

# Speaking the Same Language?

## A Comparative Investigation into Professional Perceptions of Neurodiversity in Applied Behavior Analysis Intervention for Autistic Children with Communication Disorders

By: Bridget Krus

Advisor: Joan E. Furey, Ph.D., CCC-SLP

### Purpose

The purpose of this study was to investigate ABA professionals' and speech-language pathologists' (SLPs) perceptions of interventions targeting communication in autistic children. More specifically, this study sought to compare perceptions of Applied Behavior Analysis to those of speech-language therapy for improving communication skills in autistic children with communication disorders. In addition, this investigation aimed to provide insights regarding how ABA-based interventions can exist within a neurodiversity-affirming framework as well as the professionals' attitudes towards neurodiversity in clinical contexts.

### Definitions

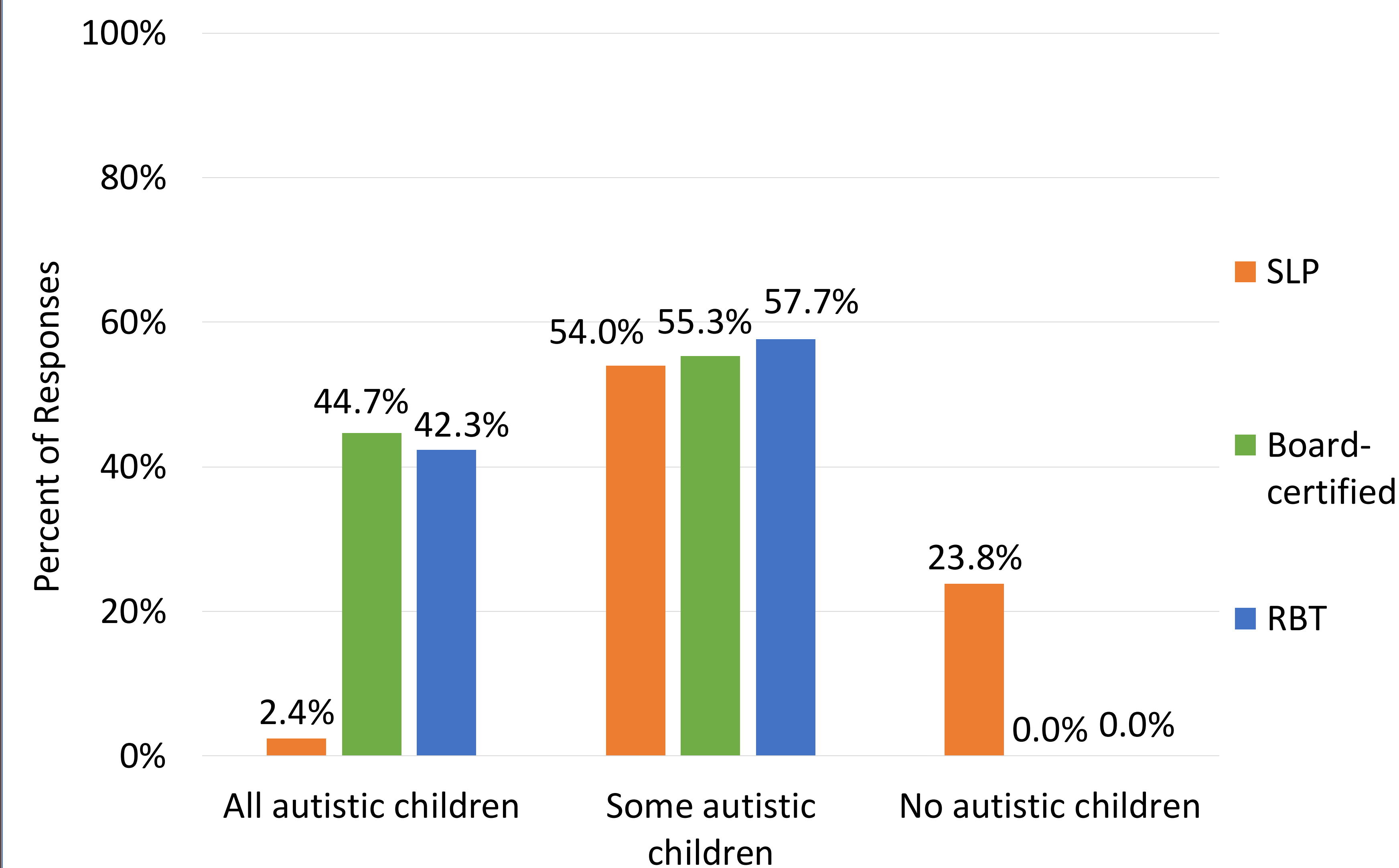
**Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA):** a systematic approach to understanding and modifying behavior based on the principles of behaviorism, emphasizing observable and measurable behavior (Baer et al., 1968, p. 93). ABA is most often used to treat behaviors considered unproductive in autistic children.

