

# Autism & Education

## Current practice issues and emerging trends

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# Autism Centre of Excellence

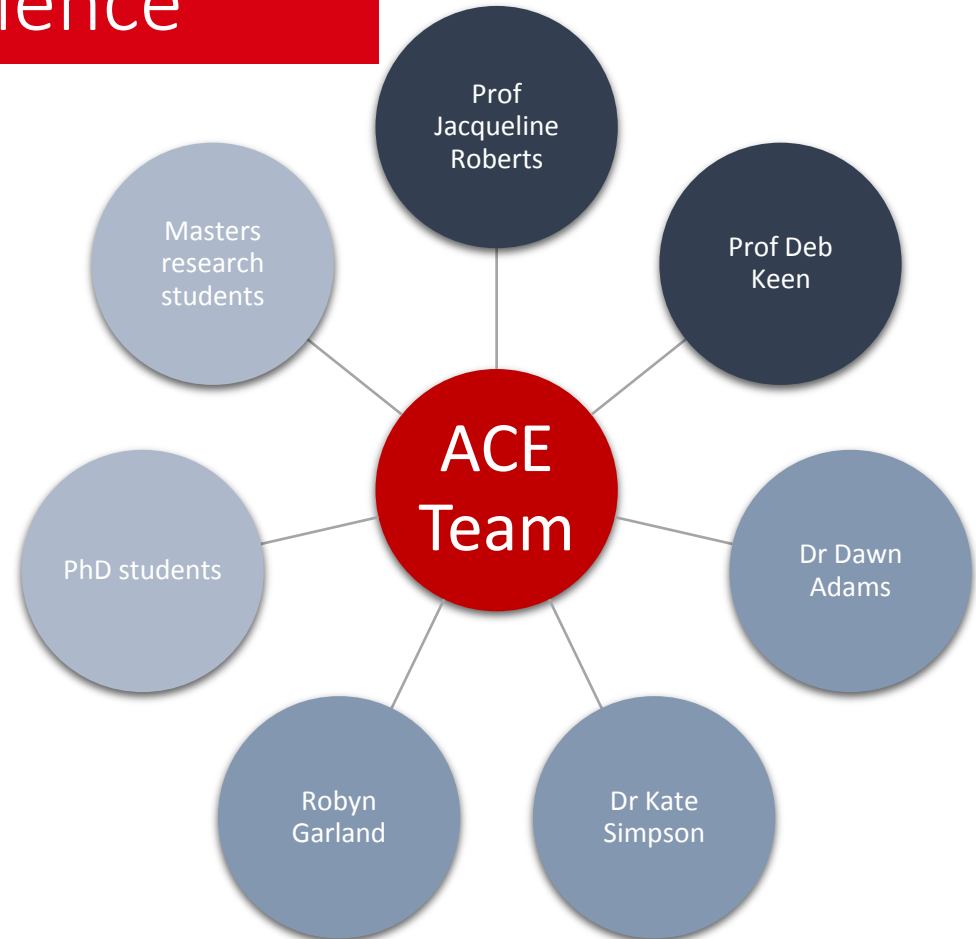
## What do we do?

