

**Types of Home-School Communication and  
Autistic Spectrum Disorder:  
A Case Study of Parents and Teachers in  
Two Primary Schools**

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## ABSTRACT

The present study offered an insight into the types of home-school communication that are valued and used by parents and teachers of students with autistic spectrum disorder (ASD) at two Queensland primary schools. The parents and teachers of this study were atypically available for frequent unplanned meetings at drop-off and pick-up times.

In this two-stage study, records and interviews were used to explore the range and complexity of types used, and the perceptions of practice around these types, at two schools. In Stage 1, parents and teachers provided shared information about home-school communication in separate focus group meetings. In Stage 2, two parent-teacher dyads at each school recorded home-school communication events for four weeks then reflected on these events in face-to-face interviews.

Schools differed in the types of communication that were in place. Face-to-face communication was preferred at one school, whereas the communication book was preferred at the other school. Unplanned meetings occurred daily for three of the four parent-teacher dyads at drop-off or pick-up times. Many of these events were not recorded but were discussed briefly in the face-to-face interviews. Communication books were infrequently used, but parents and teachers at one school frequently discussed these books during the face-to-face interviews. Parents and teachers at the two schools were generally satisfied with the types of home-school communication, the frequency of events, and the time devoted to these events. Parents and teachers also valued the positive parent-teacher partnership that had been established through frequent home-school communication.

This exploratory study showed that parents of students with ASD appreciated the opportunities for frequent home-school communication with teachers of their children. The practice at the two schools, however, was not representative of practice across this state because students were transported to school by their parents who volunteered to be involved in the research. Analyses focused on the frequencies of a limited number of types of communications with less scrutiny of the content of each of these exchanges. This study provided a starting point for more direct investigation into the content of home-school communication used when parents do not transport their child to school and are randomly selected.

## STATEMENT OF ORIGINALITY

This work has not previously been submitted for a degree or diploma in any university. Stanley, Beamish, and Bryer (2005) presented a summary of the literature review and methodology that was intended to be used in this research. Some of this thesis content appears in that prior publication. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no other material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the thesis itself.

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_

Anthony Stanley

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Preamble

Over the past 50 years, the roles of parents and teachers in home-school communication have changed. For most of the twentieth century, teachers were perceived as experts (Hammitte & Nelson, 2001; Porter, 2002). There was little perceived need for parents to communicate with teachers because they *always knew best*. Today, however, educational theory and policy has framed parents as collaborative partners of equal status with teachers. Research into parent-teacher partnerships and home-school communications for different student populations has identified a broad range of practice.

For all students, parent-teacher partnerships and home-school communications have been encouraged. Collaborative partnerships between parents and teachers have valued the different skills, experiences, and knowledges that parents and teachers bring to educational decision on the needs of individual students (Epstein, 2001). Parent-teacher partnerships have been shown to enable two-way communications across home and school. In a complex interplay, two-way home-school communications have also been shown to enable such partnerships.

For students with special needs, parent-teacher partnerships and home-school communications have been particularly recommended. Many recommendations have focused on how to actively involve parents in mutual goal setting and review within Individual Education Plan (IEP) processes. Beyond IEP meetings, two-way communications have been perceived as necessary to establish parent-teacher partnerships that enable goal setting and review (Clark, 2000; Deslandes, 2006). Yet research has tended to show that parents are not always been provided with equal status within IEP processes for students with special needs (e.g., Stroggilos & Xanthacou, 2006; Yanok & Derubetis, 1989).

For students with autistic spectrum disorder (ASD), parent-teacher partnerships and home-school communications have become a critical component for the inclusive education of these students in regular schools (Stoner et al., 2005). Many students with ASD have severe impairments in communication and social emotional

challenges (Attwood, 2007). These impairments have created the need for parents and teachers of students with ASD to engage in frequent and continuous home-school communication and strong partnerships (Whitaker, 2007).

## 1.2 Continuum of parent-teacher partnerships

Porter (2008, p. 4) has offered a theoretical overview of the changing roles of parents and teachers in Australia in her “continuum of parent-teacher relationship styles.” Table 1.1 presents the seven aspects of each of these styles on this continuum. An inspection of this continuum highlights the complex nature of parent-teacher partnerships. Different relationship styles have developed over time. Recommended practice for schools has evolved from “*professional-driven*” or “*family-allied*” styles, towards “*family-centred*” or “*family-driven*” styles for specific members of the school communities.

Teacher dominance has exemplified the “*professional-driven*” style. Teachers have relied on their professional knowledge to plan, implement, and evaluate. Information on student progress has been reported to parents in a one-way communication. Porter (2008) has argued that parent-teacher relationships at many secondary schools typically adhere to this style and communications have not sustained an on-going partnership beyond each communication event.

Separate side-by-side roles have characterised the “*family-allied*” style of relationship. Parents have helped out at the uniform shop or tuck shop but their involvement have not challenged the “teachers’ domain” of the classroom (Porter, 2008, p. 7). Parents routinely have been provided with extra training in order to engage in homework or task focused activities at the home that involved school-like learning. This style has pitted teachers against parents who have not carried consistently out the tasks that they set for them. Porter (2008) signalled that parent-teacher relationships at many primary schools adhere to the “*family-allied*” style.

## Introduction

Table 1.1. Continuum of Parent-Teacher Relationship Styles (Porter, 2008, p. 4)

	Professional-driven	Family-allied	Family-centred	Family-driven
View of parents	Sources of their child's problems Joint victims	Agents of practitioners	Equal participants with complementary skills and expertise	Family leaders Teachers' employers
Parents' role	Comply with practitioner-advice Show deference towards professionals	Carry out assigned tasks to support their child's learning at home and school	Teachers and parents share responsibility for planning and enacting programs	Parents steer their child's education Parents choose their style of participation
Assessment	Practitioners locate deficits within the child or family	Practitioners assess children's needs	Practitioners assess children's needs and family's strengths	Solution focused: identify solutions that are already in place.
Sources of goals or priorities	Professionals dictate goals and interventions	Parents consent to a program designed by practitioners	Joint goal setting and shared decision making to meet family needs	Parents and students articulate their own goals or aspirations
Purpose of interactions with parents	To advise parents of their child's needs and program	To engage parents in helping practitioners to teach their child.	To empower parents to meet their child's and family's needs	To listen to parents so that practitioners can provide a service to meet their goals.
Communication style	One-way flow of information Parent training	Communication is task focused Parent education	Communication aims to build a relationship and empower parent participation.	Communication aims to build a relationship and support parents' interests in their child's education. Responsiveness to parents Collaborative consultation
Common venues	Secondary schools	Primary schools Preschools Child care centres	Some early intervention services	Some private practitioners e.g., tutors, therapists

“Collaboration” has featured in the *“family-centred”* style recommended by some contemporary literature and policy on parent-teacher partnerships especially in the early years of schooling. In this style, teachers have typically engaged with parents to collaboratively plan and implement programs for students. Home-school communication has aimed to empower both parents and teachers to meet students’ needs. Parents and teachers have been able to function as equal and joint decision makers by exchanging information and building relationships through communication.

Parental expertise has typified the *“family-driven”* style. Parents have been active agents in steering their children’s learning. Porter (2008) has recognised that there is little evidence of family-driven practice in regular schools. In this style, more than in any other style, teachers listen to parents as knowledge is shared.

Frequent communications are an aspect of the two “family” styles. However, these communications are not widely used in regular schools (Porter, 2008). The more balanced communications between home and school described in these two kinds of partnership styles may be very valuable for students with ASD in regular settings.

### **1.3 Aims of the study**

The present study aimed to provide a focused insight into the types of home-school communications valued and used by parents and teachers of students with ASD. Case study method was used. This study was an exploratory investigation into home-school communication in two primary schools.

This study addressed a rapidly expanding student population in government schools. The population of students with ASD in schools had increased substantially over the past 20 years in Queensland, as it had across the world. Bryson and Smith (1998) cited in Ruble and Dalrymple (2002, p. 76) reported that 1 out of a 1000 students was affected by ASD (termed “autism” in their study). Prevalence of ASD across Australia which is now estimated at 1 in 166 for 6-to-12-year-old children (Advisory Board on Autism Spectrum Disorders, Commonwealth Department of Families and Community, 2005) increasingly challenges regular classroom practice.

Five research questions framed this study.

1. What types of communication now occur among the school community and when do these communications occur?
2. What is the purpose of these communications?
3. How satisfied are you (parents or class teachers) with the current ways that parents and teachers are communicating?
4. What are the facilitators to home-school communication?
5. What are the barriers to home-school communication?

#### **1.4 Definition of key terms**

A number of key terms from the literature assisted in setting the parameters for this study. These terms are defined in order to ensure that their meaning is clear.

##### *Home-school communication*

Home-school communication “is understood as a process consisting of continual acts of representation and interpretation, in which the meaning of what is being communicated is never fixed” (Nichols & Read, 2002, p. 51). Within this framework, participants are seen to continually read signs and to produce signs for others to read. This definition places the focus on a negotiation of meanings between participants. Parents and teachers are perceived to frequently communicate with each other when they are unaware that such communications are occurring in unplanned interactions. By acknowledging that communications are often unplanned, non-written types of home-school communication (e.g., telephone and face-to-face interactions) are considered. This definition acknowledges that home-school communications and parent-teacher partnerships affect each other.

##### *Parent-teacher partnerships*

Parent-teacher partnerships are seen “to involve 1) mutual respect, 2) complementary expertise and 3) a willingness to learn from each other” (Armstrong, 1995, p. 18). Parent-teacher partnerships serve to work collaboratively to address the needs of the student. These partnerships have been seen to be a subset of home-school relationships. Earlier constructs of home-school relationships saw the main role of parents to be that of volunteering in activities outside of classrooms in schools. Typically, these activities were tasks not coordinated by classroom

teachers. In recent times, influences on home-school relationships beyond the classroom, and most notably school-wide policy and practice, have been probed to identify their effects on parent-teacher partnerships. Cotton and Wikelund (2004) used the closely aligned term “parental involvement” instead of “parent-teacher partnerships”. They maintained that parents can become more involved in assisting their child improve their schoolwork and can attend functions and conferences. Cotton and Wikelund recommended that schools should provide encouragement, model desired behaviours, and support parents to monitor homework or to become tutors at home.

### *Collaboration*

“Collaboration” refers to “the desire or need to create or discover something new, while thinking with others” (Hargrove, 1998, p. 3). Creative collaboration involves (a) different views and perspectives, (b) shared goals that build new shared understandings, and (c) creation of new values (Hargrove). Collaboration between parents and teachers has been shown to be required for problem solving around the needs of individual students. Home-school communication has been seen as the vehicle that enables such collaboration within parent-teacher partnerships.

### *ASD*

The American Psychological Association (APA) has developed diagnostic criteria for the identification of ASD using the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders Fourth Edition Text Revision* (DSM-IV-TR). The DSM-IV-TR defines individuals with ASD as “characterized by severe and pervasive impairment in several areas of development: reciprocal social interaction skills, or the presence of stereotyped behaviour, interests and activities” (American Psychological Association, 2000, p. 69). Individuals diagnosed using the DSM-IV-TR must display specific and observable behaviours.

### *Primary school*

In Queensland education sectors, primary school commences with a non-compulsory, preparatory year and then is followed by seven years of compulsory learning from Years 1 through to 7. Children must be six by June in the year they enrol in Year 1. At approximately the age of 12 years, students transition from primary to secondary school or high school in order to complete their schooling.

### **1.5 Overview of chapter content**

This research is reported in six chapters. Chapter 2 presents literature relevant to this study on the types of home-school communication for students with ASD. Parent-teacher relationships and home-school communications are shown to influence each other.

Chapter 3 outlines the methodology used in this study. Attention is initially focused on providing a justification for the use of an ethnomethodological (EM) theoretical perspective. Then, the specific data collection tools (viz., focus group meetings, individual home-school communication records, and face-to-face interviews) are reported. Data analysis procedures included text sampling, concept maps and concepts lists that were generated using the *Leximancer 2.2* (Smith, 2002) software program. This software also enabled automated content analysis of the interview scripts.

In the next two chapters, the results from this study are reported. In Chapter 4, results from group perspectives are presented (focus group activity). In Chapter 5, results from individual perspectives are provided (home-school recording and face-to-face interview activities).

Finally, Chapter 6 offers a discussion of the results from the two previous chapters. Limitations of the study mainly related to its narrow scope are presented. Concluding comment is offered regarding the overall contributions of the study to professional practice and to future research.

## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Overview

The purpose of this study, as indicated previously, was to investigate the use of home-school communication by parents and teachers of students with ASD in two Queensland primary schools. Given the research focus, the conceptual basis of this study referred to four related literatures: parent-teacher partnerships, and the respective types, influences, and benefits of home-school communication. This review systematically examines each of these literatures from three student perspectives: all students, students with special needs, and students with ASD.

### 2.2 Parent-teacher partnerships and communication

The nature of parent-teacher partnerships has shaped the communications between the home and the school. Epstein (1995) provided a framework for action teams that included home-school communication as a type of parent-teacher partnership that could structure collaborative decision. This framework, formulated from research conducted in the USA, has been regularly used and modified by researchers of parent-teacher partnership. Typically, participants for these action teams would be recruited from school councils. USA research provided a starting point for reviewing the literature related to parent-teacher partnership over the last 15 years.

Home-school communication has also featured as an aspect on the “continuum of parent-teacher relationship styles” (see Table 1.1) developed by Porter (2008) from her research on Australian schools. Porter’s model more accurately illustrated parent-teacher relationships in local schools than did the Epstein framework. School councils have a much shorter history in Australia and have not been formed in government state schools in Queensland. Consequently, Australian schools have not been as accustomed to including parents in decision making around educational issues. In her model, Porter showed that parent-teacher partnerships in primary schools have tended to be “*professional driven*” or “*family allied*.” One-way or task focused communications have typically been used in these partnerships. The literature reviewed for all students, and for students with special needs, found this result. For students with ASD the literature identified practice more associated with the “*family-centred*” style of parent-teacher partnership involving relatively more two-way communication between home and school.

### **2.2.1 Parent-teacher partnerships regarding all students**

Teachers of all students have been urged to build parent-teacher partnerships through frequent parental involvement on collaborative decision making. Epstein (1995; 2001) reasoned that there were six types of parental involvement that informed parent-teacher partnerships for all students: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating with the community. Table 2.1 shows that these types briefly outline how schools can collaboratively work with parents to enable them to become involved in educational programming for children at a school.

Table 2.1. Six Types of Parental Involvement (Epstein, 2001, pp. 43-44)

Type of Involvement	Details
1: Parenting	Assist families with parenting and child-rearing skills, family support, understanding child and adolescent development, and setting home conditions to support learning at each age and grade level.
2: Communicating	Communicate with families about school programs and student progress with school-to-home and home-to-school communications.
3: Volunteering	Improve recruitment, training, work and schedules to involve families as volunteers and audiences at the school or in other locations to support students and school programs.
4: Learning at home	Involve families in learning activities at home including homework and other curricular-linked activities and decisions.
5: Decision making	Include families as participants in school decisions, governance, committees, councils, and other parent organisations.
6: Collaborating with the community	Coordinate the work and resources of community businesses, agencies, colleges or universities, and other groups to strengthen school programs, family practices, and student learning and development.

A review is presented of four North American studies that investigated collaborative school practice using the Epstein framework over time (Deslandes, 2006; Eccles & Howard, 1994; Sanders, 1996; Vaden-Kiernan, 2003). These studies were selected because they each found a result directly related to home-school communication. The studies reported mixed findings on how the schools had used such

communication to collaborate with parents.

In the 1990's, research in the USA found few positive results regarding the extent that teachers engaged parents of older primary school students in home-school communications. Eccles and Howard (1994) identified that low levels of parental involvement had resulted because of negative attitudes and practices of the teachers toward such involvement. Face-to-face and telephone interviews and surveys were used to examine the perceptions, held by parents of students in Years 7 and 8, of collaborative practices that were involved in action teams. More than fifty percent of teachers in their study only communicated with the parents through report cards. Building on this result, the Sanders (1996) study showed that the academic performance, self-concept, achievement ideology, and social behaviour of students were positively affected, to a small degree, by school, family and community involvement. Interview methodology was used to examine the effects of teacher, family and community support on attitudes concerning school, behaviour and academic achievement. The participants of this study consisted of members from action teams across three schools. More recent findings from North American research have also identified clear linkages among the aspects of teacher attitudes, parental involvement, and home-school communication.

In the first decade of the twenty first century, more communications and collaborative decisions were found to occur between teachers and parents of younger students. Vaden-Kiernan (2003) found that the attitudes of teachers played a critical role in increasing parental involvement, improving the academic achievement of students, and in establishing strong partnerships between parents and teachers. Parents of students in Year 1 through to Year 12 were surveyed on two different occasions. National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) surveys of 12,426 homes were analysed from 1996 data and compared to like survey data from 11,265 homes from 2003. A small majority of parents, and mainly those of students in the early years of school, perceived that the school had performed "very well" in letting parents know between report cards how the child was doing. By comparison, Deslandes (2006) found ineffective collaborative practices within action teams. Participants from two primary schools and four secondary schools located in Quebec, Canada were interviewed in 2001-2005. One positive result was that the participants at one primary school were happy with the number of times the team met and with the informal manner in which two-way communications were conducted. Current thinking in the UK builds upon these findings from the USA regarding the willingness of primary schools to communicate often with parents.

Successful approaches to parent-teacher partnership in the UK are summarised in a recent national sampling by the Department for Children, Schools, and Families (2009). Table 2.2 shows the five approaches that were identified from multiple case study methodology across 10 primary and 5 secondary schools. In summary, these schools were able to increase engagements by parents in student learning. Survey results showed improvements in outcomes for the students as a result of increased parental involvement in programming. Face-to-face involvement of parents in the early years of schooling was found to be particularly successful. Table 2.2 shows that the staff in primary schools, and the early years of secondary schools were able to use a wider range of approaches to engage parents than were staff in middle and upper years of secondary schools. Results from Australian education have also found that parent-teacher partnerships for students in the earlier years have lead to relatively more benefits than those achieved for older students.

Table 2.2. Department for Children, Schools, and Families (2009) Research

Approach to Parental Involvement	Case Study Schools
1: Sharing curriculum plans with parents with suggestions of activities for parents/siblings to work on together as part of homework	1 primary 1 secondary (focus Year 7)
2: Using homework activities to communicate key areas of learning that parents can support.	4 primary 1 secondary (focus Year 7)
3: Giving parents access to current curriculum materials on the school website or virtual learning environment	1 primary 1 secondary
4: Involving parents in their child's lessons at school	1 primary 1 secondary (focus Year 7)
5: Helping specific parents to work with their child on identified curricular targets.	2 primary

School councils in the primary years have had a short history in Australia. School councils have been used in Victorian primary schools for only the last 15 years (Department of Education & Training, 2006). During the even shorter 10 year history of school councils in primary schools in New South Wales, a state-wide audit found few examples of positive parent-teacher relationships being generated by on-going

initiatives (New South Wales Department of Education & Training, 2001). Because of this relatively short history of school councils, Australian research has tended to focus on methods for addressing specific problems with student outcomes, rather than investigating long-term collaborative decision making across a range of curriculum.

From the breadth of Australian studies on parent-teacher partnerships, two representative studies were selected that specifically measured home-school communication. Cairney and Ruge (1999) conducted a description and evaluation of 216 existing literacy and numeracy programs in the middle years of schooling in a nation-wide project. Practice in primary schools, a variety of community centres, and homes was recorded and analysed in an attempt to address the low academic achievement of children identified from disadvantaged socio-economic and non-English speaking backgrounds. Two-way communications between the home and school were valued by parents on the rare occasions that they occurred. The findings identified that there was still much to be learnt about parent-teacher relationships and future research into these relationships was recommended. A subsequent study by Lawson (2000) investigated the relationship between home literacy, school literacy and pedagogy in the early and middle years of schooling. Low academic achievement in English by students across the western suburbs of Sydney had suggested a need for this research. A stronger relationship between parents and teachers was evidenced after these workshops even though a one-way delivery model was used to disseminate information. In both the Cairney and Ruge (1999) and Lawson (2000) studies, a shift from “*professional driven*” to “*family-allied*” styles of parent-teacher relationship had occurred (Porter, 2008). The focus of communications from the schools broadened from merely sharing information about a child’s learning to enabling parents to support their child’s learning in a specific program.

In the Queensland state education system over the last two decades, the *Triennial School Review* process (Department of Education, 2002) has been used to analyse and plan each 3-year cycle of educational priorities based on localised need. In the absence of school councils, this structure has provided schools with an opportunity to engage parents and school staff in collaborative decision making. However, from his experience as a primary school teacher, the Researcher has found that the role of parents in this structure has typically been limited to agreeing to priorities determined by school staff. Parent-teacher relationships within the Triennial School Review process have tended to be “*professional driven*” (Porter, 2008).

Teachers have been found to dominate home-school communications in the majority of studies of parent-teacher partnerships that have been conducted in Queensland. Goos (2004) conducted a large study of decision making processes within 38 numeracy programs in primary schools. Parents, schools, professional organisations, research organisations, and community groups were surveyed and interviewed. Findings showed that one-way communications from the schools to their parents were typical and vertical decision making was identified that had not empowered these parents to be involved in programming. Coco, Goos, & Kostogriz (2007) conducted a small-scale investigation of home-school communication that was used to support a program where parents volunteered to tutor Year 1-3 students in a computer skill. Parents and school staff were interviewed regarding their involvement in this program. Participants from both the home and school reported that parent-teacher partnerships would have worked more collaboratively if the “rules of communication” had been agreed upon before the program. Parents identified that teachers dominated communications, and teachers identified that parents were an unreliable resource in the computer skills program because they often did not attend lessons that had been scheduled. In Queensland primary schools, if parents are involved in presenting curriculum, home-school communications have tended to be task specific within the “*family-allied*” style rather than focused on developing collaborative relationships (Porter, 2008) .

One Queensland study that researched a more collaborative approach to home-school communication involved a Triennial School Review process at a Queensland primary school (Stanley, Beamish, & Bryer, 2003). This review process was conducted within an ethos of shared decision making. Parents ( $n = 12$ ), teaching staff ( $n = 24$ ), and non-teaching staff ( $n = 9$ ) prioritised directions for curriculum and school community relationships that had been collected from a whole school survey. Written notes were recorded from group conversations. Results showed that frequent communications were believed to have developed relationships that enable collaborative decision making. In addition, the next whole school survey found that both parents and teachers believed that decision making structures had been improved after the active involvement of parents in the Triennial School Review process.

For all students, the nature of partnerships between parents and teachers has been shown to have influenced the nature of home-school communications. In the USA and UK, more collaborative parent-teacher partnerships and two-way

communications have been associated with the early years of primary schooling. The established history of school councils in these countries has provided a structure from which to draw action teams for collaborative decision making between parents and teachers. School councils have a shorter history in Australian schools, and have not existed in the majority of Queensland primary schools (i.e., schools that have been managed by the state government). Parents have appreciated collaborative decision making and two-way communications with teachers on the rare occasions that schools have supported such practices.

### ***2.2.2 Parent-teacher partnership regarding students with special needs***

For students with special needs, effective parent-teacher partnerships have been particularly recommended. Over the past 25 years, many texts have called for collaborative decision making between schools and parents of children with special needs (e.g., Doorlag, 2010; Hornby, 2000; Westling & Fox, 1995). However, only limited research has identified such collaborative decision making. Research has shown that communications have tended to be one-way from schools to parents of students with special needs. Collaborative decision making between parents and teachers was not strongly evidenced within IEP processes (Yanok & Derubetis, 1989; Strogilos & Xanthacou, 2006), homework activities that these students regularly struggle with (viz., Epstein & Munk, 1999; Munk et al., 2001; Harniss, Epstein, Bursuck, Nelson, & Jayanthi, 2001), and interventions for students with special needs (Cox, 2005),

The literature related to IEP processes has provided strong arguments for creating collaborative parent-teacher partnerships to support students with special needs. Rock (2000) reasoned that all participants should collaborate to determine the student's strengths, needs, present levels of performance, special education and related services, and goals/benchmarks for the upcoming year. Regular home-school communications were seen as necessary to develop these components within the IEP process. Clark (2000) maintained that class teachers were best placed to establish connections across the student's individualised needs, the general curriculum, and the requirements of different environments including the home. This researcher offered a number of practical ways that home-school communication can improve collaboration between the home and school (e. g., a "parent-friendly" IEP manual of the student's work, sample IEPs, and formal invitations to be forwarded to each parent prior to the IEP meeting).

A small amount of research has been conducted into parent-teacher relationships in the IEP process, and no studies were located that considered this process and home-school communications in an Australian school. Yanok and Derubetis (1989) found that communications around the IEP process were limited in number and scope, and that parents had felt disempowered as a result. These researchers used a telephone survey to probe the participation of 702 parents of students in a Midwestern district of the US. Yanok and Derubetis (1989) called on classroom teachers and school administrators to drastically improve their efforts to include parents in the IEP process. In particular, they recommended direct, informal, and personal communication facilitated by school personnel. A more recent study by Stroggilos and Xanthacou (2006) also found that IEPs did not involve much communication between parents, teachers and other members of the planning team. These researchers used case study methodology to investigate school practice around ten students who had attended one of five schools in Aegean, Greece. The use of the IEP as a collaborative tool between home and school was not evidenced in any of the cases. Most teachers recognised that parents were capable of more input but the “lack of time” prevented such involvement (p. 344). Parents perceived that the goals formulated, mainly by school staff, were not broad enough or informed by input from the home. Based on the research by Yanok and Derubetis (1989) and Stroggilos & Xanthacou (2006), home-school communications around the IEP process have been ineffective. By and large, recommendations in the literature have not been followed by schools.

Homework is another context requiring parents and teachers of students with special needs to engage in home-school communication. Three studies are reviewed that involved either teachers or parents of children in one of the 12 years of schooling in the USA (viz., Epstein & Munk, 1999; Munk et al., 2001; Harniss et al., 2001). Each of these studies offered specific recommendations for home-school communication after identifying limited collaborative decision making between parents and teachers. Epstein and Munk (1999) asked teachers ( $N = 635$ ) to rank recommendations for improving home-school communications. These teachers recognised the necessity for a two-way dialogue with parents to communicate individual student needs and valued such dialogue. However, a lack of teacher time to prepare written communications was perceived to have restricted such dialogue. Munk et al. (2001) found that parents were most concerned that their child's teachers did not communicate with them as frequently as they desired. Parents ( $N = 83$ ) ranked problems with home-school communication around homework. These parents

advised that a two-way dialogue between the home and the school needed to be established as the teacher of their child did not know enough about their child's needs. Harniss et al. (2001) found that parents believed the frequent use of multiple types of communication could establish such a two-way dialogue. These researchers asked parents ( $N = 120$ ) to rank recommendations for improving communications. The use of daily assignment book and telephone homework hotlines was strongly recommended. The parents in this study expressed a clear desire to be more involved in the education of their children.

Across Epstein and Munk (1999), Munk et al. (2001), and Harniss et al. (2001) studies, the strongest recommendation was for homework diaries to be composed each day by the student and signed by both the teacher and parent. This procedure was suggested because often there was a break in the transmission of information from the teacher to the student, student to the parent, or parent to the teacher. Without frequent communications parents felt disengaged in their children's learning around homework tasks. A similar sense of disengagement had been expressed by the parent of students with special needs in the research related to the IEP process (Stroggilos & Xanthacou, 2006; Yanok & Derubetis, 1989). In both groups of studies, parents believed that there were insufficient opportunities for them to communicate with the teachers of their children with special needs.

Research has shown that interventions to support students with special needs that have produced the strongest effect have been those that frequently used communication types that had created a two-way dialogue with parents. Cox (2005) provided an analysis of 18 empirical studies of interventions that used home-school collaboration for USA students aged between 4-16 years with an existing disorder or problem. Home-school collaboration had a positive influence on these students' academic and/or social outcomes in 17 of the 18 intervention studies. Kelley and McCain (1995) studied first and second grade students with reading difficulties and Trice, Parker, Furrow, and Iwata (1983) studied 11<sup>th</sup> grade students with challenging behaviours. School-to-home notes or daily report card communication types were usually used to achieve successful dialogue around the individual student's needs in these two studies. In contrast, the interventions showing the smallest effect tended instead to be those that used non-specific communication about school routines (Conrad & Eash, 1983; Cook, Murphy, & Hunt, 2000).

Very few studies have investigated interventions to support students with special needs in Australia. Carrington and Robinson (2004) used a process to facilitate change in the culture and practice of a Queensland primary school. Workshops were used to in-service 48 teachers on the critical elements of the *Index for inclusion 2000* (Booth, Ainscow, Black-Hawkins, Vaughan, & Shaw, 2000) that originated in the UK. The primary aim to improve inclusive beliefs and values was achieved. Focus group interviews and reflective journals data showed that these workshops had created a culture of review and reflection within the school community through regular communications. This outcome suggests that collaborative practice around the “*family-centred*” style of relationship as designed by Porter (2008) had some positive influences on home-school communication for students with special needs.

For students with special needs, the nature of partnerships between parents and teachers has been evidenced within IEP processes, homework activities, and interventions. From the very small number of studies that have been conducted, it appears that typically schools have not reached out to these parents to engage them in collaborative decision making. Several interventions (Carrington & Robinson, 2004; Kelley & McCain, 1995; Trice, et al., 1983) have been found to have used home-school communication to generate the positive parent-teacher relationship that the literature has recommended and that parents have requested.

### **2.2.3 Parent-teacher partnership regarding students with ASD**

For students with ASD, a number of studies have shown that frequent use of home-school communications is a crucial element in enhancing parent-teacher partnerships (Rodger, Braithwaite & Keen, 2004; Spann, Kohler, & Soenksen, 2003; Sperry, Whaley, Shaw, & Brame, 1999; Stoner et al., 2005; Whitaker, 2007). This finding was consistent with findings from research of home-school communications for other students with special needs. One difference was that there are more frequent calls for “*family-driven*” parent-teacher relationship styles, as defined by Porter (2008), from parents of children with ASD than there are from parents of children with special needs more generally.

