

Inclusion of Learners with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) in Lesotho Primary Schools

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Abstract

The Lesotho Inclusive Education Policy 2018 aims to integrate all learners with special needs, with teachers playing a crucial role in including autism spectrum disorder (ASD). This paper focused on exploring teachers' perceptions of including learners with ASD in mainstream primary schools in Lesotho. Ten practising teachers, pursuing a bachelor's degree, were selected for semi-structured interviews regarding their experiences teaching learners with ASD. A phenomenological approach was used to analyse their responses. The findings indicate that the Lesotho education system does not adequately support learners with autism. Teachers feel unprepared to accommodate these learners and lack understanding of their needs. The findings suggest various forms of support to help manage ASD effectively. Therefore, a national study is recommended to assess teachers' needs in supporting learners with autism spectrum disorders, which would inform the successful implementation of the Lesotho Inclusive Education Policy (LIEP) 2018 in mainstream schools.

Keywords: Autism Spectrum Disorders, Inclusion, Learners, Teachers, Mainstream Primary Schools, Lesotho.

1. Introduction

The Lesotho government had signed various concordats to promote the inclusion of learners with disabilities in mainstream schools, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UN, 1948) and related human rights agendas (Pantic & Florian, 2015). The United Nations accentuates the importance of full participation in public school systems for children with special needs (UN, 2019). Several countries' educational policies globally affirm all children's rights to equal education treatment, regardless of differences such as disability, religion, or social status (Humphrey & Symes, 2013). In alignment with these policies, Lesotho's Ministry of Education and Training recently initiated and enacted the Lesotho Inclusive Education Policy in 2018. This policy guarantees that diverse children, including those with autism spectrum disorder, can fully engage in the Integrated Curriculum for Primary Schools in Lesotho and enrol in their local schools. Inclusion is characterised as a process that accommodates the varied needs of learners, augmenting their engagement in educational settings and communities while mitigating exclusion, prejudice, and discrimination of disabled learners. Its objective is to establish conducive environments for learners with special educational needs (LSEN) that foster academic and social development through essential modifications in content, methodologies, and strategies (Ministry of Education and Training, 2018).

Defining Autism Spectrum Disorder

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a lifelong condition characterised by challenges in social communication and the presence of repetitive behaviours (American Psychiatric Association,

2013). It is recognised as a complex neurological disorder affecting brain development and functioning (Landsberg et al., 2011). Recent studies conceptual estimate that the prevalence of ASD ranges from 0.6% to 1% (Davidovitch et al., 2013). ASD is typically diagnosed in childhood and is characterised by difficulties with social engagement as well as restricted and repetitive activities (RRBs) that frequently lack a clear purpose (Tian et al., 2022). The impact of ASD on the quality of life can be significant (Abubakar et al., 2016). Though there are few studies by Mosia and Tseeke (2021) Tseeke and Rakolobe (2024) and Monyane (2024) on the autism spectrum disorder, however, none of them addressed the Integrated Curriculum for Primary Schools in Lesotho with the recent development of Lesotho Inclusive Education Policy 2018, therefore, there is a scarcity of research addressing the inclusion of learners with ASD in mainstream schools in Lesotho. These learners frequently encounter obstacles in participating in the education system alongside their peers. This paper examines teachers' perceptions of including learners with Autism Spectrum Disorder in primary schools in Lesotho.

