

# **We Are on the Same Page! Strengthening Parent–Teacher Partnerships Through Autism-Focused Training Workshops**

*Najeeba Syeda and Susan Bruck*

## **Abstract**

Parent–teacher partnerships involve open and frequent communications. Successful partnerships are important contributors to the learning outcomes of students with diverse needs. However, parents and teachers often have limited opportunities to develop a shared understanding of the student on the autism spectrum and to have conversations about strategies to support the child’s learning at home and school. This article evaluates a combined parent–teacher training program, held in Australia before the COVID-19 pandemic, that built and strengthened the parent–teacher partnership. Nine parents and nine teachers were interviewed one month after attending the training workshop. Parents and teachers reported improved communications and a strengthened partnership as an outcome of the training program through an improved understanding of the needs of the student on the autism spectrum.

Key Words: students with autism, professional training, workshops, parent–teacher partnerships, shared understanding, communication, Australia

## **Introduction**

Inclusive school environments that meet the social–emotional, communication, sensory, and behavioral needs of students on the autism spectrum (American Psychiatric Association, 2013) offer the best opportunities to learn

(Saggers et al., 2016, 2019; Stephenson et al., 2020). Inclusive teaching practices acknowledge the individual's skills, talents, interests, and preferences for learning and communicating (Mesibov et al., 2004). Teacher and parent partnerships that encourage inclusive teaching practices through a welcoming, respectful, and collaborative culture enable the delivery of consistent academic, social, emotional, and behavioral practices across school and home settings (Azad et al., 2020). However, educators and parents report several barriers to participating in collaborative partnerships, including a lack of training in teaching students on the autism spectrum, limited time to engage in such training, and a shortage of accessible, relevant information about the needs of students and families or autism-specific specialist support options (Saggers et al., 2016).

Australian preservice teachers receive limited training in the value of developing parent–teacher partnerships or how they influence student learning support. To fill the gap, the Positive Partnerships program offers Australian school communities workshops focused on developing and strengthening home–school partnerships. In Australia, students on the autism spectrum attend mainstream schools or satellite classes (established in mainstream schools) or special education schools. The purpose of this study was to evaluate the effect of a one-day workshop designed to overcome the barriers to collaborative school partnerships between teachers and parents. The focus of the workshop was to provide teachers and parents of students on the autism spectrum with information and skills to promote an effective parent–teacher partnership.

### **Parent–Teacher Partnership**

A parent–teacher partnership provides opportunities for the two stakeholders to discuss the learning needs of the student on the autism spectrum, embrace their learning style, and encourage consistency of supports across all settings (Hodges et al., 2020). To develop a strong partnership between the parent/s and the teacher, a shared understanding of the student, parent, and teacher needs is required (Hodges et al., 2020). This shared understanding between the teacher and the parent can enable a consistent, structured, and predictable home and school environment for student learning (Clark & Adams, 2020; Lei et al., 2017).

Despite this understanding of the value of school partnerships, two barriers to their success have been identified by the teachers and the parents. The Australian Autism Educational Needs Analysis (Saggers et al., 2016) identified that mainstream teachers often feel underequipped to teach students on the autism spectrum, and for this reason, they can be hesitant to engage in a partnership with parents. Parents also have concerns about the ability of teachers to engage with their child and support their needs, and they suggest that teachers have

a limited understanding of autism and the needs of their child or the family (Roberts & Simpson, 2016; Saggars et al., 2016).

### **Supporting the Parent–Teacher Partnership**

Building a parent–teacher partnership requires teachers and parents to respect each other’s opinions and to work as equal team collaborators (Murray et al., 2018). Partnership training programs that focus on developing trust, promote advocacy, encourage respectful communications, and are committed to equality provide the opportunity to strengthen the relationship between the stakeholders (Turnbull et al., 2011). Professional development can increase the confidence of teachers to speak to parents and thereby improve the effectiveness of their communications (Symeou et al., 2012). Enabling teachers to access autism specific information and relevant teaching strategies can also intensify their perceived confidence in their ability to support students on the autism spectrum and engage with parents about their child (Bruck et al., 2021; Syeda & Dresens, 2020).

Research indicates that conducting parent and teacher training programs in a shared setting offers the stakeholders a facilitated and supported environment in which to understand the impact of challenges that are faced at school and at home (Collier et al., 2015). The shared understanding can support the development of strategies for both the family setting and at school. For example, both the teacher and the parent identify the child’s interests and abilities and agree on consistent strategies to support specific behaviours (Hoy et al., 2018; Lake et al., 2018).

Effective communication involves providing teachers and parents with opportunities to discuss their concerns about the student and to collaboratively problem-solve (Kirmaci, 2019). However, there is evidence that parents, although included in the discussions, are frequently not consulted when *fait accompli* solutions are presented (Azad et al., 2016). This lack of inclusion of parents and communication with them can cause dissatisfaction with the partnership (Azad et al., 2018) and can have a profound impact on student learning (Ludicke & Kortman, 2012). When parent–teacher communication is frequent, easy to understand, and the child’s needs are acknowledged, parents are more satisfied with their partnership with the school (Hauptman, 2019).

