# Are School Professionals in Australian Schools Well-Prepared to Collaborate With Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Families of Their Students on the Autism Spectrum?

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## Abstract

In Australia, the school population in metropolitan areas is increasingly multicultural. School staff must be prepared to teach students from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds and to interact constructively with their families for desired student outcomes. Interactions with CALD families can be a daunting task for school professionals, especially when adequate support is scarce or nonexistent. The relationships between school staff and CALD parents may become even more complicated when the child is on the autism spectrum or has another disability. This exploratory study sets out to examine how school staff connect with CALD families of their students on the autism spectrum, what difficulties they face, what resources and services are currently accessible to them, and what additional assistance could help build stronger partnerships. Our results indicate that school professionals perceive their relationship with CALD families positively. However, school staff report several difficulties, such as a lack of satisfactory communication due to linguistic barriers, stigma related to disability, cultural incongruity of views on autism, and issues in accessing interpreters. School professionals believe adequate access to translated materials, additional tools to assist conversations, and targeted professional learning opportunities would strengthen their partnerships with CALD families. We conclude that the provision of targeted support would improve outcomes for all involved.

Key Words: culturally and linguistically diverse families, CALD, students, home–school partnerships, family, autism, schools, school professionals

## Introduction

The cultural makeup of Australia's population is rapidly changing. Data from the 2016 census indicates that 49% of the population was born overseas or one or both parents were born abroad compared to 46% in 2011. Australians speak over 300 languages, and one-fifth of the population speak a language other than English at home (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2017). In this article, we focus on culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) families of students on the autism spectrum. The term CALD background refers to Australians who are not indigenous and have a "cultural heritage different from that of dominant Anglo–Australian culture, replacing the previously used term of people from a non-English speaking background" (Queensland Government, 2010, pp. 5–6). Policymakers have used this term since 1996 (Queensland Health, 2019).

Australian Bureau of Statistics estimated that there were 205,200 Australians on the autism spectrum in 2018 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2019). Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2017) defined autism as "a persistent developmental disorder, characterised by symptoms evident from early childhood. These symptoms can range on a spectrum from mild to severe and include difficulty in social interaction, restricted or repetitive patterns of behaviour, and impaired communication skills" (p. 1). People from all cultural and economic backgrounds can be diagnosed with autism, and its characteristics can differ from child to child.

A positive and collaborative home–school partnership is crucial for the success of students on the autism spectrum (Schultz et al., 2016). Parent involvement in their child's education results in improved academic, behavioral, and social outcomes for the students (Minke et al., 2014). Open and honest, two-way communication is the basis for robust home–school partnerships, in which families and schools share information and use it to improve upon how they work with children (McCoach et al., 2010; Scullin et al., 2014). Effective home–school partnerships flourish on mutual respect, parity between parents and teachers, and parent involvement in educational decisions concerning their children (Murray & Mereoiu, 2015). Successful home–school partnerships also depend on school leadership commitment, inclusive school culture, priority for positive student outcomes, and the school's willingness to partner with the broader community (Gross et al., 2015).

Challenges encountered by parents in understanding the needs of their child with a disability can be enormous. CALD parents may face additional

cultural and structural barriers in accessing desired services. Low levels of English language skills and difficulty understanding professional jargon can be significant obstacles not only to newly arrived CALD communities, but also for second and third generation migrants in Australia (Bevan & Van Luyn, 2019). These issues can also be substantial for CALD families in their communication with the school and for being an advocate for their child (Starr et al., 2014). Cultural norms—such as relying on family support, keeping family issues within the family, traditional gender roles, and stigma associated with disability—can become difficulties for CALD communities. Professionals need to think about the intersectionality of culture and disability in their work with such communities (Bevan & Van Luyn, 2019). CALD families may also face structural barriers in accessing services and inclusion within the system, such as practical hurdles (location and access), lack of knowledge of the services available (providers not sufficiently engaging), and of the system (health, education, employment; Bevan & Van Luyn, 2019). They may also have to cope with hindrances in their interaction with schools including language barriers, a lack of understanding of school systems, and a lack of cultural responsiveness from school staff (Fontil & Petrakos, 2015).

