



Collaborative partnerships in action

FINAL REPORT

Associate Professor Beth Siggers
Professor Delphine Odier-Guedj
Associate Professor Michael Whelan
Dr Jill Ashburner

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Associate Professor Beth Sagers

Queensland University of Technology | Autism CRC

Professor Delphine Odier-Guedj

Monash University

Associate Professor Michael Whelan

Queensland University of Technology | Autism CRC

Dr Jill Ashburner

Autism Queensland | Autism CRC

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The Cooperative Research Centre for Living with Autism (Autism CRC)

The Cooperative Research Centre for Living with Autism (Autism CRC) is the world's first national, cooperative research effort focused on autism. Taking a whole-of-life approach to autism focusing on diagnosis, education and adult life, Autism CRC researchers are working with end-users to provide evidence-based outcomes which can be translated into practical solutions for governments, service providers, education and health professionals, families and people on the autism spectrum.

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A note on terminology

We recognise that when referring to individuals on the autism spectrum, there is no one term that suits all people. In our published material and other work, when speaking of adults we use the terms 'autistic person', 'person on the autism spectrum' or 'person on the spectrum'. The term 'autistic person' uses identity first language, which reflects the belief that being autistic is a core part of a person's identity.

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is diagnostic terminology used by the healthcare sector, and is used in the context of a person being 'diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder'.

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1. Executive summary

The Collaborative partnerships in action (CPIA) project involved collecting qualitative data from multidisciplinary partner perspectives. The overarching aim was to identify essential elements in actioning collaborative partnerships that support the inclusion of learners on the autism spectrum in the short and long term. Data was collected from a real-life, autism specific context with a focus on supporting adolescent learners. The single case study involved 5 participants and included semi-structured interviews conducted face to face or online at 4 different time points across a school year. Observations of collaborations in action and archival evidence from participants were also collected.

The aim was to illustrate how challenges experienced in supporting students on the spectrum are navigated through authentic collaborative partnerships with relevant partners (e.g., the family, student, external partners) and to help identify key elements that are critical to the establishment and sustainability of authentic partnerships. This data generated 3 main themes and 16 key sub themes which identify several essential elements to successfully actioning collaborative partnerships that support learners on the autism spectrum.

A key output of the research was to produce professional educational support products that support teachers in developing and sustaining positive collaborative partnerships in their own practice and unique contexts. These multimedia products will be housed on the Autism CRC *inclusionED* website (www.inclusioned.edu.au) and used to support teachers and empower school communities in translating authentic collaborative partnerships into their practice.

Findings from the project reinforce the importance of establishing and sustaining student-centred collaborative partnerships within inclusive contexts that promote an equitable and collective voice for all partners and maximise the success of learners on the spectrum in their schooling.

2. Background

Australian classrooms are home to a widely diverse group of learners with uniqueness and difference apparent across geographical locations, school communities, and individual classroom contexts (McCormack & Smith-Tamaray, 2018, p217). Collaborative partnerships are key to helping educators effectively manage and address these diverse learning needs. These partnerships are critical to supporting teachers and school communities to understand and cater to

the diverse needs of their learners and to build connections with students, families, and external agencies.

Aims of the project

Utilising an intrinsic case study approach (Stake, 1995; 2006), this research aimed to further extend translation of the previous Autism CRC “Australian Educational Needs Analysis” (ASD-ENA) results by nurturing our understanding of the collaborative partnerships that support the educational needs and strengths of learners on the spectrum. The project involved collecting qualitative data from multidisciplinary partner perspectives of the partnerships and what mobilises and sustains these collaborations. A key output of the research was to produce professional educational support products that map data to support actioning positive collaborative education partnerships to help teachers in translating this research knowledge in their own practice and unique contexts to promote collaborative partnerships.

The development of multimedia educational resources aims to demonstrate how educational communities (e.g., teacher, parent, student on the spectrum, allied health and ancillary staff) can work together collaboratively to support the needs of students on the autism spectrum. These products will be housed on the Autism CRC *inclusionED* website (www.inclusioned.edu.au) and used to empower school communities. It is hoped that the resources will support educators to respectfully foster the voice of students on the spectrum and their families in collaborations, but also provide educators with support in knowledge and understanding of how to develop positive collaborative partnerships that can be actioned and work to support planning and adjustments to their teaching practices to meet the needs of diverse learners.