**The neurodiversity movement:** a human rights advocacy model which "was organized with the goal of redefining autism as a human specificity not to be treated but instead to be respected in the same way as other human differences, such as gender, race, and sexuality" (Ortega, 2013, p. 78).

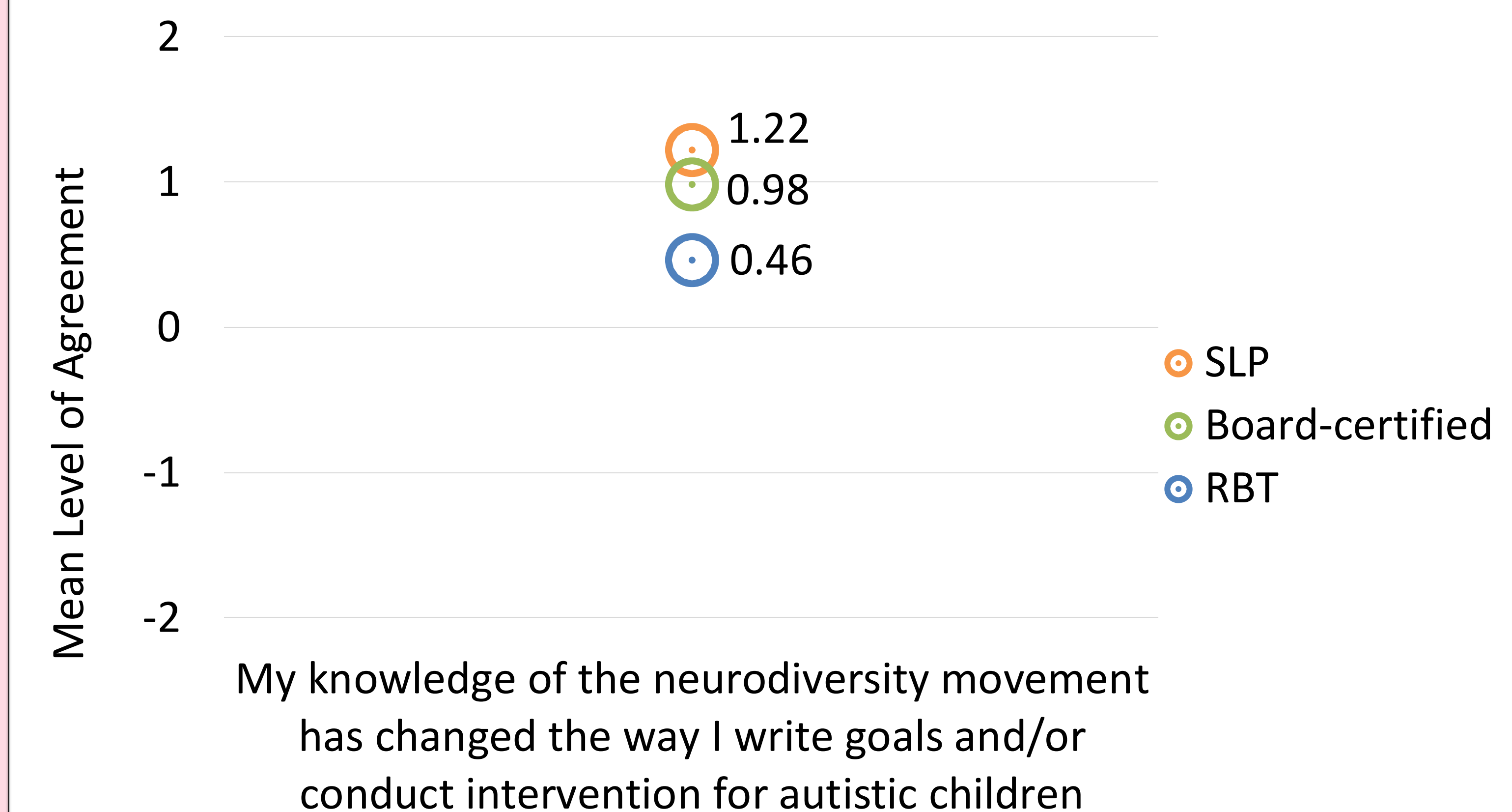
### Method

- Participants had experience providing services to autistic children with communication disorders
  - SLPs  $n = 266$
  - RBTs  $n = 35$
  - BCaBAs  $n = 7$
  - BCBAs  $n = 46$
- The Board-certified group includes BCBAAs and BCBAAs.
- The 35-item survey questions addressed:
  - experiences and perceived impacts of ABA therapy on communication skills
  - the integration of neurodiversity-affirming practices in intervention
  - collaboration experiences in intervention

