

**Increasing Family Participation in the IEP Process Through Culturally Responsive
Engagement Strategies**

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Abstract

This action research project examined family involvement in Individualized Education Program (IEP) planning and outcomes for 15 students with autism. Engagement strategies included accessible information, interpreters, personalized communication, and flexible participation. Data were collected in October 2025, March 2026, and August 2026. By August, four of five students with highly involved families (80%), three of six with moderately involved families (50%), and none of four with little or no involvement (0%) had mastered at least three goals. An exploratory Fisher–Freeman–Halton exact test was not statistically significant, $p = .077$. Two highly involved students showed particularly strong social and behavioral progress. Moderately involved students showed social improvement but continued behavioral difficulty; the least-involved group progressed without mastering goals. Findings inform accessible collaboration, but the small, nonrandom sample cannot establish causation.

Keywords: autism, family engagement, IEP participation, culturally responsive practices, family-school collaboration

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Introduction

Background and Relevant Research

Family participation is central to the development of meaningful Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) for students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Families contribute information that cannot be fully captured through school-based assessment alone, including knowledge of a student's strengths, communication preferences, sensory needs, behavior patterns, interests, routines, and performance across home and community settings. When this information is combined with educational data, IEP teams are better positioned to create goals and supports that are individualized, functional, and relevant. Yet the legal expectation that parents participate as members of the IEP team does not automatically ensure that participation is equally accessible or meaningful for every family. Language differences, unfamiliar special education terminology, scheduling conflicts, limited access to interpreters, prior negative experiences with schools, and differences in cultural expectations about the roles of parents and educators can all reduce a caregiver's willingness or ability to participate actively.

Recent research demonstrates that family-school partnership quality is particularly important for autistic students. Santiago et al. (2022) found that stronger parent-reported relationship quality and family involvement were associated with later positive parent and teacher perceptions of the parent-teacher relationship. Andoni et al. (2022) similarly demonstrated that parent-teacher relationship quality can be measured reliably in families of autistic children and that relationship quality is associated with parent involvement and student-teacher functioning. These findings support the idea that engagement is more than

meeting attendance. Meaningful participation depends on trust, communication, reciprocal respect, and opportunities for families to influence educational planning.

The need for culturally and linguistically responsive practice is especially clear when families must navigate both autism services and unfamiliar educational systems. Fong et al. (2022) identified system-, provider-, and family/cultural-level barriers among Korean immigrant families seeking autism services, illustrating that access problems can arise from the interaction between service systems and family circumstances. Smith et al. (2023a) found that Chinese parents of autistic children valued educational opportunities but reported inadequate communication, difficulty navigating systems, and experiences of discrimination. In a related study of Vietnamese parents, Smith et al. (2023b) reported that language barriers, deference to teachers, stigma, and concern about the consequences of advocacy shaped parent-teacher interactions. These studies are directly relevant to a Title I school context with a high population of English Language Learners because they show why translated information alone may be insufficient. Families also need understandable communication, culturally respectful invitations to contribute, and explicit reassurance that their expertise is valued.

Research examining the IEP process more broadly reaches similar conclusions. Mercado-Anazagasty et al. (2025) compared Spanish- and English-speaking parents across 22 U.S. states and found that Spanish-speaking parents reported less knowledge of special education rights, more perceived discrimination, language barriers, and inadequate interpretation services. Sanderson and Rojas (2023) found that parents valued supportive school staff and changes to IEP meetings that promoted meaningful student and family involvement. Teacher perspectives also matter. Brooks et al. (2023) found that educators recognized productive family-professional partnerships as important for students with autism while identifying factors that can either build

or hinder collaboration. Together, this research suggests that IEP participation should be viewed as a shared systems responsibility. Schools can increase access by improving communication routines, making meeting structures more flexible, reducing jargon, and providing families with multiple ways to participate.

Family engagement may also influence student outcomes by improving consistency and the quality of educational decision-making. Fernández Cerero et al. (2024), in a qualitative study of parents of secondary students with ASD, found that active parental involvement was associated with perceptions of stronger academic performance and emotional well-being, while parents also reported communication barriers and limited school resources. Andoni et al. (2024) showed that parent-teacher relationship quality is intertwined with the behavioral and emotional adjustment of autistic students, underscoring the importance of collaboration when student needs are complex. Rabba et al. (2025) further documented the consequences of adversarial school-family relationships: autistic mothers of autistic children described repeated struggles to obtain appropriate support and emphasized mutual respect as a foundation for successful partnerships. Across these studies, a consistent theme is that schools cannot expect families to engage fully when communication feels inaccessible, one-sided, or dismissive.