2. Statement of the Problem

Despite studies by Mosia and Tseeke (2021) on parents' experiences raising children with autism spectrum disorders in Lesotho and Monyane (2024) on supporting learners with autism spectrum disorders in primary schools and Tseeke and Rakolobe 2024 on the right to education for children with autism in Lesotho: A review of the legal and policy frameworks, no research has been conducted to integrate the Integrated Curriculum for Primary Schools in Lesotho with the proposed Lesotho Inclusionary Education Policy 2018. The Ministry of Education and Training enacted the Lesotho Inclusive Education Policy 2018 to align the national curriculum with inclusive education principles. This policy asserts that all learners should access a curriculum that is adapted and delivered through suitable instructional methods by trained teachers (Ministry of Education and Training, 2018). Additionally, the policy highlights the necessity of providing instructional materials that are accessible and customised to individual learners' needs. Nevertheless, obstacles such as unqualified educators and insufficient resources have hindered schools from adequately supporting students on the autism spectrum. Therefore, this article explores the inclusion of these learners in primary schools across Lesotho and also how teachers integrate the Integrated Curriculum for Primary Schools in Lesotho with LIEP 2018.

Rationale of the Study

This case study aims to outline the commitment and actions needed in Lesotho schools for teachers to support learners with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) effectively and efficiently in their day-to-day teaching and learning. It aligns with the Lesotho Inclusive Education Policy 2018, which promotes inclusive school culture and learner diversity. Lesotho's mainstream schools struggle to include learners with ASD effectively. Research into teaching strategies for including children with disabilities in mainstream education is essential, both in Lesotho and worldwide (Majoko, 2016). Successful inclusion depends not only on pedagogical methods but also on teachers' attitudes and expertise (Hinton et al., 2008; Sanger, 2020). This is particularly relevant for children with ASD, who are often considered challenging to include in standard classrooms (Symes & Humphrey, 2010). Currently, there is limited research on teachers' experiences and their perceived ability to support and include learners with autism spectrum disorder in schools. Thus, the present study sought to examine teachers' experiences with including children with ASD in Lesotho primary schools as well as how teachers integrate the national curriculum with the current policy.

3. Literature Review

This section aims to succinctly discuss the literature review. First, I will look at ASD in Lesotho, the function of the Inclusive Education teacher, and the obstacles of include children with ASD.

Autism Spectrum Disorder in Lesotho

The Lesotho Tribute Report (2023) indicates that the education of children with autism in Lesotho is uncertain due to a lack of specialised schools. A Bhekisisa (2022) state that there are no dedicated schools for these children and government support for existing institutions is inadequate. The Ministry of Social Development (2021) reported that the number of autistic children remains unknown, which complicates parents' search for suitable educational options. A study by Mosia and Tseeke (2021) highlights the challenges parents face, including insufficient educational assessments and support services for learners with autism spectrum disorders (ASD). The research calls for better coordination among the Ministries of Health, Social Development, and Education, as well as a national study on ASD to guide policy and practice in the country. Besides that, Tseeke and Rakolobe (2024) argue that the Lesotho government should enact laws and policies to improve education access and secure the right to education for children with autism, rather than using these frameworks as policy tools. Monyane's (2024) research underscores the difficulties encountered by educators in Lesotho primary schools in assisting students with ASD, encompassing insufficient information, adverse attitudes, minimal family engagement, and restricted access to resources.

The Role of the Inclusive Education Teacher

The inclusion of children with special educational needs in mainstream schools is a global trend. Teachers play a crucial role in the successful implementation of inclusive education policies. An inclusive education teacher adopts various roles, such as teaching assistant, supervisor coach and mentor. According to Joshi (2019), a teacher's role is essential for providing quality education and fostering meaningful change within the educational system. The study also indicates that teachers can promote inclusive policies and practices in mainstream schools. Weber (2013) suggests that facilitators are significant in accommodating learners with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in mainstream classrooms.

Challenges in the Inclusion of Children with ASD

Research identifies several challenges teachers face when including learners with ASD in classrooms. Many educators perceive these learners as unteachable or difficult to assess due to their clinical characteristics and lack of training (Rattaz et al., 2020). Mfuthwana and Dreyer (2018) found that teachers often feel unprepared for inclusive settings, and time constraints limit the support they can offer (Oliva, 2016; Rosenzweig, 2009). Insufficient parental involvement further complicates efforts to address learning barriers (El Shourbagi, 2017), despite the link between active parental engagement and better academic outcomes (Afolabi, 2014). Learners with ASD struggle with social interactions (Landsberg et al., 2011). Ultimately, the lack of inclusivity in educational systems hampers their access to quality education and integration, leading to social isolation and difficulties with community involvement.

