Home–School Collaboration in Supporting Learners with Autism: Teachers' Experiences, Challenges, and Insights

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ABSTRACT

Background*:* Home–school collaboration is central to inclusive education for learners with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), yet little is known about how teachers experience it, particularly in the Philippines. *Objective:* This study explored the lived experiences, challenges, and insights of elementary teachers who work with parents of learners with ASD.

Methods*:* A qualitative descriptive phenomenological design was used. Fifteen elementary teachers from one university basic education department were purposively selected; eight took part in individual in-depth interviews and seven in a focus group discussion. Data were analyzed using Colaizzi's seven-step method, with preconceptions set aside through bracketing and reflexive journaling.

Results*:* Six themes emerged: parental engagement as the foundation of collaboration; collaboration as a multi-stakeholder, shared responsibility; communication as the core mechanism; interpersonal barriers, including parental denial, defensiveness, unavailability, and miscommunication; structural and institutional constraints, including workload, limited time, and limited training; and teacher agency and professional dispositions.

Conclusion*:* Teachers experienced collaboration as sustained, uneven relational commitment rather than a partnership of equals, maintained largely through personal effort. Institutional support for home–school collaboration should therefore sustain teachers as well as structure partnerships. The findings offer a context-specific basis for strengthening inclusive education practice in the Philippines.

Keywords*:* Autism Spectrum Disorder; home–school collaboration; inclusive education; parental engagement; teacher experiences; descriptive phenomenology; Philippines

INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education for learners with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) depends on collaboration between home and school, with teachers and parents offering consistent, coordinated support. When that collaboration works, learners benefit socially, emotionally, academically, and behaviorally (Azad et al., 2021; Josilowski & Morris, 2019). Consistency matters especially for children with ASD, who often find it hard to carry what they learn in one setting into another (Josilowski, 2019). Even so, collaboration is difficult to sustain and varies considerably across contexts. Much of what is known comes from parents' reports or outcome measures rather than from the teachers who do this work every day.

The literature affirms the value of partnership but also shows that it often falls short in practice. Teachers tend to emphasize academic achievement, whereas parents tend to emphasize social skills and functional integration (Vlcek et al., 2024; Dale et al., 2025). Communication is the form of parental involvement most often studied (Goldman & Burke, 2019). It is more than the passing of information: it is an ongoing, relational exchange in

which teachers play a central role (Aouad & Bento, 2020; Leenders et al., 2019), and it can be strained by differences in language, culture, and power (Nthibeli et al., 2022). Caregivers say they want frequent, honest, and open communication and want to feel heard in decision-making (Li & Burke, 2023). Strategies proposed for strengthening collaboration include structured consultation models (Azad et al., 2021; Dale et al., 2025), parent-mediated programs (Brian et al., 2022), and teacher professional development (Smith & Sheridan, 2019), although their success depends on context, teacher training, and school culture (Al-Hamad et al., 2023; Muckenthaler et al., 2020).

Systemic conditions also shape collaboration. Many teachers have limited knowledge of ASD (Gómez-Marí et al., 2021). In the Philippines, teachers committed to inclusive practice report insufficient special education training, poor access to support services, and limited resources (Macabenta et al., 2023). Across Asia, inclusive education policies have been interpreted unevenly and resources are unevenly distributed (Faragher et al., 2021), and in Philippine settings parents' involvement has been linked to cultural perspectives, family income, and financial stress (Raval, 2025). Where organizational systems are rigid or workloads overwhelming, even well-meaning teachers struggle to sustain relationships with families (Aouad & Bento, 2020).

What remains thinly documented is the teachers' side of this relationship as it is lived. Teachers manage parental expectations, communicate with families, and work within institutional structures, often doing substantial emotional work that goes beyond their formal duties (Ngadni & Chen, 2024; Salonzo et al., 2023). Outcome-oriented research tends to obscure how teachers understand their own role, what difficulties they meet, and how they stay connected with parents when doing so is hard. Three gaps follow: few teacher-centered phenomenological studies treat collaboration as a lived experience rather than an abstract construct; micro-level accounts from specific Philippine school settings are scarce; and the emotional and relational dimensions of collaboration remain under-examined.