Research Gap and Local Need

The reviewed research describes partnership quality and cultural or linguistic barriers, but much of the culturally specific evidence comes from Australia or Canada. These studies involve immigrant or culturally diverse families within those national settings; they are not studies conducted in China or Vietnam. The U.S. study by Mercado-Anazagasty et al. (2025) examines IEP experiences across disability categories rather than this specific junior high autism sample. The gap relevant to this project is the limited direct applicability of those findings to sustained

IEP collaboration and multiple everyday outcomes in this local setting. This is a gap in local evidence and transferability, not a claim that U.S. immigrant families have never been studied.

The local problem was uneven access to sustained family-school collaboration, and differences in the student outcomes reported across levels of involvement. The researcher sought to understand whether ongoing shared decision-making was associated with broader progress than annual meeting attendance or IEP-goal growth alone. The project considered 15 students and families with whom the researcher worked. Its practical goal was to identify ways school personnel could make participation more accessible and use family knowledge when reviewing instruction, behavior supports, and regulation needs.

Purpose and Research Questions

Two research questions guided the project: (1) How does family involvement in IEP development, meetings, communication, progress monitoring, and intervention planning relate to reported academic and functional IEP-goal progress for students with autism? (2) What patterns of behavior, social interaction, social-emotional functioning, sensory regulation, and time outside the classroom are reported across different levels of family involvement? These questions examine associations. The available evidence cannot determine whether engagement strategies increased involvement or caused student improvement. The significance of the project lies in connecting accessible partnership practices with everyday educational decision-making in a junior high setting.

Methodology

Research Design

This project used practitioner action research with a descriptive review of existing educational records and classroom observations. Quantitative information consisted of group

counts, percentages, and an exploratory comparison of goal mastery by August 2026. Social and behavioral outcomes were summarized qualitatively. The design was not a controlled experiment or a verified pre/post comparison. The action research component involved examining a local problem, reflecting communication practices, and identifying changes for a subsequent improvement cycle. Different sources informed interpretation, but agreement between sources was not formally tested. The design supports a local account of outcomes rather than estimates of intervention effectiveness.

Setting and Participant Selection

The setting was a Title I junior high school serving a culturally and linguistically diverse population, including English Language Learners. The sample comprised 15 students with autism and their 15 families, drawn from those with whom the researcher worked. Selection was based on existing professional contact rather than random recruitment; this is best described as a convenience sample. All 15 families were included in the descriptive comparison. Individual ages, language distributions, demographic characteristics, and eligibility details were not provided in the study record, so subgroup conclusions about immigrant or multilingual families cannot be drawn.

Engagement Approach and Researcher Role

The researcher served as educator, facilitator, observer, and reviewer of educational records. The engagement approach described in the draft offered translated or clarified information, interpreter assistance, telephone contact, text communication when permitted by school procedures, and virtual participation. These options were intended to reduce access barriers and invite family input. However, the available record does not identify which families used each option, how often it was offered, or whether scheduling flexibility increased

participation. The analysis therefore concerns involvement patterns, not the separate effectiveness of these strategies. Shared summaries omit personally identifying information. The educator's dual role creates potential interpretation bias, and formal consent or research approval procedures were not described in the available record.

Instrumentation and Data Sources

The instruments were practice-based records rather than a standardized research battery. IEP and meeting records informed participation in IEP development and meetings; conference records and communication logs informed continued contact. Goal progress was drawn from educational progress-monitoring records. Classroom observations and collaborative notes informed descriptions of behavior, social interaction, sensory overload, breakdowns, and time outside the classroom. Notes about discussions and plan changes helped distinguish contact from collaboration. No validated family-engagement scale, standardized social-emotional instrument, or independent observer reliability procedure was reported. The available record does not provide individual goal scores or incident counts, so those quantities cannot be reconstructed from the group's summaries.