### Autism Studies Program:

- Graduate Certificate
- Masters – coursework and research
- PhD

### Research projects

- LASA



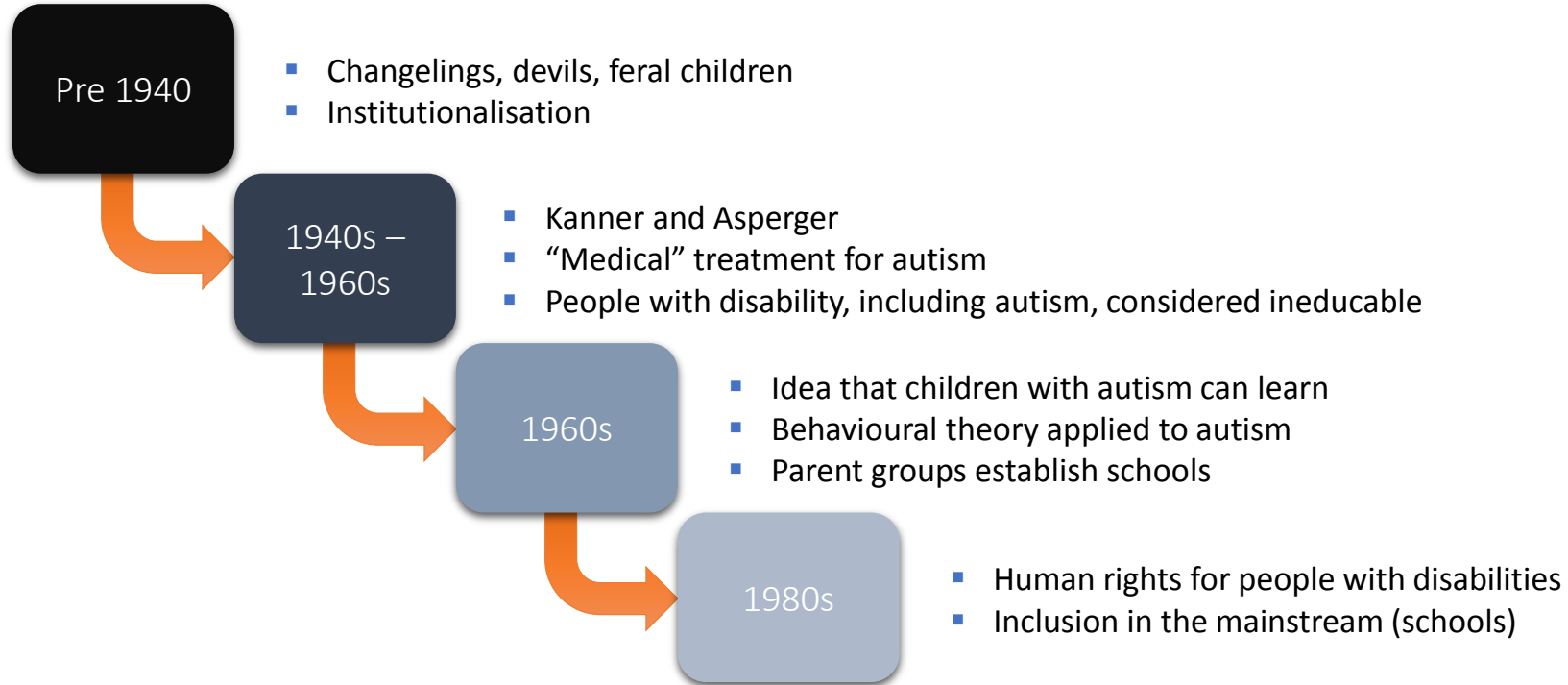
“Autism is a lifelong neurological condition that manifests during early childhood, irrespective of gender, race or socio-economic status.

Appropriate support, accommodation and acceptance of this neurological variation allow those on the Spectrum to enjoy equal opportunity, and full and effective participation in society.” -

[United Nations](#)

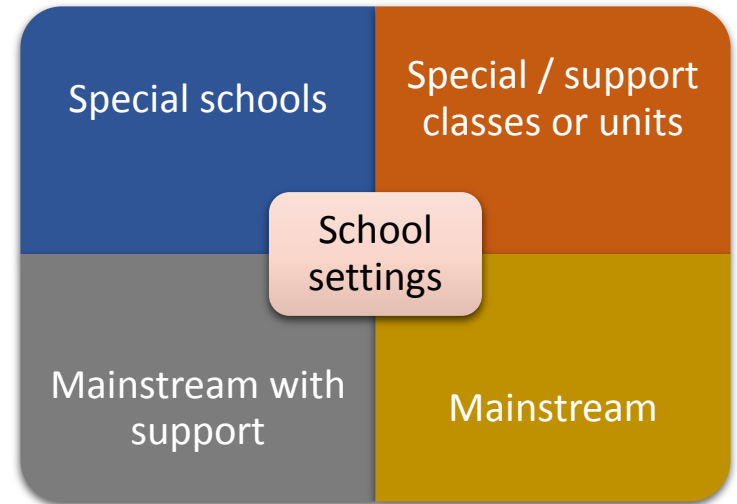


# How have children with autism been educated?



# School settings

- Students in schools with a diagnosis of autism:
  - US ranges from 0.4 – 1.8%
  - NSW (2015) 1.8%, QLD (2015) 2.3%, FNQ 3% (Webster & Roberts, in press)
- While most high school age students with autism in the US attended regular schools (84%), only one third of their courses are in regular education classes
- Students with autism in Australia are the majority in special education and other support programs (ABS, 2017)