4. Method

This section briefly discusses research methodologies, methodology, paradigm, design, approach, and data collecting, with a focus on the study's view of reality as socially created and true for those who value it.

Study Design and Data Collection

The interpretative phenomenology, a qualitative research method, is an effective instrument in educational research, enabling researchers to grasp the essence of participants' emotional responses to their experiences (Alhazmi & Kaufmann, 2022). This study employed a case study design to gain an in-depth understanding of participant teaching in mainstream schools in Lesotho ((Yin, 2018; Thomas, 2021). Ten teachers with diplomas who were studying part-time for a bachelor's degree at a university in Lesotho were selected. These participants provided insights into their perceptions of including learners with ASD in primary schools. Due to their comprehensive nature, data was gathered through semi-structured interviews, as recommended by Laverty (2016). Participants voluntarily consented to take part, and the interview questions encouraged open-ended responses to capture their experiences accurately. They were given opportunities to verify and correct the information gathered. Inductive thematic content analysis was used to identify patterns and themes (Babbie & Mouton, 2011). Direct quotes were included to strengthen the findings (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Smith, 2011). Reliability and accuracy were emphasised throughout the study, with responses categorised according to the research questions. The researcher also reviewed the data independently and discussed the findings with the participants, who then had the chance to clarify any inaccuracies in the transcripts.

5. Results

This section presents and discusses the emerging findings from the interviews. The findings were systematised using themes that arose during the analysis. The objective was to document the obligations and measures required in these schools to empower teachers to enhance the education of learners with ASD, as well as to pinpoint strategies that could aid the Ministry of Education and Training and relevant stakeholders in promoting the inclusion of learners with ASD in Lesotho schools. Based on the analysis of the participants' responses, seven main themes emerged from the semi-structured interviews. The following sections explore these themes. Verbatim participant quotations are also included to ensure that their voices are represented.

Teachers' Knowledge about Autism Spectrum Disorder

According to the findings, the participants demonstrated a variety of understandings of autism spectrum disorder (ASD). When asked about their comprehension of ASD, Respondent 1 stated: It is a developmental ailment that affects infants in the infancy stage, with some being born with the condition and others were developing symptoms, as they grow older. A child has trouble learning or learning quicker than usual, as well as problems with interaction and socialisation.

Participant 2 asserted this saying: "I think it is a neurodevelopmental disorder that results in repetitive behaviours," and further highlighted that those repeated behaviours can be characteristic of ASD. Additionally, Participant 3 emphasised that "ASD is a complex neurodevelopmental condition affecting both verbal and nonverbal communication and social relationships." This response underscores how neurodevelopmental factors can negatively impact communication among learners. Participant 5 acknowledged that there is no "one-size-fits-all" solution for ASD and noted that deficits in social communication and interaction are common.

However, participant 6 added that "individuals often struggle to recognise social cues and can have heightened or reduced sensitivity to sensory input." Overall, teachers recognised ASD as a lifelong disorder that presents unique challenges, particularly in the areas of social communication and sensory sensitivity.

Teachers' Experiences with Inclusion of Learners with ASD

Participants were asked to share their experiences regarding the inclusion of learners with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in the classroom and they provided several insights.

Participant 1 expressed the view thus:

My experience has focused on the unique needs of children with an autism spectrum disorder. To support their varying learning rates, I've adapted lesson plans, incorporated social interactions, introduced remedial classes, and involved parents in their education.

Participant 2 expressed:

From my perspective, children with autism spectrum disorder are not fully accommodated in Lesotho's educational system. I was once harsh with a learner I taught, labelling him as 'silly' and 'lazy.' I did not know he had autism, I had to send him home because I was not able to handle him.

