

**Exploring Communication During the Personalized Learning Plan Process in Rural New
Brunswick: A Dual Parent/Teacher Perspective Autoethnography**

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore my own dual parent and teacher perceptions of communication and collaboration during the Personalized Learning Plan (PLP) process for my son JJ, diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) who attends an elementary school in rural New Brunswick. Background information on ASD, early intervention, learning plans, and effective parent-teacher communication was provided to readers. Autoethnography was used as my methodology. Labelling theory, cultural capital theory and situation perception were used as a framework to complete a reflexive analysis of self-interview questions and journal entries to determine what enhancements can be made to communication and collaboration during the PLP process in New Brunswick. Three themes emerged from the coding process, which included the importance of identity; we are too passive about communication, and we need more support. Implications and recommendations for the education system in New Brunswick as well as my own parenting and teaching practices were provided. *A Guide to Parent-Teacher Communication* was developed and provided to readers as a communication planning guide for both parents and teachers.

Keywords: autism spectrum disorder (ASD), personalized learning plan (PLP), communication, collaboration, autoethnography, labelling theory, capital, situation perception, Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA), identity, support

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Exploring Communication During the Personalized Learning Plan Process in Rural New Brunswick: A Dual Parent/Teacher Perspective Autoethnography

“Can we talk?” In education, this is often easy to say, but challenging to execute.

Communication between parents and teachers can be both easy and difficult, but effective communication can significantly impact a students’ success at school (Gazi et al., 2016, p. 1071). The purpose of this autoethnographic study was to explore my dual parent and teacher perception of the Personalized Learning Plan (PLP) process, with a focus on communication and collaboration between home and rural elementary school stakeholders regarding my child, JJ, who has an autism spectrum disorder (ASD) diagnosis. The PLP is a formal document the government of New Brunswick requires be provided to students in pre-primary and primary to Grade 12 educational settings when their needs exceed usual supports and interventions. This autoethnographic research used a combination of storytelling, deep reflection, and analysis to share my unique parent, teacher, and researcher perspective as I uncovered my own mistakes and insights regarding communication during the PLP process in rural New Brunswick. This research offers potential enhancements to communication and collaboration during the PLP process. This study was guided by the following questions:

1. What is my parent and teacher perception of the PLP process?
2. What is my parent and teacher perception of the amount and quality of communication taking place between the parent and the school?
3. What is my parent and teacher perception of what might be done to further enhance current PLP communication and collaboration practices?
4. How do my answers to the above question align with current research on effective communication between families and schools?

In the early days after JJ's ASD diagnosis, a variety of emotions came in waves, which included sadness and doubt, as well as curiosity and determination. I scoured the internet for countless hours, searching for information about ASD, support services, and experiences with advocacy, hoping to feel supported and prepared for the journey of advocacy ahead of me. This led to finding ASD parent discussion forums on social media, one that was for parents in New Brunswick. This Facebook New Brunswick ASD discussion forum included comments where numerous parents had questions about the PLP process, including questions about communication clarity and frequency, with new questions being posted regularly (Autism Parents Group, 2017). Instead of gaining clarity about the PLP process and how to be an effective advocate, I was left worried and wondered why so many parents of children with ASD had so many questions about and frustrations with a government-regulated process.

My own subsequent experiences navigating the preschool PLP process left me with similar questions about the PLP process and I wondered what could be done to ensure parents received the information they needed to navigate communication and collaboration during the PLP process. As a parent of a child with ASD, I have had many questions about how to support my child's education, even as an educator with my insider knowledge of the education system and its policies and procedures. I have often wondered about what and how he is doing in the classroom, and I wondered when I should be in contact with the school about his PLP. How much parent communication about questions and concerns is the right amount?

On the other hand, as a teacher, I have had questions about how parents perceived my communication about a PLP for their children, how I conducted the PLP process, and how I could do my job better. Any past inquiries into my job performance usually resulted in responses of "good," with very little or no elaboration or constructive criticism. There are many excellent

teachers trying their best to meet the needs of all learners across the province and I wondered if there is anything that teachers can do to enhance their communication throughout the PLP process to better meet the needs of learners diagnosed with ASD. How much teacher communication about a PLP is the right amount?

Porter and AuCoin (2012) prepared their report *Strengthening Inclusion, Strengthening Schools* as part of former Minister Jody Carr's directive to review inclusive education in New Brunswick. Porter and AuCoin (2012) identified "a number of universal themes and common concerns" regarding the implementation of inclusive education which included collaboration, accountability, and training (p. 12). In my experience, education stakeholders have conscientiously worked toward improving some, but not all, of the recommendations made by Porter and AuCoin since the release of the report. Because I am a parent of a child diagnosed with ASD as well as a teacher of children diagnosed with ASD, Porter and AuCoin's (2013) theme of "ongoing collaboration and communication" between all school stakeholders stood out most to me (p. 11). Porter and AuCoin (2012) noted that "the parent/guardian and the student (when appropriate) as well as the classroom teachers, education support teacher and other relevant professionals should be required to be part of the personalized learning plan process" (p. 161). Korotkov (2021) reviewed New Brunswick's inclusive education policy, and although communication was revealed as a theme for recommendation, the theme focused on communication of the policy and communication between schools and districts. However, Korotkov (2021) identified communication between school and home as important to the success of inclusive education, and noted that, "When effective communication was not in place, families spoke of feeling isolated and disconnected" (p. 25). I wondered what is being done to improve the areas of action to enhance inclusive education in New Brunswick, specifically

communication and collaboration, as outlined in Porter and AuCoin's report? What actions, if anything, have I taken to ensure ongoing collaboration and communication as a parent and as a teacher?

Autism Spectrum Disorder

Autism was considered a rare childhood disorder for a long time, the symptoms of which were described as early as 1943 (Feinstein, 2012). Early diagnostic criteria often described autism being associated with more severe behaviour characteristics and "severe delays in language and cognitive skills" (Hollander et al., 2018, p. 2). Autism research has continued over the years, providing more information and broadening its definition along the way (Feinstein, 2012). Autism and ASD are now often "defined by onset prior to three years of age and the presence of deficits or unusual behaviours" in two symptom categories, "social communication and fixated, repetitive interests" (Feinstein, 2012, p. 2). Risk factors may include having "a sibling with autism, parental history of schizophrenia or other mental disorders, male gender, low birth weight, maternal age older than 40 years, and paternal age between 40 and 49 years" (Azeem, 2016, p. 59-60).

In 2013, The American Psychiatric Association released the fifth edition of its Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5), which is used as a reference by clinicians to help diagnose mental conditions, including autism spectrum disorder (ASD). The DSM-5 describes five key criteria for diagnosing ASD as follows (p. 50-51):

- A. Ongoing deficits in social communication and interaction in many contexts, demonstrated by a lack of social-emotional reciprocity, deficient non-verbal communication, and deficient relationship skills.

- B. Limited and repetitive interests and behaviours, which could include recurring movements or phrases, rigid and inflexible routines and thinking, intense fixated interests and focus, and sensory processing difficulties (including being over and under reactive).
- C. Symptoms are present early in life but may not be discernable at times due to coping strategies or low social demands.
- D. Symptoms cause obvious dysfunction in important areas of life.
- E. Symptoms are not better explained by other intellectual disabilities or delays.

The DSM-5 (2013) also notes that clinicians should specify if the ASD diagnosis includes an intellectual or language impairment; a linked medical, genetic, or environmental influence; an accompanying cognitive disorder or accompanying catatonia (p. 51).

As part of an ASD diagnosis, the DSM-5 (2013) notes that clinicians should also include severity specifiers, with communication and behaviours being rated separately (p. 51-52). Level one severity requires support and, without the supports, communication and interaction deficiencies cause obvious difficulties and behaviour rigidity causes notable difficulties with functioning. Level two severity requires substantial support, where pronounced communication and interaction deficiencies, even with supports, cause considerable difficulties, and behaviour rigidity appears often enough that difficulties are evident to bystanders. Level three severity requires very substantial support, where extreme communication and interaction deficiencies cause very little initiation of or responses to social interactions, and extreme behaviour rigidity and tremendous coping difficulties cause significant interference with functioning.

Waterhouse (2008) points out that “there has been an immense increase in the prevalence of autism and [ASD]” (p. 273). Canada’s National Autism Spectrum Disorder Surveillance System through the Public Health Agency of Canada (2018) reported that “the combined

prevalence of ASD for the year 2015 is 1 in 66” (p. 1). It is important to note that new and changing diagnostic criteria, sampling strategies, and differences in nomenclature influence prevalence estimates, although “reliability overall is currently high” (Hollander et al., 2018, p. 3). Waterhouse (2008) explained that “many unique theories have been proposed as the cause of an actual increase in autism prevalence” (p. 274). Waterhouse (2008) noted that some theories include ingestion of synthetic folate supplements by pregnant women increasing disruption of the gut-blood-brain barrier, watching cable television, changing diagnostic criteria, diagnostic substitution, and genetics (although some theories have been dismissed by some experts). The cause of ASD is not yet known, although heritability, single gene variations as well as abnormalities on chromosomes have been reported in people with ASD (Azeem, 2016, p. 59).

That is a red flag for autism

Figure 1

JJ at four months old



Note. Photograph by S. Ponting. Middle of July Photography, 2015.

JJ’s arrival was joyful and happy. He was named after his beloved grandfathers. We were healthy and we thought everything appeared normal for the first two years. Like many other

parents, we watched closely to make sure JJ was hitting the ever-important developmental milestones. We were constantly reminded of milestones and expectations by everyone around us. “Is he sleeping through the night?” “Is he getting enough tummy time?” “Is he crawling yet?” “How much does he weigh?” It appeared as though JJ was meeting all the growth and development milestones... for a while. I took JJ to the healthy toddler assessment when he was 18 months old and, even though the nurse and I tried to convince each other that JJ’s lack of language and interaction was fine, it was not fine. There were other early signs that we did not connect with autism, such as a high tolerance to pain, rigid and inflexible play preferences, fixation with spinning objects, and lining up objects, as shown in Figure 2. When I reflect on our first two years together as mother and son, JJ was telling me that his brain processed the world differently, but I was not hearing his message.

Figure 2

JJ at Play



Note. Left: JJ watching intently as he spins the wheels on his toy car. Right: JJ lining up his toy trucks, 2016.

I returned to teaching after a one-year maternity leave, but by fall 2017, the babysitter noted that JJ was not interacting with the other children as expected. JJ was easily frustrated when he spent time with other small children. He frequently played alone and away from others for extended periods of time, as shown in Figure 3. If he was playing near other children, it was always parallel play, which did not include interacting with others. JJ started to use a few words: mom, dad, and please, but then he stopped talking. He was distraught when prompted to stop a preferred activity. JJ was sometimes aggressive (even biting others), did not respond to his name, and rarely made eye contact. The babysitter reported that he frequently cried in the corner, often with his hands over his ears, for extended times each day. At home, JJ could play for hours lining up cars and watching their wheels spin. For a while, my husband and I had convinced ourselves that other difficult life changes going on in our lives explained JJ's behaviour.

Figure 3

JJ Playing Alone



Note: JJ shown playing alone at daycare while the other children played together, Fall 2017.

Because of the babysitter's concerns, I reached out for help, and a Speech Language Pathologist (SLP) was scheduled to observe JJ at childcare. During the observation, the SLP tried

to interact with JJ, clipboard and pencil in hand, while I sat quietly at the bottom of the stairs watching. JJ sat leaning forward with his legs in a “W,” his eyes locked on three cars lined up on the floor in front of him. I could feel my heart racing and felt like it was hard to breathe. Her face looked increasingly concerned each time she prompted him, and she made a note on her clipboard after each interaction. She met me at the bottom of the stairs and quietly began to review her written observations on the clipboard. Even though I was aware of the signs and symptoms of autism, I repeatedly responded to her concerns with “but that isn’t a red flag for autism, is it?” Panic was setting in. There were many signs of autism. I was given a sheet of paper titled *Autism Spectrum Disorder Red Flags* to review at home and was asked to check any of the 40 boxes that applied. I knew our lives had just changed. The experience was like sitting on the beach at the edge of the water watching a giant wave approaching, but knowing all that can be done is wait for the wave to hit you and sweep you out to sea.

I cried for days and worried about our future. I cried because I was afraid of the possibility of my son suffering through hardships. I cried because I knew I would have to invest an unknown amount of time, energy, and resources into autism and advocacy. After four days of despair, I awoke on the fifth day and realized that JJ needed me to be strong and determined, so I could not spend more time feeling sad and worried. JJ needed me to let him choose his own future and simply give him the skills and tools to do so. From that day forward, I sought out as much information, resources, and support as possible to support my son’s growth and development. The first step in the process was reaching out for help.

Being a teacher, I knew it was important to seek professional help as quickly as possible to determine if ASD was part of my son’s reality. Early intervention has been shown to have a variety of positive effects for children diagnosed with ASD because of the malleability of the

brain during the first few years of life (Boyd, Odem, Humphreys & Sam, 2010). After a long and difficult process that included visits with a speech language pathologist, an occupational therapist, an audiologist, and several other professionals, we were able to visit a pediatrician.

Diagnosis: Autism Spectrum Disorder

We visited a pediatrician in February 2018. The visit included a review of the SLP's observations and notes, a review of the children's rehabilitation team notes, a series of questions for parents, and observation of our son during the meeting. After considering all the information, the pediatrician gave JJ a diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Some of the characteristics of ASD that JJ displayed, and were considered a "red flag" for consideration of ASD included:

- no eye contact
- no pointing at objects or people
- little response to his name
- little to no interaction with children of a similar age when presented with the opportunity
- lined up toys
- extended hyper-focus on spinning parts of toys
- no pretend play
- obsessive interests
- finger flitting
- delayed and regressed language
- covering ears while rocking in the corner of a room as a response to a variety of stimuli
- aggressive and extreme reactions to changing an activity that he enjoys

An ASD diagnosis was significant because managing ASD has had and will continue to have a variety of effects on my family over our lifetimes and has also had implications for my teaching practices. Because of the diagnosis, we were able to schedule therapy and intervention for JJ. This was the beginning of my experience as a parent in the PLP process.

Early Intervention

I have taught students with ASD during my teaching career and have seen some complete a school year with growth and some complete it with little to no growth. I have observed students with ASD who have not had their needs met effectively, thus experiencing slower academic and social interaction progress. Needs, whether academic, physical, or behavioural, are not always being met because classroom teachers cannot be experts on every type of disability, there is no additional time allotted for carrying out many learning plan tasks, and because of a lack of funding for educational assistants, psychologists, or social workers (Riva, 2016). There have also been circumstances where needs were not being met because parents were not participating in their child's school education or did not perceive certain needs as being a priority at the time. I have also observed the positive effect that early intervention, collaborative planning, and supported plan implementation can have in helping a student with ASD achieve academic and social success. When the classroom teacher, resource teacher, educational assistants and parents work together to create, implement, and reevaluate a plan that works for a specific student with ASD, that student often experiences an improvement in academics and social interactions. In my experience, students with ASD experience the most growth when team planning is done well and is combined with a loving, caring, and consistent school and home environment. These experiences were motivation for me to pursue early intervention for my son quickly after his diagnosis.

Leaf et al. (2016) explained that children diagnosed with ASD make the most gains with early and intensive intervention, the most implemented and empirically supported being based on Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA). Leaf et al. (2016) also noted that intervention works best if it occurs 25-40 hours a week and if staff are adequately trained to implement the program. Tarbox et al. (2014) noted that early interventions ideally occur before the age of five and can occur in the home or a clinic, with the goal of the child being eventually integrated into a regular education setting after transitioning to school (p. 179). Feinstein (2012) suggested that because of the heterogeneity of the ASD population, “a single program may not be appropriate for the majority of children in a classroom” (p. 3). Feinstein (2012) also pointed out that “careful assessment is needed to determine the most appropriate services for different children, as well as for the same child at different points during the life course” (p. 3). Leaf et al. (2016) supported this sentiment by explaining that interventionalists are most effective when they “know how to alter and individualize curriculum and treatment strategies” (p. 721). Tarbox et al. (2014) noted the importance of modifying the intervention program to maximize learning if previous teaching strategies were not effective (p. 180). In New Brunswick, a student requiring accommodated, modified, or individualized curriculum and treatment strategies would typically have a PLP created for them to guide their intervention and learning at daycare or school.

New Brunswick’s Personalized Learning Plan

Because education is under the jurisdiction of each province and territory, each have created their own definitions of inclusive education. New Brunswick’s Department of Education and Early Childhood Development’s (2013) Policy 322 defines inclusive education as “the pairing of philosophy and pedagogical practices that allows each student to feel respected, confident and safe so he or she can participate with peers in the common learning environment

and learn and develop to his or her full potential” (p. 2). New Brunswick’s inclusion policy values diversity, a sense of belonging, and positive interactions with others and promotes a complete school experience with social cohesion (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2013, p. 2). Ideally, a common learning environment which uses differentiated instructional strategies and universal design for learning (which I will explain in more detail shortly) are used to support student learning. However, there are circumstances when a student may require specific and individualized goals beyond universal accommodations made for all students to experience meaningful success, which is when a Personalized Learning Plan (PLP) is used (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2013, p. 3), helping to ensure an inclusive learning environment is maintained.

The Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (2017) notes that a PLP is to be created for a child enrolled in the Preschool Autism Program (p. 2), like the partial example from JJ’s preschool PLP shown in Figure 4. The program provides intervention services based on Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA), which uses positive reinforcement as the main tool to promote learning. One principle of ABA, discrete trial instruction as described by Hollander et al. (2018), breaks down a task into smaller parts, which include a stimulus, response, and a consequence (p. 202). Many of JJ’s early preschool clinic notes described a “manding” program which used discrete trial instruction. Faiz et al. (2022) noted that a “mand is a [spoken] request for something required, or a request to bring an unwanted situation to an end” (p. 1792). The goal was for JJ to develop enough spoken language to be able to request something he wanted. For example, the behaviour interventionist could show JJ one of his favourite toy cars, withhold it and prompt him to say “car.” If JJ said “car,” the behaviour interventionist would give JJ the car as a reward, provide praise, and possibly reinforce the successful request with a

food reward. The preschool PLP “outlines all of the goals and the focus of the child’s intervention” (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2017, p. 2). It includes meaningful and specific learning goals to increase a child’s independence, improve their ability to participate in learning with their peers, and help a child transition to school (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2020, p. 4). The interventions are intended to help develop skills for school and should be based on goals identified in a pre-school PLP, which outlines learning strategies, goals, and supports for specific individuals. The early intervention program offers a consultative or comprehensive intervention model, where children receive up to 12 or 20 hours of intervention per week, as determined by the needs of the child and family (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2020, p. 4).

Figure 4

JJ's Preschool PLP

| PLP - Preschool ASD | |
|--------------------------------|--|
| Anticipated Programs: | Operant prosocial behaviour |
| Responsibility: | BIs, BC, CS |
| Program Implementation: | Operant Reinforcement of Social Skills May 2, 2019 |
| Domain: | Behaviour |
| Goal: | JoFr will demonstrate tolerance of a change in a play routine and/or participate in play with novel activities and activities selected by someone else (not him). He will demonstrate success by complying with the change which includes at least one play response in the absence of challenging behaviour, or verbal or non-verbal refusals to comply. He will also comply with demands to engage in targeted “calming” strategies on 90% of opportunities. |
| Justification: | JoFr demonstrate rigidities and strong preferences in his play. This program will help him learn to be more flexible during play and to accept a wider variety of routines, and changes in his play routines. He will also begin to pair “calming” strategies with calm behaviour to prepare him to learn to implement these during more challenging situation in the future. |
| Anticipated Programs: | Increasing flexibility in play |
| Responsibility: | BIs, BC, CS |

Note. Image of a portion of page 5 of 13, 2019.

In New Brunswick, the Education Act outlines the rights and responsibilities of all school stakeholders and section 12 outlines the programs and services for students requiring a PLP. The New Brunswick Education Act (2017) explains that:

“[P]ersonalized learning plan” means a personalized plan for a pupil that specifically and individually identifies practical strategies, goals, outcomes, targets and educational supports and designed to ensure the pupil experiences success in learning that is meaningful and appropriate, considering the pupil’s individual needs. (p. 5)

New Brunswick’s Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (2015a) states that “a PLP should be considered when a student is experiencing difficulties over an extended period of time and not making progress even with the additional support that a teacher would typically employ following the tiers of intervention and differentiation” (p. 4). Tiers of intervention include whole group instruction, small group interventions and intensive interventions. Other situations that require documentation in a PLP include reduced instructional hours, transportation plans that impact hours of instruction, partial day plans, and grade retention plans (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2015a, p. 4).

PLPs are recommended for any student who “is experiencing difficulties over an extended period of time and not making progress even with the additional support that a teacher would typically employ following the tiers of intervention and differentiation,” although some students may arrive at school with previously identified needs, such as those with an existing Preschool PLP (Department of Education and Early Childhood Education, 2015a, p. 4-5). To support their academic and behavioural learning, many (but not all) students with ASD have PLPs with goals and outcomes in New Brunswick schools, like the partial example showing one of JJ’s goals with one outcome in Figure 5.

Figure 5*JJ's Grade Two PLP: A Goal and Outcome*

| | |
|--|--|
| Present Level of Performance | |
| Currently, JJ does not show an awareness of the feelings of his peers and does not recognize how his words may affect them. | |
| Goal | |
| By June 2023, JJ will strengthen his social skills by learning how to identify basic emotions from the body language (facial expression, clenched fists, head down) of his peers. He will be successful in 4 out of 5 opportunities as measured by EA or teacher observations. | |
| Outcome | By the end of second term, JJ will practice identifying basic emotions (happy, sad, angry, tired) based on facial expressions. He will be successful with verbal prompting, in 3 out of 5 opportunities as measured by EA or teacher observations. |

Note. Image of a portion of page 3 of 7, 2023.