School staff have their fair share of challenges in working with CALD families. Lack of knowledge of other cultures, scarcity of pre- and in-service professional development (Gilmour et al., 2018), and insufficient resources (e.g., interpreters, translated materials in community languages) top the list of hurdles in meaningful interactions between school professionals and CALD families. A study by Gilmour, Klieve, and Li (2018) in five Queensland high schools found that only 4.7% of surveyed teachers had preservice academic training to teach CALD students. Only 10% of teachers had received professional development, while CALD students made up 20% of the total student population at their schools. Fallah, Murawski, and Moradian (2018), in their study with CALD parents in the USA, reported that a majority of the parents believed that their school teachers did not have adequate cultural knowledge and understanding and recommended the staff undergo cultural competency training.

Educators do have access to interpreters, though the extent depends on states and territories in Australia. Available data is scarce on the degree of the use of interpreters by school staff. Moreover, even though the documents containing translated information are supplied online for the school staff in states and territories, there is hardly any information available on the actual practical usage of those documents by school staff.

This study was conducted by Positive Partnerships to explore the needs of school staff concerning their work with CALD families of their students on the autism spectrum. Positive Partnerships is a national project funded by the

Australian Government Department of Education, Skills, and Employment through the Helping Children with Autism program. Since 2008, Positive Partnerships has been working with schools, families, and their communities to provide professional learning and resources through workshops, webinars, and online modules to strengthen capacity to support and advocate for students on the autism spectrum (Positive Partnerships, 2019). Throughout this time, its work with families from a CALD background has been expanding. Positive Partnerships delivers workshops and develops resources in community languages in culturally respectful and responsive ways. Our work and funding are specifically aimed at supporting children on the autism spectrum; however, many of the strategies, approaches, and implications of this study may help professionals working with the families of all children with diverse learning needs.

In the professional learning workshops organized by Positive Partnerships, educators have been increasingly asking for information focused on families from a CALD background, differences in parent knowledge and understanding, and how to work together to build partnerships with CALD families. The school staff surveyed showed interest in resources and information relevant to their role and the needs of the families they work with. We identified a gap in research, particularly within an Australian context, that explored the experience of teachers working with CALD families. We set out to investigate: How prepared are school professionals in Australian schools to work collaboratively with families from a CALD background to support children on the autism spectrum? To answer this question, we probed into the following subquestions:

1. What factors influence CALD families' understanding of autism?
2. How effective is the home–school partnership between CALD families and school professionals?
3. What challenges do school professionals encounter when working with CALD families?
4. What kind of support is available to school professionals and to what extent?
5. What further assistance do school professionals require to work effectively with CALD families?

## Methods

### Research Design

A survey was conducted as it reaches a large number of people within a short period (VanderStoep & Johnson, 2009). Moreover, it can capture responses broadly utilizing limited resources, as in the case of this study. We created an online survey using Survey Monkey®.

## Measure

The survey included a total of 15 multiple-choice, Likert scale questions and one open-ended question. These were grouped into the following categories: demographic, cultural diversity in schools, the prevalence of autism in schools, its understanding by CALD families, parent–teacher relationships, challenges and support available, and future needs of the school professionals. In the open-ended question, the participants were able to provide additional information. Only six participants wrote responses to the open-ended question. Their comments did not add any significant information to the study and therefore were not included in the data analysis.

## Participants

School professionals in Australian schools were invited to participate in the study through an online announcement. We would like to clarify that we use the terms school professionals, school staff, and participants interchangeably to describe teachers, leadership teams, and other professionals working there. We took into account a range of terminology employed in different administrative settings. We anticipated that the survey would attract school professionals who came into contact with CALD students, in particular the ones with disabilities including autism. It was also natural to expect that the school staff who had previously attended the Positive Partnerships workshops would complete the survey, the rationale being that the past workshop attendees regularly access the Positive Partnerships website, Facebook page, and e-newsletter.