Similarly, participant 3 shared her views as follows:

I researched extensively when I suspected my daughter had ASD and even had a computed tomography (CT) scan done. Her primary language is English, and her doctor in Bethlehem revealed some details about her condition. I was astounded by the diagnosis. I've found that teachers who are uninformed about autism may mistreat autistic learners in the classroom, as some may struggle to keep up with the pace of the lessons.

Additionally, Participant 4 noted:

My experiences with learners with ASD have shown that they require extra attention due to their hyperactivity. Some individuals need more time to grasp concepts, so repetition and patience can be beneficial. They should receive special consideration because they need to feel a sense of belonging.

Participant 5 admitted, "I have no experience with learners who have autism spectrum disorders in an inclusive classroom. I basically teach all the children the same way." Additionally, Participant 6 also explained, "I have never learned anything about ASD." The comments from the participants revealed that while some learners with ASD may exhibit hyperactivity, teachers must modify their lesson plans to meet their needs. Furthermore, the educational system in Lesotho does not adequately support the inclusion of learners with ASD, leaving teachers to handle these learners on their own.

Challenges Teachers Face when Integrating Autistic Learners in Inclusive Classrooms

Teachers face significant challenges when integrating autistic learners into the classroom. Participant 1 expressed frustration: "They wreak havoc in the classroom. I struggle with a lack of focus and difficulties due to their cognitive abilities since I'm not trained to handle them." Participant 2 noted the importance of training:

We need regular training on autism spectrum disorder (ASD) to include these learners effectively. It's essential to foster understanding and empathy among peers to create a welcoming school environment.

Participant 3 shared the difficulty of managing classroom time:

I find myself spending more time with children with ASD, which can be exhausting. They often require constant supervision, as they may not pay attention to potential dangers.

Participant 4, also a parent to a child with ASD, highlighted the need for understanding:

During therapy sessions, my daughter wants to learn at her own pace and can become aggressive if pushed too hard. Learners with ASD need patient teachers who can address their unique educational needs.

Additionally, inadequate knowledge about ASD among teachers is problematic. Participant 5 pointed out: "My lack of competence in working with children with ASD is my main challenge." Participant 5 explained: "Engaging them and collaborating with parents is

difficult due to limited understanding of the disorder.” Overall, these insights indicate that many teachers are unprepared to work with learners with ASD, thus highlighting the need for better training and support in inclusive classrooms.

Lack of Support for learners with ASD by the Ministry of Education and Training

Participants were questioned about the support they receive from the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) for the inclusion of learners with autism spectrum disorders (ASD). Many expressed concerns about the lack of governmental support from MOET. Participant 1 explained:

There are currently no systems in place through the Ministry of Education and Training to support the inclusion of ASD learners. We are on our own because the Special Educational Unit only provides us with advice on how to handle these students. I often rely on improvised teaching resources.

Participant 2 narrated:

The Ministry of Education and Training does not offer any help. I use only my techniques to assist these learners. Since learners with autism have a short concentration span, I try to use engaging activities that will entertain them, help them feel welcomed, and, most importantly, make them feel loved and safe.

Participant 3 also highlighted her views as follows:

There are no relevant materials in class to support their learning. For example, when we do addition in class, there should be counters available to help them count and arrive at the correct answer. However, I improvise by creating a learning corner with concrete materials where some students can stay engaged while learning.

Participant 4 noted: “Another challenge in an inclusive classroom with learners who have ASD is the lack of resources that cater to all learners, both with and without disabilities.”

Participant 5 explained:

We do not receive funding from MOET for hiring and training teachers. We rely on enrolment fees and donations from organisations like World Vision. Hiring a counsellor costs a lot, and lack of support and resources is a significant issue.