Teachers in New Brunswick are responsible for preparing, updating, and reporting on PLPs and related documents for any student in their class with a PLP, like the example shown in Figure 6, which shows one of JJ's fundamental skills goals, with two outcomes and accompanying updates. All PLP responsibilities require time, and some teachers have multiple students with PLPs in their class or classes, however, additional planning and preparation time is usually not provided. Because of the increasing numbers of students with PLPs, many teachers in the province participate in professional learning experiences provided by schools and by New Brunswick's Department of Education and Early Childhood Development that will enhance their ability to effectively write PLP goals and outcomes as well as effectively meet the needs of diverse learners. As a teacher, I have received basic introductory training about teaching students with ASD but have never had any in-depth formal training or education on how to best meet the needs of those students. ASD training is available in the form of online modules for teachers in New Brunswick, free of charge, but is voluntary and must be completed on one's own time. There are sometimes other ASD learning opportunities offered during teacher learning days, but they are often offered at the same time as language arts, mathematics, and other professional

learning, some of which are mandatory, often making it difficult to participate in other training. Finding and making time to participate in additional training as well as fulfill other PLP tasks, all while completing regular teaching responsibilities, is often complex and difficult.

Figure 6

JJ's Grade Two PLP: Progress Reporting

| | | |
|--|--|---|
| Student Name: John Joseph Cameron Friel | | Student ID: |
| INDIVIDUALIZED PROGRESS REPORTING | | |
| Individualized Domain | Fundamental Skills | |
| Goal By June 2023, JJ will strengthen his self management skills by following appropriate classroom procedures for sharing experiences/ideas and offering answers to questions. He will be successful in 4 out of 5 learning situations as measured by observations. | | |
| Outcome | By the end of second term, with verbal or visual cues, JJ will practice raising his hand when he wants to share an idea with the class. He will be successful in 2 out of 5 learning opportunities as measured by teacher or EA observations. | |
| Evaluation Date | Achievement Level | Comment |
| 2023/03/30 | Met | With prompts from the teacher JJ is able to complete this outcome. He is most successful when the teacher uses verbal reminders before the activity and visual reminders during the activity. It has been evident that JJ has been thinking about this skill and trying to practice it in class. Well done, JJ! |
| Outcome | By the end of second term, with verbal or visual cues, JJ will begin to learn how to wait quietly while other classmates to share their ideas. He will be successful in 2 out of 5 learning opportunities as measured by teacher or EA observations. | |
| Evaluation Date | Achievement Level | Comment |
| 2023/03/30 | Met | JJ has been making gains with waiting quietly for others to share their ideas. He is able to do this with a verbal reminder from an adult. He does try to listen to when his classmates share. |

Note. Image of a portion of page 5 of 7, 2019.

The PLP document is created and updated electronically in the ESS Connect/monAPPUI system, in the PowerSchool student information system, as shown in a fictional example in Figure 7. The ESS Connect system stores a variety of documents related to education support

services and allows the user to report, collaborate and communicate about specific students requiring additional support. Documents stored and shared in ESS Connect include a student profile, needs assessments, requests for services, PLPs, and other support services forms. Only the school and district staff who teach the student or are directly involved with the student have access to the student's profile on ESS Connect.

Figure 7

Sneak Peak of ESS Connect Draft: Creating a PLP

ESS Connect/monAPPUI

Search Curriculum Communication Reporting

Editing Section: Student Information - Review: Personalized Learning Plan for Bobby BB (2345678)

Save, Done Editing Save, Continue Editing Cancel Editing

Brunswick School Year 2018-2019

PERSONALIZED LEARNING PLAN

STUDENT INFORMATION

Plan Start Date: 09/04/2018 Plan End Date: 07/05/2019

Student Name: Bobby BB Student Number: 2345678 Date of Birth: 2003/02/06

School: Fredericton High School Grade: 10

Parent/Guardian: Joan BB Phone Number: 5067777777

Address: 355 Smith Street Fredericton, New Brunswick E1N 2R5

Teacher: Sally TT

Other Team Members:

- 777777 (TT,Debby) (ID) lock
- 212121 (RT,Dave) (ID) lock

Note. Video screenshot, 2:04, November 26, 2018.


<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rHcmDoC-8B8>

Currently, the communication feature in ESS Connect allows school and district staff involved with a student profile and district staff who maintain ESS Connect to send messages and announcements within the system and includes an email feature that allows documents to be shared electronically with others who do not have access to ESS Connect, such as families. I

have never sent or received communication in the ESS Connect system, other than general announcements from District staff regarding tips and system updates, because I prefer to communicate primarily by phone and paper notes and documents, or sometimes include my communication in the homeroom teacher's communication. Documents stored in ESS Connect can also be printed and distributed as needed, which is typically how families are provided with copies of PLPs.

Figure 8

JJ's Grade Two PLP: Student Information


School Year 2022-2023

PERSONALIZED LEARNING PLAN

STUDENT INFORMATION

| | | |
|--|----------------------------|---------------------------|
| Plan Start Date: 2022/09/01 | Plan End Date: 2023/06/30 | Revision Date: |
| Student Name: John Joseph Cameron Friel | Student Number: [REDACTED] | Date of Birth: [REDACTED] |
| School: [REDACTED] | Grade: 2 | Phone Number: |
| Parent/Guardian: Erin Friel | | |
| Address: [REDACTED] | | |
| Teacher: [REDACTED] | | |
| Associated Teachers: [REDACTED] | | |
| Program of Study: Early French Immersion (Grade 1 entry) | | |
| Student Name: John Joseph Cameron Friel | Student ID: [REDACTED] | |

JUSTIFICATION SUMMARY

Diagnosis: Neurodevelopmental Disorder - Autism Spectrum Disorder

Pertinent Medical Information:
 JJ has Autism Specturm Disorder. He currently does not take any medication at school. JJ has received support from OT [REDACTED]

Present Level of Function Supported by Assessments

| Assessment Name | Assessor | Date | Summary |
|-----------------------|------------|------------|------------------------------------|
| Diagnostic Assessment | [REDACTED] | 2018/02/01 | Autism Spectrum Disorder Diagnosis |

Note. Image of a portion of page 1 of 7, 2023.

All types of PLPs include basic student information and a justification summary which outlines why a PLP is needed, as shown in page one of JJ's Grade Two PLP in Figure 8. The PLP also includes the type of PLP required (accommodated, modified, or individualized), and the PLP. As shown in JJ's Grade Two PLP in Figure 9, each PLP indicates the type of personalization being utilized in the PLP for that student. It outlines the individualized domain if applicable, accommodations if applicable, a summary of methods and materials, the people responsible for creating and updating the PLP, a student's present level of performance, learning goals, and learning outcomes.

Figure 9

JJ's Grade Two PLP: Type of PLP

| | | |
|---|--|-------------------------------|
| Student Name: John Joseph Cameron Friel | | Student ID: [REDACTED] |
| TYPE OF PERSONALIZED LEARNING PLAN(S) | | |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> PLP-Individualized <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> PLP-Individualized (in addition to provincial curriculum) | | |
| Student Name: John Joseph Cameron Friel | | Student ID: [REDACTED] |
| PLP-INDIVIDUALIZED | | |
| Start Date: 2022/09/01 | | End Date: 2023/06/30 |
| Individualized Domain | Fundamental Skills | |
| Summary of Methods and Materials | verbal cueing, gestures, peer modeling, reinforcement, repetition, visuals | |
| Person Responsible | | |

Note. Image of a portion of page 3 of 7, 2023.

Accommodation, Modification, and Individualization of Learning in New Brunswick

Universal accommodations are strategies, technologies, and adjusted teaching strategies that enable all students to reach and demonstrate their learning of unaltered curriculum learning targets. Universal accommodations are part of a Universal Design for Learning, a framework that

eliminates or reduces barriers to academic success by providing “multiple, varied, and flexible options for representation, expression, and engagement” for all students in a classroom (Ralabate, 2011, p. 15). These accommodations are often referred to as good teaching strategies (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2015b, p. 8). Examples of universal accommodations include using a computer to demonstrate learning, minimizing distractions by providing a quiet environment, and allowing for increased/decreased opportunities for movement during assessment (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2015b, p. 8-9). Universal accommodations are not required to be documented in a PLP because they do not alter the expectations set out in curricula and can benefit all learners. Justifiable accommodations “are documented strategies, technologies or adjustments without which the student would not be able to access the curriculum” (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2015b, p. 7). Examples of justifiable accommodations include using large print, using a speech/text device, and extended time for test taking (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2015b, p. 8-9). These accommodations need to be documented in a PLP (p. 8).

Modification of a course occurs “when grade level curricular outcomes of a subject have been altered, deleted, or added in order to address the specific needs of a student” (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2015a, p. 9). Modifications change or remove the complexity and required understanding of outcomes while the general intent of the course is preserved (p. 9). Students with modifications participate in learning with their class but receive different supports than their peers (p. 9). Modification of a course is a significant decision because it can affect post-secondary options (p. 9).

A PLP does not follow the prescribed curriculum, addresses the needs of a specific student, and typically focuses on skill development goals such as daily living, language and communication, motor skills, social/behavioural interactions, and academic skills (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2015b, p. 9). A PLP also records the support personnel involved with helping the student meet their learning goals, such as education assistants, speech-language pathologists, and occupational therapists (p. 9).

Learning Plans in Other Areas of Canada

Learning plans for students can be referred to as Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), Individualized Education Plans (IEPs), Individualized Program Plans (IPPs), Instructional Support Plans (ISPs) and Inclusion and Intervention Plans (IIPs) in various provinces in Canada. Not all students diagnosed with ASD have learning plans because of the varying needs and characteristics of students with ASD and because of the varying requirements for needing a PLP. There are some students diagnosed with ASD who can meet academic curricular outcomes and behaviour expectations without significant modifications to those learning expectations. There are some ASD students who only require a plan for behavioural improvement, and some students who require plans with significant individualized modifications to curriculum and behaviour expectations. There are even some students who require individualized plans for their full year(s) of schooling.

For example, the Alberta Government's Learning and Teaching Resource Branch (2006) noted that it provides an IPP to support "students with special education needs" (p. 1). These are students who are described as "in need of special education programming because of their behavioural, communicational, intellectual, learning or physical characteristics, or a combination of those characteristics" (Learning and Teaching Resource Branch, 2006, p. 3). The Special

Program's Branch (2004) defined an IPP as "a concise plan of action designed to address students' special education needs, and is based on diagnostic information which provides the basis for intervention strategies" (p. 4). The Learning and Teaching Resource Branch (2006) also noted that "students with special education needs will benefit from a coordinated team approach in the development and implementation of their IPP processes... [and] may consist of the classroom teacher, parents and students (where appropriate) ... and others where appropriate" (p. 3).

The Nova Scotia Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (2008) in the *Special Education Policy* stated that an IPP is put in place when a student cannot achieve the provincial learning outcomes, even with exploration of instructional strategies and adaptations. The Nova Scotia Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (2008) also stated that "the IPP should detail the outcomes involved and the supports and services needed to enable the student to reach these outcomes" (pp. 32-33). In the Nova Scotia Department of Education and Early Childhood Education's (2016) *Individual Program Planning Review*, it was confirmed that there is a "need to do more to support parents and guardians in understanding the program planning process and to involve them in decisions affecting their children" (p. 10)

The Research Purpose and Questions

The purpose of this autoethnographic study was to explore my dual parent and teacher perception of the PLP process, with a focus on communication and collaboration between home and school stakeholders regarding my child, JJ, who has an ASD diagnosis and attends elementary school in rural New Brunswick. Although Porter and AuCoin (2012) made it clear that collaboration, communication, and co-operation amongst all school stakeholders are integral components to inclusive education in New Brunswick, there is no current information regarding

how well stakeholders in New Brunswick have been meeting the collaboration and communication action plan recommendation since the report was published. Although Korotkov (2021) reviewed New Brunswick's inclusion policy, it did not include a review of the recommendation of communication made in Porter and AuCoin's (2012) report. For schools to best support students with exceptionalities, more specifically those diagnosed with ASD and working with PLPs, it is important for teachers and parents/guardians to know how well they are communicating and collaborating and if there are enhancements that can be made to improve the PLP process.

Although it would be ideal to learn more about the perspective of others, I also have experience with the PLP process as both a parent and teacher and have insights that may be valuable to others. Lapadat (2017) defined autoethnography as "an approach to qualitative inquiry in which a researcher recounts a story of his or her own personal experience, coupled with an ethnographic analysis of the cultural context and implications of that experience" (p. 589). Adams et al. (2015) noted that autoethnography provides an opportunity to describe and reflect on "beliefs, practices and experiences (p. 1)" through "deep and careful self-reflection (p. 2)." Adams et al. (2015) also explained that "autoethnographic stories are artistic and analytic demonstrations of how we come to know, name, and interpret personal and cultural experience (p. 2)." The combination of storytelling, deep reflection, and analysis that autoethnography provides was an opportunity to share my unique combination of parent, teacher and researcher perspective of the PLP process. It also provided an opportunity for me to reflect on my perspective and share my own insider perspective of the PLP process and insights I have gained during the ongoing process that may not have been shared in a case study format.

Wehlburg (1995) noted that collaboration between schools and parents has “a positive effect on the [academic] achievement of students” (p. 127). Parents of students know their children very well and can be an asset when creating and implementing a learning plan that will most effectively help their child excel at school and in every-day life. Shelden et al. (2010) pointed out that research over the years supports “the role of parent involvement in positive educational outcomes for students” (p. 159). Porter and AuCoin (2012) also supported this idea when they noted that “in schools where parents and outside support had relationships with the school staff, regular and ongoing collaboration supported the students” (p. 19).

Theoretical Framework

When exploring my dual parent and teacher perspective of the PLP process, labelling theory (LT) as defined by DeRoche (2015) was used as my theoretical framework. DeRoche (2015) described LT as outlining the negative consequences of labelling individuals, including formal and informal labels. DeRoche (2015) posited that educational labels may ultimately “lead to fewer educational opportunities..., stigma, and, along with lowered self-concepts, can contribute to a self-fulfilling prophecy” (p. 4), although recently “the use of these terms has become common in our culture to the point of being normalized” (p. 5). This is important to consider when schools communicate with parents as parents may have negative feelings about the label of ASD given to their child which may influence their perceptions of the PLP process. It is also possible that, according to LT, parents and teachers may have pre-determined ideas about the possible limitations of academic and social goals that the child can accomplish, which also may affect perceptions of and communication during the PLP process. In my experience, some parents of students requiring PLPs are reluctant to agree to the PLP because of stigma associated with the labels of disability and diagnosis, and the possibility of their child being treated

differently by both staff and students. I have also encountered teachers that have preconceived ideas about a student's capabilities based only on a diagnosis label. This was important to consider when analyzing my dual perceptions of communication during the PLP process because negative feelings about labels and the effects of labels may create bias when communicating between school and parents, and may even make teachers and parents reluctant to communicate with each other. DeRoche (2015) explained that "parents now play an active role in their child's educational outcomes" (p. 5). DeRoche (2015) noted that "while considering LT and the role of parents in label advocacy, more attention needs to be paid to how labels may be tied to socio-economic status and cultural capital" (p. 5).

Cultural capital theory was described by Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) when they discussed power relations and how those power relations contribute to material and symbolic interests as determined by the dominant culture. Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) explained that these cultural interests are passed down through generations and the education system is used to pass down the cultural interests of the dominant culture. They also explained that the dominant cultural interests determine what is considered valuable cultural capital, a formal education being an example, which can then be used to perpetuate differing distributions of cultural capital among groups of people. Parents have differing cultural capital and differing perspectives about the value of their cultural capital, which may affect their participation in and perceptions of communication during the PLP process. Teachers often have a higher cultural capital because of their level of education and job status which may affect their willingness to participate in and their perception of communication during the PLP process. Communication timing and frequency between the school and parents may also be perceived differently by parents and teachers because of differing cultural capital. DeRoche (2015) argued that "parents draw on their

cultural capital in order to create and sustain opportunities of educational advancement not otherwise provided without a diagnosis” (p. 5). This was important to consider when analyzing and interpreting the data because the frequency and content of communication between parents and school may be impacted by cultural capital. Parent cultural capital was also an important consideration during data analysis because it may have impacted teachers’ perceptions of communication during the PLP process as teachers may also have bias due to differing cultural capital.

Each instance of communication during the PLP process can be considered a situation. Edwards and Templeton (2005) defined situations as a combination of elements that impact “the people or things in it” (p. 706). They described behaviour in situations as being influenced by intrinsic factors and external factors, and the demonstration of certain behaviours is determined by the situation (p. 705-706). Edwards and Templeton (2005) also explained that situations are often assigned personality traits such as “boring” or “productive,” which often determine the cause and effect that occurs in a situation (p. 706). They also suggested that people will make presumptions about situations which “will likely play a substantial role in determining people’s thoughts, feeling, and behaviour in response to the situation” (p. 707). Edwards and Templeton (2005) explained “this analysis implies that the effects that a situation has on a person’s outcomes are always intertwined with the characteristics of the person... (including abilities, personality traits, social roles, past experiences, etc.)” (p. 717). This conceptualization of situation perception was significant when I interpreted my perspectives of communication during the PLP process because parents and teachers have varying characteristics and experiences that influence their perceptions and perspectives of the PLP process. It was important to take note of the adjectives used when I described situations that occurred during the PLP process, as these

were indicators of preconceptions that influenced my perceptions of communication during the PLP process.

Labelling theory, cultural capital theory and situation perception are frameworks through which I analyzed my dual perspective of communication during the PLP process. Parents and teachers have varied experiences with the education system which affect their perceptions of communication during the PLP process. Parents have varied economic and social capital available to help them communicate with school stakeholders and acquire services for their child which affect both the parents' and teachers' perceptions of the PLP process. Parents and teachers have varied characteristics that affect situation perception which also plays a role in their participation in the PLP process. DeRoche (2015) suggested that inequality in access to "formal labels and accommodations" exist, and that "inequality in access, then, leads to inequality in academic opportunities and perpetuation of class structures" (p. 19). Parent involvement in their child's academics can range from no involvement to being involved in every minute detail. Teacher communication during the PLP process can range from communicating only during required reporting periods, to frequent and consistent detailed communication. This theoretical framework helped me interpret where on the involvement continuum I fall in each of my roles and determined what I could do as a parent to improve my communication during the PLP process. This theoretical framework also helped me gain a deeper understanding of why parents and teachers may have varied perspectives of the PLP process, how I can improve my communication during the PLP process as a teacher, and helped me gain insights into enhancements that could be made to communication during the PLP process for other teachers and parents of children diagnosed with ASD.

Objectivity in ethnography can be difficult because writing autoethnography is produced by people who have feelings, values, ideas, interests, and assumptions (Wall, 2008, p. 42). Hegelund (2005) described a more traditional understanding of objectivity as being accomplished by using accurate descriptions of verifiable experiences which, in turn, creates reliability and validity through taking a neutral stance during the research process (p. 653). Acknowledging that my perception of the instances of communication during the PLP process is just one perception, and that other stakeholders involved in the PLP process will have experienced the same situations differently, helped me establish objectivity. All stakeholders in the PLP process have differing perceptions of a given instance of communication because they too come with varying pre-determined ideas about a child with ASD because of the diagnosis label, different cultural capital and socio-economic status, and situation perception. It is also evident that the events that take place in a day for each individual affect how we communicate with others and affect how we perceive how they have communicated with us. Stress, diet, sleep, communication skills, and computer literacy, which can also be connected to LT, cultural capital and socio-economic status, and situation perception, are just a few factors that may affect communication during the PLP process. I cannot speak for others, but I shared my own experiences. Although my perceptions are affected by emotions, I combined my stories of situation perceptions with PLP documents, letters, and emails, as well as observable facts, and combined them with repeated contextual acknowledgment that other stakeholders probably perceived the situation differently, which also helped to build the case for seeing the narration of my experiences as valid and reliable interpretations.

Using reflexivity, which Adams (2015) described as looking back at “our experiences, identities, and relationships in order to consider how they influence our present work” (p. 29), to

uncover any bias, assumptions and beliefs that may affect the outcome of the research, helped me reduce bias and increase accountability and objectivity. This theoretical framework in combination with reflexivity was also used to uncover and discuss possible mistakes and missteps I have made throughout communication during the PLP process. I highlighted what others did well, the facts regarding communication timing and frequency, and my perceptions of my own communication during the PLP process, whilst at times using a third-person voice to distance myself from the story, which contributed to objectivity in this research. Through this, I attempted to honor what I have not done well so that others can improve their own communication during the PLP process, while also making the “writing and research accessible so that it might improve others’ lives,” with the possibility of uncovering possible enhancements that could be made to current communication and collaboration practices both in my own teaching practice, my parenting, and for others’ teaching practices and parenting (Adams, Holman, & Ellis, 2015, p. 114).

Although my dual role as a parent of a child with ASD and a PLP, as well as teacher is not unique, sharing my perspectives of communication during the PLP process and being a researcher of these stories, appears to be a unique situation. It is possible that the analysis of this research presented new and unique perspectives and insights into communication during the PLP process. These theories, combined with researcher objectivity and reflexivity, helped me interpret possible factors that may affect the extent of parent and teacher involvement in communication during the PLP process and enhancements that could be made to improve communication during the PLP process.

Literature Review

Research shows that parent engagement with a child's education can result in improved successes at school (Kraft & Rogers, 2015; McNaughton & Vostal, 2010; Murray, McFarland-Piazza & Harrison, 2014; Olmstead, 2013). Barnard (2004) found that parent involvement in elementary school improved long-term school success for children. Desforges and Abouchaar (2003) also noted that parental support is needed for students to maximize their potential. Harris and Goodall (2008) noted that although research about parental engagement in education on student achievement is complex due to the number of variables that influence student success, evidence suggests that parental engagement significantly influences educational achievement, especially at an early age. Desforges and Abourcharr (2003) explained that even when a variety of different variables were considered and researched, parental involvement in education remained beneficial, especially in building resiliency. Azad and Mandell (2016) explained that open communication between parents and teachers is especially important to the school success of children with autism and leads to more effective implementation of support plans. The National Research Council (2001) also supported collaboration between parents and school as best practice for children with autism, especially during the individualized planning process.

Barton et al. (2004) set out to research parental involvement and engagement in high-poverty urban communities regarding science education reform. As Barton et al. (2004) researched how "parental beliefs and actions align with the expectations held by others," they questioned what was meant by parental engagement. They found two key conceptual findings "that frames parents as both authors and agents in schools" (p. 3). First, they defined parental engagement as a "set of relationships and actions that cut across individuals, circumstances, and events that are produced and bounded by the context in which that engagement takes place" (p.