Family Involvement Classification

Families were classified descriptively using the patterns reported by the researcher. High involvement meant participation across IEP creation and development, meetings, conferences, continued communication, goal review, progress monitoring, and behavioral or social-emotional planning; five families fit this description. Moderate involvement meant some participation with less sustained collaboration across these activities; six families were described in this way. Little or no ongoing involvement meant minimal reported participation in planning and continued collaboration; four families were classified in this group. These were qualitative categories, not

scores from a validated rubric. No minimum number of contacts, attendance percentage, or duration threshold was documented. The categories should not be treated as precise or reproducible without additional records.

Collection Procedures and Outcome Interpretation

Data collection occurred in October 2025, March 2026, and August 2026, spanning approximately 10 months. Existing educational records and observations informed the summaries; within-wave observation frequency was not supplied. The quantitative endpoint was whether each student had mastered at least three IEP goals by August 2026. Four high-involvement students and three moderately involved students met this threshold; none in the little or no involvement group did. The comparison uses students, not individual goals, as the unit of analysis. Students who did not meet the threshold may still have made progress or mastered fewer goals. The specific mastery criteria for each individualized goal and goal-level scores were not supplied. Social and behavioral improvement remained based on teacher-reported observations rather than standardized ratings. Separate October and March scores were unavailable, so change over time was not statistically tested.

Data Analysis

Analysis compared five families with high involvement (33.3%), six with moderate involvement (40.0%), and four with little or no involvement (26.7%). The mastery contingency table contained counts of students meeting versus not meeting the three-goal threshold: high, 4 versus 1; moderate, 3 versus 3; little or none, 0 versus 4. Because the sample and expected cell counts were small, an exploratory two-sided Fisher–Freeman–Halton exact test for the 3×2 table was used. The null hypothesis was independence between involvement groups and threshold attainment. The exact p value was calculated by enumerating all tables with the same

margins and summing probabilities no greater than the observed table's probability, consistent with the documented Fisher exact-test convention (R Core Team, n.d.). The .05 significance threshold was used for this exploratory analysis. Figure B1 and Table B1 in Appendix B present the mastery rates and qualitative findings. No, pairwise tests were conducted.

Conclusions

Findings and Interpretation

The project examined uneven family participation in IEP planning and the reported student outcomes associated with sustained collaboration. It treated access as a shared school's responsibility rather than assuming that limited participation indicated limited interest. Descriptive analysis identified a pattern across the three involvement groups, summarized in Figure B1 and Table B1 in Appendix B. The findings inform school practices and future research questions, but they do not establish an intervention effect.

Five families (33.3%) demonstrated high involvement across planning, meetings, conferences, communication, progress monitoring, and intervention decisions. By August 2026, four of their five students (80%) had mastered at least three IEP goals. Two students (40% of this group) showed particularly strong progress in both social and behavioral goals. This observation does not establish that only two improved or that either mastered every social or behavioral goal. Earlier classroom observations also described improved regulation, fewer overload episodes and breakdowns, and less time outside class, without individual numerical measures. Figure B1 shows the mastery rate; Table B1 separates that endpoint from the qualitative observations.

The first major finding was that sustained involvement appeared to matter most when it extended beyond attendance. The five highly involved families were active across the entire educational process: IEP development, meetings, conferences, communication, goal review,

progress monitoring, and intervention decisions. This pattern is consistent with Santiago et al. (2022) and Andoni et al. (2022), whose research emphasizes relationship quality and family involvement as meaningful dimensions of family-school partnership. In the present project, ongoing communication allowed concerns to be discussed while they were occurring and allowed plans to be adjusted when a student's behavioral, sensory, or social-emotional needs changed.

A second major finding was that family collaboration was associated with the ability to individualize interventions more responsively. When families remained in regular contact, information from home and school could be compared, interventions could be put in place, and plans could be revised when existing approaches were not meeting a student's behavioral or social-emotional needs. This is consistent with research emphasizing that meaningful partnership requires understandable communication, respect for family expertise, and genuine opportunities to influence educational decisions (Mercado-Anazagasty et al., 2025; Smith et al., 2023a, 2023b). The local data suggest that the practical value of family involvement was not merely procedural; it gave the team additional information for problem solving and helped maintain consistency across settings.