In the Philippines, inclusive education is supported by legislation such as Republic Act No. 11650 (2022) and by Department of Education directives, and the study is aligned with Sustainable Development Goals 4 (Quality Education), 10 (Reduced Inequalities), and 17 (Partnerships for the Goals). At the setting of this study, the Basic Education Department of the University of San Agustin, a growing number of learners with ASD are included in general classrooms, and teachers are expected to coordinate with their families. How teachers experience that coordination has not been documented in this setting.

Three theoretical traditions dominate scholarship on home–school collaboration: Epstein's (2011) theory of overlapping spheres of influence, Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory, and Christenson and Sheridan's (2001) family–school partnership theory. Because the study used a descriptive phenomenological design, these frameworks were treated as part of the researcher's prior knowledge, identified and bracketed before data collection, and were not used to organize the findings. They are brought back into dialogue with the findings in the Discussion.

The study therefore asked: (1) What experiences do teachers have in collaborating with parents of learners with autism? (2) What challenges do teachers encounter in home–school collaboration? (3) What insights were derived to strengthen home–school collaboration?

METHODS

Research design

The study used a qualitative descriptive phenomenological design grounded in Husserlian phenomenology (Husserl, 1970; Moustakas, 1994). This approach gives expression to experience in participants' own language and aims to describe the essence of a phenomenon without imposing theories or explanations (Abraham & Padmakumari, 2025). It was chosen because the study sought the fundamental structures of teachers' collaborative experience while preserving their authentic voices.

Researcher Positionality and Bracketing

In descriptive phenomenology the researcher is the primary instrument of data collection and interpretation (Creswell & Poth, 2018), so positionality is a methodological concern. The foundational response in the Husserlian tradition is bracketing, or epoché: setting aside prejudgments and preconceptions so that participants' accounts can be met with openness (Moustakas, 1994). Bracketing does not remove subjectivity; it makes it visible and holds it in suspension.

Five preconceptions were identified before data collection and recorded in a reflective journal: (1) that home–school collaboration is fundamentally beneficial; (2) that parental denial and limited engagement are the main challenges teachers face; (3) that better communication is the main way to strengthen collaboration; (4) a theoretical orientation toward ecological and systems thinking arising from prior study of Bronfenbrenner and Epstein; and (5) a personal belief in teachers' efficacy and agency. Each carried a specific risk, respectively: favoring positive accounts, shaping data collection around confirming one pattern, producing prescriptive rather than descriptive findings, imposing ecological categories on the data, and reading teachers' accounts sympathetically rather than openly.

Three practices were used to carry out the epoché. First, the researcher kept a reflexive journal, revisiting the five preconceptions before each interview and recording after each interview and analytic stage any moments when the data surprised or challenged an assumption. Second, the researcher kept an open-ended interview stance, probing further when accounts departed from expectation and avoiding the vocabulary of Epstein and Bronfenbrenner (for example, "spheres," "mesosystem," "ecological") in all questions and probes. Third, description and discussion were kept structurally separate: the findings are presented as descriptive accounts, and engagement with theory is deferred to the Discussion. The researcher acknowledges that bracketing is an ongoing discipline rather than a completed act.

Participants and Setting

Participants were recruited through purposive sampling (Creswell & Poth, 2018) from the Basic Education Department of the University of San Agustin during School Year 2025–2026. Inclusion criteria were (a) currently teaching at the elementary level, (b) at least one year of teaching experience, (c) currently handling learners diagnosed with ASD, and (d) direct experience collaborating with parents of learners with ASD. Fifteen teachers took part. Eight participated in individual in-depth interviews (IDIs) and seven in a focus group discussion (FGD); no teacher took part in both. The sample size was guided by data saturation, with no new themes emerging after the fifteenth participant.

Table 1 presents the participants' profile. Participants were aged 25 to 51 years; thirteen were women and two were men. Most held a Bachelor of Elementary Education (BEED) degree, and several held or were pursuing graduate study in special education, early childhood education, reading, or educational management. Teaching experience ranged from 1 to 14 years, and experience with learners with ASD from 1 to 11 years.

