

Parents and Teachers Experiences of Managing Peculiar Psychosocial Behaviours of Learners with Autism Spectrum Disorder in Selected Special Units in Lusaka, Zambia

by

Victor Macha, Francis Simui and Kenneth Kapalu Muzata

The University of Zambia

Abstract

This paper focused on the experiences of parents and teachers in managing peculiar psychosocial behaviours of learners with Autism Spectrum Disorder. A qualitative phenomenological research design was applied riding on a purposive sample of 18 participants consisting six special education teachers; six parents and six learners with Autism Spectrum Disorder. Emerging from this study was a cluster of peculiar psychosocial behaviours in learners with Autism Spectrum Disorder manifested in social interaction disorders, social-communication challenges and social-emotional problems among other behaviours. The study also revealed that parents experienced Psychological problems such as anxiety, disbelief, stress and sleep deprivation. Some of the strategies parents used to manage peculiar behaviours included being security conscious; acceptance; unconditional love and care for the child. The study further revealed that teachers too faced both positive and negative experiences. Teachers managed peculiar psychosocial behaviours of Autism Spectrum Disorder by being security conscious; sharpening own knowledge and skills training about Autism Spectrum Disorder; using both negative and positive reinforcements; collaboration with parents, teamwork, tolerance; patience; acceptance, peer to peer support, and practicing unconditional positive regard. Thus, among others, this study recommends that learners with Autism Spectrum Disorder need a supportive learning environment enriched with a variety of modern computerized programmed technological materials.

Key Words: Parents' Experiences, Teachers, Management, Peculiar Psychosocial Behaviours, Autism Spectrum Disorder.

Background

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a disability in social functioning. The condition is neurological. Hannah (2001) defined ASD as a complex developmental disability that essentially affects the way a person communicates and relates to people. The term 'Autistic Spectrum' is often used because the condition varies from person to person. The word ASD emanates from the Greek word "auto" which means "self" and was first used by an Austrian psychiatrist, Leo Kanner in 1943 in his classical paper titled, "Autistic disturbances of affective contact." Jordan (1997) describes ASD as a term used to describe the variables of ASD which include a wide range of differences among children with ASD and common impairments in the ability to interact socially and appropriately; understand and use language and to communicate; think imaginatively, enjoy and participate in a range of activities often manifested in repetitive and restricted behaviour patterns.

Attwood (1998) indicated that children with ASD also differ in their intellectual abilities. Many have severe learning difficulties and are educated in special schools, while others have average or above abilities and are taught in mainstream schools. Children with this condition present several challenges to parents and teachers who take care of them on a daily basis. Some known behavioural characteristics of ASD include individualistic behaviour, obsessiveness to things and events, and over sensitivity to sensory situations such as light, noise and objects (Myers & Johnson, 2007). Children with ASD have unpredictable behaviours such as being over sensitivity to many things, including sound, light reflection, texture and certain food stuff (Carolyn, Casey & Ashlea, 2017). Hartmann (2012) and Khasakhala & Galava (2016) identified a number of peculiar behaviours in ASD which include deficits in social communication, social interaction, social-emotional deficits, aggression, and temper tantrums. Mainly, problems with social attachment appear to obscure all other characteristics children with ASD portray. The children exhibit tactile defensiveness and tend to be irritable and withdrawn (Carolyn et al, 2017). With a classroom environment being naturally

an interactive social environment, such traits could be problematic to learning conditions within and outside the classroom. Most likely, classroom management can be a problem for teachers. Some of the behaviours in learners with ASD can be disruptive to the learning process and quite stressing on the part of the teacher and a parent unless critical measures are taken to reduce the stressful behaviours in these children. This is so especially for the kids who scream a lot when attacked by temper tantrums and those who react aggressively to peers.

Studies have shown that parents experience anxiety and disbelief as a result of the behaviours by their children with ASD (Prince, 2007). For instance Prince, (2007) found that parents to children with ASD experience periods of disbelief, deep sadness and depression and self-blame and guilt whereas others experience helplessness, feelings of inadequacy, anger, shock and guilt. Other specific stressors that contribute to parental distress include concerns over the permanency of their child's condition, poor acceptance of autistic behaviours by society and, other family members and low levels of social support received by parents. It is in this same vein that Kourkoutas, Langher, Caldin, & Fountoulaki (2012) stated that mothers to children with ASD appear to be the most affected by distress, conflicting and even indecisive emotions. However, depression is said to be often elevated at the time of diagnosis of a child's disability but may decline substantially over time and that chronic sorrow.