All six students in the moderate-involvement group (40.0% of the sample) made IEP-goal progress and showed some improvement in social skills, while continuing to struggle with behavioral goals. Three of six (50%) mastered at least three IEP goals by August 2026 (Appendix B, Figure B1, and Table B1). The remaining three did not reach that threshold; this does not mean they failed to make progress or mastered no goals. The distinction illustrates that goal mastery, social development, and behavioral needs can follow different patterns. Student

needs, instructional support, and family access were not controlled, so these outcomes should not be attributed solely to involvement.

Four students (26.7%) were in the little or no ongoing involvement group. They made some progress, but none mastered any IEP goals by August 2026; consequently, none met the three-goal threshold (Appendix B, Figure B1, and Table B1). Some progress and lack of mastery are distinct outcomes: growth may occur before a goal's criterion is met. Separate numerical results for regulation, social interaction, and time outside class were not supplied. Limited participation may reflect scheduling, language access, transportation, prior to school experiences, or other circumstances that were not measured. The findings support investigating access barriers while avoiding assumptions about families' motivation.

Rabba et al. (2025) adds an important perspective on autistic parents: mothers described having their parenting knowledge and lived autistic experience discounted by schools. This evidence supports offering clear agendas, accessible communication, and time to respond as possible to accommodations, while asking each caregiver about preferences. Because that study involved Australian mothers, its findings should inform respectful local practice rather than be generalized automatically to every family. The most useful implication for this project is to document how family input affects decisions and invite disagreement without treating advocacy as a problem.

For the first research question, the observed three-goal mastery rates were 80%, 50%, and 0% across high, moderate, and little or no involvement groups, respectively. The exploratory exact test yielded $p = .077$, which did not meet the .05 threshold. The 30-percentage-point difference between high and moderate groups and the 80-point difference between high and little or no involvement groups are descriptive, not statistically established for pairwise effects. The

result does not prove that no relationship exists; the small sample provides limited precision. For the second question, two high-involvement students showed particularly strong social and behavioral progress, while the six moderately involved students showed some social improvement and continued behavioral difficulty. These observations were not statistically tested. Figure B1 and Table B1 summarize the quantitative endpoint and qualitative findings without implying causation.

Additional Research Questions

Further questions concern which participation options families use, whether family input changes interventions, and how access preferences differ by language. Would stronger communication support behavioral progress after accounting for student needs? Andoni et al. (2024) suggests examining reciprocal influences between student adjustment and relationships. The present evidence cannot determine which additional support would be most helpful to the six moderately involved families.

Limitations

Limitations include one setting, a convenience sample of 15 families, nonrandom involvement groups, teacher interpretation, and variation in student needs. The exact test assumes independent student observations and uses fixed margins; it does not adjust for differences in disability-related support needs or educational opportunities. The outcome of mastering at least three goals were selected for this exploratory revision rather than specified prospectively. Goal difficulty, number of goals, and individual mastery criteria were not standardized across students. Collection occurred in October 2025, March 2026, and August 2026, but individual scores for each point and independent observer agreement were unavailable. These limits prevent a statistical analysis of change over time or causal effects. The

nonsignificant result and small sample require cautious interpretation; neither family commitment nor an individual student's prospects should be judged from group membership.

Practice Improvements and Future Research

Next steps should focus on institutionalizing the practices that were feasible and well received. The school should maintain a family communication preference record, ensure interpreter procedures are clearly understood by staff, provide translated or plain-language IEP preparation materials when appropriate, and continue offering flexible or virtual meeting participation. Families should receive brief explanations of the purpose of major IEP components before meetings when possible, allowing meeting time to be used for discussion and shared decision-making rather than only document review. Staff professional development should include culturally responsive family engagement, communication across language differences, and strategies for responding to disagreement without becoming defensive. The research by Mercado-Anazagasty et al. (2025), Smith et al. (2023a, 2023b), and Rabba et al. (2025) provides strong support for these priorities.

A subsequent cycle should build the three collection points by defining a consistent school-year schedule and explicit procedures. Communication and shared-decision records could be updated after each contact, goal data collected on each student's IEP schedule, and behavior or regulation observations recorded during clearly specified routines. Monthly reviews could examine change within each student before comparing groups. A prospective engagement rubric should distinguish contact, contributions, and shared decisions; its criteria should be tested with families and staff before use. The Parent-Teacher Relationship Quality Scale examined by Andoni et al. (2022) offers a possible additional measure. These are proposed improvements, not procedures claimed for the completed review.