## MOVE TO THE MAINSTREAM

- **Changes in diagnostic criteria**
- **Increase in identification of cognitively able people with autism**

### **Coincided with:**

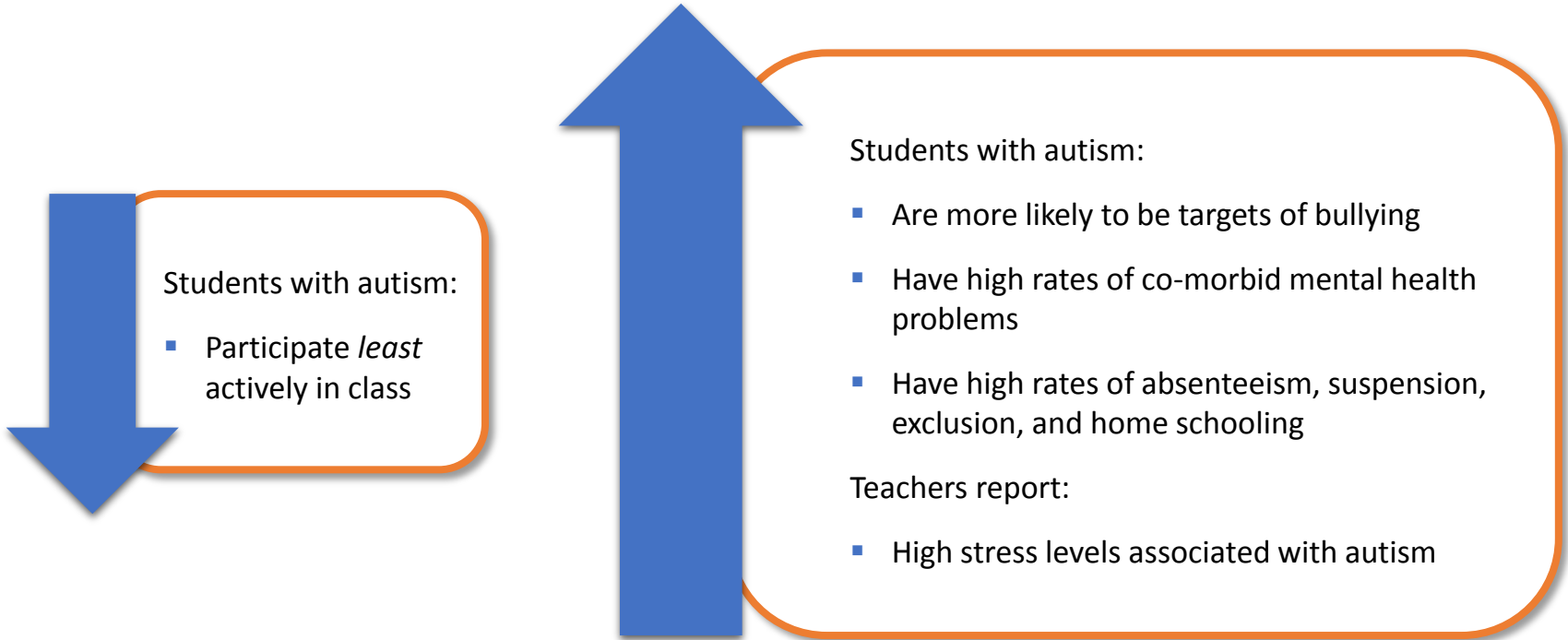
- **Idea that education is a basic human right**
- **Salamanca agreement – children should be educated together**
- **Philosophical underpinning of inclusion of children and young people with autism in regular education**

## What are the issues?

18% (674,323 students) of all Australian school students received an educational adjustment due to disability (National Consistent Collection of Data (NCCD), 2015).

Of the children diagnosed with autism attending mainstream schools in Australia, it was reported that 86% experienced difficulties. (Education Services Australia, 2016).