With such experiences, parents need the support of professionals to help them manage the behaviours children with ASD. Parents' failure to manage their children with ASD leads to stigma and discrimination by members of the public (Wonani & Muzata, 2019). The family becomes stigmatized because of the existence of a child with ASD in their family and basically due to the perceived troublesome behaviour the child shows to peers and adults. Parents and guardians are very particular with the manner in which onlookers check on them as they try to put their level best in managing the ASD condition in their child. The family gets so suspicious to an extent of thinking that some neighbors are talking about or laughing

at their child. As a result, the family with the child may to some extent limit their socialisation with the neighbors and friends. Nyoni & Serpell (2012) argues that parents of children with ASD in Zambia face challenges both at home and in the community due to the negative attitudes by the community. The impact of ASD On parents' mental health has been reviewed. Children with ASD exert pressure of restlessness on parents especially when the children fail to sleep early at night. According to Hartmann (2012) parents of children with ASD (ASDs) often reported increased levels of stress, depression, and anxiety. The dissatisfied parents' mental health needs were reported to pose a significant risk to the psychological, physical, and social well-being of the parents of the child affected by ASD. The good and sound mental and physical health of every parent is key for better choice making and maintenance of a harmonious home environment. Once the health of parents is compromised, the relationship between the child with ASD and the family together with the surrounding environment may not be that sound. Aylaz, Yilmaz, & Polat, (2012) revealed that caring for a child with ASD affected the relationship that parents had with other family members and with the wider community. Parents experienced conflicts in the community and sometimes were even confronted when the child destroyed somebody's property. This created tension and resulted in lack of peace especially with people like neighbors who could not understand the condition of the child.

Literature also shows that teachers equally face challenges managing psychosocial behaviours of learners with ASD in classroom situation. For instance, Muller, Schuler, & Yates, (2008) revealed that among the challenges teachers face with ASD learners is the commonly known behaviour to withdraw from social contact, preference for social isolation, and lack of the ability to establish and maintain age-appropriate relationships. These social impairments have been found to contribute to the child's emotional vulnerability, depression, and extreme stress or frustration. Additionally, Reid and O'Connor (2003) have also indicated that children with ASD do exhibit symptoms of Attention Deficit/Hyperactive Disorder, strong preference toward certain sensory stimuli, over selectivity, and

intense interests and deficits in fine and gross motor development which poses significant teaching challenges. A study by Lindsay Proulx, Scott, & Thomson (2014) found that students with ASD do exhibit challenging behaviours in the school environment such as spitting, biting, hitting, throwing objects and self-harming. The study further highlighted that these challenging behaviours can be detrimental to the learning process and teachers may try a variety of procedures to deal with these behavioural problems.

In Zambia, not much is known about ASD (Nyoni & Serpell, 2012). This observation is consistent with the historical perspectives of special education and the existent policy documents on education from the 1977 Education Reforms and Recommendations to the 1996 Educating our Future policy document. For instance, Zambia's history of special education has been more biased towards special education for learners with visual impairment, hearing, mental and physical impairments (Ministry of Education- MoE, (1977); Ndhlovu, Muzata & Mtonga, (2018); Kalabula, (2007) & Simui, (2018). However, there are so many categories of disability that require specialised attention and education. ASD is one such a category of disability that appears unconsciously ignored, yet learners of this category exist in schools, either placed wrongly among learners with intellectual challenges or not placed at all. Since parents and teachers are key stakeholders in upbringing and in the education of children with ASD, this study endeavored to assess parents and teachers experiences of managing peculiar psychosocial behaviours of learners with ASD in selected special units in Lusaka, Zambia.

In this paper, we use the phrase 'Peculiar Psychosocial Behaviours,' of learners with ASD loosely to refer to the unusual behaviours that these children exhibit when interacting with parents at home and with teachers at school. Such behaviours have been termed unusual because they are thought of as culturally unacceptable of a child of a school going age who is expected to learn the acceptable societal mores and manners. With such behaviours such as being individualistic, obsessive or being hypersensitive, the classroom environment would be difficult for teachers to manage.