Seventy-one school professionals completed the survey, although a total of 95 accessed it online. The other 24 either just gave consent and later decided not to participate or provided answers to only demographic questions. Since their responses lacked vital details on their work with CALD families, we excluded these cases from the analysis. Out of the 71 filtered out for our study, six participants chose not to reveal their role. However, they were still taken into consideration for our analysis as they answered all other questions. Eighteen classroom teachers completed the survey along with almost an equal number ($n = 20$) of staff members in leadership roles. Many ($n = 24$) learning support/special education teachers and a few ($n = 3$) school counsellors/well-being officers also completed the survey.

Table 1. The Role of Participants at School

| Role at School | Responses ($N$) | Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| Classroom Teacher | 18 | 28% |
| School Leadership | 20 | 31% |
| Learning Support/Special Education Teacher | 24 | 37% |
| School Counsellor/Well-Being Professional | 3 | 4% |
| Total | 65 | 100% |

The majority of participants (63%) worked in the public school system.[1] About 33% of school professionals who completed the survey were from Catholic and independent school systems (see Table 2). There are some likely reasons for this result; there are more public schools in Australia compared to Catholic and independent ones, and as a consequence, more students enroll in public schools (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2020b). More participants were from primary schools. These participants were more likely to be from schools that had previously participated in the Positive Partnerships workshops. Primary school staff also generally come into contact with families receiving a new diagnosis and early intervention. A majority of the participants were women. This result is consistent with the national demographic as there are more female staff in Australian schools than male staff (72% female staff in 2019; Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2020a).

Table 2. Participants' Sector of Work

| School Sector | Primary | Secondary | Total | Percentage |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Public Schools | 32 | 13 | 45 | 63% |
| Catholic Schools | 15 | 1 | 16 | 23% |
| Independent Schools | 4 | 5 | 9 | 13% |
| Others | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1% |
| Total | 52 | 19 | 71 | 100% |

More than half (56%) of the participants worked in schools with student enrolment ranging from 300 to 600 and more. The size of their schools indicates that these were most likely in metropolitan areas. Approximately 33% of the school staff worked in schools with 100 to 300 students. Only seven (10%) worked in a school with 100 or less than 100 students.

All participants reported having students from diverse cultural and linguistic background at their schools. Most of them worked in schools with CALD families ranging from 20–80% of the total school population, whereas 11 school professionals reported having more than 80% of CALD families enrolled in their school. This result suggests that the likelihood of participants having some interaction with CALD families at their school is reasonably high.

The prevalence of diagnosed disabilities in the schools of some participants ranged from 10–20+% of the total school population. However, the majority of participants believed it to be less than 10%.

### Data Collection

Autism Spectrum Australia's (Aspect)[2] Research Approval committee approved this study before its commencement. The study was announced online to recruit participants. A survey link was posted on the Positive Partnerships Facebook page, website, e-newsletter, and the Aspect website. Participants were directed to the anonymous survey on Survey Monkey®. Only some demographic information was collected, such as gender, roles at school, and the sector of work. Participants read an information statement detailing the purpose of the study, confidentiality, and anonymity before going to the first question. The approximate time for survey completion ranged from three to five minutes. The data was stored on a password-protected computer with limited access to staff.

### Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using the Survey Monkey® analysis tool. This tool provided descriptive statistics such as numbers and frequencies in table and graph format. The analysis was conducted by clicking on the "Analyse" tab, and reports were printed to allow researchers to further examine the data in detail.

## Results

### Subquestion 1: What Factors Influence CALD Families Understanding of Autism?

The participants reported their perceptions of the factors impacting upon CALD parents' understanding of autism by rating their responses on a 3-point Likert scale. The options were: *significant impact*, *some impact,* and *no impact.* Possible factors such as cultural and child development beliefs, English language proficiency, access to information, differing family priorities, and social stigma associated with disabilities (Bevan & Van Luyn, 2019) were listed.

Table 3 shows the results. Of the participating school professionals, 69% (*n* = 49) reported that cultural beliefs and perceptions of disability and child development had a *significant impact* on parents' view of autism. In addition, 62% (*n* = 44) believed that language proficiency issues had a *significant impact.* Other listed factors showed similar results. These findings suggest the awareness within the majority of school staff who responded to the survey of the impact different factors can have on how CALD families understand autism.