Research into parent-teacher partnerships regarding students with ASD has most frequently occurred in the USA. Three ASD studies from the USA were reviewed because they specifically analysed home-school communication practices for students with this disability (Spann et al., 2003; Sperry, et al. 1999; Stoner et al., 2005). Across each of these studies, the parents appeared to have perceived home-

school communication as a means to develop a dialogue whereas the teachers appeared more concerned with the exchange of information between contexts to “get a job done.” Parents wanted to operate within a “*family-centred*” or “*family-driven*” style of parent-teacher partnerships but the teachers, while valuing the principle of collaboration, appeared to have perceived the parent-teacher partnership more along the lines of a “*family-allied*” type relationship (Porter, 2008). Findings are presented in a sequence, based on the age range of the persons with ASD referred to in home-school communication events.

Stoner et al. (2005) found that early educational intervention services were perceived positively by parents because of their need for self-education and problem solving around the challenges that ASD presented to their family. Multiple methodologies were used to obtain perceptions from parents ( $N = 8$ ) of preschool and primary school age. However, positive parental perceptions of teachers tended to reduce as students progressed through their schooling. Parents felt that education professionals had not included them in a problem solving relationship during IEP meetings. Spann et al. (2003) found that most parents ( $n = 37$ ; 82%) were generally satisfied with the current use of home-school communication types. Parents of children with ASD were interviewed about their perceptions of the special education services provided for their children of pre-school through to secondary school age. Half these parents ( $n = 23$ ; 51%) communicated on a daily basis with the class teacher or teacher aide. The highest frequency of home-school communications was recorded by parents of early-years primary school students. Most communication events were around progress or behaviour at school (91%). Sperry et al. (1999) also found that both parent and teachers valued the degree of collaboration between individual parents and program providers. Focus group study methodology of parent ( $N = 30$ ) and provider ( $N = 22$ ) groups were used to investigate themes related to collaboration in programming for students with ASD, from 2 to 30 years of age. Across each of these USA based studies, parents perceived that such collaboration was a means to improve student learning (Spann et al., 2003; Sperry et al., 1999; Stoner et al., 2005).

Findings of a recent UK study by Whitaker (2007) reinforced the conclusions of the three studies from the USA. The majority of the parents of school aged children ( $N = 173$ ) surveyed in the UK study were satisfied with the home-school communication types that were used. Home-school communications were perceived to have occurred as frequently as these parents had desired. More than half of the parents

reported that they were satisfied with the provisions made to address their child's difficulties. The calls for family-driven practice are audible in the Whitaker (2007) study, as they are in the other studies reviewed here that relate to parent-teacher partnerships for students with ASD.

Form the Queensland context, a single study was located that investigated parent-teacher partnership for students with ASD. Rodger et al. (2004) interviewed parents ( $N = 22$ ) on the use of a catalogue (i.e., the "Canadian Occupational Performance Measure") that helped identify goals that were relevant to their child's learning. Along with the research from the USA (Spann et al., 2003; Sperry et al., 1999; Stoner et al., 2005) and the UK (Whitaker, 2007), these parents appreciated that frequent home-school communications were geared toward them having a large say in the education of their student.

### **2.3 Types of home-school communication**

Earlier research focused on types of communication that typically occurred infrequently throughout the school year, most notably, planned meetings and written reports (Clark, 2000; Dabkowski, 2004; Mason, McGhee-Kovvac, & Johnson, 2004; Nicholas & Read, 2002; Porter, 2002; Rock, 2000; Strogilos & Xanthacou, 2006; Yanok & Derubetis, 1989). This research was framed within the "*professional-driven*" and "*family-allied*" styles of parent-teacher partnership (Porter, 2008). More recent research has probed types of home-school communication that have been found to be typically more frequently used, such as the communication books and unplanned meetings. This contemporary research was framed within the "*family-centred*" and "*family-driven*" styles proposed by Porter (2008) that parents of students with ASD have requested.

#### **2.3.1 Infrequently used home-school communication types**

Research has shown that in primary schools, parents and teachers have typically communicated with each other on an infrequent basis. Nicholas and Read (2002) found that from the school's point of view, the home-school communication types of written reports and parent-teacher interviews have been shown to have kept most parents informed with the most efficient use of teachers' time. These two types were seen to be typically used for one-off events. Nicholas and Read (2002) compared the views of parents and teachers on the effectiveness of both reports and parent-teacher interviews related to primary students with learning difficulties. Semi-

structured reports typically combined standardised and individualised detail with a small space for parent comment. School staff was satisfied with the quality of information that was included. Parents were much less positive stating that there was often a lack of distinction between actual and expected performance. Because of the “impenetrability” of grading schemes and the “blandness” of comments, parents felt that they needed to “read between the lines”—looking for what is not said—to gauge where there is a concern (Nicholas & Read, 2002, p. 53). Similarly, parent-teacher meetings were seen by parents to facilitate the widest dissemination of information rather than be focused on a free-flowing discourse.

Previously in this review, recommendations have been cited as how to enable the active participation of students with disabilities, and their parents, in meetings (Clark, 2000; Rock, 2000; Salend, 1998; Stroggilos & Xanthacou, 2006; Yanok & Derubetis, 1989). Similar findings have been established for meetings generally, and IEP meetings specifically. Therefore, sufficient review of meeting types of communication has been provided, and no further review on this topic is required.

### ***2.3.2 Frequently used home-school communication types***

Frequent communications have been recommended to maintain the parent-teacher partnership between one-off reports on progress, such as planned meetings and report cards (Turnbull & Turnbull, 2001). Research has focused on the frequent use of unplanned meetings and communication books. A limited number of studies have probed the effectiveness of electronic technologies.

#### **2.3.2.1 Unplanned meetings**

Research into unplanned meetings has centred primarily on early childhood education and has not usually been orientated toward students with ASD. Parents of younger children have typically engaged in conversations with the teacher-provider or teacher aides at pick-up and drop-off times. Many early childhood educational programmes have required that a parent drop-off and pick-up their child from the teacher. Consequently, parents and teachers at these institutions have been more likely to use unplanned meetings at these times.

The small number of studies conducted outside of Australia has found positive perceptions related to the use of unplanned meetings. Bridgemohan, van Wyk, and van Staden (2005) used observation and interviews to review home-to-school and school-to-home communication at three South African primary schools. Unplanned

meetings at drop-off time were perceived as time consuming for teachers, but teachers were generally prepared to accommodate parents' needs for such meetings. Most teachers perceived that such unplanned meetings with parents did not place unmanageable demands on their time. In a USA based study, Weiss et al. (2006) examined the types of home-school communication used beyond scheduled activities, such as parent-teacher conferences and start-of-the-year teacher information-giving sessions. Interviews were conducted with 23 families of first year children at a school in the USA and their teachers. Most of these parents and teachers engaged in and valued short, unplanned meetings that had occurred at least monthly. Unplanned meetings between the parent and teacher have also been shown to have been facilitated by teacher aides. Chopra and French (2004) interviewed 17 teacher aides in the early years of regular primary schools to probe their partnership with the parents of students with significant disabilities. The key result was that individual teacher aides and parents had established and maintained regular interactions. The teacher aides reported they were instructed to communicate with parents about the social challenges faced by each student. Vital to the effectiveness of the daily unplanned meetings between the teacher aides and parents was that the teachers had scheduled weekly meetings with available parents to discuss programming issues. International research has shown that unplanned meetings at pick-up times have been used to establish and maintain parent-teacher partnerships.

In the Australian educational context, early childhood centres and preschools have a longer history of creating parent-teacher partnerships to facilitate decision making around programming than do primary schools. A few recent studies have investigated home-school communications in these settings (e. g., Hughes & McNaughton, 2001; Rodger et al., 2004). Beecher and Makin (2002) found that early literacy development for students of Aboriginal ethnicity is strongly supported when their families and educators share their understandings of the local and the English language. Across 80 early childhood centres in the state of New South Wales perspectives of families and educators were collected using focus group, interviews and direct observations. Two-way communication, through unplanned meetings, built strong relationships between the home and educational settings of the younger students. Other frequently used types of home-school communication have provided permanent records of interactions.

### 2.3.2.2 Communication books

The communication book has also been termed the daily log (Powell, 1980) or home-to-school notebook (Hall, Wolfe, & Bollig, 2003). This two-way type of communication has been shown to construct an ongoing documentation of problem solving and child progress that has promoted congruent educational decision making and coordinated programming efforts. By contrast, the use of loose hand written notes has been popular, but has not been suited to establishing ongoing two-way communications between the home and school contexts (Hornby, 2000; Turnbull & Turnbull, 2001). Hand written notes were typically sent from the teacher to the parent without an expectation that a dialogue would be constructed around the issue of concern.

The findings from two representative studies show various features of communication book use that have helped to develop parent-teacher partnerships (Davern, 2004; Hall et al., 2003). Davern (2004) found that communication books enabled parents and teachers to solve problems because they provided a vehicle for the regular back-and-forwards flow of information. Davern (2004) used parent interviews and self-reflections on her experience as an educator to critique the use of communication books in primary schools. Communication books had been used as an organiser to track student performance on social and academic tasks across the home and school environments. To help develop parent-teacher partnerships, teachers composed communication book entries within a “growth paradigm” rather than a “deficit paradigm” (p. 27). Communication book entries composed within a growth paradigm promoted problem-solving with each parent by focusing on the needs of the student. For students with disabilities, Davern (2004) found that home-school communication entries needed to be structured around the priorities of the IEP. From an analysis of other research, Hall et al. (2003) also found that home-to-school communication books were more functional when the components of these books corresponded to the student’s IEP priorities (i.e., leisure, functional academics, social skills, living skills, and behavioural foci). Differences were detected between the content entered by parents and teachers. Parents tended to report opinion and personal facts regarding their child, whereas teachers tended to give directives and provide evaluation of student progress (Bollig, 1998).

Clearly, unplanned meetings and communication books have been used to provide useful feedback on a student’s day. Many recommendations and a number of proformas have emerged from research to direct communication book practice (Hall et al., 2003). In contrast, research has provided little guidance to advise the content

of unplanned meetings, beyond stating that content can be used in conjunction with the communication book to respond to everyday issues.

### 2.3.2.3 Electronic technologies

Some research has recommended the use of electronic technology types for regular but brief communications. Alpay (2005) found that the Internet and telephone had been effective in keeping working parents informed of basic details concerning student progress at a primary school in the USA. These electronic types were used to monitor whether other types of home-school communication needed to occur (e.g., planned meetings) that allowed for more dialogue around issues of concern. Cannon (2006) found that school websites provided access to parents at a small number of schools. The content of 149 elementary school websites in a state of the USA was analysed. These websites also supplemented parent-teacher meetings, phone calls, and written correspondence. Weiss et al. (2003) concluded that the use of fax machines and the telephone helped mothers to access teachers. Mothers of kindergarten-aged children ( $N = 20$ ) were interviewed to examine the effect of hours worked and income on electronic home-school communication. There was weak relationship identified showing increased hours of work resulted in decreased contact with the school. A major limitation of electronic communication types identified by these studies (Alpay, 2005; Cannon, 2006; Weiss et al., 2003) was that they did not allow participants to gain access to feedback on the nonverbal messages such as gestures and body movements.

### 2.3.2.4 Multiple types of home-school communication

The frequent use of multiple types of home-school communication has been shown to improve parent-teacher partnerships. Decker and Majerczyk (2000) targeted eight types of intervention that addressed the decline in parental involvement in two classes at an elementary school in the USA.

1. A folder of student work and school notices were sent home once a week.
2. Student progress reports were sent home at three-week intervals.
3. A newsletter was distributed every 2 or 3 weeks to inform parents of general skills, units of study, and other information regarding classroom life.
4. A curriculum night was presented to the parents.
5. A survey was sent home to parents related to the students' work.
6. Regular unplanned meetings were conducted with individual parents.
7. Students and parents completed monthly self-selected homework activities.
8. Parent volunteers were surveyed on their assistance in the classroom.

This intervention was found to be successful in raising parental involvement, as indicated by the resulting increase in student, parent, and teacher comments and the increase in frequency with which parents assisted in the classroom. The key finding of the Decker and Majerczyk (2000) study was “that when teachers reach out to parents, parents will respond. Parents, when provided with a variety of involvement opportunities that meet personal needs and schedules, will actively support student learning” (p. 55). Communication was able to build a relationship that empowered parent participation within the “*family-centred*” model outlined by Porter (2008).

In summary, recommendations from the literature have established that parents should help to determine the types of communication so that meaningful engagement in home-school communication is realised (Epstein, 2001; Porter, 2008). The frequent use of home-school communication, employed in a way that has respected input from both the parent and the teacher, has been shown to foster discourse and positive parent-teacher partnerships (Bridgemohan et al., 2005; Davern, 2004; Hall et al., 2003; Stoner & Angell, 2006; Weiss et al., 2006).

### **2.4 Influences on home-school communication**

Studies over the period between 10 to 30 years ago, tended to identify a positive parent-teacher partnership as a key facilitator of home school communication. Many other influences were perceived as barriers to such communication. The Continuum of Parent-Teacher Relationship Styles from Porter (2008), presented in Table 1.1 is typical of recent conceptualisations of relationships between home-school communications and the type of relationships parents and teachers work within. Within this model, home-school communication can either function as a facilitator or a barrier to forming working partnerships between parents and teachers depending on how such communication is managed. Porter (2008) explained that just as home-school communication influences the quality of the parent-teacher partnership, the quality of the parent-teacher partnership influences the quality of home-school communication. In this section of the review recommendations are extracted from the parent-teacher partnership literature that identified influences on home-school communication.

### **2.4.1 Facilitators to home-school communication**

The qualities within the parent-teacher partnership that Porter (2008) and Epstein (2001) believed have helped to facilitate home-school communication have been provided previously in this review. Agreement across parent and teacher conceptions of the learning goals of the student has built a positive parent-teacher partnership, and in turn, facilitated home-school communication. Teachers have been encouraged to take the lead role in establishing these partnerships. Three further studies are reported here that provided like results and recommendations (Blue-Banning, Summers, Frankland, Nelson, & Beegle, 2004; Epstein, 2005; Rodger et al., 2004) to provide a comprehensive review of the literature.

Research in the USA has found specific strategies that teachers can use to facilitate home-school communications. Blue-Banning et al. (2004) used focus groups and interview techniques to gain an understanding of the family-professional relationship from the viewpoint of parents of children with and without disabilities. Both parent groups stressed the need for teachers to adopt the lead role in facilitating home-school communication. Seven qualities (listening, clarity, honesty, positivism, tactfulness, and openness) and two practices (resource sharing, and the coordination of information) of communication were identified as facilitators. Epstein (2005) used interviews with regular elementary school staff to evaluate the “Comprehensive School Reform” (CSR) collaborative model. Document analyses of action plans formulated by these teams also provided detail on the elements of the CSR model. Four facilitators of the parent-teacher partnership were identified,

1. Strategies should be tailored to meet the needs of the parents.
2. Communications exchanges should be positive.
3. Personal communication by educators sets the climate.
4. Teachers should respect cultural perspectives.

Across both of these studies, the suggested strategies are primarily aimed at facilitating parental input into programming for their children.

A local Queensland study by Rodger et al. (2004) identified several facilitators to home-school communication for students with ASD. Parents ( $N = 22$ ) in the study found that the use of a catalogue (i.e., the “Canadian Occupational Performance Measure”) helped them to identify goals that were relevant to their child’s learning. The adherence by teachers to four other practices was viewed by parents as facilitating home-school communication—avoidance of educational jargon, finding a mutually convenient time to interact, trying to perceive the parent’s perspective, and

active listening. There is clearly a united voice in the literature for teachers to use home-school communication as a vehicle to engage the parents of students with and without disability in collaborative decision making. In turn, the quality of the relationships that was formed improved the quality of these communications.

#### **2.4.2 Barriers to home-school communication**

Barriers to home-school communication, as identified in the literature, are now considered. Table 2.3 presents a list of the “Barriers at Home” and Table 2.4 presents a list of “Barriers at School.” Research methodology concerning barriers usually consisted of surveying stakeholders in the home and school contexts.

Table 2.3 shows that families need support to cope with emotional, family-related, cultural, and parental skill barriers (Berry & Hardman, 1998; Epstein, 2001; Hammitte & Nelson, 2001; Nassar-McMillan & Algozzine, 2001; Porter, 2008; Turnbull & Turnbull, 2001, 2006; Walker, 1989). Frequent home-school communication that is sensitive and responsive to each family’s need has been shown to address each of these barriers. The largest body of research has focused on the need for schools to support the emotional needs of families. “Feelings of inadequacy in schools”, “feeling intimidated by professionals”, and a “personal history of discrimination” have been identified in research of the perceptions of parents of students with special needs (Epstein, 2001; Hammitte & Nelson, 2001; Nassar-McMillan & Algozzine, 2001; Porter, 2008; Turnbull & Turnbull, 2001). In each of these studies, teachers have been urged to improve their home-school communication practice, which was reported to be infrequent and insensitive to individual family needs and emotions. Turnbull and Turnbull (2001) highlighted that parents of students with disabilities have different communication priorities at different stages of their lives.

Table 2.3. Identified Barriers at Home by Studies

Barriers	Berry & Hardman (1998)	Epstein (2001)	Hammitte & Nelson (2001)	Nassar-McMillan & Algozzine (2001)	Porter (2008)	Turnbull & Turnbull (2001)	Turnbull & Turnbull (2006)	Walker (1989)
<b>Emotional</b>								
Feeling inadequate in schools		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
Feeling intimidated by professionals		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
Emotions, grieving			✓		✓	✓		
Personal history of discrimination				✓	✓	✓	✓	
Preference for a passive role					✓			✓
<b>Family Characteristics</b>								
Parent's other responsibilities					✓	✓	✓	
Family Structure					✓	✓	✓	
Family Life Circle					✓	✓	✓	
Lack of resources (e.g., problems with transport)			✓		✓	✓	✓	
<b>Cultural</b>								
Roles of "teacher", "parent", and "student"		✓	✓			✓	✓	
Language challenges			✓			✓	✓	
<b>Skills</b>								
Lack of expectation of active involvement		✓					✓	✓
Lack of communication and curriculum skills	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	

Table 2.4 summarises barriers to home-school communication that seemed to originate at schools (Berry & Hardman, 1998; Epstein, 2001; Hammitte & Nelson, 2001; Hughes & McNaughton, 2001; Porter, 2008; Salend, 1998; Turnbull & Turnbull, 2001; Walker, 1989). The negative attitude perceived to be held by educators is recognised as the major barrier to parent-teacher communication at schools. The constraint of communications being time consuming was acknowledged and given particular attention in the literature. It was also acknowledged that teachers were often unaware of their responsibilities to support families of students with special needs (Berry & Hardman, 1998; Epstein, 2001; Porter, 2008).

Table 2.4. Identified Barriers at School by Studies

Barriers	Berry & Hardman (1998)	Epstein (2001)	Hammitte & Nelson (2001)	Hughes & McNaughton (2001)	Porter (2008)	Salend (1998)	Turnbull & Turnbull (2001)	Walker (1989)
<b>Attitudinal</b>								
Willingness to communicate		✓		✓	✓		✓	
The use of jargon		✓			✓			
Focus on the negative aspects of the student's development	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓		✓
Undermine parents sense of what is best for the child	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓		
<b>Logistical</b>								
Time constraints-long work hours		✓	✓		✓	✓		✓
<b>Teacher Skills</b>								
Lack of skills for assisting home-school communication		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	
Lack of training working with families other professionals	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			
<b>School-Wide Issues</b>								
Lack of administration support		✓	✓		✓			✓
Communication scheduled on what suits schools-teachers	✓	✓			✓			

An evolution of thought around barriers to home-school communication is demonstrated by briefly unpacking notions around time made available by teachers for such communication. In earlier commentary on research and recommendations for practice presented in text books, the lack of time teachers allotted to communications with parents was identified as a barrier to home-school communication (Hammitte & Nelson, 2001; Salend, 1998). More recent research has obtained more positive results on this issue. Whitaker (2007) sampled opinions from a large number of parents of students with ASD ( $N = 353$ ) in a UK county. Home stakeholders were found to be generally "satisfied" with time devoted by the teachers of their children to home-school communication. Parental perceptions were reported as positive because teachers were perceived to devote time in their busy day to offer

a range of “types” of communication to discuss issues related to the agreed “purpose” of communications (i.e., the addressing of day-to-day issues). Thus, time efficiency was perceived as a “facilitator” to home-school communications. However, some parents commented that if their child’s teacher was less committed, lack of time efficiency would work as a “barrier” to home-school communication. Participants in the Whitaker (2007) study and other recent studies that have examined home-school communications for students with ASD (Stoner et al., 2005; Spann et al., 2003; Sperry et al., 1999) were clearly focused on the benefits of such interactions.

### **2.5 Purpose of effective home-school communication**

For all students, their parents and their schools, effective home-school communications have been shown to serve a number of beneficial purposes. Such interactions have promoted the exchange of resources that have enhanced individual family and community well being (Epstein, 2001; Porter, 2008; Turnbull & Turnbull, 2001). Furthermore, communication between parents and staff has been found to positively influence children’s cognitive and social development, enhancing their educational success (Sanders, 1996; Vaden-Kiernan, 2003). Such dialogue has helped communities to celebrate the diversity of their population (Sanders, 2006). Effective home-school communications most particularly benefit the students with special needs, their families, and schools. Some distinct benefits have been identified for stakeholders of students with ASD.

#### **2.5.1 Benefits to the student**

Many positive outcomes for children with special needs have been shown to have resulted from home-school communication around primary classroom programs. Listed outcomes have included increased generalisation and maintenance of treatment gains (Kelley & McCain, 1995; Trice et al., 1983), increased continuity in specialised programming (Decker & Majerczyk, 2000), higher levels of parent satisfaction (Cox, 2005; Decker & Majerczyk, 2000), and more effective strategies for resolving problems (Epstein, 2001; Porter, 2008).

Students with ASD specifically have been shown to benefit from home-school communication (Spann et al., 2003; Sperry et al., 1999). Because of the nature of their condition, students with ASD require parents and teachers to engage in regular dialogue. ASD is a pervasive, developmental disorder described in the “Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders-Fourth Edition” (DSM-IV; The American

Psychiatric Association, 2000) as involving social and communication impairments as well as a limited range of highly individualised activities and interests. The impact of ASD adds complexity to the needs, abilities, and learning styles of the student and restricts their social interactions. Communication about the students between home and school becomes important, to help the child to share events with people in both settings and to help parents and teachers to coordinate educational information (Wood, Karvonen, Test, Browder, & Algozzine, 2004).

### **2.5.2 Benefits to the home**

Home-school communications have enabled parents of students with (Kelley & McCain, 1995; Trice et al., 1983) and without special needs (Decker & Majerczyk, 2000; Deslandes, 2006; Vaden-Kiernan, 2003) to obtain information from educators concerning the learning of their children (Nassar-McMillan & Algozzine, 2001). Communications also have transferred information about programming and disability from the school to the home. Students with special needs have been shown to develop skill areas at different rates (a) relative to other skills, (b) relative to other children, and (c) in different contexts (Doorlag, 2010; Raywid, 1993; Thousand & Villa, 1990; Westling & Fox, 1995; Wood, 1992). Regular updates on the student's performance have been shown to allow stakeholders to more closely match home learning to the needs of the student. Results from several studies about home-school communication for students with ASD have found that communications and the learning they have facilitated have empowered families to be more self-reliant in educating their child (Spann et al., 2003; Sperry et al., 1999; Stoner et al., 2005; Whitaker, 2007).

### **2.5.3 Benefits to the school**

Effective communications with families have been shown to provide school staff with an ability to address related policy mandates (Epstein, 2001; Stroggilos & Xanthacou, 2006; Turnbull & Turnbull, 2006). Effective communications with the home environment has enabled an exchange of information about the student's (a) learning styles, (b) interests, (c) reinforcement preferences, (d) progress away from the school, and (e) strengths and needs of the family (Porter, 2002, 2008; Yanok & Derubetis, 1989). The aforementioned research has established that educators need to accommodate these variables in order to maximise learning for these students at school. Benefits of home-school communication for the schools with students with ASD are similar to those for schools with students with special needs more generally.

#### **2.5.4 Mutual benefits**

Mutual benefits have been provided by frequent communications between the parents and teachers of students with and without special needs in home and school environments (Cox, 2005; Kelley & McCain, 1995; Trice et al., 1983). Improvements in the learning of students have been shown to occur if stakeholders in the home and school contexts concur to establish a common focus across contexts.

Research has shown benefits to both the homes and the schools of students with ASD from effective home-school communications. Ruble and Dalrymple (2002) focused on the personal environmental risk factors in the classroom environment of primary schools in the USA. Regular home-school communication provided the vehicle for collaboration that enabled curriculum to be developed to meet the needs of the student with ASD. These researchers found that teachers learnt from parents of children with ASD about how to address the students' needs. Specifically, home-school communication was found to be especially important because of four interrelated facets of this disorder. First, ASD was acknowledged as being a pervasive, diverse disorder, so a diagnosis did not delineate specific IEP goals and teaching strategies. Second, ASD was seen to affect an individual student's ability to transfer information from one context to another so consistency in teaching strategies was critical. Third, ASD was shown to impact on the student's ability to act as an agent to exchange information between the home and the school. Fourth, ASD was perceived as a lifelong disability that required ongoing and systematic consultation. Rodger et al. (2003) conducted an evaluation of an early intervention conducted in Queensland. These researchers found that when home-school stakeholders shared a common purpose to their communications, equal and respectful, trusting partnership had been shown to be established. In both these studies (Ruble & Dalrymple, 2002; Rodger et al., 2003), parents and teachers were satisfied that frequent communications had strengthened partnerships across the home and early intervention contexts.

Supporting students with and without special needs has been shown to face a number of barriers across both the home and school contexts. Home-school communication has helped to ensure that there is consistency in program strategies and behavioural support across learning contexts. Such communications have been shown to have addressed the complex needs of students with ASD throughout this review (Rodger et al., 2003; Ruble & Dalrymple, 2002; Sperry et al., 1999; Stoner et al., 2005; Whitaker, 2007).

## 2.6 Queensland policy directions

To contextualise this study, mention will now be made of policy documents that relate to home-school communication in Queensland. The Department of Education, Training and the Arts (DETA) has published no specific policy documents related to home-school communications for Queensland school communities. In the main, policy has focused more broadly on educational provision for all students. Three recent DETA documents have emphasised the importance of parent-professional relationships, Strategic Plan 2005-2009 (DETA, 2005a), Inclusive Education Statement (DETA, 2005b) and Curriculum Provisions CRP-PR-009: Inclusive Education (DETA, 2005c).

The Department of Education Strategic Plan 2005-2009 (DETA, 2005a) document provided a broad framework for practice in Queensland schools. Within the section “Promoting student well-being”, teachers and other educators have been reminded that they are *“increasingly required to collaborate with parents, the community sector and other agencies”* (DETA, 2005a, p. 11). Such collaboration has been seen to create *“secure and supportive school environments”* that *“maximise the capacity of students to learn while supporting their development as resilient, well-adjusted and healthy Queenslanders”* (p. 11). The notion that schools in Queensland were required to collaborate with parents corresponded with the underlying philosophy of parent-teacher partnership research that was presented earlier in this literature review. No details were provided to define what was meant by the term *“collaborate with parents.”*

Some direction as to what DETA intended by “collaboration with parents” was provided in the following two statements;

Principals are to—*“Establish open and positive relationships with parents/carers and community to improve access to programs, facilities, information and expertise.”*

Teachers are to—*“Work with parents/carers and broader community to improve student participation in social, recreational, vocational and academic pursuits.”* (Curriculum Provisions CRP-PR-009: Inclusive Education (DETA, 2005b, p. 3).

From these statements it appeared that principals were perceived to have been better placed to establish positive relationships with parents than teachers. This conceptualisation was contrary to research findings presented in the literature review

that have concentrated on the influence of parent-teacher communications on the parent-teacher partnerships.

The Inclusive Education Statement (DETA, 2005c) provided a little more detail on the DETA directive for schools and teachers to “*collaborate with parents.*” Within the “Indicators of Inclusive Education—Systems, Districts Schools” section, schools were required to build “effective partnerships” within the “school community and all agencies responsible for supporting children, young people and their families” (p. 2). Detail within the “Indicators of Inclusive Education—Teaching and Learning” appeared to suggest that home-school communication can enhance relationships; “*Teachers build bridges from the knowledge and skills that students bring from their homes and communities to the knowledge and skills they need for success in schooling*” (p. 3). This Inclusive Education Statement required Queensland teachers to take the lead role in establishing home-school communication but did not specify how this involvement this communication was to be performed.

### **2.7 Conclusion**

Research into home-school communication practice has come predominately from qualitative studies concerning parent-teacher partnerships. Positive relationships between the home and school have been shown to create contexts where the needs of individual students and their families, as well as those of schools, can be met (Blue-Banning et al., 2004; Epstein, 2005; Porter, 2008; Rodger et al., 2004). Class teachers have been called on to take the lead in establishing these relationships with each of the parents of their students. Policy statements from the educational authority of public education in Queensland, DETA, have directed teachers to strive to establish parent-teacher partnerships. DETA has not included detailed recommendations or strategies to enhance such partnerships. Research, however, has identified communication as a key facilitator of parent-teacher partnerships.

Frequent home-school communication has been identified as a useful strategy in developing positive parent-teacher partnerships (Bridgemohan et al., 2005; Davern, 2004; Hall et al., 2003; Stoner & Angell, 2006; Weiss et al., 2006). Teacher commitment to frequent home-school communications has been shown to co-occur with positive teacher attitudes to accommodating the needs of students identified by parents. Parents of primary students with ASD have been shown to have an increased need to engage in frequent dialogue with the teachers of their children

(Whitaker, 2007). Furthermore, they consider the creation of this dialogue, as the purpose of home-school communication (Rodger et al., 2004; Spann et al., 2003; Whitaker, 2007). There is some evidence that the demands of these parents for “*family-centred*” and “*family-driven*” styles of parent-teacher partnerships (Porter, 2008) are being accommodated by the teachers of their students with ASD. Consequently, these parents are satisfied with the efforts of the teachers of their children when these educators engage them in regular communications. The attitudes of teachers towards such engagement have been identified as the major determiner of whether particular factors, such as time, function as facilitators or barriers to home school communication (Falvey & Haney, 1989; Hammitte & Nelson, 2001, Turnbull & Turnbull, 2001).