Table 1

Participants' Profile

Code	Age	Sex	Educational background	Years teaching	Years with learners with ASD
P1	30	Female	BEED	7	2
P2	28	Female	BEED	6	3
P3	27	Female	BEEd – ECE	4	1
P4	36	Female	BEED / MAEd SpEd CAR	14	6
P5	31	Female	MAEd SpEd	7	4
P6	51	Female	BEED / MAEd SpEd (20 units)	9	4
P7	31	Female	BEED	9	6

P8	38	Female	BEED	3	1
FGDP1	34	Male	BEED / MAEd Educational Management	7	3
FGDP2	33	Female	BEED / MEd ECE	11	11
FGDP3	30	Male	BEED – ECE	3	3
FGDP4	31	Female	BEED	5	2
FGDP5	25	Female	BEED	1	1
FGDP6	28	Female	BEED / MEd Reading (30 units)	4	4
FGDP7	29	Female	BEED	5	2

Data Collection

Two complementary methods were used. In-depth interviews were the primary data source. A guide of open-ended questions ensured that key topics were covered while leaving participants free to elaborate (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). Each interview was a single face-to-face session of approximately 20 to 30 minutes. The FGD was a supplementary source, held in a single session of approximately 45 to 60 minutes following the interviews, to bring out shared patterns of experience that could be cross-checked against the interview accounts (Krueger & Casey, 2015).

Focus groups are not a standard method in Husserlian descriptive phenomenology, which rests on first-person, individual conscious experience; group discussion introduces social consensus, peer influence, and conversational co-construction. The FGD was therefore given a bounded, corroborating role. Extraction of significant statements, formulation of meanings, and derivation of themes proceeded from the IDI transcripts, and FGD accounts were used to confirm, qualify, or diverge from them. Where FGD accounts departed from the interviews, the divergence was noted and treated as meaningful. Interviews and the FGD were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were anonymized and stored in password-protected files.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed with Colaizzi's (1978) seven-step method. The researcher (1) read and reread the transcripts to gain an overall sense of the accounts; (2) extracted significant statements bearing directly on the phenomenon; (3) formulated a meaning for each statement, staying close to participants' words and checking each formulation against the original transcript; (4) clustered formulated meanings into themes, comparing and combining IDI and FGD results so that similar meanings were merged into integrated themes; (5) wrote an exhaustive description integrating the themes; (6) derived a fundamental structure, a concise statement of the essential meaning of the experience; and (7) validated the findings by member checking. Clustering the IDI and FGD data separately first showed substantial convergence, and the two were then integrated into six themes.

Trustworthiness

Rigor was supported through four criteria (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility was addressed through prolonged engagement, use of both IDIs and an FGD, and member checking. Dependability was supported by a detailed audit trail of procedures, decisions, and analytic steps. Confirmability was supported by reflexive journaling and the same audit trail. Transferability was supported by contextualized description of the setting and participants so that readers can judge applicability to similar contexts.

Ethical Considerations

The study received approval from the University Research Ethics Review Committee 2025-301, February 2026, and permission was secured from school administration before data collection. Participation was voluntary, written informed consent was obtained before participation (including consent to audio recording), and participants could skip any question, pause, or withdraw at any time without consequence. Risk was

judged minimal. The study complied with the Data Privacy Act of 2012 (Republic Act No. 10173). Names were replaced with codes (P1–P8 for interviewees and FGDP1–FGDP7 for focus group participants), identifying details were removed from transcripts and reported excerpts, and data were stored in password-protected files accessible only to the researcher.

The researcher is a colleague of the participants in the same department, a relationship that may have influenced who agreed to take part and what participants chose to share. Participation was kept voluntary, and the reflective journal was used to monitor how the collegial relationship might have shaped the interviews and the analysis.

RESULTS

The findings are presented descriptively, organized around the three research questions. Direct quotations are the evidence for each descriptive claim; ellipses mark omitted text. Across the data, collaboration appeared not as a fixed procedure but as a dynamic, relational, and context-dependent process that teachers lived through daily. Six integrated themes emerged (Table 2).

Table 2

Summary of Themes

Research question	Integrated theme	Description
Teachers' experiences	Theme 1: Parental engagement as foundation of collaboration	Collaboration depends on parental openness, acceptance, and active involvement; where these are present it becomes meaningful and sustained, and where absent teachers work against resistance.
	Theme 2: Collaboration as a multi-stakeholder, shared responsibility	Teachers, parents, and other professionals share responsibility, with parents as co-educators; in practice teachers often led and sustained the work.
	Theme 3: Communication as the core mechanism of collaboration	Open, consistent, timely, and sensitive communication sustains alignment between home and school and the relationship itself.
Challenges	Theme 4: Interpersonal barriers as disruptions to collaboration	Parental denial, defensiveness, unavailability, and miscommunication disrupt relationship-building and continuity of support.
	Theme 5: Structural and institutional constraints	Heavy workload, limited time, insufficient training, and scarce resources limit the consistency and quality of collaboration.
Insights	Theme 6: Teacher agency and professional dispositions	Patience, empathy, adaptability, and commitment to learning allow teachers to sustain partnerships despite challenges.