Participant 6 stated: “The Ministry of Education and Training does not provide us with in-service training on how to educate children with ASD, making it difficult for us to meet their needs.” It is clear that teachers continue to face obstacles due to insufficient in-service training aimed at addressing the unique challenges of educating children with ASD. Schools receive inadequate funding from the Ministry of Education and Training for both educators and learners with ASD.

The Resources that Could Support the Inclusion of a Child with ASD in the Classroom

Participants were asked to suggest resources that could help accommodate learners with autism. One participant suggested that visual and interactive teaching aids are essential for autistic learners. Participant 1 stated:

I normally use visual and interactive teaching aids specifically designed for learners with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). For instance, projectors can stimulate visual learning, and textbooks can be tailored to meet the needs of ASD learners. Additionally, modifications to the learning environment can create a more conducive atmosphere for these students.

Participant 1 further elaborated:

I create picture-based schedules to engage students with and without ASD. By writing down activities and pairing them with visual cues, I tape these timetables on each student's desk. This way, they are always informed and prepared for daily curricular and extracurricular activities, helping to establish routines that incorporate visual supports aligned with their interests.

Another participant 2 suggested:

I think hearing aids could be beneficial. It's also important to provide ample materials that suit learners with ASD. They tend to enjoy colourful materials, and I prefer using those with ASD learners.

Participant 3 highlighted: "I think we need the appropriate learning materials and the use of virtual resources and sounds to help them learn effectively". Participant 4 indicated: "Learners need to receive visual or written instructions rather than solely auditory ones. This approach helps learners with ASD understand how to answer questions and clarifies any uncertainties." The Participant added: "I often prefer games when teaching the English language, as they help learners with autism develop their listening and speaking skills."

Participant 5 pointed out:

Autistic learners appreciate coloured pictures, drawings, and documents with bold writing, as these help them understand concepts more easily. I prefer using visual tools such as mind maps and Venn diagrams, which provide a scaffold for students to generate new ideas and capture their thoughts. They are especially useful for children who may have poor working memories.

Participant 6 explained:

Fridge toys are popular sensory resources that help children with autism spectrum disorder and other sensory processing disorders stay focused and calm. The Ministry of Education and Training should consider purchasing ready-made fridge toys for schools.

The Participant further highlighted:

One effective tool for helping teachers identify learners' emotions is emotional cards. These printable cards assist children with autism in recognising various emotions in themselves and others. I shuffle the emotion cards and show each one to the students, asking them to identify the emotion without looking at the text.

In conclusion, providing learners with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) resources and materials – such as visual displays, games, photographs, and documents featuring bold text – can significantly enhance their inclusion in the learning environment. All learners should have access to structured routines within these resources. Visual aids, such as branded chairs and doors, visual representations of classroom routines, and visual signals to enhance verbal communication, can also be highly effective.

Appropriate Assessment Tools for Learners with ASD in the Classroom

Relevant assessment tools are essential steps in the overall programme planning for learners with autism spectrum disorders (ASD). However, these learners often present unique challenges during formal evaluations, which can impact the success of the evaluation process and the usefulness of the assessment data. When discussing the assessment of learners with autism, participants indicated that the approach should depend on the individual needs of each learner. P1 explained:

It depends on the uniqueness of the learner's ASD. For example, if a learner's ASD significantly affects their writing, an oral assessment may be sufficient. After tests and examinations, it is only fair to grade learners according to their specific ASD challenges.

Participant 2 added: "They should be assessed individually. They should be given extra time and be well-guided during the assessment. They should be treated like other learners." Participant 3 elaborated:

I assess them by giving them the same work as their peers to see if they meet expectations. I also provide instructions to check their ability to follow them. Sometimes, I observe how they hold a pencil and write and how they eat. It is essential to notice patterns in their behaviours, as this adds valuable information to their assessment.

Participant 5 stated:

I usually group them into small pairs or groups to improve their social and communication skills. I use colour coding to promote independence; for example, I place a red shape near a reading station or use coloured tape to create visual boundaries in the classroom.