3. Research design and methods

The project was a joint research collaboration funded by the Autism CRC in partnership with Queensland University of Technology, Monash University, and Autism Queensland. The CPIA research utilised a single intrinsic case study (Stake, 1995; 2006), drawing on data collected from the real-life context of a multidisciplinary collaborative partnership between an educator, parent, student, multidisciplinary and ancillary staff. The aim being to illustrate how challenges experienced in supporting students on the spectrum are navigated through authentic collaborative partnerships with relevant partners (e.g., the family, student, external partners) and to help identify key elements that are critical to the establishment and sustainability of authentic partnerships.

The qualitative research focused therefore on 3 interdependent aims:

1. Collecting a case study of a collaborative partnership within a real-life educational context.
2. Illustrating the process of collaboration in a multidisciplinary educational community partnership (e.g., teacher, parent, allied health and ancillary staff, student on the spectrum) through the collection of visual data (meetings, interviews, observations, archival evidence from participants) mapped across a school year.
3. Developing multimedia resources presenting the results as a professional resource for school communities to support them in engaging in authentic, positive and sustainable collaborative partnerships with families and students on the spectrum, multidisciplinary staff, and external agencies.

Research question

The overarching research question for the CPIA research was:

What do collaborative partners identify as essential elements in actioning collaborative partnerships that support the inclusion of learners on the autism spectrum in the short and long term?

Participants

The single case study included 5 key participants involved in an educational collaborative partnership and voluntarily consented to be involved in the project. The participants included:

- an adolescent on the autism spectrum
- the student's maternal parent
- the class teacher
- an occupational therapist who worked with the class and student involved
- the teacher aide involved with the class

The participants were working within an autism-specific context and the collaborative partnerships were focussed on supporting adolescent learners on the autism spectrum.

Data collection

Data was collected through a series of face-to-face or online interviews with each participant involved in the collaborative partnership (as described above) once per term across a school year as well as observations of collaborations in action and archival evidence.

Data analysis

Semi-structured interviews with participants were conducted at 4 different time points and audio recorded and transcribed verbatim to ensure direct quotes and extracts could be used to illuminate the qualitative data, clarify links between data, support the interpretation and conclusions generated. Data was analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2019) reflexive thematic analysis approach.

4. Findings

The project aimed to investigate what collaborative partners identify as essential elements in actioning collaborative partnerships that support the inclusion of learners on the autism spectrum in the short and long term. There were 3 main themes and 16 sub themes generated by the data that identify several essential elements to successfully actioning collaborative partnerships (see Table 1). This data was used to inform the development of multimedia professional resources to be housed on the Autism CRC *inclusionED* site to support teachers and school communities in developing student-centred collaborative partnerships.

Table 1: Student-centred collaborative partnerships

Data-generated themes that identify essential elements to successfully actioning collaborative partnerships