### **Parent Involvement in Strengthening Partnerships**

Parent involvement in their child’s education can positively influence student outcomes, attendance, and behavior (Đurišić & Bunijevac, 2017; Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Successful teacher–parent partnerships consider the needs of the family. These partnerships provide an honest, respectful,

welcoming environment where relevant information about the child is shared through regular two-way communications (Đurišić & Bunijevac, 2017; Searing et al., 2015). For many parents, the preference is for this communication to be face-to-face conversation as compared to phone calls and letters (Kimaro & Machumu, 2015). The understanding of the requirement of reciprocity of the partnership is rarely appreciated by either teachers or parents (Rouse & O'Brien, 2017), as the perceived responsibility is with the educator (Broomhead, 2018).

To evaluate the Positive Partnerships combined professional training program two research questions were posed:

1. What did parents and teachers gain from attending the workshop?
2. One month after the workshop, what outcomes do parents and teachers report?

### **The Program**

The Positive Partnerships program is an Australian Government-funded national program that provides free autism education workshops to parents and teachers of students on the autism spectrum. The program has delivered autism education to thousands of parents and teachers across Australia since 2008. The data presented in this article was collected in 2018. The program is delivered by an Australian nongovernmental, autism-specific, not-for-profit support organization.

Positive Partnerships provides professional learning, online resources, and follow-up networking and support for teachers, school leaders, and other school staff across Australia. This training aims to build understanding, skills, and expertise of participants in working with children on the autism spectrum. Positive Partnerships also provides workshops, information sessions, and online resources to parent/carers of children on the autism spectrum. This training aims to assist parents and carers to work with schools to improve their child's educational outcomes. In addition, Positive Partnerships facilitates a range of webinars and provides online learning modules on their Online Learning Hub. The length of the workshops ranges from one day to two days, with some programs having longer engagement with schools. The workshops are held at locations convenient to parents and teachers.

The data presented in this article is from 15 one-day workshop programs of Positive Partnerships. This program provides the parent and teacher of a student on the autism spectrum the opportunity to strengthen their partnership by attending the workshop together so that they have a shared knowledge of autism and develop practical strategies to support the student on the autism spectrum at home and school. The Positive Partnerships program is widely

promoted to schools and through parent support networks. The schools are invited to participate in the program by an email. The school selects a team to attend the workshop comprising a member of the leadership team and two classroom teachers of the student on the autism spectrum. The school then invites the parents of children on the autism spectrum to attend the one-day workshop in metropolitan and regional Australia.

Before the parent–teacher workshop, teachers are required to complete two online modules that cover an introduction to autism and the use of a planning tool that supports the development of strategies. These modules are optional for parents and carers. Teachers and parents/carers attend a one-day workshop which includes sessions where they can, together, develop tailored goals and strategies for the individual student. The evidence-informed workshop content covers family perspectives, home–school partnerships and working together, understanding autism and behavior, and understanding mental health and well-being.

## Method

The Positive Partnerships workshops were delivered by qualified autism educators. To avoid bias in the collection and interpretation of the data, the Positive Partnerships research officer conducted the interviews (Author 1). The evaluation was approved by Aspect Research Approvals Committee.

### Participants

Table 1. Demographic Information of the Parent Participants

Parent	Child's age	School Level	Time Since Autism Was Diagnosed
1	7 years	Primary	Less than two years
2	7 years	Primary	More than two years
3	5 years	Primary	More than two years
4	10 years	Primary	More than two years
5	11 years	Primary	More than two years
6	5 years	Primary	More than two years
7	10 years	Primary	Less than two years
8	Under 5 years	Preschool	Less than two years
9	8 years	Primary	Less than two years

To evaluate the impact of the workshop on parent and teacher attendees, participants were interviewed to investigate the effect of the workshop experience

on their partnership. All participants were invited to participate in an interview. Nine parents and nine teachers participated in this evaluation interview. While parents and teachers of a specific student attended the workshop, the participants of this evaluation were not matched. All parent participants were mothers (see Table 1). All participating teachers were women (see Table 2).