# Outcomes for students with autism in school





# Autism and employment: Labour force participation

ABS 2017 estimates

**1%**

of the Australian population have autism

Autistic:



People with a disability:



People with no reported disability:



## Academic outcomes (Keen et al., 2015)

- **Students with autism underperform academically, relative to their own cognitive ability and to typically developing peers.**
- **This gap widens after 13 years of age, even in areas that may have been a relative strength**
- **Predictors of academic achievement include:**
  - **IQ**
  - **Behaviour issues**
  - **Social skills**
- **Pattern of development is highly variable and typically uneven**

## Adult outcomes (Shattuck et al., 2012)

- High school programs fail to lead to employment
- Inactivity, continued residence with the family likely
- Social isolation, especially for those with severe impairments and/or low income families

# Stakeholder perspectives (Roberts & Simpson, 2016)

Review of research into stakeholder perspectives of inclusion in schools for students with autism

## Themes:

Lack of knowledge and understanding of autism

Frequency and intensity of behaviours that challenge (internalising and externalising)

Impact of social communication characteristics

Bullying and teasing

Lack of support / resources

Very little investigation / reporting of perspectives of people with autism



“ I don’t understand the children around me. They frighten and confuse me... I try so hard to do what I am told, but just when I think I am being helpful and good, the teachers tell me off and I don’t know why. It’s as if everybody is playing some complicated game and I am the only one who hasn’t been told the rules.”

Claire Sainsbury, 2000

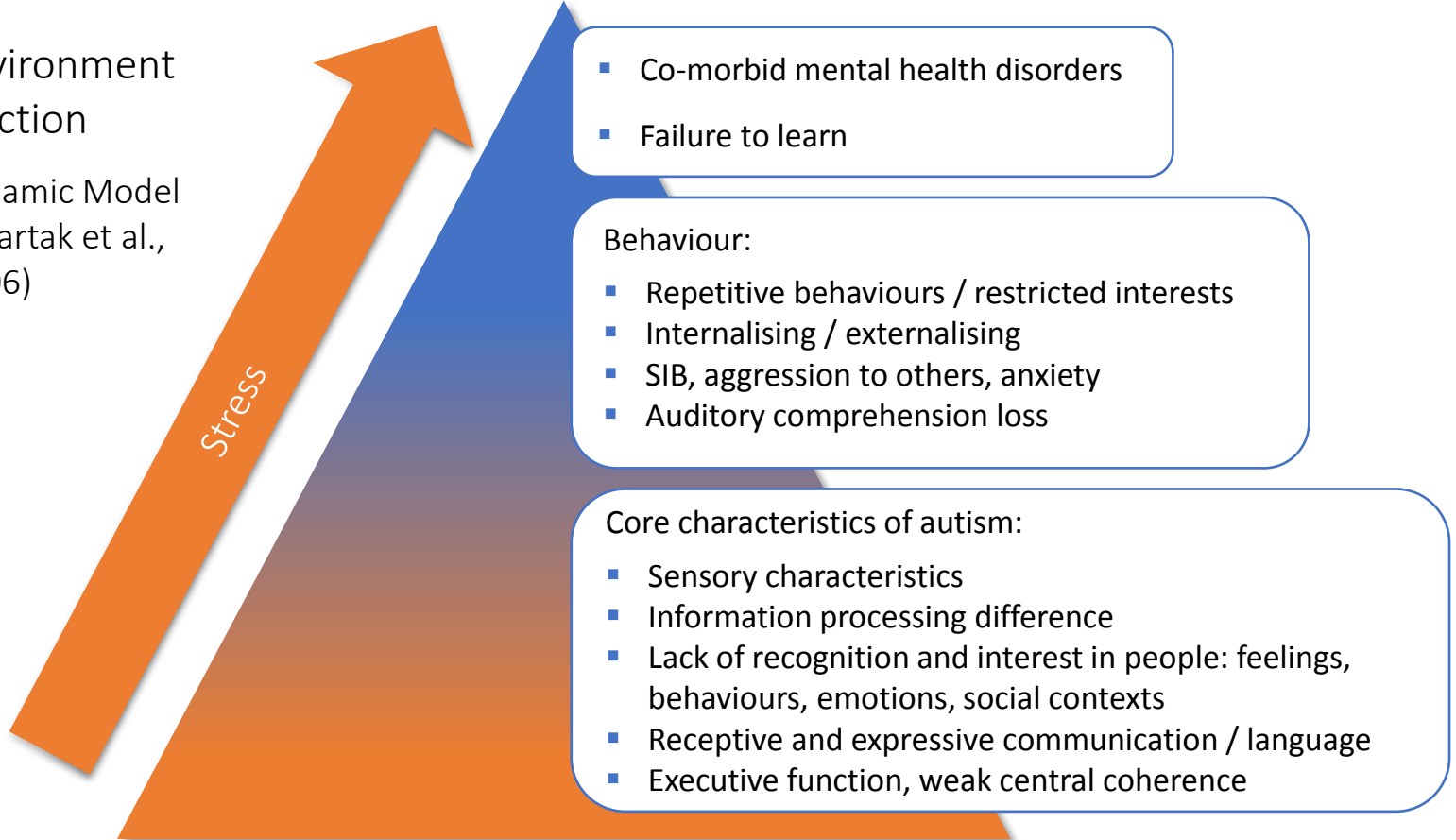
*For some people school is like fitting a square peg in a round hole. For me at the moment the hole (school) has changed its shape slightly to accommodate me and the square peg (me) has tried to soften its edges. So a better description would be a **rounded square** trying to fit itself into **a circle with sticky out bits**.*