11). Barton et al. (2004) elaborated by noting that “parental engagement is a desire, expression and an attempt by parents to have an impact on what actually transpires around their children in schools and on the kinds of human, social, and material resources that are valued in schools” (p. 11). Secondly, they presented a data-driven model, The Ecologies of Parental Engagement (EPE), which described the “interconnections between ‘what’ parents engage in and ‘how’ they manage to do so” (p. 3). As part of the EPE, Barton et al. (2004) suggested that effective engagement is not just individual actions, but interactions between parents, teachers, and other stakeholders in specific places and, if parents activate the resources available to them to create a place of their own in schools and position themselves so that they can influence decisions at school, they can successfully be engaged in their child’s education. Parent engagement involves a person’s ability to articulate what they know and want but requires others to listen and respond and, in order to be effectively engaged in a child’s education, a parent must move beyond the traditional reactive receivers of prescribed school structures and be present in schools. This dynamic relationship between parents and schools creates positioning, where different forms of non-traditional capital are required to gain positions of power to influence change. Barton et. al. (2004) cautioned that although some parents were successful at using creating roles and positioning to engage in their child’s education, “many parents struggled to author authentic, productive spaces in school” (p. 9).

Parent Perspectives on Communicating with Schools and Barriers to Communication

Although parent involvement in education is associated with improved student success (Rodriguez, Blatz, & Elbaum, 2014), approaches to inclusive education vary and communication practices are also inconsistent from school to school (AL Jabery et al., 2014; Trainor, 2010). Rodriguez et al. (2014) found the quality and quantity of collaboration between parents and

schools as reported by parents varied from very little collaboration to frequent and positive collaboration. Azad et al. (2016) also affirmed that although communication between parents and teachers impacts student success, communication can also cause conflict, and districts struggle to create consistent and reliable communication systems. Azad et al. (2018) explained that “establishing and sustaining partnerships between parents and teachers is extremely challenging in practice” (p. 2). Parents reported that communication from school is inconsistent and is often about behavioural incidents and less about progress updates (Goldman, et al., 2019).

Rodriguez et al. (2014) conducted individual and focus group interviews with “96 parents of students with disabilities in 18 schools to explore parents’ views of schools’ efforts to engage them in their child’s education” (p. 79). Eight themes regarding “schools’ efforts to facilitate parent involvement and parents’ involvement with their child at school” were identified and evaluated (p. 79): parents report varied involvement, from no participation to frequent involvement; parents will increase involvement if they feel their child is not progressing or is insufficiently supported; parents perceive a responsibility to initiate involvement with schools; the frequency, type and quality of communication between parents and schools varies, but is important to parents; parents want communication and support with changes and transitions at school; parents’ trust in schools is important, but varies; parent knowledge and experience affects their perception of, and willingness and ability to be involved in their child’s education; and the teacher’s knowledge and efficacy affects parental involvement. Rodriguez et al. (2014) elaborated by noting that a school’s effort to involve parents is linked with parents’ views of the quality of services provided by the school, so “parents who perceive that schools are doing a good job of providing services may not feel the need to interact as frequently with teachers as those [who] perceive their children are not receiving needed supports” (p. 91). They also noted

that although their study likely represented parents who tended to be more involved in their child's education and was likely overrepresented by Caucasian parents, the study indicated that schools can "maximize parent involvement" by being receptive to parent input, providing quality services for students with disabilities, and communicating regularly with all parents using a variety of communication methods (p. 92).

Azad et al. (2018) tested a parent-teacher consultation model, *Partners in School*, with the goal of improving parent-teacher communication about specific teaching practices and outcomes for children with ASD in a large urban public school district. In the study, 26 teachers and 49 parents of children with ASD measured their communication and child outcomes in a survey before and after the consultation process. The results of the study indicated that parents and teachers perceived improvements in child outcomes and parent-teacher communication after participating in the consultation process. Teachers in the study stated they often lack the training, time, and support to develop effective communication relationships with parents. Tucker and Swartz (2013) identified a need for increased teacher knowledge about effective communication as well as increased teacher knowledge about ASD. Kurth et al. (2020) also noted that parents expressed concerns about the availability of teachers who are qualified to work with students in inclusive settings and knowledgeable about ASD, and who can manage behaviour, supports, and collaboration effectively. Azad et al. (2018) also noted that although teachers often do not have communication training, parents also lack training on how to communicate with teachers, which also contributes to ineffective communication between parents and teachers.

Gartmeier et al. (2016) asked 677 German mathematics teachers to complete questionnaires that measured parent-teacher communication competence, frequency of idea exchange with colleagues, and time spent working with parents, to determine teacher ability to

overcome challenges that arise from communicating with parents. They found that many teacher education programs do not include interacting with families, leaving teachers to develop communication skills through experiences at work, resulting in teachers often being poorly prepared for interactions with parents. They also found because of varying degrees of communication competence, some teachers have a straightforward approach to proposing solutions when talking to parents and do not focus enough on cooperating with parents. Because of their research findings, Gartmeier et al. (2016) suggested that teacher education programs should include a focus on helping teachers develop conversational techniques, realistic viewpoints of teacher roles, knowledge of when to involve other professionals, knowledge of how to establish good interpersonal relationships with parents, knowledge of how to reach goals in a small timeframe, and knowledge of how to learn from collaborative reflection.

McNaughton et al. (2008) investigated the effect of instruction of effective listening skills to undergraduate preservice teachers at a large university in the northeastern United States. They used a pretest-posttest control group design with ten preservice teachers, five in the control group with no training and five in the experimental group who received *LAFF Don't CRY* training, a framework of active listening skills to communicate respect and empathy. In the study, the ten preservice teachers participated in parent-teacher interaction role-play scenarios, and thirty parents from a variety of cultural and linguistic backgrounds of preschool and school-aged children watched the videotaped role-play scenarios. The parents in McNaughton et al.'s (2008) study provided feedback on the presence or lack of effective communication skills. The study demonstrated evidence of the effectiveness of preservice teacher training in active listening skills, the use of the skills as valued by parents, and that the use of the skills can produce observable improvement in communication skills. In a reflection of McNaughton et al.'s (2008)

research, McNaughton and Vostal (2010) explained that adversarial relationships between teachers and parents, differing cultural and linguistic backgrounds between teachers and parents, differing expectations, past negative experiences with schools, and difficulty with print materials can further complicate collaborative efforts. McNaughton and Vostal (2010) explained that when teachers use any of the CRY strategies when communicating with parents (“criticize people who aren’t present, react hastily and promise something you can’t deliver, and yakety-yak-yak [or talk about themselves]” (p. 252), they may diminish the parents’ confidence in the teacher, shift attention away from the student’s problem, or leave a parent feeling misunderstood.

Lemmer (2012) used individual and focus group interviews, school visits, and parent-teacher conference reports of 17 teachers, 20 parents, and two students in selected South African schools to investigate parent and teacher perspectives of the parent-teacher conference. Lemmer (2012) concluded that although parents participate in a child’s education in many ways, the most important direct link between families and school is through regular rounds of formal parent-teacher conferences. Lemmer (2012) cited differing race, language, and social backgrounds as barriers to successful communication, especially in multicultural schools which have parents with diverse educational, cultural, and economic frameworks. Lemmer (2012) noted that teacher training does not usually provide instruction in communication skills, so novice teachers often encounter more difficulties in communicating effectively. Lemmer (2012) described how language barriers may exist when communicating with immigrant or language minority parents, with the use of educational jargon further complicating communication. Lemmer (2012) also pointed out that the importance of conferences is trivialized due to their short length, poor seating arrangements contribute to unequal power relations, and the voices of parents as partners

are often treated with reserve, all factors which could contribute to poor communication and collaboration between parents and school.

Parents of children diagnosed with ASD are reported as being less likely to be satisfied with parent-teacher communication than parents of students with other disabilities (Goldman et al., 2019). Tucker and Schwartz (2013) explained that parenting a child with ASD creates “challenges that in many ways set them apart as a group from even other families with children with disabilities,” because children with ASD often have complex physical, behavioural, and social needs that require extra care, extra monetary obligations, and more time spent in meetings and requesting resources (p. 4). Tucker and Schwartz (2013) noted that although there is variability in children with ASD, many “are able to complete grade level or advanced academics but require behavioural and social support [and] continue to baffle public schools” (p. 4). Harris and Goodall (2008) described parents as also citing work commitments and childcare struggles as another barrier to engaging with their child’s education but noted that “the issue of time is part of a more complex social and economic picture” (p. 280). Azad et al. (2021) suggested that parent and teacher self-efficacy, characteristics, and skills also play a role in parent involvement in education.

Although parents described a variety of experiences with communication with schools and equally as varied barriers to communication and collaboration, AL Jabery et al. (2014) noted that there is a “need for unifying the delivered services under one umbrella, to enhance parents-professional partnerships, remove the financial burden caused by the cost of services, and improve accessibility methods,” and stressed the need for “immediate enhancement in the service delivery system to consider parents’ opinions” (p. 484). Rodriguez et al. (2014) stated that additional research is needed to understand how parent characteristics and school

engagement methods may facilitate or hinder parent involvement in education. Kraft and Rogers (2015) suggested that policymakers and school administrators set clear and reasonable expectations for teachers while designing efficient and effective communication systems.

Effective Parent-Teacher Communication

Although effective communication between parents and teachers presents many challenges, there are suggestions for strategies to improve this communication. Rodriguez et al. (2014) noted that a key factor in the success of the relationship between the school and parent is trust (pp. 90-91). Parents in research by Elbaum et al. (2016) described more trust in schools with teachers who demonstrated higher levels of competence in teaching and implementing learning goals.

Murray et al. (2014) noted that effective parent engagement should include discussing school at home, supervising the completion of homework, and participating in school events in addition to communicating with the school. Murray et al. (2014) stated that teachers should first recognize parent preferences for modes of communication and should include both one-way and two-way communication opportunities. Goldman et al. (2019) suggested a daily structured form sent from school to home can assist in parent-teacher collaboration. Kraft and Rogers (2015) suggested that frequent teacher-to-parent phone calls, text messages, and mailing information brochures are found to increase student engagement. Murray et al. (2014) suggested that “newsletters, daily journals, parent letters and notice boards” as well as “email, websites and digital portfolios” can all be used to help teachers communicate with parents (p. 1033). Olmstead (2013) suggested that technology is a great opportunity for parents to receive information and communicate with the teacher. Olmstead (2013) noted that “online textbooks, links to educational websites that include games or videos, and teacher websites” are great ways for

parents to gather information and “blogs, wikis, and email provide parents with two-way communication” (p. 30). Olmstead (2013) also noted that electronic communication can “include voice-calling systems, websites, email, and parent portals” (p. 30). McNaughton and Vostal (2010) noted that active listening skills are important when establishing effective communication and include making empathetic comments, asking questions, and paraphrasing the speakers’ comments.

Although effective communication between parents and teachers can be difficult and challenging, improved pre-service teacher training, use of active listening skills and frequent, varied, and purposeful communication methods create a strong foundation for effective communication (Elbaum, Blatz, & Rodriguez, 2016; Murray et al., 2014). Support from school districts and administrators through planning and communication time as well as additional teacher training will also strengthen a foundation for effective parent-teacher communication (Kurth, Love, & Pirtle, 2020).

Learning Plan Collaboration Expectations and Legislation in Atlantic Canada

In Canada, each province and territory is responsible for their education system and, because of this, each province and territory has differing names for learning plans as well as slightly differing criteria for requiring and creating an accommodated, modified, or individualized learning plan for students. Although each province in Atlantic Canada has slightly different standards for designing and reporting on learning plans, all provincial learning plan documents note the importance and necessity of parent involvement in the learning plan planning process, but with varying degrees of detail and emphasis.

The Newfoundland and Labrador Department of Education (2021) stated that “parent/guardian involvement is a critical component of the program planning process,” that the

“planning team will meet at least annually, with additional meetings as required,” and that “parents [will] have access to the Department of Education’s Parent Handbook” (p. 11-12). The teacher will review the Individual Education Plan and any attachments with the parent/guardian once it is developed.

The Prince Edward Island Department of Education (2005) has a *Preparation and Planning Checklist* for teachers which included meeting with parents and noted that “schools are expected to involve parents in the planning, development, and implementation of educational programs for their children” (p. 17). Ongoing communication and collaboration between teachers and parents were stressed as essential as well as teachers taking the initiative to contact parents. Parent input was described as critical to the planning process as well as a relationship of trust built upon parents believing that they are considered one of the most knowledgeable sources of information about the needs of their child. Best practices to ensure parental involvement in the planning process were summarized as: give information about the process; give information about roles and responsibilities; give information about how parents can contribute to a meeting; give information about who will be attending a meeting and why; have a meeting at a mutually agreed upon time; parent ideas are heard and valued; and invite parents to communicate what they can do to support their child (p. 17-18). To support the involvement of parents in the planning process, the Prince Edward Department of Education (2005) also provided an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) information handbook for parents which describes what an IEP is, the purposes of the IEP, and common questions about the IEP with answers (p. 92-95).

The Nova Scotia Department of Education (2016) noted that the planning team should include parents and guardians, that Individual Program Plan (IPP) reports are sent home with regular report cards, and that IPPs are reviewed by the planning team at least twice a year (p. 4).

The necessity of helping parents and guardians understand and be involved the planning process is also noted (p. 10). Meaningful communication and collaborative relationships were reported as strengthening the planning process (p. 12). The Nova Scotia Department of Education (2016) also included a development criteria checklist, which lists active participation of parents throughout the planning process as essential, as well as emphasized the vital role that communication and collaboration between school and parents plays in ensuring appropriate programming (p. 19). The Nova Scotia Department of Education (2006) also provided a comprehensive program planning process guide for parents, which thoroughly details the program planning process, details the roles and responsibilities of team members (including parents), and provides a thorough list of considerations and tips for parents to help them contribute to the planning process and its meetings, meaningfully and effectively. The parent guide also provided information to support parents beyond the school setting. A “collaborative consultative approach” to the program planning process, based on mutual trust and respect was emphasized; however, the guide also acknowledges that the collaborative nature of the process may break down and provided strategies to help minimize and resolve conflict during the process (p. 19-28). The guide also contained excerpts from documents supporting the planning process, a glossary of terms and acronyms, and questions for reflection for parents.

The New Brunswick Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (2015) explained that the planning process for students with diverse learning needs should include collaborative consultation with all stakeholders (p. 5). Parents/guardians were described as being knowledgeable about their child and capable of contributing information to the planning process throughout the school year regarding negative behaviours or struggles at home, or health issues (p. 6). The New Brunswick Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (2015)

noted that parents/guardians must be consulted during the planning process and are an integral part of planning and support, which may include being responsible for implementing parts of the plan (p. 6-7). A child's success at school was noted as being dependent upon parental support and involvement; although, if a disagreement occurs, parents/guardians may submit a formal appeal (p. 7). Parents/guardians, as well as the student, if possible, were encouraged to be part of a continuous planning process as goals and outcomes often change throughout the school year (p. 7). It was also suggested that teachers share information about community support groups available to assist parents/guardians through the initial difficult stages of the planning process (p. 7). It was also noted that a school or teacher is obligated to make at least three attempts to contact parents/guardians regarding input into the PLP planning process per reporting period when no response is received (p. 10).

Department of Education learning plan documents in Atlantic Canada demonstrated that communication and collaboration between parents and schools during the planning process is important to the success of students with learning plans, with varying emphasis on crucial connections and communication with families. Each province in Atlantic Canada also has legislation that, by law, the Department of Education is responsible for administering. This legislation is referred to as the Education Act in Prince Edward Island (RSPEI 1988), Nova Scotia (SNS 2018), and New Brunswick (SNB 1997), and the Schools Act in Newfoundland (SNL 1997). All four provincial statutes stated that either consultation or communication between parents and teachers regarding a child's education is a legal requirement, with PEI also requiring cooperation and collaboration as part of a child's education.

Methodology

Denzin and Lincoln (2013) noted that “qualitative research consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible” (p. 27). According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), qualitative researchers are interested in “how people make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world” (p. 15). Merriam and Tisdell (2013) explained that “research focused on discovery, insight, and understanding from the perspectives of those being studied offers the greatest promise of making a difference in people’s lives” (p. 1) and, according to Denzin and Lincoln (2013), have the potential to “change the world” (p. 27). My experiences as a parent of a child with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) who has a Personalized Learning Plan (PLP) and as a teacher of students with ASD who have PLPs, combined with reading the Porter and Aucoin report (2012) and hearing and reading about the experiences of others, left me wondering if there were practices that could be enhanced to improve communication and collaboration during the PLP process. The application of inductive qualitative research, described by Merriam and Tisdale (2013) as building theory from information gathered through data such as interviews and documents, was an effective way to learn more about communication during the PLP process, made experiences with the process more visible, and helped uncover specific and detailed information about how to best support children diagnosed with ASD and their parents to enhance communication and collaboration during the PLP process.

Research During a Pandemic

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) noted that a case study shares “with other forms of qualitative research the search for meaning and understanding, the researcher as the primary instrument of data collection and analysis, an inductive investigative strategy, and the end product being richly descriptive” (p. 37). Understanding participants’ perspectives is the goal of

the case study and a person is the best way to collect and analyze data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). A case study was selected as an appropriate research approach for my inquiry because of the depth of description that it could provide about parents' and teachers' perspectives of communication during the PLP process.

At the elementary school level in New Brunswick, the homeroom teacher is the primary person responsible for writing the goals and outcomes defined in a student's PLP. I planned to interview two purposefully selected parents or sets of parents of children in elementary school diagnosed with ASD and have active PLPs, as well as the homeroom teachers responsible for preparing each student's PLP, which is convenience sampling (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) because participants would be selected only because they conveniently meet the sampling criteria. Research was planned at a school where I did not have personal connections to help ensure anonymity of participants and help increase reliability of data collected by enhancing my role of an observer. The semi-structured interviews were to be conducted once per set of parents and once per teacher. A semi-structured interview format was also selected to provide freedom to use questions flexibly and freedom to respond to the participants (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The timing was planned to ensure all participants had at least one recent experience with the PLP process.

As school resumed after the break March Break of 2020, I was optimistic about my case study research. I had completed a thesis proposal, presented to my committee, completed the Research Ethics approval process, acquired school board and principal approval, and had participants for my case study. Then, March 2020 brought the beginning of COVID shutdowns. Many people stayed home. I also gave birth to my second child the day New Brunswick imposed the first shutdown restrictions. Being on maternity leave was part of my data collection plan, but

COVID-19 restrictions and concerns led my participants to withdraw their consent to participate in interviews. It was quickly evident that much of the world's priorities were shifting, so my research timeline did not go as planned and a new plan was needed.

I planned to wait out the spring and summer, hoping for the new school year to be an ideal time to revisit securing participants. I made a visit to my doctor in June 2020 after noticing a spot on my shoulder. The result: cancer. Not only was the spot malignant melanoma, but the initial removal did not get it all. A second surgery was performed in July 2020. A suspicious spot on my eyelid was removed and tested in September 2020 and came back clear. After a visit to the dermatologist, I was notified that another type of cancer cell had been identified in my shoulder sample and a third surgery was required in October. Thankfully, I was considered cancer-free after the results of my third surgery were returned. My skin cancer journey dominated my thoughts and time during those five months; all the while, fear and uncertainty surrounding COVID-19 continued to affect people's lives. My research remained on hold.

Our community struggled through the closure of two local schools accompanied by online learning in January 2021 due to positive COVID-19 cases and required isolation that caused a teacher shortage and temporary school closures. As it neared the one-year mark since I had last made progress on starting interviews, I felt an alternative to my proposed pathway was necessary to learn more about possible improvements to the PLP process. My contact at the proposed research participant school gave a presentation of my research to the staff and contacted potential participants. Potential participants expressed that they were too busy and overwhelmed to participate. After discussion with my thesis advisor, I planned to approach a different school about participating in my research at the beginning of the 2021-2022 school year.

Summer of 2021 brought with it a renewed sense of optimism as COVID-19 cases were low, vaccinations were offered and many restrictions in New Brunswick were lifted. As the 2021-2022 school year began, the COVID-19 Delta variant was dominating the headlines. Early in the fall, restrictions were reinstated, and active cases rose. Local schools experienced more confirmed COVID-19 cases and experienced a two-week closure of schools due to a labour strike. I reached out to potential participants and even though they seemed interested in the idea of the research, they felt too overwhelmed to participate. As 2022 began, fear, uncertainty and new COVID-19 variants were triggering province-wide school closures and ever-changing restrictions and expectations. The continued and ongoing disruption of COVID-19 combined with additional personal life obstacles made it very complicated and difficult to acquire interview participants for a case study. The case study and interview format proved to be too difficult because of the restrictions and uncertainty during the pandemic. This led me to autoethnography as an alternative research method.

Autoethnography

Like Adams (2015), I also felt that “As a researcher, I am confident about my right (and privilege!) to speak for myself, but I am less confident about my right to speak on behalf of others” (p. 12). Adams et al. (2015) described a “crisis of representation” that occurred which “motivated researchers to acknowledge how their own identities, lives, beliefs, feelings and relationships influenced their approach to research and their reporting of “findings”” (p. 22). After looking for literature about the learning plan process experiences of others during the initial case study phase of my research, I determined that the literature from a dual parent-teacher perspective was limited and usually did not reflect experiences in rural areas, especially in

Canada. Using autoethnography to explore the PLP process created an opportunity for me to report findings without a significant possibility of mis-representing the experience of others.

Although years had passed since presenting my research proposal, there is still no current information regarding how well stakeholders in New Brunswick have been meeting the collaboration and communication action plan recommendation since the Porter and AuCoin (2012) report on inclusive education was published. Adams et al. (2015) stated that the fundamental reasons for doing autoethnography are:

1. To critique, make contributions to, and/or extend existing research and theory
2. To embrace vulnerability as a way to understand emotions and improve social life
3. To disrupt taboos, break silences, and reclaim lost and disregarded voices
4. To make research accessible to multiple audiences. (p. 36)

I felt that because I have experience with collaboration and communication during the PLP process as both a parent and as a teacher, it was important for me to contribute to the discussion of how to continue to improve collaboration and communication between parents and teachers of students diagnosed with ASD. Although sharing details of and reflections on my experiences left me vulnerable, adding to the often unheard or overlooked voices of the people that support students with ASD is vital to support effective communication between parents and teachers.

The COVID-19 pandemic created a great deal of stress, worry and disruption to everyone's lives. My personal life and implementing my thesis research were both profoundly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. I connected with Adams (2015) when he said that "[he] turned to doing the kind of work that mattered most to [him] and to bringing [his] emotions and experiences into the research process (p. 8)." Although I hope to one day be able to help others

share their experiences with and insights into communication during the PLP process, given the circumstances, using autoethnography to share my experiences, reflections and analysis was the most effective way for me to contribute to the improvement of the PLP process while protecting the valuable relationships between parents and teachers.

