeable guide to the evaluation process, leader of the focus groups, and observer to the discussions that took place in each team meeting.

Data Analysis

To understand and interpret the experience and constructed knowledge of the stakeholder groups engaged in a process of school practice evaluation, an inductive thematic analysis process was employed. The data analysis process followed the six stages of thematic analysis presented by Braun and Clarke (2021). Participant conversations in the transcribed interviews were first summarised

Four key themes:			
1. Evaluation of practice is a positive, useful process (Schools 1 and 2)	2. Importance and benefit of a team process (Schools 1 and 2)	3. Professional learning comes from collaboration (School 1)	4. Importance and benefit of an inclusive school (School 2)
Subthemes:	Subthemes:	Two minor themes:	
Alignment with whole-school priority/review (Schools 1 and 2)	Leadership involvement (Schools 1 and 2)	5. School practice element of student voice (Schools 1 and 2)	6. What next? (Schools 1 and 2)
Educating autistic students is a complex, continuous journey (Schools 1 and 2)	School community representation (School 2)		
Usefulness of the Whole School Profile Tool (Schools 1 and 2)	Autism consultant involvement (School 1)		
	Consideration of classroom teacher involvement (Schools 1 and 2)		

Figure 1. Visual Representation of the Six Themes.

into smaller sections of text to reduce the quantity of raw data into manageable amounts (Patton, 2015). Codes were generated from these condensed summaries following semantic (surface-level) interpretation of the text (Braun & Clarke, 2021). These codes were then manipulated to compose categories representing key ideas and patterns constructed from the data. A manual mind-mapping process was used to combine and link the categories into six themes that form the findings of the study.

Employment of a manual approach to the data analysis process was used to enhance reliability of the findings, as this approach enabled the research team (most prominently the first author) to be close to the data (Creswell, 2015). A second research team member (third-listed author), who was familiar with the research study but not exposed to participant discussions, also reviewed the focus group transcripts and the coding process. All research team members collaborated to discuss patterns and key ideas identified from the data. Some exact words participants used in the interviews are presented in the documentation of the findings, helping to justify the conclusions drawn (Berg & Lune, 2012).

Results

In total, six themes constitute the findings of this study: four major themes and two minor themes. The minor themes represent key ideas identified but deemed to be less prominent in the discussions than those constituting the major themes. The majority of the six themes are shared by both school teams, meaning experiences and learnings were similar in the two cases. However, *professional learning comes from collaboration* is specific only to School 1 and *importance and benefit of an inclusive school* pertains only to School 2. Collectively, the themes address both research questions, including (a) stakeholder experience of the evaluation process, and (b) knowledge gained (or strengthened) from the process. A visual representation of the six themes is presented in Figure 1.

Shared Theme 1: Evaluation of Practice is a Positive, Useful Process

In addressing Research Question 1 (stakeholder experience), both school stakeholder groups found the process of evaluating their practice in relation to autistic students to be a positive experience. When participants were asked about the process they had been part of, they commented with enthusiasm, for example, ‘really, really great’ (leader of inclusion School 2). Both school teams noted their teams came away with a sense of what they were doing well in this space and priorities for improved practice. Three subthemes constitute this key theme:

Subtheme: Alignment with whole-school priority/review

Both school teams saw alignment between the evaluation-of-practice process they were engaged in and a wider process of whole-school review taking place outside of the study. For example, the leader of inclusion at School 1 noted,

We know that the school is in a reflective process at the moment, looking at a . . . strategic plan review. So these headings fit very neatly across into that. So it allows us to contribute to the strategic plan in a much more clear way.

Subtheme: Educating autistic students is a complex, continuous journey

Both stakeholder groups identified that a reflection process aided the complex work required for educating autistic students. The two school teams frequently referred to this work as a ‘journey’ (numerous participants), suggesting a perception the work required to effectively educate autistic students is ongoing.