Few Australian studies have been conducted to investigate home-school communication for students with ASD. It is timely to review communication practices at a small number of Queensland schools. The intent of this study, therefore, is to provide information on the range and complexity of home-school communication about students with ASD by examining practice and perceptions in two Queensland schools. The framing of localised practice was constructed from five research questions that have emerged from this review:

1. What types of communication now occur among the school community and when do these communications occur?
2. What is the purpose of these communications?
3. How satisfied are you (parents or class teachers) with the current ways that parents and teachers are communicating?
4. What are the facilitators to home school communication?
5. What are the barriers to home school communication?

The exploratory nature of this study means that its research questions needed to be framed to elicit initial information about the topic. Research questions that serve to elicit information can appear mundane and limited in their ability to investigate the topic (Stake, 1995). If researchers are aware of the variables which influence the topic provided by previous studies, they are advised to frame research questions that investigate the issues related to the topic. The search of the literature could not identify previous studies that had investigated home-school communication about students with ASD in Queensland schools, so no related issues were apparent for

investigation. Researchers in the future may be able to use the information obtained by this study to investigate issues that emerge from this and other exploratory research on this topic. The chapter that follows (Chapter 3) describes and justifies the qualitative methodologies of this two-stage study, and gives a detailed account of how the research was conducted and the methods that were used to analyse the data.

## CHAPTER 3: THE RESEARCH METHOD

### 3.1 Introduction

This chapter details the methodology used to explore home-school communication between parents and teachers of students with ASD in two primary schools in the study. A rationale for the key approach used, information on the context including the participants, an introduction to the research procedures, and explanations of how data was collected and analysed, are presented. Detailed descriptions are presented of *Leximancer 2.2* (Smith, 2002) software program and procedures used to analyse focus group and face-to-face interview conversations. The software was an emerging technology at the time that this research was conducted.

### 3.2 Rationale for the approach

The rationale for selecting an ethnomethodological (EM) theoretical perspective for the study was essentially two-fold. First, it was necessary to select a perspective that aimed to account for, and draw meaning from, everyday activity as home-school communication is an everyday social activity for parents and teachers. EM is the study of methods used in social practice (Silverman, 2002). Second, the exploratory nature of the study required a theoretical perspective that accommodated a limited understanding of the context before the research activities were conducted. Adherence to the “four core tenets of the EM approach” shows that the specific methodologies of the current study allowed for knowledge of the context to develop as the investigation proceeded (Freebody, 2003, p. 64).

Freebody’s tenets, and their application to this study, can be summarised as:

1. The understandings and practices of members of a culture are inherently and resolutely social and accomplished by multiple parties (Freebody, 2003, p. 64). The multiple meanings of voices from the conversations of parents and teachers grouped together, and from individual participants, were accounted for in this study. The Leximancer software was used to represent and analyse the focus group meetings and face-to-face interviews based on communication experiences accomplished between the home and the school.

2. Accounts of cultural practices that members provide one another are contingent on the here-and-now of the local social context (Freebody, 2003, p. 64). The individual home-school communication records of pairs of parents and teachers was used to generate quantitative data accounts on “the here and now” for this study.
3. Social reactions are socially reflective (Freebody, 2003, p. 64). Parents and teachers were asked to report, relate and respond to the daily exchanges that they had noted in individual home-school communication records during the face-to-face interviews.
4. The orderliness of commonplace actions needs to be discovered from within the settings and the participants of those actions (Freebody, 2003, p. 65). Parents and teachers were asked to reason through and then reconstruct the daily exchanges that they had recorded as they looked to future practice during the face-to-face interviews.

Framed within an EM theoretical perspective, this study tells the story of a small group of parents and teachers in daily communications. Investigations lead to an understanding of the phenomenon of home-school practices for students with ASD in regular primary schools. Consistent with the views of Bassey (1999), because this study aimed to gain an understanding of daily communications by studying the communications with a limited number of participants, a case study approach was deemed appropriate.

An exploratory two-case embedded design was used in this study. Information in two school settings was collected and analysed in order to consider the range and complexity of home-school communication about students with ASD. Parents and teachers spoke about their perceptions of home-school communication in separate focus groups, and self-reported and reflected on actual home-school communication experiences in individual interviews. It is acknowledged that this limited study might have, in the main, been specific to parents and teachers in these contexts. However, this case was expected to be similar to other cases where parents and teachers of students with ASD are available for daily communications. Findings could be of use in the development of policy and practice of home-school communication and particularly such interactions for students with ASD. Data about local practice were needed to foster improvement in parent-teacher communications.

### 3.3 Contexts and participants

School selection first involved contact with the Brisbane South district of the Department of Education, Training and the Arts in order to obtain a short list of primary schools with at least 10 students with ASD. The Executive Director Schools was requested to provide written authorisation that would enable access to relevant schools. By setting the criterion of “at least 10 students with ASD” only a small number of schools would be listed by the Executive Director for possible involvement in the study. Such a procedure reduced the complexity of further school selection procedures (Bassey, 1999; Krueger & Casey, 2000). A list of four schools that met the criteria of a primary school with at least 10 students with ASD was provided by the office of the executive. The principals of these four schools were contacted by telephone, informed of the activities of the study, and asked to provide confirmatory data about the ASD population at that school. Three emailed back within a week accepting the offer to be involved in the study. Selection of two schools from these three schools that accepted the initial offer was determined by the number of students that attended more than 80% of their day in the regular classroom.

Relationship building commenced with a subsequent telephone call to principals at the two schools. These principals were asked to nominate a staff member who would assist with the coordination of study activities. At a meeting prior to the first study activity, this contact person was asked to assemble school documents related to home-school communication. A date for the focus group meetings was established.

Both schools were in the southern suburbs on a 10km radius from the Central Business District of Brisbane. Historically, many of the dwellings were public housing and most were rented by families of lower socio economic status (SES). The property price surge of inner city of Brisbane over the previous 5 years had meant that only families of average to higher SES could now afford to purchase in the areas surrounding each school. There was difference in the cultural composition of each school. One school had a higher number of students from Middle Eastern countries with 30% of the families being of Islamic faith, several Somali refugee families had recently arrived to the school, and many families identified with Aboriginal culture. This school was named “School 1” and the other school “School 2.” Cultural composition posed challenges with home-school communication at School 1 that were not experienced at School 2.

Parents and regular classroom teachers of primary students with ASD at each of two schools were invited to participate in the data collection activities. The parents were required to be living full-time with their child, and the regular classroom teachers were required to have had a minimum of one semester's experience in teaching students with ASD. A nominated contact person from each school site would also assist in participant recruitment. The small number of schools that met the "at least 10 students with ASD" criterion required for a viable case study in the Brisbane South district made it impossible to control the constitution of the parent and teacher groups. Pseudonyms were used to refer to participants of the study, and the students that they supported, in reporting the results and formulating discussions.

The Researcher had experience as a parent of a 15-year-old-male with ASD and as a teacher of regular and special education students. He was able to draw upon the knowledge and emotional base that he had developed to connect with parents and teachers that support children with ASD on the topic of home-school communication. Having established this professional relationship, he then collaborated with parents and teachers in eliciting insights in the everyday experiences of home-school communication. As suggested by Rubin and Rubin (1995, p. 116), such a base helped the Researcher "to define a mutually acceptable research role" that is essential for EM framed investigations.

### **3.4 Research procedure**

The focus group meetings, recordings, and semi-structured interview procedures used in this study are compatible with case study methodology (Bassey, 1999; Creswell, 2003; Denzin & Lincoln, 1998; Merriam, 2009). Qualitative interviewing was selected as the primary method of collecting data on the topic because this methodology adopts an orientation that is required for EM investigation. The interviews were used to "obtain descriptions of the lived world of the interviewees with respect to interpretations of the meaning of the described phenomena" (Kvale, 1996, p. 30) being, the home-school communication. The semi-structured interview format allowed a "sequence of themes" to be probed yet allowed the flexibility to respond to the answers provided and the "stories" of the participants (Kvale, 1996, p. 124). Table 3.1 outlines the timeline for the data collection activities. Before these activities commenced, clearance was granted from the "Griffith University Human Research Ethics Committee" (reference number: CLS/24/05/HREC).

Table 3.1. Overview of the Research Design

Data Collection	Time Frame
Focus group meetings	March 2006 - April 2006
Individual home-school communication record	April 2006 - May 2006
Face-to-face interviews	May 2006 – June 2006

### **3.4.1 Focus group meetings: Rationale**

Focus groups meetings were used in this study because such procedures have been shown to be useful when (a) there is not a dense set of observations readily available about the phenomenon in the context (Morgan, 1997), and (b) answers to the “what” type questions need to be sought (Blaike, 2000). It was anticipated that the interactions among participants would provide a breadth and variation of perceptions from parents and teachers regarding home-school communication. Focus group methodology is compatible with the EM approach of this study that presumes meaning arises from within social interactions. Participants were given an opportunity to listen to group opinions before they considered their own personal viewpoints. In this way the focus group meetings functioned as an ice-breaker to a richer probing in the individual interviews.

### **3.4.2 Focus group meetings: Procedure**

Participants were provided with information sheets which detailed their involvement in each of the three research activities. Each participant was advised verbally and in writing that they were free to withdraw from this study at any time and also that confidentiality would be maintained (see Appendix A for copies of the information and consent sheets for the three activities). Each participant also completed a sheet that collected demographic information related to them or the child with ASD (see Appendix B for a copy of the demographics sheet). The research questions formed the general structure that helped to keep the participants on the topic within the time frame. Assistive probes were created to maximise the open question format established by these questions (see Appendix C for a copy of these probes). These probes were used to clarify answers, gain more information, and focus discussions on the research questions (Burton & Bartlett, 2005).

Focus group meeting data for the study was collected from four meetings (i.e., a parent and a teacher group at each of the two schools). Between two and six participants took part in each discussion. Focus group sessions commenced with the coordinator of activities at each school introducing the potential participants. The five research questions were spaced on an A4 sheet that was handed to participants. Each group was reminded of the purpose of and procedures for the study as presented in an information sheet. Components of the focus group meeting were outlined, and potential participants were reminded that their involvement was voluntary. Participants were informed that the aim of the discussion was to obtain a collective point of view in relation to the presented questions. Each focus group meeting lasted approximately 30 minutes.

### ***3.4.3 Individual home-school communication record: Rationale***

Individual home-school communication record, a quantitative data collection method, was used to inform the qualitative analyses. Parent and teacher participants collected brief frequency counts on the types of home-school communication that they engaged in over a month-long period primarily so that the face-to-face questions could be steered to these issues. These records acted as sign posts to qualitative analyses that investigated the richness of the data that said “look over here” (Freebody, 2003, p. 46). The collection of data on the home-school communication types used by pairs of parents and teachers also enabled statistical comparisons between these data and the perceptions recorded from the group and individual interviews that involved these participants.

### ***3.4.4 Individual home-school communication record: Procedure***

After the parent focus group meeting at each of the two schools, the Researcher asked for volunteers to participate in the individual home-school communication record and related face-to-face interview activities. The first two parents that volunteered at each school were selected. The teachers of the children of the four volunteer parents were then asked to also participate in these activities, so as to create parent-teacher dyads. All four teachers agreed. Recording sheets for the individual home-school communication record and face-to-face interviews activities were then distributed (see Appendix D for a copy of the “Actual home-school communications sheet”).

The individual home-school communication record activity required individual parents and teachers to generate a quantitative catalogue of the types and frequency of actual home-school communication events in which they engaged over four successive weeks. An extensive survey of the literature was used to generate a substantive listing of six communicative types (i.e., newsletter, hand written note, communication book, planned meeting, unplanned meeting, and telephone call). Participants were asked to add details of who initiated each communication event and tallies for extra communication types they used. Completed records from each school were collected before the face-to-face interview with each participant. These sheets were perused before face-to-face interviews with each of these participants were conducted. This process helped to form questions during the face-to-face interview that elaborated on the individual home-school communication record sheet detail.

### **3.4.5 Face-to-face interviews: Rationale**

The face-to-face interviews were chosen to allow meanings and perceptions that the teacher and parent participants held concerning home-school communication to be explored in greater depth. Individual interviews gave those participants who might have been reluctant to divulge their opinions in the focus group meeting, an opportunity to do so in a one-on-one situation (Patton, 2002). Face-to-face interviews required individual parent and teacher participants to reflect on actual home-school communication events so that they could provide suggestions on how to improve related practices. To assist this process, the research questions were explored using a 5Rs Framework as designed by Bain, Ballantyne, Mills, and Lester (2000). Application of the five components (reporting, responding, relating, reasoning, and reconstructing) produced increased depth of emotionally-based and cognitively-based reflection of the home-school communication records (Martschinke, Waugh, Beamish, & Davies, 2004). Table 3.2 illustrates how the research questions were sorted around the 5Rs framework for the face-to-face interviews.

Bain et al. (2000) found that when reflecting on educational experiences, teachers would tend to respond at the more basic levels of reporting or responding shown in Table 3.2. Furthermore, these researchers discovered that the content of teachers' reflections could be manipulated by the feedback provided. In the current study, precise questioning aimed to prompt the parents and teachers to reflect upon how different communication events related to each other. These participants were also

asked to reason through why they chose to use particular types of home-school communication on various occasions. As Bain et al. (2000) established use of the 5R's Framework also helped to keep these parents and teachers centred on reflecting upon the actual events that were recorded rather than merely their perceptions of home-school communication practice. Finally, this framework helped these participants to consider and adjust the way that they communicated with their home-school partner in the future. It should be noted that the 5Rs had been designed to facilitate written reflection rather than oral reflection that was used in the current study.

Table 3.2. Research Questions Sorted According to the 5Rs Framework

Research Question: Used for Focus Group	Adapted Research Questions and their Links to the 5Rs Framework: Used for Face-to-face Interviews
What types of communication now occur among the school community and when do these communications occur?	What can you report about these communication events?  Reporting (i.e., description of events)
What is the purpose of these communications?	How did these events make you feel?  Responding (i.e., emotional response to events)
How satisfied are you with the current ways that parents and teacher are communicating?	How did these events relate to your own skills, experiences, and/or understanding?
What are the facilitators to home-school communication?	Relating (i.e., emotional link between responses and prior history of affective experiences)
What are the barriers to home-school communication?	How might these events change your present home-school communication practice?  Reasoning (i.e., cognitive response to and interpretation of events)  How might these events change your future home-school communication practice and that of other school community members?  Reconstructing (i.e., cognitive analysis of impact and implications of events)

Inevitably, researchers play a larger part in the construction of meaning in participant-researcher pairings than they do in focus group interviewing where there are more participants (Gay & Airasan, 1999). The parent and teacher participants in this study were asked to bring forward the issues that were relevant to their school community in the focus group meeting, before the Researcher played a larger part in shaping the discourse in the one-on-one, face-to-face interviews. This focus group-individual interview sequence helped to offset the effect of researcher influence on data collection.

### ***3.4.6 Face-to-face interviews: Procedure***

A 45° angle seating position was used to avoid either face-to-face confrontation or side-by-side disengagement (Burton & Bartlett, 2005). Each interview commenced with each of the eight interviewees (i.e., two teachers and two parents from each of the two schools) being referred to the record of home-school communications that they had previously compiled. Two semi-structured scripts were used to link these records of actual home-school experience to previous, present, and future experiences using the five research questions. The questions on the right hand side of Table 3.2 were asked during each of these interviews. This procedure maintained the integrity of the 5 R's approach of reflecting on and reconstructing practice (Bain, et al., 2000). In addition, the Researcher referred to the assistive probes used during the focus group meetings (see Appendix C for a copy of these probes). In this way, individual parents and teachers were questioned fully to build upon and tease out their initial responses. The interviews were each of approximately 30 minutes duration.

### ***3.4.7 Pilot of the three research activities***

Before the focus group meeting, home-school record, and face-to-face interview activities occurred, a pilot of these three activities was conducted. A small group of teachers with similar demographic characteristics to those at the two primary schools in this study voluntarily participated in these activities. This pilot was conducted at the primary school where the researcher taught, which was located within the Brisbane South district. Six classroom teachers participated in the focus group meeting and one in both the record and face-to-face interview activities. All six of the early years teachers at this school had agreed to stay for a further 30 minutes after a Preschool-Year 3 team meeting to participate in the focus group pilot. This pilot was conducted in March 2006. Five of these teachers had past experience supporting a

student with ASD as classroom teachers and the other had supported a younger child with ASD in a childcare centre. The teacher who agreed to be involved in all three activities was the only educator at this school who at the time was supporting a student with ASD in her classroom. The pilot of these activities provided insight into five key issues related to useability. The conclusions suggested by the pilot were:

1. Research and additional questions were able to elicit useful information that related to the purpose of the study.
2. A relatively longer length of time needed to be devoted to earlier questions in the focus group meetings and face-to-face interviews.
3. The time required to generate and analyse the transcripts of the focus group meetings and face-to-face interviews was feasible.
4. The individual home-school communication record activities sheet was easy to use.
5. Conversations in the focus group and home-school communication record legitimately informed the questioning in the face-to-face interviews.

No adjustments needed to be made to the planned activities.

### **3.5 Data collection**

Responses to the focus group meetings and face-to-face interviews were collected using an audio tape recorder. The records were later transcribed using “Dragon Naturally Speaking Software 8” (Nuance Communication, 2005) into individual “Microsoft Word” files. That is, the audio record of the parents’ and teachers’ verbal responses, were re-spoken and the Dragon software used to generate a text file that was then edited. Individual home-school communication record sheets were collected from the four parent and four teacher participants of that activity.

### **3.6 Planned approach to data analysis**

The voice of the Researcher was legitimately present in the research reported in the study. Also present were the voices of the participants, and that of DETA policy embedded in the register in which the teachers spoke. Whilst each person’s voice was individual and distinct, it was also “polymorphic”, that is, embedded in culture and in relationship (Gilligan, Spencer, Weinberg, & Bertch, 2003). The authenticity of the data in this research comes from “genuine attention, genuine reasonableness [and] genuine responsibility” (Lonergan, 1971, p. 265) in the judgment and

articulation of individual voices within the polymorphic voices of the parent and teacher participants.

The researcher made a further methodological decision to reduce the likelihood that his constructs around home-school communications influenced the recordings and perceptions of the parents and teachers in this study. He did not introduce types of home-school communication to the participants. During each of the four focus group meetings, additional probe questions were used (see Appendix C). The researcher selected among these probes to ensure that the parents or teachers were asked to consider a type of home-school communication only after one of the group members had introduced it. The starter list of types provided for participants for the record activity was amended to include only those types that were mentioned during the focus group meetings. Also, during the face-to-face interviews, additional probe questions were orientated around the types of home-school communication that the parent or teacher had recorded.

The focus group meeting, individual home-school communication records, and face-to-face interview data of this study was strengthened by verification from academics and teaching colleagues. The strength of the data set was built by the triangulation accomplished from comparison of the data across two schools, two different participant types (parents and teachers of primary students with ASD) and three data strategies (Patton, 2002; Stake, 1995). All data collected was maintained in a database, to offer a strong audit trail so that an independent observer may be able to follow the same trail of evidence and come to like conclusions (Bassey, 1999; Yin, 2003).

Separate and combined content analyses (CA) of the focus group meeting and complementary face-to-face interview transcripts were used to identify key categories and themes of responding (Silverman, 2002). Participants were asked the research questions directly during the focus group meetings whereas these research questions were probed using a 5Rs Framework (Bain et al., 2000) during the face-to-face interview. Analyses of the face-to-face interview conversation did not divide this data into the five segments of the 5Rs approach (reporting, responding, relating, reasoning, and reconstructing). Instead, consistency in analyses across the data collected in the study was maintained by scrutinising both the focus group meeting and face-to-face interview conversations against the five research questions. This

determination allowed for the development of converging lines of inquiry (Yin, 2003). Descriptive analyses were used to interpret the information of the individual home-school records.

It was planned that Leximancer-generated maps and concept lists would first be used to identify the themes and major concepts that parents and teachers utilised in responding to the research questions. Then, manual analysis would be used to locate pertinent text samples that reinforced the results generated by the Leximancer analysis. The maps and list would provide the background context and the text samples would offer the foreground accounts of the data.

### **3.7 Leximancer: Instrument of data analysis**

The software program “Leximancer 2.2” (Smith, 2002) was used to represent the relationships and frequencies of concepts across the focus group meeting and face-to-face interview conversations. Leximancer is data-mining software that creates a series of automatic analyses of responses, by converting them into 2-dimensional concept maps and word frequency lists. The conversations of the parent and teacher participants were entered into word files. Each data set was content analysed to locate the main themes and their respective relationships. Leximancer analysed the interview scripts to generate a list of key lexical terms on the basis of word frequency and co-occurrence. Davies and Beamish (2009, p. 251) explained the next step in Leximancer analysis; “A thesaurus builder then ‘learnt’ a set of classifiers from the text by extending the seed word definitions into weighted term classifiers, referred to as *concepts*.” The interview scripts were then classified using these concepts to generate a concept index for these scripts, and a concepts co-occurrence matrix. This matrix was generated by calculating the relative co-occurrence frequencies of the concepts. Each matrix was in turn used to create a two-dimensional concept map through a clumping algorithm (Smith, 2002). Concept maps were generated for the whole and different combinations of the parent and the teacher interview conversations. Figure 3.1 shows the concept map for all of the focus group conversations combined into one script.

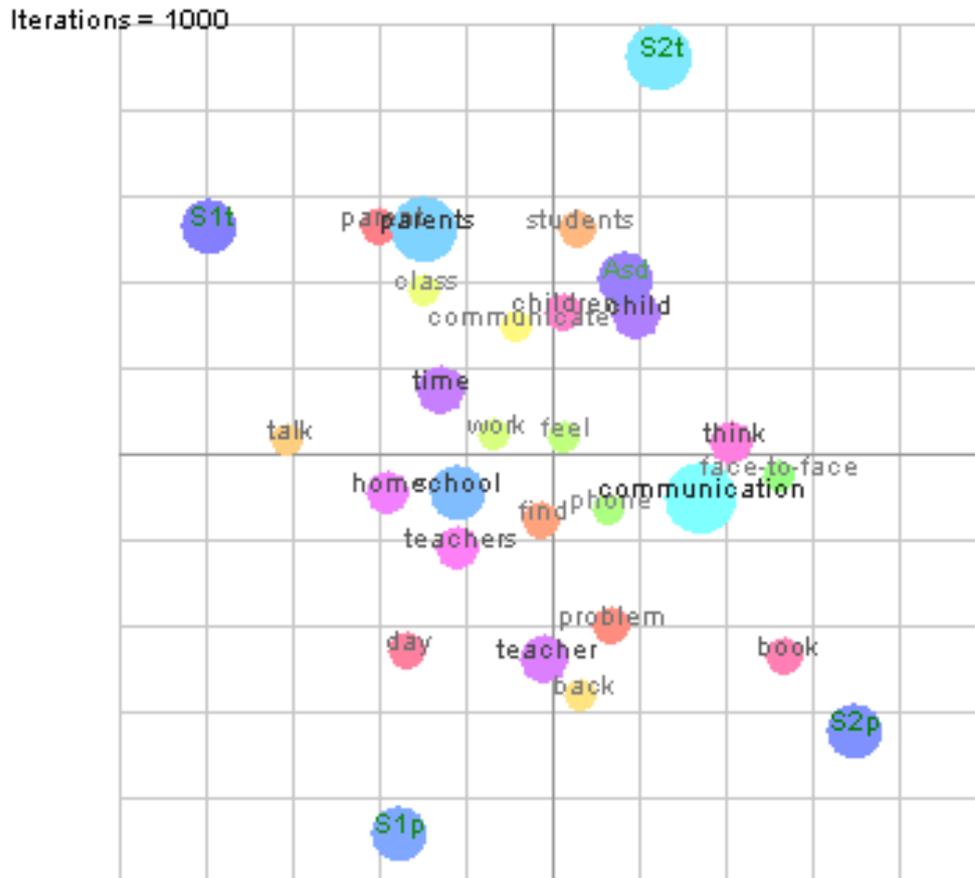


Figure 3.1. Leximancer map of parent and teacher voices, with 100% of concepts showing: Focus groups.

### 3.7.1 Further things to know about Leximancer

The x and y axes on Leximancer concept maps have no particular meaning. Unlike optimal scaling (Shadish, Cook, & Campbell, 2002) where these axes reflect factors, axes are used in Leximancer maps purely to provide an arbitrary framework to allow analyses of the relative positions of the concepts. The concepts can be rotated around the x and y space to anchor a key concept or concepts in the same position on a number of concept maps that are being compared. Such adjustments make it possible to look across a number of concepts maps that represent conversations from like activities. In this research, concepts maps for the focus interviews were rotated so that the concept “home” was located on a horizontal line to the left of the concept “school.” The concept maps for the face-to-face interviews were rotated so that the concept “time” was consistently placed on the x-axis to the left of the centre point. It was then possible to interpret the data in terms of which concepts appeared in the left half, right half or upper or lower sectors of each map for the group and face-to-face interviews.

Distances between concepts on Leximancer maps do not show a direct linear relationship. Leximancer aims to identify many concepts and their relationships with each other within a document. In this research, Leximancer analysed three sentences at a time or, if there was a change of speaker within those three sentences, the program looked at the contribution of one speaker at a time. These settings were recommended for scrutinising interview conversations (Smith, 2002). The entire document was examined in those small segments and the concepts were produced by analysing the frequency of words within those small segments using a clumping algorithm (Smith, 2002). When all the concepts were examined using this algorithm, some concepts fell together and others fell away from one another. The distances that concepts are relative to each other on the concept maps are representative but not measurable.

Representation in a Leximancer map (see Figure 3.1) is based on brighter and larger dots for concepts used in higher frequency, closer positioning of dots for concepts used closer to other concepts in the conversations, and more centrally collected concepts for those that are most critical to the script meaning (Smith, 2002). Also, more frequently occurring concepts shown on a map are of a generally darker colour. Tagging shows the different perspectives of the parent and teacher at the two schools. The identification of each conversation from the participants of the four focus group meetings and the identification of the individual parents and teachers during the eight face-to-face interviews were made possible by such tagging. Table 3.3 details the tag codes that were used for each participant in these two activities. The distance between tags on the map indicated the extent to which the content of different participants agrees or varies.

The Researcher played a limited role in determining which concepts appeared on the Leximancer maps and concept lists. As Smith (2002) explained, the automated processes of Leximancer significantly reduce threats of researcher bias. Table 3.4 presents a 5-step decision series that reports how Leximancer was used to analyse the data from the study. The Researcher made only three decisions in this series for both the focus group meetings and face-to-face interviews. First, he decided which nonsense and repeated words to omit. Second, he reasoned that tagging had not distorted the maps representation of the data of either of the two interviews. Third, he determined that a few synonymous and redundant concepts should be merged or omitted.

Table 3.3. Tag Codes for the Interview Activities

School	Participant Type	Tag
<i>Focus Group Meetings</i>		
1	Parent group	S1p
1	Teacher group	S1t
2	Parent group	S2p
2	Teacher group	S2t
<i>Face-to-face Interviews</i>		
1	Parent in dyad 1	S1p1
1	Parent in dyad 2	S1p2
1	Teacher in dyad 1	S1t1
1	Teacher in dyad 2	S1t2
2	Parent in dyad 1	S2p1
2	Parent in dyad 2	S2p2
2	Teacher in dyad 1	S2t1
2	Teacher in dyad 2	S2t2

Table 3.4. Decision Series for Leximancer Processing for Results Reporting

Step	Explanation	Purpose
1. Data cleaning in preparation for map generation	The removal of nonsense and repeated words occurred.	To prepare text for Leximancer analysis.
2. Comparison of untagged and tagged maps	These maps were generated and then compared.	To assess the extent that tagging distorted the data.
3. Initial analysis of tagged maps	The clustering of concepts on these maps was compared.	To analyse the relationships among the concepts used.
4. Substitution and merging of concepts	The synonyms and unimportant words were removed.	To capture the true meaning of the conversations.
5. Subsequent analysis of tagged maps	Similar processes to Steps 2 were used.	To adjust the analyses after Step 3 processes.
6. Text browsing of transcripts	Texts were browsed and sampled.	To provide additional interrogation of the text.

### 3.8 Actual approach to data analysis

It had been anticipated that the Leximancer analyses would have elicited at least six concepts that related to each of the five research questions from both the focus group meeting and face-to-face interview conversations. The combined interview texts for both of these activities were perused at the initial data cleaning stages in the decision series for Leximancer processing (see Table 3.4). Text segments were located that related to each of the research question. However, as Table 3.5 shows, only five concepts (“talk”, “book”, “face-to-face”, “phone”, and “time”) were identified from the focus group meetings and only three from the face-to-face interviews (“talk”, “book”, and “time”).

Table 3.5. Concepts Identified by Leximancer Software from the Activities

	Focus Group Meetings	Face-to-face Interviews
Research Question		
1 ( <i>types</i> )	“talk”, “book”, “face-to-face” and “phone”	“talk”, and “book”
2 ( <i>purpose</i> )	Nil	Nil
3 ( <i>satisfaction</i> )	Nil	Nil
4 ( <i>facilitators</i> )	Nil	Nil
5 ( <i>barriers</i> )	“time”	“time”

The clumping algorithm (Smith, 2002) used in Leximancer did not elicit a sufficient number of concepts for automatic analyses to be relied on as the primary form of content analysis of the interview scripts. Consequently, the decision was made that results from the text browsing would be reported before the results for the concept maps and concept lists. This modification allowed for the key findings that related to the five research questions to be presented at the front of each of the two results chapters. Leximancer map and concept list analyses then followed. These analyses provided findings on the concepts that parents and teachers drew upon to report on the limited types of home-school communication that they used or perceived as being used at their school.

### 3.9 School policy documents

School policy documents from the two primary schools involved in this study were analysed. The aim of this procedure was to see if there was written evidence that state policy directions were considered in formulating internal policy on home-school communication. School 1 personnel were unable to provide any written documentation that related to home-school policy for that school when such detail was requested.