Table 3. Factors Influencing CALD Families' Understanding of Autism

| Factors | Significant Impact | Some Impact | No Impact |
|---|---|---|---|
| Cultural differences and different understanding of autism | 69% | 31% | |
| Language barriers | 62% | 38% | |
| Lack of access to information | 62% | 37% | 1% |
| Differing family priorities | 62% | 35% | 3% |
| The stigma associated with disability | 66% | 32% | 2% |

## Subquestion 2: How Effective Are the Home–School Partnerships Between CALD Families and School Professionals?

The participants rated three attributes of a strong partnership between home and school on a Likert Scale from one to four (*always, most of the time, some of the time, never*). The attributes the school staff rated were: communication; the school's effort to make CALD families comfortable in meetings for making decisions about their child's learning; and the teacher valuing parents' knowledge about their child (Haines et al., 2015).

The data in Table 4 suggests that communication between 71% of the school professionals (*n* = 50) and CALD families either *always* or *most of the time* worked well. However, 28% believed that it worked only *some of the time*. The majority of the participants reported that their school either *always* or *most of the time* made efforts to make CALD families comfortable in meetings and with decision making related to their child's learning. Most (91%) of the school professionals said that they either *always* or *most of the time* valued CALD parents' knowledge about their child. These results demonstrate that a majority of the participants had positive perceptions about their school's interaction with CALD families; others were not so optimistic about their school and their communication with CALD families.

Table 4. Home–School Partnership

| Participants' Statements | Always | Most of the Time | Some of the Time | Never |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Communication between CALD parents and me (as a school professional) works well | 13% | 58% | 28% | 1% |
| The school takes steps to help CALD families feel comfortable in meetings and involves them in decisions | 34% | 51% | 13% | 2% |
| I value the knowledge of the CALD parents of their children | 63% | 28% | 9% | |

## Subquestion 3: What Challenges Do School Professionals Encounter When Working With CALD Families?

Possible difficulties such as accessing interpreters, families not making it to appointments, communicating child's progress to parents, and understanding and catering for cultural differences, were listed with the option to choose more than one. The results in Table 5 show that 44% of the participants ($n$ = 31) faced difficulties in accessing interpreters when they needed them to communicate with CALD families. Approximately 65% of the school staff who completed the survey ($n$ = 46) believed CALD families missing appointments was an issue, and 79% ($n$ = 56) identified communication with parents about their child's progress as a hurdle. A lack of understanding of other cultures and the inability to cater to cultural differences was a barrier for 56% of the school professionals ($n$ = 40). The results indicate that a majority of the school staff faced difficulties in communication, whether it was accessing interpreters or parents not attending meetings or talking to parents about their child's progress.

Table 5. Challenges faced by school professionals

| Challenges | Frequency | Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| Access to interpreters | 31 | 44% |
| Families not making to appointments | 46 | 69% |
| Communication with parents on student progress | 56 | 79% |
| Understanding and catering for cultural differences | 40 | 56% |
| Other | 9 | 13% |

## Subquestion 4: What Kind of Support Is Available to School Professionals and to What Extent?

The school professionals rated the level of additional support available to help them to engage with CALD families effectively on a four-point Likert scale (*not in place, partially in place, fully in place, not sure*). The results presented in Table 6 show the level of implementation of the extra support available across the whole school environment to be in the minority.

Table 6. Additional Support to Engage With CALD Families

| Support in Place | Frequency | Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| Not in place | 7 | 10% |
| Partially in place | 37 | 52% |
| Fully in place | 24 | 34% |
| Not sure | 3 | 4% |

The participants also identified support available that would assist them in their engagement with CALD families. Five possible support items were listed, such as interpreters, information for parents in community languages, cultural competency training, specialist staff, and other professional development. Interpreters were available to 65% of the school staff (*n* = 46). Approximately 45% of the participants (*n* = 32) reported having access to informational materials in community languages. Only 33% of the school professionals (*n* = 24) had a community liaison officer or multicultural aides at their school. Cultural competency training was available to 18% (*n* = 13), and other professional learning opportunities were available to 13% (*n* = 9). The findings indicate that the participants in the study did not have full access to resources that could help them work with CALD families in a more culturally responsive manner.