Teachers' Experiences in Collaborating With Parents

Theme 1: Parental engagement as the foundation of collaboration. Teachers in both the interviews and the focus group described parental engagement as the condition that opens or closes the possibility of meaningful collaboration. They experienced it less as one factor among many than as a threshold. Participants described three interlocking elements: parental openness (willingness to receive information and engage in dialogue), acceptance (acknowledgment of the child's condition and its implications), and active participation (readiness to act on shared strategies at home and at school). These were not equivalent: openness could exist without acceptance, as when a parent seemed cooperative while remaining in denial, and acceptance could exist without participation. The deepest collaboration required all three.

When parents were engaged, teachers described ease and mutual recognition. "If the parent is open, my teaching experience becomes easy" (P3). P3 described her relationship with the parent as "very healthy,"

noting that the parent shared what the child was dealing with at home and that the child behaved differently when the parent was involved. Others described reciprocity: "I can get information and strategies from them, and they can also get strategies from me" (P1). One participant spoke of "sharing strategies at home" (P5), and a focus group participant described "teamwork that was very effective in managing the child" (FGDP6). Teachers felt their effort had traction, because what they taught at school could be reinforced at home and what parents saw at home could shape the classroom.

When engagement was absent, especially in the form of denial, the texture of the experience changed. "The experience was not nice because the parents were in denial" (P4); similar accounts came from P1, P2, P7, and P8. Another recalled parents who "did not believe" (P2), and a focus group participant said, "Some of the parents are in denial… some are willing and open…" (FGDP2). Teachers described this less as a practical obstacle than as a relational void, a case of reaching out and finding no one reaching back. The researcher interprets this as a form of professional loneliness; this is the researcher's interpretive term, not one participants used. Denial was also not always fixed. P4 described the experience as "not nice" in the years before the pandemic because parents were in denial, and as "very nice" in recent years, when parents became helpful and cooperative and the school took steps to involve both parents and teachers.

Teachers also described the emotional labor of persisting. Rather than withdrawing, they softened their tone, gathered evidence, and stayed patient over long stretches. P1's words, "Be open-minded, have more patience," described what the teacher had learned to do internally to keep a collaborative stance when parents did not return it. A focus group participant observed, "Words can lead to misinterpretation" (FGDP6), reflecting an awareness that language in these conversations is a delicate instrument.

Theme 2: Collaboration as a multi-stakeholder, shared responsibility. Teachers consistently described collaboration as a responsibility shared among teachers, parents, and other stakeholders, grounded in trust, respect, and coordinated effort. It extended beyond the teacher–parent pair: "with parents and with the therapist also" (P1). It bridged settings ("we shared strategies… at home," P5) and was described as reciprocal: "a two-way process" (P6) built on "communication. cooperation." A focus group participant stressed "consistency between the home and school" (FGDP2) and said that "collaboration… can really benefit the child" (FGDP6).

Parents were described as co-educators, with expertise flowing in both directions. "I can get information and strategies… and they can also get strategies from me" (P1); "parents… help us what… we must do" (P2). A focus group participant said, "I capture activities… so parents can facilitate at home" (FGDP4), showing how teachers deliberately extended learning beyond the classroom. When the relationship worked, it had the quality of a shared project of knowing in which each party held knowledge the other needed.

Shared responsibility, however, was not always shared equally. Although collaboration was described as collective, teachers often took the lead in starting communication, coordinating strategies, and keeping everyone aligned: "everyday… communication… follow-up" (P7); "we communicate immediately… what is happening in the classroom" (FGDP2). Collaboration was thus something teachers brought into being and had to keep renewing, often without systemic support.