*Luke Jackson; Freaks Geeks and Aspergers*



# Autism-Environment Interaction

Based on Dynamic Model of Autism (Bartak et al., 2006)





Individual Variability: When you've met one person with autism,  
you've met one person with autism



# Individualised approach

- Each person with autism needs an individual program
- The process needs to be collaborative and multidisciplinary
- Start with assessment – across all relevant domains – consider strengths as well as needs, motivation, preferences, and interests
- School age – academic and hidden curriculum
- Determine impact, implications, and function of characteristics
- Prioritise, be realistic about how much the team can work on at one time
- Set goals – SMART – what will success look like?
- Plan and implement strategies / interventions
- Evaluate, review, and revise



## Managing the environment

Look through an autistic lens. Consider how the environment could change to better accommodate the person with autism. For example:

- Visual supports
- Structure and routine
- Keyboard as an alternative to handwriting

Participation and engagement in learning for students with autism in schools, through an autism lens:

- All about communication
- All about play
- All about social skills
- All about friends
- All about motivation and interests



# A Wicked Problem: Barriers to translation of research and theory into practice

## Why is it so difficult to translate research findings into real life?

- Interventions don't fit the population and / or the community service context
- Research aims don't match educators' priorities and needs
- Variability of characteristics of autism
- Within school barriers
- Lab-developed interventions too complex for classroom use
- Measuring fidelity of implementation is challenging

## What can be done? Facilitators

- Support for educators with professional development
- Research Community Partnerships
  - Inclusive teams (researchers, practitioners, people with autism)
- Process
  - Collaboration from beginning
  - Include decision makers
  - Iterative process
  - Flexibility, co-learning, and organisation



