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Challenges Faced by Newly Appointed Teachers at Autism- specific School: A Thematic Analysis Study

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Abstract:

Introduction: Learners with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) present with challenges in their social communication, social interactions, and repetitive patterns of behavior. These challenges significantly impact the provision of education by newly appointed teachers with limited experience in teaching learners with ASD.

Aim and Objective(s): The purpose of this study was to explore the challenges faced by teachers working in autism-specific schools. The study sought to achieve this aim by understanding the experiences of teachers who are newly appointed at autism special schools.

Methodology: A qualitative research design was used, with two focus group discussions conducted with a total of 16 participants (9 participants in group 1 and 7 participants in group 2) working in autism-specific schools. The main research question included the following: What are the challenges encountered by new teachers in autism special schools? A Thematic Content Analysis was used to analyze the data collected from these discussions.

Result(s): The study identified several challenges faced by teachers working in autism-specific schools. The challenges included managing challenging behaviors such as temper tantrums, meltdowns, communication difficulties, and disciplining learners.

Conclusion: Other problems encountered by teachers included limited resources, lack of support, and lack of training and professional development opportunities.

Keywords: Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), Neurodevelopmental disorder, Teacher(s), Learner(s), Work efficacy, Challenges.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is defined as a neurodevelopmental disorder that is associated with persistent deficits in different domains, including social communication, social interaction, and repetitive patterns of behavior [1, 2]. The deficits in the communication, interaction, and behavior domains impact the academic performance of learners with ASD, as their learning ability may require different ways of giving instructions to cater to their special educational needs [3]. Studies show that the number of learners diagnosed with ASD continued to rise [4]. This influx of learners diagnosed with ASD created a dire need for teachers who are trained to cater to learners with special educational needs associated with ASD. On the same note, studies [5, 6] indicated that there is a shortage of teachers trained for learners with ASD. Generally, teachers were employed with only training that equips them with skills to teach in mainstream schools and

not necessarily special needs schools [7]. This then created challenges for teachers during their employment period in the special school sector [7]. Seemingly, the shortage of teachers in ASD schools results from ASD being a newly found phenomenon in Southern African countries [8, 9].

Studies show that teachers experience teaching learners with ASD to be challenging [10]. This is because teachers are appointed without having sufficient know-ledge about the field and the learners with ASD. As a result, they find it difficult to manage behavioral problems, understand the learner's diagnoses, formulate support plans, and create learning spaces that cater to all diverse needs of the learners in their classrooms [11].

Teachers indicated encountering challenges such as lack of training to teach learners with ASD, difficulties in organizing teaching plans, and lack of support from colleagues and parents of children with ASD [12]. Furthermore, other challenges included insufficient resources, experiencing anxiety symptoms, and difficulties practicing inclusive education for learners with ASD without prior training.

Seemingly, the shortage of skilled teachers in special needs education for learners with ASD has multifaceted implications for teachers and their work performance. Teachers argued that the lack of training for ASD learners impacts the support provided to the learners and their ability to understand the behaviors associated with ASD [13]. Due to inadequate training and support, teachers were prone to show negative attitudes towards learners with ASD [14]. These attitudes included perceiving learners as incapable of learning and being labeled as visitors and a burden on teachers. Other researchers [15] attributed the negative attitudes not only to the lack of teachers' training but also to the nature and severity of the learners' disability and the higher number of learners allocated per teacher.

Furthermore, studies suggest that about two-thirds of teachers felt isolated in their roles as teachers of ASD learners due to insufficient skills to support the learners [16]. This implicates not only their work efficacy but also impacts student's ability to learn and improve their skills [16]. The challenges faced by teachers have a significant impact on their psychological well-being, which subse-quently affects their work efficacy. Notably, teachers without appropriate training tend to experience anxiety symptoms, uncertainty, and role confusion when they are expected to teach and support learners with ASD [17]. This further creates stress for the teachers and makes them want to avoid teaching the learners due to their difficulties in providing support [17]. These challenges are found to cause an enormous amount of stress and anxiety for teachers, especially those newly appointed in the profession [18]. Interestingly, teachers who were allocated ASD learners with severe behavioral and emotional challenges were likely to experience heightened levels of stress and burnout [19]. Meanwhile, in other studies, the challenges were reported to complicate the mental health of teachers and cause emotional exhaustion, depersona-

lization, and reduced feelings of personal achievement [20].