Theme 3: Communication as the core mechanism of collaboration. Teachers described using regular updates, feedback exchanges, and flexible approaches to stay connected with parents. "Every day I have communication with the parent" (P2); "we do communicate… very often" (P6). Participants stressed the quality as well as the frequency of communication, pointing to openness and clarity ("being open to communication," P2; "open-mindedness… open communication," P5) and to structure ("clear communication system… day-to-day updates," FGDP1; "frequent communication," FGDP7).

Participants also said communication must be handled with sensitivity and precision. One cautioned that "words… can lead to misinterpretation" (FGDP6), and another described stating "all the things that are factual" Communication had to be done "in a proper way… parents can get sensitive" (FGDP2), and "parents may feel defensive" (FGDP3). In these accounts, communication could both enable and constrain, depending on how it was carried out. Overall, participants described communicative practice aimed less at transferring information than at continually sustaining the relationship itself: the medium through which trust was

established, tested, and, when it broke, rebuilt. Teachers experienced this as relational labor, not a task completed and set aside.

Challenges in Home–School Collaboration

Theme 4: Interpersonal barriers as disruptions to collaboration. Teachers described four interpersonal conditions that disrupted collaboration: parental denial of the child's condition, parental defensiveness, parental unavailability, and miscommunication. These were experienced as active disruptions that broke the continuity of the relationship and forced teachers to begin again. Parental denial was most often described as the hardest, because it worked at the deepest level of the relationship and kept shared understanding from for-

ming. "The difficulties are when the parent is in denial" (P1, P7, P8). For P2, parents who "did not believe" meant that the barrier was not informational: the teacher could not simply speak more clearly or gather more evidence, because the difficulty lay in what the parent accepted as true about the child.

Defensiveness had a different texture. Where denial was a refusal, defensiveness was an active response from a position of self-protection, requiring teachers to adjust word choice, tone, and pace in real time. Miscommunication added another layer, and teachers described choosing words with precision as a form of protection. Unavailability was a barrier of absence rather than resistance: "It is very difficult when the parent is not here" (P8); "the unavailability of the parents" (FGDP1). P7 described parents who "did not appreciate our effort."

Across these barriers, teachers kept making an effort without reciprocity. They did not describe giving up, withdrawing, or deprioritizing these relationships; they described adapting, recalibrating, and waiting. Barriers were experienced not as endpoints but as conditions in which professional commitment was tested and, in most accounts, maintained.

Theme 5: Structural and institutional constraints. Teachers described workload, time constraints, limited training, and insufficient institutional support as felt in the course of the working day, as a constant negotiation between what they wanted to do and what the day allowed. "We want to communicate more, but sometimes there's just no time" (P2). "There are so many tasks… it's hard to focus on collaboration alone" (P6). Collaboration was one responsibility among many rather than a supported priority.

Limited training brought a sense of professional vulnerability. "We are not fully trained on how to handle all situations with parents" (P6); "We don't even know how to handle those kids" (FGDP4). Teachers asked repeatedly for more training: "teachers need more training" (P5), "training on handling learners" (FGDP6), "trainings for the teachers" (FGDP7). Together, these constraints left collaboration fitted into the margins of the workday: communicating after class, following up at day's end, and returning messages when time allowed.

Insights For Strengthening Home–School Collaboration

Theme 6: Teacher agency and professional dispositions. Teachers described their own role in sustaining collaboration in terms of dispositions: patience, empathy, adaptability, and willingness to keep learning. "Be open-minded… have more patience" (P1); "open-mindedness… open communication" (P5). Many saw themselves as responsible for building and maintaining relationships with parents, so that collaboration was something they actively shaped as well as something they went through. Participants described sustained engagement ("everyday… communication… follow-up," P7; "we help each other… follow-up," P8) and relationship-building ("build mutual trust and respect," FGDP1; "both should be open… communication," FGDP6).

Teachers also valued professional growth. They named a need for continuing training, particularly in communication and ASD-specific practice ("need… training… communication," P8; P5, FGDP6, and FGDP7 as above), and showed adaptability despite limited preparation. P8 said, "indi ko trained (i'm not trained) … improve teaching strategies" , suggesting that even without formal training teachers tried to improve and adjust their strategies.