Table 2. Demographic Information of the Teacher Participants

Teacher	Role at School	School Type	Years of Teaching Experience
1	Well-Being Coordinator	Secondary School	6–10 years
2	Individual Need Coordinator	Primary	10 years and above
3	Classroom Teacher	Early Primary	2–5 years
4	Classroom Teacher	Special Education	Less than 2 years
5	Classroom Teacher	Primary	6 years
6	Learning Coordinator	Primary	5 years
7	Classroom Teacher	Primary	10 years
8	Classroom Teacher	Special Education	3 years
9	Classroom Teacher	Primary	6 years

### Evaluation

The Positive Partnerships program was evaluated through a qualitative analysis of post-program interview data from teachers and parents. Separate, semi-structured interview schedules were developed for both parents and teachers. A semi-structured approach gathers consistent data wherever possible and allows for comparisons between cases and observation of emerging patterns and gives interviewers the flexibility to gather data that is specific or unique to them (Cachia & Millward, 2011). Telephone interviews are increasingly used in qualitative research as a cost- and time-effective method of collecting data and are considered equally effective as face-to-face interviews (Creswell & Báez, 2020; Oltmann, 2016). Participants who were unable to meet for an interview by phone or face-to-face were offered an email interview. The email interview is a practical and effective data collection method of participant responses that provides explicit, concise comments that are directly relevant to the research question (Hawkins, 2018).

### Data Collection

The interviews were conducted one month after the completion of the workshop. The interview investigated the perceptions of the parents and teachers about the effectiveness of the workshop in promoting a shared understanding

of autism and stronger parent–teacher partnership. One month is an appropriate post-program time to evaluate the outcome of the workshop and any translation into practice (Guðmundsdóttir et al., 2017).

Parents were asked five questions with several prompts:

1. Have you had the chance to use any of the new knowledge and skills you have gained since taking part in the program to build a stronger partnership with your child’s school?
2. Can you tell me about this, how have you used this new information/resources, and what’s happened?
3. From what you learned during the program, how did you, as a parent/carer, benefit from using a collaborative approach with your child’s school?
4. Since joining the Positive Partnerships program, have you experienced or noticed any benefits for your family or for your child’s school?
5. Since you completed the program, have you had the chance to try out any strategies to support your child’s learning?

Teachers were asked four questions with several prompts:

1. Have you had the chance to use any of the new knowledge and skills you have gained through taking part in the program to build a stronger partnership with any of the families of your students on the autism spectrum?
2. Can you tell us about this, how you have been able to use this new information /resources to build a stronger partnership, and what happened?
3. From what you learned during the program, how do you think that you, as a teacher, have benefitted from taking a collaborative approach with the families of your students on the autism spectrum?
4. Since joining the Positive Partnerships program, have you experienced or noticed any of these benefits happening for you, any of your students, or their families?

Informed consent interviews were conducted according to the preferences of the participants (telephone or email). The parents provided a phone number and a convenient time for the interview. Five teachers preferred to answer the interview questions by email. The first author conducted semi-structured interviews with parents. Interviews were audiorecorded. Signed informed consent was obtained before the day of the interview and confirmed prior to starting the recording. Each interview lasted between 15–20 minutes.

### **Data Analysis**

Thematic analysis was conducted to categorize themes and patterns across the entire data set related to the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The first author transcribed all telephone interviews. Interrater reliability

checks were performed by the second author. An inductive approach was used to develop a coding frame from the interview data. The analysis began by reading the transcript carefully a number of times, actively observing meanings and patterns across the transcriptions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The potential codes were written. The first author reread the transcripts and applied codes to excerpts from the transcriptions. All excerpts were grouped together for a code, then codes collated into potential themes. The themes were reviewed and revised. The second author independently reviewed the data and codes. The authors compared and discussed the themes and codes until interrater agreement was achieved.

## Findings

Three themes emerged from the post-training interviews. The themes showed that the workshops: provided opportunities to discuss student issues and goals; strengthened the parent–teacher partnerships; and supported the process of planning for student learning between the teacher and parent.

### **Theme 1: An Opportunity to Discuss Student Issues and Goals**

Theme one highlighted that the workshop environment provides a calm setting for teachers and parents to focus on the needs and goals of the students and to build a trusting partnership.

#### *Opportunity to Engage Without Interruption*

Parents stated that the combined training with their child’s teacher offered an excellent opportunity for them to interact with the teacher without the distractions of the busy school setting and to develop a shared understanding of the characteristics and strengths of children on the autism spectrum. One mother of a 7-year-old child indicated that the shared setting enabled extensive discussion with the teacher about her child:

Completing the planning tool together provided us a chance to discuss my child’s needs and sensory issues in detail. I think it was a big realization for my son’s teacher, to realize how kids on the autism spectrum behave, as a rule, because they function differently, and what you need to do to try and help them.

Parents reported that the workshop was an opportunity to identify common goals and work together with the teacher. Many parents also found that attending the workshop with the teacher of their child was extremely helpful as they could focus on the areas of need and collaboratively develop relevant student goals. A mother of an 11-year-old student said,



We found out that we were on the same page to work towards some goals on that day, and then I was able to pass that on to some health professionals to put the program in place. I am starting to see small steps in the right direction with the right goals in mind. I am hoping as the year progresses this goal will develop further with her.