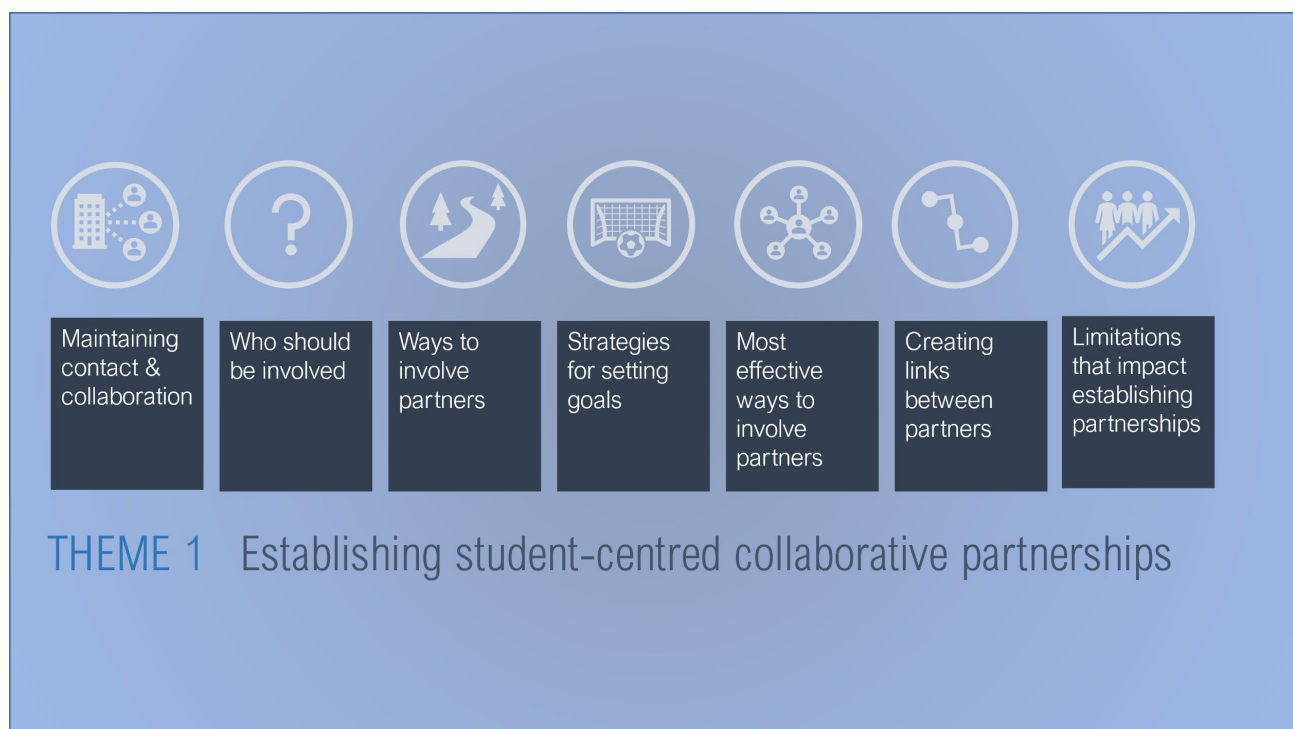
Theme 1	Theme 2	Theme 3
Establishing	Valuing a collective voice	Sustaining
Who should be involved?	Promoting collective and equitable voices in partnerships	Maintaining, monitoring, and reviewing goals
Ways to involve partners	Shared expertise and views	Communication
Strategies for setting goals	Input to planning and goal setting	Evaluation
Most effective ways to involve partners	Facilitating trust	
Creating links between partners	Clearly defining roles	
Maintaining contact and collaboration	Use of jargon	
Limitations that impact establishing partnerships		

Theme 1 – Establishing student-centred collaborative partnerships

There were 7 key sub themes generated by the data that highlighted key elements important to consider and influence the establishment of these partnerships. The sub themes as represented in Figure 1 included:

- who should be involved?
- ways to involve partners
- strategies for setting goals
- most effective ways to involve partners
- creating links between partners
- maintaining contact and collaboration
- limitations that impact establishing partnerships.

Figure 1. Sub themes generated in Theme 1



Theme 2 – Valuing a collective voice in student-centred collaborative partnerships

The second theme related to valuing a collective voice in student-centred collaborative partnerships and identified factors and/or practices that can help to nurture and value a collective voice in collaborative partnerships. There were 6 key sub themes

(See Figure 2) that emphasised important features of valued and equitable partnerships. These included:

- promoting collective and equitable voices in partnerships
- shared expertise and views
- input to planning and goal setting
- facilitating trust
- clearly defining roles
- use of jargon.