2. METHODOLOGY

The study collected data using two focus group interviews. The focus group interviews were conducted by the first author (male) in continuous consultation and supervision with the second (female) and third authors (female); at the time of data collection, the researcher was a Master of Science student in a clinical psychology program at Sefako Makgatho Health Sciences University and had minimal experience as a researcher. Before the commencement of studies, the first author was a former educator at an autism school special school in Gauteng. Five of the 16 participants in the study were former colleagues of the first author in the autism school. The relationship was mainly limited to professional aspects and nothing further than that.

2.1. Aim and Objectives

- The study aimed to explore the challenges experienced by new teachers in ASD schools and the impacts of the challenges on their psychological well-being.
- The study objective was to explore and understand the challenges experienced by teachers in ASD schools. The specific focus on ASD newly employed teachers' challenges thereof was found important as it provides critical insights and understanding about the diverse experiences of new teachers and how the challenges faced impact the important aspects of their careers.

2.1.1. Participants

A non-probability sampling following a purposive sampling technique was used in recruiting participants. The deliberate approach in using the purposive sampling technique was to recruit participants with similar characteristics who were available at the time to partake in the study. The participants in the study included male and female teachers who were working at ASD schools and inclusive schools with ASD classes. A total of 25 participants were approached face-to-face and 20 agreed and consented to participate in the study. On the day of data collection (day one: 9 participants and day two: 7 participants), only 16 participants were able to join the Zoom virtual meetings. No apologies or formal withdrawal from the study were forwarded to the researcher. All teachers who were included in the study had not worked for more than 5 years in ASD schools (refer to Table **1** for participant's biographical information). Teachers who had over 5 years of working experience, teachers on temporary contracts, and teachers working at mainstream schools were excluded from the study. At the time of data collection, all participants were residing and working in Soweto, south of Johannesburg in South Africa.

2.2. Data Collection Procedure

Two focus group interviews were used to collect the data. The focus groups' interviews were conducted through Zoom virtual meetings on different days. The first group

consisted of 9 participants and 7 participants in the second focus group. A total of 16 participants took part in the study. The participants were recorded verbatim, and consent was obtained before the commencement of the study. The researchers followed an interview guide and prompt follow-ups were done whenever it was deemed necessary. The researchers also took field notes during the process of data collection and the focus groups lasted for approximately 1 hour and 30 minutes with a maximum of 2 hours. The main research questions included the following:

- What are the challenges encountered in autism special schools?

No repeat interviews were done after the conclusion of the study. The saturation of the data was discussed with other authors before concluding the study. No transcribed data was sent to the participants for correction. The data was coded by the authors of the study, and no external sources were used to code the data. The themes used in the study emerged during the data analysis, and there are no themes used that were created before data analysis. The themes were further clarified in the discussion of the data.

2.3. Research Approach and Design

The study employed a descriptive qualitative research design to gather in-depth experiences of newly employed teachers in ASD schools. Through a Thematic Content Analysis (TCA), the data was evaluated, and themes were created as they emerged to categorize similar experiences in the respective segments. These include challenges identified, such as lack of training, insufficiency of working resources, and managing challenging behaviors exhibited by the learners.

2.4. Development and Validity of Themes

Following the [21, 22] TCA guide, the following steps were followed to develop and validate themes:

2.4.1. Step One

The transcribed data were studied extensively with the purpose to get familiar with the data.

2.4.2. Step Two

The data sharing similar meanings were organized in order to formulate codes. The codes were coupled with different colors, respectively. The purpose of the codes was to extract relevant data from the large pool of data collected.

2.4.3. Step Three

During this step, the initial themes were developed by combining related codes into one theme and sub-themes. This was done with careful consideration of the main research question, aim and objectives of the study.

2.4.4. Step Four

Emerging themes and subthemes were reviewed under supervision from the other supervisors. During this stage, the researcher and supervisors discussed the relevancy of themes to the study and the relevancy of subthemes in the study. Data that overlap were set aside to develop separate themes and other data were discarded to the main data sheet.

