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OF THE REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA



**Autism inclusion in the  
Post-School Education and  
Training (PSET) Sector**

**By**

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## LIST OF ACRONYMS

<b>ASA:</b>	Autism South Africa
<b>ASD:</b>	Autism Spectrum Disorder
<b>CARA:</b>	Centre for Autism Research in Africa
<b>CET:</b>	Community Education and Training
<b>DBE:</b>	Department of Basic Education
<b>DHET:</b>	Department of Higher Education and Training
<b>DoH:</b>	Department of Health
<b>DSD:</b>	Department of Social Development
<b>ION:</b>	Institute of Neurodiversity
<b>NMU:</b>	Nelson Mandela University
<b>NSDS:</b>	National Skills Development Strategy
<b>PSET:</b>	Post-School Education and Training
<b>SDGs:</b>	Sustainable Development Goals
<b>SETAs:</b>	Sector Education and Training Authorities
<b>SLPs:</b>	Speech-Language Therapists
<b>TVET:</b>	Technical and Vocational Education and Training
<b>UCT:</b>	University of Cape Town
<b>UJ:</b>	University of Johannesburg
<b>UN:</b>	United Nations
<b>UNCRPD:</b>	United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
<b>UNISA:</b>	University of South Africa
<b>WAAD:</b>	World Autism Awareness Day
<b>WHO:</b>	World Health Organization



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Autism Acceptance Month provides an important lens through which to examine the inclusion of autistic individuals within South Africa's Post-School Education and Training (PSET) sector. Although national policy frameworks strongly endorse equality, access, and non-discrimination, evidence indicates that autistic students continue to experience uneven participation and success across universities, TVET colleges, community colleges, and skills development programmes. Autism, as a lifelong neurodevelopmental condition, remains insufficiently addressed within post-school systems that are largely shaped by neurotypical assumptions about learning, assessment, communication, and sensory regulation.

This paper situates autism inclusion within South Africa's rights-based policy architecture, drawing in particular on the White Paper for Post-School Education and Training and the White Paper on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. While autism is not always named explicitly, these frameworks together establish a clear obligation to remove systemic barriers, provide reasonable accommodation, and ensure access with success for students with disabilities, including those with invisible and neurodevelopmental conditions. The analysis demonstrates that autism exclusion arises less from policy absence than from gaps in policy interpretation, implementation, and accountability across the PSET sector.

The paper highlights persistent implementation challenges. Disability inclusion is frequently approached as a compliance or support-service function rather than as an integral dimension of teaching and learning. Recent research shows that rigid curricula, inflexible and time-pressured assessment practices, sensory-overstimulating environments, and limited institutional understanding of neurodiversity contribute to lower retention, completion, and post-study economic participation for autistic students. Institutional support for autism remains inconsistent, staff development on neurodiversity is limited, and monitoring systems often fail to generate disaggregated data capable of informing autism-specific planning and improvement.

To address these challenges, the paper advances policy-relevant recommendations focused on strengthening autism-responsive policy interpretation, embedding inclusion within teaching and learning through Universal Design for Learning, improving institutional capacity and accountability, and using Autism Acceptance Month strategically as a catalyst for institutional review, planning, and monitoring. The paper argues that meaningful autism inclusion within the PSET sector is both a human rights obligation and a developmental priority. Sustained leadership, clearer guidance, institutional accountability, and a commitment to neurodiversity as a core dimension of transformation are essential to aligning policy intent with practice and advancing equitable outcomes for autistic individuals across the lifespan.



## 1. INTRODUCTION

Autism Acceptance Month, observed annually in April, provides an important opportunity to reflect on the inclusion of autistic people across all sectors of society, including education and employment. In South Africa, this reflection is particularly relevant within the Post School Education and Training (PSET) sector, which remains a critical but unevenly accessible pathway for students with disabilities. Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), a lifelong neurodevelopmental condition, is increasingly recognised across the lifespan, yet post-school systems continue to be shaped largely by neurotypical assumptions.