Fundamental Structure of the Phenomenon

Drawing on the exhaustive description, the fundamental structure of teachers' lived experience of home–school collaboration is as follows. To be a teacher collaborating with the parents of learners with autism is to live in a relational space that is unstable, demanding, and rewarding only under certain conditions. The experience rests on an ongoing, uneven encounter with parental engagement, which teachers cannot control but on which the quality of their collaborative work depends. When parents are open and accepting, teachers experience shared purpose and relational ease. When engagement is absent or interrupted, through denial, defensiveness, or unavailability, teachers experience what the researcher interprets as professional loneliness.

Communication is the substance of the relationship itself, and teachers experience it as fragile: consistency can build trust, and a single misunderstood word can strain it. Structural constraints are felt as a daily narrowing of possibility, an awareness of the gap between the collaboration teachers want and the collaboration that time, training, and institutional support allow. Even so, teachers do not experience collaboration as something they can step away from. They stay, adapt, and continue. At its core, the experience is a persistent engagement with a process that is never finished, never secure, and never fully reciprocal, yet one that teachers regard as indispensable to the child it serves.

Not every account fit this structure equally. P3 reported no difficulty working with parents, and P4 described a relationship that changed over time as parents became more cooperative and the school took steps to bring parents and teachers together. These accounts show the structure's conditions rather than contradicting it, and suggest that denial and openness may change over time rather than being fixed.

DISCUSSION

Principal Findings

For these teachers, home–school collaboration was not primarily an experience of partnership. It was an experience of sustained, uneven relational commitment, which teachers maintained not because the relationship was always reciprocal but because the child at its center needed it. This finding does not contradict the literature's view that collaboration is valuable. It adds to that view by showing what the value costs those who carry it.

Findings in relation to the Literature and Theory

Consistent with the literature, teachers described collaboration as a coordinated effort in which strategies are carried across home and school (Cheng et al., 2024; Josilowski, 2019; Brian et al., 2022) and as dynamic and negotiated, shaped by differences in expectations, roles, and levels of engagement (Dale et al., 2025; Vlcek et al., 2024). Their treatment of communication as foundational to trust and shared responsibility (Goldman & Burke, 2019; Okamura, 2021; Aouad & Bento, 2020; Leenders et al., 2019), their emphasis on clarity and responsiveness (Li & Burke, 2023), and their concern that technical language, misinterpretation, and relational tension can make communication a barrier (Nthibeli et al., 2022) all echo earlier work. The structural constraints they named, and their call for training, agree with studies linking teacher training and institutional support to instructional strategy and parent engagement (Al-Hamad et al., 2023; Gómez-Marí et al., 2021; Macabenta et al., 2023), and their emotional effort matches literature on the emotional labor of teacher–parent work (Ngadni & Chen, 2024; Salonzo et al., 2023) and on the relational abilities that sustain collaboration (Rohimah et al., 2024; Okamura, 2021).

Set beside the three theoretical traditions bracketed at the outset, the findings confirm, complicate, or extend them in specific ways. Epstein (2011). Epstein's overlapping spheres did not appear in teachers' accounts as a structural feature that exists once the right conditions are in place. The overlap had to be brought into being through sustained relational effort and could close at any moment if parental engagement was withdrawn. Collaboration was experienced as conditionally possible rather than structurally given. Christenson and Sheridan (2001). The findings confirm the importance of mutual respect, two-way communication, and shared accountability, and add the experience of asymmetry: teachers described a commitment maintained largely on

their own initiative, so that shared accountability may be borne unevenly, with teachers carrying more of the relational burden than the language of partnership implies. Bronfenbrenner (1979). Teachers did not experience the home–school mesosystem as naturally cohesive. They described an active, uncertain, and sometimes fragile encounter that had to be renegotiated repeatedly. The findings do not contradict the structural mapping; they point to the lived texture of what happens at the connecting point.

Two findings qualify the literature's emphasis on outcomes. First, teachers' reliance on personal dispositions such as patience and empathy suggests that collaboration may depend heavily on individual effort rather than systemic support, which raises the question of whether such effort can last and points to a risk of overburdening teachers. Second, communication was described less as a solution than as the ground on which collaboration plays out, a ground that can be fractured as easily as it is strengthened. The study did not compare settings with more and less contact, so whether quality matters more than frequency remains open.