Dissemination

Findings will be shared through special education team meetings, administrator discussions, and staff for professional learning. A concise practice guide will address preferred communication methods, language access, flexible participation, and documentation of family input. A family-facing summary will explain the findings in accessible language and invite suggestions. Staff and family feedback will inform subsequent implementation and revision.

Professional Growth Goal

My professional growth goal as an autism specialist is to improve how IEP teams invite and use family input. During the next school year, I plan to provide one staff learning session each semester on accessible communication, model family-centered meeting practices, and review communication and shared-decision records monthly. At each review, I will identify at least one access barrier or concern requiring follow-up and document the response. Family feedback will address understanding, respect, preferred communication, and influence decisions. Training materials, coaching notes, and review records will document progress. This goal evaluates adult practices within the team's control rather than assuming student outcomes depending on family participation alone.

The comparison supports examining sustained collaboration alongside goal mastery, regulation, relationships, and classroom participation. Making participation accessible and documenting family contributions can improve educational planning. A more structured next cycle is needed to determine whether engagement changes precede student progress.

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Santiago, R. T., McIntyre, L. L., & Garbacz, S. A. (2022). Dimensions of family-school partnerships for autistic children: Context and Congruence. *School Psychology*, 37(1), 4–14. <https://doi.org/10.1037/spq0000473>

Smith, J., Rabba, A. S., Cong, L., Datta, P., Dresens, E., Hall, G., Heyworth, M., Lawson, W., Lee, P., Lilley, R., Syeda, N., Ma, E., Wang, J., Wang, R., Yeow, C. T., & Pellicano, E. (2023a). 'They were saying that I was a typical Chinese mum': Chinese parents' experiences of parent-teacher partnerships for their autistic children. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 53, 4888–4900.

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Appendix A

Annotated Bibliography

Andoni, L., Eisenhower, A., Poon, C. Y. S., Joseph, K., Blacher, J., & Carter, A. (2024). Working together: The role of autistic students' behavioral adjustment in promoting positive parent-teacher relationships. *Research in Autism Spectrum Disorders, 110*, Article 102291. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.rasd.2023.102291>

This study examined student behavioral adjustment and parent-teacher relationships over time. Its findings caution against assuming a simple causal pathway from family engagement to improved student behavior. Student needs and relationship quality may influence one another, and positive relationships do not necessarily predict later symptom improvement. This source supports the cautious interpretation of the current project and the recommendation to examine reciprocal influences in future cycles. It also encourages proactive communication when emotional or behavioral needs to place strain on collaboration.

Andoni, L., Hamsho, N., Blacher, J., & Eisenhower, A. (2022). Psychometric properties of a parent- and teacher-report measure for autistic children: Parent-Teacher Relationship Quality Scale (PTRQS). *Journal of School Psychology, 95*, 25–42. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jsp.2022.08.004>

This primary research study examined the psychometric properties of the Parent-Teacher Relationship Quality Scale using parent and teacher reports for 192 autistic children in preschool through second grade. The authors evaluated factor structure, reliability, and convergent validity and found support for a multidimensional measure of parent-teacher relationship quality. Scores were associated with parental school involvement, parent perceptions of teacher effectiveness, and student-teacher relationship quality. The study is important to this action research project

because it demonstrates that family-school partnership quality is a measurable construct rather than an abstract idea. It also supports the use of relationship quality and family involvement as meaningful indicators when examining school-family collaboration. Although the current action research did not administer the PTRQS, the study informs interpretation of the project's qualitative findings and suggests a stronger measurement option for future cycles. A future replication could use an established partnership measure alongside attendance, communication logs, and family feedback to improve reliability and permit more precise pre/post comparison.