This paper situates autism inclusion within the South African PSET context, drawing on the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) policy architecture, specifically the White Paper for Post School Education and Training (2013) and the White Paper on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2015).<sup>1</sup> It argues that autism acceptance is both a transformation imperative and a human rights obligation within the PSET system.

## 2. OVERVIEW OF AUTISM<sup>2</sup>

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), ASDs are a diverse group of conditions. They are characterized by some degree of difficulty with social interaction and communication. Other characteristics include atypical patterns of activity and behaviour, such as difficulty transitioning between activities, a focus on details, and unusual reactions to sensations.

Characteristics of autism may be detected in early childhood, but autism is often not diagnosed until much later. People with autism often have co-occurring conditions, including epilepsy, depression, anxiety, and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, as well as challenging behaviours such as difficulty sleeping and self-injury. The level of intellectual functioning among autistic people varies widely, extending from profound impairment to superior levels.

- Autism, also referred to as autism spectrum disorder (ASD), constitutes a diverse group of conditions related to differences in brain development and functioning, particularly affecting social communication and behaviour.
- About 1 in 100 children worldwide have autism, according to global prevalence estimates from the World Health Organization (WHO). This represents an average figure, with prevalence varying considerably between regions due to differences in awareness, service availability, and diagnostic practices.
- Characteristics of autism may be detected in early childhood. Still, autism is often not diagnosed until later in childhood or adolescence, especially in settings with limited access to developmental screening and specialist services.
- The abilities and support needs of autistic people vary widely and may change over time. While some autistic individuals live independently, others have significant disabilities and require lifelong care and support.
- Evidence-based psychosocial interventions, particularly when initiated early, can improve communication, social skills, and adaptive functioning, contributing to improved quality of life for autistic people and their caregivers.

<sup>1</sup> Department of Higher Education and Training (2013; 2015).

<sup>2</sup> World Health Organization (2023; 2025).



- Effective care for people with autism must be accompanied by community and society-level actions, including inclusive education, accessible health and social services, anti-stigma efforts, and supportive public policies that promote participation and well-being.