Reflexive Return to the Bracketed Preconceptions

Returning to the five preconceptions (Moustakas, 1994) shows how the data confirmed, complicated, or exceeded the researcher's prior understanding. (1) Collaboration as beneficial: complicated. Teachers valued collaboration, but it could also be psychologically costly, both valuable and exhausting. (2) Parental barriers as the main challenge: partly confirmed and considerably nuanced. Denial did emerge as a major barrier, but teachers described conditions to be navigated again and again, not problems to be solved, which shifts the picture of teacher agency from problem-solving toward relational endurance. (3) Communication as the solution: not supported. Participants called for communication that is more careful and sensitive, not simply more frequent. (4) Ecological and systems thinking: the preconception most difficult to bracket, and one that likely shaped the study in ways that cannot be fully traced. Participants did not speak in ecological terms; they spoke of specific moments, parents, and words that went wrong or right. (5) Teacher efficacy and agency: confirmed, but with a frank acknowledgment of inadequacy and vulnerability that went beyond the researcher's prior view; agency appeared less as confident mastery than as persistent effort in the face of uncertainty.

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings suggest that institutional support for collaboration should be built not only around conditions for partnership, such as communication systems, parent engagement programs, and structured meetings, but also around sustaining the teachers who carry much of its relational weight. For teachers and parents, collaboration may be better served by moving beyond one-off exchanges toward an ongoing, two-way process of trust, openness, consistency, and shared understanding centered on the learner. For school administrators, structured systems such as clear communication protocols, scheduled parent–teacher engagement, and professional support may reduce dependence on individual teacher effort. For the Department of Education and SPED program implementers, sustained capacity-building in communication, family engagement, and ASD-specific strategies may help carry inclusive education policy into practice.

The following recommendations are suggested starting points to be piloted, not findings of the study. At the teacher level, a structured weekly communication system (for example, a digital log or communication notebook) and at least two training sessions a year on working with parents and supporting learners with ASD. At the school level, a formal home–school collaboration framework with standardized protocols and a coordinator, together with structured professional support such as SPED coordinators and protected consultation time. At the system and research level, future studies that include parents, learners, and administrators, and that use mixed-methods and comparative designs across public and other school contexts.

LIMITATIONS

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, focus group data are not standard in Husserlian phenomenology and may be socially shaped, since participants may tailor accounts in front of colleagues. FGD accounts were treated as corroborating, and most themes are grounded mainly in the interviews, but several clusters, including parental defensiveness, miscommunication, parental unavailability, and the need for

training, draw largely on the FGD. The study is therefore an epistemological hybrid, and future studies seeking stricter adherence to the tradition should rely solely on individual interviews. Second, prior theoretical formation in Epstein's and Bronfenbrenner's frameworks likely shaped the analysis in ways that cannot be fully identified in retrospect.

Third, the study was conducted at one institution within a single school year. The essential structure described here may not hold across different institutional cultures, resource contexts, or national systems, and transferability, rather than statistical generalization, is the appropriate criterion (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Fourth, only teachers were interviewed, so the phenomenon is described from one side of a two-party relationship. Terms such as "denial" and "defensiveness" are teachers' characterizations of parents, and how parents experience the same collaborative space remains unknown. A multi-perspectival study including parents would add considerably to the structure described here.

CONCLUSION

Teachers of learners with ASD experienced home–school collaboration as a dynamic, relational process resting on parental engagement, sustained by careful communication, and constrained by interpersonal barriers and structural limits. Their patience, empathy, adaptability, and commitment to learning kept partnerships going, but they did so largely through personal effort and often without reciprocal engagement or adequate institutional support. Strengthening collaboration therefore calls for engaged parents, supportive systems, and teachers who are themselves supported. Future research should add the perspectives of parents and examine what moves a relationship from denial toward openness.

Declarations

Ethics approval and consent. See Section 2.7. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants.

Origin of the work. This article is based on the author's master's thesis (Master of Arts in Education, major in Special Education, University of San Agustin, 2026).

Use of artificial intelligence tools. Generative AI tools (Claude, Anthropic; ChatGPT, OpenAI) were used in a limited, supporting role to refine the language, clarity, and organization of selected passages. No AI tools were used to collect data, analyze transcripts, formulate meanings, or develop themes. The author reviewed and revised all AI-assisted material and takes full responsibility for the content, analysis, and interpretation.

Conflict of interest. *The* author declares no financial conflict of interest. The author is a colleague of the participants; see Section 2.7.

Data availability. Transcripts contain potentially identifying information and are not publicly available. Coded excerpts supporting the findings are reported in the article.

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