Subtheme: Usefulness of the Whole-School Profile Tool

Both stakeholder teams reported they found the WSP to be an effective tool for evaluating practice relevant to autistic students. Stakeholders identified the WSP tool as being ‘well structured’ (case manager 3, School 1) and suggested, ‘It helped to inspire the thought process. Rather than sitting there going, okay how do we do this? It guided that thought process and lined up the thoughts, if you like’ (admin support team member).

This first overarching theme corresponds to a perceived positive experience engaging in an evaluation process relevant to autistic students for the two stakeholder teams. However, the student representative associated with School 2 identified that it requires ‘guts’ to engage in a process of school practice evaluation. Similarly, in response to a question about advice the participants had for other school teams, the year-level leader associated with School 1 warned, ‘It is a risk engaging in this. Unless you’ve got a degree of confidence, you may not like what comes out’.

Shared Theme 2: Importance and Benefit of a Team Process

This theme also relates to Research Question 1 (stakeholder experience). Bringing together a team of stakeholders for this activity was identified as a positive opportunity to share in the complex work of educating autistic students. The school leader at School 2 reflected,

It’s good that it’s a big group, because we all have different roles to play in this. . . . when we’re actually sitting in a big group, everyone’s chipping away at the same things, so the collaborative result is much more powerful than just having one person doing it.

Identification of the importance and benefit of a team approach to the evaluation process was represented in terms of the ‘good cross-section’ (school leader, School 2) of roles that were included in each school team.

Subtheme: Leadership involvement

Both teams valued the inclusion of school leaders in their group. When asked about inclusion of participants in the process, the leader of inclusion at School 1 noted, 'I think you must have a school leadership team member. Because otherwise you are minus the potential of having the structure to support the staff'.

Principal involvement in the process. School 2 felt that the principal's involvement in the evaluation process was essential. 'We have to have [principal],' the leader of inclusion stated. The team reflected the principal has 'incredible responsibility in this area' (principal), being 'legally liable for everything' (leader of inclusion), and because education for all students, including autistic students, 'starts at the top' (parent representative). The principal also reported positively about their participation in the process and recommended other principals should consider taking part. They stated, 'I mean you can't make a principal do it, but if you can, get a principal to do it. It's a very positive exercise for a principal'.

Subtheme: School 2 — School community representation

School 2 had a wider scope of school community representation in their team than did School 1 with the inclusion of both a student and parent representative.

Student representation. The School 2 team noted value in having the student representative in the process. They saw inclusion of a student voice as 'very important' (leader of inclusion) and appreciated the 'different perspective' (principal) this student brought to the discussion. The student also acknowledged they brought a different perspective to the process. They stated, 'Obviously, from a student's view, . . . I don't have the same understanding that the staff have. I see it from a very different lens; it's like looking at it through different glasses, to be honest'.

Parent representation. Inclusion of a parent representative was also valued by School 2, and the parent representative themselves stated they learnt a lot about the school practices in place to support autistic students following their participation in the team.

Subtheme: School 1 — Autism consultant involvement

School 1 identified a positive benefit related to inclusion of the autism consultant in their evaluation team. Specifically noted by this team was the autism consultant's ability to provide an external, critical perspective of the practices being evaluated. This partnership was also identified as a benefit in terms of their role as a support member for their school community on a continuing basis.

Subtheme: Consideration of classroom teacher involvement

Although there was some disagreement among group members, most participants suggested that the inclusion of classroom teachers in this process was warranted. Teams further specified this should include teachers who did not also hold roles in the special education or leadership teams; for example, the case manager associated with School 2 stated, 'I do think that we need to have the voice of a person who is actually . . . on the ground and only on the ground . . .'. The counterargument at School 2 included acknowledgement related to the balance of numbers included in the team — 'once you get too large a group, it's too difficult to have a conversation', the school principal suggested.