Exploring and describing my parent and teacher perception of communication during the PLP process was important, but if the study showed change is needed, it would be ideal if action were taken. Because of this, I think it was beneficial to use a critical lens to code and interpret the data. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) suggested that in critical studies, it is assumed that power differences exist and cause oppression, and that critical research “seeks to make these dynamics visible so that people can challenge power relations” (p. 61). There are usually power differences between parents and school staff, and navigating the power differences in a dual parent-teacher role are complex. Providing all school stakeholders with an opportunity to understand more about an important aspect of strengthening inclusion in New Brunswick and supporting student learning should ideally help to challenge unhealthy power relations if they exist.

Data Collection

Because of the shift from interviewing others to interviewing myself, I used a revised but similar set of structured interview questions to those in my original plan so that I could experience the interview as both a participant and an observer. The interview questions were designed to allow me to connect deeply with myself, my own experiences and the questions, and to uncover the elements of communication and collaboration during the PLP process starting from my first parent experience with the PLP process to the end of JJ’s second grade school year. The questions were also designed to help me uncover any assumptions or biases that I had. The self-interview questions helped me write and reflect deeply and richly about my experiences with

the PLP process with a focus on what went well and ideal communication during the PLP process. I performed a one-hour free-write response for each of the interview questions while emphasizing the parts of my experiences during the PLP process that went well. The interview and free-write process created opportunities for barriers and challenges to be examined. This only occurred if students, parents, or teachers could not be identified and only if the barriers and challenges could contribute to the enhancement of the PLP process. The free-write responses were the data collected for the following interview questions:

1. How long have you lived in this area? (background/demographic)
2. When did you become a teacher? (background/demographic)
3. When was your child diagnosed with ASD? (background/demographic)
4. How many years has your child been on a PLP? (background/demographic)
5. How many PLPs have you been involved with writing or implementing as a teacher?
(background/demographic)
6. Please describe the PLP process. [e.g.: planning, implementation, assessment/reporting, communication quality and frequency, documentation]
(knowledge/opinion/value/sensory)
7. Describe the quality and frequency of contact the school has made with home regarding your child's PLP and progress? (feeling)
8. What are the similarities and differences between how the PLP process has been implemented over the years? (experience/behavior)
9. What aspects of the PLP process currently work well?
(opinion/values/knowledge/experience)
10. What would the ideal PLP process be? (opinion/values/knowledge) (ideal position)

Field notes were also collected during, between, and after the interview and free-write sessions. Field notes included observations about my feelings during the process, reflections, analysis, and comments about what I was learning. Field notes also presented an opportunity to consider other questions or additions to the original questions that could have been included in the Interview Guide. Deggs and Hernandez (2018) suggested that researchers should engage in “purposeful reflection” to “enhance the value and utility of qualitative data” (p. 2552). Deggs and Hernandez (2018) recommended that researchers should consider key question categories during their reflection, such as examining norms and cultures as well as researcher positionality to “take a more systematic in-depth approach to the collection, transcription, and analysis of field notes and other forms of qualitative data” (p. 2552). It is evident that an examination of my capital and special position as a parent of a student with ASD as well as a teacher in the same school as my child also required careful consideration.

PLP documents were organized into chronological order and dates of communication using this format were put into a timeline to determine frequency of communication. Because much of JJ’s experience at school occurred during COVID-19 changes and restrictions, documents were collected for all four years of his prior education to promote deep reflection on the factors that influenced my communication and collaboration as a parent. Dates of parent-teacher conferences that were offered were also marked on the chronology, as well as which conferences were not attended. Additional PLP meetings were also added to the chronology. Email communication dates regarding the PLP process were reviewed and added to the chronology. The communication chronology was used as an additional artifact to inform reflection.

Coding was a dynamic process because the data was actively coded as it came in. From the open codes, axial codes were generated by comparing open codes and noticing the relationships between recurring patterns in the data. Assigning open codes and noticing commonalities and recurring patterns early in the data collection process, as guided by my theoretical framework and literature review, provided organization to the data, and made it easier to retrieve data throughout the research process. This process was recursive because I continued to return to the data and check my findings throughout the research process. This process came to an end once the categories were considered exhaustive. This thorough and regularly occurring data analysis helped to ensure the validity and reliability of the research findings.

To bring sense and meaning to my autoethnographic writing and reflections, Adams et al. (2015) suggested that I look for and create themes from “repeated images, phrases, and/or experiences” (p. 77), create a character that serves as a narrator and a “mechanism for connecting yourself and your experience to others” (p. 78), and choose a narrative voice (p. 79). Adams et al. (2015) also noted that including dialogue can add depth to a story that descriptions may not (p. 79). Adams et al. (2015) indicated that “any story we construct is partial, privileged, and rhetorically crafted for an audience” (p. 82); therefore, my story will consider culture and “the researcher within culture” (p. 82).

Adams et al. (2015) suggested that the plot of the narrative forms through the writing process and takes shape “after initial thematizing” (p. 83). Adams et al. (2015) also suggested that autoethnographic forms of representation often overlap (p. 84) and encourage the exploration of “how combining multiple forms/types of representation might help [me] accomplish [my] writing goals” (p. 85). Adams et al. (2015) described expressionist autoethnographies as focusing "on expressing a researcher’s internal *feelings* and *emotions*,

presenting personal/cultural experience from a thoroughly subjective perspective” (p. 87), using the “story as the mechanism for interpretation and analysis” (p. 87). They described conceptualist autoethnographies as “personal stories [that] become the mechanism for conveying and critiquing cultural experiences, breaking silences, and reclaiming voices” (p. 89), where “showing and interpreting are tightly coupled” (p. 89). I explored expressionist and conceptualist forms of representation during my writing process and, as Adams et al. (2015) suggested, “reimagine[d] and extend[ed] these categories and forms” (p. 89).

To link “story, self, theory, and culture” (p. 90), Adams et al. (2015) recommended working with theory in a way that “the theory-story relationship is successful and compelling” (p. 90). Adams et al. (2015) stated that citationality “uses *citation* (the quoting of texts) as a means for articulating ideas, feelings, and conclusions” (p. 92). I used citations in my writing in hopes that citations helped to merge my “story and theory so that story becomes theory in action” (p. 93). Although I used citations in my writing, Adams et al. (2015) noted that “this approach does not work well with all theoretical writing” (p. 91). Holman Jones combined her language with scholars’ words and cited their work in the main text or in endnotes and shared this example from her work “Lost and Found,” where the words of others are shown in italics (Adams et al., 2015):

These stories tell a journey into a possible future. They make pilgrimages into what happens on the way, assembling temporary *monuments* to risk, to loss and longing.... You tell these stories as *a memorial, as a way to slow down*⁸⁵ and to resist the impulse to represent and evaluate long enough to perform what takes

hold in and of us

in a world that’s always now,

always being made

and suffered,⁸⁶ composed and inhabited (p. 92)

Adams et. al. (2015) also suggested using “a theoretical idea/image as a starting point for mapping the movement of an idea or a series of observations” (p. 92). Adams (2015) described how he merged theory and story by creating several iterations of the story where he connected “words, ideas, and feelings with existing research and theoretical ideas, letting [his] insights around one brief experience create ever-expanding possibilities, relationships, and contexts” (p. 93). In Adams’ (2015) example, he started each iteration with the same sentence, then added layers of detail each time he reflected on the story (p. 93). These methods of combining theory and writing resonated with me and were used throughout my research process. As Adams et al. (2015) suggested, I also considered and “examine[d] autoethnographies and texts in which [I] believe the theory-story relationship is successful and compelling” (p. 90) throughout the writing process. Adams et al. (2015) stressed that “your writing must be faithful to your experience and respectful of and responsible to your participants and readers” (p. 97).

Ethical Considerations

My research was approved by the Saint Francis Xavier University Research and Ethics Board as well as the applicable School District Superintendent. Adams et al. (2015) noted that a “heightened concern about the ethics and politics of research practices and representations” (p. 8) is one of the qualitative research concerns that “contributed to the formation of autoethnography” (p. 8). Anonymity, interpretation of data and power dynamics were key ethical considerations during the initial phase of my research. Another key ethical consideration in my initial research phase was the protection of the parent-teacher relationship throughout and after the research process. Using autoethnography to explore my own relationship with the PLP process ensured

that there were no negative responses from interview participants, because I provided the responses. It was important to “develop strategies for protecting the privacy and identity” (Adams et al., 2015, p. 59) of the participants in my own story. Identifying information from document artifacts was removed, names were not used in my writing other than my name or JJ’s name, and no identifying descriptions or details were used in my writing.

Adams et. al. (2015) explained that researchers “must consider the personal, relational, and institutional risks and responsibilities of doing autoethnography” (p. 25). Spry (2016) suggested engaging in the following approaches in order to consider relational ethics in autoethnography: critically reflect on motives and methods of our own mistakes; seek to understand and acknowledge “the differences and difficulties of cultural interaction” without exaggeration and with “dignity and balance” (p. 135); avoid blame and use thick description to critically reflect on how events are connected to larger social issues; and analyze socio-cultural accountability with humility (p. 135-138).

I used autoethnographic accounts of my experiences and perceptions of communication during the PLP process and, although names and identifying information were not shared, it is possible for someone to ascertain the identity of the staff involved in JJ’s PLP process. To maintain and protect my relationships with my family and my past and present colleagues, my writing focused on aspects of the PLP process that went well, aspects that I could have done better, and aspects of the system that could be enhanced to improve communication and collaboration, all while rich descriptions and critical reflections were used. The completed thesis was presented to implicated staff as a member check, with emphasis on writing sections where they could be implicated. They were given the opportunity to respond to how they were represented in the text, and no concerns were noted. My son JJ was also implicated in this

research, and although JJ is a minor and his understanding of the content is limited, he gave consent for me to continue with my research topic based on the provided descriptions. I discussed my research with JJ throughout the research process and shared my ideas and writing with him. JJ consistently stated that he was happy with being included in my writing because he is part of my experiences, he was excited about the possibility of others learning from our experiences. JJ was given a copy of my research to read for when he is ready. My husband, JJ's father, was also kept informed during the research process. We discussed the possibility of JJ not being happy later that details about his ASD were shared with others but determined that the possibility of the PLP process being improved for both JJ and others outweighed the risks. My husband reviewed the research and gave consent for me to share details about our experiences with the PLP process, use JJ's name in my writing and share parts of PLP documents in my research.

Limitations

Although autoethnography created an opportunity for me to report findings without a significant possibility of mis-representing the experience of others, the experience of others is not included in this research. This research is presented from my own experiences with and perceptions of the PLP process, do not represent the experiences of others, and thus did not capture the whole picture of how communication and collaboration are experienced in rural New Brunswick. My perspectives of events are shaped by my experiences and privilege and therefore my writing and critical analysis has bias, although these biases were addressed in the research. Although this autoethnography presents one perspective of communication and collaboration during the PLP process in rural New Brunswick, the research provided insight into enhancements that could be made to improve communication and collaboration during the PLP process.

The Autoethnographic Interview Results

This chapter is my autoethnography, a first-person narrative, where I shared and analyzed my experiences with the Personalized Learning Plan (PLP) process. Each section begins with a self-interview question as outlined in the methodology chapter, with the response provided in italicized font text. Field notes were provided in regular text font.

Question 1: How long have you lived in this area? Why did you choose to come and stay in this area?

I moved to Atlantic Canada to attend university in the fall of 2002. My undergraduate degree was so much more learning than academics. So many life changes occurred during those four years. All the emotions and experiences, from heartache and despair to joy and exhilaration, from failure and deaths to success and new relationships, played an important role in shaping the person I am today. I learned that I could persevere. I learned that I could work hard to achieve goals. I learned that I could define my own happiness. The relationships I formed with people, the town, the university, and myself, led me to continue my education at STFX. I knew that I had more to learn.

I graduated from the STFX education program with what I thought were great marks – something that I had never achieved before. I fell in love with Atlantic Canada because of all that I had experienced on the road of continual self-discovery and all that I had achieved. I felt inspired to pursue a career in teaching. I also fell in love with my best friend who is from New Brunswick, which reinforced my desire to stay in Atlantic Canada. Although Ontario is where I grew up and is where my family lives (who I miss so much), the pace of life, cost of living and dense population in Ontario are so different than this beautiful and peaceful rural area of New Brunswick.

I got a job teaching right away and quickly learned that the education system in New Brunswick was special because of its vision of inclusion and the possibilities it offered for people with disabilities. We chose to live and stay in this area of rural New Brunswick because of the special relationships we formed with friends and colleagues, because of how much we love our jobs, because of improving provincial inclusion, and because of the “small-town” love and passion that is offered here. I feel seen in this rural area. I feel like part of the community. I feel like my family and I have built an identity here and strong relationships here. This is the place for me. We moved here in the summer of 2008 and plan to stay.

For many years, I believed that I was confined to the “lazy kid” and “stupid” version of my identity and couldn’t be anything other than that identity. When I reflect on choosing to move to Atlantic Canada, one of the initial reasons I chose to move away from home is because it was a way for me to create an identity that aligned with who I truly am and wanted to be, and not the identity that others had created for me in the past. This strong and independent identity also reinforced my desire to stay in Atlantic Canada. My identity as an independent adult, as a teacher, and as an Atlantic Canadian emerged from my experiences at university.

Although we live in a more populated rural area of New Brunswick, I feel the lower population of this area (compared to where I grew up) affords me the opportunity to build closer relationships at school, within the community and with the professionals that support my child’s learning. Choosing to live and work in a rural area of Atlantic Canada affects my situation perception. When I first moved to Atlantic Canada, I was often labeled as being “from away,” and therefore was treated as an outsider and was reminded frequently of how different I spoke and behaved compared to others. As I spend more time living and working here, I have developed deeper relationships with the community and culture here, which has allowed me to

feel more comfortable sharing my ideas, feelings, and opinions about the PLP process as I participate in it. I feel less like an outsider and more like an insider who belongs, which has motivated me to communicate more frequently each year I participate in the PLP process.

Question 2: When did you become a teacher? Why did you become a teacher?

School was always a struggle for me in many ways. It's amazing how what is happening at home has such a drastic impact on a child's behaviour at school. I always found it difficult to focus on the given task and never felt motivated to complete the work. Acting out in negative ways in elementary and middle school got me attention, but negative attention. Acting out did not get me what I was truly seeking. I wanted someone to ask "why" or "what's going on." I needed someone to ask if I wanted or needed help. I needed an adult to ask me why I was acting out, why I regularly did not complete work. I wanted someone to see the real me. No one did.

High school was a journey of self-discovery. I still didn't complete homework, struggled to feel motivated, and struggled with writing and math. There were still nay-sayers. "You will never be a good writer." "You aren't worth my extra time." The "sigh." The eye rolls. I wanted to be more than "the lazy kid." And at first, no one asked if I was ok. No one offered help. I was always complacent, going along with the labels. I figured the labels must be true. Although I wanted someone to ask me how I was doing, wanted someone to offer help, I never spoke up. I never asked for help. I never told anyone what I needed to be happy. And then things changed.

I discovered that I really enjoyed helping others and kept busy with extracurriculars. While I was in Grade Ten, a student known for her outgoing personality and her unwavering efforts in academics and extracurriculars was tragically killed in a car accident on the way to a Christmas party. This was an event I was invited to. That was significant because I wasn't usually invited to anything. I had injured my ankle significantly the day before and despite the

injury, had spent most of the day carrying Christmas dinner boxes down flights of stairs to people's vehicles, so had made the decision not to attend as it was painful to walk. I had the opportunity to belong but chose not to. I vividly remember my stepdad telling me about the accident and death the next morning. Her death changed my life because it was the first time that I really realized how fragile life really is. I realized that death didn't discriminate between those that completed work and those that didn't - didn't discriminate between old and young - didn't discriminate between those that helped others and those that quietly blended in. All of us though, have hearts that desire love, that desire someone to care about us, that desire compassion, that desire being needed, that desire someone to acknowledge that we matter and are an important contribution to this earth. Life wasn't going to magically improve. No one was going to step in and fix everything, especially if I didn't speak up. I wanted to be more. I wanted to help people. I wanted to give love to others.

And then there were the teachers that said, "It's nice to see you," "Welcome back," "Would you like some help?" and "How are you?" I remember sitting in a downstairs classroom with a window that looks out onto the football field, although you can't really see it because most of the classroom is below ground, third row away from the window, two seats from the back. I looked down at my essay, which really wasn't an essay. Perhaps it is better described as a sad attempt at writing, covered in red pen marks, none of which said "wow" or "great idea." That teacher must have seen the defeated look on my face as I stared at the paper. "Do you want to learn how to write an essay?" he asked. "I really do" I replied. "You'll have to put in a lot of time after school, but I'll help you if you're willing to put in the time." And he did. And I did. He talked me through my writer's blocks. He talked me through getting frustrated. He talked me through my achievements. He helped me discover that anyone can be a writer if they want to. He

opened the door to my heart and helped me learn that a teacher can be so much more than a person who lets your heart stay invisible. He saw and acknowledged the real me. And then I got a C on an essay. Yessssssssssss.

Those two things were major turning points for me. I realized I could learn. I realized I could be more if I chose to. I had learned that teachers held an amazing power to give to others the love that their hearts desire and need so much. What an amazing power to hold. Teachers have so many opportunities to acknowledge those needing hearts and, unfortunately, so many opportunities to hurt those hearts, as well. There were still so many aspects of my life where I blended in with the background – academics being one of them. I didn't want to blend into the academic background – I wanted to be better, but still struggled to realize my potential.

I discovered over the last few years of high school that there were more teachers that cared. There were more teachers that saw my heart, and other people's hearts. There were teachers that acknowledged my potential. After seeing what a positive impact a great teacher could have, I wanted so much to have the opportunity to be a teacher, to have the opportunity to show students that I cared, and to help others feel loved and appreciated for who they are.

University was another journey of self-discovery and learning many lessons “the hard way” – but I persevered and was accepted to the education program at STFX after completing my undergraduate degree. The stars were aligning and there seemed to be a possibility of my dreams coming true. I wanted to try so hard to fulfil my dreams and show others that I could be more than blending into the background. I graduated from my B.Ed. with an 85 average, a feat I would never have thought possible before that.

I became a teacher with a contract in the fall of 2008. I have taught most grade levels and most subjects. I was honoured with a permanent contract during my seventh year of

teaching. I currently teach elementary physical education full-time. I love being a teacher because of the opportunities for life-long learning, because of the opportunities to help students realize their full potential, and because of the opportunities to help students feel loved. I have enjoyed the challenges of volunteering my time to work with others on a variety of different committees to improve many aspects of the education system.

I have always wanted to tell this coming-of-age story more formally – to “release this story to the universe,” and share it with others. These mis-educative and educative experiences during my formative years emblazoned a pathway towards being an educator, so I felt it was important to share why I became a teacher with the when I became a teacher. This is my first epiphany story. I wanted to take charge of my own identity, an identity where I am the best version of me and help others achieve their best by sharing my love and compassion. I feel that everyone should be given the opportunity to define their own identity, and not have it chosen for them. Temple Grandin stated “Autism is an important part of who I am, but I won’t let autism totally take over. I have to make sure 60% of my recognition is for my livestock work. I want to be recognized for cattle” (Temple & Moore, 2021, p. 10). Like Grandin, I too wanted to define my own identity and what I was recognized for. Finding, creating, and maintaining my own identity plays a meaningful role in my decision-making process. Adults have a significant impact on children. Adults have so much power to make life for children both worse and better. There are so many little things that adults can do to have a positive impact on children and help them feel “safe, accepted, and competent” (Nason, 2014, p. 14). Because of these experiences, my pedagogy is rooted in inclusion, compassion, and unconditional love. I connected with Nason (2014) when he stated that he “learned that if [he]... created conditions so the children feel safe and secure, accepted and valued, and confident and competent, all children will grow and

develop,” and that both children and adults will flourish under those conditions (p. 15). I approach each day as a parent and as a teacher with this mindset because of the experiences that led me to want to become a teacher.

This epiphany story and pedagogy always plays a role in how I approach situations, including how I communicate and participate in the PLP process. Because of the events that led me to a teaching career, I approach communication situations slowly and often stay quiet until I can ensure I am not causing harm with what I say. Unfortunately, in many of my roles, being afraid of harming others by communicating my opinion or concerns has led me to wait too long to communicate with others. I have learned to start communicating with others more, and in a timelier manner, over the past few years, but my parent fear of causing harm through communication has directly and negatively impacted the PLP process in the past, as explained in response to question seven.

Question 3: When was your child diagnosed with ASD? What led you to seek a diagnosis and what was the process?

Life was difficult in many ways when we became pregnant with JJ. We had lost our previous pregnancy, so we found out the baby was a boy very early on in the pregnancy. Although there was a twin that stopped growing early in the pregnancy, we were thrilled at the possibility of sharing our lives with a child. He was going to be the first grandchild for my parents and the first boy grandchild for my in-laws, so we knew he was going to be extra special and needed an extra special name. So, he was named after all three of his grandfathers – John Joseph Cameron, pictured in Figure 10.

Figure 10*JJ's First Day*

Note: JJ's first day being home after being born, 2015.

JJ was such a sweet baby. He ate well and slept well. As he grew, he didn't ask for much attention, and I remember being surprised that he was so content to not interact. He was content to lie on the floor and run his fingers along the lines on the carpet. Even as an infant he seemed to have a special ability to sense people's feelings and emotions and was visibly affected by them. JJ and I traveled back and forth to visit my in-laws regularly. He was very popular with his aunts, uncles and cousins and was always content to be passed around. One of JJ's grandfathers passed away right before JJ turned 11 months old. This was a difficult time for so many of us and JJ was there to comfort us. He was not yet saying any words, but we thought it was probably due to our frequent traveling and spending his time with stressed adults (especially us).