Participant 6 indicated:

Since we lack the tools to assess them like typical learners, I propose that a variety of adaptive technology tools be used to meet the needs of every learner. While evaluating students, we must also consider those with autism who struggle with additional challenges, such as intellectual and learning difficulties. These children require extra time and individualised assessments.

It is clear from the participants' statements that they use a variety of evaluation instruments tailored to the unique educational needs of their learners. They improvise with different tools to assess the learners effectively. This highlights the need for support from relevant agencies to provide adaptive tools that would benefit both educators and learners, ensuring they have suitable evaluation instruments available.

Suggested Strategies to use in the Inclusion of a Learner with ASD in the Classroom

Participants were asked to suggest methods for incorporating learners with autism into classrooms. They highlighted several instructional techniques suitable for these learners. Participant 1 explained:

I use various teaching strategies, including interactive visual aids, to help address challenges such as disruptive behaviour and lack of attention in students with ASD. For example, in a trading lesson, I create fictional scenarios where they act as buyers or sellers, which has been effective.

Participant 2 emphasised:

I think accommodating stimming behaviours by building independence through visual schedules and positive reinforcement is essential. I can also work with the Head of the Department to discuss any unusual behaviours observed in students and recommend assessments when necessary.

Participant 3 suggested as follows:

A corner in their classroom is filled with engaging materials. This area includes items like water bottles for pouring exercises to improve hand-eye coordination and soil-transfer activities to enhance balance skills.

Participant 3 further explained: "I think each school needs a psychologist who can observe the children, meet with the teacher, and involve parents." Participant 4 noted: "I also recommend that parents seek further assessments for their children from educational psychologists and therapists." Participant 5 emphasised:

Using positive reinforcement to encourage students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and their typically developing peers upon completing tasks is crucial. By recognising their achievements, no matter how small, students can make meaningful connections. I also use specific keywords, speak slowly, and address learners with ASD by name to ensure their engagement.

Participant 5 added: "I offer incentives to motivate students whenever I see improvement, reinforcing positive behaviour." Participant 5 further stressed:

The Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) does not support ASD learners. Collaborating with special education teachers to determine effective strategies for each student is important. I also limit the workload for students with ASD to manageable tasks, allowing them to work at their own pace without feeling overwhelmed.

Participant 6 mentioned the need for an aide to assist the students during class by helping with instructions and textbook navigation. Participant 6 further highlighted the importance of clear, concise language and specific directions to ensure students understand tasks: "Visual cues and encouraging students to repeat instructions can also enhance comprehension." These

strategies promote inclusion by enabling peers to learn from those with ASD. Participants noted that a better understanding of ASD can improve the school experience, and reinforcement could be an effective motivational tool for ASD learners.

6. Discussion

This paper explores teachers' perceptions regarding the inclusion of learners with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in mainstream primary schools in Lesotho. The study identified seven key themes, which were analysed in the following manner: teachers' knowledge, their experiences with the inclusion of learners with ASD, and the challenges they face when integrating autistic learners. Additionally, teachers reported a lack of support for learners with ASD from the Ministry of Education and Training. They indicated that there is a shortage of resources to assist in the inclusion of children with ASD in the classroom and that they struggle to use appropriate assessment tools for these learners. Finally, teachers suggested various strategies for successfully including learners with ASD in the classroom.

The first theme examined teachers' general knowledge about autism spectrum disorders (ASD). The findings reveal that teachers generally possess a strong understanding of ASD as a lifelong, complex neurodevelopmental condition that impacts children at various developmental stages. Participants included descriptions of specific challenges, such as difficulties with social communication, in their explanations of ASD. This coincides with the literature's definition of autism spectrum disorder as "a complex, variable, neurologically based pervasive developmental disorder that influences both the development and functioning of the brain" (Landsberg et al., 2011). From the teachers' perspectives, autism affects the brain's functioning, leading to children displaying restricted and repetitive behaviours (Tian et al., 2022).