Discrete Theme: School 1 — Professional Learning Comes From Collaboration

This theme addresses Research Question 2: knowledge gained about school practice improvement priorities. As listed in the WSP tool, '*Staff have knowledge of evidence-based practice and effective strategies for students with autism*', staff knowledge about autism was raised as a priority for improvement by both school teams. Specifically relevant to the conversations at School 1, this discrete theme includes acknowledgement that professional learning develops from on-the-ground experience with students

and professional collaboration among staff and other key stakeholders. Deliberate scheduling of team meetings, where staff members would have opportunity to discuss and share personalised learning strategies for their autistic students with their colleagues, was a key action planned by this team.

Discrete Theme: School 2 — Importance and Benefit of an Inclusive School

The importance and benefit of inclusive schooling was a strong theme identified from the meetings held at School 2 and addresses Research Question 2: knowledge gained about the strengths of current school practice. The perspective of the school's strength in catering for individual student difference was highlighted by the student representative in their team who stated the school 'target . . . the individual', further clarifying that

the individual gets the attention that the individual needs, instead of just, you know, trying to build a jigsaw puzzle with pieces that don't fit. Whereas at [another secondary school], you kind of have to be one of the fitting pieces to go there.

The School 2 team believed their school was driven by an inclusive vision and culture and felt this was key to their ability to support autistic students.

Shared Minor Theme: School Practice Element of Student Voice

Of the many elements of practice relevant to the education of autistic students listed in the WSP tool, reflection on the importance of student consultation about their education was prominent across both group discussions. Thus, this theme addresses Research Question 2: knowledge gained or strengthened about good practice for autistic students. Both stakeholder teams identified having some knowledge of the importance of student voice but reflected that the evaluation process strengthened their perspective of the significance of this practice. Both school teams discussed possible strategies that could be implemented to better include the voice of their autistic students in the planning of their educational adjustments and their education as a whole. Inclusion of autistic students in their individual learning plan meetings and informal discussions with students throughout the day are examples of ideas that were discussed.

Shared Minor Theme: What Next?

Once more addressing Research Question 1 (stakeholder experience of the process), a final theme identified from the focus group discussions was the question, what next? Stakeholders identified that the evaluation process was only one step in the journey toward improved practice for autistic students. Questions and some uncertainty about what should follow and how the process will make a meaningful impact for their autistic students were prevalent thoughts for both teams. For example, stakeholders questioned, 'What's the next step?' (school leader from School 1) and 'How can we do something about it?' (School 2 admin support team member). The principal associated with School 2 also reflected that 'this has been really good, but I wonder if it gets picked up . . . just the structures within a school as to how to resource effectively'. These comments suggest that stakeholders were thinking about the next steps, particularly in relation to support, structure, and resourcing considerations that might be required following an evaluation process.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to investigate experience and knowledge gained by two teams of education stakeholders engaged in an evaluation-of-practice process designed to improve educational outcomes for autistic students.

Stakeholder Experience Evaluating Whole-School Practice Relevant to Autistic Students

The first key finding of this study was that the evaluation process was perceived by the included teams to be a positive and useful process. This finding from qualitative research adds to existing quantitative research demonstrating benefit in the use of evaluation processes to evaluate current practice relevant to autistic students (e.g., Maddox & Marvin, 2013; Odom et al., 2018). The findings also align with existing literature about the usefulness of collaborative joint reflection in promotion of inclusive education (e.g., McMaster, 2015). Having a degree of confidence in current practice, as teams in the current study demonstrated, may enable a more positive view of self-evaluation (MacBeath, 2010). This was further highlighted by stakeholder observations that some school teams may not like the outcome of an evaluation-of-practice process. This suggestion aligns with McMaster's (2015) cautioning that school practice reform can lead to discomfort.