An important benefit of attending the workshop with their child's teacher was that the parents were able to discuss the ongoing issues and share strategies. A mother of a 7-year-old said,

I told my son's teacher that my son has an issue of refusing to write; he just would not give it a go because he feels that if he writes something he will not get it right. So, at the workshop, his teacher and I made it as our strategy that the teacher will ask for his thoughts about a particular thing, and she will type it into the computer, and then my son can copy it from the computer and build his confidence.

*Build Mutual Trust Through Focused Conversations*

The teachers affirmed the parents' sentiments that the combined training provided an opportunity to work with the student's parent and learn how to support each other and build mutual trust. Two teachers reflected that it was also an opportunity to let parents know the efforts they made to support their child in the classroom. Some teachers reported that the combined training gave them insight into life as a parent of a child on the autism spectrum as well as a more personalized and holistic understanding of the family's needs. A primary school classroom teacher said,

It was fantastic to sit with my little boy's mum, sit with her and understand what her days were like with her son. I got a huge insight into what her life was like, as well as being able to spend the time with her and plan some actions for my student.

Another primary school teacher with 10 years of teaching experience said,

It was building trust with the parent. Also sharing experiences with the parent, as he is different at school, and I did not know those things, so it was a great way of sharing, [better] than in busy school time, everyone walking around. I had an opportunity to open up to her, especially about the stress and grief they were going through.

*Opportunity to Interact and Learn From Parents*

The teachers considered combined training meaningful because it provided an opportunity to have more in-depth conversations with the parent and set goals and develop strategies. A special education teacher said,

With the parent present, there was much conversation about home and the school environment. Both parties then discussed goals, do's and don'ts, learning new characteristics of the child from each other that happens in different environments.

## **Theme 2: Strengthened the Partnership Between Parents and Teachers**

### *Forum for Shared Learning Through Improved Communications*

Most parents felt that the workshop strengthened their relationship with the teacher as the workshop opened lines of communication, allowed for more in-depth conversations, and improved the frequency and quality of interactions. A mother of a primary school student said,

After the workshop, we are definitely chatting more. We have a lot of interaction; we send messages to each other. So, the communication is a lot more open and frequent now. It is fantastic. I think my daughter picks [up on] it and is quite happy about it and is more settled now.

Another mother who was also a teacher went on to say:

I think that it [the workshop] has altered us in a way, to the fact that additional communication probably is a good thing. I mean, we have a good relationship, but it made us mindful of regular catch ups and now we both are enjoying. The communication has improved, yes, definitely.

Parents reported that attending the workshop improved their understanding of the benefits of having a strong partnership with the teacher/school. Parents emphasized their expectation that a positive relationship with their child's teacher would ultimately benefit their child. They anticipated that, after attending the program, there would be an improved understanding of the needs of their child. They felt that they would have formulated common goals for their child and that the same strategies would be used both at home and the school. A mother of a 5-year-old primary school student said,

The most substantial benefit for the teacher and parent is the strong bond of communication and understanding between them about how to support the child and not only understand their behavior, but develop consistent strategies that can have a positive impact on them. This then flows down to an excellent benefit for the child, who is supported consistently by the teacher and parent.

A parent of a 10-year-old primary school student shared how all parties involved could benefit from having collaborative partnerships with their child's school and teacher:

The benefit of this partnership would be that we would be able to support the child, because every parent wants their child to be successful at school, and the teacher plays an important role. If they are open to listening to the parent, the child gets the support that he or she needs. The benefit for school would be that they would be equipped and would be able to support the child better.

*Perceived Increased Confidence in Collaborating Towards Common Goals and Strategies*

Some parents indicated that the whole experience of attending the training with their child's teacher boosted their confidence in their ability to support their child and work better with their child's teacher and the school. On a personal level, it helped make changes in their lives that were necessary for them and their child's well-being. A mother of an 11-year-old student said,

I think what it did is, it cemented the partnership that I already had with the teacher, and it strengthens my confidence and her [teacher's] confidence in what we are doing. I think it could really be powerful for people that are lacking in confidence or lacking in communication or struggling to understand or come up with right strategies for, at least for their student, I think it would give them so much [help at] home.

Another parent of an 8-year-old primary school student said:

After coming away, I decided to change my job, quite a significant change, but certainly, the workshop gave me the confidence and initiative to do that, to make a change. I have to say I have noticed a difference for my son.

*Deep and Meaningful Conversations*

Similarly, teachers acknowledged that attending the workshop together with the parent strengthened the partnership between them. The conversations helped teachers to understand the parent's perspective. Working together on goals and strategies developed a sense of ownership and responsibility. A special education teacher said,

I definitely think it [relationship] is stronger than before. We are quite familiar now because of the conversations that we had. We both know where we are going. We both have high expectations for our young person, keeping her happy, of course that is a priority, but pushing her to get everything out of her that we can. She is happy to come to school now.