# A whole school approach to make school “work” for children and young people on the autism spectrum

An ecological capacity building model for autism education

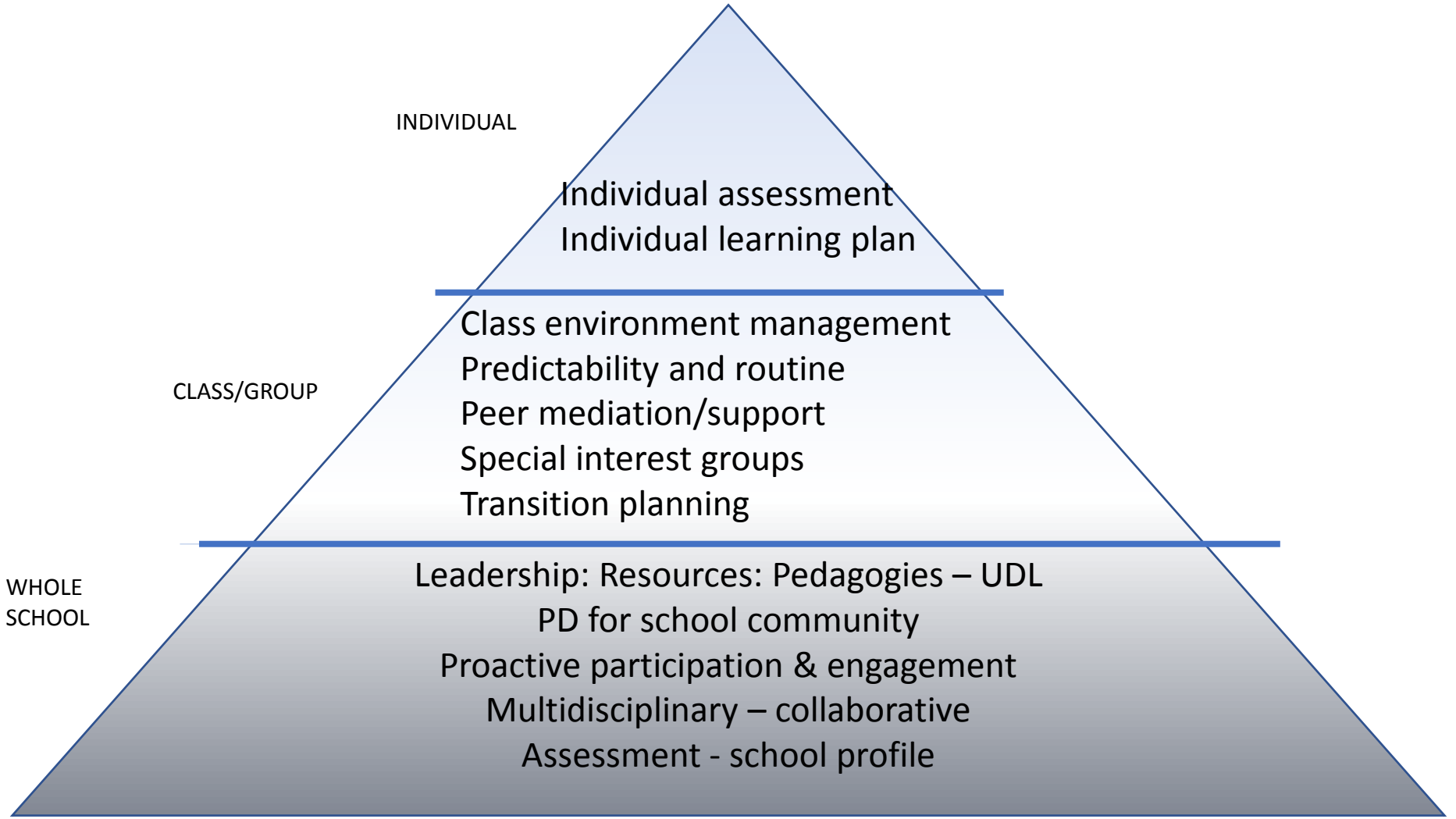
Where?

When?

Why?

What?

Who?