2.5. Data Analysis

The data was analyzed through the Thematic Content Analysis (TCA). The TCA guide [22] suggests the following steps to analyze data.

2.5.1. Phase One: Initializing Stage

This stage included transcribing the audio recordings and combining them with the notes taken during data collection. Similar findings were highlighted in similar colors to be reviewed and studied to enhance the researcher's understanding.

2.5.2. Phase Two: Construction

During this stage, the data were categorized and labeled with codes to easily identify emerging similar data. The data was compared according to their categories to minimize repeating similar information in different themes. No translation occurred as the interviews were conducted mainly in English.

2.5.3. Phase Three: Rectifying

In this stage, the developed themes are verified to ensure that the transcribed data is a true reflection and representation of the participant's contributions. The researchers further studied the data to enhance understanding and correct possible errors.

2.5.4. Phase Four: Finalization

During this stage, the researcher develops a storyline while integrating with the existing literature. The storyline is developed according to the themes and reported to the audience.

The TCA was found suitable for this study because it captured the subjective experiences of the participants and integrated the existing literature into the study through the creation of themes and subthemes.

2.6. Ethical Considerations

The study did not follow the Helsinki Declaration; however, in ensuring that human participants are protected, the study sought ethical clearance from the two following institutions. The study was approved by the Sefako Makgatho University, South Africa Research Ethics Committee (SMUREC/M/323/ 2020:PG) and the Gauteng Department of Education (Validity of Research Approval: 2021/67). Participants were informed in person and writing by the researcher about the details of the study. Informed consent was obtained from all parti- cipants who agreed to participate in the study. The study further maintained anonymity and confidentiality using pseudonyms in communicating the findings of the study. Participants were also informed that participation was voluntary and had the right to withdraw at any stage of the research.

3. RESULTS

The study aimed to explore the challenges experienced by new teachers in ASD schools. In querying the experiences of teachers in ASD schools, particularly the challenges encountered, the following themes emerged in the results.

3.1. Theme 1: Teachers' Challenges in ASD Schools

The study discovered that teachers face challenges such as lack of ASD training, lack of parental cooperation, limited support from experienced colleagues and management, and lack of resources.

3.1.1. Subtheme One: Lack of Training in Teaching Children with ASD

In South Africa, teachers are trained in higher education and training institutions for four years for a Bachelor of Education (BEd) or a Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) and then registration with the regulatory board, South African Council for Educators (SACE). This enables graduates to be recognized as licensed teachers. SACE further allows teachers to be employed in mainstream schools in the public or private sector and special schools. However, it seems teachers in special schools need additional training after their initial training to enhance their knowledge and skills to cope with teaching learners with additional special needs. The participants in the study indicated experiencing challenges as they were only trained and licensed to teach in mainstream schools and later appointed as teachers in ASD special schools. The appointment did not come with additional training to equip them with those much-needed skills. The participants shared the following:

3.1.1.1. Participant 12

"When I got appointed as a teacher at the xxx School for Autism, I did not have any form of background with autistic learners."

3.1.1.2. Participant 15

"I was actually from a mainstream school, so for me to adjust it was difficult, not that the learners were worse than it was me, I was just finding it difficult to adjust in that environment.... because we don't really have formal training. Most of us didn't really go through any training where we learned more about autism. Even now, I don't know what to say about autism. I'm not really exposed, I didn't get much training, but we still have such learners in our classes."

3.1.2. Subtheme Two: Managing Challenging Behaviors of Learners

Participants in the study expressed their struggles in managing challenging behaviors presented by learners with ASD. According to the participants, each learner with ASD presents differently. This requires teachers to have passion, skills, and knowledge to manage challenging behaviors for ASD learners. Therefore, lacking this critical training and skills makes teachers prone to experiencing difficulties in managing challenging behaviors, communicating, and maintaining discipline in their respective classrooms. The participants shared the following:

3.1.2.1. Participant 6

"My first challenge was so (uhm) I have a couple of children in my class who are (non-verbal), so I was confused whether I should speak in full sentences or do I also speak in one word. So I had that challenge when teaching with communication."