The relevant sections of two documents, provided by the coordinator of activities at School 2, are cited in Box 2.1. The document “Policies and Documents outlining Special Education Unit (SEU) Communication: Parent Teacher Information Evening” was written by the Head of Special Education Services (HOSES) for an audience of parents of students with ASD. Teaching staff were expected to be familiar with the contents of “Staff Handbook: School Organisation and Management.” The principal composed this document. The content of the two documents focused on the routines and language that was used to maintain relationships with the parents.

Limited routines are outlined in the two document segments from School 2 presented in Box 5.1. The four parent-teacher dyads of this study were provided with a starter list of six types of communication to be considered as they recorded communication events. Written policy at School 2 outlined some routines for three of these types (i.e., newsletter, communication book, planned meeting). Broad guidelines were provided on the minimum frequency that each of these types of home-school communication ought to occur. It was stated that newsletters were published every fortnight, communication books (termed Keeping In Touch or KIT book at School 2) be used when there is a need, and planned meetings (termed “parent interviews” at School 2) be organised by teachers at least once a year. Guidelines on the content for these communication types were also limited. The only guideline related to the content of the newsletter directed that coordinators of the key learning areas and extra curricula activities were asked to make contributions. In preparation for parent interviews teachers were directed to prepare evidence of the progress of students. No written policy was forwarded on the content of the KIT book.

### **Policies and Documents outlining SEU Communication: Parent Teacher Information Evening**

Confidentiality: Please do not allow what you see in the Unit (to) be a topic of conversation outside this setting. This can inadvertently cause prejudices against students, the unit and the school. Please discuss concerns you have about your child with the appropriate SEU teacher or myself. We request that you do not discuss your child's progress with a teacher aide as this puts them in an uncomfortable situation and they are not qualified to offer advice on programs... If the SEU teacher you wish to see is not available please leave a message and they will get back to you as soon as possible to arrange a suitable time. Please contact the SEU teacher to arrange a meeting. This can be done by phone before 8:45am or via the KIT book.

### **Staff Handbook: School Organisation and Management**

It is the aim of the school to foster a close liaison within the general community and with the parents of the children who attend the school, by way of improving communication between the school and the wider community. Teachers can do a great deal to assist the Principal achieving these aims through their general conduct within the community, by their friendliness and willingness to assume an active role within the community, and by treating parents with the utmost dignity and respect no matter how tough the going might be. On occasion, there will be school-community functions, such as Parent-Teacher nights, barbeques, school carnivals, concerts etc. If at all possible teachers are expected to be in attendance at these functions and to assist in their orderly functioning.

#### *Keep in Touch Book (KIT book)*

The KIT book will be used by teachers and parents to correspond with each other when necessary... the children will take the KIT book home and return it to school on a daily basis.

#### *Parent Interviews*

Parents are invited to the school at the end of Term 1 to discuss the progress of their children and at other times when necessary. At times these interviews will be with the Principal and at other times with teachers. On all occasions, interviews will be on an arranged basis. Teachers are to conduct these interviews on a businesslike basis and are to be thoroughly prepared prior to the interview with examples of the pupil's work, results of tests etc readily available.

#### *Irate Parents*

From time to time, teachers may have dealings with irate parents and these can be emotional disturbing. Treat the parent with courtesy and refer the parent to the Principal. Do not attempt to enter into an argument with the parent. Remember also that many times this type of parent usually has a legitimate complaint and these are best handled by the Principal. Teachers who work within the guidelines as set down in this Policy are assured the full support of the Principal.

#### *Newsletters*

To keep the parent informed of what is happening in the school and the community, the Principal publishes a fortnightly Newsletter which is given to all families. Coordinators of key learning areas and extra curricula activities will be asked to contribute to the newsletter on a regular basis.

#### *Teacher/Parent Meetings*

Teachers are expected to conduct at least one Parent-Teacher Meeting each year. These are designed to show parents exactly what is happening in the educational programme that you have planned for the class, and to give parents some idea of the strategies that you have planned to use. The timing of these meetings will be at the discretion of the Principal and the teacher. However, a parent-teacher night will be negotiated for all classes within the first month of the year.

#### *Parents Visits to Classrooms*

At this school, an open day is held during Education Week each year. Parents are invited to join the staff for morning tea after they visit their children's classrooms to join in organised activities.

#### *Out of School with Parents*

It is a common occurrence for parents to raise matters that occur in the school outside the school, and teachers are often asked to comment on matters of school policy, other teachers, and matters regarding the school.

Teachers are asked to treat this type of parent with courtesy but on no account to enter into discussions that might be detrimental to the school. If parents raise complaints, ask them to present

Box 2.1. Written documentation of policy on home-school communication: School 2.

Teachers at School 2 were instructed to develop a “close liaison” with “the general community and parents” with the terms “dignity”, “respect”, and “courtesy” used to detail the manner in which parents were to be approached. Communication from staff to the home and other sectors of the school community were perceived to promote community liaison. Findings from the research literature endorsed the notion of teachers creating a “close liaison with the general community and parents” (Davern, 2004; Dunst & Dempsey, 2007). However, some of the language used could be construed as being less than respectful. The placement of adjectives before the term “parent” (i.e., “irate parent and “this type of parent”) encouraged teachers to categorise parents (as “this type” or “not this type”; as “irate” or “not irate”).

### **3.10 Conclusion**

This chapter has detailed the methodologies used in this two-stage study. The chapter that follows (Chapter 4) presents results obtained from the parent and teacher focus group meetings during the first stage of the study. Chapter 5 presents the home-school communication record and face-to-face interview data from individual parents and teachers reflections obtained during the second stage of the study.

## CHAPTER 4: RESULTS FROM GROUP PERSPECTIVES

### 4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents results from the first stage of the study voiced at four focus group meetings (i.e., a parent group and a teacher group at each of these two schools). A sequence of data presentation logically evolved and was informed by the results from this data set. Leximancer software was used to automatically generate these results. Text browsing identified actual words spoken by the parent and teacher participants that related to each of the five research questions. Then concept maps and concept lists representations illuminated general result patterns in the conversations within and across the focus groups meetings. The range and variety of opinions on perceived home-school communication practice was established.

### 4.2 Participants

The 7 parents shared demographic characteristics with each other, and the 11 teachers shared demographic characteristics with each other. These characteristics worked to standardise the conversations of each of the parents, and similarly, that of each of the teachers, across the focus group meetings at the two schools. Analysis of the demographic information sheets that were completed by each of the participants identified these characteristics (see Appendix B for a copy of the demographics sheets).

Each of the parents (a) were female, (b) spoke English at home, (c) identified “Australian” as their culture, and (d) received only “infrequent” respite and/or written newsletter support from other agencies. Face-to-face communication with the teacher of each student with ASD was facilitated by the demographic features that all parents lived close to their school and transported their child by car each day. All 11 teachers recorded that they had no outside agency support for their teaching of the student with ASD. Because of the relatively high number of students with ASD at each school, Brisbane South district of DETA had placed Special Education Unit (SEU) specialist staff to provide such support. The criteria of the teachers having at least six months prior experience supporting a student with ASD ensured that teachers had previously supported at least one other student with ASD.

Table 4.1 and Table 4.2 show demographic characteristics whenever such details varied within and across the parent and teacher groups. The 7 parents and 11 teachers that were involved in the focus group meetings supported students with ASD of different age groups. Table 4.1 shows that the participants from School 1 supported students across the seven years of primary schooling. These students were between of 5 years and 13 years of age. The youngest of the students at School 2 was in Year 3 (see Table 3.2).

Parents were of a similar age. The youngest of these participants was 35 years of age and the eldest was 47 years of age. These parents shared the characteristic of supporting both a student with ASD, and a school aged student without this disability. Parent 2, Parent 4 and Parent 5 at School 2 would have found it relatively more difficult to communicate in face-to-face communication with the teacher of her child with ASD due to work commitments.

Each of the 11 teachers supported more than one student with ASD during the data collection activities. This characteristic was a distinctive demographic of this study. Few Queensland primary classrooms support multiple numbers of students with ASD. Table 4.1 and Table 4.2 show that the 11 teachers were of different ages. The spread of ages of the teachers did not show patterns distinctive to either of the two schools. Three teachers were aged in their twenties, six were aged in their thirties, and two were aged in their forties. Both male and female teachers participated in the focus group meetings, with both genders represented at each of the two schools. Each of the teachers held at least a bachelor level degree qualification. One teacher from School 1 had successfully completed special education studies during her pre-service education. This teacher was the coordinator of activities for this study at that school. She made minimal contributions to the focus group meetings.

Table 4.1. Participant Demographics for School 1 Focus Groups

Demographic	Participant					
	1	2	3	4	5	6
<i>Parents</i>						
Age	35 years	40 years				
Gender	Female	Female				
Other school aged children	1	1				
Hours of paid work each week	0	0				
<i>Teachers</i>						
Age	49	25	24	35	35	30
Gender	Female	Male	Male	Female	Female	Female
Highest qualifications	G Dip (Com T)	B Ed	B Ed	B Ed	G Cert (Leader)	B Ed (Sp Ed)
Year level currently teaching	1/2	4/5	3	6/7	6/7	4/5
Students with ASD in their class	2	3	2	3	3	3

Table 4.2. Participant Demographics for School 2 Focus Groups

Demographic	Participant				
	1	2	3	4	5
<i>Parents</i>					
Age	47 years	38 years	40 years	35 years	39 years
Gender	Female	Female	Female	Female	Female
Other school aged children	1	2	1	1	2
Hours of paid work each week	0	25	0	25	20
<i>Teachers</i>					
Age	23	38	35	40	35
Gender	Female	Male	Female	Female	Female
Highest qualifications	B Ed	B Sc	M Ed, B A	B Ed	B A
Year level currently teaching	4	6	5	7	3/4
Students with ASD in their class	3	2	2	2	2

### 4.3 Focus group conversations overview

Table 4.3 presents the sequence of analysis of group conversations across text browsing, concept mapping, and concept listing. This sequence logically evolved and was informed by the results in each previous step in this sequence. In step one, each of the parent and teacher group meetings provided details that related to each of the five research questions. In step two, highly frequent core concepts are centrally placed on the concept maps of the four conversations combined. The next two steps illuminate natural separations of concepts away from the core concepts to present results of the contrast in conversations of the different stakeholders.

Table 4.3. Sequence of Analysis of the Focus Group Conversations

Step	Purpose	Summary of Results
1. Text browsing of the meeting conversations	To identify details in the focus group conversations that related to the research questions.	The parents and teachers of each of the focus group meetings spoke to each of the five research questions.
2. Two tagged concept maps of the combined parent and teacher (viz., showing 50% and 100% of concepts)	To illuminate the broad result patterns in the focus group meetings.	Frequent occurring core concepts were centrally placed on these maps. All conversations were focused on the topic.  Some natural separations of concepts occurred away from the core concepts and in close relationships to the tags from parents and teachers at both schools.
3. One tagged concept map of the combined parent and one concept map of the combined teacher conversations	To unpack relationships, similarities, and differences in the conversations.	Differences emerged in conversation on the basis of school.
4. Concept lists of the four groups combined, the two parent and the two teacher focus groups combined and separated	To help further interpret the concept maps and to establish links to the research questions by examining frequency counts.	The parent and teachers were focused on the topic but there were group differences.  Concepts of the parents' and teachers' conversations across the two schools referred directly to only two of the five research questions; Research question 1 (types), and Research question 5 (barriers).

#### 4.4 Text browsing

Text browsing was used to identify the perceptions that the parents and teachers had formed in response to each of the five research questions. The focus group meeting scripts provided detail on the types (Research question 1), purposes (Research question 2), satisfactions (Research question 3), facilitators (Research question 4), and barriers (Research question 5) to home-school communication at the two schools. Representative sampling captured the richness of the conversations of the parents and teachers from the syntactic and semantic complexity of the text.

##### 4.4.1 Types of home-school communication

Different types of home-school communication were discussed by parent and teacher focus participants at the two schools. The parents at School 1 focused their conversation on the face-to-face type, whereas the parents at School 2 focused their conversation on the communication book type. The words of a parent at School 1, *“If we didn't have that face-to-face meeting and had to rely on the communication book, I don't think it would work”* contrasted with those of a parent at School 2, *“The way that I communicate, is the communication book and I find that very effective.”* The parents at School 1 consistently agreed that face-to-face communication was better than other types. Although support was given by most parents at School 2 for the use of the KIT book, half the parents qualified their support for this type of home-school communication. The same parent at School 2 quoted above went on to report, *“However, if I feel that it's too long-winded, my issue or my concern, I will come up and visit, as basic as it sounds, it works very well. So that's my main thing.”*

Text segments from the teachers referred to relatively more frequent use of face-to-face types of communication at School 1 and relatively more frequent use of written types at School 2. This pattern of results was also evidenced in the focus group conversation of the parents presented above. The teachers at School 1 were keen to be involved in more face-to-face home-school communication. One teacher explained, *“I think talking to the parents face-to-face is something that I would like to do more. With conversation flowing, going backwards and forwards, you know that what you say cannot be taken the wrong way like a letter can be.”*

Different use of the communication book was reported at these two schools. In every incidence that the School 1 parents and teachers spoke about this concept, they were discussing why the communication “book” was not used at that school. By contrast, for every incidence where School 2 parents or teachers referred to the concept “book”, they were referring to the KIT book being used. The words of one of the School 2 teachers are representative of focus group discussion in which she participated, “(Home-school communication is about)... *daily contact, going home, a record going home, with the book.*” However, it also appeared the SEU teachers did most of the KIT book records at this school. As another teacher reported, “*If there has been an incident in the class and I'm struggling to get to write something down in the Kit book, the Special Education Unit (SEU) Teacher says, 'I'll do it', and the next thing you know there's this page long letter, I get to check it before it goes.*”

#### **4.4.2 Purpose of home-school communication**

The main purpose of home-school communication, as perceived by the parents and teachers at each of the two schools, appeared to be to address the day-to-day social challenges for each child with ASD. A parent at School 2 explained, “*His learning level is only low, so we don't have so much of that problem (having to talk to school about curriculum learning) because he is not capable of that, so it is more about getting along, day-to-day things, even if he has had a bad night, I let his teacher know, because he would be more drowsy and it will be harder for him to learn, all things like that.*” Parents from School 1 also perceived the purpose of home-school communication was addressing daily living problems: “*The teacher might see a problem or you might see a problem, but if you don't communicate everyone's not going to know what is going on. You'll see behaviour and not know why.*”

Teachers at School 1 also perceived the purpose of home-school communication was to address the day-to-day social challenges for each child with ASD. The comments of one teacher at that school were representative: “*Most of the parents get in touch with us (face-to-face) like come to see us if they have a problem.*” The words of one teacher from School 2 summed up how her peers perceived the purpose of home-school communication at her school: “*So as far as informing the parent, some of the parents have a very good understanding of the children's condition. I feel like I'm the dunce in the triangle.*” For the School 2 teachers, home-school communication was as much about eliciting information from parents as it was providing information to them.

#### **4.4.3 Satisfaction with home-school communication**

Parent and teacher participants were generally satisfied with home-school communication practices at their respective school. One parent at School 1 stated, *“If there was a problem, I call a spade a spade anyway and I expect the same back from them. And I think that's what I get.”* Parents at School 1 were satisfied with how the main type of communication at their school, face-to-face communication, was working. Parents at School 2 were generally satisfied with the KIT book usage at their school. A representative comment was made by one parent at this school, *“I find that the communication book works quite well.”* Two School 2 parents each identified influences that qualified their satisfaction with the KIT book use. For one parent, face-to-face meetings needed to be used in conjunction with the KIT book, *“We have communication book as well, but if we have any problems, we make sure that we ‘run into’ the teacher.”* Another stated, *“Of course you have hiccups of the child not wanting to bring it (the communication book) home, because it has something bad in it.”*

The teachers at School 1 qualified their satisfaction with current home-school communication practice: *“I feel it depends on the parent. I'm happy to try things but if it's not picked up from the other side, why should we be bothered, just wasting our time.”* Teachers at School 2 were satisfied that the SEU teachers were accepting responsibility for home-school communication. The following text was typical of their conversation: *“I love it when my SEU teacher gets involved, takes charge and writes that note or makes that call home.”*

#### **4.4.4 Facilitators to home-school communication**

Selecting the time of day that suits the teacher was recognised as the main facilitator by parents at both schools. A parent from School 1 stated, *“It's probably related to what suits that teacher”,* and a parent at School 2 stated, *“You need to pick your moment as well. At 3 o'clock, there are lots of parents there picking up their kids and a lot of them will want to say ‘How's Johnny's day been’, and they will just be making general chitchat so you've got to pick your moment when the teacher is free and not surrounded by parents so you've got that private minute to speak to her.”*

Teachers at both schools believed that forming an open relationship with parents was the key facilitator. A teacher from School 1 reasoned, *“I think it's the school too. If parents feel comfortable with the whole school community, they feel comfortable*

*coming to the school, comfortable knowing the teacher, they might have had other experiences with the teacher, the teacher has been around for awhile, once they know you as a person, that is what it's about."* A teacher from School 2 succinctly summed up the situation, *"Probably mutual respect between parent and teacher."*

#### **4.4.5 Barriers to home-school communication**

Barriers to home-school communication were identified in the focus group conversation around the concept of "time." Parents and teachers at both schools were in strong agreement that time was a major challenge to communication. However, the two stakeholder groups held different opinions regarding who was inconvenienced by time-based issues.

Parents at School 1 and School 2 recognised time as a barrier but were satisfied with how the teachers of their children worked within time constraints. A parent at School 1 stated, *"It's the time constraints with the teacher's working day. Most teachers don't mind you coming along, and just as long as you are short and sharp with the information that you give and you don't waffle on, they're allowable."* A parent at School 2 provided a more elaborate response that makes suggestions for future practice: *"In a perfect world, teachers would have more time and perhaps at the end of the day before the bell rings at three o'clock, the teachers aide or someone could come in and take over so that parents would have access to the teacher, just like a few minutes before the bell rings, not so much in every class, but in a class with a lot of special needs kids, that's a perfect world so that is not going to happen."*

Teachers at both schools perceived time as a barrier affecting the involvement of both parents and teachers. The comment by one teacher at School 2 was representative of the conversations of teachers at both schools: *"Time is the problem. It's good if you've got parents who have the time to talk. The time issue is an all-important issue for teachers. You are limited to the amount of time before and after school."*

#### **4.5 Concept Mapping**

To facilitate interpretation of the focus group concept maps, two content processing decisions were applied to all of the Leximancer maps presented in this chapter. First, tags were inserted as markers for contributions of participants in the four focus group

meetings (School 1 parent group “S1p”, School 1 teacher group “S1t”, School 2 parent group “S2p”, School 2 teacher group “S2t”). Appendix E provides a comparison of an untagged map and a tagged map, which shows that the data are not migrating under the influence of such tagging (i.e., virtually unchanged positioning of the concepts). Second, the term “home” was rotated to a location on a horizontal line to the left of the term “school.” Appendix F provides a precise description of the Leximancer settings applied to focus group maps.

#### 4.5.1 Parent and teacher conversations

Figure 4.1 allows the most frequent concepts and their relationships to be seen, and Figure 4.2 shows a map of all concepts, in conjunction with tagging. These maps were compared to determine an overview of relationships among concepts. Natural clusters formed around the concepts used in the focus group conversations.

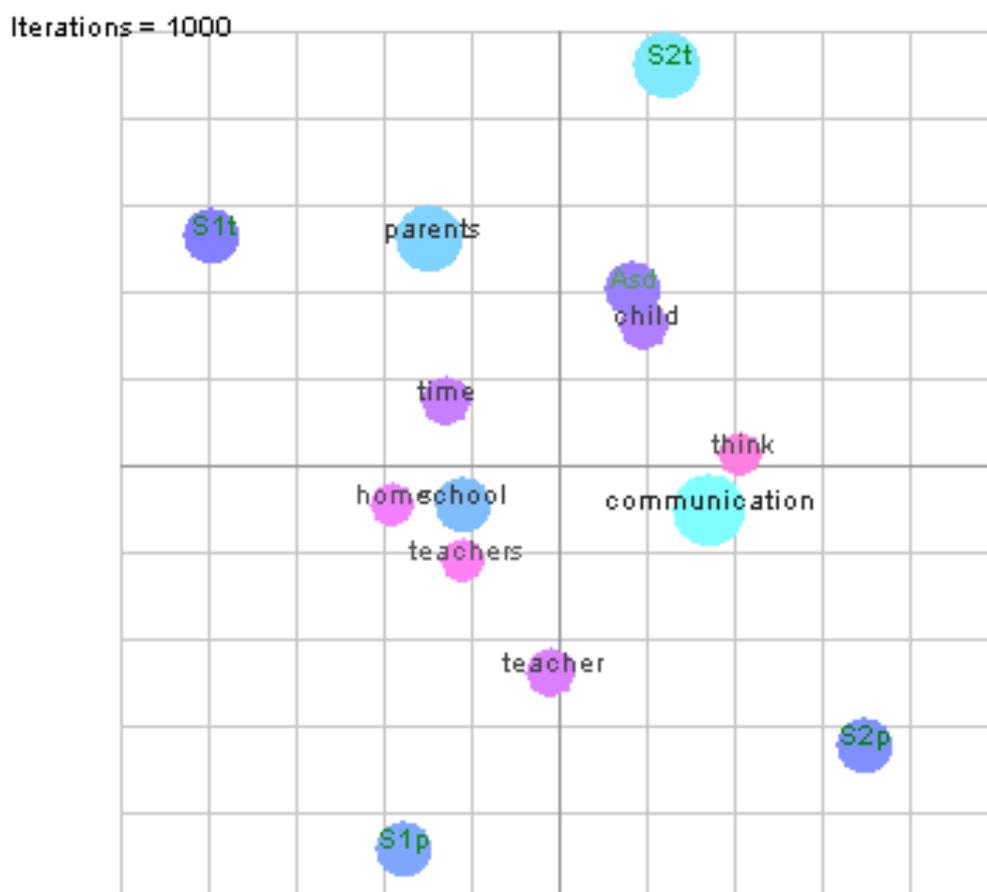


Figure 4.1. Leximancer map of parent and teacher voices, with 50% of concepts showing: Focus groups.

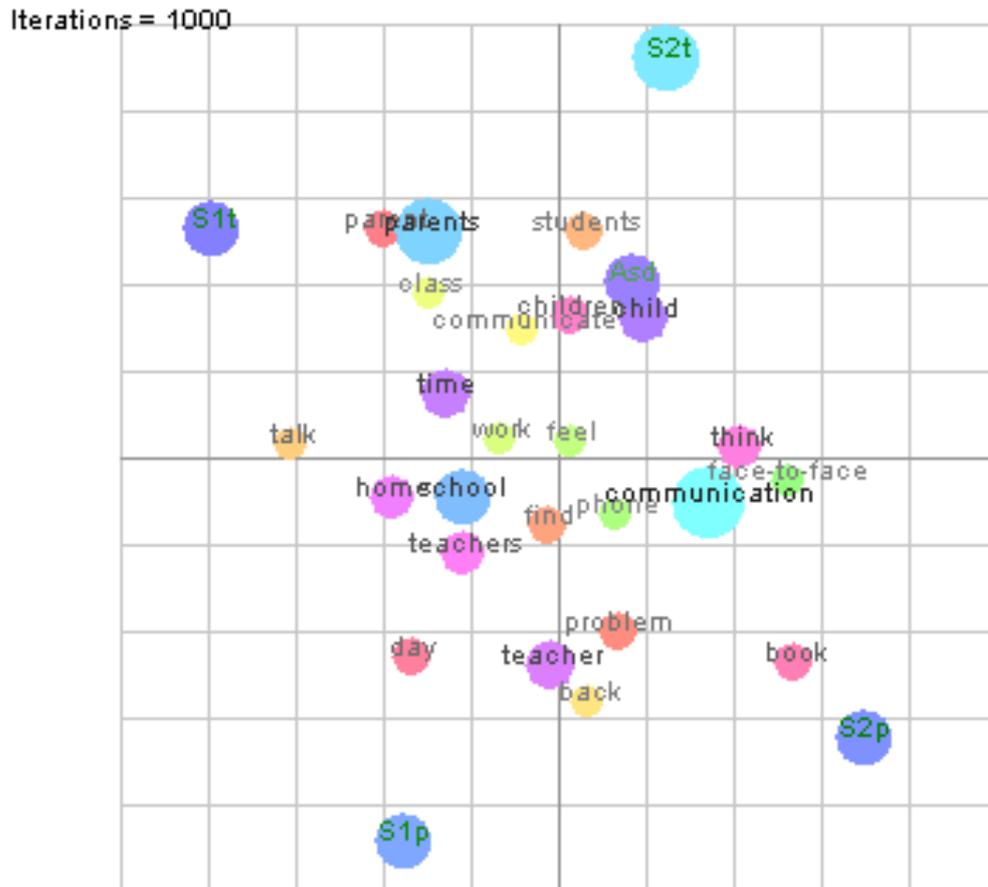


Figure 4.2. Leximancer map of parent and teacher voices, with 100% of concepts showing: Focus groups.

On the Figure 4.1 and Figure 4.2 maps, all the concepts fall within the four participant tags. These arrangements show a high degree of common language across the two parent and two teacher focus group meetings. The tags for these participant groups form the extreme points of a rough quadrangle. This placement shows that some concepts were used more by participants of each group meeting. Given that Leximancer maps work on the closeness of association, participants of a particular focus group meeting were more likely to have used the part of the common language that was near the tag for their group.

The placement of concepts on these maps illustrates that the parents and the teachers were all connected to the topic of the study. The most frequently occurring core concepts (i.e., those that only appear in Figure 4.1 and represented by the biggest dots) are clustered around the centre of these maps indicating that they are most connected to other concepts. These concepts are either identical to words in the topic of the discussion or refer to stakeholder names (viz., “communication”,

“parents”, “school”, “time”, “teacher”, “child”, “ASD”, “home”, and “teachers”). The peripheral concept “think” was excluded. The clumping of two groups of concepts indicates two sets of closer relationships among core concepts (viz., “home”, “school”, and “time” together; “ASD” and “child” together). Participants appeared to speak in one voice about the connectedness of the major stakeholders to home-school communication. In essence, focus group participants were on task.

The presence of less frequent concepts was connected to the nature of participation. Figure 4.2 shows natural separations of concepts developing around the parent and teacher conversation tags of the two schools. The conversation of each individual focus group migrated into separate quadrants on this map. This result indicates a degree of specificity in the responses of each of the four focus group conversations. Three concepts, “problem”, “back”, and “teacher”, are closely related to each other. They straddled the two parent tags on the y-axis between the bottom left and right quadrants on this map. Parents at each of the two schools discussed home-school communication issues around sharing of a problem with the teacher and the challenges of back and forward interaction. The conversation of the teachers focused more on the “time” taken for “communications” with “parents” regarding the “student” with “ASD.”

Other concepts that appear on Figure 4.1 are mostly types of communication, (viz., “face-to-face”, “phone”, “book”, and “talk”). The location of the concept “phone”, at the centre of the map suggests it was central to the discussion of parents and teachers at the two schools. The remaining concepts relating to types of communication were more scattered. These secondary concepts were used by different stakeholders at each of these schools. Visual comparison of the Figure 4.1 and the Appendix E concept maps affirmed that tagging did not affect these separations of concepts. The less frequent concepts were in relatively the same position to the parent and teacher tags on both of these concept maps. Given that tagging did not affect the presentation of the data in concept maps, it was of empirical importance to illuminate the clustering of concepts further using Leximancer.

#### **4.5.2 Parent conversations**

Figure 4.3 presents a concept map representation of the School 1 and School 2 parent focus group conversations. The participant tags sit roughly at the top and at the bottom of these maps. The concepts raised by the various participants sit

between them. This arrangement shows that like concepts were used across the parent focus group conversations at the two schools. The parents conversed around the concept “teachers.”

Figure 4.3 shows that the parents at each meeting did to some extent respond differently to each other. The parents from School 1 used relatively more concepts that referred to intimate, regular communications with teachers (i.e., “home”, “school”, “day”, “time”, and “teachers”). In contrast, the parents at School 2 appeared to have talked relatively more about the communication “book” and communication as a phenomenon (i.e., “book”, “problems”, “ASD, and “communication”). The relatively tight clustering around the S1p tag shows that conversation of the School 1 parents more regularly used the concepts near this tag whereas the School 2 parents used the concepts shown across the map in a more balanced way.

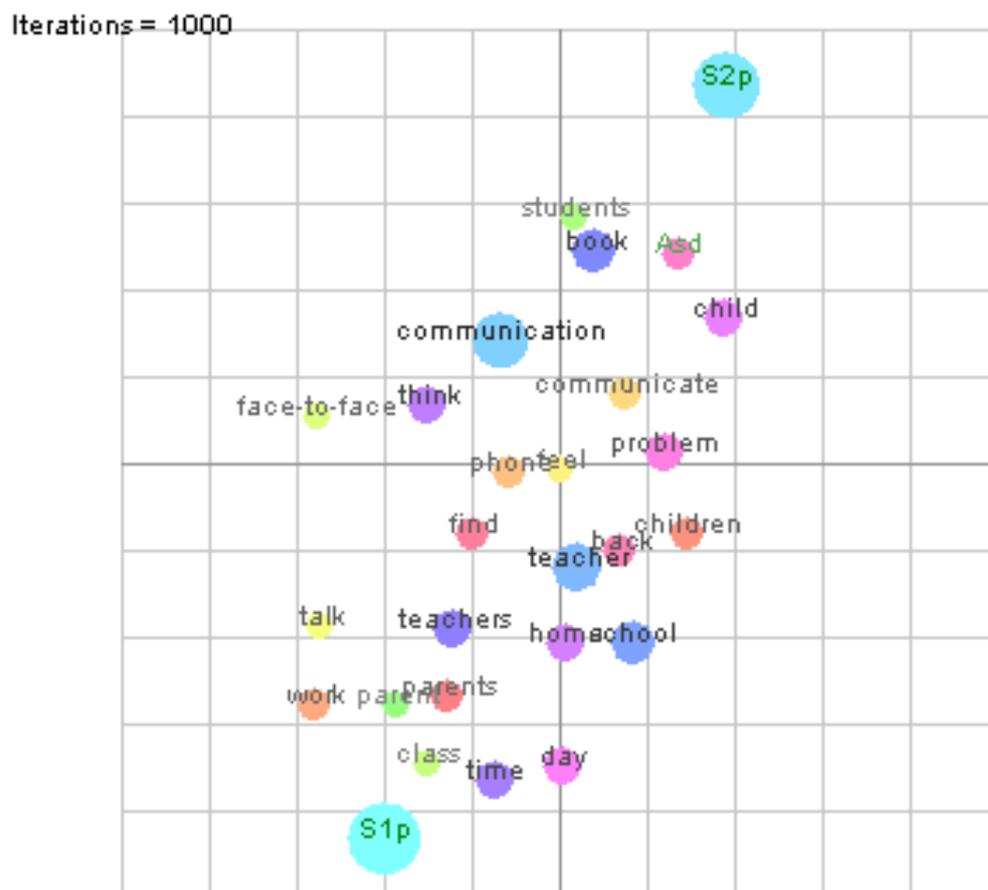


Figure 4.3. Leximancer map of parent voices, with 100% of concepts showing: Focus groups.