Teachers indicated that because of being together in training, they believed that the parent was on the same page with them, working collaboratively for the student on the autism spectrum. An individual needs coordinator said,

I found it a most worthwhile exercise. The parent–teacher relationship was strengthened and the sharing of information between us was fantastic. I think by seeing both perspectives [home and school], a more holistic understanding of the ASD child’s world was achieved.

Some teachers reported that their meetings with the parent became more focused and meaningful. A teacher reported that, after a candid conversation with the parent at the workshop, she became aware of the reasons for the student’s meltdowns. The parent and she planned strategies together which now support the student.

### **Barriers to Strong Partnerships**

Parents also identified two issues that acted as barriers to obtaining the best outcome from the workshop, as described below.

#### *Lack of Engagement From Teachers*

Parents indicated that teacher attendance was a crucial element of the program, and when the child’s teacher was not present, it meant that the workshop activities lost their relevance. Parents reported that the lack of teacher attendance at the workshop impacted on the school engagement in implementing the program, and there was little to no follow-up by the school or teacher about the program suggestions.

#### *Poor Parent–Teacher Working Relationship*

The second issue raised by the parents was the importance of the parent–teacher relationship. During the interview process it became evident that long-term poor parent–teacher relationships hindered the growth of productive partnerships.

### **Benefits of a Strong Partnership**

The benefits of having a combined training go beyond just one parent and one teacher. The whole school benefits from the training as the resources and experience are shared and discussed amongst the staff. A primary school classroom teacher with six years of teaching experience said,

With regards to collaboration, it is not only with the parent, and I went to the workshop, but I also have given feedback to staff when we had our staff development day to reflect with staff. The whole school utilizes the time I spent at the workshop. It is not just benefitting me and the parent I went with, it is across the board. We share resources and talk about how we can help them with the student in their class.

Improved communication after the training was a subtheme that emerged from the teacher interviews. The teachers reported that the communication was more frequent, through emails, quick chats before and after school, phone calls, and the communication book. A special education teacher said,

I think communication has improved. It was great to meet the parent at the professional development and then build on the relationship afterwards. You know where you are starting from after the professional development, which increases confidence.

Another primary school classroom teacher said that communication improved by “Making the parent feel comfortable enough to be able to get in touch at any time if they have concerns regarding their child. Particularly so, small issues do not become large ones.”

### **Theme 3: Planning of Student Learning in Partnership With the Teacher**

#### *Improved Access to Information*

Parents and the teacher worked together on a planning tool that helped identify the unique challenges and strengths of each child and then developed strategies to support the child. The parents reported that the planning tool helped them develop overarching goals and a range of smaller, targeted goals that support the primary goals. The process helped parents to see the big picture and gave them a realization that taking small steps would help them achieve the goals they set for their child. The parents shared a range of ways that the planning tool helped them at home, at school, and in the community. They developed strategies for behavior, identified the sensory needs of their child, used the tool with their new school, at the Individual Education Plan meeting, and for writing the application for the National Disability Insurance Scheme. A mother of an 8-year-old primary school student said,

The teacher and I used the planning tool to create a personal education plan for my daughter, which is now being used consistently at home and school by the family and the educators. This has been incredibly beneficial in creating consistency in expectations and ways of helping my daughter.

A parent of a 7-year-old student provided an example of how she used the planning tool for implementing strategies for her child’s sensory needs at school:

During the Positive Partnerships workshop, we discussed a couple of sensory issues. For example, if he takes his jumper off in the playground, when he needs to put the jumper back on, he would not do it; he has

to have his collar tucked out as I do for him in the morning. When this happens, the teacher now knows and tucks the collar out.

Some parents indicated that completing the program helped them understand their child's behavior and what support their child needed:

The tool has been quite useful. For example, it has helped my family and me to be more considerate and be more patient, because it is as if we note a behavior, it is not that he wanted attention or he wanted to get something, [but] because that is how he is.

Parents acknowledged that the program gave them access to useful tools and resources that helped them understand and support their child. They appreciated a hard copy of the workbook and indicated that they often referred to it.

Teachers also reported that completing the planning tool with the parent was very helpful in understanding many characteristics of their student on the autism spectrum, including any particular behavior the student displayed in the classroom and at home. A classroom teacher said,

It was good completing that planning tool and making plans to implement them across both settings. When we were doing the planning tool together, there were some behaviors we wanted to bring up. We put in the behaviors we did not experience in the school. We talked about how we both were going to implement strategies at home and school so that it can be consistent for her.

Another special education teacher said:

It was great for me to go to the workshop and have that time with the parent, sit there and discuss behaviors that are happening in the classroom and seeing that the behaviors are very similar at home. We were able to hone in on one particular behavior, used the planning tool at home and school, and were able to get the strategies going.

## **Discussion**

Shared parent and teacher workshops can strengthen school-home partnerships by conducting training in a disturbance free, mutually respectful setting. The evaluation of the program indicates that bringing parents and teachers together in a low-stress, formal workshop setting provides an opportunity for in-depth conversations and the development of shared goals and strategies that offer the student consistent support both at home and at school. When teachers and parents have a shared understanding of autism and the student on the autism spectrum, they are more likely to work collaboratively to provide support for the child's specific needs (Hodges et al., 2020).