The perceived benefit of the process for teams of stakeholders in this study was also reported in part to be associated with a sense of community readiness for the process. This is a noteworthy finding for other school teams considering engagement in a similar exploration of current practice. Education priorities, as well as barriers associated with availability of educator time, resources, and support, can impact the readiness for implementation of evidence-informed practice in schools (Locke et al., 2015). The perceived alignment of the evaluation process with the timing of wider whole-school review processes in the current study appeared to be a prominent contributor to the state of readiness for the included teams. As such, other school teams may benefit from timing evaluation-of-practice processes relevant to autistic student education alongside other review priorities in their school.

Both stakeholder teams reported feeling some degree of uncertainty about what should come next in their school effectiveness journey following the exploration of their current practice. Thus, a need for further consideration of the implementation stages that follow an evaluation process is supported by the findings of this study. Specifically, this requires a structured format for stakeholder teams to move from evaluation of current practice and determination of good practice (first implementation science phase) to resource acquisition and staff capability building (second implementation phase; Fixsen et al., 2013). Current education policy in Australia includes frameworks to guide action research processes in schools (e.g., NSW Department of Education and Training, 2010; Queensland Department of Education, n.d). These existing frameworks provide structure that aligns with implementation science and can be used to support school teams to progress through the implementation stages. Integrating the specific work required to improve outcomes for autistic students into these existing structures of school reform seems worthwhile.

A further key finding included stakeholder perceptions of the benefit of coming together as a team, inclusive of leadership members and classroom teachers. The benefit of teamwork in the field of education is well established, as is active involvement of school leadership in school reform (Roberts & Webster, 2022; Trimmer et al., 2021). Further, effective leadership involvement is listed as a key driver to successful implementation processes (Fixsen et al., 2013). Opportunity for collaboration, however, should extend to those who have a stake in the success of the practice being evaluated (Jason, 2008). This includes classroom teachers, as well as students and parents (Brown et al., 2020) — stakeholders School 2 found beneficial including in their team. Moreover, when evaluating school practice relevant to autistic students, autistic student voice should be included in the process, as they are the people with the largest stake in this work.

Stakeholder Knowledge Gained in Evaluating Current School Practice Relevant to Autistic Students

In relation to knowledge gained about school improvement priorities, increasing staff knowledge about autism was identified by both school teams as a high priority. This was unsurprising, as multiple stakeholders represented in the research literature have called for an increase in staff professional learning

related to inclusive education for autistic students (e.g., Falkmer et al., 2015; Roberts & Simpson, 2016). One of the six themes constituting the findings of this study relates to a key reflection made by the team from School 1: professional learning comes from collaboration with key stakeholders. This was a noteworthy finding of the current study. The reflections of the School 1 team correlate with emerging literature about effective professional learning methods in schools moving beyond stand-alone lectures to more collaborative opportunities (e.g., Harper-Hill et al., 2022; Schnellert et al., 2020).

In addressing the knowledge gained about good autism practice, both stakeholder teams reflected on the practice of listening to student voice. Research highlighting the importance of student consultation in schools is emerging (e.g., Chandroo et al., 2018; Warren et al., 2021) and its importance is stated in human rights conventions (United Nations, 2018) and national policies (Australian Government, 2005). The knowledge strengthened by stakeholders in the current study about the importance of listening to students highlights the view that the evaluation process itself can be useful for school community members to strengthen their own knowledge about good practice in this field. Use of an evidence-informed tool as a guide to the evaluation-of-practice process has the potential to enhance this learning opportunity (Shaneyfelt et al., 2006).

Limitations of the Study and Direction for Further Research

Being a small qualitative study, generalisation of findings was not the intended outcome of this research. As the study presents a snapshot of stakeholder experience in an evaluation process across two Australian independent Catholic schools, there are limitations in terms of the scope of implications for practice and policy that can be drawn from the findings. Analysis of each school's final WSP results and consequent use to guide future practice implementation was outside the scope of this study and deliberately excluded from the outset to enable authentic evaluation processes. Future research may include evaluation results from stakeholder teams in collected data, although research groups should be wary of the possibility of inauthentic results from any practice evaluations conducted under external critique. Further research conducted in Australia should include education stakeholders from sectors not represented in this study, schools situated in regional and rural areas, and school teams with less perceived confidence in their current practice. Critically, inclusion of autistic students in the evaluation-of-practice process is required in future research. Poor representation of this voice in the current study is considered a limitation and was the result of age limitations stipulated in ethical clearance and challenges related to school recruitment. Consideration for how these barriers can be overcome for future research of this topic is essential.