Table 7. Support available to school professionals

| Support Available | Frequency | Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| Interpreters | 46 | 65% |
| Materials available in community languages | 32 | 45% |
| Community Liaison Officer/multicultural aids | 24 | 34% |
| Cultural Competency training | 13 | 18% |
| Other professional learning | 9 | 13% |

## Subquestion 5: What Other Support Do School Professionals Require to Work Effectively With CALD Families?

School professionals rated items from a list of possible tools and resources that could support them in building or strengthening their relationship with CALD families. The list included: translated materials in community languages that provided information about autism and learning at school, professional learning workshops, tools to assist in conversations with parents, and the opportunity to connect with other schools to learn about best practice.

Table 7 shows that three-quarters (75%) of the school staff suggested that access to translated resources in community languages would be *highly useful*. It is important to note that none of the school professionals classified these resources as *not useful*. Many (66%) of the participants regarded professional learning as *highly* valuable, and an almost equal number (68%) of school staff believed tools to assist conversations would be *highly* beneficial. The rest (*n* = 23, 32%) thought these tools to be *of some use*. These results point towards a need for additional resources which will help in communication with CALD families, as well as training opportunities for staff that will enable them to understand cultural differences and the situation of families, paving the way to improved, efficient, and productive interaction.

Table 8. Support Required to Work With CALD Families

| Support Needed | Highly Useful | Of Some Use | Not Useful |
|---|---|---|---|
| Translated resources | 75% | 25% | |
| Professional development | 66% | 30% | 4% |
| Tools to assist conversations | 68% | 32% | |
| Opportunity to learn from best practice by other schools | 55% | 41% | 4% |

## Discussion

The challenges school professionals encounter—and the resources and supports that are missing—have an impact on their interactions with families from diverse cultures who have a child on the autism spectrum. The findings demonstrate that school staff face difficulties in communicating with parents and lack resources and professional development. There is a great need for relevant and accessible professional development to build stronger partnerships between school professionals and CALD families.

### Factors Impacting the Understanding of Autism in CALD Families

#### Differing View of Autism

School professionals in this study had a clear understanding of the factors that may affect CALD parents' view of autism, such as the cultural concept of disability and child development. In their opinion, CALD parents in Australian schools may have a completely different idea of how autism and disability are understood in their respective cultures compared to the majority culture of school staff. This study aligns with previous studies (Alqahtani, 2012; Bernier et al., 2010; McCabe, 2008; Samadi & McConkey, 2011; Sun et al., 2013; Ying et al., 2012) that suggest that in countries such as Vietnam, China, Iran, South Korea, and Saudi Arabia, a diagnosis of a childhood disability can be seen as retribution for a past sin the parents committed or a fault in their genes. The implications of these cultural concepts of disability can be far-reaching. As a result, parents may not seek a diagnosis (e.g., Samadi & McConkey, 2011), which in turn can impact the support and intervention families can receive. In China, McCabe (2008) reported that some children were not enrolled in school to avoid the family "losing face." Starr, Martini, and Kuo (2014) also noted that families from collectivist cultures were often reluctant to discuss their child's difficulties outside the family, resulting in the utilization of fewer supports and services.

*Language and Stigma*

Language barriers and stigma associated with disability and limited proficiency in English can impair a family's ability to access necessary information. In this study, the school professionals were aware of the language barriers, the stigma associated with having a child with a disability, access to information, and varying family priorities.

Language barriers and stigma associated with a disability can also limit a family's ability to access services. Families with limited knowledge of the English language may not be able to understand and interpret information, especially professional jargon used in written and verbal communication. It might also severely hamper their access to services that could help their child with a disability (Lo, 2008). Similarly, social stigma related to disabilities could impact parents' acceptance of their child being diagnosed with autism and, consequently, make them hesitant to access the services offered to them. Summarizing our analysis, for school professionals to work effectively with CALD families, it is vital to take into consideration the fact that disabilities such as autism are not viewed identically in different cultures (Harlin & Rodriguez, 2009). This realization naturally leads us to the prospect of developing a constructive partnership between the two groups which we discuss below.

## The Partnership Between School Professionals and CALD Families

School professionals who participated in this study considered their partnership with CALD parents to be positive. The majority of the professionals self-reported a high level of communication with CALD families and the recognition of parents' valuable knowledge about their child, as well as reiterated that their school welcomed families.