When it was time for me to return to work, JJ was cared for in a wonderful home with the caregiver's son. As time went on, JJ struggled more and more to interact effectively with the other child. The first caregiver moved, so JJ switched to another caregiver's home. He was with three other children and after only a few months, showed that he struggled significantly with

noisy environments and interacting with other children. JJ said the words “please” and “dad” for a couple of weeks, then stopped talking. JJ also showed a preoccupation with spinning wheels on toy vehicles, as shown in Figure 11. His caregiver and I discussed the concerning behaviours and at first, my husband and I justified it as a result of the many life changes he had experienced with us in his short life. Although he passed his 18-month healthy toddler assessment, the nurse and I listed justifications for his lacking speech and lacking interaction, instead of agreeing that his delays were a concern. It was clear that his language was not developing as quickly as it should. JJ used a few words, and then stopped talking. He used a couple of different words for a couple weeks, then stopped talking again. JJ eventually reached a point where he was crying most of the day, screaming often, and unable to interact effectively with his peers, so I reached out for help. I had participated in mother and baby support programs through a non-profit agency in the local community during JJ’s first year, so I contacted them first when I knew we needed help.

Figure 11

JJ and His Truck



Note. Picture of JJ driving his truck back and forth on the table to watch the wheels spin, 2018.

The agency arranged for a Speech Language Pathologist (SLP) to observe JJ. She came to watch JJ interact with his peers in the in-home daycare setting. I watched her observe him as I sat at the bottom of the stairs. She quietly made notes on her clipboard as JJ struggled with interactions and often did not respond to her. The uneasy feeling in my stomach grew as I watched. He showed her every one of the behaviours we thought were concerning. The other children left for the end of the day, and we reviewed and discussed her notes. As we went down the list, I would respond to her with “But that’s not a red flag for autism, is it?” She responded with “It is” each time. As more red flags were discussed, it was becoming clear that our lives were about to change drastically. We got to the end of her notes, and I said, “So, this is autism?” I remember seeing that look in her eyes, knew the answer without a response, and began to cry quietly. I felt like I had been punched in the stomach but felt that I needed to hide my devastation. She noted that she was not qualified to diagnose autism but felt that it was important that we see a pediatrician as soon as possible as she felt a diagnosis was likely. She handed me a checklist to fill out, “Autism Spectrum Disorder Red Flags,” shown with my responses in Figure 12. I thanked her for her time, then JJ and I packed into the car quickly. We drove home slowly as it was difficult to see through all the tears.

There was so much crying that night. Crying because my teaching experience had shown me the wide variety of possible outcomes of an autism diagnosis. Crying for fear of an unknown future. Crying for knowing how much time and energy is required to be an advocate for someone with special needs. Crying for the possibility that my beautiful baby could struggle in life or experience sadness. Crying for the struggles that he had already experienced. I cried for four days. I felt bad for me. I felt bad for him. I woke up on the fifth day and the crying stopped. JJ needed me to stop crying, step up and support him in getting what he needs and deserves.

Figure 12

Autism Spectrum Disorder Red Flags

| Autism Spectrum Disorder Red Flags | | |
|---|--|---|
| Communication Red Flags | Social Interaction Red Flags | Behaviour Red Flags |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Delayed age appropriate speech (Babbling by 11 months, <u>single words</u> by 16 months or <u>2 word phrases</u> (a noun and a verb) by 24 months) * <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Loss of acquired speech at any age <input type="checkbox"/> May not use or understand basic hand gestures (such as waving) <input type="checkbox"/> Echoes words or phrases = Echolalia * <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Unresponsive to their name being called <input type="checkbox"/> Constantly talks about obsessive interests <p><i>These red flags can only be used as a guideline as many typically developing children display some of these traits and no child will display all of these traits.</i></p> <p><i>We suggest making an appointment with a paediatrician or psychologist as only a professional can properly diagnose a child with an Autism Spectrum Disorder.</i></p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Little or no eye contact * <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> More interested in looking at objects than at people's faces <input type="checkbox"/> Inappropriate laughing or giggling <input type="checkbox"/> May not like to cuddle <input type="checkbox"/> Relies on self calming measures <input type="checkbox"/> Unable to imitate adults or children * <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Poor pretend play skills * <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Unusual or <u>repetitive</u> play * <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Does not point to show interest in something * <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Seems to prefer to play alone * <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <u>Avoids</u> or ignores other children when they approach him/her <input type="checkbox"/> Facial expressions may be unanimated * <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Brings items to someone only when assistance is needed * <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> May seem distant towards their family members * <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> May seem like they are in their own world <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Difficulty in understanding the feelings of others | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No real fear of dangers <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Spins objects or self * <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Lining up toys or objects <i>cars only</i> * <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Tip toe walking * <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Arm or <u>hand flapping</u> <i>sometimes</i> * <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Temper Tantrums * <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Compulsions or rituals (has to perform activities in a special way or sequence) <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> High pain tolerance <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Inappropriate attachment to objects <input type="checkbox"/> Uneven gross and fine motor skills <input type="checkbox"/> Resistant to change <input type="checkbox"/> Insistent on routines <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Preoccupation with objects such as fans, wheels, etc. <input type="checkbox"/> Sensory issues <input type="checkbox"/> Self-Injurious behaviour <input type="checkbox"/> Sleep issues <input type="checkbox"/> Limited food preferences * <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Special interest in letters or numbers |

Note. The ASD checklist provided by the SLP with my responses, 2017.

The early days of information overload left me wondering why I felt I needed to mourn a future that I had envisioned for my child, instead of my child deciding what future would make him happy. I felt stupid and embarrassed for even having those feelings. I was angry at me. Nason (2014) validated these feelings when he noted, “There are a lot of emotions that flow when the diagnosis is first received” (p. 25). Nason (2020) also noted that, “When first getting the diagnosis, especially at the young ages, parents are often overwhelmed, bewildered and stricken with grief for the child they have lost” (p. 20). Grandin and Moore (2021) also noted

that parents may experience a wide mix of emotions after a diagnosis, such as relief, grief, loss, helplessness, and fear (p. 64). Although I am his mother, I feel that it is not acceptable for me to decide what makes my child happy and sad, or what makes him feel loved and accepted. I continued to feel sad about the possibility of him feeling pain over being treated differently by others or feeling pain because of having to overcome obstacles that many people do not have to overcome. I had no idea what the future held for either of us. Giving my son the skills and support to overcome the inevitable hardships that are part of life, as well as the confidence and communication skills necessary to share what makes him happy, became my priority in parenting and set me on course for being an advocate.

Neurodiversity is defined by Merriam-Webster as “individual differences in brain functioning regarded as normal variations within the human population” and “the concept that differences in brain functioning within the human population are normal and that brain functioning that is not neurotypical should not be stigmatized” (2024). Mathur et al. (2024) reviewed applied behaviour analysis (ABA) and neurodiversity research to summarize key criticisms concerning ABA, explain neurodiversity and the social model of disability, and propose practical steps to integrate neurodiversity into the field of ABA. Mathur et al. (2024) explained that most research and practice in autism is guided by a medical model of disability that encourages “individuals live independent, social, and economically productive lives, based on societal perceptions and definitions of being productive, without centralizing the neurodivergent person’s desires” (p. 4). Mathur et al. (2024) explained that criticisms of ABA include the reality that some models of ABA aim to make autistic people appear neurotypical, emphasize compliance, reduce autistic people to a set of undesirable behaviours, and overlook autistic voices, and that some professionals provide ABA as the only available intervention.

Mathur et al. (2024) suggested that in order for ABA to be effective, service providers must listen to autistic voices about concerns and suggestions regarding ABA and use a collaborative approach to treatment, must view autism through a social model lens, must continually reflect on the purpose of the ABA goals and implementation, must incorporate the neurodiversity paradigm in planning, and must recognize and acknowledge the past traumas caused by ABA. I believe that ABA can be an effective approach for students with ASD if a model of neurodiversity inclusion, compassion and acceptance is incorporated in the planning process, which is why I have supported the use of some ABA strategies in JJ's PLP process.

The early days after the realization that JJ had autism were bombarded with waves of frustration, sadness, and self-doubt because I wondered if I had inadvertently done something to hurt my child or cause him sadness or suffering. The idea that I had caused past, current, or future suffering for my child was extremely painful, physically, and emotionally. Although I had some knowledge of autism, I felt an insatiable need to learn more so that I could avoid any future preventable suffering. Countless Internet searches and reading resulted in me wanting to know even more about autism, what a person with autism experiences, what obstacles someone with autism might face, and what I could or should do to support a person with autism.

What could or should be done to support a person with autism is subjective and should be individualized to support that person's needs. Each person with autism is an individual, with individual personalities and processing capabilities. This is more complex when that person cannot communicate well. Nason (2020) noted that "many in the neuro-diversity movement argue that much of their stress comes from a society that does not understand and respect their differences, forcing them to change, to conform and be like others, to be non-autistic" (p. 16). Nason (2020) elaborated and noted that families and teachers usually have the best intentions but

assume that supporting children with autism means having them conform to look and act as typically as possible to be successful, which can be harmful. Nason (2020) explained that “every child will thrive and grow when those around them embrace and celebrate what they value. Instead of suppressing and extinguishing these differences, let them play out and foster them to grow” (p. 21).

Parents have a wide variety of feelings after a child has been diagnosed with ASD, and those feelings directly impact the way we perceive situations (Edwards & Templeton, 2005). I think that if I had continued to embrace my negative feelings about an autism diagnosis, it is possible that I may have avoided reaching out to find out if ASD really was the diagnosis. Maybe I would have embraced the idea that, if the diagnosis doesn't happen, then he doesn't have ASD. If I had embraced the idea that my child is the ASD label and the idea that ASD is a deficit, it is possible that as Grandin and Moore (2021) explained, “others in the child's environment tend to do the same” (p. 12). Grandin and Moore (2021) noted that “when we focus on behaviors, particularly ones deemed *impaired* or *abnormal*, we selectively magnify these parts of the person and minimize other important aspects” (p. 15).

Because the SLP had observed concerning behaviours, and because I repeatedly reached out for help, we were able to get support from the children's rehabilitation team at the local hospital in the short time we had between the SLP visit and the appointment with the pediatrician. The team of professionals which included a dietician, occupational therapist, speech language pathologist and audiologist were very supportive, knowledgeable, and also repeatedly expressed their observations of red flags for autism. They also stressed that they were not qualified to make a diagnosis.

My husband and I both attended the appointment with the pediatrician, who at that time was the professional responsible for assessing the possibility of autism. JJ played on the floor as expected and demonstrated several of the concerning red flag behaviours that led us to the appointment. Our pediatrician is excellent in so many ways. He listens attentively, validates feelings, and speaks supportively. He asked us a series of questions about JJ's behaviour at home and at daycare. I continued to try to explain the behaviour as being caused by stressful events in our life. The pediatrician listened intently. Autism was the diagnosis. Although the diagnosis brings a label with it that can create pre-judgements (usually from adults), the diagnosis also opened doors for needed supports and therapies. The pediatrician expressed that he was optimistic that JJ would do well with intensive therapy that could only be accessed with a diagnosis. My teaching experience allowed me to know that the label that came with the diagnosis was going to play an important role in helping us get needed supports once JJ started attending school. One of these supports is the PLP.

JJ has received therapies, educational supports, and financial support over the years because of the ASD diagnosis, which we sought and agreed to because of my teaching experience capital. DeRoche (2015) argued that “parents draw on their cultural capital in order to create and sustain opportunities of educational advancement not otherwise provided without a diagnosis” (p. 5). Because I frequently excused JJ's behaviour with life events prior to his diagnosis, I think it is possible that I would not have sought assessments and professional opinions without my teaching experience.

DeRoche (2015) described Labelling Theory (LT) as outlining the negative consequences of labelling individuals, including formal and informal labels. DeRoche (2015) posited that educational labels may ultimately “lead to fewer educational opportunities..., stigma, and, along

with lowered self-concepts, can contribute to a self-fulfilling prophecy” (p. 4) although, recently, “the use of these terms has become common in our culture to the point of being normalized” (p. 5). I do not feel that there have yet been any negative consequences of JJ being given the ASD label, but also acknowledge the possibility of future negative consequences. So far, the label has been helpful and used to access supports and help all adult stakeholders gain a better understanding and perspective of how JJ processes information. JJ’s peers do not yet know that he has ASD but, when they do find out, I hope that the label helps his peers gain a deeper understanding of JJ’s thinking and behaviour. The ASD label has helped me gain a deeper understanding of JJ’s thinking and behaviour. The label helps me slow down my own thinking and reactions and as Nason (2020) suggested, “observe, listen and understand where [JJ is]... coming from before jumping in to guide and direct” (p. 25).

DeRoche (2015) interviewed and observed nine families and nine children in northern Ontario with a relatively unknown disorder, some pre-labelled with no diagnosis and some with an official diagnosis. DeRoche’s (2015) study researched what role parents played in acquiring a label for their child, and why they do or do not seek labels; what attitudes parents had regarding the labelling of children; what experiences parents had in the diagnostic process; and if providing labels was beneficial for students. DeRoche (2015) found that all the parents expressed some fear of labelling and fear of their child being treated differently and noted that labels were not a guarantee for improvement. All the parents also voiced benefits of labels, especially for getting accommodations and explaining behaviours happening at home. Parents in DeRoche’s (2015) study also stated that advocacy was needed for a variety of situations within educational and societal contexts to ensure fair treatment and respect. Parents in the study used their economic capital to provide additional treatments and activities to benefit their child. Parents also used

their cultural and social capital, including educational backgrounds and social connections, to advocate for their child, get supports, and understand treatments. Overall, DeRoche (2015) found that parents were ambivalent about labelling, but the ambivalence did not hinder them from actively pursuing labels and supports. I feel that my experiences using my capital to pursue labels and supports aligns with the experiences shared in DeRoche's (2015) study.

Question 4: How many years has your child been on a PLP?

My son required a PLP once he began receiving support from the preschool autism program at the age of two and a half, in 2018, so he has had a PLP for approximately six years. Key learning and behaviour goals were outlined in the PLP so that all invested parties understood clearly JJ's goals were, which helped to ensure that all of us were working on the same goals. The phase of initiating the preschool PLP process was not smooth. At the time, I did not have any experience as a parent in the PLP process and did not know where to look for parent resources to help guide me through the process. I also did not know what goals and outcomes would be in JJ's best interest. The initiation phase required a great deal of research, advocacy, and communication. At the time, the program experienced difficulties recruiting and retaining employees, so employee turnover contributed to the delay of having a PLP written and implemented. There was no indication that the PLP process had been initiated until I communicated the need for it to begin; however, I did not communicate my questions or concerns in a timely manner, which also contributed to the delay of initiating the PLP process.

The six years of being a parent in the PLP process has left me wondering what the overall goal for JJ having a PLP is. Is it JJ fitting in? Is the goal for JJ to experience happiness and success? Nason (2020) explained that the "goal should be to understand, accept and respect their differences and help them maximize their potential (actualize), not to suppress, change or

cure them, not to deny their differences, but to maximize them to their potential” (p. 22). I often worry that the goals the school, other professionals and I choose for my son may not be truly best meeting his individual needs. I have so much self-doubt when it comes to the PLP process and planning goals and outcomes, but I also know that all young people need adult help and guidance in life.

My overall goals and hopes for JJ’s learning at home and school are that my son can communicate effectively with others, that he can perform daily living and hygiene skills independently and develop the skills necessary to live independently if he so chooses. I hope that he develops enough of the previous skills so that he may develop positive human relationships with others in ways that make him happy. I also hope that he is one day able to acquire and keep employment that makes him enough money to pay for his living expenses. I have these same goals for my other children as well.

Regardless of what the student goals and outcomes are, I believe that a PLP can help all adults that are responsible for the care, wellbeing, and development of a child clearly know and understand what the child’s goals are, who is responsible for helping the child achieve the goals, and provide updates on how well the child is meeting the goals.

Temple Grandin stated, “The doctor made a big mistake when he assumed he could tell my mother what to do. Parents deserve respect and they need to be listened to” (Grandin & Moore, 2021, p. 64). This sentiment resonated with me. It has been difficult to find my parent identity and voice throughout the PLP process over the years. I do not think that any professional giving advice to a parent of a child with ASD does so with mal intent. We are all trying to do the best we can with the information that we have. In my experience, most people offer advice because they think it will be helpful. I do often feel that my parent input is not given much

weight in the decision-making process, although my perception may be inaccurate, and acknowledge that there have been instances in the past where, as a teacher, I have not invested enough time into honouring parent input through deeper and more thorough discussions.

Question 5: How many PLPs have you been involved with writing or implementing as a teacher? Describe some of the experiences with PLP communication you had as a teacher that worked well. What worked well? What supports would help you improve communication?

I have written several PLP goals and outcomes since I began teaching in 2008. I have written PLP goals and outcomes for specific subjects while teaching middle and high school courses and have had students with PLPs in my current teaching assignment in physical education. I have also written full PLPs with multiple subject areas as an elementary homeroom teacher. I have written only one individualized PLP for a student diagnosed with autism as a homeroom teacher. I have always been supported by Resource Teachers and government documents during the PLP process over the years. The Resource Teachers in New Brunswick are a valuable resource for teachers and parents during the PLP process. Not only are they a wealth of knowledge and information regarding differing abilities and differentiation, but they have also played a role in bridging communication between school and home in my experiences as a teacher and as a parent.

The experience with teaching a student diagnosed with ASD that stands out the most to me was before JJ was born. As an early career teacher, I was nervous about doing a good job helping the student learn because I had no training or experience with ASD and PLPs, even though I had some experience with other PLPs that included only academic goals and outcomes. This ASD PLP included both academic and behavioural goals and outcomes. Because the experience was so new, I relied heavily on documents which outlined the expectations for both

teachers and parents/guardians to guide me through the PLP process. Both the Education Act (2017) and the Guidelines and Standards (2015) documents note the importance of the involvement of parents/guardians in the planning and implementation of the PLP, so the first thing I did was connect with the family. Older versions of these documents existed when I prepared the mentioned PLP, but also included the importance of parent/guardian involvement.

The student's mother was the primary contact for communicating about this student, and she seemed happy to discuss her child's strengths as well as her child's needs and goals for the school year. No matter the type of contact, whether by email, by phone, by letter, or in person, this mother expressed gratitude for keeping her informed and involving her in the learning process. I continued to contact this mother throughout the school year to discuss struggles, successes, and next steps.

I felt comfortable reaching out and having discussions throughout the school year with this mother because our initial conversations went well, and a positive relationship was established through clear, open, and honest communication. The positive relationship foundation was a key factor in my willingness to communicate with home regardless of whether the student was struggling or experiencing success. The positive relationship increased my frequency of communication beyond the required report card and PLP document timelines.

At the end of the school year, I received a letter from the parent detailing how pleased they were with their school experiences, including the PLP process. This parent letter inspired me to approach any future PLP development with a more open mind and a respect for a parent/guardian's thoughts about the PLP. The letter explained that although they had the opportunity to move to another community, into a home they had just inherited, they had chosen

to stay in their current location because their child had made so much progress and because of the positive interactions and supports they felt their family had received.

I think back both fondly and critically on this experience with the PLP process. I remember being so scared that I was going to do everything wrong and feeling so unprepared for the process. I felt scared about communicating with parents early in my career. I had no training on how to communicate effectively with parents and I had already had a previous negative experience. I initiated communication with this parent with honesty, divulging that I had no experience or training in ASD or creating PLP goals and outcomes, but reassured her that I was going to ask for help, was willing to learn as much as possible during the school year, and was going to include her in the planning process. I am thankful that the guidelines document at the time stated that parental involvement in the PLP process was important because it compelled me to push past my insecurities and do it.

As a teacher, I feel like I made many mistakes throughout the PLP process that year. Mainly, I could have done more research into how to determine what PLP goals and outcomes best support students with ASD. I could have reached out for support from specialists and experts in the field of ASD. I also feel like I could have kept more detailed records of communication during the PLP process to ensure I was best supporting the student and the family. I also knew very little about ASD and how someone with ASD processes information and should have invested more time into learning more about ASD. I use the knowledge of what I could have done better and what went well to inform my current teaching practices. I have learned so much since that ASD PLP and know that there is more that I can learn and more that I can do better.

Question 6: Please describe the PLP process (from a teacher perspective). [e.g.: planning, implementation, assessment/reporting, communication quality and frequency, documentation]

“A PLP should be considered when a student is experiencing difficulties over an extended period and not making progress even with the additional support that a teacher would typically employ following the tiers of intervention and differentiation” (Government of New Brunswick, 2019, p. 4).

"Other situations requiring documentation within a PLP include:

- reduced instructional hours including transportation arrangements which impact hours of instruction; (see Appendix B: Positive Behaviour Intervention and Supports)
- partial day plans including the projected timeline to return the student to fulltime instruction; and
- grade retention plans when supported by the district (6.7.3). (For more information see Appendix C: Policy 322)” (Government of New Brunswick, 2019, p. 4).

A learning plan can be academic, behavioural, and/or individualized goals and outcomes. Goals and outcomes should be written in a way that all parties involved can get a clear picture of what a student’s present level of performance is, what their goals are, how they will work toward their goals, who will help them get there, and what successful meeting of goals is. Subject teachers, Resource Teachers, parents, and students (when appropriate) should all be involved in the selection of goals/outcomes.

In my experience, the first week back to work after the summer break includes meeting with one or more resource teachers or classroom teachers about students that have PLPs or may need support in the classroom to experience success. This meeting typically includes discussing

the student's present level of performance, past goals, and outcomes if applicable, current curriculum, and future goals and outcomes. If the student has had a PLP in the past, parents are typically not contacted to participate in planning because goals and outcomes are typically written based off the previous school year's most recent goals and outcomes.

A paper copy of the PLP is sent home in late October or early November to ensure that enough time has passed to assess the student's current level of performance and ensure the planned goals and outcomes will contribute to the student experiencing success. Parents review and sign the document to approve as presented or return with suggestions for changes.

At the elementary level, updates on goal/outcome progress are inputted into the electronic ESS Connect system at the end of each reporting period. Progress reports are sent home in the form of a paper copy of the PLP. All parents, including those without and with a child on a PLP, are given the opportunity to participate in a parent-teacher conference at the end of the first and second reporting periods. Each parent-teacher conference is typically around 10-15 minutes in duration. All parents are offered the opportunity to participate in a parent-teacher conference and can choose to attend or not to attend.

In my experience, many elementary teachers use some type of communication folder that is sent between home and school each day in a child's backpack. Some students with PLPs have a communication folder with specific communication topics, which may include behaviour goals and tracking, and more frequent communication timelines. This folder can be used for a variety of purposes, including sending student work home, permission slips, newsletters, reports, and notes from home. Many elementary teachers also communicate with home using emails. The frequency and timing of communication varies widely, but general updates often occur weekly or monthly.