3.1.2.2. Participant 6

"I had another challenge of discipline. (Uhm) I have a child in my class who throws tantrums just for fun. So I had a challenge of how do I discipline him because I don't know how to discipline him."

3.1.2.3. Participant 1

"So (my) learners were having meltdowns and (I) don't know how to deal with them...that was my challenge."

3.1.2.4. Participant 16

"In my class, my learners are runners, so the moment they see the door opened, they will just run to the door. I'll have to run all over the school looking for them, so like it was a little challenging."

3.1.3. Subtheme Three: Limited Resources

The study further discovered that teachers were experiencing challenges, including a lack of resources. In the participants' view, this factor also contributed negatively to their experiences as teachers in the ASD educational sector. The participants shared the following:

3.1.3.1. Participant 7

"We do not have resources to teach these learners. Since last year, I was teaching (final year) learners using books for grades one, two, and three, and these books we got from the mainstream, so we don't have resources of our own."

3.1.3.2. Participant 1

"Another thing was the lack of resources in the school. We get workshops on how to use Augmentative Alternative Communication (AAC) devices, but at the actual school, there are no (AAC device) resources."

3.1.3.3. Participant 10

"I think also another one is also the lack of resources, so when it comes to working with special needs schools, there are special resources that need to come into the school that are quite different from what everyone else is getting in the mainstream."

3.1.4. Subtheme Four: Lack of Support From Management and Parents

The participants also shared the following concerning the lack of support from the management personnel and limited meaningful interactions with the parents of learners with ASD.

3.1.4.1. Participant 1

"So (uhm) the challenge that I experienced is the lack of support from those in management. They do try, but at times, you feel like they don't do enough because they don't understand the type of learners that you are dealing with..."

Table 1. Description of the study participants [62].

S.No.	Participant(s)	Gender	No of Years at ASD School	Other Teaching Experience	Group no
1.	Participant 1	Female	2 years	1 year in mainstream	Group 1
2.	Participant 2	Female	4 years	5+ as an assistant teacher	Group 1
3.	Participant 3	Male	1 year and 6 months	None	Group 1
4.	Participant 4	Male	4 years	None	Group 1
5.	Participant 5	Female	2 years 6 months	None	Group 1
6.	Participant 6	Female	6 months	4 months in the mainstream	Group 1
7.	Participant 7	Female	1 year	3 months in the mainstream	Group 1
8.	Participant 8	Female	2 years 6 months	None	Group 1
9.	Participant 9	Female	1 year	None	Group 1
10.	Participant 10	Female	1 year	None	Group 2
11.	Participant 11	Female	3 years	5+ in private school mainstream	Group 2
12.	Participant 12	Female	4 Months	None	Group 2
13.	Participant 13	Female	10 Months	None	Group 2
14.	Participants 14	Female	2 years	None	Group 2
15.	Participants 15	Female	3 years	2 years in mainstream	Group 2
16.	Participant 16	Female	2 years	Former social worker	Group 2

3.1.4.2. Participant 3

"…in the mainstream, you have a guideline like a CAPS document; you know what to do and when to do it. In the special school, you have to figure something out for yourself, sometimes you try to do something and someone comes and says no! You are not supposed to do that, but they don't give you a guideline on what you should do."

4. DISCUSSION

4.1. Challenges in ASD Schools

The findings of the study indicated that teachers in ASD special schools were experiencing challenges executing their duties. Generally, studies indicate that teachers present with poor ASD knowledge, specialized training, and skills to teach learners with special needs, including learners with ASD [23]. The study further identified limited resources and the inability to understand the learners' conditions and aptly manage challenging behaviors presented by the learners to be another challenge in ASD schools. As argued by researchers [24], teachers face challenges in teaching learners with ASD. These challenges included a lack of understanding of ASD characteristics and failure to address challenging behaviors and the specific triggers of those behaviors [25]. Similarly, participants in this study shared their experiences that they had little or no knowledge of ASD, they had difficulties in understanding and managing challenging behaviors, and had limited skills in catering to the diverse needs of the learners.