Several research studies on collaboration between home and school emphasize the importance of skillful and efficient communication, mutual respect among both the parties, and a welcoming policy of the school (Edwards & Da Fonte, 2012; Garbacz et al., 2016; Haines et al., 2015; Olivos et al., 2010; Rodriguez et al., 2014; Rossetti et al., 2017; Schultz et al., 2016). Our survey relied heavily on these three yardsticks. We found that the school professionals' perception of their partnership with CALD families was overall excessively positive, which is not surprising or unexpected. More than three-quarters of the school staff rated themselves and their schools rather high on all three indicators, that is, communication, open-door policy of the school, and recognition of parents' valuable knowledge about their child.

However, we find it useful to focus on those opinions which deviated significantly from the ones mentioned above. More than a quarter of the participants reported that communication with their CALD students' families worked only

scarcely. This situation is further deteriorated by their lack of access to reliable interpreters and families not attending scheduled meetings. Issues about the lack of communications between school staff and CALD families are well documented. In numerous cases, cultural and linguistic differences are the source of miscommunication. Also, the professional language used in meetings and paperwork intimidates many CALD parents. Use of simplified language can improve the situation enormously (Fallah et al., 2018). It is also known that parents are undoubtedly experts on their children. Therefore, an acknowledgement of this fact on the part of school staff can help start trusting conversations with CALD parents. Our findings highlight the need for school professionals to develop effective communication as well as trust and openness towards CALD families. These traits provide a well-known basis of improved education of students in general and with the ones with diverse learning needs, in particular (LaBarbera, 2017).

## Challenges Faced by School Professionals

The findings of this study suggest that a sizable number of school staff faced difficulties in accessing interpreters (49%) and communicating student progress to families (79%). In addition to this, access to interpreters varies in different states and territories across Australia. It is also likely that some professionals may not have full knowledge of the availability of these services or may not find them fully reliable. On the other hand, parents may feel hesitant to communicate through an interpreter because they may not want to expose their deficiency in English skills or because of the stigma attached to disabilities or the lack of sensitivity and possible intimidation by interpreters (Woolfenden et al., 2014).

More than half of the participants identified their lack of cultural understanding as a challenge for interactions with CALD families. Wu and Chu (2012) cited four steps (as identified by Harry, Rueda, & Kalyanpur, 1999), for school professionals to achieve cultural competence: "identification of their cultural values and assumptions about their students' difficulties; discovery of similarities and differences between their cultural values and family's; respecting identified differences and fully explaining professional assumption to families; and developing the most effective way to provide services for the child through discussion and collaboration" (p. 153). School professionals also need to examine the culturally responsive practices already in use to engage with CALD parents (Rossetti et al., 2017). The process of self-reflection may lead to school professionals incorporating *cultural humility* (Hook et al., 2013) in their interactions with CALD families, demonstrating an understanding of the experiences and viewpoints of the latter (Rossetti et al., 2017).

### Support Available to School Professionals

The outcomes of this study indicated that additional support to assist school staff in working with CALD families was limited. The data identified that providing information, protocols, and training in using interpreter services can be beneficial for school staff. Professional development opportunities and cultural competency training, in particular, were available to only a small number of participating professionals. The literature suggests school professionals can achieve cultural understanding/competency by being open to diversity; by exercising introspection; by having a belief in social justice; and by having an exposure to various cultures (Garmon, 2004). Although school professionals have educational experience and their own worldview, relying solely on these will not ensure that they will become culturally competent. Therefore, schools need to explore ways to incorporate this aspect in school routines (Craig et al., 2000; Duke & Ming, 2006) and provide ongoing support through professional development on how to successfully engage and communicate with families. It is also crucial to incorporate strategies in professional development that would enhance mutual trust between families and school staff (Fallah et al., 2018). The result of focused training would equip teachers with knowledge, skills, and confidence to build stronger partnerships (Symeou et al., 2012). Our results suggest that school professionals required access to training to achieve more understanding of the cultural needs of CALD families in their school communities. Only a small number of school staff received adequate cultural competency training. They also identified a need for translated materials in community languages and additional tools to assist such training. The participants recommended these actions as future steps by their school towards greater cultural competence.