PLP goals and outcomes are reviewed by teachers at the beginning of each term, and new goals or outcomes are often added to a PLP at the beginning of each term, with the goal of increasing complexity over time. The new and updated goals and outcomes are sometimes sent home in a paper copy of the PLP early in the second and third terms. This communication is not an expectation in the timeline documents, so may be completed differently from school to school.

This PLP process was described using my experiences with the PLP process. Homeroom and Resource Teachers now have access to timeline documents on the SharePoint resource site to help them ensure basic expectations for communication and documentation are being met. In my experience, although these basic communication expectations are often being met, schools and teachers are given the autonomy to choose how they communicate and if they will do so more frequently than required.

Question 7: Describe the quality and frequency of contact the school has made with home regarding your child's PLP and progress?

The Comprehensive Assessment for Learning and Independence (CALI) was developed by the New Brunswick Department of Education and Early Childhood Development and is used to evaluate the strengths and needs regarding functional skills of a person with ASD up to the age of 21 that will enable them to thrive as an adult (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, n.d.). The CALI assesses functional skills in ten different domains, including fundamental skills; language and communication skills; motor skills; daily living skills; social interaction skills; functional academic skills; community skills; recreation and leisure skills; sexual health and well-being skills; and self-determination (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, n.d.). The results of the assessment are interpreted and used to define general and specific outcomes to create a PLP (Department of Education and Early Childhood

Development, n.d.). The CALI is used by the preschool autism program as an intake assessment, to assist in creating new learning goals as previous goals are mastered, and to identify new goals in preparation for transitioning to school (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2020b, p. 6).

The transition from preschool to elementary school PLP process was the most thorough and thoughtful experience we have had with the PLP process. My husband and I also felt the most involved with this part of the PLP process. We were aware of the requirement for JJ to have a CALI and PLP before attending school, so we communicated frequently with stakeholders to ensure that happened before the transition to kindergarten meetings. Having PLP and CALI documents to give to the school as part of the transition process made it easier for the school to understand JJ's present level of performance, his capabilities and needs, and helped to guide the development of elementary school PLP goals and outcomes. The transition process included an in-person meeting between parents, the preschool autism program, the homeroom teacher, the resource teacher, and guidance before the school year started. We were able to share our long-term goals for JJ and provided input into the development of new goals for kindergarten. All stakeholders at the meeting helped us feel heard by asking questions and taking notes.

I felt like the PLP was most effective and helped my child experience the most success when I was asked to be part of the process for selecting goals and outcomes. I believe that JJ experienced the most success meeting the goals and outcomes that were planned collaboratively because I was able to communicate the goals and outcomes, as well as their purpose, to daycare stakeholders who also worked on the same goals and outcomes with JJ. Because of the collaboration, we also worked on the same goals and outcomes at home. The consistency of goals and outcomes being approached by all stakeholders as well as the strategies used to

support the goals and outcomes contributed to JJ's success. The most ideal PLP communications I have participated in as a parent began with an in-person meeting. In-person meetings that allow for more than 10-15 minutes were most helpful. Follow-up discussions which included clarification and checking for understanding were also valued parts of the PLP process. Phone conversations were the next best form of communication that I have felt fostered effective communication. In-person and phone meetings allow for those involved to elaborate and ensure that everyone truly understands what is being said and that the information being presented is not misinterpreted. When written communication has occurred, a response indicating the information has been received and considered has also contributed to feeling like a valued member of the PLP team.

As a teacher, I always begin a phone call by stating my name, where I am calling from, and the purpose of my call. Next, I explain or describe what I am calling about, which could include a behaviour concern, an assessment result, program planning, or an achievement celebration. Then, I either ask the parent if they have any questions or offer the parent the opportunity to comment or discuss. Often, parents and teachers will engage in a conversation that ensures both parties are clear about the situation and what both parties will do as next steps, if necessary. Last, I thank the parent for their time and let them know that they are welcome to call or email any time they have any questions or concerns. I record key components of the conversation in a logbook as the conversation takes place, then go back and add any missed details after the phone conversation ends.

Because I am also a teacher in the building, quick in-person communication was able to occur frequently if needed and allowed both me and the homeroom teacher to communicate updates and concerns frequently. This form of communication, although convenient for both

parties, also presented complexities when defining parent/teacher/colleague/friend boundaries. Although I want to be kept up to date on my child's progress and behaviour, be part of the PLP process, and keep the homeroom teacher informed, I also would prefer to keep my interactions in parent and teacher roles separate, especially at work. This is difficult because although I feel the different roles require different approaches to communication, I cannot separate the identities because I am always a parent/teacher/colleague/friend at the same time. As a parent, I now try to use email and written notes in the communication as the primary mode of communication regarding JJ and his PLP.

As a parent I felt reassured when I received regular updates on PLP goals and outcomes in addition to quick general updates and report cards. Having both a parent and teacher role in the same building, regular written updates are preferred. In my parent experience, the PLP document has been sent home for review typically in late October or early November and sent home with comment updates, along with the report card, at the end of reporting period two and three during the school year. The elementary school year is divided into three terms.

Frequency of occurrences of communication and collaboration that took place between home and PLP stakeholders over the first four years of JJ's PLP journey are shown in Table 1. This timeline was compiled using letters, emails, PLP documents and report cards. I consider our involvement in JJ's education high because we read to JJ daily, discuss academic and behaviour goals and learning with JJ regularly, advocate for JJ often, and I am routinely involved in providing extracurricular activities at school because of my role a teacher in the same school as JJ. My husband plays a larger role in supporting the French language homework completion. My husband and I would like to be more involved in the PLP planning process.

Table 1*JJ's PLP Timeline of Communication*

| School Year | Date of Communication | Nature of Communication |
|---------------------|------------------------------|--|
| Preschool | February 12, 2018 | diagnosis letter |
| | February 22, 2018 | enrollment to preschool autism program |
| | May 20, 2018 | preschool autism program began |
| | January 14, 2019 | letter to preschool autism program requesting CALI and PLP |
| | January 28, 2019 | communication stating PLP written |
| | February 6, 2019 | communication stating CALI administered |
| | March 12, 2019 | communication stating CALI administered |
| | April 8, 2019 | CALI and PLP meeting |
| | June 3, 2019 | communication stating PLP goals and outcomes written |
| | June 19, 2019 | PLP paper copy sent home |
| | January 13, 2020 | PLP update discussion by phone |
| | January 20, 2020 | email communication: PLP revision, implementation of CALI, and programming goals |
| | February 3, 2020 | transition meeting held at school |
| | February 13, 2020 | transition report sent home |
| | Kindergarten | September 4, 2020 |
| December 1, 2020 | | term 1 kindergarten report card and PLP sent home |
| December 4, 2020 | | term 1 kindergarten parent-teacher conference |
| January 11-15, 2021 | | school closure due to COVID-19 |
| January 18-22, 2021 | | school closure due to COVID-19 |
| March 31, 2021 | | term 2 kindergarten report card and PLP sent home |
| April 14, 2021 | | term 2 kindergarten parent-teacher conference |
| June 25, 2021 | | term 3 kindergarten final report card and PLP sent home |
| Grade 1 | November 1-5, 2021 | school closure due to COVID-19 |
| | November 8-12, 2021 | school closure due to COVID-19 |
| | November 1, 2021 | difficulty with the changes to routine communicated through email |
| | November 12, 2021 | in person – asked about adding goals to the PLP due to difficulties |
| | November 18, 2021 | email inquiry to adding eating goal to PLP |
| | November 29, 2021 | term 1 grade 1 report card and PLP sent home |

| | | |
|---------|------------------|---|
| | December 3, 2021 | term 1 grade 1 parent-teacher conference – did not attend |
| | April 11, 2022 | term 2 grade 1 report card and PLP sent home |
| | April 14, 2022 | term 2 grade 1 parent-teacher conference – did not attend |
| | June 24, 2022 | term 3 grade 1 final report card and PLP sent home |
| Grade 2 | October 24, 2022 | term 1 PLP sent home |
| | December 1, 2022 | term 1 grade 2 report card and PLP sent home |
| | December 9, 2022 | term 1 grade 2 parent-teacher conference – did not attend |
| | March, 2022 | meeting - changed the PLP from individualized to accommodated |
| | April 9, 2023 | term 2 grade 2 report card and PLP sent home |
| | April 14, 2023 | term 2 grade 2 parent-teacher conference – did not attend |
| | June 23, 2023 | term 3 grade 2 final report card and PLP sent home |

Our second child was born in March 2020 and our third child was born in September 2021. Navigating the combination of school closures due to COVID-19 restrictions, health concerns, and family dynamics proved extremely difficult during JJ’s kindergarten and Grade One school year. We felt too overwhelmed to participate in any of the formal parent-teacher conferences during the 2021-2022 school year. We also felt that JJ would probably be “ok” if we did not attend the parent-teacher conferences where PLP goals, outcomes and comments appeared clear, easy to understand, and were fairly similar to past goals and outcomes. As a parent, I have not been diligent about attending regularly scheduled parent-teacher conferences. In the past, I have relied on informal in-person communication to keep both me and the school up to date.

As mentioned in the self-interview response, I am both a parent and teacher in the same school as JJ. JJ’s PLP timeline does not include the numerous times in-person communication about JJ’s learning occurred informally between me and either the homeroom or resource teacher

at school because that communication was not documented. My ability to communicate so frequently with the staff at school is a direct result of my capital as a teacher in the same school. This insider positionality also provided me a deeper understanding of what the PLP process and timeline is at JJ's school and who to communicate with when I have questions or concerns, which is an advantage and is capital that most parents do not have. Although this additional communication has occurred frequently over the years and kept both me and the teacher up to date, the informal nature of the communication has resulted in me thinking that I have been an effective advocate and representative for JJ. However, recent changes in JJ's ability to regulate at home and at school left me reflecting on the effectiveness of the frequent informal in-person communication. I concluded that the laissez-faire nature of the interactions, the short duration, and the lack of record keeping resulted in missed opportunities for more in-depth and meaningful interactions during the PLP process. As a parent, I needed to take more time to analyze and discuss JJ's PLP goals and outcomes and take more time to have in-depth formal conversations with JJ's homeroom teachers and resource teachers because it may have led to more meaningful and effective PLP goals and outcomes.

Question 8: What are the similarities and differences between how the PLP process has been implemented over the years?

When I first started working with PLPs, they were a blank template of boxes where teachers could write their own goals and outcomes. Often, resource teachers would take the lead on planning and writing PLP goals and outcomes, sometimes writing the PLP for the homeroom teacher. PLP goals were encouraged to be specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, and timely. Dropdown menu options now exist for academic PLPs to help teachers choose and write goals and outcomes.

I found the PLP process overwhelming as an early career teacher. During my time at university, my B.Ed. program did not cover preparing learning plans or communicating with parents. There may have been a course available for teaching students with exceptionalities, but it was not mandatory. When I prepared my first PLP, the provided guideline documents did not provide enough guidance or support for new teachers. Although resource teacher support was provided, I wanted clear, step-by-step instructions and more guidelines for how to complete the process effectively, including when and how communication with home should occur. A quick-reference guide would have been very helpful. I relied heavily on resource teacher help and guidance for my first experiences writing PLP goals and outcomes.

The updated Guidelines and Standards document (2019) by the New Brunswick Department of Education and Early Childhood development, provides a helpful overview of definitions, policies, frequently asked questions, rubrics, and other information to guide teachers during the PLP process. When ESS Connect was introduced as the new system for creating and maintaining PLPs, a SharePoint site with a series of support documents and videos which help guide teachers through the PLP process was released. Although some definitions, some expectations, and the file-management system have changed, the overall PLP process has not changed.

The PLP process is initiated when a student experiences difficulties and doesn't make progress over an extended period, even after the tiers of intervention and differentiation have been used, or when a student has previously identified needs. A resource teacher is consulted, and a referral is made to the ESS team. A parent/guardian is consulted when determining the need for a PLP. Collaborative consultation between stakeholders to plan and implement PLP goals occurs. Some goals and outcomes are monitored by both home and school.

Parents/guardians and the student (when possible) should participate in continuous meetings throughout the school year. Goals and outcomes are adjusted, updated, and changed as necessary (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2019).

The electronic system used to prepare, update and store PLP documents and other supporting documents has been updated and improved. Support documents and videos available to teachers to help them navigate the PLP process have improved greatly. The provision of additional supporting documents and videos as well as a SharePoint site to organize and share materials for school stakeholders was a positive enhancement to the PLP process. The overall PLP process, including how teachers create learning goals and outcomes and how stakeholders are involved in the process, has not changed significantly since I began teaching in 2008.

Question 9: What aspects of the PLP process currently work well?

From a teacher perspective, the ESS Connect file-management system is an improvement from the old system. I especially like how user-friendly the home page layout is when looking for classes and students, as shown in a fictitious example in Figure 13. As someone teaching multiple classes and with many students on PLPs, being able to easily check the PLPs and keep up to date with goals and outcomes, especially as a non-homeroom teacher, helps me to plan effectively to meet student needs, ensure my lesson planning aligns with PLP goals and outcomes, and allows me to be more involved in the PLP process. I can easily stay up to date with changes by accessing PLP documents through the ESS Connect system instead of a paper copy. The ESS Connect system also allows teachers to request supports for specific students by clicking on a student name in a specific class using the “My Classes” panel. The ESS Connect system also allows teachers to communicate with stakeholders by using the “Communicate” tab and functions.

Figure 13

Sneak Peak of ESS Connect Draft: Home Page

ESS Connect/monAPPUI

Search Curriculum Communication Reporting

My Home Page

Quick Access

Search Student with Supports: type name or ID

Students with Supports Recently Worked With

- BB, Bobby
- BB, Aaron
- BB, Joe

Personal Options/Content

- Access Self-Service Documents

My Classes

- [Art K](#) (ID: ANG_5001_FEARB0000_2018_KLB, 13 Students with Supports)
- [English Language Arts K](#) (ID: ANG_5001_EELAB0000_2018_KLB, 13 Students with Supports)
- [Homeroom](#) (ID: ANG_5001_NGHRA1308_2018_KLB, 14 Students with Supports)
- [Mathematics K](#) (ID: ANG_5001_MEFMA0000_2018_KLB, 13 Students with Supports)
- [You and Your World K](#) (ID: ANG_5001_HESSB0000_2018_KLB, 13 Students with Supports)
- [Class Assessment Reports](#)

Unread Messages (1, 1 high importance)

| Subject | From | Date |
|--|--|--------------------------|
| Personalized Learning Plan for Joe BB (246810) | 212121 (Dave RT) George Street Middle School | 11/23/2018 Fri, 11:21 AM |

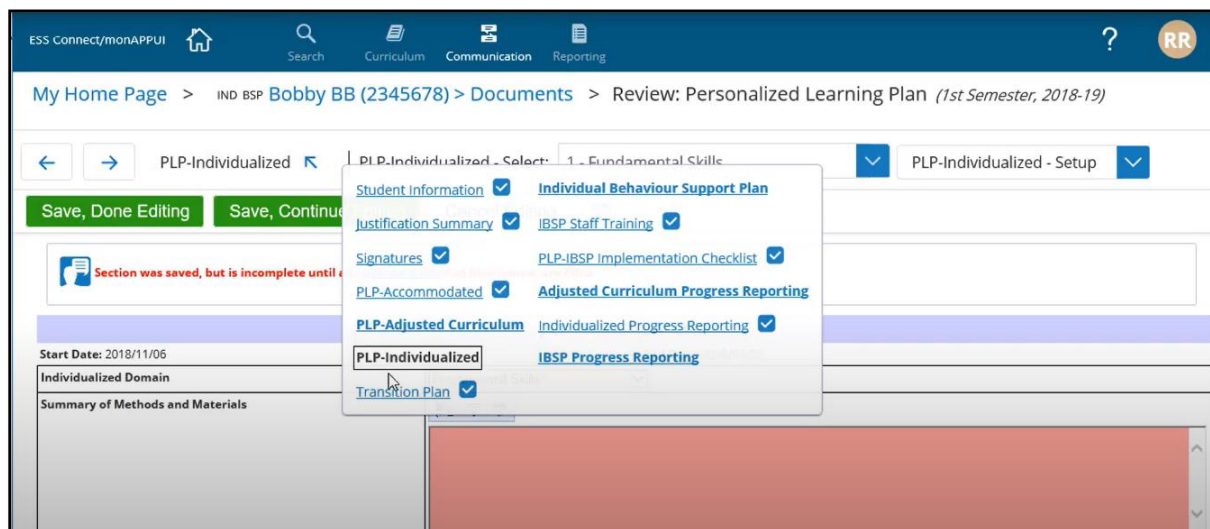
Note. Video screenshot of the ESS Connect Home Page, 1:38. November 26, 2018.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rHcmDoC-8B8>

The ESS Connect file-management system is also beneficial during the PLP process because of the icons with links, drop-box menus, and label/comment boxes which allow the user to create, revise, add comments or finalize PLP documents with ease, like the fictitious example in Figure 14. It is easy to navigate because the user can use the mouse cursor to hover over an icon and navigation options appear. The drop-box menus also indicate which documents apply to the student.

Figure 14

Sneak Peak of ESS Connect Draft: Navigation



Note. Video screenshot of selecting PLP documents for editing or viewing in a student profile, 2:06. November 26, 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rHcmDoC-8B8>

From a teacher perspective, the supplementary documents and videos on the SharePoint ESS Connect Support site are very helpful during the PLP process. This support site can only be accessed by staff with Department of Education and Early Childhood Development login credentials. The support site provides training, timelines, checklists, and rubrics that provide the opportunity for teachers to ensure they are using the features of the ESS Connect system correctly and effectively as well as ensure they are meeting basic PLP expectations and policy requirements.

From a parent perspective, the details shown on the printout of the PLP document are clear when trying to understand the PLP goals and outcomes, however, the language used could be difficult to understand if I were not also a teacher. There is lots of detail shared in the PLP

document and information is shared in a logical order, such as: student information, justification summary, accommodations, goals and outcomes, progress reporting, and signatures.

The transition to kindergarten meeting format, where multiple stakeholders such as a principal or vice principal, resource teacher, guidance counsellor, homeroom teacher, and parents, sat in a roundtable style arrangement and discussed a plan for transitioning JJ to school as well as goals and outcomes for the PLP, was the most effective part of the PLP process that I have participated in to date. We, the parents, were invited to share our thoughts, ideas, and concerns with everyone at the meeting, and everyone was taking notes. Stakeholders then shared their plans for helping JJ transition to kindergarten based on their observations and information from the preschool autism program. The ideas discussed at the meeting were then put into the PLP and implemented at school. My husband and I have since participated in a second roundtable format meeting with multiple stakeholders, and found it exceptionally well done. We began by sharing what we thought the school stakeholders were doing well to support our child and us, then shared JJ's present level of performance at home and what behaviours we thought needed support at home and school, then shared the pediatrician's recommendations, and finished with ideas we had for supporting JJ's learning. The other stakeholders then took turns sharing their ideas and how they could or would contribute to the planning and support process. We thought it was well done because everyone demonstrated that they were listening attentively and shared ideas in a way that demonstrated they met before the meeting and came prepared with attainable action items and ideas. The roundtable format meeting was very effective at making us feel heard and understood, was effective at making school staff feel understood, as well as effective for creating a clear plan that worked for all stakeholders. The table that we sat at during the meeting was a rounded rectangle and because so many people attended the meeting

and the homeroom teacher sat beside us, we felt like we were part of the group and not just sitting across from them in an “us and them” style. During COVID-19 restrictions, it was necessary to have a parent-educator meeting where my husband and I sat at a separate table from the other stakeholders, and it was very intimidating and contributed to us not feeling comfortable sharing all our thoughts and ideas. An actual round table used at parent-teacher conferences during the PLP process would help all stakeholders feel like they are part of the whole group working together.

Question 10: What would the ideal PLP process be?

Although navigating through the communication process during COVID-19 restrictions was difficult, it showed the possibilities of video conferencing and digital communication platforms, such as PowerSchool, Microsoft Teams, and Zoom. Having the option to participate in consultation, planning, and update meetings in a virtual format would give families and teachers more options for communicating during the PLP process. Using virtual platforms to communicate and collaborate would be even more effective if training for using the platforms was made available for parents and teachers. In an ideal scenario, the technology required to participate in virtual communication and collaboration would also be provided to families that could not provide the technologies themselves.

Having the PLP, general reporting, and scheduled communications available in a dynamic digital online format, like the way PowerSchool provides a login where parents can check reporting updates in real time, could be an effective and convenient platform for many parents and teachers. Families that would like more frequent communication and updates could login whenever they wanted, and the families that would like less frequent communication could choose not to login. Although this option would be convenient for families that had access to

technology, the option to have paper communication should still be available to ensure equitable accessibility.

I feel that the roundtable style meeting with multiple stakeholders should be held at the beginning of every school year, to ensure that all stakeholders build a strong relationship foundation and start the school year with a series of goals and outcomes which all stakeholders feel capable of supporting. A face-to-face meeting at the beginning of the school year should also include a discussion of how stakeholders would like to communicate during the school year and how often and should also include a clarification that parties can change the format and frequency of communication as needed. This would ensure a trust relationship is being built between home and school right at the beginning of each school year.

As a parent of a child with ASD I find myself constantly wondering about how well he is meeting his goals and if other goals are needed to help him experience success. I also continually wonder if home could be playing a bigger role in supporting the PLP goals and outcomes, and what that role should be. As a parent, I think it would be beneficial to receive a mid-term report for PLPs and a form for feedback, questions, or concerns from family that goes with the mid-term reports. From a parent perspective, I would like to see mid-term reports on PLP goals and outcomes progress in the form of a short paragraph, which may or may not include a copy of the PLP goals and outcomes depending on the circumstances, with the opportunity for home to provide feedback either on paper or electronically.

The teacher is an expert on what the academic goals should be and how to help the student get there. Although the teacher is also the authority on what behavioural and individualized goals in the classroom should be, the family should have significantly more input in behavioural and individualized goals. It would be beneficial to have parents more involved in

the goal and outcome setting process as they know their child in so many contexts and can provide insight into what works at home and could be applicable at school. Parents can also provide additional support at home to help their child meet their goals and outcomes. Providing a platform for parents to share their input would help parents feel more involved and valued in the PLP process.