Brooks, S. W., Schwartz, R., Ampuero, M., & Kokina, A. (2023). Teacher perspectives on partnerships on families of children with autism. *Journal of Research in Special Educational Needs*, 23(2), 79–89. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1471-3802.12581>

Brooks and colleagues conducted a primary study focused on teachers' perspectives regarding family-professional partnerships for students with autism. The study is valuable because much of the partnership literature emphasizes parent experiences, while effective collaboration depends on the behavior and beliefs of both families and educators. Teachers identified conditions that support or interfere with productive partnerships, including communication and collaboration practices. For the present action research project, this source supports the decision to treat family engagement as a shared responsibility rather than a parent compliance issue. If educators control meeting structures, communication systems, terminology, and access to interpreters, then school practices can either create or reduce barriers to participation. The study also supports the professional development implications of the project. Sustaining improvement will require staff to understand how their own communication and relationship-building behaviors influence family participation. The article therefore contributes

to the rationale for coaching teachers and IEP team members in proactive communication, respectful problem solving, role clarity, and family-centered meeting practices.

Fernández Cerero, J., Montenegro Rueda, M., & López Meneses, E. (2024). The impact of parental involvement on the educational development of students with autism spectrum disorder. *Children*, 11(9), Article 1062. <https://doi.org/10.3390/children11091062>

This qualitative primary study examined parental involvement in the education of secondary students with ASD. Forty-two parents participated through interviews and focus groups. Parents described involvement strategies that supported academic performance and emotional well-being, including structured home environments, use of assistive technology, and open communication with school staff. They also identified barriers such as limited school resources, communication problems, and insufficient ASD-specific training. This study is closely aligned with the action research project because it links family involvement with student educational development while also recognizing that schools can make participation difficult. Its findings support the project's emphasis on ongoing, two-way communication and creating conditions that allow parents to contribute knowledge about the student. The article also informs the professional development recommendations in conclusion: staff need training not only in autism practices but also in family collaboration. Because the study is qualitative, it does not prove that parental involvement causes improved achievement, but it provides current empirical support for examining family engagement as an important part of educational planning for autistic students.

Fong, V. C., Lee, B. S., & Iarocci, G. (2022). A community-engaged approach to examining barriers and facilitators to accessing autism services in Korean immigrant families. *Autism*, 26(2), 525–537. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13623613211034067>

Fong and colleagues used a community-engaged qualitative design to examine barriers and facilitators experienced by 20 Korean immigrant parents seeking autism services in British Columbia. Semi-structured interviews were analyzed thematically, revealing barriers at system, provider, and family/cultural levels. This source is particularly important to the culturally responsive focus of the action research project because it demonstrates that access difficulties are rarely explained by one factor, such as language alone. Families may simultaneously encounter unfamiliar systems, providers of communication issues, cultural expectations, and practical constraints. The findings support the project's use of multiple engagement strategies rather than a single intervention. Translated materials can increase access, but families may also need individualized explanation, relationship-building, flexible communication, and explicit invitations to ask questions or advocates. The community-engaged approach is also relevant methodologically because it centers family experience when identifying problems and solutions. This supports the project's recommendation that future school improvement cycles gather direct family feedback and use it to refine communication and IEP participation procedures.

Mercado-Anazagasty, J., Ramirez, A., Alba, L. A., & Johnson, A. H. (2025). Exploring differences in Spanish- and English-speaking parents' experiences with Individualized Education Program meetings. *Remedial and Special Education, 46*(6), 411–425.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/07419325241267240>

This peer-reviewed primary study surveyed 177 Spanish- and English-speaking parents of children with disabilities across 22 U.S. states. The researchers examined IEP meeting experiences, attendance challenges, knowledge of special education, participation, discrimination, stress, and satisfaction. Spanish-speaking parents reported lower knowledge of special education rights, greater perceived discrimination, language barriers, and problems with

interpretation services. These findings are directly applicable to the present action research setting because the school serves many English Language Learners and the project specifically targeted language access. The article provides strong contemporary evidence that interpretation and translated documents are equity issues rather than optional conveniences. It also supports the project's emphasis on clear explanations of IEP terminology and procedures. Importantly, the study suggests that attendance alone should not be treated as evidence of meaningful participation; parents can be physically present while still lacking language access or confidence to contribute. For future project cycles, this source supports collecting data on perceived understanding, voice, and respect in addition to meeting attendance.