### 4.5.3 Teacher conversations

Figure 4.4 shows a representation of the School 1 and School 2 teacher focus group conversations. The two teacher tags are positioned at opposite ends of the mapping with the concepts positioned between them. This placement shows that common language was used across the teacher meetings at the two schools. The conversation of both groups of teachers concentrated on the role of “home”, and “school”, to support the “child” with “ASD.” However, concepts spread out more from the centre of Figure 4.4 than they do for the map of the parent group conversations (see Figure 4.3). The focus group conversations of the two groups of teachers were more distinctive than were those of the two parent groups. The teachers at School 1 seemed to focus their conversation on “parent” or “parents”, and on interactions with the “teacher” to address issues that were a “problem.” In contrast, the teachers at School 2 appeared to talk in more general terms concerning the “time” involved in home-school “communication” for “students” with “ASD.”

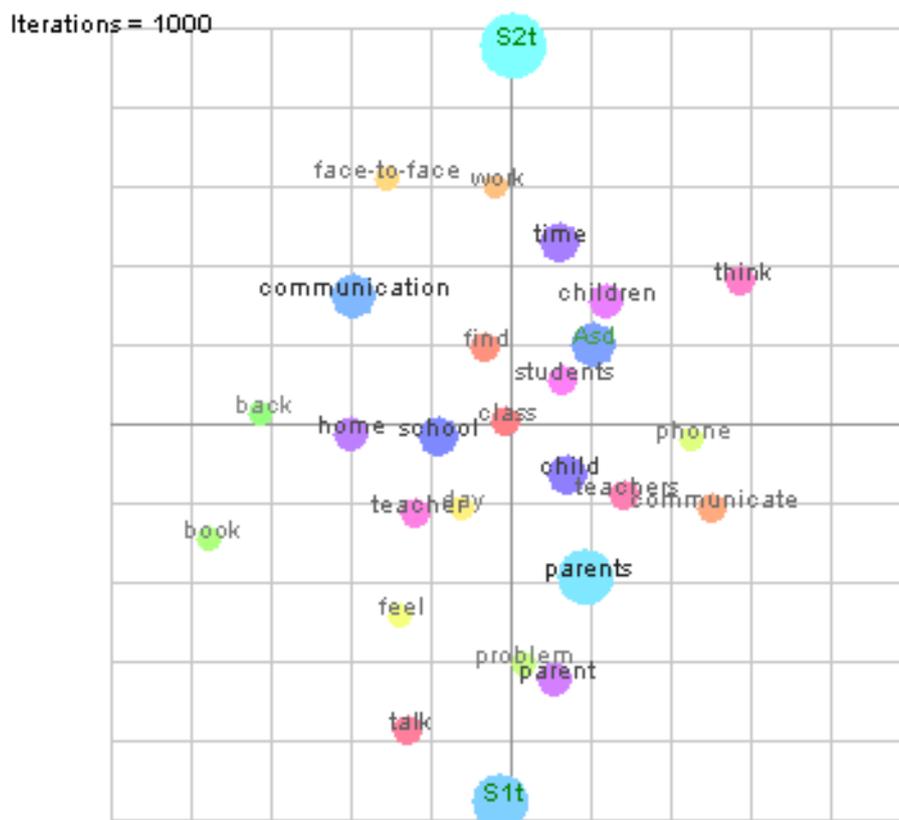


Figure 4.4. Leximancer map of teacher voices, with 100% of concepts showing: Focus groups.

#### 4.6 Concept listing

A comparison of the quantitative concept lists and the qualitative concept maps built up from these lists was the next logical step in presenting the results of the focus group conversations. This comparison tested the validity and stability of this data set. Also, analyses of the less refined concept list data were used to glean a clearer understanding of the similarities and differences in the response patterns illustrated in the concepts and of the relationships of the result patterns within these maps to the research questions of the study. Table 4.4 shows the concept lists from the four focus group conversations. The most important result from this extensive data set was that the concepts used by the parents and the concepts used by the teachers across the two schools pertained to only two of the five research questions.

Table 4.4 includes a coding system. “Like” concepts are coloured in the same font. This coding allows for comparisons in the use of concepts across the conversations in relation to (a) the topic of the discussion, (b) stakeholder names, (c) types of home-school communication, and (d) barriers to home-school communication.

Green coloured concepts, concepts that relate to words in the topic of the focus group meetings, were among the most frequently used concepts. The high frequency of these concepts across focus group conversations reaffirmed the results from the concept maps. In essence, parents and teachers in both schools provided extensive elaborations on the topic, with some specificity in concept use across participant groups. For example “communication” was a frequently used concept by parents and teachers at both schools, whereas teachers at School 2 used the concept “ASD” in relatively high frequency while parents at School 1 used the term in relatively lower frequency.

Pink coloured concepts relate to stakeholders’ names. These names were used in moderate frequency across all focus group conversations. Parents talked about teachers, and teachers talked about parents.

Table 4.4. Concepts Used Across Focus Group Conversations

Order	Combinations of Focus Group Conversations						
	<i>Combined</i>	<i>Parents</i>	<i>Teachers</i>	<i>S1p</i>	<i>S2p</i>	<i>S1t</i>	<i>S2t</i>
1	Com'n 130	Com'n 70	Parents 83	Com'n 31	Com'n 39	Parents 47	Parents 36
2	Parents 93	Teacher 47	Com'n 60	School 24	Book 28	Com'n 22	Com'n 38
3	School 81	School 42	Time 41	Teacher 22	Teacher 25	Parent 18	Time 29
4	Time 69	Book 33	Child 41	Teachers 20	Child 19	School 17	ASD 26
5	Child 69	Teachers 31	ASD 40	Time 20	School 18	Child 16	Child 25
6	Teacher 65	Think 31	School 39	Day 17	Think 16	Talk 14	School 22
7	ASD 60	Child 28	Home 29	Think 15	ASD 16	ASD 14	Children 17
8	Think 55	Time 28	Parent 29	Home 15	Teachers 11	Home 13	Home 16
9	Home 54	Home 25	Think 24	Problem 9	Problem 11	Time 12	Think 15
10	Teachers 48	Day 24	Children 22	Child 9	Home 10	Think 9	Class 10
11	Book 42	Problem 20	Students 19	Work 9	Time 8	Students 9	Parent 11
12	Children 36	ASD 20	Teacher 18	Children 8	Back 8	Teacher 8	Students 10
13	Parent 33	Back 17	Talk 19	Parents 8	Com'te 7	Teachers 8	Teacher 10
14	Day 32	Children 14	Teachers 17	Find 8	Day 7	Com'te 6	Face-to 9
15	Talk 31	Find 13	Class 15	Back 9	Children 6	Feel 6	Teachers 9
16	Problem 29	Work 12	Com'te 14	Face-to 7	Phone 5	Children 5	Work 9
17	Com'te 25	Talk 12	Face-to 13	Talk 7	Feel 5	Problem 5	Com'te 8
18	Students 25	Face-to 11	Work 12	Phone 5	Find 5	Phone 5	Find 8
19	Find 25	Com'te 11	Feel 12	Book 5	Talk 5	Day 5	Feel 6
20	Work 24	Phone 10	Find 12	ASD 5	Face-to 4	Class 5	Phone 5
21	Back 24	Parents 10	Phone 10	Com'te 4	Students 4	Book 5	Talk 5
22	Face-to 24	Feel 9	Problem 9	Class 4	Work 3	Find 4	Problem 4
23	Class 21	Students 6	Book 9	Feel 4	Parents 2	Face-to 4	Book 4
24	Feel 21	Class 6	Day 8	Parent 3	Class 2	Work 3	Back 4
25	Phone 20	Parent 4	Back 7	Students 2	Parent 1	Back 3	Day 3

Note. Abbreviations for 3 concepts.

Com'n = Communication, Com'te = Communicate, and Face-to = Face-to-face.

Blue coloured concepts that relate to communication types were located in many spaces in the bottom half of Table 4.4. This pattern of results can be linked to the representations of concepts that refer to a type of home-school communication by small dots on the concept maps. The concept “book” was used many more times by parents at School 2 ( $n = 28$ ) than teachers at School 1 ( $n = 5$ ). Concept frequencies for the less structured types of communication (i.e., “talk”, “face-to-face”, and “phone”) were used in similar frequencies by each parent and teacher group, with type of school not identifiable as a variable.

The orange coloured concept relates to one possible barrier to home-school communication. “Time” seems to be identified as the primary barrier to such discourse in accordance with the result patterns shown in the concept maps. The concept “time” appears in the top 11 of the rankings for all focus group conversations.

### **4.7 Summative comment**

For each of the five research questions, either one or two specific results can be drawn from the focus group data.

1. Face-to-face types of communication were referred to more at School 1, whereas the Keeping in Touch (KIT) communication book was discussed more at School 2 (Research question 1: Types).
2. The common purpose of home-school communication apparent in all group discussions was to address the day-to-day social challenges for each student with ASD (Research question 2: Purpose).
3. Both parent and teacher participants were generally satisfied with home-school communication at their respective school. Parents’ level of satisfaction was in part dependent on the perceived commitment shown by teachers. Teachers’ level of satisfaction was dependent, in part, on the perceived commitment shown by parents (Research question 3: Satisfaction).
4. Parents at both schools identified the time of day that suits the teacher to interact with them as the main facilitator of home-school communication. The teachers at both schools believed that forming an open relationship

with parents was the key facilitator of home-school communication (Research question 4: Facilitators).

5. Time was identified as a barrier to communication but parents and teachers were generally satisfied with the commitment shown by home and school stakeholders at their school (Research question 5: Barriers).

This chapter has presented data on the perceptions of home-school communication practice from a group of parents and a group of teachers at two primary schools with children with ASD. While the focus group participants share many perspectives, there were several distinctions between the conversation at School 1 and School 2. In the next chapter (Chapter 5), actual home-school events at each of these schools will be probed in depth from the personal perspectives of participants involved in the focus group meetings.

## CHAPTER 5: RESULTS FROM INDIVIDUAL PERSPECTIVES

### 5.1 Introduction

This chapter presents results from the second stage of the study in two related sections. First, permanent records of communication events from four parent-teacher dyads (two from School 1 and two from School 2) were analysed. Descriptive comparisons highlighted the different frequencies in the home-school communication types used within and across these four parent-teacher dyads. Second, face-to-face interview responses to these records were analysed using Leximancer software. Text browsing allowed the richness of the interview conversations to be examined. Then, broad representations of the concepts used were illustrated in concept maps and concept lists. Face-to-face interview responses added more substantive detail to the types (Research question 1), purposes (Research question 2), satisfactions (Research question 3), facilitators (Research question 4), and barriers (Research question 5) of home-school communication obtained during the focus group meetings. The face-to-face interview questions orientated within the 5 R's framework (Bain, et al., 2000) examined actual practice.

### 5.2 Participants

The four parents and the four teachers who were involved in the recording and face-to-face interview activities were a subset of those involved in the focus group meetings. A demographics sheet (see Appendix B) had been collected from each of these participants. Descriptive comment was used to report demographic characteristics that were common across these participants. Tables 5.1 and 5.2 show discriminative detail of the parents and the teachers. The students referred to were not involved in these activities but they were the focus of home-school communications. The students' demographic detail appears in Tables 5.1 and 5.2.

Each of the parents (a) were female, (b) spoke English at home, (c) identified "Australian" as their culture, and (d) received only "infrequent" respite and/or written newsletter support from other agencies. The four parents who participated in the record and face-to-face interview tasks were broadly of the same age. The parent of School 2 dyad 2 worked 5 hours each school day. It was, therefore, more difficult for

this parent to meet with her teacher than it was for the other three parents.

**Table 5.1. Participant Demographics for School 1 Face-to-face Interviews**

Demographic	Participant	
	1	2
<i>Parents Leximancer tag</i>	<i>S1p1</i>	<i>S1p2</i>
Age	35 years	40 years
Gender	Female	Female
Other school aged children	1	1
Hours of paid work each week	0	0
<i>Teachers Leximancer tag</i>	<i>S1t1</i>	<i>S1t2</i>
Age	49	25
Gender	Female	Male
Qualifications	G Dip (Com. T), B Ed	B Ed
Students with ASD in their class	2 students	3 students
<i>Students</i>		
Age	9 years	7 years
Gender	Male	Female
Diagnosis	ASD	ASD
Individual needs	Aggressive behaviours	Adaptation to change

*Note.* Participant 1 and Participant 2 for both the Parents and Teachers variables are the same Participant 1 and Participant 2 for those variables from the focus group activity at each school (e.g., “S1p1” in this table is the same participant as “S1p1” shown in Table 4.2).

The four teachers ranged in age (see Table 5.1 and Table 5.2). There were no obvious age or gender patterns in the data for either of the two schools. All four teachers held bachelor degrees. Also, all four teachers had only 2 years experience supporting a student with ASD. Schools that were approached and had agreed to participate in the study had an atypically high number and concentration of students with ASD in their classrooms. This arrangement maximised opportunities to collect rich information on an emerging topic, albeit in contexts less than representative of most Queensland primary classrooms that supported students with ASD.

Table 5.2. Participant Demographics for School 2 Face-to-face Interviews

Demographic	Participant	
	1	2
<i>Parents Leximancer tag</i>		
	<i>S2p1</i>	<i>S2p2</i>
Age	47 years	38 years
Gender	Female	Female
Other school aged children	1	2
Hours of paid work each week	0	25
<i>Teachers Leximancer tag</i>		
	<i>S2t1</i>	<i>S2t2</i>
Age	23	38
Gender	Female	Male
Qualifications	B Teach (Primary)	B Sc, Dip T
Students with ASD in their class	3 student	2 students
<i>Students</i>		
Age	9 years	11 years
Gender	Male	Male
Diagnosis	ASD / II	ASD
Individual needs	Curriculum adjustments	Few modifications required

*Note.* Participant 1 and Participant 2 for both the Parents and Teachers variables are the same Participant 1 and Participant 2 for those variables from the focus group activity at each school (e.g., “S2p1” in this table is the same participant as “S2p1” shown in Table 4.2).

Demographic information about the student that was supported by the parent and the teacher of each dyad was important because these students set the occasion for home-school communication. Table 5.1 and Table 5.2 show that the four students ranged from 7 years to 11 years of age. The youngest student was the only female. The individual needs of each of these students were quite distinct. The student of dyad 1 exhibited physical aggression that typically resulted in several same-aged peers requiring minor first aid each week. The student of dyad 2 regularly exhibited anxiety as a result of changes in routines in her home and school life that had resulted in non-engagement in many scholastic tasks. The

student of School 2 dyad 1 had intellectual impairment as well as ASD and required a modified curriculum negotiated between the home and school contexts. By comparison, the student supported by School 2 dyad 2 required few modifications to the curriculum or the home or school environments.

### **5.3 Home-school communication record**

The frequency of different home-school communication types used over a continuous 4-week period was recorded. Participants filled in a record sheet that listed six starter types (“newsletter”, “hand written note”, “communication book”, “planned meeting”, “unplanned meeting”, and “telephone”) and a generic “other” category (see Appendix D). An extensive survey of the literature had been used to generate a substantive listing of eight communicative types. The types “email”, and “report card” were left off this list after neither of these types were mentioned at any of the focus group meetings. Data related to individual home-school communication record events were analysed using two sequenced lines of enquiry. First, the records of the four parent-teacher dyads were combined to show patterns of the frequency of types across the parents and teachers of the two schools. Second, the records of each of the four parent-teacher dyads were analysed to illuminate separate response patterns on the variables of school and participant type.

#### ***5.3.1 Parent and teacher records combined***

A constrained range and frequency of communication type was used during the month of home-school communications record. Figure 5.1 illustrates that the “other” column contains only two novel events. These two novel entries illustrated two separate communications by email. All other entries were derived from the starter list types. In total, 74 communication events occurred. Of these, 49 were communications between the parent and the class teacher. There were 12 events from the “Parent to the SEU teacher” that are only briefly reported here in this chapter because SEU teachers were not part of the parent-teacher dyads. Also, the 13 newsletter events are briefly reported. Newsletter events did not involve communications between the parent and the teacher of each dyad.

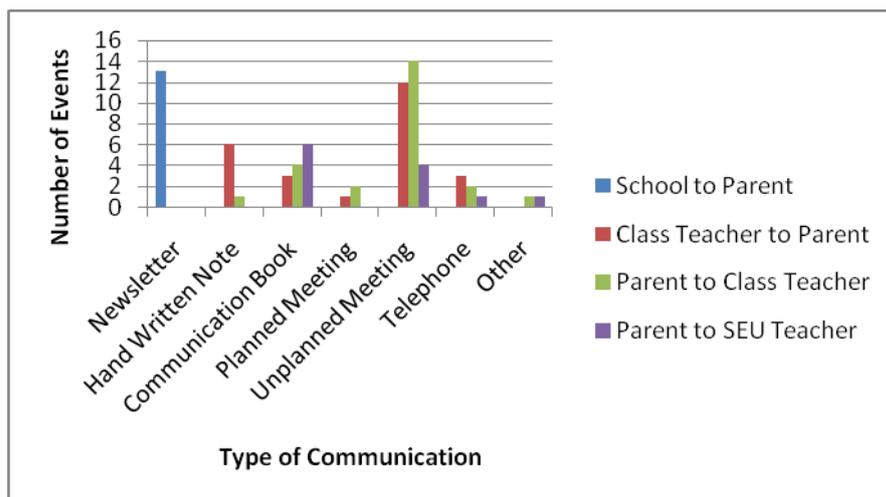


Figure 5.1. Home-school communication events in a month: Four parent-teacher dyads.

The 49 communication events involving parents and classroom teachers are shown by the green and red bars on Figure 5.1. Of these events, 24 were initiated by parents and 25 by teachers. These 49 events represent a mean rate of less than one interaction within each dyad for every day of recording (i.e., 49 events shared across 20 recording days shared by four parent teacher dyads).

Unplanned meetings comprised approximately half of the communication events between parents and teachers (i.e., 26 of the 49 events). Comments made by three of the four parents during the face-to-face interviews indicated they did not record many unplanned meetings that occurred:

Parent from School 1, dyad 1: *"I should've written more down. We talk each day."*

Parent from School 1, dyad 2: *"The most important event would be the unplanned meeting. They probably happened on a daily basis. It might just be a quick conversation with the teacher at the end of the day."*

Parent from School 2, dyad 1: *"The conversations often just responded to general things. These conversations happen every afternoon."*

The parents and teachers also recalled that the brief and unstructured nature of these meetings made it difficult for them to determine who initiated each event.

More teachers initiated hand written notes than did parents. The telephone, planned meeting, and other (e-mail) communication types were all used in low absolute and relative frequency. Comments made during the face-to-face interviews reported how the types of communication were used together. The telephone calls, and the e-mail event from parent to class teacher, were used to request meetings between home-

school communication partners or to flag important content that was planned for discussion at these meetings. In essence, the parents and teachers substantively communicated through unplanned meetings, and, to a lesser extent, communication books or hand written notes.

### 5.3.2 Parent and teacher records separated

Figures 5.2, 5.3, 5.4, and 5.5 shows that there were substantial differences across the records of the four parent-teacher dyads. Variation occurred across the range and frequency of communications that were initiated. This variation was not consistently linked to the variables of either participant type or school.

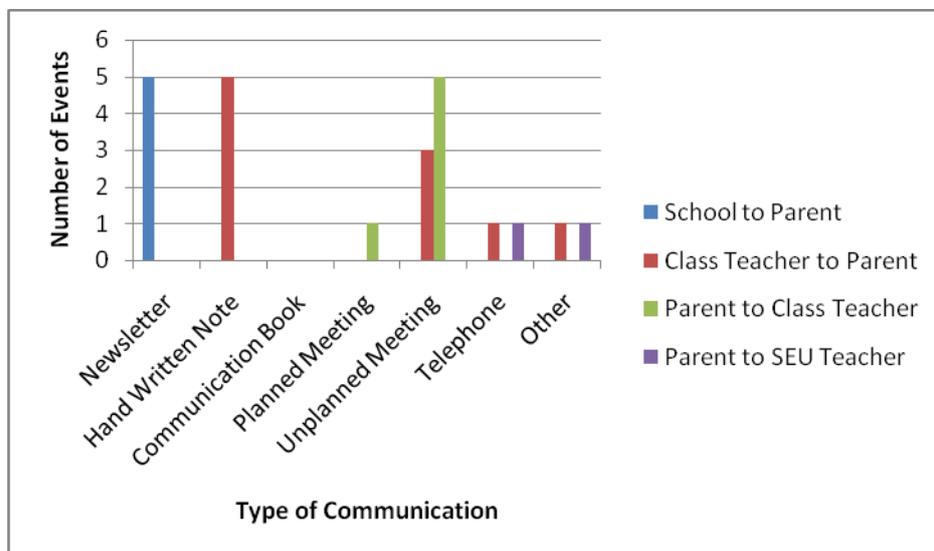


Figure 5.2. Home-school communication events in a month: School 1, dyad 1.

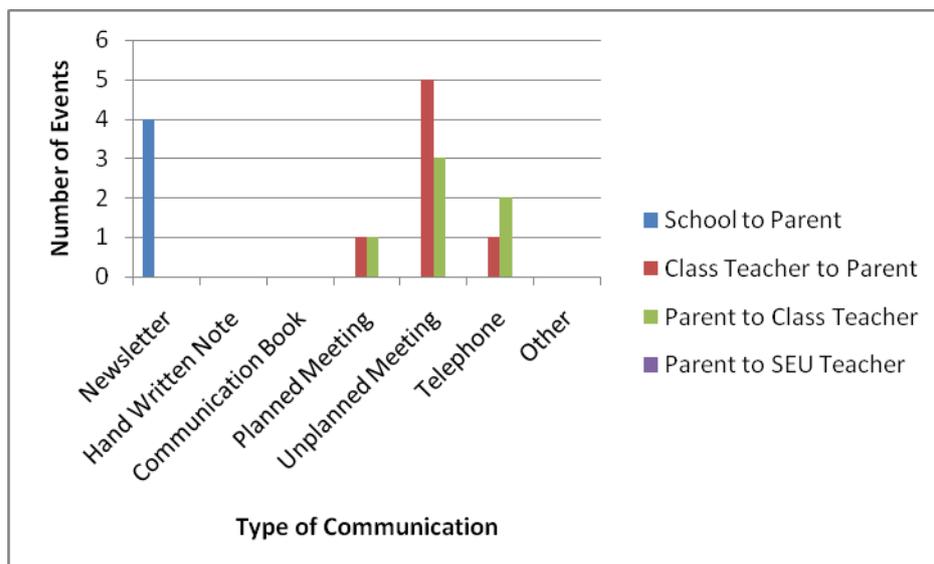


Figure 5.3. Home-school communication events in a month: School 1, dyad 2

Figures 5.2 and 5.3 for School 1 show that the parent and teacher in each of the two dyads shared responsibility for steering the home-school communications. Dyad 1 also relied heavily on unplanned meetings that were usually initiated by the parent. The class teacher in this dyad used hand written notes to provide the parent with information. Dyad 2 relied on unplanned meetings, but these meetings were usually initiated by the teacher, and planned meetings usually initiated by the parent. Telephone calls were used, mainly by the parent, to arrange several of these meetings. School 1 home-school communications typically involved the sharing of information between individual parents and teachers in daily unplanned meetings.

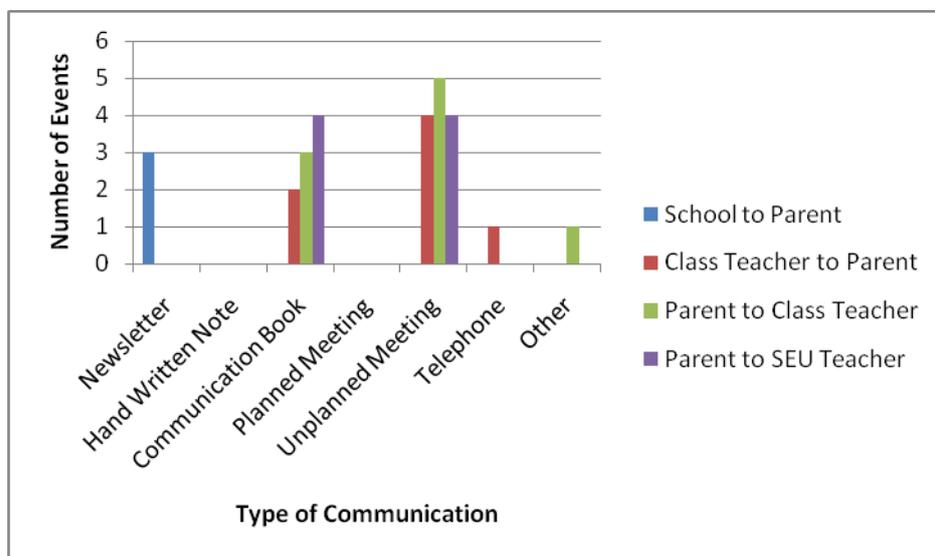


Figure 5.4. Home-school communication events in a month: School 2, dyad 1.

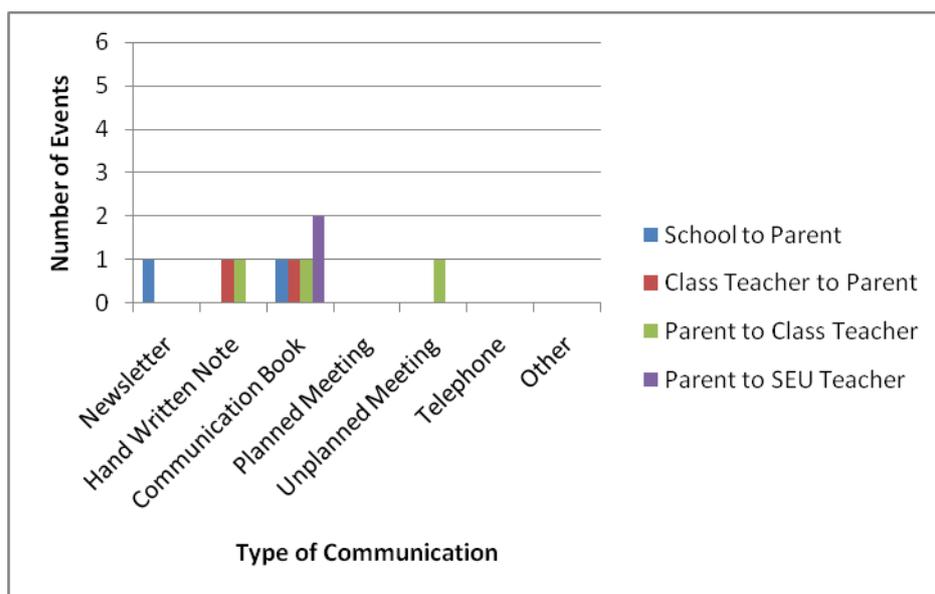


Figure 5.5. Home-school communication events in a month: School 2, dyad 2.

Figures 5.4 and 5.5 for School 2 show quite different patterns of home-school communication for the two dyads within this setting. The parent and teacher in dyad 1 interacted with each other considerably more frequently than the parent and teacher of dyad 2 did (viz., 15 versus 6 interactions). Dyad 1 used mainly unplanned meetings and the communication book types, with the parent initiating most of these interactions. Dyad 2 participants mutually initiated five written communications and only one unplanned meeting.

#### **5.4 Face-to-face interview conversations overview**

Face-to-face interview conversations investigated the home-school records with each of the eight participants. The four teachers, and three of the four parents, choose the school as the site for their interview. One of the parents elected that her interview be conducted at her home. Analyses focused on how the usage patterns of different groups of participants shaped their perceptions of home-school communication. Table 5.3 shows the sequence of analysis that logically evolved. Initially, text browsing shows that the conversation of the parent and the teacher of each dyad were related to the individualised need of the student with ASD. Then, analysis of a combined map of the conversations of the parents and the teachers shows that the concepts that the parents used moved to one side and concepts that the teachers used moved to the other side. Next, separate parent and teacher tagged maps show that the two teachers of each of the two schools talked about similar concepts, whereas the conversation of parents was more individualised. Finally, the frequency of concepts discussed did not closely relate with the usage patterns recorded by these parent-teacher dyads.

Table 5.3. Sequence of Analysis of the Face-to-face Conversations

Step	Purpose	Summary of Results
Text browsing of the conversation of each of the four dyads	To compare the talk of the parent and the teacher of each dyad	The parents and teachers of each dyad spoke about the individualised need of the student with ASD.
One tagged concept map of the combined parent and teacher voices	To determine future steps in the data analysis sequence.	Concepts used by parents and teachers tended to move to opposite sides of this map.
Two tagged concept maps, one of the combined parent and one of the combined teacher contributions	To compare and contrast the contributions of parents and teachers within and across dyad arrangements	Three parents talked about similar concepts (“teacher”, “communications”, “week”). One parent used concepts similar to those used by the teachers.  Teachers talked about similar concepts (“information”, “parents”, “parent”).
Concept lists of the eight face-to-face interviews combined and separated	To compare frequencies of communicative types recorded with those discussed	The frequency of concepts discussed in the interviews did not closely match with communication type use patterns in the home-school record task.