From both a teacher and parent perspective, I would like to see the addition of a place for parents to give feedback on the paper PLP document, for providing feedback on PLP goals and outcomes, the planning process, what is going well or needs support from school at home and what skills or behaviours may need attention. The signatures page of the current PLP format, as shown in Figure 15, already has blank space that is not currently used, and could be used to prompt for feedback, questions, or concerns. This feedback communication could also be available as a “button” in a digital format PLP which brings the user to an electronic form with the same feedback boxes as the paper format. This feedback would be given at the end of each reporting period with the report card and PLP update. A copy of the new or updated PLP goals and outcomes for the next term should be included with the end of term report card and PLP.

From a parent and teacher perspective, the PLP process timeline checklist provided to teachers should include communication with home check boxes as a minimum standard of practice, and preferably have communication required more frequently as a minimum standard. In my opinion, the communication does not always need to have a great deal of detail or require much preparation time of the teacher. Short, thoughtful, and frequent communication can be effective. Examples of other circumstances that would require communication with parents would be a helpful addition to the timeline resource for teachers. Parents could be provided a copy of the timeline document to ensure they understand the process and what to expect from school.

This transparency would also contribute to building a trust relationship between home and school through accountability.

Figure 15

JJ's Grade Two PLP: Signature Page

Student Name: John Joseph Cameron Friel **Student ID:** [Redacted]

SIGNATURES

I have read the PLP document and believe the planning described to be representative of that agreed to in discussion with the school. This information may be used by the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development for statistical analysis or monitoring purposes.

| Name | Sign | Signature | Role | Date |
|------------|-------------------------------------|-----------|---------------------------|------------|
| Erin Friel | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | | Parent/Guardian | 2022/11/03 |
| [Redacted] | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | | Education Support Teacher | 2022/10/20 |
| [Redacted] | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | | Administrator | 2022/10/20 |
| [Redacted] | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | | Classroom teacher | 2022/10/24 |

Attachments:

Note. Image of page 7 of 7, 2023.

Research Journal Entries

These journal entries were written during the research process and are reflections on feelings and ideas that were brought up during the free-write interview process. Each entry is a closer analysis of impactful feelings and ideas that occurred during the PLP process and the research process that contribute to learning more about how I have experienced the PLP process as both a parent and teacher, revealing insights into improving how parents and teachers communicate and collaborate during the PLP process.

Reflections in the Water: I am Swimming Through the Ocean of Life

I am swimming across the ocean of my life.

“Just go with the flow” I’ve been told. Where is the flow going?

Life events come in waves. The waves change. They are sometimes unpredictable. Waves are sometimes small and calm; sometimes large, rough, and relentless; and sometimes a tsunami that arrives with little warning. Released to the ocean at birth, some set sail in yachts, some in dinghies, and some simply thrown in the water. Some people are left to learn how to swim and navigate the waves on their own. Some are taught how to swim, how to read the waves and how to navigate the waves.

The bottom of the ocean can be seen from the surface in some places, clear waters, full of life and sometimes easy to reach. But the bottom of the ocean is not visible from the surface from most places – a dark abyss, full of the unknown. It can be scary to think about what lies below if you fall below the surface... or sink. There have been times when I have had to fight against being swallowed by the bottom but felt like it would be better to let the waves push me under and permanently sink into the darkness below. I’ve let my legs rest in stormy waters before. My mind

and body got so tired I didn't want to fight the waves. I opened my eyes as I sank and looked down at the darkness and up where there was a glimmer of light. I started to swim again.

Because of my privilege, there were times early in life when I rode in a boat, but it felt like the boat was small. I fell off. Because of my privilege, I've always had a lifejacket while navigating the water. The condition and effectiveness of the lifejacket changes. There have been times when I feel like a wave has torn the lifejacket off me. I keep swimming. I keep fighting the big waves. I keep taking deep breaths. The lifejacket always eventually returns, and although I may have lost sight of it, it had never really drifted far.

Am I just treading water?

Am I swimming sideways? Backwards?

Or am I swimming forward?

Where am I swimming to?

I think there is a warm, sunny beach waiting for me when my swim is done.

I know how to swim in most waters. I've seen how to fight the big waves. I've seen how to float on calm seas basking in the sun with others. I've seen how to take a boat ride. I've seen how to support others during stormy seas and work together. I've seen how to push others under to stay above the surface. I've seen how to fall below the surface and emerge again. I've seen how to get pushed below the surface and emerge again. I've seen how to stop swimming and let the sea take us under.

I'm responsible for teaching my three new swimmers how to navigate the waters and fight the big waves. But we've been thrown into new waters. Being responsible for others in the water while also staying afloat is a heavy responsibility. They have life jackets. I sometimes get pushed under the water to lift them up. These autism waters are so different than any I've seen before.

They are murky. These early years waves are unpredictable and usually come fast, with little rest between. Most of what I have learned from watching others swim the waters of life is not helpful in these new waves. When a big wave hits, I have learned to ask for help, but sometimes I need to ask repeatedly to get help. I always slip below the surface before help arrives, but I always keep swimming. Unfortunately, autism is so unique to the individual that no one can really help us predict the waves.

I feel unheard. But I don't speak up. I feel unseen. But I don't speak up. "But he doesn't look autistic," they say. "But he doesn't do that with me," they say. Is he not "autistic enough" to get support? It feels like knives in the heart and water in the lungs every time I hear this. Masking is real. We, children with ASD and their parents, hide our true selves and our true feelings in public, trying to fit in to a neurotypical way of living.

I'm not in a boat, but I don't see others near me in a boat either. I'm trying to learn more about how to navigate these autism waters. The more that I learn, the more I recognize I don't know. I'm trying to hear the autistic voices, but they are muffled and difficult to hear in these muddy and wavy waters.

Waves come from around me, but waves of emotion come from inside me too. Waves of sadness and grief after diagnosis, waves of happiness and elation when goals are achieved, waves of anger and frustration when needs are not met, waves of fear and depression during meltdown episodes... and so many waves of unconditional love and the desire to protect. The fear of making the wrong choice or causing harm engulfs me at times. Discussing and processing emotions during therapy and with other ASD parents is a lifeline in these stormy waters.

It is possible to play in the rain. It is possible to smile and laugh in some storms. There are always sunny days. We can find calmness and safety in each other's company, even in the

stormiest seas. We can choose to lift each other up and support each other on this journey. Most people are doing the very best they can with the skills and knowledge they have. I believe that we can best navigate stormy waters by being lifelines for others, by speaking up and sharing in calm and respectful ways, and by listening to others with open and loving hearts.

I have enjoyed painting as a form of expressing myself over the years and found myself wanting to include a visual with this metaphor and journal entry. Because of my current role of parent, teacher, and researcher, investing time in sharing this reflective journey in my own painting was not possible. Hess' (2018) painting "Adrift," shown in Figure 16, captures my vision of what it is like to be set out to navigate the waters of the ocean of life, at times, seemingly alone. These are the waters I see when I close my eyes while navigating the waters of being a parent of someone with ASD as well as a teacher in the same school, my privilege and capital the white float beneath me. This dual role and identity is so awesome and so hard all at the same time.

Figure 16

Adrift: by Peter Hess, Copyright 2018



Note. Carved painted wood on panel, 36'x50'x5'. <http://www.peterhessart.com/projects/3009058>

The Autistic Voice: by Andrew Blitman (2018) (Reprinted with author's permission)

Streams of words
 Flow as drops on paper
 From the fountain pen,
 Their source.
 Communication is easy when written,
 But when spoken it often feels forced.

Although I am normal on the outside
 – As normal as you are,
 Which is crazy to me in your own way –
 I often see barriers between us,
 Impenetrable as they are wide.
 Asperger Syndrome
 – Autism –
 As I may have it,
 Is a developmental disorder
 That affects the way
 People grow up
 Psychologically
 And neurologically.
 We are, in most situations,
 Completely intact intellectually.

The growth milestones often come delayed.
 These include things like first words, walking,
 And following conversations
 Like ours right now,
 When we are talking.

If you have met
 One person with autism,
 Then you have met
 One person with autism.

The spectrum is a constellation of symptoms
 That individuals with autism
 Happen to share.

No two people are identical;
 No two cases are the same.
 Yet, for some reason,
 The stereotypes of *Rain Man*
 And Albert Einstein remain.
 After all these years,

We should watch *The Good Doctor* again.

However, even though we are whole as individuals,
 Many of our advocates claim that a piece of us is missing.
 They do research without listening,
 Speaking on our behalf
 That we lack theory of mind, empathy;
 That the world should be aware of us
 Without desiring us or accepting us.

Beauty is subjective,
 By nature selective.

For this reason,
 Awareness is not what we want.
 We are blue because we want something more
 – Inherent dignity – from you,
 To be sincerely embraced for who we are
 Without having to change ourselves beyond recognition;
 To receive true, authentic love
 Without preexisting conditions.

We want to be a part of the world around us,
 To be apart from the world
 That stigmatizes us
 And manipulates us
 Because we are naïve, jaded,
 And neurologically different.

Autism is not so much a disability
 As it is a difference.
 It is a diagnostic label
 That need not become a person's identity,
 Lest that be his or her choice.

It is high time we made that decision for ourselves.
 The moment has come to welcome the autistic voice. (Blitman, 2018)

The first stanza of this poem is what initially captivated me and led me to read the whole poem. Although I do not have autism, I feel this way about communication as well. I find writing my feelings and ideas much easier than talking about them. Sharing those feelings and ideas with others is even more difficult. I find it easy to communicate orally with children, but often find it

much more difficult to communicate orally with adults. Communication between home and school, from both perspectives, can be complex. It can be so much easier to send an email, especially when frustrated or upset, but emails can be misinterpreted. It can often be difficult to express emotional topics and ideas in person or on the phone compared to the ease of putting those ideas in writing. It is also often easier to stay quiet and say nothing, either orally or in writing.

The first stanza also caused me to reflect on the parent-teacher conference. From both a parent and teacher perspective, the discussions during a parent-teacher conference feel forced and superficial because they are usually limited to 15 minutes or less and only occur twice during a school year. Even if a parent or teacher feels that they want to discuss more during a conference, the time constraints leave the discussion rushed and depthless. Although as a teacher, it can be difficult to add tasks to an already daunting and time-consuming lists of tasks, as both a parent and a teacher, I would like to see additional time dedicated to individual parent-teacher conferences, especially for students with a PLP.

The second stanza makes me reflect on what normal really is. Who gets to define normal? Why does anyone have to conform to this standard of normal? Why do humans judge others using this invisible standard? Merriam-Webster (March 13, 2024) defines normal as “conforming to a type, standard, or regular pattern: characterized by that which is considered usual, typical, or routine;” and “generally free from physical or mental impairment or dysfunction: exhibiting or marked by healthy or sound functioning.” As a parent of a child with ASD, I have been told “but he doesn’t look autistic.” Somehow, humans have created an ambiguous image of what a “normal” person should look like, and unfortunately, what a “disabled” person should look like too. It must be especially difficult to feel like you do not fit into either of those categories. Those

barriers to conform to a standard created by “normal” people, are invisible to many, but very tangible for others. I want to be sure I am not contributing to barriers by setting unrealistic expectations of conformity during the PLP process.

Blitman (2018) artfully described the uniqueness of people with ASD. Understanding and acknowledging that no two people are identical is so important to be cognizant of during the PLP process. Ongoing assessment, discussion, and communication with a focus on fostering abilities can help parents and teachers ensure individual needs are met and help the person with ASD “maximize their potential” (Nason, 2020, p. 22). Grandin and Moore (2021) explained that, “When we label someone, others start to see them through the filter of that label” and “risk creating an over-simplified snapshot of that person” (p. 10). Grandin and Moore (2021) noted “part of the uniqueness of each child is the individuality of their developmental trajectory” and emphasize the need to “fit interventions to the child in a continually shape-shifting dance” (p. 67).

I feel that the last stanza is so important to consider during the PLP process. Nason (2020) explained that people “have been trying to for years to ‘treat’ autism by suppressing the behavioural symptoms while trying to shape people to look and act as neurotypical as possible” (p. 18). Nason (2020) noted that many adults on the spectrum often “are burnt out from constant invalidation and struggling to conform to what others want them to be” (p. 18), which “erodes their self-identities, increases social anxiety and often results in severe depression” (p. 23).

Nason (2020) elaborated and noted:

These concerns are asserted by many adults on the spectrum who plead for others to listen to these needs and re-evaluate what we as parents, teacher and professionals are trying to do. They desperately want us to understand what they are experiencing, to

accept and respect them for who they are and help support their differences, so they can live happily in our culture. (p. 23)

Although the New Brunswick Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (2015) noted that the student, if possible, is encouraged to be part of continuous planning process, I find that it can be difficult to truly engage a student with ASD in the process, especially a young student, because they often have a limited understanding of their ASD and often have limited communication skills. As Blitman (2018), Grandin and Moore (2021) and Nason (2020) have noted, people with ASD have communicated a desire to have their voices heard and capabilities considered by those that support them during their childhood. Grandin and Moore (2021) explained that “teams that have included parents and the child all along will be in a much stronger position to have successful communication during this stage of a young person’s move toward increased independence” (p. 68). It would be beneficial to introduce developmentally appropriate strategies to include student voice more in the PLP process in New Brunswick, ideally developed in consultation with experts in the field of ASD, child psychologists and, especially, people with ASD. These strategies could be included in an updated Guidelines and Standards handbook.

Test et al. (2004) “conducted a review of the literature to investigate interventions designed to increase students’ involvement in their individualized education program (IEP) process” and found that “students with widely varying disabilities can be actively involved in the IEP process” (p. 391). Test et al. (2004) found that direct instruction methods and small-group instruction of verbal rehearsal, role playing, and prompts were effective instructional strategies used to teach students skills to enhance their participation in their IEP meetings. Asking students

questions directly and avoiding jargon and complex language during IEP meetings also enhanced student performance. Test et al. (2004) suggested that:

If student participation in IEP meetings continues to be valued by educators, then universities and school districts need to assume some responsibility for ensuring that special educators have the necessary knowledge, skills, and tools to prepare students for their IEP meetings, and that time is made available for this participation to take place. (p. 407)

Sanderson and Goldman (2022) examined student participation in program planning meetings across all grade levels using a large-scale national survey of parents of students with disabilities in the United States. Sanderson and Goldman (2022) determined that student input in learning goals increased as their grade level increased, although participation was still relatively low overall. They suggested that younger students should be provided “ongoing opportunities to participate in decision-making that has important ramifications for their future” (p. 8). Sanderson and Goldman (2022) explained that students “can become familiar with the IEP [Individualized Education Program] process so they will be better prepared to learn and practice critical self-determination skills in the future” (p. 8). Sanderson and Goldman (2022) also determined that stronger parent-teacher partnerships increased student participation in the planning process. Sanderson and Goldman (2022) suggested that student involvement in the planning process could be increased by training teachers how to better involve students and by promoting the importance of parent-teacher partnerships.

Lessons Learned: Themes and Recommendations that Emerged from the Coding Process

During the inductive open coding process, themes emerged after reviewing the interview responses, field notes, journal entries, and literature. The themes are presented in this section as lessons learned.

Lesson 1: Identity is Important

The word identity appeared in different contexts numerous times throughout the research and coding process. Teachers, parents, and children with ASD are all trying to find, define, and redefine their identities and want others to recognize these identities, instead of having identities created for them, especially identities defined by labels. Grandin and Moore (2021) explained that “once we label someone, we also risk creating an over-simplified snapshot of that person. But everyone – with or without a label – is always developing and evolving” (p. 10).

De Ruyter and Conroy (2002) reviewed related literature and their own experience in education to describe their interpretation of identity, and defined identity “as the dynamic configuration of the defining characteristics of a person;” dynamic because they are partly socially constructed and because people change over time (p. 511). De Ruyter and Conroy (2002) explained that identity is comprised of a person’s physical characteristics and the societal standards of those characteristics, their social role, their belonging to groups, and their ideal identity. They explained that having an ideal identity, the kind of person someone wants to be or the situation they envision their self in, influences who someone is and how they act, and is essential for both the community and the individual because it gives people a sense of purpose, meaning, and direction. De Ruyter and Conroy (2002) cautioned that if a person feels that it is impossible to reach their ideals, a loss of self-esteem can result. Furthermore, parents and educators can play an important role in providing children with possible ideals that must “be

positive, constructive, and morally good” without making children feel they must attain those ideals (p. 517). De Ruyter and Conroy (2002) noted that “children must be given the freedom to explore the given ideal images” (p. 517), because these images “will be carried by the child through her entire life” (p. 521).

In their book *Communication in Everyday Life: A Survey of Communication*, Duck and McMahan (2019) defined identity as “symbolic creations based on the performance of personal roles, how people perceive themselves, and how people want to be viewed by others,” including personal identities (kind/lazy), relational identities (parent/friend), social identities (customer/manager), and demographic identities (race/age) (p. 21). Duck and McMahan (2019) explained that identity influences our relationships and the way we communicate during interactions, and the performance of our identities includes “communicating and behaving in ways culturally understood to represent [our]... characteristics” (p. 27). They also noted that although our biological and physical characteristics can influence the way we communicate with others and the way others communicate with us, “people construct multiple, sometimes contradictory, identities through communication with others,” which can be affected by mood, situations, relationships, and evaluations of people (p. 22). The performance of our identity can be dependent on the occasion and social cues, within the context provided by others, where people often perform a professional or proper version of their identity when under public scrutiny.

Bury et al. (2022) surveyed 198 formally diagnosed autistic adults in Australia and investigated where they reported learning about autism to determine if it was associated with accurate knowledge, perceptions of stigma, and how they defined their autistic identity. Participants reported that they learned more about autism from professionals, advocates, and

online sources than from parents and the media, although participants also reported a later age of diagnosis. Learning about autism through parents and professionals was “associated with higher levels of internalized stigma, and lower attribution of specialized abilities and autism identity” (Bury et al., 2022, p. 6). They suggested that parents and professionals should prioritize “healthy identity formation and accurate autism knowledge” given the importance of positive self-identity (p. 6). Grandin and Moore (2021) suggested that “a wise clinician, educator, or parent must look beyond diagnosis and appreciate all aspects of the child so they can help them develop an identity based on more than just being autistic” (p. 10). Grandin and Moore (2021) stressed that it is important to: recognize and understand the difference between autistic traits and temporary states; avoid making global assumptions and consider all of the data; ask the person directly about and discuss their strengths and interests; gather a more complete picture of a child by involving family, and include their culture; and do not ignore information that is uncomfortable, distressing, or unexplained.

JJ often states that his “brain is stupid and has a hard time with a lot of things” and “I hate my brain,” but at other times he also expresses that he is “nice, kind, loves sports, and good at math and video games.” JJ still has a lot to learn about how his brain processes information and how that affects how he feels and behaves. DeRoche’s (2015) labelling theory (LT) suggested that it is possible that JJ may develop secondary negative effects from his ASD label such as social stigma, lowered self-esteem, and lowered self-perception. JJ’s knowledge of his ASD label but lack of ASD knowledge, combined with his young age and having ASD, has contributed to JJ’s current struggle with his identity and his negative self-talk. I have learned that JJ is still defining his identity and I can support the formation of his identity in a positive way by providing him with accurate, age appropriate, information about autism, by discussing and

investigating his strengths and interests, and by supporting him with patience, understanding and compassion during his temporary challenging behaviours (Bury et al., 2022; Grandin & Moore, 2021). These strategies should also help JJ to perceive communicating with his parents and his teachers about his education and learning in a positive way. Over time, this should help JJ build the capital required to begin advocating for himself. Nason (2014) explained that some people with ASD experience difficulty in social situations, and in an effort to fit in, pretend to understand the situation and imitate the behaviours of others. Nason (2014) noted that “social acting takes its toll over time,” and “since we develop a sense of self from our relations with others, it tears at their self-identity and self-esteem” (p. 205). To help JJ avoid feeling anxious, angry, or depressed because of masking to fit in, Nason (2014) suggested role-playing and practicing social scenarios, preparing JJ with what to expect and what to do in specific social situations, as well as providing a peer mentor in social situations to help JJ protect his self-identity. Nason (2014) also suggested that “once home, allow the children to be themselves and express their needs, wants and desires in their own unique ways” because “we all need to feel free to be our true selves when at home and away from the group,” and by doing so, “we can protect their identity and self-esteem” (p. 207).

Puchegger and Bruce (2021) interviewed and observed seven physical education teachers from a large city in New Zealand to determine how teachers navigate becoming a teacher and what affects defining their teacher identities. They suggested that teacher identity is traditionally viewed as fixed, stable, and established through teacher education programs, a state of being a teacher, but noted the results suggested that teacher identity is actually based on a complex and dynamic system of unpredictable and changing teaching situations. Puchegger and Bruce’s (2021) research results explained teaching as “a performance of self that is constructed within a

dynamical system” and defined teacher identity as a “dynamic identity performance that depends on multiple interacting elements in teachers’ contexts” (p. 186). They suggested that it would be beneficial to help teachers embrace and understand the complexity, diversity, and interconnectedness of the systems that affect their performance as normal, and thus would provide an opportunity for teachers to reflect on what good teaching practices and pedagogy look like. Hsich (2013) interviewed and observed three early career teachers from one school in the San Francisco Bay area to determine sources for determining their professional identities, identity orientations, and implications of their identity orientations. Hsich (2013) reported that a dialogic identity, one that connected experiences, theory, and practice, led to cohesive classrooms with shared responsibility where both students and teachers engage in reflection and feedback to improve. Hsich (2013) stated that professional identity is a key factor in teacher commitment and retention and contributes to the development of effective adaptive and collaborative teaching practices grounded in theory and reflection.

Miller et al. (2019) conducted interviews and focus groups with 17 parents of children with disabilities in rural and urban areas of the Midwestern United States to examine how parents navigate inclusive and special education decision-making, form identities, and maintain values while working with schools. Miller et al. (2019) found that parent identities were often fluid and overlapped. The parent identities included: victim of failed collaboration; advocate; hope and persevering; educator; facilitator of parent-teacher relationships; and surrendering and yielding. Miller et al. (2019) noted these parent identities were revealed after parents reported they needed to remind educators about their child’s strengths and the value of their input, advocated for their child, showed determination to be resourceful and participate in planning, took up teaching roles with their child and other parents, developed and maintained partnerships

to access supports and services, and some surrendered and settled for less than what they wanted. Miller et al. (2019) noted the parent identities defined in their study “revealed specific implications for practice because they denote how parents interacted with school professionals, contributed to the educational system, and were or were not able to address collaboration challenges” (p. 105). Parent identity is influenced by experiences during the educational decision-making process and schools can facilitate parent empowerment through training and education, support parents by sharing resources and knowledge, and support parents by structuring planning meetings to value and respect parent input and contributions (Miller et al., 2019).