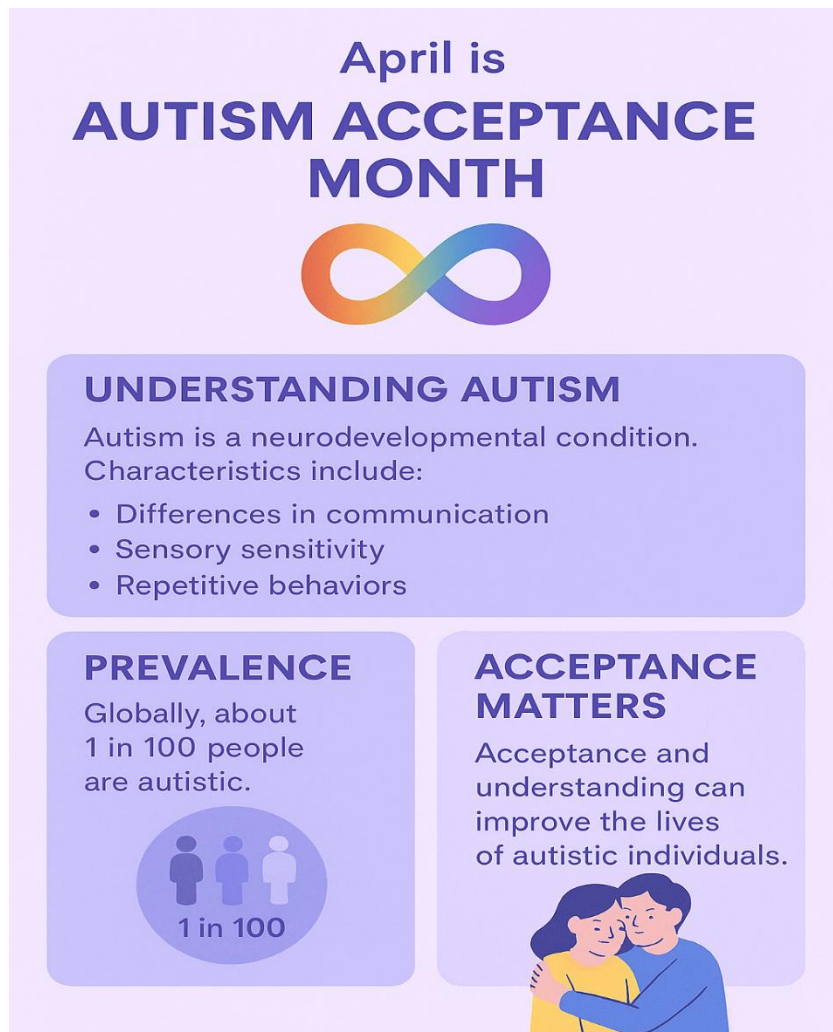


Figure 1: Autism Acceptance Month<sup>3</sup>

### 3. AUTISM ACCEPTANCE MONTH AND A RIGHTS-BASED SOUTH AFRICAN CONTEXT

The evolution of Autism Acceptance Month reflects a broader shift from deficit-driven models of autism toward approaches grounded in dignity, accommodation, and participation. This shift aligns strongly with South Africa’s constitutional framework, which enshrines equality and non-discrimination as foundational principles. South Africa’s ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) in 2007 further commits the state to ensuring equal access to education at all levels for persons with disabilities.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> World Health Organization (2025).

<sup>4</sup> United Nations (2007).



Building on this obligation, the White Paper on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (WPRPD) frames disability as a human rights and development issue rather than a medical concern. The WPRPD emphasises removing systemic barriers, promoting inclusion, and enabling persons with disabilities to realise their full potential through education, skills development, and economic participation.<sup>5</sup> Within this framework, autism acceptance is understood as a collective, systemic responsibility rather than an individualised adjustment.

## 4. AUTISM IN SOUTH AFRICA

Autism Spectrum Disorder affects individuals in diverse ways, influencing communication, social interactions, and behaviour. Local studies have found the prevalence of autism in South Africa to be between 0,08 per cent and 2 per cent.

While global awareness has increased, South Africa continues to face challenges in providing adequate support, particularly in under-resourced communities. The lack of early diagnostic services and the scarcity of autism-friendly educational institutions make advocacy efforts on World Autism Awareness Day even more critical. Organisations such as Autism South Africa (ASA) and Action in Autism have been at the forefront of promoting understanding, offering resources, and fighting for policy changes that improve the lives of autistic individuals. ASA works closely with the government to influence policy changes that ensure better access to education, employment, and healthcare services for autistic individuals.

### 4.1 Autism across the lifespan and the post school context

In South Africa, the Post-School Education and Training (PSET) system faces challenges in fully including students with autism, with the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) working to improve access and success through a Strategic Policy Framework on Disability.<sup>6</sup> This framework aims to address the fragmented management of disability rights and ensure full inclusion, integration, and equality for people with disabilities. The Department of Higher Education and Training has thus made significant progress towards improving education and training opportunities for people with disabilities by including them in mainstream programmes. Matters of Neurodiversity conditions and Neurological disorders will be included in the New Legislation that the Department of Women, Youth, and Persons with Disabilities is developing.<sup>7</sup>

Although autism discourse in South Africa has largely focused on early childhood and basic education, autism is a lifelong condition that increasingly intersects with post-school learning environments. Growing numbers of autistic individuals are accessing universities, TVET colleges, community colleges, and skills development programmes. However, research consistently demonstrates that autistic students often encounter significant barriers in post-school contexts, including inflexible curricula, inaccessible assessment practices, sensory-overstimulating environments, and limited institutional understanding of neurodiversity.<sup>8</sup> Recent international and South African studies show that these barriers are

<sup>5</sup> Department of Women, Youth and Persons with Disabilities (2015).

<sup>6</sup> Department of Higher Education and Training (2018).