## Implications

Here we summarize the implications of our findings:

1. School professionals must reach out to CALD families with an open mind and work in close collaboration with them to bridge the gap between their differing views on autism and disability. A lack of a sincere effort in this direction can have huge implications, hindering any other genuine effort to help students on the autism spectrum. The focus should remain on the child as an individual regardless of diagnosis.

2. Among other useful steps to enhance teacher–family joint efforts, our study highlights the need for accessible translated materials and tools to help conversations with CALD families of students on the autism spectrum, removing the language barriers to the best workable extent.

3. One crucial and practical solution to the issue of lack of consistent and valuable communication between school professionals and CALD families is to seek the help of qualified, trained interpreters in whose presence the parents will have no hesitation opening up regarding their concerns and alleviating social and cultural stigma.
4. Rigorous preservice training of school professionals to equip them with skills for smooth cultural connectivity with families of diverse backgrounds can be of immense importance for providing the best educational environment for the students under consideration.
5. Our study also suggests a greater need for continuous professional learning in general and for cultural competence in particular.

In response to our survey and analysis, Positive Partnerships is extending the number of information sheets and resources about autism that are translated into 11 community languages to assist CALD families in understanding autism. Positive Partnerships' translated materials are also available online for teachers to use. In the future, Positive Partnership will be willing to contribute to designing and incorporating cultural competency training in its professional learning programs in collaboration with school professionals and parents. It can also create a knowledge-based list of requirements interpreters must have to successfully assist in bridging the gap in linguistic and cultural communication.

### Limitations and Future Research

Seventy-one school professionals completed the survey for this study. Consequently, the results may not be 100% representative of all school staff in Australia. Future studies will benefit from recruiting more participants and making the survey more comprehensive. Also, note that this study is based on quantitative data alone from an online survey. Due to the nature of the research, we believe both quantitative and qualitative methods should be applied to gather rich data on the subject. A study of CALD parents' perspectives on their interactions with school staff would also contribute to the knowledge on the subject and is already in progress. In addition, examining various methods of outreach could aid in determining the most effective practices. Another possible avenue of inquiry could be to carry out a comparative study of home–school relationships between CALD and mainstream communities with children on the autism spectrum. It could enable us to pinpoint the barriers and issues facing the former group distinctively and with more clarity.

### Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to investigate how school staff currently interact with CALD families, what challenges they face, and what resources and

professional learning school professionals have available to them. The study also identified additional solutions that would help support stronger collaborations with CALD families who have children on the autism spectrum. The cultural diversity of Australian classrooms makes it imperative for teachers and other school staff to form effective and close partnerships with these families to optimize student outcomes. This study addresses an existing gap in the research on what school professionals already do and what further steps they can take in regards to the efficacy of this partnership in the Australian context. The findings from this study suggest that CALD families may face cultural and structural barriers in accessing services and in their interactions with schools. Despite reporting presumed good partnerships, the participants face several challenges with providing services to CALD families. Communication is a significant challenge; additional vital support to work with CALD families is also not adequately made available in practice for many school staff who took part in the survey.

To help address some of the challenges faced by school professionals, translated materials, tools to assist conversations with CALD families, and professional development for cultural competency need to be implemented efficaciously and promptly. School professionals require support and resources to work collaboratively with families of CALD children on the spectrum. To improve home–school partnerships, the school professionals need to have access to interpreters, translated information, and cultural competency training. Provision of translated supporting materials into the languages of local communities with evidence-based resources can help address the challenges of the home–school partnerships. More professional development and cultural competency training would be helpful for school professionals. Further research is recommended to explore the subject in depth.

## Endnotes

[1]There are three types of schools in Australia: Government, Independent, and Catholic. Government schools are funded by the Government, and students do not or pay a minimal cost. Independents schools are self-funded and offer a broad curriculum not provided by other schools. Catholic schools are mainly funded by the federal Government and have a low fee (Schoolapedia, 2019).
[2]Aspect is Australia's largest not for profit autism-specific service provider. Positive Partnerships is delivered by Aspect.

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