## 5.5 Text browsing

Text browsing using a Leximancer search engine located representative samples of the face-to-face interview text. Selections were made among all of located text samples on the basis of how effectively each selection addressed the five research questions (types, purpose, satisfaction, facilitators and barriers). Where individual parents, teachers and dyads provided a distinctive voice, such results were highlighted. Participants generally shared perspectives on issues related to the research questions, such that most representative samples reflected the voices of clusters of participants.

### 5.5.1 Types of home-school communication

The two types of home-school communication, “talk” and “book,” were subsequently discussed by the parent and teacher during the face-to-face interviews. The concept “talk” was primarily used by the four parent-teacher dyads in the interviews to mean the same thing as the concept “face-to-face” used by the participants of the focus group meetings. All eight of the parents and teachers who participated in the face-to-

face interviews valued the richness of communication available through “talk.” Parents were appreciative of the dedication of teachers to talk, and the teachers were dedicated to allocating time for such conversation.

School 1, dyad 1: *“Unplanned meetings, they're not limited in their content. Sure you can go off on tangents but you can also explore and respond to topics that you and the teacher didn't originally plan to talk about. Plus because it's so regular, it gives you that relationship with the teacher which is vital I think to support special needs kids”* (Parent).

*“When they knock on the door and .... you've got to be seen as a professional, be seen as people who will listen and not judge”* (Teacher).

School 2, dyad 1: *“Freda is usually there by the time we arrive at school, and she will come out and say hello and make it obvious that she's available if you would like to talk”* (Parent).

*“If Carl's parents weren't here all the time I'd have to provide a lot more information in the communication book so making time to talk is fine”* (Teacher).

The use of the concept “book” varied considerably across the two schools. Neither of the two parents at School 1 made mention of a communication book. One of the two teachers at School 1 talked of the communication book very briefly to note that she did not value this type of communication: *“I don't have a communication book as I don't really need one.”*

In contrast, both parents and teachers at School 2 commented that the KIT book was best suited to low-priority issues: *“I'll use communication book for something that is not urgent, and I'll write it in before school in case I don't see Freda”* (Parent). *“It is in the book anyway in case I don't see her for things that are not urgent”* (Teacher).

### **5.5.2 Purpose of home-school communication**

Text samples show that each of the eight participants perceived that the purpose of home-school communications was to keep the lines of communication open between the home and the school. They each also perceived that they needed to establish a supportive relationship with their communication partner. Home-school communication was seen as being required to maintain a positive relationship. Each parent and teacher focused on the individual needs of the student with ASD during their interviews.

## 5.5.2.1 School 1 dyad 1 conversations

The parent and teacher of School 1 dyad 1 explained that the content of their communications was shared information regarding the aggressive behaviour challenges of the student with ASD. As the parent explained, *“I just go to the teacher each day and ask him how he’s been. I see if there are any problems, and they let me know. Nothing much happened in the month. It’s checking that’s he’s not been belting people, not misbehaving. And I tell the teacher things that happen at home.”* In a like way, this teacher emphasised the value of regular unplanned meeting contact to share information regarding the behaviour of this student. He reported that *“The parent comes up every morning so that sort of eliminates the need for any other communication. She likes to come up every morning to see if everything is going smoothly, and what to do if he’s aggressive.* This teacher went on to explain the place unplanned meetings have in developing a positive relationship and the need for such a relationship for when the student’s behaviour spikes, *“They (unplanned meetings) help you realise how important it is to establish a friendly relationship with the parents, a casual sort of one where you can joke. You never quite know when things will get tough (the student with ASD demonstrates challenging behaviours).*

Information sharing around homework support was also a priority for the parent and teacher of this dyad. The parent of this dyad explained the need to support the student’s challenges in transferring learning across the home and school contexts: *“That was about the teacher and his maths, because at home he shows a different thing than he does at school. I know. I help out in the room. But that is not enough. He needs extra teacher aide time.”* The teacher of this dyad explained how this incident around the maths homework required a planned meeting to reduce the anxiety of the student with ASD, and in turn the parent: *“It is a huge problem. He finds it hard to listen to instructions. I know his Mum could have had hours of pain over that from him just stressing out. Sometimes I use a handwritten note to help explain, but I just didn’t see this one coming. I needed to arrange a planned meeting for the next day.”*

The parent of this dyad also voiced a number of concerns regarding a breakdown in communications with school staff other than the teacher. The essence of a large block of conversation was that she was concerned that the school had lost academic records that had been transferred from a previous school. Also she was concerned that the guidance officer had arranged for her son to have a development assessment from an outside agency before checking with her, *“I was very upset,*

*because I wasn't even told that DAT (The Developmental Assessment Team, a section a Queensland Heath) had been contacted."* This parent stressed that while she was unhappy with communications with the administration, the class teacher and her *"were on the same page."*

#### 5.5.2.2 School 1 dyad 2 conversations

The School 1 dyad 2 parent and teacher reported that the unplanned meeting was the type of home-school communication that they preferred. Such meetings were seen to address changes in either home or school routine that would influence the behaviour of the student. Such communications were seen to establish a positive relationship of two-way communication for when the needs of the student with ASD were heightened as the result of changes to routine. The parent of this dyad reported, *"It's (unplanned meetings) so regular, it gives you that relationship with the teacher which is vital to support these kids with special needs when they go off the rails. We covered a lot of depth in the IEP meetings, so these conversations are more about touching base... On 99.9% of occasions, she settles into the classroom, but I need to be aware of the occasions when she doesn't. She is like Jekyll and Hyde when things change at home and school...and we must keep each other informed."* Likewise, interview conversation of the teacher focused on how unplanned meetings were used to keep lines of communication open for when the student reacted to changes to her environments. An example of the teacher's conversation relates to preparing for an atypical experience in the room, *"It (unplanned meeting conversations) gives me insight into her. It helps me in my day because I know the things to do like when we had a lockdown and a fire drill practice last week. She is petrified of sirens, so I needed to know what to do."*

This parent was critical of communications with school staff other than the teacher, just as the other parent at this school was. She was particularly concerned with a lack of communication around the IEP planning process, *"The normal day-to-day stuff (with the teacher) is fine but the relationship with the school, there is a gap. I had discussion in the IEP meeting, and we discussed targets. It was supposed to be typed up, and it just did not happen and then last week I found out it was changed without my consultation and I am not happy."*

### 5.5.2.3 School 2 dyad 1 conversations

The parent and teacher of this dyad focused their communications on issues related to the student's emotional state. The parent explained that because the student also had intellectual impairment, and used a limited number of words, he experienced daily episodes of anxiety about life skill tasks. She summarised that communications with the teacher were about, *"a basic thing, like he hasn't had a good night's sleep or that he had been upset about something the night before. The conversations were just about how Craig was feeling (whether or not he was feeling ill)."* The parent noted that daily unplanned meetings served to share strategies when the student showed idiosyncratic reactions to a stimulus, *"The other day there was a crane that he saw over in the distance. He was excited by this and ran over to the school fence (to look from the school car park). So we exchanged high-fives and I shared that with Fran in case he did not settle."*

The teacher from this dyad also considered that the main focus of home-school communications was maintaining lines of communication for when the student with ASD was experiencing anxiety, *"No, he is usually as 'good as gold' at school. I have only seen him upset to the point when he cries several times, whereas at home, if he can't see something, he cries."* This teacher went on to explain a particular issue in which she needed to communicate regularly with the parent, *"Mum wanted a lot of information about how he was coping with having his teeth removed. When I asked 'how are you feeling?' he would give 'thumbs up' or point to his cheek, to show pain."*

### 5.5.2.4 School 2 dyad 2 conversations

The parent and teacher of this dyad focused home-school communication on supporting the student's anxiety to curriculum challenges. These comments from the parent are representative of her satisfaction with the curriculum focus of home-school communications, *"The IEP came home for me to sign and that was everything that we discussed. That was good. We actually touched base on the typing program for Larry. So yes, things are in place. I am very pleased with the follow up and the progress in each little category. It would be 50/50 the school's advice and half for things to try at home."* This parent also spoke of her satisfaction with the ongoing communications that had been established for when her child did feel anxious about academic demands of the curriculum. She reported, *"Look (I am) very, very content. It gives a good feeling of security knowing your child is going somewhere where there is that (high) level of communication."*

The teacher of this dyad highlighted the communications that he needed to initiate with this parent to support her child with ASD, *“We got into our theme about Antarctica so that (record entry) was to do with activities that we were starting to do as a whole class. I jotted down in Larry’s (communication) book materials that he would need to bring just to prepare him and his family.”* This teacher highlighted how he appreciated that he needed to keep lines of communication open to maintain the relationship with parents of children with ASD, *“I still find that I like to initiate contact if these parents are around (available) and they are appreciative of that.”*

### **5.5.3 Satisfaction with home-school communication**

The parent and teacher interview participants were generally satisfied with home-school communication practices at their school. The comments of the parent in the first dyad at School 2 are representative of the conversation at both schools: *“Because of the atmosphere in the school, it is very positive and welcoming. We feel at ease here.”* The teacher of School 2 dyad 2 was satisfied with his efforts to communicate with his parent, as were all of the teachers: *“I like to initiate a contact... they are responding well to me doing that as well and I am not getting a lot of feedback of concern, so that allows me to interpret how they feel. I’m doing my job in regards to looking after their child and I am very satisfied with this.”* The parent of this dyad stated that, since the focus group discussion, she was more satisfied with home-school communication at this school and, in particular, with the SEU staff providing her with more information: *“There has been a notable increase in just general information and I see that next week there’s actually something on the notice board at the school ‘Info on Autism for the General Community’ and I’ve never seen anything on the notice board about ASD or autism, so yes, that was good.”*

Parents at School 1 stated that, while they were generally satisfied with home-school communication, they were concerned with interactions around programming for their children that had occurred in the month of event recording. It appears breakdowns occurred among the parent-class teacher-other staff communication links in relation to IEP programming at this school. The parent in the second dyad at School 1 stated: *“Yes, I’m basically happy. I’m annoyed that the planning that we agreed upon has been changed. I’m frustrated that you get something going and then the wheels slow down. As a parent, you feel like you have got to nag. You don’t like to nag.”* The teachers at School 1 stated that they were satisfied with their attempt to facilitate home-school communication. The teacher from dyad 2 made a seemingly-misinformed comment concerning how satisfied her parent partner was with the IEP

process: *“So I feel more comfortable with her because I know her better, because I have a better understanding of her, and she would share any concerns about the child’s school work, especially during the IEP meeting.”*

#### **5.5.4 Facilitators to home-school communication**

Parents and teachers at both schools agreed that the major facilitator of communication between home and school was the establishment of good relationships. The words of the parent from the second dyad at School 2 were representative of the contributions of other parents that focused on relationship building: *“The relationship has to exist between all three of you, the child, the parent and the teacher.”* The teachers at both schools said that they needed to reach out to the parents of the student with ASD. As the teacher of dyad two from School 1 commented in reviewing the recorded events, *“It is important to try and establish a friendly type relationship with the parents, a very casual sort of one where you can joke with them and things like that, which we have with two of the parents.”* The teacher in the first dyad at School 2 explained how she needed to respect the parents’ expertise: *“They know nine years of the child, I know six months, and whilst I can read out information about ASD, every case is individual.”*

The rich conversation of the face-to-face interviews allowed parents and teachers to outline some specifics of practices that facilitated home-school communication. The parent in the second dyad at School 1 talked to how daily face-to-face meetings facilitated home-school communication more generally: *“If I had to rely on a once a term parent-teaching meeting, or for a note to come home from the teacher; that would not work.”* Also, the teacher from dyad 2 at School 1 recalled details on current practice encouraging home-school communication: *“At the start of the year, or when the child starts, they are told what sort of communication is available, nominate what they would like to do, and I fine tune things from there.”*

As a side note, several of the participants stated that the study acted as a facilitator to home-school communication at each of the two schools. The parent in the second dyad at School 2 stated in relation to email: *“It’s made me more aware that I should use email more, because it’s quick and you can get a lot of information in and out.”* The teacher in the first dyad at School 1 also generated a practical recommendation for her future communications with her parent: *“I should write down more because I am trying to keep this information in my head.”*

### **5.5.5 Barriers to home-school communication**

Instead of merely identifying time as a barrier, parents stated that they were appreciative of the dedication and time devoted by teachers to face-to-face conversation. A sample of the conversation from the teacher of the second dyad at School 2 was representative of other statements made by teachers: *“I think clearly I’m communicating more with his family, and I generally don’t communicate this much with the parents of other children, but at the same time, is it enough home-school communication given that I want to include this child in my class?”* On this occasion, this teacher literally used the word “time” to mean the concept “instance.” On most occasions, the word “time” was used in the interviews to mean the concept “instance” and not as a barrier to home-school communication. One of the parents at this school identified the time lag between communication (KIT) book interactions as a barrier to communications: *“There is still a little bit of a lag in acknowledging notes.”* The teacher of this dyad elaborated: *“I don’t know whether the KIT book would have reached home for the reason that Len will keep stuff in his bag and it won’t come out.”* It appeared that the parent blamed the teacher for taking too long to respond to her communications, while the teacher blamed the child with ASD for not passing on the KIT book.

### **5.6 Concept Mapping**

Initial concept maps generated by Leximancer from the face-to-face interview conversations were difficult to interpret. Concepts clustered very close to the centre of all three of the concepts maps making it difficult to interpret the relationships among concepts in the conversations. Two decisions were made to reduce the bunching of concepts while maintaining the stability of the data. First, the “# of Points” slide scale function was adjusted in the generation process for each of the three concept maps. A setting of 91% of points was the lowest value where the critical data of all the parent and teacher tags were visible on these maps. Second, three clusters of concepts were merged. Merging had the effect of clearing the concept maps of five concepts. In this merging, “communication”, “home”, and “school”, were combined to make “communication”; “child” and “Larry” were combined to make “child”; and “parent” and “mum” were combined to make “parent.” Comparisons of the initial maps with the merged maps showed that most concepts were in similar relative positions. All concept maps presented in the chapter were orientated by rotating the data until the concept “time” was placed on the x-axis of the left-hand side of these maps. Appendix G provides a precise description of the

Leximancer settings applied to face-to-face interview maps.

### 5.6.1 Parent and teacher conversations combined

Figure 5.6 shows that the concepts used by parents and teachers during the face-to-face interviews are clustered in the middle of this concept map. Participant tags are generally positioned around the outside of these concepts. One of the tags (S2t2) is positioned among several of these concepts. This arrangement shows that all of the parents and the teachers would have used many of the concepts that are illustrated. In particular all participants used the concepts that appear in the centre of Figure 5.6. They each discussed “time” taken for “back” and forward home-school “communication.” The teacher of the second dyad at School 2 would have used some of the concepts positioned close to his tag (“information, “child’, “parents” and “ASD”) more than the other participants.

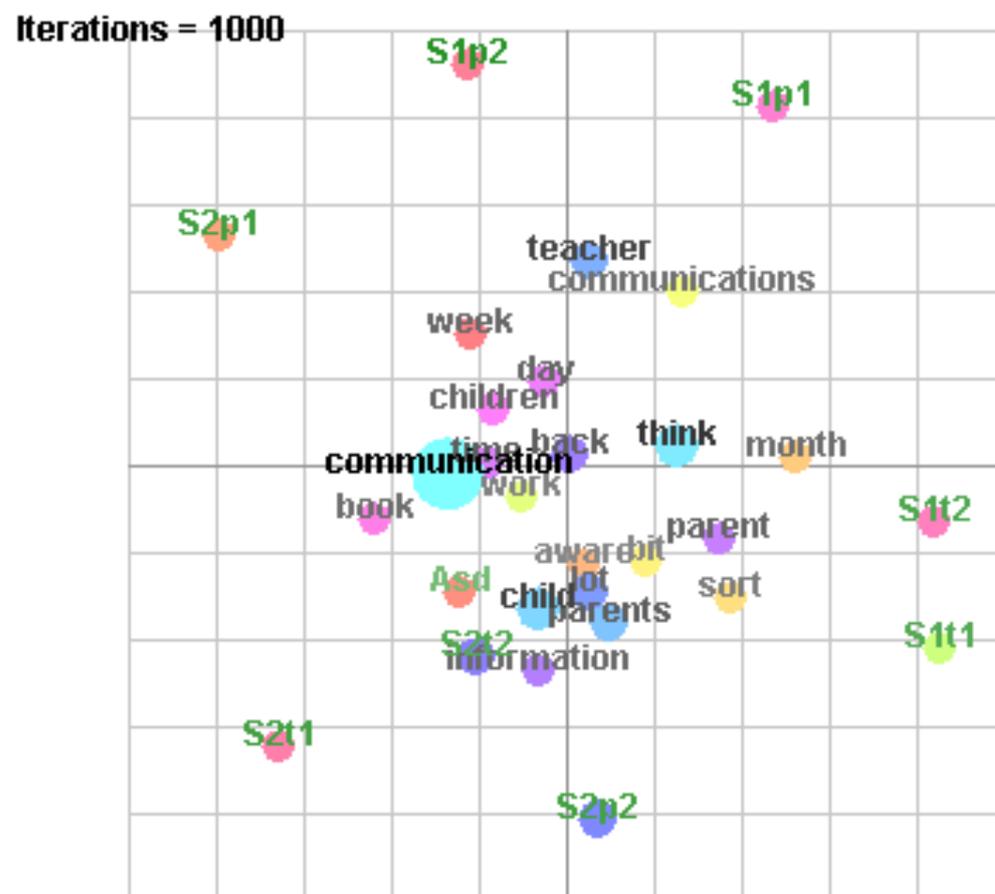


Figure 5.6. Tagged Leximancer map of parent and teacher voices, 91% of concepts showing: Face-to-face interviews.

The concepts used more by the parents, generally appear at the top of Figure 5.6. Three parents frequently referred to the “communications” each “day” or “week,” with the “teacher.” They used these concepts while engaging in the common discourse regarding the time taken for such communications. The tag for the conversation of the School 2 dyad 2 parent (2p2) is positioned among the tags for four teachers. She responded to the interview question using similar concepts to those used by the teachers.

The tags for the four teachers are located in the bottom half of the Figure 5.6 concept map. The concepts near these tags are clustered together (i.e., “lot”, “information”, “parents”, “parent”, “sort”, “child”, and “ASD”). This layout suggests that these concepts are used more by these teachers and the one parent (2p2) whose tag is in close proximity. This parent worked as a pharmacist. It appears there is a two-way spilt shown on the Figure 5.6. The parents who were not in paid employment have used many similar concepts similar, and the parent that was in employment and the teachers have used a professional register consisting of like concepts.

The two tags for the School 1 teachers (S1t1 and S1t2) are closely positioned near each other. A distinct emphasis in the interview concepts of these two teachers was on the role that home-school communication had in “sort(ing)” out problems with “parents.” The positioning of the two tags for School 2 teachers (S2t1 and S2t2) relatively further apart from each other shows that these two participants concentrated some of their interview concepts on the function of information sharing in home-school communication.

Even though the parent and teacher of each dyad conversed about home-school communications around the same child, they frequently used concepts that were different to those used by their communication partner. Figure 5.6 shows that only the two participant tags for School 2 dyad 2 (S2p2 and S2t2) are in close proximity at the bottom of the vertical axis. Tags for the conversation of the parent and teacher of the other three dyads (i.e., S1p1, S1t1; S1p2, S1t2; S2p1, S2t1) are some distance from each other.

### ***5.6.2 Parent and teacher conversations separated***

Figure 5.7 shows that the concepts used by the four parents during the face-to-face interviews are clustered around the middle of this concept map. The tags for these participants form the extreme points of a rough quadrangle. This arrangement shows

that a common discourse was present across each interview around “communications” each “day” or “week,” with the “teacher.” Nevertheless, some concepts cluster around one of the parents (S2p2) and away from the other parents. The tag for this parent sat nearby those for the teacher on the Figure 5.6 map of the combined face-to-face interview conversations. The interview concepts of three of the four parents (S1p1, S1p2, and S2p1) were focused on the function of “talk” in regular communication between the home and the school. The parent from School 2 dyad 2 (S2p2) spoke instead about “parents” sharing “information” about “children.” The other three parents also spoke in individualised ways. School 1 parent 1 talked about “communications” with “teacher”, and School 1 parent 2 talked about the “time” to “talk” about “children.” School 2 parent 1 talked about the use of the communication “book” to report what had “happened” each “day.”

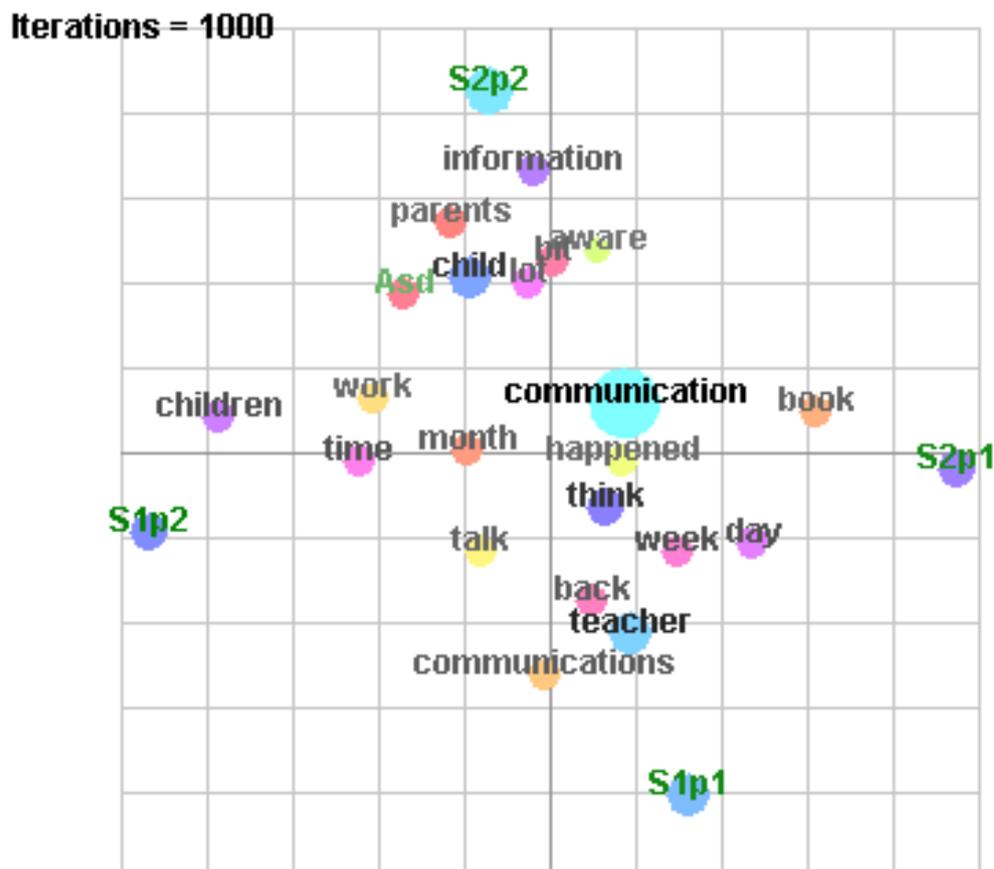


Figure 5.7. Leximancer map of parent voices, with 91% of concepts showing: Face-to-face interviews.

Figure 5.8 shows that the concepts used by the four teachers during the face-to-face interviews are bound by the four participant tags that are generally on the edges of the grid. All of the teachers used the concepts at the centre of this grid. They

discussed “talk” each “day” with “parents.” The concept “talk” did not appear on the map of the combined parent and teacher interview conversations (see figure 5.6). A more frequently used concept must have been placed on top of “talk” on that map. Many more of the concepts appear near the two tags for the teachers of School 2 (S2t1 and S2t2). The teachers at School 2 discussed more issues than did the teachers at School 1. Raw data explained this result. The face-to-interviews involving the School 2 teachers were of longer duration than those for the School 1 teachers.

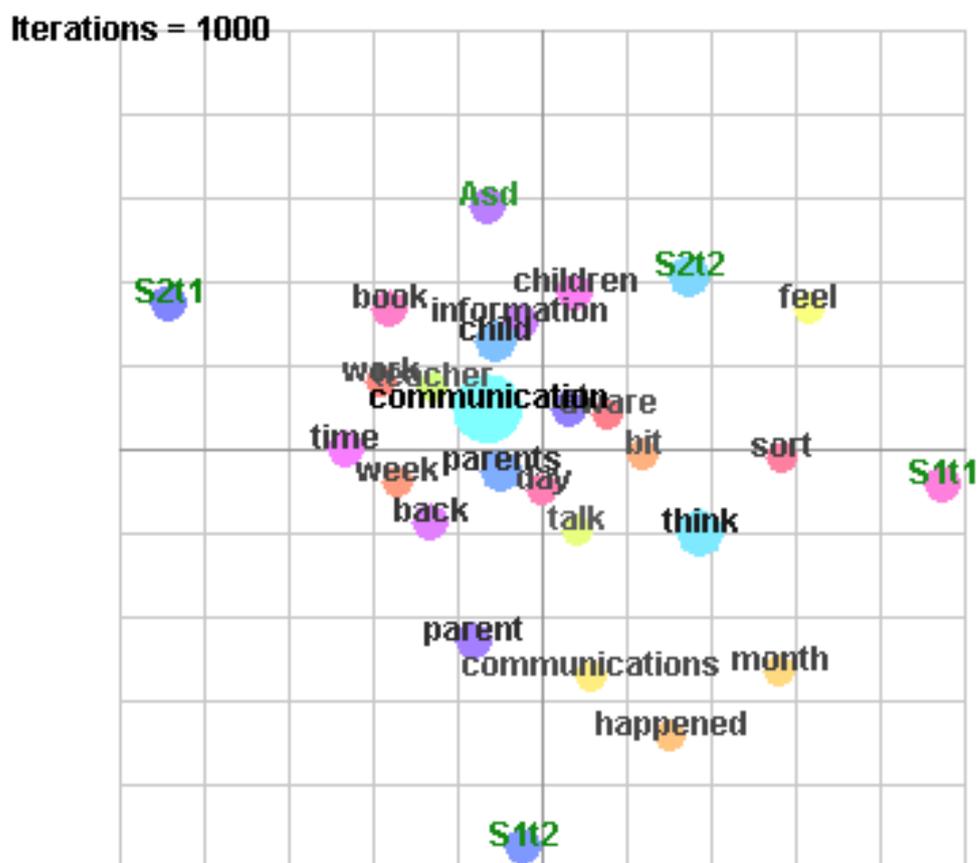


Figure 5.8. Leximancer map of teacher voices, 91% of concepts showing: Face-to-face interviews.

The two School 1 teachers spoke to a limited number of individualised concerns. The Figure 5.8 map shows that the tags of both of these teachers are positioned a distance from each other with few concepts between these tags. The conversation from the two teachers from School 2 was slightly more distinctive than that of the other teachers and parents. Concepts migrated towards the S2t1 and S2t2 tags at the top of this map. These teachers were concerned with sharing “information” about the “child” or “children with ASD.” As such, the concepts used by the teachers at School 2 encompassed the contributions of all four teachers as a combined group.

The concept “book” is positioned close to the two School 2 teacher tags and away from School 1 teacher tags. The communication book was a key concept in the conversations of the School 2 teachers but not of the School 1 teachers.

### 5.7 Concept listing

Table 5.4 shows listings of the frequent concepts used across and within separate and combined face-to-face interviews. Identical colour coding of “like” concepts to that used for the focus group data was used. Similarities and differences in the face-to-face interview conversation of these parents and teachers were highlighted from these lists. Findings were linked to the research questions of this study.

Green coloured concepts relate to words in the topic of the face-to-face interview discussions (“communication”, “communicate”, and “ASD”). Parents and teachers provided some elaborations on the topic. Many more other types of concepts (i.e., those not coloured green) were more frequently used in the structured interview format than in the focus group meetings.

Pink coloured concepts relate to stakeholder’s titles. These concepts were used in moderate frequency across the face-to-face interviews. This result corresponded with a result from the focus group meetings; parents talked about teachers—teachers talked about parents.

There were both consistencies and inconsistencies between the rates that the different dyads recorded and discussed types of home-school communication. Table 5.4 shows that there were only two concepts used in the face-to-face interviews clearly related to types of communication (i.e., “book” and “talk”). Analyses showed that (a) types of communication were discussed by various dyads, even when those types were not frequently recorded by that dyad, and (b) two types of communication (i.e., “newsletter” and “hand written note”) were recorded but not discussed by dyads. School 1 parents and teachers recorded no communicative events for the communication book and used “book” as a concept on only two occasions. The School 2 parents and teachers recorded a small number of communication book events ( $n = 7$ ) relative to the number of occasions they discussed such communications ( $n = 40$ ) in the face-to-face interviews. Table 5.5 shows that both dyads at School 2 spoke about the virtues of the communication book, while in practice, recorded few communicative events for this type of communication.