Statement of the Problem

In Zambia, Wonani & Muzata, (2019) studied the experiences of parenting and educating children with ASD among Lusaka Parents. Chansa- Kabali and Nyoni (2019) established that there was limited awareness and Knowledge Associated with ASD Spectrum Disorders among University Students in Zambia. Nyoni & Serpell (2012) also indicated that most parents had no knowledge about ASD and lacked information on the nature of the disorder. However, all these studies did not examine the management of peculiar psychosocial behaviours that children exhibited in school and at home. With limited studies on this condition, service provision may be compromised. The understanding of parents and teachers experiences in managing psychosocial behaviours in learners with ASD would help stakeholders provide the needed assistance to enable effective delivery of lessons to learners with ASD in school. Thus, teachers and parents need knowledge and skills to manage such behaviours in order to help learners acquire quality education.

Objectives of the Study

The study was guided by the following objectives:

1. To explore the nature of peculiar psychosocial behaviours exhibited by learners with ASD in two selected special units of Lusaka district.
2. To describe the experiences of parents in managing peculiar psychosocial behaviours of learners with ASD in two selected special units of Lusaka district.
3. To describe teachers' experiences in managing peculiar psychosocial behaviours exhibited by learners with ASD from two selected special units of Lusaka.

Theoretical Underpinning

The study made reference to Ecological Systems Theory of Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979), relating it to the family and the school environments as critical to the child's optimal development. This theory is relevant in explaining the family dynamics and the potential

impact of the family system on typically developing siblings. The Ecological Systems Theory maintains that the environment affects a child's development. It also explains that there is reciprocity in the child's effects on his or her surrounding environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The child can be affected at various levels of the ecological system. For instance, at the primary system (Microsystem) comprising the father, mother and siblings and other relations as is in the African construction of a family, the way the child's development is affected by the way the family interacts with the child with ASD. Limitations in communication may affect the provision of the child's needs. Consequently, failure to communicate his or her needs may be understood as being unloved by family members.

The second level according Urie Bronfenbrenner is the mesosystem comprising the neighbours. Acceptance within the neighborhood helps the child to interact with peers outside home and expand their mental horizons. If negative behaviour is spotted, parents have a tendency to stop their children from playing with the perceived naughty child with ASD.

The exosystem which comprises the linkages and processes taking place between the child with ASD and his family in relation to the schoolmates, social media and work mates also have an impact on the child's development. For instance, failure to communicate and any forms of strange behaviours that pose a sense of insecurity among other children may lead the child to be excommunicated from peer social groups in school. Peer social groups are crucial in determining a child's optimal development.

The Macrosystem, which is wider most level involves policies and legislation that are meant to protect and support the child's development in his or her own home, school and wider environment to which he or she belongs. Weaker policies or the none existence of child protection policies as well as empowerment policies to families can affect the child's development in the home and school because the needs would not be met. We have deliberately chosen to ignore the recent most fifth level of Urie Bronfennbrenner's theory (the Chronosystem) since our focus in this study derives more meaning from the first four levels.

Methodology

This study was qualitative in nature and employed a phenomenological research design with an aim of in-depth understanding of individual experiences of parents and teachers in managing psychosocial behaviours of children with ASD. Lessons from home may vary from those at school, and a collection of such experiences from the two supporting sources of education for a child with ASD should help to find effective strategies for managing the child's behaviour. In phenomenology research design, researchers retain the detailed and meaningful characteristics of real-life events as experienced by participants. In this study, three data generation instruments (*Interview guides for teachers and parents and a qualitative observation checklist for behaviours of learners with ASD*) were used to generate data from teachers, learners and parents of the two selected special education units with learners with ASD in Lusaka. Teachers were sampled based on extreme case, learners by homogenous sampling and parents were sampled by means of snowball purposive sampling technique. Six (6) Special Education teachers from two special units and six (6) parents to the children with ASD and six (6) learners bringing the total study sample to eighteen (18) participants were involved in the study.

Description of Instruments

Interview guide for Parents: An Interview guide was used on parents/guardians to provide information regarding their experiences in managing peculiar behaviours in children with ASD. Parents being the custodians of the children with ASD were interviewed face to face by the researchers to provide information of how they found living with a child with ASD, what behaviours they found challenging to handle and how they managed such behaviours.

Interview guide for teachers: Teachers too were interviewed face to face by the researchers to obtain information regarding their experiences in dealing with learners with ASD in the classroom, what behaviours they found challenging, how such behaviours

impacted on their psychological wellbeing and how they managed such behaviours.