In the current study, parents and teachers reported that the combined workshop training provided the chance to develop a shared understanding of the characteristics, strengths, and abilities of the student on the autism spectrum. The opportunity to attend the workshop together provided parents and teachers with new insights about the students that helped them plan consistent strategies for addressing ongoing issues at home and school.

Mainstream teachers describe a need for more opportunities for autism-focused professional development (Roberts & Simpson, 2016; Saggars et al., 2016) to enable a better understanding of the issues encountered by parents. Likewise, parents also require autism education to understand their child's challenges and support needs. The program reportedly encouraged parents to have the confidence to work closely with school and to advocate for their child (Searing et al., 2015). An outcome of the combined training was that some teachers acquired insightful views of life as a parent of a child on the autism spectrum, thus gaining a more holistic understanding of the student and their learning needs. The parents also commented that they learned from the teachers about the issues they were managing in the classroom. This shared understanding of each other's concerns developed an empathy between the teachers and the parents. Both teachers and parents also identified that the combined training helped built trust.

Frequent, personalized, clear, and honest communication strengthens partnerships between teachers and parents (Kirmaci, 2019; Symeou et al., 2012). For most of the participants, the partnership that developed during the training continued post-workshop. Both groups of participants reported improved communications and interactions. They provided one another with daily updates about the mornings before school and how the school day progressed, thereby creating a respectful, honest, and open partnership. These findings are in line with research by Đurišić and Bunijevac (2017) and Kimaro (2015). They also found that successful parent–teacher partnerships are built on honesty, respect, and a welcoming environment where information can be shared. The connectedness that the teachers and parents reported also corroborates with recent work by Hodges and colleagues (2020). It was evident that the opportunity to discuss student needs and develop consistent strategies and supports without the distractions and time constraints of school-based meetings were considered the foundation of the partnership. As a result, parents commented that they felt more confident in their ability to support their child after attending the workshop.

One of the main features of the program was the shared development of the planning tool. Reports from both the teachers and the parents indicated that this tool encouraged an ongoing dialogue that continued to strengthen the

partnership. The shared awareness of the child's sensory, behavioral, communication, social interaction, and learning needs established opportunities to plan coordinated strategies and actions for home and school.

The aim of the workshop was to improve communication to enable a consistent and predictable learning environment across school and home settings. (Clark et al., 2020; Lei et al., 2017). The parents and the teachers reported that, as a result of attending the program, there was a reduction in the frequency of challenging behaviors, and the children appeared happier at school and at home.

Two barriers to establishing a partnership with their child's teacher were identified. Despite attending the training, the strategies discussed in the workshop were not always implemented. This lack of engagement on the part of the teacher disappointed the parents and was especially notable when the rapport between the parent and the teacher was poor (Ludicke & Kortman, 2012). A second barrier to successful partnerships was when their child's teacher did not attend the workshop, and the parents said that they missed the opportunity to develop strategies and strengthen the collaborative partnership. This finding highlights the importance of encouraging the child's classroom teacher to engage with the parent when developing plans and strategies for the student.

## **Conclusion**

Combined parent–teacher training programs that focus on improving student learning outcomes can establish robust and more effective parent and teacher partnerships. This evaluation significantly contributes to the body of knowledge that relates to parent–teacher partnerships that support the educational needs of students on the autism spectrum. The implications for parents, teachers, schools, and students include a confirmation that establishing a mutually respectful parent–teacher partnership offers an opportunity to develop a shared understanding of the student. Shared parent–teacher workshops are a valuable intervention that prepare the school community for a positive and productive home–school partnership. This parent–teacher interaction establishes a safe environment for teachers to understand the concerns of the parents and a way to engage them in the implementation of consistent strategies. Strong, collaborative partnerships are a mutually respectful arena for parents to share information with the teacher and a setting where a better understanding of the impact of the child's autism on their education, home, and family life can be honestly discussed. The evidence from this evaluation has implications for school policy development and budget planning as it provides information that can influence school learning supports. Furthermore, for students,



there is evidence that respectful, committed, and perceived equality between the parent and teacher can lead to better learning support (Ludicke & Kortman, 2012; Murray et al., 2018; Turnbull et al., 2011).

Accessible, ongoing, autism-focused shared workshops enable parents and teachers to develop strong school partnerships. The evaluation of this national program has highlighted the benefits of the need for greater consultation and coordination between the school, parents, and teachers at a school level, but the findings are also relevant to national-level policymakers worldwide. The increase in the prevalence of autism in the community (Baio et al., 2018) suggests a greater need for well-funded and accessible autism-focused partnership training programs for teachers and parents, as well as an increased focus on professional development programs and teacher university training. Although this program was developed as an autism-specific training model, it has the potential for deployment with other diverse learners.