Table 5.4. Concepts Used Across Face-to-face Interviews

Order	Combinations of Face-to-face Interviews										
	Combined	Parents	Teachers	S1p1	S1p2	S2p1	S2p2	S1t1	S1t2	S2t1	S2t2
1	Com'n 295	Com'n 173	Com'n 123	Teacher 38	Com'n 40	Com'n 54	Com'n 43	Com'n 27	Com'n 23	Com'n 36	Com'n 37
2	Think 106	Teacher 67	Think 59	Com'n 36	Children 24	Think 16	Inform' 19	Sort 15	Think 19	Book 11	Think 20
3	Teacher 80	Think 47	Parents 38	Think 13	Teacher 13	Book 14	Parents 16	Think 13	Parents 16	Back 10	Home 14
4	Parents 54	Children 29	Back 32	Day 10	Think 11	Teacher 10	Lot 11	Lot 8	Parent 11	ASD 9	Aware 13
5	Time 54	Week 27	Time 27	Back 10	Time 9	Day 9	Bit 10	Feel 7	Happen' 10	Parents 8	Parents 13
6	Back 54	Day 27	Lot 27	Week 8	Week 8	Com'tes 8	Aware 9	Month 6	Child 9	Time 8	Book 11
7	Children 47	Time 27	Book 24	Child 8	Child 7	Week 7	Child 9	Happen' 5	Time 9	Think 7	Inform' 11
8	Day 47	Child 26	Sort 24	Com'tes 7	Com'tes 6	Time 5	Month 9	Day 5	Com'tes 8	Child 7	Back 10
9	Week 46	Inform' 23	Month 22	Happen' 5	ASD 6	Happen' 4	Time 8	Back 5	Month 8	Work 7	Children 9
10	Child 46	Com'tes 22	Inform' 22	Time 5	Work 5	Back 4	Think 7	Week 4	Back 7	Feel 7	School 8
11	Inform' 45	Back 22	Feel 21	Feel 5	Back 5	Talk 4	Feel 7	Bit 4	Lot 5	Day 6	Time 8
12	Lot 45	Month 20	Happen' 20	Parent 5	Month 5	ASD 4	ASD 7	Work 4	ASD 5	Teacher 6	Lot 8
13	Book 42	Book 18	Child 20	Aware 4	Talk 5	Bit 3	Happen' 6	Inform' 4	Week 4	Lot 6	Day 7
14	Month 42	Bit 18	Day 20	Sort 4	Parents 3	Feel 33	Work 6	Children 3	Children 4	Week 5	Week 6
15	Com'tes 40	Talk 18	ASD 20	Work 4	Bit 3	Inform' 3	Teacher 6	Teacher 3	Sort 4	Inform' 5	Parent 6
16	Feel 37	Lot 18	Week 19	Month 4	Day 3	Lot 3	Day 5	Talk 3	Bit 4	Com'tes 5	Feel 5
17	Happen' 36	ASD 17	Children 18	Talk 4	Parent 3	Child 2	Talk 5	Book 2	Talk 4	Happen' 3	Month 5
18	ASD 37	Parents 16	Com'tes 18	Lot 3	Happen' 1	Month 2	Week 4	ASD 2	Day 2	Month 3	Com'tes 4
19	Sort 33	Happen' 16	Parent 18	Bit 2	Sort 1	Children 1	Sort 4	Time 2	Aware 2	Children 2	Talk 4
20	Work 31	Work 16	Aware 15	Children 1	Feel 1	Work 1	Book 4	Com'tes 1	Feel 2	Sort 2	ASD 4
21	Talk 30	Feel 16	Work 15	Parents 1	Inform' 1		Children 3	Parents 1	Inform' 2	Talk 1	Sort 3
22	Bit 29	Aware 13	Teacher 14		Lot 1		Back 3	Child 1	Teacher 1		Bit 3
23	Parent 29	Parent 11	Talk 12				Parent 3	Parent 1			Child 3

Note. Com'n = Communication, Com'tes = Communicate, Face-to = Face-to-face interview, and Happen' = Happened and Inform' = Information.

Table 5.5. Recorded and Discussed Types of Communication

Participant Type	Types of Communication <i>Recorded</i> and (Discussed)						
	<i>Newsletter</i>	<i>Hand Written Note</i>	<i>Communication Book</i>	<i>Planned Meeting</i>	<i>Unplanned Meeting</i>	<i>Telephone</i>	<i>Other</i>
<i>School 1 Dyad 1</i>	5	5	0	1	8	1	0
Parent (S1p2)			(Book 0)		(Talk 5)		
Teacher (S1t2)			(Book 0)		(Talk 4)		
<i>School 1 Dyad 2</i>	4	0	0	2	8	3	0
Parent (S1p1)			(Book 0)		(Talk 4)		
Teacher (S1t1)			(Book 2)		(Talk 3)		
<i>School 2 Dyad 1</i>	3	0	5	1	9	1	1
Parent (S2p1)			(Book 14)		(Talk 4)		
Teacher (S2t1)			(Book 11)		(Talk 1)		
<i>School 2 Dyad 2</i>	1	2	2	0	1	0	1
Parent (S2p2)			(Book 4)		(Talk 5)		
Teacher (S2t2)			(Book 11)		(Talk 4)		

*Note.* Information in italics shows types documented during the home-school communication records. Information in parentheses shows concepts discussed during the face-to-face interviews.

Unplanned meetings, planned meeting and telephone were all oral communicative types. The first three dyads listed in Table 5.5 recorded similar frequencies for these types and used the concept “talk” on a similar number of occasions during their interview conversation. School 2 dyad 2 used the concept “talk” in the same relative frequency as the other dyad but only recorded one unplanned meeting. Apparently, perceptions on the value of conversation in this dyad was not matched by parent and teacher practice.

The newsletter type was recorded in relatively high frequency but did not appear to be highly valued as a type of home-school communication. Newsletters were sent home on a fortnightly basis at School 1 and School 2 during the month of home-school record. Despite this practice, none of the eight parent or teacher participants mentioned the newsletter by name in the face-to-face interviews.

School 1 dyad 2 and School 2 dyad 2 recorded using the hand written note. Nevertheless, this type did not appear to be as valued as other types that were used as frequently ( $n = 7$ ) but discussed more extensively. The communication book was used on seven occasions as was the hand written note by the combined group of parents and teachers. The concept list shows 42 occasions for the concept “book” but none for “hand written note.”

One further result shows considerable disparity between home-school communication records and the face-to-face interviews. School 2 dyad 2 focused their conversation on the theoretical need for home-school communication to share “information.” The parent and the teacher use this concept so regularly ( $n = 30$ ), their contributions pushed the combined tally for this concept ( $n = 45$ ) beyond the combined tally for the concepts of “book” ( $n = 42$ ) and “talk” ( $n = 30$ ). However, in practice, this dyad only engaged in eight episodes of home-school communication or eight opportunities for information sharing, during the month of recording.

### **5.8 Summative comment**

A constrained range and frequency of type usage occurred during the month of home-school communication recordings. Substantial differences occurred across the records of the four parent-teacher dyads. Variance occurred across the range and frequency of type recording. For three of the four dyads, parents relied mainly on unplanned meetings with the teacher and newsletters from the school administration, and

teachers mainly on unplanned meetings. In contrast, School 2 Dyad 2 participants recorded considerably fewer communications and recorded a preference for written types. Across all dyads parents and teachers initiated and steered the communicative events with their partner in a balanced manner (i.e., about 50% of the time).

Specific results link to each of the five research questions:

1. “Unplanned meetings”, “talk”, and “communication book” types were frequently recorded types. Various dyads frequently discussed types that were not frequently recorded by that dyad. Both of the School 1 parent-teacher dyads and one of the two School 2 parent-teacher dyads recorded and discussed many unplanned meetings. School 1 recorded but did not discuss usage of the newsletter. A communication book was used irregularly at School 2 but not at all at School 1 (Research question 1: Types).
2. Each of the dyads corresponded around a common purpose (Research question 2). Communications related to the individualised need of the student with ASD. The parent and teacher of each dyad spoke to an individualised concern of their student: either (a) behavioural, (b) adaptation to change, (c) emotional, or (d) curriculum support. Lines of communication were kept open to build a working relationship between the home and the school. This positive relationship was deemed necessary for communications when the child with ASD faced individualised challenges, (Research question 2: Purpose).
3. The level of satisfaction with home-school communication was generally high. Teachers were satisfied with their efforts to engage parents in home-school communication. Parents were generally satisfied with communication practices. The parents at School 1 were dissatisfied with communications with school administrators around IEP programming (Research question 3: Satisfaction).
4. The major facilitator to home-school communication, as perceived by both parents and teachers, was a good relationship between the home and the school (Research question 4: Facilitators).
5. The parents and teachers identified time as a barrier to home-school communication but were satisfied with the efforts of teachers to accommodate this barrier (Research question 5: Barriers).

Tagging of each of the eight participant’s conversation did not highlight consistent distinctions among the conversation of the four parent-teacher dyads that recorded

home-school communication events. There was some correspondence on the basis of role. Three of the parents spoke about the function of “talk” in frequent communications. The four teachers and one of the parents spoke about sharing “information.”

In this chapter, individual parents and teachers reflected upon recent home-school communication events that they had recorded in face-to-face interviews with the researcher. In the next chapter (Chapter 6), the extent to which these results complement and build upon results from the focus group meetings, reported in the previous chapter (Chapter 4), is discussed.

## CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

### 6.1 Introduction

This chapter is comprised of three sequential sections. First, a discussion of the results from the two previous chapters is presented to link findings with the literature. Second, limitations of the study are reported to contextualise implications. Third, these implications for school practice and future research are detailed to direct future practice. The small number of parents and teachers at two schools in the Brisbane South District over a period of a month provided a particular view from within their context

### 6.2 Discussion

Key findings emerged from the research activities in relation to the five research questions. Parents and teachers focused their discussions on their daily use of either the unplanned meeting or the communication book (KIT book) types of home-school communication (Research question 1). They perceived that the purpose of such communications was to accommodate the individual needs of each student with ASD (Research question 2). Participants were satisfied with home-school communications because they were focused on this agreed purpose (Research question 3). Also, the positive relationships that existed between the home and school were perceived as a facilitator, and time was perceived as both a facilitator and a barrier to such communications (Research question 4 and Research question 5).

This discussion necessarily was focused on results related to Research question 1 (types) because Leximancer was unable to generate single word concepts related to the other research questions. Complex notions such as the purpose (Research question 2), satisfaction (Research question 3), facilitators (Research question 4), and barriers (Research question 5) of home-school communication could not be reduced to one-worded concepts and still convey meaning. Also, the parents and teachers used less words to respond to these four research questions relative to the number of words that they used to respond to Research question 1 (types). Silverman (2002) emphasised that discourse cannot be effectively represented just by coding and sorting contents into categories. Browsing of text from the conversations of this study revealed results related

to each of the five research questions. Concept maps and concepts lists generated by Leximancer software (Smith, 2002) were useful in providing the relationships and frequencies of concepts across the focus group meetings and face-to-face interviews in response to Research question 1. Concepts for the types of communication such as “book”, “talk”, “face-to-face” and “phone” were formed from the sorting processing of Leximancer software based on frequently occurring words in these conversations.

### **6.2.1 Preferences for types of home-school communication**

*Research question 1: What types of communication now occur among the school community, and when do these communications occur?*

A small range of home-school communication types was discussed and used by the parents and teachers of the two schools of this study. This result was apparent across the three research activities. At each of the four focus group meetings, parents and teachers used just four concepts as they discussed the types of communication at their school, “book” (communication book), “talk”, “face-to-face”, and “phone” (see Chapter 4, Figures 4.2, 4.3, and 4.4). Furthermore, the home-school communication recording referred to only newsletter, communication book, planned meeting, unplanned meeting, telephone and email types (see Chapter 5, Figure 5.1). The face-to-face interview conversation focused on the unplanned meeting (“talk”) and communication book (“book”), and virtually ignored other communications noted during the month-long recording activity (see Chapter 5, Figures 5.6, 5.7, and 5.8). Across the focus group meetings and face-to-face interviews, the concepts “talk”, and “face-to-face” were used to refer to a short “unplanned meeting” either at the time when children were dropped off or collected from school. Therefore, any reference to “face-to-face” or “talk” by the participants was perceived as a reference to the unplanned meeting.

A key finding of this study was that the parents and the teachers engaged in two-way communications between the home and school using either unplanned meeting or communication book communications. Text browsing of the face-to-face interview scripts identified that the four parent-teacher dyads were able to use these two types of communication in the frequency that was required to address the needs of the student with ASD (see Chapter 5, Section 5.5). The parent and teacher of three of these dyads communicated on a daily basis. Events around the four other communications types that

had been noted during the month of recording were briefly and indirectly referred to (newsletter, hand written note, planned meeting, and telephone). The insignificance of the conversation around these four types is shown by the fact that the sorting process of Leximancer (Smith, 2002) attributed these types to the frequency counts of other concepts (see Chapter 5, Section 5.7, Table 5.4).

The recording activity did not account for most events that had occurred during the unplanned meetings (see Chapter 5, Figure 5.1). It appeared that these unplanned communications were so commonplace for the home and school partners that they did not recall them when completing the recording sheets. According to a parent in a focus group meeting, unplanned meetings were used to discuss “day-to-day things” (see Chapter 4, Section 4.4.2, p. 60). Parents and teachers during the face-to-face interviews continued this impression. Perhaps participants recorded communication events only when they were of longer duration or the content was unusual. There are some bases for this proposition in the literature. Bridgemohan et al. (2005) found that such meetings were usually of short duration, and Chopra and French (2000) found that they were typically used for “routine limited interactions” (p. 243).

The preference of parents and teachers for unplanned meetings was an unexpected result of the present study. The context for this study was a primary school, and the particular focus was the support of students with ASD. Previous studies that had identified use of the unplanned meeting had usually examined parent-teacher partnerships in early childhood settings without particularly investigating practice around students with special needs or those with ASD (Bridgemohan et al., 2005; Chopra & French, 2004; Weiss et al., 2006). Recent studies involving parents of students with ASD have tended to report positive expectations and perceptions of collaborative practice with the teachers of their children in response to frequent home-school communications (Spann et al., 2003; Stoner & Angell, 2006; Whitaker, 2007). However, communication books rather than unplanned meetings were used to provide frequent communications. In the present study, unplanned meetings served the same purpose.

Because unplanned meeting and communication book provided the two-way interaction that parents and teachers wanted, other types of communication did not need to be relied upon. Nil or low frequency results were obtained for communications about the

use of report cards and IEP meetings. These results also reflected specific conditions in the study. The children in this study were young students with ASD and there were no scheduled IEP meetings. No reference to report cards was made throughout the data collection. This finding contrasts with findings in the literature. Eccles and Harold (1994) found that most teachers of Year 7 and 8 students in their large study ( $N = 1400$ ) without a disability, used report cards as the only type of home-school communication to communicate with parents. As the research activities were conducted mid-semester in the present study, reference to report cards was less likely. IEP meetings were referred to only briefly during this study by only two of the eight parents in the face-to-face interviews. This result was unexpected. The literature considered IEP meetings to be a type of home-school communication that was critical for collaborative planning to support students with special needs including those with ASD (Clark, 2000; Dabkowski, 2004; Rock, 2000; Stroggilos & Xanthacou, 2006; Yanok & Derubetis, 1989). Perhaps, the timing of IEP meetings at the two schools also did not coincide with the present study.

The two schools differed in specific ways on Research question 1. School 1 dyads used unplanned meetings as their main communication type for both parents and teachers. School 2 dyads used both unplanned meetings and communication books. From the focus group meetings and face-to-face interview conversations at School 1, it was clear that use of the communication book had not previously been found to be successful at that school. Teachers did not provide this type of home-school communication as an option to their parents. The parents were happy to use unplanned meeting rather than communication book communications. At School 2, the communication book was the most frequently mentioned communicative type by both parents and teachers. One of the parents and both of the teachers focused more of their conversation on the communication book exchanges when reflecting on the recorded communication events during the face-to-face interview (see Chapter 5, Table 5.3). Unplanned meeting events had occurred in a like frequency to communication book events.

It was possible that the parents and teachers at School 2 were conditioned to associate communication book with home-school communication from practices maintained by the Special Education Unit (SEU) staff. This kind of SEU, with specialised staff, had been established at this school that did not exist at School 1. School 2 had written policy on home-school communication composed with input from SEU staff (see Chapter 3,

Section 3.9, Box 2.1.). SEU staff took responsibility for facilitating parent–class teacher communication by writing communication book messages for class teachers (see text sample by a teacher, last paragraph in Section 4.5.1.). This dynamic may have helped to draw the face-to-face interview conversation toward discussing the communication book. Other investigations identified use of the communication book across primary schools for all students (Davern, 2004) and for students with disabilities (Hall et al., 2003; Stoner & Angell, 2006).

### **6.2.2 Purpose of home-school communication**

*Research question 2: What is the purpose of these communications?*

The main purpose of home-school communication for the parents and teachers was to address the day-to-day challenges for each student with ASD. In the focus group meetings and face-to-face interviews, it was reported that home-school communications helped to create a collaborative environment between parents and teachers (see Chapter 4, Section 4.4.2 and Chapter 5, Section 5.5.2 for text samples). This result was consistent with findings reported in the literature from other studies involving students with ASD (Spann et al., 2003; Sperry et al., 1999; Whitaker, 2007).

A distinctive need of the student with ASD was the focal purpose for each parent and teacher (see Chapter Section 5.5.2 for text samples). At School 1, dyad 1 focused on aggressive behaviour issues, and dyad 2 addressed change of routine issues. At School 2, dyad 1 focused on issues related to emotional state, and dyad 2 focused on anxiety about curriculum challenges. In the large investigation of parents of students with ASD ( $N = 353$ ) by Whitaker (2007), parents and teachers also shared a common understanding of a specific purpose for communications related to student's needs.

Parents and teacher acknowledged that the month of recording was typically uneventful. Home-school communication kept the lines of communication open. Each participant realised that ASD could cause a rapid spike in the anxiety experienced by the student with this condition. More frequent home-school communications of longer duration were perceived to be required when the student with ASD was experiencing anxiety. Stoner et al. (2005) advised that collaborative parent-teacher partnerships for students with ASD

needed to be based on responsive home-school communications.

Comments about the purpose of home-school communications at the two schools seemed to reflect different roles. Parents tended to discuss sharing of a “problem” with the teacher and the challenges of “back” and forward interaction. The conversation of the teachers during the focus group meetings centred on the “time” taken for “communications” with “parents” about the “student” with “ASD” (see Chapter 4, Figure 4.3). During interviews, teachers talked about sharing a “lot” of “information” with “parents”, or about helping the “parent” to “sort” out problems faced by the “child” or “children” with “ASD” (Chapter 5, Figure 5.7).

Thus, the parent and teacher of each dyad reported a similar purpose for home-school communication related to the individualised need of the student with ASD, but they did use some different concepts. The concepts used by each participant were shaped by whether they were responding within the culturally defined roles of “parent” or “teacher.” Gilligan et al. (2003) explained, while the language used by each of the participants was individual and distinct, it was also “polymorphic”, that is, embedded in culture and in relationship. In our culture, parents and teachers tend to use particular concepts more than others.

### **6.2.3 Satisfaction with home-school communication**

*Research question 3: How satisfied are you with the current ways that parents and teacher are communicating?*

High levels of satisfaction with current parent-teacher communications were reported by all of the participants across the focus group and face-to-face interview activities. Parents and teachers were satisfied that communications was focused on the individual needs of the student with ASD. Each of the participants was also satisfied with the extent that they and their communication partner contributed to problem solving around this need.

Parents and teachers of the same dyad were satisfied that the home-school communications they used met their needs to communicate with each. Other studies on the parent-teacher partnerships for students with ASD have also found that parents were satisfied with the efforts of class teachers to engage them in home-school communication focused on the needs of the student (Spann et al., 2003; Sperry et al., 1999; Whitaker, 2007). During interviews, participants reported that they were able to communicate with their home-school communication partner at the frequency they desired. Parents involved in this study appreciated that they could avail themselves of “teacher” time that they perceived parents of students that did not have ASD, of a like age, typically did not access.

Both of the parents at School 1 were dissatisfied with an aspect of home-school communications that was coordinated by staff other than the class teacher of their child. One of these parents criticised the lack of teacher aide support to explain homework tasks to her child, and the other parent was critical of school-wide practices around the IEP process. Because of the impact of ASD upon the student of School 1 dyad 1, information sharing around homework support was a priority for the parent and teacher. Both the parent and teacher explained the need to support the student’s challenges in transferring learning across the home and school contexts. The parent was dissatisfied with the level of support provided by staff other than the classroom teacher to assist the child transfer learning from the school to the home context. She would have liked extra teacher aide support to help explain homework tasks to her child with ASD. Harniss et al. (2001) suggested that schools use multiple strategies to avoid and address breakdowns in home-school communication around homework tasks.

Parent satisfaction with school-wide practice around the IEP process appeared to be at different levels at the two schools. During the face-to-face interview, the parent of School 1 dyad 2 shared her dissatisfaction when the IEP document was changed after the meeting stage without her consultation. The results of studies into the IEP process over time have suggested that parent and teacher collaboration has rarely been a part of this process. For example, Yanok and Derubetis (1989) and Stroggilos and Xanthacou (2006), reported that parents were typically not involved in such collaboration. The parent of School 2 dyad 2 was satisfied with her input before and during the IEP meeting.

All of the participants were satisfied the home-school communications maintained by the classroom teacher and the parent of a student with ASD. This finding holds regardless of concerns voiced by the parents at one of the schools about school-wide communications for homework and IEP meetings.

### **6.2.4 Facilitators and barriers of home-school communication**

*Research question 4: What are the facilitators to home-school communication?*

*Research question 5: What are the barriers to home-school communication?*

The parents and teachers of this study discussed two influences on home-school communication at their schools: (a) the positive and open relationships that existed between home and school (facilitator), and (b) time (facilitator and barrier). The parents and teachers praised the open relationship that existed that both schools during the focus group meetings and face-to-face interviews. Findings from the literature have shown that regular, sensitive home-school communications helps to establish collaborative partnerships between parents and teachers for all students (Decker & Majerczyk, 2000; Epstein, 2001; Sanders, 1996; Vaden-Kiernan, 2003), for students with disabilities (Blue-Banning et al., 2004; Cox, 2005), and for students with ASD (Spann et al., 2003; Sperry et al., 1999; Whitaker, 2007).

In this study, parents and teachers shared responsibility for initiating home-school communication. The results of the recording activity (see Chapter 5, Figure 5.1) showed that parents initiated 24 events, and teachers initiated 25 events. This balanced initiation is an indicator of “*family-centred*” or “*family-driven*” styles of parent-teacher partnership that Porter (2008) viewed as necessary to support needs of children in schools.

Time was mentioned both as a facilitator and as a barrier to home-school communication, by different groups of participants. Parents in the focus groups explained that their preparedness to attend unplanned meetings at a time that suited the teachers was a facilitator. Teachers in the focus groups mentioned time as a barrier to home-school communication. During the face-to-face interviews, the parents were appreciative of the time teachers gave to them for home-school communication, and the teachers were please with the time that they had provided for home-school

communication. In line with the findings of Whitaker (2007), parents perceived the time that teachers devoted to home-school communication as a facilitator to these interactions. Time constraints (Hammitte & Nelson, 2001; Hughes & McNaughton, 2001; Walker, 1989), and need to find a mutually convenient time for parents and educators to meet (Rodger et al., 2004) have long been acknowledged as challenges to maintaining a collaborative parent-teacher partnership.

### ***6.2.5 Other influences on home-school communication***

Two additional influences to those outlined above also appeared to have shaped how unplanned meetings were used, without the parents and teachers necessarily being aware of these influences. First, the availability of three of the four parents for daily unplanned meetings meant it was more efficient for three of the four dyads to engage in brief communications at pick up or drop off times each day. The ages of the students with ASD appeared to also influence the availability of the four parents for unplanned meetings. In this study, as was the case in other research (Chopra & French, 2004; Weiss et al., 2006), parents and teachers of children in the early years rather than the later years of primary schools engaged more in unplanned meetings at drop-off and pick up times. Second, a lack of departmental or school based policy allowed space for the parents and teachers of the four dyads in this study to engage in the easiest type of home-school communication for them to organise to meet their needs.

Parent and teacher availability for daily unplanned meetings was identified from the face-to-face interview conversations as a determiner of the type and frequency of home-school communication in this study. Three of the parents involved in the record tasks were able to attend daily unplanned meetings. Consequently, each spoke with the teacher of their child each day. Very few details about the content of unplanned meeting conversations were provided in the parent or teacher interviews. When questioned in interviews, individual parents or teachers either could not recall what was said or gave a vague response recalling that the conversation was about the behaviour of the student with ASD. As outlined in the Chapter 2 literature review, similar results have been reported in a limited number of studies that have examined conversations between parents and teachers at pick up and drop off times (Chopra & French, 2004; Weiss et al., 2006).

Nevertheless, the parents and teachers of these dyads were satisfied that unplanned meetings allowed the focus to be placed on social challenges faced by the student with ASD. The School 2 dyad 1 parent wrote issues of concern in the communication book in case the teacher was not able to communicate with her on a given day. This parent reported that the teacher was usually available for unplanned meetings.

Access to daily communication was possible for three of the four parents. Typical of most parents with school aged children, but distinct to the other three parents in this study, the parent from School 2 dyad 2 worked in full-time employment. Hence, communication events between this parent and her teacher dyadic partner needed to be scheduled. It was relatively more challenging for this parent and her teacher to regularly communicate, which at least in part explained why they interacted less often than the other parents and teachers (see Chapter 5, Figures 5.1 and 5.5). Scrutiny of the interview texts showed that the conversation of this parent and teacher pairing was much more focused on the curriculum for the student with ASD than that of the other three dyads. These stakeholders described teaching strategies that each communication partner used to support the impact of ASD on the student's performance in two activities; a written project and a three-day camp.

The child of the parent from School 2 dyad 2 was older than the other three children (see Chapter 5, Table 5.1). This child was age 11 years whereas two of other three children were aged 9 years, and the other child was aged 7 years. The parent and teacher of this child engaged in fewer unplanned meetings than the other three dyads. It is much more likely that parents and teachers chat when their children are in the early years rather than the middle or senior years of schooling. The literature review of this study, presented in Chapter 2 identified two studies addressing drop-off and pick-up times (Chopra & French, 2004; Weiss et al., 2006) both of which were focused on the early years of education. Early years teachers were found to have provided parents with frequent unplanned meetings at the beginning and at the end of the school day.

Limited policy guidance from either the DETA or the schools was in place to standardise how home-school communication types should be used (see the Chapter 2). Participants were essentially able to use whatever types of communication that they chose, as frequently or infrequently as they chose, knowing that they would not be called on to

account for their practice. The School 1 focus group conversation provided the only oral policy of significance at that school; use of the communication book was not facilitated at this school. The School 2 coordinator of activities for this study provided the only written policy that relates to communication types discussed or used in this study (see Chapter 2, Box 2.1). Of relevance is that teachers at this school were directed to use the communication book when necessary.

### **6.3 Limitations of this study**

Limitations of the present research related to five issues (a) the availability of the large proportion of the parent and teacher participants for unplanned meetings, (b) the involvement of just parents and teachers in the research, (c) the role of the Researcher in the interviews, (d) the structured nature of the questions posed in both types of interview, and (e) the scrutiny of relatively few communication events collected over a short period of time that were self-reported by participants.

Parents and teachers of this study were atypically available for unplanned meetings. Description of methodology in Chapter 3 outlined that the parents and teachers invited to participate in the record and face-to-face interview activities were those likely to be available to complete these tasks. Most of these participants were also available for daily home-school communication. The discussion of the findings of this case provided insight into home-school communication practice when parents and teachers of students with ASD were available for frequent interaction at drop off and pick up times as recommended in recent research albeit in the early childhood sector (Chopra & French, 2004; Weiss et al., 2006).

The involvement of other community members and school staff may have provided further perspectives on home-school communication. The HOSES at either of these schools may have provided further insights into the IEP process that these administrations had the responsibility for overseeing. Also, members from the administration may have provided further insight into school-wide policy practice about home-school communication. Most of the previous research into home-school communication had drawn on perceptions and practice from parents and teachers. Therefore, focusing on these stakeholder groups did not reveal why the school

administrations did not pursue more active policy on home-school communication.

The role of the Researcher inevitably played some part in limiting the results that were obtained. As Silverman (2002) cautioned, there is a tension between the “insider” and “outsider” roles that researchers need to adopt when conducting interviews. He warned that interviewers who position themselves either too close or too far away from the cultural stories that interviewees are asked to tell, restrict how these stories are told. How interviewees respond is based on their perception of what social category the interviewer belongs to (Silverman, 2002). During the ice breaker sections in both the focus group meetings and face-to-face interviews, the Researcher made a point of explaining that he was both a classroom teacher as well as a parent of a student with ASD. The aim was to establish a degree of familiarity and trust with each stakeholder group by identifying that he “was one of them.” At the same time, he attempted to establish a sense of impartiality by explaining that he could also perceive practice from the stakeholder group that the parents of students with ASD or teachers did not belong to.

The Researcher made a decision not to introduce a type of home-school communication until a participant referred to this type. He reasoned that, if he had introduced a type, he would have positioned himself too much as an “insider” in the dialogue and steered the conversation toward his constructs of home-school communication. However, there were lost opportunities to further investigate use because of this restraint. For example, perceptions around IEP and report card use at the focus group meetings could have been probed had the Researcher introduced these types. It may also have been useful to have asked the teacher of School 1 dyad 2 whether he would have used the communication book type if school policy had allowed. This teacher had a preference for using hand written notes during for home-school communications. However, because this teacher had not referred to the communication book during the face-to-face interview it was reasoned that questions around communication books could not be raised. More instructions could have been made to stimulate the parents and teachers to comment on types of communication that they had not mentioned. Opportunity was provided for the participants, to consider types of home-school communication other than those that immediately came to mind, at the end of the focus group meetings and face-to-face interviews (see Appendix C, for Additional Focus Group Meeting and Face-

to-Face Interview Questions). Open-ended questions were posed at this time to prompt the participants to consider communication types that they had not previously mentioned in the focus group or face-to-face interview.

Questions were posed that helped to align the conversation of the focus group meetings and face-to-face interviews. The research questions and accompanying probes formed the general structure of these interviews. Not only did this cueing set the participants up to use the particular types of concepts relevant to the topic, but also the concepts that were used by the participants were close to the real meaning of the words contained in the questions.

The present study relied on self-report practices over a short (month-long) period. Green, Camilli, and Elmore (2006) explained that self-report methodologies are easily administered and provide opportunities for unique information that is not offered by methodologies that use set questions. However, as these authors caution, a higher margin for error has been found using these methods relative to techniques suited to more specific research questions. Some of the participants of the present study may not have accurately reported on the home-school practice that actually occurred. For example, School 2 parent participants were shown to talk extensively about communication book usage, but the frequency of such usage was minimal in practice. It could have been that only a relatively few incidences of meaningful communication book interactions needed to occur for the parents and teachers of School 2 to value the use of this communication type. Perhaps there were gaps in the self-recording and self-reporting of such practice. Also, if the activities had have been conducted over a 12 month period, it would have been more likely that the participants would have referred to report card and IEP meeting types of communication around the times that these events were scheduled. Report card and IEP meeting events did not occur during the activities of this study.