Conclusion

In this study, two teams of education stakeholders reflected on their experience participating in a self-evaluation of their whole-school practice related to the education of their autistic students. The findings of this collective case study have implications for future practice. The stakeholder reports of a positive experience engaging in an evaluation-of-practice process relevant to autistic students is encouraging for teams seeking to undertake a similar process in their school. Knowledge about good practice in this field can be strengthened through stakeholder participation in this process, and the practice appears to have a place in existing action-research cycles. Having a team sense of readiness for this process may be beneficial, perhaps aided by timing autism practice evaluation alongside broader whole-school reform or review procedures. There should also be consideration for the composition of the stakeholder team, with ways to include a good cross-section of roles, inclusive of school leadership, classroom teachers, and autistic students.

Supplementary material. To view supplementary material for this article, please visit <https://doi.org/10.1017/jsi.2023.3>

Note

1. Identity–first language is used throughout this manuscript in response to emerging terminology preferences of many autistic people (Kenny et al., 2016).

References

- Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority. (2020). *My school*. <https://www.myschool.edu.au/>
- Australian Government. (2005). *Disability Standards for Education 2005*. <https://www.legislation.gov.au/details/F2005L00767/Explanatory%20Statement/Text>
- Berg, B. L., & Lune, H. (2012). *Qualitative research methods for the social sciences* (8th ed.). Pearson.
- Booth, T., & Ainscow, M. (2011). *Index for Inclusion: Developing learning and participation in schools* (3rd ed.). Centre for Studies on Inclusive Education.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2021). *Thematic analysis: A practical guide to understanding and doing*. SAGE.
- Brown, M., McNamara, G., O'Brien, S., Skerritt, C., O'Hara, J., Faddar, J., Cinqir, S., Vanhoof, J., Figueiredo, M., & Kurum, G. (2020). Parent and student voice in evaluation and planning in schools. *Improving Schools*, 23(1), 85–102. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1365480219895167>
- Carrington, S., & Duke, J. (2014). Learning about inclusion from developing countries: Using the Index for Inclusion. In C. Forlin & T. Loreman (Eds.), *International perspectives on inclusive education: Vol. 3. Measuring inclusive education* (pp. 189–203). Emerald Group Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1108/S1479-36362014000003025>
- Carrington, S. B., Saggars, B. R., Shochet, I. M., Orr, J. A., Wurfl, A. M., Vanelli, J., & Nickerson, J. (2021). Researching a whole school approach to school connectedness. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2021.1878298>
- Chandroo, R., Strnadová, I., & Cumming, T. M. (2018). A systematic review of the involvement of students with autism spectrum disorder in the transition planning process: Need for voice and empowerment. *Research in Developmental Disabilities*, 83, 8–17. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ridd.2018.07.011>
- Creswell, J. W. (2015). *Educational research: Planning, conducting, and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research* (5th ed.). Pearson.
- Falkmer, M., Anderson, K., Joosten, A., & Falkmer, T. (2015). Parents' perspectives on inclusive schools for children with autism spectrum conditions. *International Journal of Disability, Development and Education*, 62(1), 1–23. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1034912X.2014.984589>
- Fixsen, D., Blase, K., Metz, A., & Van Dyke, M. (2013). Statewide implementation of evidence-based programs. *Exceptional Children*, 79(3), 213–230. <https://doi.org/10.1177/001440291307900206>
- Fox, M., Laverty, T., & Chowdhury, S. (2019). *Supporting the emotional well-being of children and young people with learning disabilities: A whole school approach*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429316906>
- Fullan, M. (2016). The elusive nature of whole system improvement in education. *Journal of Educational Change*, 17(4), 539–544. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10833-016-9289-1>
- Fullan, M. G., & Miles, M. B. (1992). Getting reform right: What works and what doesn't. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 73(10), 744–752.
- Guldberg, K., Parsons, S., Porayska-Pomsta, K., & Keay-Bright, W. (2017). Challenging the knowledge-transfer orthodoxy: Knowledge co-construction in technology-enhanced learning for children with autism. *British Educational Research Journal*, 43(2), 394–413. <https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3275>
- Harper-Hill, K., Beamish, W., Hay, S., Whelan, M., Kerr, J., Zelenko, O., & Villalba, C. (2022). Teacher engagement in professional learning: What makes the difference to teacher practice? *Studies in Continuing Education*, 44(1), 105–118. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0158037X.2020.1781611>
- Jason, M. H. (2008). *Evaluating programs to increase student achievement* (2nd ed.). Corwin Press. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781412990264>
- Karagiorgi, Y., Nicolaidou, M., Yiasemis, C., & Georghiades, P. (2015). Emergent data-driven approaches to school improvement: The journey of three schools through self-evaluation. *Improving Schools*, 18(1), 69–82. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1365480214566914>
- Kenny, L., Hattersley, C., Molins, B., Buckley, C., Povey, C., & Pellicano, E. (2016). Which terms should be used to describe autism? Perspectives from the UK autism community. *Autism*, 20(4), 442–462. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1362361315588200>
- Lipsky, D. K., & Gartner, A. (2012). *Inclusion: A service, not a place: A whole school approach* (Rev. ed.). Dude Publishing.
- Locke, J., Olsen, A., Wideman, R., Downey, M. M., Kretzmann, M., Kasari, C., & Mandell, D. S. (2015). A tangled web: The challenges of implementing an evidence-based social engagement intervention for children with autism in urban public school settings. *Behavior Therapy*, 46(1), 54–67. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.beth.2014.05.001>