The socio-demographics of the participants in this study indicated that some of the participants had previous mainstream teaching experiences while others had no previous experience of teaching in general before their appointment at an ASD school. On the same note, several participants in the study attested to being appointed at ASD schools without knowing what ASD entails, lack of orientation to ASD during the university period, and lack of training that equipped them with the necessary skills to support the learners. It is worth noting that this is not an isolated incident. A study conducted in Tanzania [26], revealed that ASD is poorly understood by teachers who are normally allocated learners with ASD. This is due to the absence of training and preparation of teachers before their appointments in special needs schools. Likewise, studies affirmed that ASD teachers' inability to support learners was influenced by a lack of appropriate training, lacking knowledge about ASD, and poor practical strategies to support the learners [27, 28]. These challenges play a significant role in impacting teachers' psychological well-being during the period of their careers in ASD schools [29]. The lack of knowledge and relevant training also affects teachers' adjustment at ASD schools and the support provided to learners in the early stages of their careers [30]. It also makes teachers' work expectations unclear to senior staff members [59].

4.2. Managing Challenging Behaviors of Learners, Feeling Ill-prepared, and Lack of Understanding of ASD and its Characteristics

The findings of the study indicate that teachers in special schools generally feel incompetent and incapable of supporting learners with ASD [31], Special school teachers feel unprepared to support learners with disabilities and they are constantly concerned about their ability to cope with such learners. In support, authors argued that teachers in special schools lack relevant qualifications and working resources to prepare and support learners with ASD [32]. For instance, individuals with ASD present with non-verbal conduct comorbid with other challenging behaviors such as sensory problems, inappropriate behaviors, and intellectual impairment in other cases [33]. Teachers lacking the necessary skills to identify the abovementioned problems and provide necessary support will experience burnout, anxiety, and depressive symptoms [33].

Teachers with only mainstream teaching qualifications are likely to experience reduced confidence and apprehension when expected to support learners [34]. This further exacerbates feelings of frustration, anxiousness, burnout, and suicidal ideations. It can be argued that the lack of understanding of ASD reduces the ability to support learners [35]. This contributed to several teachers leaving the profession for other non-teaching careers.

Moreover, it is indicated that teachers impacted psychologically are more likely to treat learners in a pathology-based approach, leading to learners experiencing bullying and other treatments that can be categorized as abuse [35]. It can be argued that the teaching profession requires passionate and patient teachers to adequately support learners with ASD [36]. However, since the adoption of inclusive education in South Africa, there has been a low improvement in developing teacher's skills and support structures for learners. This impacts the provision of teachers' training, working resources, and appropriate support to new teachers in the field [36]. As a result, teachers feel compelled by inclusive education policies such as White Paper 6 of 2001, which advocates that learners, irrespective of their special needs, should be accommodated and receive quality education in promoting lifelong learning [37]. Comparably to the findings of this study, teachers seem to merely comply with the policies of White Paper 6 even when they know that they lack critical skills in the field. Furthermore, in the absence of training, it becomes difficult for teachers to support and uphold the White Paper 6 policy; this then affects their views on inclusivity and attitudes and leaves teachers frustrated, stressed, and emotionally overwhelmed [12]. Generally, the study seems to indicate that teaching in special schools for learners with ASD comes with challenges that appear to stem mainly from teachers lacking adequate knowledge and appropriate training.

4.3. Limited Resources

The study findings suggest that while teachers lack the knowledge and skills to execute their duties in ASD schools, they also face the challenge of limited working resources. Teacher's working environments are not equipped sufficiently, and this hinders the support given to their learners [38]. It is inarguable that learners with ASD present with diverse needs. Commonly, teachers are allocated to ASD learners who may be challenged in cognitive functioning, sensory domains, and motor and adaptive skills [38]. Furthermore, many of these learners have co-morbid conditions and yet receive education in mainstream schools due to limited schools for ASD learners and limited resources in established schools [39]. Therefore, this necessitates tailored educational support by teachers which needs access to working resources [39].

In essence, teachers require resources such as Individualized Educational Plans (IEPs), Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS), Treatment and Education of Autistic and related Communication Handicapped Children (TEACCH), and Applied Behavioral Analysis (ABA); these resources enable the provision of tailored educational support and improve communication, learning abilities and management of learner's behavior [39,40]. However, the limitation of such resources often leads to teachers adapting the curriculum and other resources available to them to support the learners [41]. Amongst other things, ASD schools generally have limited human resources such as speech, language, and occupational therapists who help in the integration of learning while assisting learners in mastering important skills such as proficient communication.