The second theme focuses on teachers' experiences with the inclusion of learners with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). The findings reveal that teachers' experiences vary based on their approach to autistic learners in the classroom. In some cases, teachers have modified their lessons to accommodate the educational needs of these children, allowing for more interaction with learners and parents, as well as opportunities for socialisation. However, some teachers struggle to support autistic learners effectively due to a lack of experience in addressing their educational needs, especially when these learners exhibit complex and repetitive behaviours in the classroom. Consequently, these teachers often seek guidance from colleagues with special training in autism spectrum disorders. Additionally, teachers have observed that hyperactive learners require extra attention. These learners may take longer to grasp concepts, which necessitate those teachers to exercise patience and frequently repeat information. The findings of this study is consistent with prior studies by Van Der Steen et al. (2020) who noted that one significant challenge faced by general educators is their insufficient training and expertise in working with learners who have ASD.

The third theme addresses the challenges teachers face when integrating autistic learners into classroom settings. The findings indicate that accommodating such learners requires well-trained teachers due to the complexities of learners' behaviour, as many can be difficult to manage. Additionally, teachers must provide constant supervision to these learners; failing to do so could lead to dangerous situations. Teachers have suggested that relevant authorities, particularly the Ministry of Education and Training, should implement in-service programmes to equip them with the necessary skills, attitudes, and knowledge. This aligns with the findings of Al-Saleh (2019), who emphasised that teachers need more training opportunities to develop effective inclusive education practices.

The fourth theme focuses on the Ministry of Education and Training's support for learners with ASD. The findings designate that the Ministry does not provide the necessary resources for autistic children. Because some have limited attention spans, teachers must improvise by using their own methods and materials to keep learners engaged and entertained in the classroom. The lack of resources complicates matters for teachers, prompting them to create learning corners within classrooms. Moreover, teachers' efforts to accommodate the diverse needs of their learners are hindered by their inadequate understanding of autism and the absence of appropriate learning resources tailored to these needs. It has also been noted that the Special Educational Unit, which is intended to assist teachers, has not effectively supplied schools with the necessary resources, forcing instructors to rely on their own materials. Research by Khumalo and Mosia (2023), as well as studies by Lumina and Hodgson (2023), confirm these findings, indicating that the Special Education Unit appears to be understaffed and lacking resources to fully implement the Learning Improvement and Enhancement Program (LIEP). This conclusion also aligns with previous studies in the international literature (Iliadou, 2023).

The fifth theme focuses on the resources that can support the inclusion of children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in the classroom. The study found that interactive and visual teaching tools, such as projectors and textbooks, can aid learners with specific educational needs and help create a welcoming learning environment. For effective education, learners with ASD benefit from visual displays, games, photos, and materials that feature prominently highlighted text. Teachers highlighted the importance of the materials they use, which engage learners and encourage hands-on interaction during lessons. Additionally, teachers felt it was essential to write down timetables and connect them with visual cues to create image schedules that are appealing to both children with and without ASD. Each learner's desk was equipped with one of these timetables. Furthermore, teachers consistently ensured they had the necessary information and preparation to carry out daily academic and extracurricular activities, helping to structure routines with visual aids that align with the interests of the learners. This accedes with the findings of Lindsay et al. (2013) and Pienaar and Dreyer (2023), which indicate that inadequate resources for teachers negatively impact their ability to manage the challenging behaviours of autistic learners and to plan individualised lessons in educational settings.