- Lynch, S. L., & Irvine, A. N. (2009). Inclusive education and best practice for children with autism spectrum disorder: An integrated approach. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 13(8), 845–859. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603110802475518>
- MacBeath, J. (2010). Self-evaluation for school improvement. In A. Hargreaves, A. Lieberman, M. Fullan, & D. Hopkins (Eds.), *Second international handbook of educational change. Part 1* (pp. 901–912). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-90-481-2660-6_50
- Maddox, L. L., & Marvin, C. A. (2013). A preliminary evaluation of a statewide professional development program on autism spectrum disorders. *Teacher Education and Special Education*, 36(1), 37–50. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0888406412463827>
- Mann, M. J., & Smith, M. L. (2013). Promoting rigor-in-practice through school self-evaluation: A middle school's experience with model development, implementation, and evaluation. *RMLE Online*, 37(4), 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19404476.2013.11462107>
- McMaster, C. (2015). Inclusion in New Zealand: The potential and possibilities of sustainable inclusive change through utilising a framework for whole school development. *New Zealand Journal of Educational Studies*, 50(2), 239–253. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40841-015-0010-3>
- Mitchelson, H., Simpson, K., & Adams, D. (2021). Should we stay or should we go? Parent experiences of moving or considering moving their autistic child between mainstream schools. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2021.1968515>
- NSW Department of Education. (2020). *Report summary: Understanding increased enrolments of autism and mental health needs in NSW government schools*. https://education.nsw.gov.au/content/dam/main-education/teaching-and-learning/disability-learning-and-support/our-disability-strategy/Report_summary_understanding_increased_enrolments_of_autism_and_mental_health_needs_in_NSW_government_schools.PDF
- NSW Department of Education and Training. (2010). *Action research in education: Guidelines* (2nd ed.). https://aitsforlibraries.weebly.com/uploads/2/3/4/9/23497432/action_research_in_education.pdf
- Odom, S. L., Cox, A. W., & Brock, M. E. (2013). Implementation science, professional development, and autism spectrum disorders. *Exceptional Children*, 79(3), 233–251. <https://doi.org/10.1177/001440291307900207>
- Odom, S. L., Cox, A., Sideris, J., Hume, K. A., Hedges, S., Kucharczyk, S., Shaw, E., Boyd, B. A., Reszka, S., & Neitzel, J. (2018). Assessing quality of program environments for children and youth with autism: Autism Program Environment Rating Scale (APERS). *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 48(3), 913–924. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-017-3379-7>
- Patton, M. Q. (2015). *Qualitative research & evaluation methods: Integrating theory and practice* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Queensland Department of Education. (n.d.). *Every student succeeding: State schools improvement strategy 2020–2024*. <https://dlq.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/state-schools-strategy.pdf>
- Roberts, J., & Simpson, K. (2016). A review of research into stakeholder perspectives on inclusion of students with autism in mainstream schools. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 20(10), 1084–1096. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2016.1145267>