## References

- American Psychiatric Association. (2013). *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5®)*. American Psychiatric Publishing.
- Azad, G. F., Kim, M., Marcus, S. C., Sheridan, S. M., & Mandell, D. S. (2016). Parent-teacher communication about children with autism spectrum disorder: An examination of collaborative problem-solving. *Psychology in the Schools, 53*(10), 1071–1084.
- Azad, G. F., Marcus, S. C., Sheridan, S. M., & Mandell, D. S. (2018). Partners in school: An innovative parent-teacher consultation model for children with autism spectrum disorder. *Journal of Educational and Psychological Consultation, 28*(4), 460–486.
- Azad, G. F., Williams, B. J., Minton, K. E., Sheridan, S. M., & Mandell, D. S. (2020). Partners in school: An example of care coordination to ensure consistency of evidence-based practices across home and school for youth with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). In *Inter-professional care coordination for pediatric autism spectrum disorder* (pp. 153–167). Springer.
- Baio, J., Wiggins, L., Christensen, D. L., Maenner, M. J., Daniels, J., Warren, Z., Spencer, M., Zahorodny, W., Rosenberg, C. R., White, T., Durkin, M. S., Imm, P., Nikolaou, L., Allsopp, M., Lee, L.-C., Harrington, R., Lopez, M., Fitzgerald, R. T., Hewitt, A.,...Dowling, N. F. (2018). Prevalence of autism spectrum disorder among children aged 8 years—Autism and Developmental Disabilities Monitoring Network, 11 Sites, United States, 2014. *MMWR Surveillance Summaries, 67*(6), 1–23.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3*(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Broomhead, K. E. (2018). Perceived responsibility for developing and maintaining home-school partnerships: The experiences of parents and practitioners. *British Journal of Special Education, 45*(4), 435–453.
- Bruck, S., Robinson, A., & Gallagher, E. (2021). A model of practice for improving autism knowledge in teachers of mainstream students on the autism spectrum in Australia. *Australasian Journal of Special and Inclusive Education, 1*–16.
- Cachia, M., & Millward, L. (2011). The telephone medium and semi-structured interviews: A complementary fit. *Qualitative Research in Organizations and Management: An Interna-*

- tional Journal*, 6, 256–277.
- Clark, M., & Adams, D. (2020). Parent perspectives of what helps and hinders their child on the autism spectrum to manage their anxiety. *Clinical Psychologist*, 24(3), 315–328.
- Clark, M., Adams, D., Roberts, J., & Westerveld, M. (2020). How do teachers support their students on the autism spectrum in Australian primary schools? *Journal of Research in Special Educational Needs*, 20(1), 38–50.
- Collier, M., Keefe, E. B., & Hirrel, L. A. (2015). Preparing special education teachers to collaborate with families. *School Community Journal*, 25(1), 117–136. <https://www.adi.org/journal/2015ss/CollierKeefeHirrelSpring2015.pdf>
- Creswell, J. W., & Báez, J. C. (2020). *30 essential skills for the qualitative researcher*. Sage.
- Đurišić, M., & Bunijevac, M. (2017). Parental involvement as a important factor for successful education. *Center for Educational Policy Studies Journal*, 7(3), 137–153.
- Guðmundsdóttir, K., Sigurðardóttir, Z. G., & Ala'i-Rosales, S. (2017). Evaluation of caregiver training via telecommunication for rural Icelandic children with autism. *Behavioral Development Bulletin*, 22(1), 215.
- Hauptman, L. (2019). *Parent–teacher partnership satisfaction of Latino parents of children with autism spectrum disorder*. [Doctoral dissertation, UCLA]. <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/9wr9694f>
- Hawkins, J. E. (2018). The practical utility and suitability of email interviews in qualitative research. *The Qualitative Report*, 23(2), 493–501.
- Henderson, A. T., & Mapp, K. L. (2002). *A new wave of evidence: The impact of school, family, and community connections on student achievement*. SEDL.
- Hodges, A., Joosten, A., Bourke-Taylor, H., & Cordier, R. (2020). School participation: The shared perspectives of parents and educators of primary school students on the autism spectrum. *Research in Developmental Disabilities*, 97, [103550].
- Hoy, K., Parsons, S., & Kovshoff, H. (2018). Inclusive school practices supporting the primary to secondary transition for autistic children: Pupil, teacher, and parental perspectives. *Advances in Autism*, 4(4), 184–196.
- Kimaro, A. R., & Machumu, H. J. (2015). Impacts of parental involvement in school activities on academic achievement of primary school children. *International Journal of Education and Research*, 3(8), 483–494.
- Kirmaci, M. (2019). Reporting educators' experiences regarding family–school interactions with implications for best practices. *School Community Journal*, 29(2), 129–156. <https://www.adi.org/journal/2019fw/KirmaciFW2019.pdf>
- Lake, B. J., Billingsley, B., & Stewart, A. (2018). Building trust and responding to parent–school conflict. *Handbook of Leadership and Administration for Special Education*, 265–278.
- Lei, J., Sukhodolsky, D. G., Abdullahi, S. M., Braconnier, M. L., & Ventola, P. (2017). Reduced anxiety following pivotal response treatment in young children with autism spectrum disorder. *Research in Autism Spectrum Disorders*, 43, 1–7.
- Ludicke, P., & Kortman, W. (2012). Tensions in home–school partnerships: The different perspectives of teachers and parents of students with learning barriers. *Australasian Journal of Special Education*, 36(2), 155–171.
- Mesibov, G., Shea, V., & Schopler, E. (2004). *The TEACCH approach to autism spectrum disorders*. Springer.
- Murray, M., Munger, M. H., Colwell, W. B., & Claussen, A. J. (2018). Building capacity in special education: A statewide initiative to improve student outcomes through parent–teacher partnerships. *School Community Journal*, 28(1), 91–105. <https://www.adi.org/journal/2018ss/MurrayEtAlSpring2018.pdf>