The sixth theme focuses on appropriate assessment tools for learners with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in the classroom. The findings highlight that teachers use a variety of assessment methods tailored to meet the unique educational needs of learners with ASD. For example, teachers noted that learners who struggle with writing are assessed orally and these learners are given enough time to complete their assignments, just like their peers. It is recommended that teachers observe various behaviour patterns exhibited by their learners, such as how they eat, hold pencils, and write. These observations can help educator's select suitable evaluation methods. Additionally, teachers reported that allowing learners to work in small groups or pairs enhances their social and communication skills. The use of colour coding was also highlighted as a beneficial strategy, as it encourages learner independence. For instance, a teacher might place a red shape near a reading station or use coloured tape to establish visual boundaries in the classroom. These findings are consistent with previous research on effective assessment strategies for learners with ASD (Yang, 2023).

The seventh theme discusses suggested strategies for including learners with ASD in the classroom. Teachers identified various effective methods for integrating learners with ASD. One successful approach is the use of interactive visual aids, which help address issues such

as disruptive behaviour and lack of attention among these learners. Teachers also emphasise the importance of positively reinforcing learners with stimulating behaviour for their good conduct, as this encouragement can motivate them to engage more actively in their learning. Additionally, teachers strive to promote connections between children with ASD and their typically developing peers by recognising and celebrating even small achievements. To enhance understanding, teachers often use specific keywords, repeat instructions, or speak slowly when communicating with students with ASD. It is crucial for educators to treat each learner as an individual and to learn from them. Understanding the preferences and needs of their learners can help teachers tailor their strategies more effectively. This approach resonates with the findings of Neely et al. (2013), which recommend that many classrooms are equipped with technology, such as computers and iPads, with various programs available to teach skills in social, behavioural, and academic domains. Currently, curricular outcomes focus on improving literacy skills for all children. Consequently, adapting a book to include visual supports for autistic pupils may require minimal additional time.

Moreover, teachers have created designated learning corners within their classrooms to establish effective learning centres where learners can take on different roles, collaborate, and engage in meaningful activities. These areas can cover subjects like Mathematics, Science, and Technology. Teachers also highlight the valuable role that school psychologists play in supporting learners with ASD. Psychologists can assist teachers in managing learners with developmental and mental health challenges, as well as assess and diagnose those who may need additional help. Furthermore, teachers encourage parents to consult educational psychologists and therapists for further evaluations of their children. This concurs with the study conducted by Könings et al (2022), which emphasises the importance of creating effective learning corners in classrooms to encourage collaboration and active engagement among learners. Such approaches foster diverse roles and cooperative learning activities, aligning with learner-centred teaching practices and the co-creation of knowledge in education. Additionally, the use of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) promotes inclusive environments that cater to the diverse needs of all learners.

7. Conclusion

The study examines teachers' experiences with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) and the challenges they face in integrating autistic learners into classrooms. It highlights the need for well-trained teachers and constant supervision and suggests the Ministry of Education and Training should implement in-service programs. Teachers also suggest using interactive and visual teaching tools, and assessment methods, and creating designated learning corners to create a welcoming learning environment. Strategies for integrating learners with ASD include using visual aids, reinforcing stimulating behaviour, promoting connections, using specific keywords, and creating designated learning corners.

The study highlights the need for teacher training programs focusing on autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in special and general education. The Ministry of Education and Training should create and implement specialised in-service training courses for elementary school teachers to enhance awareness and knowledge about these conditions. The educational system, particularly the Special Education Unit, should be reformed and transferred to the Inclusive Education Department. Focus should be placed on training and professional development for educators working with children with ASD, ensuring they possess diverse skills and qualifications. All educators, regardless of their specialisation, should receive effective teaching strategies for working with this student population. Future research should

aim for larger sample sizes and diverse group distribution to better understand and apply behavioural techniques to manage children with ASD.

The findings of the current study highlighted teachers' inadequate understanding of autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and emphasised the necessity for training to effectively support learners with the condition. A noted limitation was the small sample size due to the limited number of both general and specialised institutions that include learners with ASD. Therefore, further research should be conducted to explore how various groups influence knowledge, beliefs, and behavioural strategies related to ASD.

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