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Global Burden of Disease Study 2021 Autism Spectrum Collaborators (2024).



systemic rather than individual, with post-school institutions remaining largely structured around neurotypical assumptions about learning, assessment, communication, and sensory regulation. Evidence from recent reviews and sector analyses indicates that rigid curricula, time-pressured and standardised assessments, sensory-overstimulating physical and digital environments, and limited staff understanding of neurodiversity contribute to uneven participation, lower retention, and reduced completion rates among autistic students, despite policy commitments to disability inclusion.<sup>9</sup>

These challenges can lead to lower retention and completion rates, undermining national objectives for access success. The persistence of such barriers highlights the need for explicit attention to autism within PSET policy implementation, rather than assuming that generic disability provisions are sufficient.

## 4.2 Autism and the White Paper for Post School Education and Training

The White Paper for Post-School Education and Training (2013) articulate the South African government's vision of an expanded, integrated, and differentiated PSET system aimed at addressing historical inequities and supporting inclusive development. Central to this vision is a commitment to social justice, redress, and improved participation for historically marginalised groups, including persons with disabilities.<sup>10</sup>

Chapter 6 of the White Paper explicitly acknowledges the fragmented and uneven nature of disability provision within post-school institutions. It recognises that many students with disabilities face exclusion due to inaccessible infrastructure, limited student support, and inconsistent institutional policies. Although autism is not named explicitly, ASD falls squarely within the policy's definition of disability, making autism inclusion an implicit obligation rather than an optional institutional initiative.

### Legislation that guides the inclusion of people with disabilities in the PSET sector:

- Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948)
- United Nations (UN) International Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) (2006)
- The South African Bill of Rights is enshrined in the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (Act 108 of 1996)
- The White Paper on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2015)
- The White Paper for Post-School Education and Training (2014)
- The Strategic Policy Framework on Disability for the Post-School Education and Training System is aligned with the disability-inclusive Sustainable Development Goals, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in September 2015.

In response to the commitments outlined in the PSET White Paper, the DHET developed the Strategic Policy Framework on Disability for the Post-School Education and Training System. This framework seeks to guide institutions in creating enabling environments, implementing

<sup>9</sup> Butcher & Lane (2025); Horlin, Almond, Bowen & Robertson (2024); McDowall & Kiseleva (2024); Nthibeli (2025); Wolpe (2024).

<sup>10</sup> Department of Higher Education and Training (2013).



reasonable accommodation, and mainstreaming disability inclusion across governance, teaching and learning, and student support.<sup>11</sup> Of particular relevance to autistic students is the framework's recognition of invisible and neurodevelopmental disabilities, which are often poorly understood and inadequately supported. The framework calls for institution-wide responsibility, emphasising that disability inclusion should not be confined to disability units but embedded across academic and administrative systems. This approach provides a crucial policy foundation for advancing autism-affirming practices within post-school institutions.

While the White Paper for Post-School Education and Training articulate a strong commitment to inclusion and social justice, its silence on autism and neurodiversity has resulted in uneven implementation and limited systemic support for autistic students. Addressing this gap requires not a new policy but a clearer interpretation, stronger guidance, and deliberate institutional accountability.

#### 4.2.1 Policy gaps and opportunities for autism inclusion in the PSET White Paper

The *White Paper for Post-School Education and Training* (2013) establish a strong commitment to social justice, equity, and inclusion for persons with disabilities within the PSET system. However, from the perspective of autism inclusion, several policy gaps and opportunities emerge.

##### **Key Policy Gaps**

First, the White Paper does not explicitly recognise autism or neurodevelopmental conditions. Autism is implicitly included under the broad category of disability, but the absence of a specific reference limits policy visibility and results in uneven interpretation and implementation across institutions. This silence risks reinforcing support models designed primarily for physical and sensory impairments, rather than addressing the pedagogical, sensory, and communication related barriers commonly experienced by autistic students.

Second, the White Paper places greater emphasis on access, infrastructure, and enrolment expansion than on inclusive pedagogy and assessment. While physical access is essential, autistic students are more frequently excluded through inflexible curricula, rigid assessment practices, sensory-overstimulating environments, and unstructured academic expectations. These aspects are insufficiently addressed in the policy.