Figure 2. Sub themes in Theme 2

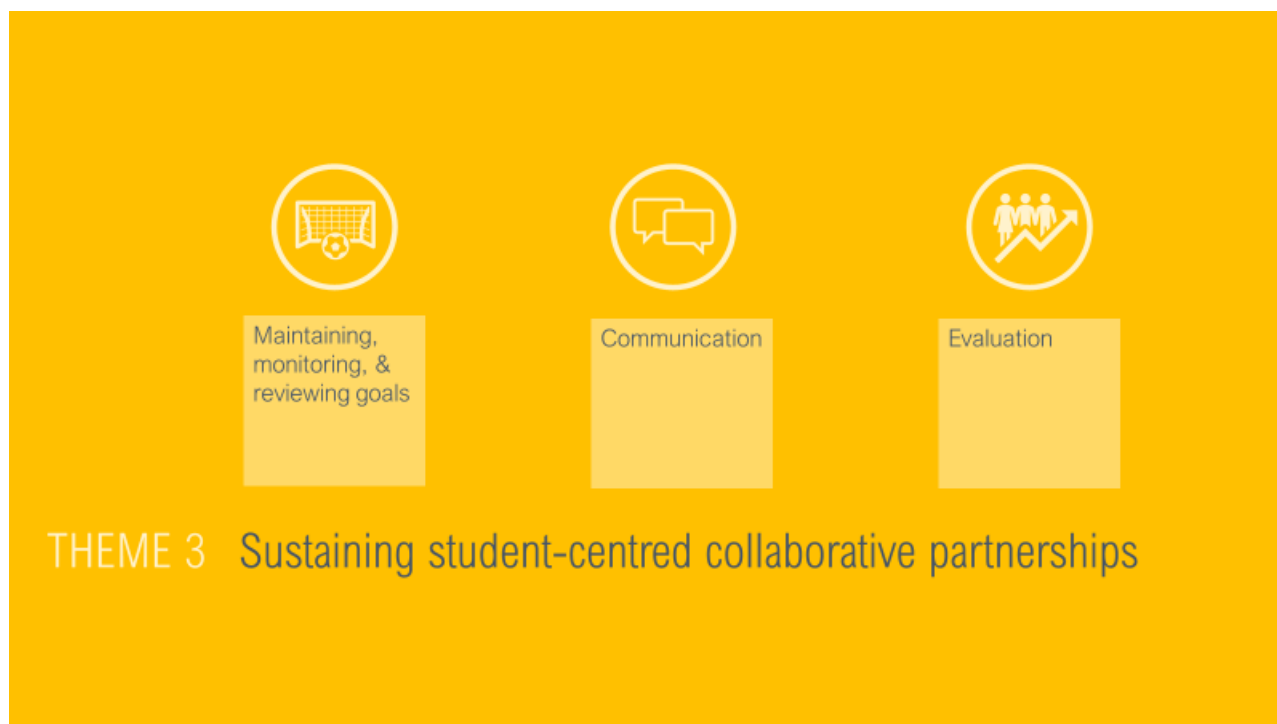


Theme 3 – Sustaining student-centred collaborative partnerships

The third theme focussed on the importance of sustaining student-centred collaborative partnerships. There were 3 key sub themes (Refer Figure 3) that were highlighted as important to consider that can help positively sustain partnerships. They included:

- maintaining, monitoring, and reviewing goals
- communication
- evaluation.

Figure 3. Sub themes generated in Theme 3



As a key aim of this project was to develop a suite of multimedia resources, these findings have been used to inform the development of multimedia educational resources that use the data to demonstrate how educational communities (e.g., teacher, parent, student on the spectrum, allied health and ancillary staff), can work together collaboratively to support the needs of students on the autism spectrum. These products will be housed on the Autism CRC *inclusionED* website and used to empower school communities.

5. Limitations

The global pandemic had a significant impact on how the research was implemented, the methodology employed, and the number of participants involved. Limitations include the limited number of participants, only one school context, and a focus on adolescent aged students.

6. Implications for research and practice

Future directions

Future research could expand the number of participants across a wider and more diverse range of contexts and with partnerships working collaboratively with students on the spectrum across a much broader age range that could further inform the development and refinement of resources. In addition, further evolution of the resources could also occur as a result of feedback from educators who use the information and resources housed on Autism CRC *inclusionED* to support their collaborative partnerships in their own practice.

7. Key recommendations

Collaborative partnerships are key to helping educators effectively manage and address the diverse learning needs in their classrooms. This project reinforces the importance of establishing and sustaining student-centred collaborative partnerships within inclusive contexts that promote an equitable and collective voice for all partners and maximises the success of learners on the spectrum in their schooling.

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Our values



Inclusion

Working together with those with the lived experience of autism in all we do



Innovation

New solutions for long term challenges



Evidence

Guided by evidence-based research and peer review



Independence

Maintaining autonomy and integrity



Cooperation

Bringing benefits to our partners; capturing opportunities they cannot capture alone



AutismCRC

Autism CRC

The University of Queensland
Long Pocket Precinct
Level 3, Foxtail Building
80 Meiers Road
Indooroopilly Qld 4068
T +61 7 3377 0600
E info@autismcrc.com.au
W autismcrc.com.au



@autismcrc



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