Teachers attest that they are expected to implement multiple techniques, some of which require modification of the environment, such as warnings, communication cues, and visual supports [42]. This requires teachers to have access to resources and training to use the techniques effectively [42]. However, it can be debatable that effective teaching does not necessarily require extensive training and extensive knowledge about the deficits of learners with special needs, including ASD [43]. However, a lack of resources, time, and training pressurizes teachers to perform and, in turn, increases symptoms of anxiety and burnout in new teachers [30]. Therefore, limitations in the resources or limitations in the training of teachers all contribute to the disruption of adequate teaching and learning, which impacts teachers' efficacy [44]. Furthermore, a study [45] emphasizes that adequate resources should be made available with continuous workshops for teachers as this enables flexibility in applying their support in evidence-based practices and materials. Moreover, the lack of material makes teachers feel unsupported. Worth noting, another study [46] attributes the insufficiency of resources in ASD schools to a lack of funding or investment towards teacher continuous learning and procuring materials to be used in the classroom. It can be said that a lack of working resources, whether in the form of material skills or human resources, has a significant impact on teachers' efficacy, emotional well-being, and general motivation to work in ASD schools.

4.4. Lack of Support by Management and Parents of Children with ASD

The participants of the study indicated that there is a lack of support from school management such as principals and Heads of departments (HODs). The participants also indicated poor support from parents. As per the participant's account, parents' especially younger parents, appeared to be less interested in their learners' educational progress. This impacted communication with teachers about the learners' progress both at home and at school.

A study [47] emphasized the significance of management support to novice teachers. Teachers shared that they are exposed to minimal support, which often lacks professional development [48]. The participants in the current study felt that they were not receiving support from their management or seniors; however, other studies seem to contradict the recent findings. Many studies showed that ASD teachers generally have little experience

in ASD Schools, and they are not specially trained to teach learners with ASD [49-51]. Furthermore, it is significant for teachers to be supported [52]. According to this study, other learners presenting with ASD characteristics are identified by teachers at lower grades, therefore, teachers must receive support from management and go through necessary training to be able to perform at their peak. By the same token, it was identified by other [30] researchers that teachers experience barriers, and part of enhancing teachers' skills is through Continuous Professional Development (CPDs). This has been proven to be effective; however, teachers find it difficult to attend CPDs as they are costly, and many teachers lack support from management who can organize and pay for this critical training.

It is worth noting that teachers do understand the importance of adequate and individualized learning and support to learners with ASD; however, limited support from school management impacts teacher's support for the learners [53].

Furthermore, in the current study, teachers expressed concerns about not having enough support from parents. This is in line with the previous findings [57], where teachers reported feeling frustrated and deflated confidence due to poor parental involvement in learners' education. Teachers further expressed the feeling that parents do not continue to educate learners at home, meanwhile, they have unrealistic expectations from teachers [52]. This is assumed to be caused by a lack of communication between teachers and parents of learners with ASD [54].

In the defense of parents, it has been [54] postulated that some parents do not know of available opportunities and they may also lack time, be overcommitted, have to care for other children at home, and generally not trust the educational system [54]. Furthermore, parents who lack knowledge about ASD are likely to be frustrated and not participate as expected in academic activities. The authors [55] also emphasized the importance of parental knowledge; they found that parents who regularly attend workshops and receive a type of support were more willing to support teachers and were more involved in the academic activities of the learners as opposed to those who did not receive any knowledge concerning ASD [55].

Teachers feel that collaboration with parents is essential and should ideally include the following: creating learning spaces at home and school with similar goals, effective communication, parents volunteering in school activities, parents' follow-ups on learners' academic activities, participating in decision-making at school and collaborating with the community at large [56].