Third, the principle of “access with success” is not operationalised in ways that account for neurodiversity. The White Paper does not define success for students with invisible disabilities, nor does it link inclusion to evidence-based teaching and learning approaches such as Universal Design for Learning (UDL). As a result, responsibility for accommodation is often individualised and disclosure-driven, rather than systemically embedded.

Finally, institutional autonomy in implementing disability support is not accompanied by minimum national standards for staff development, autism-inclusive teaching practices, or

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<sup>11</sup> Department of Higher Education and Training (2018).

consistent accommodation processes. This contributes to fragmented provision and variable outcomes for autistic students across the PSET system.

### ***Policy Opportunities***

Despite these gaps, the White Paper provides a strong enabling framework for advancing autism inclusion. Its grounding in constitutional equality, human rights, and redress creates a clear obligation for reasonable accommodation and inclusive participation. The emphasis on a differentiated and integrated PSET system offers policy space for flexible learning pathways, alternative assessment methods, and diverse modes of participation, thereby better supporting autistic learners.

The Strategic Policy Framework on Disability further strengthens these opportunities for the Post-School Education and Training System, which explicitly recognises invisible and neurodevelopmental disabilities and promotes institution-wide responsibility for inclusion.<sup>12</sup> Read together, these policy instruments provide a robust foundation for autism-inclusive practice, provided that clearer guidance, stronger accountability mechanisms, and deliberate institutional leadership are applied.

In this sense, the challenge facing the PSET sector is not the absence of policy, but the need for targeted interpretation, implementation, and monitoring to ensure that autistic students are able not only to access post-school education, but to participate meaningfully and succeed within it.

### **4.3 Autism inclusion, economic participation, and development**

The White Paper on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities positions education and skills development as central to reducing economic vulnerability and unlocking human potential. For autistic individuals, barriers within the PSET sector frequently translate into exclusion from meaningful employment and economic participation. Global evidence indicates that autistic adults experience disproportionately high levels of unemployment and underemployment when post-school pathways are inaccessible.<sup>13</sup>

In the South African context, where education and training are key levers for addressing inequality, exclusion from the PSET sector has long-term social and economic consequences. Autism inclusion within post-school education is therefore a developmental priority, aligning with broader national goals related to inclusive growth and social cohesion. Despite progressive policy frameworks, the implementation of disability inclusion within South African post-school institutions remains uneven. Sector analyses indicate that disability support is often under-resourced, inconsistently located within institutional structures, and inadequately integrated into teaching and learning practices.<sup>14</sup> For autistic students, this frequently results in reliance on self-advocacy, ad hoc accommodations, and individual disclosure rather than

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<sup>12</sup> Department of Higher Education and Training (2018).

<sup>13</sup> Global Burden of Disease Study 2021 Autism Spectrum Collaborators (2024).

<sup>14</sup> Universities South Africa (2025).



systemic inclusion. These realities point to a persistent gap between policy intent and institutional practice. Addressing this gap requires moving beyond compliance-driven approaches toward a culture of inclusion that recognises neurodiversity as part of institutional transformation.