INDIVIDUAL

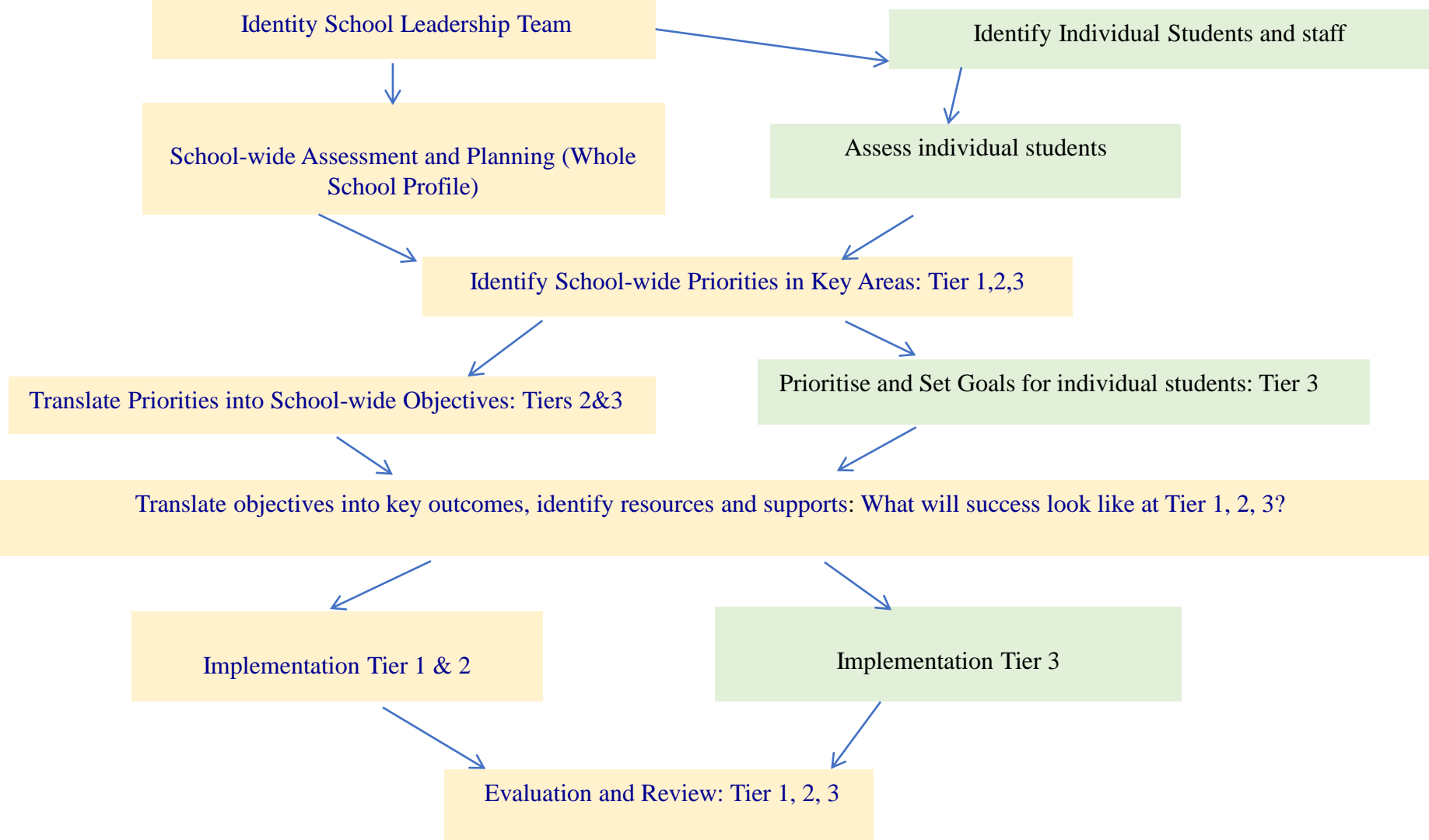
Individual assessment  
Individual learning plan

CLASS/GROUP

Class environment management  
Predictability and routine  
Peer mediation/support  
Special interest groups  
Transition planning

WHOLE SCHOOL

Leadership: Resources: Pedagogies – UDL  
PD for school community  
Proactive participation & engagement  
Multidisciplinary – collaborative  
Assessment - school profile





# Assessment

## Whole school profile:

- Shared vision developed and communicated
- Leaders engaged
- Leaders establish team
- Whole school accommodations planned and provided
- Professional development
- Curriculum and teaching
- Parents and community support