A Qualitative observation check-list: A qualitative observation check-list was used in observing learners with ASD in a natural setting and classroom environment for six days to obtain descriptive data that was compared with the narratives of parents and teachers. This instrument provided the researchers with an opportunity to compare notes with the reviewed literature as well. Observed behaviours were recorded and explained in columns provided on the instrument. For instance, when a particular behaviour was observed, a tick was accorded to it and an explanation followed on how the behaviour was exhibited. Although the study was not quantitative, the frequency of the appearance of certain psychosocial behaviours was noted for theory formulation by researchers that may be interested in this subject.

Data Analysis

Data generated through interview guides and checklist observation was thematically analysed. The objectives of the study guided the major themes for the study while emerging themes were more on how parents and teachers managed peculiar psychosocial behaviours. The researchers generated data in form of field notes, audio taped data and transcriptions. The researchers had to read the data, mark it by pen, and divided the data into categories of participants. This helped the researchers stay closer to the data and have a hands-on feel of the data. From the collected data, some of the responses from participants like parents and teachers were quoted in verbatim form using codes. The codes for parents were P1- P6 while teachers were denoted by codes like T1- T6. For the learners the codes used were from L1 to L6. Through data coding and the responses from participants, data was divided into text, narrowed down into a few themes by way of selecting specific data for use while the researchers disregarded other data that could not provide evidence for the developed themes.

Ethical Consideration

This study is an extract from a masters' dissertation titled, '*Parents and Teachers Experiences of Managing Peculiar Psychosocial Behaviours of Learners with ASD in selected Special Units in Lusaka, Zambia*'. As per university of Zambia guidelines, no study regarding humans can be cleared without ethical clearance. This study was therefore permitted by the University of Zambia, School of Humanities Ethics Committee. In adhering to ethical guidelines participants signed consent forms to express willingness to participate in the study and withdraw any time they wished if they felt uncomfortable to participate in the study. Children's consent was signed for by parents and teachers. Further, we ensured that the names of the schools where we drew our participants and the participants themselves were kept anonymous. This helps to protect the integrity of and unforeseen injury to participants from unintentional misuse, misinterpretation or misrepresentation of given data (Muzata, 2017).

Findings and Discussion

Nature of Peculiar Psychosocial Behaviours of Learners with ASD

From our attempt to understand the presence and nature of peculiar psychosocial behaviours of learners with ASD in the two selected Special Units, Table 1 shows data collected through observation checklist. The tick shows presence while 'x' shows the absence of a peculiar characteristic.

Table 1: Observed peculiar psychosocial behaviours in learners with ASD

Characteristic	L1	L2	L3	L4	L5	L6
	Age:17yrs	Age:19yrs	Age: 10yrs	Age:15yrs	Age:16yrs	Age:15yrs
	Sex: M	Sex: M	Sex: M	Sex: M	Sex: M	Sex: F
Individualistic / social interaction disorder	√√	√	√	√	√	√
In-adaptive to environmental changes	√	√	√	√	√	√
Communication challenges	√	√	√	√	√	√
Aggressiveness	X	√	√	√	√	x
Tantrums	√	√		√	√	x
Inappropriate sexual behaviours	X	√	√	x	x	x
Hypersensitivity to stimuli	√	√	√	√	√	√
Truancy	√	x	√	√	√	√
Self-injury	X	√	√	x	x	x
Screaming	X	√	x	√	x	x
Spinning	√	x	√	√	x	√
Obsessiveness	√	√	√	√	√	√
Ritualistic	√	√	X	x	√	x
Uniqueness in feeding	√	√	X	x	√	√
Anxiety	√	√	√	√	√	√

Source: Field work, 2019

L1 – L6 = Learners with ASD

From the findings, we first observed that the condition (ASD) was more among boys than girls. We observed that there were five (5) males and one (1) female with the condition. Although this study was qualitative and did not capture many respondents, available literature seems to suggest that ASD is more prevalent in males than in females (Comer and Haynes, 1992; Werling & Geschwing, 2013; Halladay, Bishop, Constantino, Daniel, Koenig, Palmer, Messinger, Pelphrey, Sanders, Singer, Taylor, & Szatmari, 2015).