### **6.4 Implications**

A number of implications for teaching practice and future research can be drawn from the findings and processes presented in this thesis. The focus group meeting, home-school record, and face-to-face interview methodology of this research featured efficient

data collection and data analysis and provided a snap shot of home-school communication practice. In the main, the results of this study were biased to a Queensland education system and to the structures within which parents and teachers operate within when supporting a student with ASD in regular primary schools. This case study investigated localised rather than generalised practice. Nevertheless, many of the implications generated from this study can be applied in varying ways to advance practice and research in this setting and, to a lesser extent, in other inclusive settings.

### ***6.4.1 Implications for professional practice***

The five most frequently used communication types identified by the research and used as a starter list for the record task in this study (newsletter, hand written note, communication book, unplanned meetings, planned meetings, and telephone), should be considered by teachers as types of communication that are made available to parents. High satisfaction levels across the parents and teachers were involved in this study. At the same time, the home-school participants perceived and frequently used these types of communication.

Classroom teachers are encouraged to demonstrate the level of commitment shown by the educators in this study to frequently use types of home-school communication. Communication with their parents, through unplanned meetings and communication book events, appear to have created a high level of agreement in satisfaction levels of parent and teachers in this study. Samples of the interview texts show that teachers were empathetic to the challenges that their home-school communication partner faced and that parents valued this empathy. The classroom educators involved in the activities appear to have forged positive parent-teacher partnerships. Frequent communications have been suggested as an effective means to engage parents of students with ASD (Spann et al., 2003; Stoner et al., 2005; Whitaker, 2007). In providing parents with a range of home-school communication types as options, teachers of students with ASD are encouraged to nurture positive relations around the use of home-school communication types.

Tentative suggestions for policy at the state-level and the school-level can be drawn from this small-scale study. Primary schools are encouraged to provide parents with frequent opportunities to communicate with the teachers of their children. It appears that

the parents and teachers of students with ASD of this local investigation appreciated that the frequent communication that they received and provided was an “extra.” Some had stated that home-school communications around students without special needs had occurred less frequently. Nevertheless, adopted communication policy such as that outlined below, could help to ensure regular home-school communication for all primary-aged students and those with special needs more particularly.

Many state bodies that control education review school performance at a set interval. The Department of Education, Training and the Arts (DETA) for this state of Queensland has a triennial school review process (Department of Education 2002). At this time, school handbooks and informal dialogue with parent and school members could be used to indicate the desired extent of home-school communication beyond the typical infrequent report card and parent-teacher meeting types. Guidelines for the minimum frequencies of such communications could be set. For example, such policy could establish that primary teachers make at least one contact, with each parent of the students they teach, every term or semester in addition to report card and parent-teacher meeting contacts. A higher frequency could be established in relation to home-school communications for students with special needs.

### ***6.4.2 Implications for research***

This pioneering exploration of the nature of home-school communication for students with ASD in two Queensland primary schools provided a glimpse of a relatively untapped scope for research, locally and internationally. Today, as in the past, classroom teachers are encouraged to present a range of home-school communication types to better meet the needs of students with ASD in inclusive settings. The evident satisfaction of parents and teachers at two schools with regular communications when both home and school stakeholders were available for such interaction, suggests that everyone was making an effort to capitalise on this interaction. Frequent and direct contacts through face-to-face unplanned meetings were valued in particular. At this point in time, it would be constructive to more fully understand the nature of home-school communication types used for students with ASD. For example, case study could track such interaction over a longer time frame. Future researchers can use the information that this study, and of other future exploratory studies on the topic, to investigate issues that emerged related to the type, satisfaction, purpose, facilitators, and barriers of home-school

communication. As Stake (1995) explained, once researchers have information on the phenomenon, they can investigate the issues involved in that phenomenon. Four particular questions about unplanned meetings emerged from the findings of this study.

1. What happens to the use of unplanned meeting by parents and teachers both for students with ASD and other students as they progress through higher years of schooling?
2. If there is a limit to the extra time frame that unplanned meetings are used for students with ASD, typically at what year level should such meetings be phased out?
3. If research is scheduled at a time when report cards and IEP meetings occur, to what extent do parents and teachers focus on these types of communication relative to the unplanned meeting type?
4. If school contexts are explored where parents are not available for frequent unplanned meetings, what are the purposes, satisfaction levels, and influences related to the types of home-school communication that are used?

All things considered, a content analysis line of enquiry of actual home-school communication events appears to offer the most viable avenue for future research. The hidden, unexamined intricacies surrounding “knowing and doing” and the situation-specific nature of practice provide compelling reasoning for the use of stimulation recall type methodology (Calderhead, 1981; Ethell & McMeniman, 2000; King & Tuckwell, 1983) to be utilised. In such research, records of actual communication events could be analysed and compared to the reflections of the parents and the teachers that made such records. Activity could also be integrated with an analysis of communication around portfolio type assessment that is being increasingly used to share information with family stakeholders about the multiple aspects of learning (Anthony, Johnson, Mickelson, & Preece, 1992). Home-school communications could be examined over a year to capture main events such as report card distribution and IEP meetings. The present case study provides a starting point for investigations of this kind.

### **6.5 Concluding statement**

This study enabled parents and teachers who support a student with ASD at two Queensland primary schools to share their actual and perceived home-school communication practice. They were satisfied with their frequent use of a small number of communication types essentially orientated to addressing the social challenges confronting each student with ASD. Four parent-teacher dyads used communications that were not obviously directed by departmental policy and only slightly directed by school policy. Parents embraced the regular opportunities for home-school communication provided to them by the teachers of their children. There is a basis to admire the daily achievements of parents and teachers in home-school communication exchanges, and to look closely at such practice, for it is where the intricacies of this phenomenon lie.

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## APPENDIX A



School letterhead

## FOCUS GROUP INFORMATION SHEET

**Research team:** Mr Anthony Stanley, Educational Doctorate Student, Griffith University  
Dr Wendi Beamish and Dr Fiona Bryer

*COMMUNICATION BETWEEN HOME AND SCHOOL OF CHILDREN WITH ASD IN  
TWO SOUTH-EAST QUEENSLAND PRIMARY SCHOOLS*

\_\_\_ March, 2006.

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

Home-school communication plays an increasingly important role in determining how children are educated. Increased value is placed on negotiated curriculum for all students in general and for students with disabilities in particular. Autistic spectrum disorder (ASD) affects students in both a pervasive and an individualised way. Therefore, it is essential to share knowledge of a student with ASD through effective communication between the home and school.

**Study Aims**

This exploratory study will provide details of the type, frequency, and content of home-school communication that are currently used and valued in primary school sites by parents and regular classroom teachers that support a student with ASD.

**Study Involvement and Conduct**

You are invited to take part in a 30-minute focus group discussion with approximately five other parents that will be facilitated by members of the research team. This discussion will probe (a) types, (b) content, and (c) timing of home-school communication at your school. Participation is voluntary, and you are free to withdraw at any time. This study is being conducted through the Faculty of Education, Cognition Language and Special Education at Griffith University. Education Queensland has also provided ethical clearance for this study. If you have any additional questions, please contact Mr Anthony Stanley ([asterlyn@bigpond.com](mailto:asterlyn@bigpond.com), 33437684) or Dr Wendi Beamish ([w.beamish@griffith.edu.au](mailto:w.beamish@griffith.edu.au); ph 3875 5636) or Dr Fiona Bryer ([f.bryer@griffith.edu.au](mailto:f.bryer@griffith.edu.au); 3875 5834). You should contact the Manager, Research Ethics, at Griffith University Human Research Ethics Committee on 3875 5585 or [research-ethics@griffith.edu.au](mailto:research-ethics@griffith.edu.au) if you have any concerns about the ethical conduct of the study.

The conduct of this study will involve audio taping the focus group discussions. All data collected will be treated confidentially and will not be disclosed to third parties without your consent, except to meet government, legal, or other regulatory authority requirements. Audio tape recordings of the focus group session will be destroyed after analysis. Anonymity of participants will be maintained in the reporting the study's findings. On the completion of the study any data which may identify any of the participants will be destroyed. Schools will be provided with the findings at meetings of Parents and Citizens and of staff.

**Benefits of the Research**

The findings of the study will provide information on home-school communication that are currently used and valued by parents and regular classroom teachers at a school that supports students with ASD so as to improve such practice within the *Triennial School Review (TSR)* process.

Thank you for your cooperation,

Anthony Stanley, Educational Doctorate Student, Griffith University

## APPENDIX A

## FOCUS GROUP CONSENT SHEET

Research team: Name: Mr Anthony Stanley Educational Doctorate Student, Griffith University

School: Cognition, Language and Special Education  
Email: [asterlyn@bigpond.com](mailto:asterlyn@bigpond.com), 33437684

Dr Wendi Beamish  
School: Cognition, Language and Special Education  
Email: [w.beamish@griffith.edu.au](mailto:w.beamish@griffith.edu.au)

Dr Fiona Bryer  
School: Cognition, Language and Special Education  
Email: [f.bryer@griffith.edu.au](mailto:f.bryer@griffith.edu.au); 3875 5834

### *COMMUNICATION BETWEEN HOME AND SCHOOL OF CHILDREN WITH ASD IN TWO SOUTH-EAST QUEENSLAND PRIMARY SCHOOLS*

I understand that my involvement in this study will involve participation in a 30-minute focus group discussion with approximately five other parents which will be facilitated by members of the research team. I understand the possible risks involved and have had all my questions answered to my satisfaction. I understand that my participation in this research is voluntary and that I can choose to withdraw at any time without comment. I understand that, if I have any additional questions, I can contact the research team. I understand that I can contact the Manager, Research Ethics, at Griffith University Human Research Ethics Committee on 3875 5585 or [research-ethics@griffith.edu.au](mailto:research-ethics@griffith.edu.au) if I have any concerns about the ethical conduct of the study.

The conduct of this study will involve audio taping the focus group discussions. All of the data collected will be treated confidentially and will not be disclosed to third parties without your consent, except to meet government, legal, or other regulatory authority requirements. Audio tape recordings of the focus group session will be destroyed after analysis. Anonymity of participants will be maintained in the reporting the study's findings. On the completion of the study, any data which may identify any of the participants will be destroyed. For further information consult the University's Privacy Plan at [www.gu.edu.au/ua/vc/pp](http://www.gu.edu.au/ua/vc/pp) or telephone (07) 3875 5585. Your school will be provided with the findings of the study at meetings of Parents and Citizens and of staff.

Participant's Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Participant's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX A



School letterhead

## HOME-SCHOOL COMMUNICATION RECORD AND FACE-TO-FACE INTERVIEWS

## INFORMATION SHEET

**Research team:** Mr Anthony Stanley, Educational Doctorate Student, Griffith University  
Dr Wendi Beamish and Dr Fiona Bryer

*COMMUNICATION BETWEEN HOME AND SCHOOL OF CHILDREN WITH ASD IN  
TWO SOUTH-EAST QUEENSLAND PRIMARY SCHOOLS*

\_\_ April, 2006.

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

**Study Aims**

This exploratory study will provide details of the type, frequency, and content of home-school communication that are currently used and valued in primary school sites by parents and regular classroom teachers that support a student with ASD.

**Study Involvement and Conduct**

Thank you for participating in the focus group discussions. The conduct of phase two of the study involves two further tasks. First, you will be requested to keep a list of home-school communications in which you engage. Second, 2 weeks later or at your convenience, you will be invited to comment on the home-school communications individually in a face-to-face interview. You will be asked to consider both (a) the communications in which you engaged in whilst you have been a member of the school community generally, and (b) home-school communications that you have engaged in since the focus group meeting specifically. Participation is voluntary, and you are free to withdraw at any time. This study is being conducted through the Faculty of Education's Cognition Language and Special Education at Griffith University. Education Queensland has also provided ethical clearance for this study. If you have any additional questions, please contact Mr Anthony Stanley ([asterlyn@bigpond.com](mailto:asterlyn@bigpond.com), 33437684) or Dr Wendi Beamish ([w.beamish@griffith.edu.au](mailto:w.beamish@griffith.edu.au); ph 3875 5636) or Dr Fiona Bryer ([f.bryer@griffith.edu.au](mailto:f.bryer@griffith.edu.au); 3875 5834). You should contact the Manager, Research Ethics, at Griffith University Human Research Ethics Committee on 3875 5585 or [research-ethics@griffith.edu.au](mailto:research-ethics@griffith.edu.au) if you have any concerns about the conduct of the study.

The conduct of this study will involve audio taping the focus group discussions. All data collected will be treated confidentially and will not be disclosed to third parties without your consent, except to meet government, legal, or other regulatory authority requirements. Audio tape recordings of the interview will be destroyed after analysis. Anonymity of participants will be maintained in the reporting the study's findings. On the completion of the study, any data which may identify any of the participants will be destroyed, and schools will be provided with the findings at meetings of Parents and Citizens and of staff.

**Benefits of the Research**

The findings of the study will provide information on home-school communication that are currently used and valued by parents and regular classroom teachers at a school that supports students with ASD so as to improve such practice within the *Triennial School Review (TSR)* process.

Thank you for your cooperation,

Anthony Stanley, Educational Doctorate Student, Griffith University

**APPENDIX A**



School letterhead

**INDIVIDUAL HOME-SCHOOL COMMUNICATION RECORD AND FACE-TO-FACE  
INTERVIEWS  
CONSENT SHEET**

Research team:      Name: Mr Anthony Stanley   Educational Doctorate Student, Griffith University  
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*COMMUNICATION BETWEEN HOME AND SCHOOL OF CHILDREN WITH ASD IN TWO SOUTH-EAST  
QUEENSLAND PRIMARY SCHOOLS*

I understand that my involvement in this phase of the study will involve two tasks. First, I will be requested to keep a list of home-school communications in which I engage. Second, 2 weeks later or at my convenience, I will be invited to comment on the home-school communications individually in a face-to-face interview. I understand that I will be asked to consider both the communications that I have engaged in while I have been a member of the school community generally, and home-school communications that I have engaged in since the focus group meeting specifically. I understand the possible risks involved and have had all my questions answered to my satisfaction. I understand that my participation in this research is voluntary and that I can choose to withdraw at any time without comment. I understand that, if I have any additional questions, I can contact the research team. I understand that I can contact the Manager, Research Ethics, at Griffith University Human Research Ethics Committee on 3875 5585 or [research-ethics@griffith.edu.au](mailto:research-ethics@griffith.edu.au) if I have any concerns about the ethical conduct of the study.

The conduct of this study will involve audio taping the focus group discussions. All of the data collected will be treated confidentially and will not be disclosed to third parties without your consent, except to meet government, legal, or other regulatory authority requirements. Audio tape recordings of the interview will be destroyed after analysis. Anonymity of participants will be maintained in the reporting the study's findings. On the completion of the study any data which may identify any of the participants will be destroyed. For further information consult the University's Privacy Plan at [www.gu.edu.au/ua/vc/pp](http://www.gu.edu.au/ua/vc/pp) or telephone (07) 3875 5585. Your school will be provided with the findings of the study at meetings of Parents and Citizens and of staff.

Participant's Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Participant's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_

**APPENDIX B**



COMMUNICATION BETWEEN HOME AND SCHOOL  
OF CHILDREN WITH AUTISTIC SPECTRUM DISORDER  
IN TWO SOUTH-EAST QUEENSLAND PRIMARY SCHOOLS

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Age (optional): \_\_\_\_\_

Is English the main language spoken at home? \_\_\_\_\_

How close do you live to the school? \_\_\_\_\_

What culture do you identify with? \_\_\_\_\_

Do you work outside of the home?  
If so what are the hours? \_\_\_\_\_

How does your child usually travel to and from  
school? \_\_\_\_\_

Are there other agencies that assist in your child's care? (e.g., AQ, respite):  
\_\_\_\_\_

Do you currently, or have you in the past, had another child attend this school?  
\_\_\_\_\_

Do you currently, or have you in the past, had another child attend another Education  
Queensland school?  
\_\_\_\_\_

**APPENDIX B**



COMMUNICATION BETWEEN HOME AND SCHOOL  
OF CHILDREN WITH AUTISTIC SPECTRUM DISORDER  
IN TWO SOUTH-EAST QUEENSLAND PRIMARY SCHOOLS

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Age (optional): \_\_\_\_\_

Qualifications: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Year level/s that I currently teach: \_\_\_\_\_

The name/s of the student/s with ASD that I  
currently teach: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Other learning challenges that they have: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Their parent's name/s: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Other agencies that support you in teaching this student:



## **Additional Focus Group Meeting and Face-to-Face Interview Questions**

### **Introduction**

*I am interested in the current ways that parents and teachers actually communicate with each other at this school, why these people communicate, and how you feel and think about that. The idea is that we have a discussion rather than one person talking to one question and the next person to the next question. Please build on each other's responses. Anything that you say will be valued. So please feel free to join into the discussion along the way. Also, time will be provided at the end for you to comment about anything that has been discussed.*

*The activity will involve audio taping. All data collected will be treated confidentially and will not be disclosed to third parties without your consent. Audio tape recordings of this focus group session will be destroyed after analysis. Aliases will be used to report the study's findings. On the completion of the study any data which may identify any of you will be destroyed and your school will be provided with the findings at a staff and Parents & Citizens meeting.*

*Please state your name first each time that you add to the discussion. If you find yourself talking generally about ways that parents and teachers communicate for all students, that's fine. However, on occasions I will ask us to focus particularly on communications between parents and teachers of children with ASD.*

### **RQ 1 How do you communicate between home and school?**

(Recorders at each school list the ways of communications as they are discussed on a white board)

What ways do you communicate?

Can you think of an example?

How long does the communication take place?

Which of these are initiated by parents/teachers?

How formal are these ways of communication?

Comment on the purpose of this way.

Is this way used together with any other way?

Are there common features in the ways that are currently used?

Are there any other types that lend themselves to open communication?

How often would you communicate?

As the need arises?

On a regular basis, say once a day or once a week? (p. 2)

What does that look like? (e.g., communication book)

Does it have a particular structure?

Do they have an opportunity to write or is it you writing to them? (p.3)

RQ 2 What is the purpose of these communications?

Why do parents and teachers communicate?

RQ 3 How satisfied are you with the current ways that parents and teacher are communicating?

Please explain your feelings

Meaning

What is your most preferred way of communicating?

Which ways other types would you liked to see used?

How would you like to communicate?

Are you able to use the ways to communicate that you want to?

When you say that you are \_\_\_\_\_ satisfied, are you feeling? (happy, unhappy; contented, frustrated; knowledge, ignorance)

Are there ways of communicating that are particularly helpful for parents and teachers of students with ASD?

How do you feel about the relationship between you and the parent/teacher?

Comment on your opportunities to begin communications with the parent/teacher?

### Quality

How well do each of these ways work?

How could the ways that parents and teachers communicate be improved?

How do you know if a way of communicating is working?

### Effectiveness

Do these communications meet your needs? (for parents)

Does this way of communication meet your needs (for parents)

Are the communications effective? (for teachers)

Is this way of communication effective (for teachers)

Which ones are working best for you (effectiveness)?

Are there ways of communication that met your needs at particular times? (parents)

Are there ways of communication that are more effective at particular times? (teachers)

Are there ways of communication that met your needs better in particular situations? (parents)

Are there ways of communication that are more effective in particular situations? (teachers)

**RQ 4 What ways help communication between parents and teachers?**

Can you think of specific things, specific arrangements that helps home-school communication to be meaningful?

Meaning

What makes it easy for you to use your preferred way of communicating?

What makes it easy for you to use the ways to communicate that you want to?

What helps you feel happier and contented about communications?

Are there ways of making easier the communications between parents and teachers of students with ASD?

What helps build the relationship between you and the parent/teacher?

What makes it easier for you to begin communications with the parent/teacher?

Quality

What helps to improve the quality of ways parents and teachers communicate?

Effectiveness

What makes it easy for these communications to meet your needs? [at different times of the day, and in different situations (for parents)]

What makes it easy for this way of communication to meet your needs [at different times of the day, and in different situations (for parents)]

What makes it easy for communications to be effective? [at different times of the day, and in different situations (for teachers)]

What makes it easy for this way of communication to be effective [at different times of the day, and in different situations (for teachers)]

Can you think of things at a school level that make it easy for parents and teachers to communicate?

RQ 5 What things get in the way of communication between parents and teachers?

What things get in the way of home-school communication for students with ASD?

### Meaning

What makes it hard for you to use your preferred way of communicating?

What makes it hard for you to be able to use the ways to communicate that you want to?

What makes it hard for you to feel happy and contented about communications?

Are there ways of making the communications hard between parents and teachers of students with ASD?

What makes it hard for you to establish a relationship between you and the parent/teacher?

What makes it hard for you to begin communications with the parent/teacher?

What things at a school level that make it hard for parents and teachers to communicate?

### Quality

What makes it hard to improve the quality of ways parents and teachers communicate?

### Effectiveness

What makes it hard for these communications to meet your needs? [at different times of the day, and in different situations (for parents)]

What makes it hard for this way of communication to meet your needs? [at different times of the day, and in different situations (for parents)]

What makes it hard for communications to be effective? [at different times of the day, and in different situations (for teachers)]

What makes it hard for this way of communication to be effective? [at different times of the day, and in different situations (for teachers)]

*This is your final opportunity to raise other issues related to the topic.*

**Q 6** What other issues are related to the communication between parents and teachers?

**Appendix D**



School Letterhead

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

COMMUNICATION BETWEEN HOME AND SCHOOL  
 OF CHILDREN WITH AUTISTIC SPECTRUM DISORDER  
 IN TWO SOUTH-EAST QUEENSLAND PRIMARY SCHOOLS

My interview date with Tony is the

**Activity 2: Actual home-school communications**

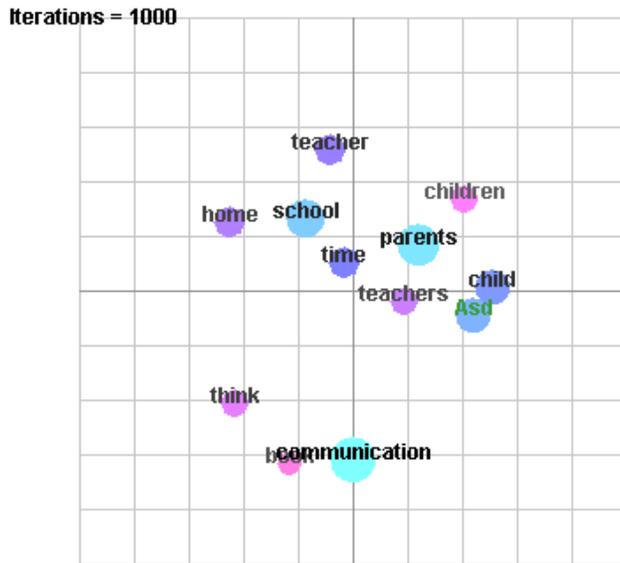
Please record the types and frequency of home-school communication in which you engage over the next 4 weeks. A starter list has been provided for you. You will receive a separate record sheet each week.

Six types of communication have been provided. Please add extra types that you use in the "Other" column. Every time you use a type place a tick in the box. Please write any additional comments as you see fit in the space provided.

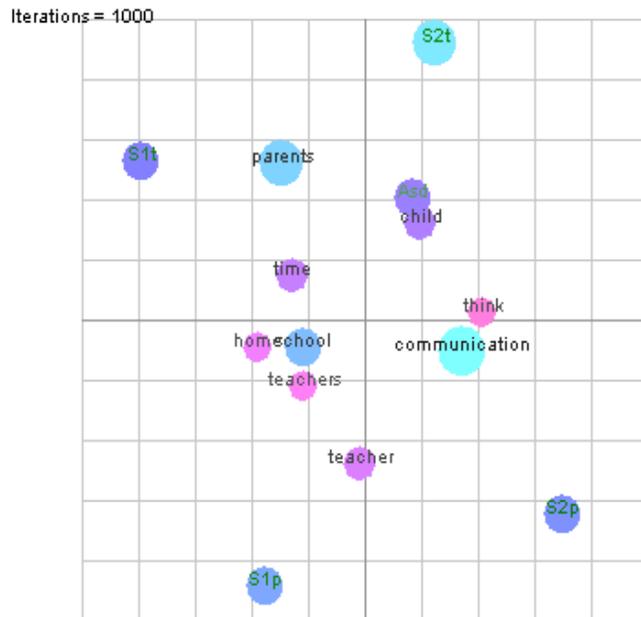
Week _	Newsletter	Hand written note	Communication book	Planned meeting	Unplanned meeting	Telephone	Other	Comments (e.g., Who initiated the contact?)
Monday								
Tuesday								
Wednesday								
Thursday								
Friday								

**APPENDIX E**

Comparison of untagged and tagged maps for focus group conversations combined.



Untagged Leximancer map of parent and teacher voices, with 50% of concepts showing: Focus groups



Tagged Leximancer map of parent and teacher voices, with 50% of concepts showing: Focus groups.

**Appendix F**

Leximancer Settings for Focus Group Conversations

Function	<i>Combined untagged</i>	<i>Combined tagged</i>	<i>Parents tagged</i>	Map				
				<i>Teachers Tagged</i>	<i>ChP Tagged</i>	<i>ChT Tagged</i>	<i>SrP Tagged</i>	<i>SrT Tagged</i>
	<b>16 728</b>	<b>16 729</b>	<b>8 587</b>	<b>8 141</b>	<b>4 456</b>	<b>4 198</b>	<b>4131</b>	<b>3 943</b>
				Words				
				Time in Minutes and Seconds				
	<b>138:09</b>	<b>138:09</b>	<b>72:10</b>	<b>65:59</b>	<b>41:00</b>	<b>32:54</b>	<b>31:10</b>	<b>33:05</b>
<b>Preprocess Text</b>								
<i>Optional Language Test for each sentence</i>	<b>OFF</b> as per recommendations for spoken language P.28							
<i>Stopwords</i>	<b>Nil</b>	<b>Nil</b>	<b>Nil</b>	<b>Nil</b>	<b>Nil</b>	<b>Nil</b>	<b>Nil</b>	<b>Nil</b>
<i>Folder and file tags</i>		Turn on Folder and Filename tagging						
Automatic Concept Id. <i># of concepts</i>					Automatic			
<i># of names</i>					Automatic			
Concept Edit <i>Mergers</i>					Nil			
<i>Renames</i>					Nil			

**Appendix F**

Leximancer Settings for Focus Group Conversations (continued)

Function	<i>Combined untagged</i>	<i>Combined tagged</i>	<i>Parents Tagged</i>	<i>Teachers Tagged</i>	Map <i>ChP Tagged</i>	<i>ChT tagged</i>	<i>SrP tagged</i>	<i>SrT tagged</i>
Learning threshold	14 (normal)	14 (normal)	14 (normal)	14 (normal)	14 (normal)	14 (normal)	14 (normal)	14 (normal)
Sentences per concept block	3 (normal)	3 (normal)	3 (normal)	3 (normal)	3 (normal)	3 (normal)	3 (normal)	3 (normal)
Ignore paragraph break	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Concept profiling # to discover	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Locate Concept Occurrences	All 4 files required	All 4 files required	2 parent files required	2 teacher files required	Single file required	Single file required	Single file required	Single file required

**Appendix G**

Leximancer Settings for Face-to-face Interview Conversations

Function	Map											
	<i>Combine untagged</i>	<i>Combine tagged</i>	<i>Parents tagged</i>	<i>Teachers tagged</i>	<i>S1p1 tagged</i>	<i>S1p2 Tagged</i>	<i>S2p1</i>	<i>S2P2</i>	<i>S1t1</i>	<i>S1t2</i>	<i>S2t1</i>	<i>S2t2</i>
	Words											
	27556	27 556	13167	14 389	2574	3070	2847	4676	2698	4168	2847	4676
	Time in Minutes and Seconds											
	<b>281:11</b>	<b>281:11</b>	<b>128:56</b>	<b>152:15</b>	<b>28:30</b>	<b>32:41</b>	<b>32:25</b>	<b>35:20</b>	<b>34:17</b>	<b>42:39</b>	<b>30:02</b>	<b>45:17</b>
Preprocess Text												
<i>Optional Language Test for each sentence</i>	<b>OFF</b> as per recommendations for spoken language P.28											
<i>Stopwords</i>	<b>Nil</b>	<b>Nil</b>	<b>Nil</b>	<b>Nil</b>	<b>Nil</b>	<b>Nil</b>	<b>Nil</b>	<b>Nil</b>	<b>Nil</b>	<b>Nil</b>	<b>Nil</b>	<b>Nil</b>
<i>Folder and file tags</i>		Turn on Folder and Filename tagging										
Automatic Concept Id. <i># of concepts</i>												Automatic
<i># of names</i>												Automatic
Concept Edit <i>Mergers</i>												"communication" for "home", "school", and communication"; "child" for "Larry" and "child; and "parent" for "mum" and parent"
<i>Renames</i>												Nil

**Appendix G**

Leximancer Settings for Focus Group Conversations (continued)

Function	Map											
	<i>Combine untagged</i>	<i>Combine tagged</i>	<i>Parents tagged</i>	<i>Teachers tagged</i>	<i>S1p1 tagged</i>	<i>S1p2 Tagged</i>	<i>S2p1</i>	<i>S2P2</i>	<i>S1t1</i>	<i>S1t2</i>	<i>S2t1</i>	<i>S2t2</i>
Learning threshold	14 (normal)	14 (normal)	14 (normal)	14 (normal)	14 (normal)	14 (normal)	14 (normal)	14 (normal)	14 (normal)	14 (normal)	14 (normal)	14 (normal)
Sentences per concept block	3 (normal)	3 (normal)	3 (normal)	3 (normal)	3 (normal)	3 (normal)	3 (normal)	3 (normal)	3 (normal)	3 (normal)	3 (normal)	3 (normal)
Ignore paragraph break	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Concept profiling # to discover	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Locate Concept Occurrences	All 8 files required	All 8 files required	4 parent files required	4 teacher files required	Single file required	Single file required	Single file required	Single file required	Single file required	Single file required	Single file required	Single file required