# Accommodations and adjustments: Curricular, instructional, environmental

Individual, examples

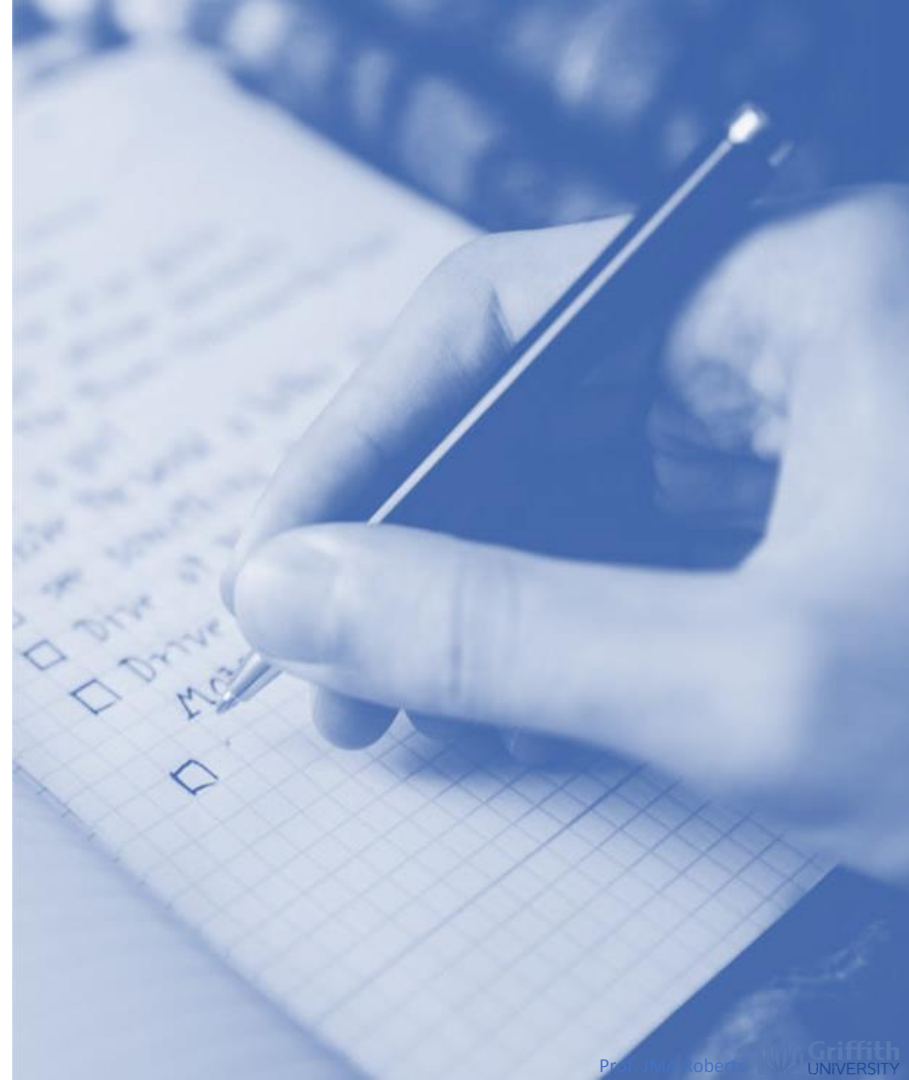
Class/group, examples

Whole school, examples

## School priorities

Target focus areas nominated by schools involved with the project included (in order of priority):

- Professional development
- Conditions for learning
- Shared leadership
- Curriculum and teaching
- Parent and community support





## School outcomes – Tier 1

Schools established effective processes at the school-wide or Tier 1 and leadership level:


- Increased awareness of the needs of students with autism
- Increased knowledge of evidence-based practice for students with autism
- Established whole school processes and systems, e.g. behaviour management practices, to benefit all students

## School outcomes – Tier 2

Established specific interventions to address the needs of students with autism in classrooms, e.g.:

- Alternative break programs
- Targeted literacy groups





Most importantly, the respondents reported that the project enabled them to examine different types of support they could provide by creating a shared culture of responsibility and practice for all students, including those with autism.



## Outcomes for students

- Reduction in behaviour incidences
- Increase in academic engagement and performance
- Variable across and within schools
- Only one school established effective processes at the individual student (Tier 3) level, including an effective case management system, which involved a high degree of collaboration between special education and mainstream education teachers

## Conclusions

- Leadership teams derived from a school-wide, shared-leadership model can effectively implement a whole school approach and improve educational outcomes for students with autism.
- The role of the school principal is critical in establishing the ethos and vision for the school and in establishing a shared model of leadership and responsibility for students with autism.
- Ongoing support and guidance of an external and critical friend is important.
- Roles of parents and classroom teachers in the school leadership team need to be defined and supported.



“

*People with autism have enormous potential. Most have remarkable visual, artistic, or academic skills. Thanks to the use of assistive technologies, non-verbal persons with autism can communicate and share their hidden capabilities.*

*Recognising the talents of persons on the autism spectrum, rather than focusing on their weaknesses, is essential to creating a society that is truly inclusive.*

”



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