Rabba, A. S., Smith, J., Hall, G., Alexander, V., Batty, K., Datta, P., Goodall, E., Heyworth, M., Lamb, S., Lawson, W., Lilley, R., Reid, K., Syeda, N., & Pellicano, E. (2025). 'I'm sick of being the problem': Autistic mothers' experiences of interacting with schools for their autistic children. *Autism*, 29(4), 1034–1046. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13623613241297223>

Rabba and colleagues interviewed 31 autistic mothers of autistic children in Australia. Mothers described school interactions in which parenting knowledge and lived autistic expertise were discounted. The study supports respect for family expertise and communication that accommodates individual preferences. Its qualitative, setting-specific findings should not be generalized to all caregivers. For this project, it informs coaching around advocacy, disagreement, and accessible opportunities for family voice.

Sanderson, K. A., & Rojas, A. J. (2023). Parent perspectives on student IEP involvement.

Journal of Research in Special Educational Needs, 23(2), 90–99.

<https://doi.org/10.1111/1471-3802.12582>

Sanderson and Rojas analyzed responses from 646 parents of students with disabilities ages 5–21 to understand how schools could better support student participation in IEP development and meetings. Constant comparative analysis produced themes involving active student roles, supportive school personnel, changes to IEP meeting practices, and concerns about participation. Although the study focused specifically on student involvement, it is relevant to family engagement because parents are key members of the IEP team and their responses describe meeting conditions that can either support or restrict meaningful participation. The large national sample adds useful context to the smaller local action research project. The study supports the recommendation that IEP teams examine meeting structures rather than expecting students and families to adapt to traditional formats. Flexible preparation, supportive staff behavior, and intentional opportunities for voice can make meetings more collaborative. In the current project, these principles were reflected in flexible participation options, clearer information, and direct invitations for families to contribute priorities and questions.

Santiago, R. T., McIntyre, L. L., & Garbacz, S. A. (2022). Dimensions of family-school partnerships for autistic children: Context and Congruence. *School Psychology, 37*(1), 4–14. <https://doi.org/10.1037/spq0000473>

This longitudinal primary study examined family-school partnership dimensions among parents and teachers of autistic children. At the first point, 68 parents provided data; a later phase included 22 parent-teacher dyads. The researchers found that family financial-resource appraisals were related to family involvement and that earlier parent-reported relationship quality and involvement were associated with later parent and teacher perceptions of relationship quality. The findings are important for the present project in two ways. First, they show that partnership quality can persist over time and may shape later interactions, supporting early and proactive

relationship-building. Second, the association between financial resources and involvement cautions schools against interpreting participation differences as differences in caring. Work schedules, transportation, financial constraints, and other contextual factors can affect a family's ability to engage. This directly supports the action of research strategies of flexible scheduling and virtual participation. The study also provides empirical support for examining communication and attendance alongside relationship quality in future cycles.

Smith, J., Rabba, A. S., Cong, L., Datta, P., Dresens, E., Hall, G., Heyworth, M., Lawson, W., Lee, P., Lilley, R., Syeda, N., Ma, E., Wang, J., Wang, R., Yeow, C. T., & Pellicano, E. (2023a). 'They were saying that I was a typical Chinese mum': Chinese parents' experiences of parent-teacher partnerships for their autistic children. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 53, 4888–4900.

<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-022-05748-z>

Smith and colleagues interviewed 17 Chinese parents of autistic children attending Australian educational settings. The participatory qualitative study explored parent-teacher partnerships and identified both positive experiences and significant barriers. Parents valued opportunities and support but also described inconsistent teaching quality, inadequate communication, difficulty navigating educational systems, and discrimination. Cultural expectations influenced interactions: some parents were highly respectful of teacher expertise and hesitant to appear demanding even when they had important information or concerns. This source is central to the culturally responsive rationale of the action research project. It demonstrates why educators should not equate quietness or deference with lack of interest. Schools may need to explicitly invite family expertise, create safe opportunities for questions, and explain that disagreement or advocacy will not harm the relationship. The study also

supports the use of communication methods that respect family language preferences and privacy. For the local project, these findings strengthen the conclusion that culturally responsive engagement requires both access support and relationship practices that make family voice genuinely welcome.