- Roberts, J., & Webster, A. (2022). Including students with autism in schools: A whole school approach to improve outcomes for students with autism. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 26(7), 701–718. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2020.1712622>
- Saggers, B., Klug, D., Harper-Hill, K., Ashburner, J., Costley, D., Clark, T., Bruck, S., Trembath, D., Webster, A. A., & Carrington, S. (2016). *Australian autism educational needs analysis – What are the needs of schools, parents and students on the autism spectrum?* Cooperative Research Centre for Living with Autism.
- Schnellert, L., King, J., Manuel, T., Searcy, N., Moase, J., & Moore, S. (2020, April 17–21). *Through a different lens: Increasing success for 'at-risk' learners through situated, collaborative inquiry* [Paper presentation]. Annual Meetings of the American Educational Research Association, San Francisco, CA, United States. <https://doi.org/10.3102/1583955>
- Shaneyfelt, T., Baum, K. D., Bell, D., Feldstein, D., Houston, T. K., Kaatz, S., Whelan, C., & Green, M. (2006). Instruments for evaluating education in evidence-based practice: A systematic review. *Journal of the American Medical Association*, 296(9), 1116–1127. <https://doi.org/10.1001/jama.296.9.1116>
- Stake, R. E. (1995). *The art of case study research*. Sage Publications.
- Starr, E. M., & Foy, J. B. (2012). In parents' voices: The education of children with autism spectrum disorders. *Remedial and Special Education*, 33(4), 207–216. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0741932510383161>
- Trimmer, K., Dixon, R., & Guenther, J. (2021). School leadership and Aboriginal student outcomes: Systematic review. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Teacher Education*, 49(1), 20–36. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1359866X.2019.1685646>
- United Nations. (2016). *Convention on the Rights of Persons With Disabilities: General comment No. 4* (2016), Article 24: Right to inclusive education. <http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/CRPD/GC/RighttoEducation/CRPD-C-GC-4.doc>
- United Nations. (2018). *General comment No. 7* (2018) on the participation of persons with disabilities, including children with disabilities, through their representative organizations, in the implementation and monitoring of the convention. https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CRPD/C/GC/7&Lang=en

- Warren, A., Buckingham, K., & Parsons, S. (2021). Everyday experiences of inclusion in primary resourced provision: The voices of autistic pupils and their teachers. *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, 36(5), 803–818. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08856257.2020.1823166>
- Webster, A., & Roberts, J. (2022). Implementing the school-wide autism competency model to improve outcomes for students on the autism spectrum: A multiple case study of three schools. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 26(8), 796–814. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2020.1735540>

Cite this article: McLennan, H., Roberts, J., & Johnson, G. (2023). Stakeholder experience evaluating whole-school practice designed to improve educational outcomes for autistic students. *Australasian Journal of Special and Inclusive Education* 47, 14–27. <https://doi.org/10.1017/jsi.2023.3>