### Participants' Perspectives on the Benefit of ABA for Language Development of Autistic Children

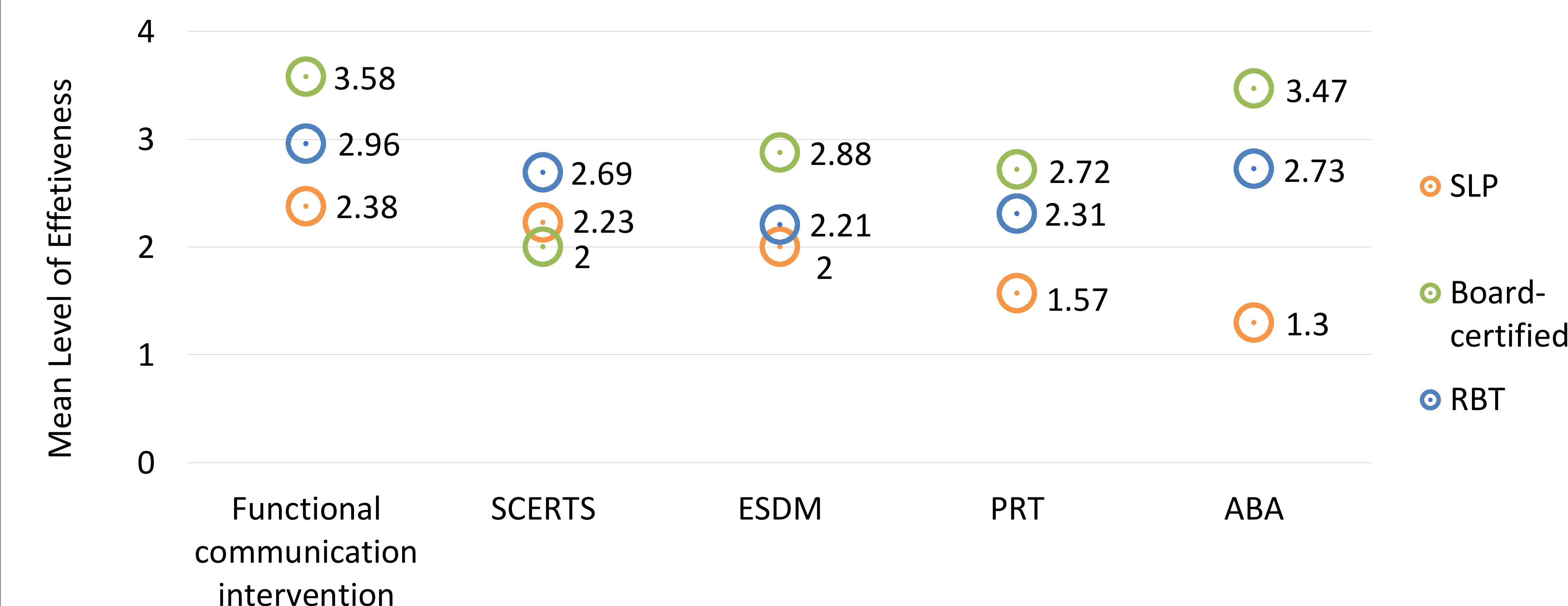


### Impact of Neurodiversity Knowledge on Intervention



*Note.* Items were coded using a scale where -2 represented *strongly disagree*, -1 represented *somewhat disagree*, 0 represented *neither agree nor disagree*, 1 represented *somewhat agree*, and 2 represented *strongly agree*.

### Participants' Perception of Effectiveness for 5 Intervention Models for Improving Communication in Autistic Children



*Note.* Items were coded using a scale where 0 represented *Not effective at all*, 1 represented *Slightly effective*, 2 represented *Moderately effective*, 3 represented *Very effective*, and 4 represented *Extremely effective*. ABA = Applied Behavior Analysis; ESDM = Early Start Denver Model; PRT = Pivotal Response Treatment; SCERTS = Social Communication, Emotional Regulation, and Transactional Supports; Functional communication intervention refers to strategies aimed at enhancing meaningful and practical communication skills.

### Major Conclusions

- SLPs and board-certified professionals of ABA (BCBAAs and BCBAs) differ in their perspective of best practices when providing intervention for autistic children, especially concerning neurodiversity-affirming practices.
- SLPs are generally distrustful of ABA intervention for autistic children, rating ESDM, functional communication intervention, PRT, and SCERTS as significantly more effective than ABA for improving communication skills.
- Professionals in both ABA and SLP have integrated the influence of the neurodiversity movement to some extent in their approaches to intervention.

Baer, D. M., Wolf, M. M., & Risley T. R. (1968). Some current dimensions of applied behavioral analysis. *Journal of Applied Behavioral Analysis*, 1(1), 91-97. <https://doi.org/10.1901/jaba.1968.1-91>

Ortega, F. (2013). Cerebrizing autism within the Neurodiversity Movement. In J. Davidson & M. Orsini (Eds.), *Worlds of autism: Across the spectrum of neurological differences* (pp. 73-98). University of Minneapolis Press.

Volkmar, F., Siegel, M., Woodbury-Smith, M., King, B., McCracken, J., & State, M. (2014). Practice parameters for the assessment and treatment of children and adolescents with autism spectrum disorder. *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*, 53(2), 237-257. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaac.2013.10.013>