Smith, J., Rabba, A. S., Dang, N., Datta, P., Dresens, E., Nguyen, H. T. T., Nguyen, K.-V., Nguyen, P., Hall, G., Heyworth, M., Lawson, W., Lilley, R., Syeda, N., & Pellicano, E. (2023b). ‘We don’t make trouble’: Vietnamese parents’ experiences of parent-teacher partnerships for their autistic children. *Research in Autism Spectrum Disorders*, 103, Article 102142. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.rasd.2023.102142>

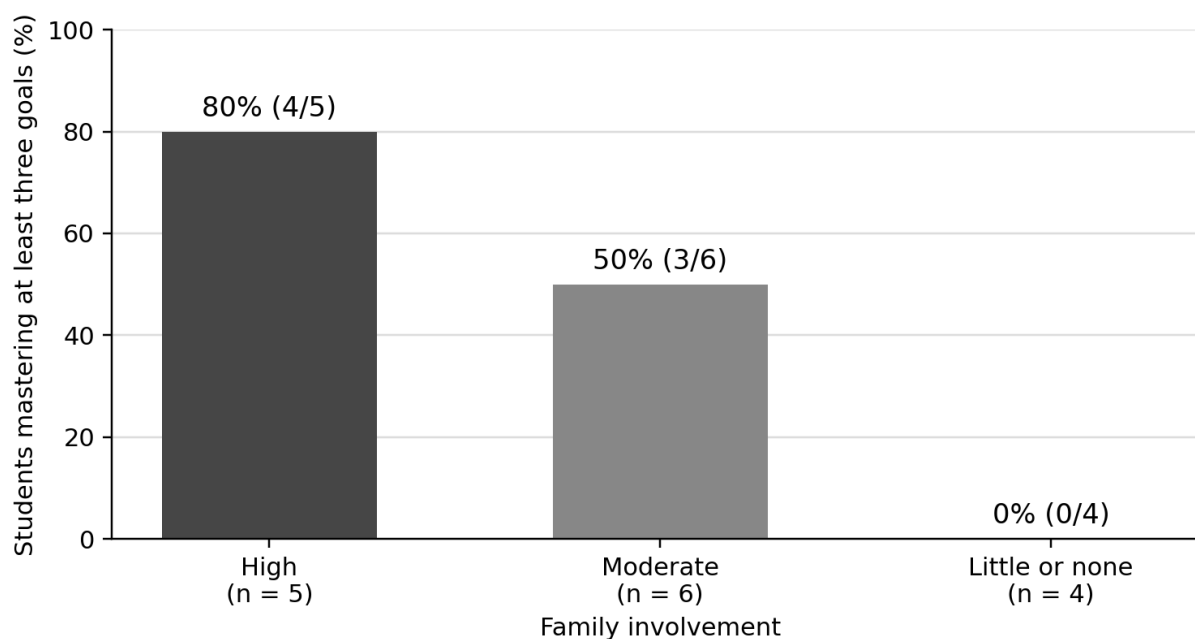
This participatory qualitative study interviewed 15 Vietnamese parents of autistic children attending Australian schools or kindergartens. Families valued education but described language barriers, stigma, deference to teachers, and concern about advocacy. It supports explicit invitations for family input and communication that respects language preferences. Its findings inform culturally responsive practice without establishing outcomes for families in the local U.S. sample. Future research could examine how language access and comfort with school authority affect shared decision-making.

Appendix B

Family Involvement and Reported Student Outcomes

Figure B1

Students Mastering at Least Three IEP Goals by August 2026



Note. Rates represent students who mastered at least three IEP goals by August 2026: high, 4/5; moderate, 3/6; little or none, 0/4. The total sample was 15 students. A two-sided Fisher–Freeman–Halton exact test of the 3×2 table yielded $p = .077$. The group differences did not reach the .05 significance threshold. Goal mastery refers to individualized IEP criteria, not a uniform performance score.

Table B1*Detailed Descriptive Summary of the Three Involvement Groups*

Family involvement	Students n (%)	Mastery of at least three goals	Social and behavioral findings
High	5 (33.3%)	4/5 students (80%) by August 2026	Two students showed particularly strong progress in both social and behavioral goals. Earlier observations described better regulations.
Moderate	6 (40.0%)	3/6 students (50%) by August 2026; all six made IEP progress	Some social skills improvement in all six; continued difficulty with behavioral goals.
Little or none	4 (26.7%)	0/4 students (0%); some progress but no goals mastered	Domain-specific social and behavioral outcomes are not separately quantified.