A qualitative study conducted which included parents of ASD learners, teachers, and ASD learners, yielded the following results: Teachers experienced poor involvement and poor support from parents in their children's education [57]. Teachers also expressed the feeling that communication between teachers and parents is most focused on expressing demands instead of developing problem-solving techniques and collaborating with them

[58]. On the same note, parents also reported feeling that teachers do not understand their children. Parents also complain that teachers do little to explain the diagnosis and complexities of the behavior; they feel unsupported and perceive teachers to be less caring about the learners [59]. Moreover, Contradicting views were observed after interviewing parents and teachers of learners with ASD. During their study, parents indicated a feeling that the teachers do not acknowledge their presence and are perceived to be unknowledgeable, while teachers felt that parents are not willing to collaborate and they do not necessarily follow the recommendations made by teachers [60]. Interestingly, a study [61] found that parents generally understand the importance of teacher support; however, some factors interfere with effective participation, including poverty, literacy level, educational background of parents, and limited support from teachers.

This seems to confirm a misunderstanding of the roles and expectations of teachers and parents, respectively. Moreover, this confirms that the lack of support from either side stems from a lack of communication and effective understanding of the learners in the educational context and home context.

CONCLUSION

The study was aimed at understanding the experiences of teachers, precisely the challenges encountered by teachers in ASD schools. Predominantly, it was indicated that teachers are experiencing challenges in ASD schools. These challenges correlate with a lack of knowledge about ASD before being appointed in ASD schools. Other factors included lack of experience, limited support, and lack of working resources. Therefore, the study found that it is paramount for teachers to receive training soon after being employed to improve their experiences and enhance their receptivity to learners with ASD while maintaining good psychological well-being.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND FUTURE PROSPECTS

- Based on the findings of the study, it is recommended that ASD schools be utilized as practicum centers for teachers' training. This will enable exposure and help teachers decide about their preferred specialties during the early stages of their careers.
- The study recommends that the Department of Education should prioritize workshops and Continuous Professional Development (CPD) for teachers in new and developing schools catering to learners with autism. This will assist inexperienced teachers in ASD schools to get continuous professional training while teaching and without being pressurized to enroll for a specialized postgraduate qualification.
- The study further recommends that future research be directed towards understanding the poor use of psychotherapy interventions by new teachers in the South African context.
- Lastly, due to the study having a limited number of male teachers, the focus for future research can be directed towards exploring male teacher's perspectives in the ASD schools.

STRENGTHS OF THE STUDY

The study takes pride in the quality and rigour of the study as it was conducted qualitatively, which allowed the researchers to probe and observe the preceding data collection.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The study only sought the experiences of teachers in ASD schools and not teachers in mainstream and other special needs schools. Therefore, the views are only limited to the participants in the current study. Moreover, the study only included 15 female participants and 1 male participant, thus, the views of the study are limited to the participants' interviewed and do not represent the views of the general public. This limitation also impacts the overall generalizability of the findings as the sample size is relatively small. Furthermore, the study acknowledges that the predominant female views on the study created biases as the male views are not adequately represented.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTION

It is hereby acknowledged that all authors have accepted responsibility for the manuscript's content and consented to its submission. They have meticulously reviewed all results and unanimously approved the final version of the manuscript.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ASD   = Autism Spectrum Disorder

TCA   = Thematic Content Analysis

PGCE = Postgraduate Certificate in Education

SACE = South African Council for Educators

IEPs   = Individualized Educational Plans

PECS = Picture Exchange Communication System

ETHICS APPROVAL AND CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE

The study sought ethical clearance from the two following institutions. The study was approved by the Sefako Makgatho University, South Africa Research Ethics Committee (SMUREC/M/323/2020:PG) and the Gauteng Department of Education (Validity of Research Approval: 2021/67), South Africa.

HUMAN AND ANIMAL RIGHTS

All human research procedures followed were in accordance with the ethical standards of the committee responsible for human experimentation (institutional and national), and with the Helsinki Declaration of 1975, as revised in 2013.

CONSENT FOR PUBLICATION

Informed consent was obtained from all participants.

STANDARDS OF REPORTING:

COREQ guidelines were followed.

AVAILABILITY OF DATA AND MATERIALS

The data supporting the findings of the article is available on the Repository name: Sefako Makgatho Health Sciences University Repository [repository.smu. ac.za: Recent submissions] [https://repository.smu.ac.za /handle/20.500.12308/1184].

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest, financial or otherwise.

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