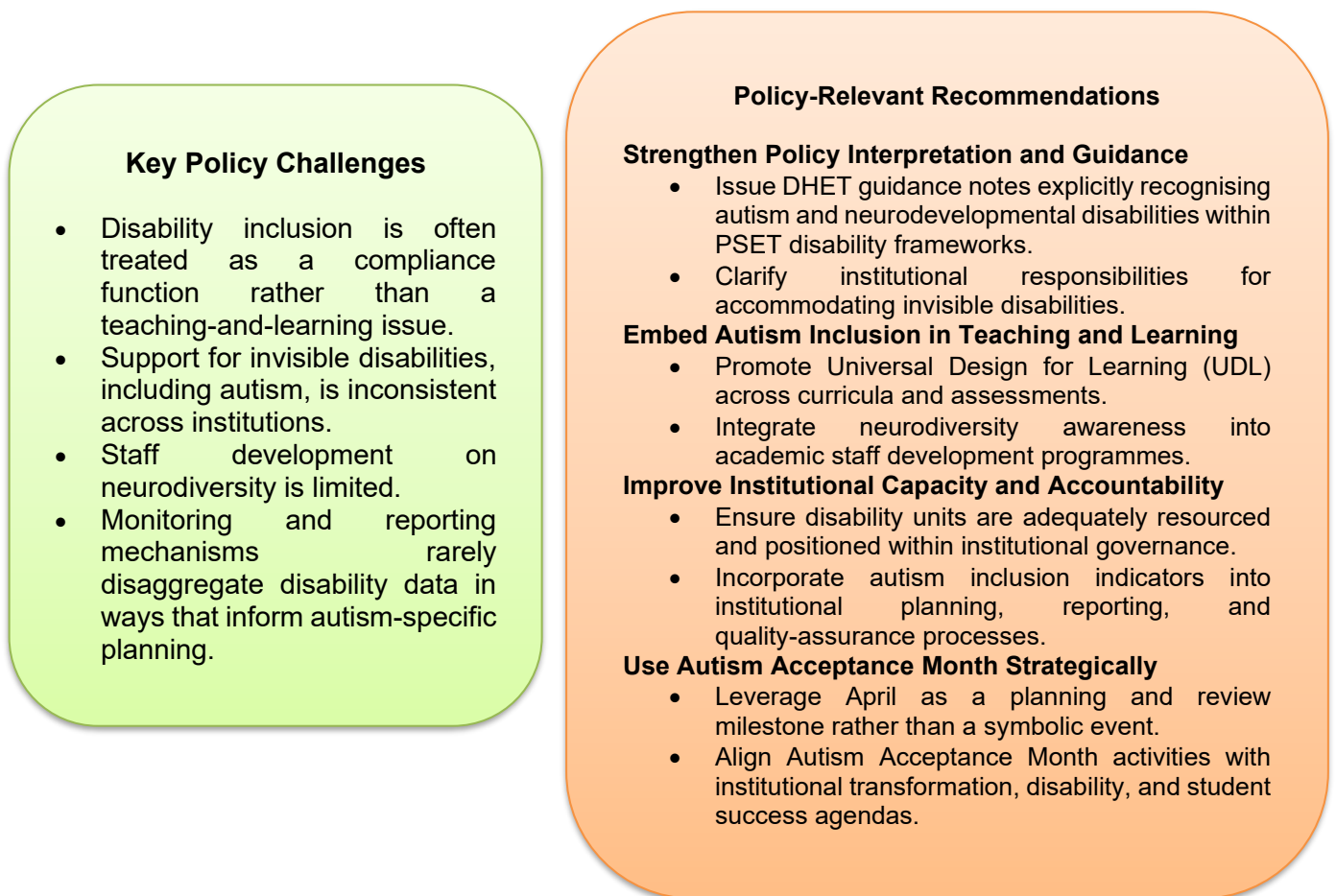


Figure 2: Policy Challenges and Recommendations<sup>15</sup>

## 5. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Autism Acceptance Month provides a valuable opportunity for reflection, review, and recommitment within the PSET sector. However, its significance lies not in symbolic recognition but in its potential to catalyse systemic change. For DHET and post-school institutions, Autism Acceptance Month can serve as an annual milestone for reviewing policy implementation, evaluating institutional readiness, and strengthening accountability mechanisms. Sustainable change, however, depends on embedding acceptance and inclusion into everyday institutional practice throughout the year.

Autism inclusion within South Africa's Post-School Education and Training sector is firmly grounded in national policy and legislative frameworks. The White Paper for Post-School Education and Training and the White Paper on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities together establish a clear mandate for rights-based, inclusive, and socially just post-school education.

<sup>15</sup> Department of Higher Education and Training (2013; 2018); Universities South Africa (2025); CAST (2024).

Autism Acceptance Month offers a timely lens through which to assess progress and recommit to this mandate. Ultimately, realising autism acceptance within the PSET sector requires sustained leadership, institutional accountability, and a commitment to neurodiversity as an essential dimension of transformation. By aligning practice with policy, the PSET sector can play a transformative role in advancing equity, access, and success for autistic individuals across the lifespan.

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