- Oltmann, S. (2016). Qualitative interviews: A methodological discussion of the interviewer and respondent contexts. *Information Science Faculty Publications*, 32. [https://uknowledge.uky.edu/slis\\_facpub/32](https://uknowledge.uky.edu/slis_facpub/32)
- 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.
- Rouse, E., & O'Brien, D. (2017). Mutuality and reciprocity in parent–teacher relationships: Understanding the nature of partnerships in early childhood education and care provision. *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood*, 42(2), 45–52.
- Saggers, B., Klug, D., Harper-Hill, K., Ashburner, J., Costley, D., Clark, T., Bruck, S., Trembath, D., Webster, 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, Australia. <https://eprints.qut.edu.au/95975/>
- Saggers, B., Tones, M., Dunne, J., Trembath, D., Bruck, S., Webster, A., Klug, D., & Wang, S. (2019). Promoting a collective voice from parents, educators, and allied health professionals on the educational needs of students on the autism spectrum. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 49(9), 3845–3865.
- Searing, B. M. J., Graham, F., & Grainger, R. (2015). Support needs of families living with children with autism spectrum disorder. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 45(11), 3693–3702.
- Stephenson, J., Browne, L., Carter, M., Clark, T., Costley, D., Martin, J., Williams, K., Bruck, S., Davies, L., & Sweller, N. (2020). Facilitators and barriers to inclusion of students with autism spectrum disorder: Parent, teacher, and principal perspectives. *Australasian Journal of Special and Inclusive Education*, 45, 1–17.
- Syeda, N., & Dresens, E. (2020). Are school professionals in Australian schools well prepared to collaborate with CALD families of the students on the autism spectrum? *School Community Journal*, 30(2), 73–92. <https://www.adi.org/journal/2020fw/SyedaDresensFW2020.pdf>
- Symeou, L., Roussounidou, E., & Michaelides, M. (2012). “I feel much more confident now to talk with parents:” An evaluation of in-service training on teacher–parent communication. *School Community Journal*, 22(1), 65–87. <https://www.adi.org/journal/2012ss/SymeouRoussounidouMichaelidesSpring2012.pdf>
- Turnbull, A. P., Turnbull, R., Erwin, E. J., Soodak, L. C., & Shogren, K. A. (2011). *Families, professionals, and exceptionality: Positive outcomes through partnerships and trust* (6th ed.). Pearson.

**Authors’ Notes.** The authors would like to thank all parents and educators for their time and valuable feedback. They also extend appreciation to Chris Champion for his careful review of the draft version of this manuscript and his insightful observations and suggestions. Positive Partnerships is funded by the Australian Government Department of Education, Skills, and Employment through the Helping Children with Autism package.

Najeeba Syeda is currently working as research officer at Autism Spectrum Australia and implementing the internal evaluation program for Positive Partnerships, a national project working with schools, families, and their communities to provide professional learning and resources through workshops, webinars, and online modules to strengthen their capacity to support and advocate for students on the autism

spectrum. Her research interests include education for girls and women in developing countries, mental health in CALD communities, and home–school partnerships between parents and teachers of the students on the autism spectrum. Correspondence concerning this article may be addressed to Najeeba B. Syeda, Positive Partnerships/Autism Spectrum Australia, Building 1, Level 3, 14 Aquatic Drive, Frenches Forest, NSW 2086, Australia, or email [nsyeda@autismspectrum.org.au](mailto:nsyeda@autismspectrum.org.au)

Susan Bruck is an educator and researcher. She holds an academic title of senior lecturer in the School of Medicine and Dentistry at Griffith University in Queensland, Australia. Her research focuses on bridging the gap between academia and educational practice. She advocates for accessible, evidence-based research findings that inform teachers and parents about developing agency and self-determination in students on the autism spectrum.