I have learned that I have struggled with defining and embracing my own identity over the years and I continue to struggle with this. In the past, the labels that teachers assigned me were self-fulfilling prophecies as DeRoche (2015) had suggested was possible, but I have learned to dismiss the negative labels and choose my own identity (although this is not always easy). I am a daughter, sister, wife, mother, friend, teacher, coach, student, advocate, and so much more. I am Erin. Although I often feel a desire to separate the roles of my identities, I am always all those people at the same time. I have given myself these informal labels, but others assign me informal labels as well. I have learned that I can set boundaries and be one of the parts of me more at certain times as needed, while continuing to be Erin. I can be daughter, sister, wife, mother, and friend Erin by scheduling specific times to spend one-on-one quality time with the people I care deeply about and nurture my personal and professional relationships. I can be coach Erin when I schedule time to be with my team. I can be student Erin when I ask for support and time alone to do reflective reading and writing. I can be primarily teacher Erin at school and

define communication boundaries with my colleagues for mother and advocate Erin, so that I can do both my teacher and mother jobs more effectively.

How, when, and why I communicate with families as a teacher is part of my teacher identity and is influenced by the other parts of my identity. I can set boundaries with JJ at school so that I can do a good job of being teacher Erin while still being mother Erin. How, when, and why I communicate with school regarding JJ and his PLP is part of my mother and advocate identity, is influenced by the other parts of my identity. My communication and collaboration with parents and with school is influenced by my perception of the situations which require communication, which is influenced by my social, cultural, and economic capital. My parent, teacher and researcher identity has created my elevated amounts of social, cultural, and economic capital which provides me with clarity as both a parent and teacher to see children, parents, and teachers as more than a label, whether formal or informal, ensuring that I do not use an individual's label to exert power or produce negative reactions or outcomes, as suggested by DeRoche's (2015) labelling theory. This elevated social, cultural, and economic capital has also provided me with clarity in perceiving situations of heightened emotion, which is often when most communication from home to school and school to home is initiated and has allowed me to continually improve my ability to communicate calmly and effectively as both a parent and a teacher.

Lesson 2: We are too Passive About Communication

The theme of people remaining quiet instead of communicating emerged from the writing, reflection, and coding process. In my experience, it often appears easier to not communicate when faced with questions, concerns, or difficult topics to discuss, but choosing not to communicate is not helpful and can have negative results.

As a teacher, I continually ask myself questions about my communication during the PLP process. How often should I communicate with this parent? What should I communicate about? Am I communicating too often? Am I communicating with enough frequency? Will I upset this parent with what I need to say? Will this parent be happy with what I say? Am I sharing enough information? Am I sharing too much information? Are the PLP and report card enough communication? Am I communicating information in a way that is easy to understand? Do I have enough time to communicate with this parent today? Can this communication wait until another day? Will this communication require follow-up actions? Will the student be alright without a lot of communication? Will the parent notice how much I communicate? These questions sometimes create enough internal struggle and worry that choosing not to communicate or choosing to communicate only the minimum requirement appears to be the best option.

As a parent, I continually ask myself questions about my communication during the PLP process. How was my child at school today? What can I do to help my child with their PLP goals? Should I talk to the teacher about this concern or incident? How much does the teacher need to know about my child's behaviour at home? What does this part of the PLP mean? Am I communicating too often? Am I communicating enough? Will the teacher be upset with me if I communicate my concern? Is the teacher upset with my communication, but not telling me? Is there information I should know that is not being shared with me? Is my child receiving educational assistant support during the day? Is my child ready for new PLP learning goals and outcomes? There are times when I have worried about unintended consequences of communication enough that choosing not to communicate appeared to be the best option because it avoided some potential negative outcomes.

Major (2023) conducted semi-structured interviews with 31 Hungarian elementary school teachers from three communities and concluded that “regular communication, common language use, a positive attitude from both parties, and the appropriate use of information and communication technology tools are essential for effective communication” between parents and teachers (p. 13). Major (2023) found that “both parties’ social and cultural capital play a role in determining the manner and quality of their interaction” because “linguistic and cultural differences influence how they understand and interpret the exchange of information between them” (p. 14). Major’s (2023) study determined that the teacher meeting was the most common form of verbal communication, online communication was also present, that spontaneous communication played a significant role at the early elementary level, and that multi-directional communication ensures effective communication is achieved. Major (2023) noted that the interviews revealed that teachers had a “fear of failure, disappointment, and related negative emotions” which impacted how they problem-solved communication obstacles and that “they might also fear passive, rejecting behaviour from families, or due to excessive investment of energy and time, they might not even attempt to establish communication” (p. 19-20). Bang (2018) interviewed five Korean parents to explore their perceptions of how parent behaviours might affect parent-teacher collaboration and found that “there is a perceptual gap and limited understanding between teachers and parents that might be the most critical barrier limiting parent-teacher collaboration” (p. 1796). Bang (2018) noted that parents and teachers made assumptions about the wants and needs of the other, which caused misunderstandings and conflict; that parents were reluctant to share concerns, opinions, and dissatisfaction; and that some parents had unreasonable expectations with little consideration of other students or the teacher. My PLP communication experiences as a parent and a teacher echoed both Major (2023)

and Bang's (2018) research results, as I have regrettably been guided by fear of failure and fear of negative interactions and been reluctant to share concerns and opinions.

It is important to acknowledge that some of my communication reluctance stems from parent-teacher power dynamics. Although I am a teacher, I am not in the homeroom classroom with my child, so often feel reluctant to contribute as a parent to discussion during the PLP process because I feel unqualified or not knowledgeable enough to make valuable contributions. This power dynamic creating reluctance to communicate is important to acknowledge from a teacher perspective because if I am feeling inadequate as a parent even with my teacher knowledge, experience, and capital, other parents participating in the PLP process will also experience the effects of power dynamics during communication and collaboration. Variance in teacher and parent capital influences how much power dynamics affects communication and collaboration. These power dynamics also affect the way both parents and teachers perceive each situation of communication, so as a parent and a teacher, it is important to remember and acknowledge that everyone is trying to do the best they can with the information, skills, and capital that they have. One goal of communication and collaboration during the PLP process should be to have both parties perceive participating in situations of communication as positive and contributing to the student's learning.

Major (2023) and Bang (2018) suggested that parents and teachers should develop a mutual understanding for communication and collaboration early in the school year to maintain effective communication. Major (2023) suggested that "educators must make every effort to strive for constant communication using one of the available information channels and formats to regularly inform parents about their child's progress" and "to facilitate support structures for families with lower socio-economic status and promote effective communication" (p. 21). Bang

(2018) suggested that “more welcoming environments for dealing with disagreements should be established so that parents and teachers can work together without prejudicial concerns” and encouraged the “formation of a caring community around children where parents and teachers cooperate as partners to improve education for all children” (p. 1797). I believe that collaboratively planning for communication at the beginning of the school year and following through with the plan will help close the power dynamic gap, thereby increasing parent and teacher capital, will contribute to a stronger parent-teacher relationship, and will help promote positive situation perceptions of communication during the planning process.

Syriopoulou-Delli and Polychronopoulou (2019) surveyed 171 teachers and 50 parents of children with ASD at primary schools in Greece to determine parent and teacher perspectives of communication and collaboration. They found that both parents and teachers are in favour of frequent communication and want to collaborate and suggested that teachers “need to undertake continuous training and technical assistance in the area of parental collaboration and support” (p. 39). They also found that “the active participation of parents and children with ASD in the implementation and improvement of individual child development plans and children’s assessment process can lead to material improvements in children’s school results” and suggested that teachers and schools can create an agreement on electronic communication, schedule feedback meetings, and arrange for support services information sessions to increase parental participation (p. 40-41). The authors suggested that parents should receive information regarding their child’s learning every one to three months, a communication notebook used daily, and cooperation with other professionals should occur. Syriopoulou-Delli and Polychronopoulou (2019) concluded that “teachers should take on the challenge of involving parents in school life without fear of criticism or having their expertise undermined by parents” (p. 38).

In their analysis of Canadian communication styles, Sieriakova and Hladush (2023) stated that “Canadians tend to use a direct assertive communication style, expressing their thoughts and opinions openly” but “also aim to be tactful and considerate to avoid causing offense” (p. 122). They explained that Canadians are polite, humble, avoid confrontation, and apologize frequently. My research revealed that in my various roles, avoiding confrontation and avoiding causing offense has been the dominant factor in my communication decision-making process over the years. I have learned that as I gain more experience with communication both as a parent and as a teacher, as I learn more about ASD, and as my confidence in my communication knowledge and skills increases, I gain more capital and I become less governed by fear and more directed by the best interest of my son and my students. This knowledge is important because it indicates that learning more about ASD and about communication skills would be valuable to incorporate in teacher education programs because it would provide teachers with the capital and confidence necessary to overcome the negative possibilities of labels and provide teachers with the skills and confidence necessary to perceive situations of communication with parents as positive and constructive opportunities.

Lesson 3: We Need More Support

The theme of parents, teachers, and schools needing more support emerged from the writing, reflection, and coding process. In my experience, I have required support both as a parent and a teacher in all of my experiences with the PLP process and continue to require support as JJ’s needs change, my students and class compositions change, the teacher workload changes, and new research regarding ASD and best teaching and parenting practices emerge. Other parents and teachers will also need support to be effective communicators and advocates. My research and reviewed literature revealed there are several ways that parents and teachers

require support through the PLP process, which include funding for additional time, professionals, space, resources and training; time allocated for parents and teachers to meet and collaborate; communication and ASD training for parents and teachers; and emotional support for parents and teachers.

In their report of inclusive practices in New Brunswick, Porter and AuCoin (2012) noted challenges regarding the support of inclusion in New Brunswick schools which included the complexity of funding methods, the role of educational assistants, a need for professional development and training, and a need for additional staffing and resources (p. 41-43). Korotkov (2021) reviewed New Brunswick's inclusion policy, Policy 322, through 500 virtual sessions and 3033 surveys from a variety of stakeholders, including parents, students, teachers, and district staff. Korotkov (2021) noted that "districts identified concerns around the current staffing funding model, saying that it needed an overhaul to be more flexible in supporting vulnerable schools and communities," (p.19). Additionally, there are rising costs due to families moving to New Brunswick to access inclusive education, and mental health, trauma, and diversity also contribute to insufficient ratios for EST-Resource and EST-Guidance which are "at a breaking point stretching those resources" (p. 19). Korotkov (2021) found that other supports needed to implement the intent of Policy 322 include additional consistent and qualified professionals, more staff, additional classroom and intervention space, reduced class sizes, and improved communication between schools and districts. In my experiences as a parent and teacher, these support concerns and requirements are still relevant, and it would be impactful to continue moving forward with the implementation and improvement of the suggested supports and resources.

As part of labelling theory, DeRoche (2015) argued that parents have unequal sources of capital required to access and acquire labels, treatments, services, and opportunities, and note that “equitable access to education requires the dissemination of solid information to educators and medical practitioners as well as the general public” (p. 18). DeRoche (2015) also suggested that accommodations need to be more accessible to families with less capital, and that “health care systems and educational systems need to work in tandem to ensure equality in access and opportunities,” which will in turn reduce “inequality in academic opportunities and perpetuation of class structures” (p. 19).

In my experience as both a parent and teacher in the PLP process, I have found having unbiased and supportive people to talk to about successes and challenges the most valuable support. In my experience, accessing emotional supports such as therapists, colleagues, family, friends, experts, and medical professionals are imperative for both parents and teachers during the PLP process because it can help to ensure any situation that requires communication is approached calmly and rationally and perceived in a positive and constructive way. It is important that these supports be provided to parents and teachers with all amounts of social, cultural, and economic capital so that all students are given equal opportunity to learn in a way that meets their individual needs and honours their strengths. Providing equal access to emotional supports will also help to close the power dynamic gap and increase both parent and teacher capital. These types of emotional supports have helped me feel competent, valued, and validated as both a parent and a teacher, something that each person involved in the PLP process should feel.

Implications and Recommendations

In their report of inclusive practices in New Brunswick, Porter and AuCoin (2012) explained that district teams noted collaboration with parents as requiring improvement and “the level of parent collaboration and communication varies from one school and district to another” (p. 37). Porter and AuCoin (2012) also noted district “concern about the level of parent involvement and input into the special education plan” and “concern that some parents do not have an understanding that there are also limits to what schools may be able to offer, which may set up an adversarial relationship between the school and family” (p. 37). Both parents and schools reported varying experiences with communication and collaboration, from positive relationships with ongoing frequent communication to negative relationships and communication met with resistance and anger (Porter & AuCoin, 2012, p. 38). Service providers outside of the department and other stakeholders also expressed concern about the level of communication and collaboration “among all personnel around students and their educational plans,” and felt that “some schools were extremely invitational and involved outside agencies, while others did not” (Porter & AuCoin, 2012, p. 38-39). As part of Porter and AuCoin’s (2012) recommendations for strengthening inclusion, recommendation 8.4.8 suggested that:

The parent/guardian and the student (when appropriate) as well as the classroom teachers, education support teacher and other relevant professionals should be required to be part of the personalized learning plan process. Minutes documenting parent/guardian collaboration should be maintained. (p. 161)

Although the Porter and AuCoin report was released in 2012, and although McKay provided a report on inclusion in New Brunswick in 2022, no assessment on how the education system has been approaching the findings and recommendations of the Porter and AuCoin report has been

completed. No assessment on how well New Brunswick's education system is currently meeting the recommendations has been completed. The combination of the significance of the Porter and AuCoin findings and recommendations to education and inclusion in New Brunswick, the impact of the findings and recommendations on my life as a parent and a teacher, and the questions and concerns voiced by parents on Facebook, resulted in me investigating and reflecting on my own experiences as a parent and teacher to determine what might be done to further enhance current PLP communication and collaboration practices. Although New Brunswick stakeholders in education have made improvements to the PLP process, there is more that can be done to enhance the process. Through the research process, I have learned and recommend the following practical tips for and enhancements to communication and collaboration during the PLP process in New Brunswick:

1. Every person bases their behaviours on a dynamic self-identity that is formed through our experiences and varying forms and amounts of social, cultural, and economic capital. Our varying experiences and capital also impact the way we perceive and behave in specific situations. It is important to acknowledge this and remember this when communicating, collaborating, and planning as a parent and as a teacher because collaboration can only be successful if all parties feel "safe, accepted, and competent" (Nason, 2014, p. 256).

Nason (2014) suggested that building a working partnership can be accomplished by validating and accepting each other, focusing on each other's strengths, and supporting each other (p. 257).

2. DeRoche (2015) warned of the potential negative consequences of labelling individuals, including formal and informal labels. No one should only be defined by a label. It is imperative to learn more about parents, students, and teachers, remembering that we are

all learning and trying our best, and imperative to build a relationship based on honesty and trust throughout the school year. Grandin and Moore (2021) suggested that “you should always look beyond labels and see all of their strengths and features” (p. 10).

3. Parents and teachers should approach communication with honesty, humility, and the goal of being constructive in order to build and maintain a relationship centered on trust. I have learned that communication should never occur during heightened states of emotion, and planning the what, how and why of communication before making contact can be a valuable way to foster positive parent-teacher relationships and effective collaboration. It is important to always remember that “everyone does better when they feel safe, accepted, and competent” (Nason, 2014, p. 256). To help both parents and teachers prepare for communication, I have provided *A Guide to Parent-Teacher Communication* in Appendix A.
4. Parents should attempt to activate the resources available to them, when possible, to create a place of their own in schools by regularly interacting with teachers and other stakeholders and position themselves so that they can influence decisions at school to effectively engage in their child’s education (Barton et al., 2004). If a parent does not know what resources are available to them, they should reach out to stakeholders around the community to find out. School stakeholders should help provide “equality in access and opportunities” for all parents, regardless of their amount of capital (DeRoche, 2015, p. 19). I hope to contribute to building accessible information and resources about ASD and the PLP process for parents in our community and around New Brunswick.
5. Teacher education programs need to incorporate programming that teaches pre-service teachers how to navigate communicating and collaborating with parents and guardians.

McNaughton et al. (2008) suggested that pre-service teachers could learn effective listening skills through participation in *LAFF Don't CRY* training and role-playing.

Symeou et al. (2012) suggested that teachers should learn attentive/active listening skills, counseling skills, and the stages of an interview through direct instruction, discussion, role-play, and reflection to enhance parent/teacher collaboration. Teachers can also review Prince Edward Island Department of Education's (2005) *Preparation and Planning Checklist* for helpful information about best practices to ensure parental involvement.

6. Parents and teachers should increase their knowledge of ASD. Teacher education programs should also include more training and resources about ASD, neurodiversity, ABA and other therapies and supports. Grandin and Moore (2021) explained that with increased training, knowledge, and mindsets, "you will be better equipped to maintain a broad perspective, conduct more useful evaluations, put interventions on concrete foundations, recognize obstacles unrelated to autism, and bring out a child's strengths" (p. 11). Parents and teachers can access resources or participate in autism training provided by the New Brunswick Department of Education and Early Childhood Development and the Autism Learning Partnership at <https://alp-paa.com/en/>. Free autism training for parents in New Brunswick can also be accessed at <https://www2.gnb.ca/content/gnb/en/departments/education/autism.html> and for teachers in New Brunswick by contacting their Education Support Services team.
7. Students should be given the opportunity to be part of their PLP process whenever possible. Students can provide input an information about their learning. Asking for student input should be part of a yearly PLP process checklist. Test et al. (2004)

suggested that direct instruction methods and small-group instruction of verbal rehearsal, role playing, and prompts were effective instructional strategies used to teach students skills to enhance their participation in their planning meetings. Asking students questions directly and avoiding jargon and complex language during meetings also enhanced student performance. Sanderson and Goldman (2022) suggested that student involvement in the planning process could be increased by training teachers how to better involve students and by promoting the importance of parent-teacher partnerships.

8. More financial backing is required to support the effective implementation of inclusive education in New Brunswick for resources such as additional teachers, additional trained professionals, additional planning and collaboration time, additional training, and smaller classroom sizes. These resources would allow teachers to participate in the PLP process more effectively for an increasingly diverse and growing student population.

If parents, teachers and other stakeholders can approach communication and collaboration during the PLP process with respect, calmness, and a positive mindset, we can all work together to embrace our differences and provide an enriching and effective learning environment for students with ASD to always feel “safe, accepted, and competent” (Nason, 2014, p. 256).

Potential Further Research

Although my research revealed potential enhancements to communication and collaboration during the PLP process in New Brunswick, it only offers a single perspective and has highlighted the need for further research. Further research should be conducted in order to determine other perspectives of enhancing communication and collaboration during the PLP process, determine ideal models of parent-teacher communication, determine methods and

content of communication training for parents, and determine methods and content of communication training for teachers.

Research Implications for my Own Parenting and Teaching Practices

Through the research process, I reflected extensively on my own parenting and teaching practices and learned to plan my communication with others before making contact, whether I invest just a few minutes to plan a brief communication or hours to plan for a conference to address bigger ideas. I will share what I have learned with others in hopes of enhancing communication and collaboration for others. I plan to continue to practice, reflect on, and refine my communication and collaboration skills as both a parent and a teacher.

As I move forward beyond this autoethnographic research, I plan to continue to read applicable and new research regarding parent-teacher communication and collaboration, reflect on my own experiences and what can be learned from them, collect information and ideas about effective parent-teacher collaboration during the PLP process, and will continue to respectfully share insights with others. I hope to continue my research journey and follow-through with learning more about how other parents and teachers perceive communication and collaboration during the PLP process and learn more about enhancements that can be made to the PLP process.

JJ continues to participate in learning at school with the support of a PLP that includes accommodations and individualized learning goals and outcomes. School staff and I have collaborated on his current learning goals and outcomes and have created a plan to communicate about JJ and his PLP more formally and leave informal communication for friend and colleague interactions. JJ is smart, funny, kind, and thoughtful, continues to make gains in defining his identity and deciding what makes him truly happy. I am thankful that he is my son and look forward to learning more together and growing together.

Figure 17

Erin and JJ Friel June 2024



Appendix A

A Guide to Parent-Teacher Communication

★*Everyone does better when they feel safe, accepted & competent*★

★*Assume the person is doing the best they can given the situation they are in & skills/knowledge they have*★

Important Considerations When Communicating:

- ① if applicable, validate their frustrations & challenges
- ② assume that negative behaviour is the result of not feeling safe or competent dealing with the situation
- ③ help them feel safe, accepted & supported by you
- ④ identify & focus on what they are doing right (rather than complaining about what they are doing wrong)
- ⑤ draw attention to everything they are doing right & provide support in making that better
(3 times more positives than negatives are ideally needed in order to feel safe & accepted)
(adapted from Nason, 2014)

The Child's Present Level of Performance:

(explain what is going on that initiated this communication)

What is the parent/teacher currently doing well?

What is your goal for this communication? What are you hoping to accomplish?

Where do we go from here? Your Ideas for Support - Positive Behaviour Support Plan:

- ① what is the challenging behaviour? (appearance, frequency, severity, duration)

- ② functions of the challenging behaviour?
(to gain positive/negative attention, to escape/avoid someone/something, to get something they want, to get sensory feedback or stimulation)

- ③ proactive plan
(developing a warm and positive relationship to help them feel relaxed and at ease)

- ④ early warning signs plan (de-escalation when subtle signals appear: pacing, fast heartbeat, sweating, increased vocalizations, facial expressions, body language)

- ⑤ reactive plan
(challenging behaviour occurs, crisis, anxious or out of control-respond to behaviour & keep everyone safe, prevent unnecessary stress and injury)

- ⑥ post incident support plan
(how we will calm the person down after an incident and return to baseline behaviour)

Questions to ask yourself:

Does he/she get distracted by things that can be changed?

Does he/she feel safe and accepted by teachers, aides, peers?

Does he/she need breaks to escape and regroup, or a sensory diet to stay calm, alert, and regulated?

Does he/she need tasks broken down, presented visually, or instructions read to him to make tasks easier?

Categories of support that you may want to discuss:

Physical/sensory

Social

Communication

Scheduling/organizing

Emotionally/behaviourally

Academic

(adapted from The Challenging Behaviour Foundation, 2024)

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