Further, Table 1 shows that behaviours such as individualistic nature, adaptive challenges, social-emotional disorder, and communication challenge, hypersensitivity to sensory stimuli, and obsessiveness were present in all learners L1- L6. These findings were consistent with Carolyn, Casey and Ashlea, (2017), Hartmann (2012), Khasakhala and Galava (2016) who identified the various characteristic problems exhibited by children with ASD. The individualistic behaviour was portrayed by the learners through the habit of wanting to live and do things in isolation from other class members. Individualistic behaviour does not help children to develop socially and interact amicably with others. Individualistic behaviours blocks exchange in communication in which children with ASD would fail to learn social skills. Adaptive challenges in learners with ASD were portrayed through inability to shift from one learning activity to another and from one learning environment to the next. Likewise, the classroom environment and home environment are places children are expected to learn the rules in order to adapt to the environment. Adaptation is a learning phase.

Social emotional challenges were also observed in learners as they could easily engage in unnecessary outbursts such as tantrums, aggressiveness and giving up on an activity. The learners with ASD also showed inability to carry out simple and meaningful communication to the satisfaction of classmates, and teachers. They could at times break off from talking and talk at a different time about things that took place a while ago. The behaviour of being hypersensitive to stimuli also applied with learners with ASD as they could easily be swayed by any slight noise, lighting, or passing object to the extent of giving up on an activity for a while or for

good. This distracts classroom attention.

Learners with ASD are individuals so obsessed by certain activities like biting one's fingers, breast nipples, carrying sticks and strings and some could enjoy touching their private parts from time to time. Some of the views from parents and teachers regarding the observed peculiar psychosocial behaviours of learners with ASD were as follows:

These children are in their own world and are unique even from each other in the manner of behaving. They are smart people and usually keep feelings and things to themselves. (T1, 15-03-2019).

This boy likes biting himself on the left breast nipple of which sometimes I used to think that he had a muscle problem or something was itching. But the boy writes and draws very well! (P2, 17-03-19).

I avoid these bigger boys because you give one a hag he holds you to point of dropping his trousers something which can embarrass you publicly (T4, 25-03-2019).

Based on the findings, it is clear that peculiar psychosocial behaviours are present in learners with ASD though with variations from one child to another. The findings are related to Hartmann (2012) who identified a number of peculiar behaviours in ASD ranging from social communication, social interaction, social-emotional deficits, aggression, and temper tantrums.

The behaviours by learners with ASD has got implications on the inclusion of such learners in the mainstream classroom because they pose several challenges to teachers. A study by Lindsay, Proulx, Thomson, & Scott, (2013) reported that teachers faced challenges related to understanding and managing behaviour, socio-structural barriers like lack of school policy, lack of training and resources and lack of understanding by teachers, students and parents. Geraldina (2015) also reported primary school teachers' low knowledge of ASD and that teachers lacked in-service training and seminars to update themselves on challenges by learners with ASD in regular classes.

Although this study did not bring out the aspect of school policy and teacher training, the findings appear consistent with previous research on ASD in Zambia by Wonani & Muzata (2019), Nyoni & Serpell; and Chansa-Kabali, Nyoni & Mwanza (2019) that parents and university students lacked understanding of the condition. In this study however, teachers demonstrated understanding of the condition because they interacted with the learners on a daily basis and during interviews were able to give the characteristics presented in the first theme. Effort is still needed to ensure that stakeholders in the welfare and education of learners with ASD are provided with not only knowledge but also skills in handling the peculiar behaviours that harm themselves or other learners. A concern in Zambian teachers' skills to adapt the curriculum and generally teaching certain categories such as learners with hearing and visual impairments have been raised in the Zambian context that teachers lack sign language and braille skills (Muzata, 2018; Muzata & Ndonyo, 2019). Although Muzata (2018); and Muzata & Ndonyo (2019) did not make mention of teachers for learners with ASD, a gap for further research remain opens to establish whether teachers for this category of learners have adequate knowledge for managing peculiar behaviours of these learners or not.

Parents experiences with peculiar psychosocial behaviours in children with ASD

Individual parents and guardians expressed different kinds of experiences in raising a child with ASD. Some of the experiences included anxiety and disbelief; physical and mental stress; divorce; frustration and embarrassment; attention shifting; stigma and abuse; costs and future concerns. Some parents narrated that these negative experiences were triggered by overwhelming demands of the undesirable behaviours children with ASD presented to them (parents). Parents' concerns are exhibited in some of their voices below:

Imagine my only son living in his own world in which no one understands him, not even himself.

This has really shaken us where family love and unit are concerned! (P6, 29-03-2019).

At first I questioned God as to why me and why this child in particular of the four I have had without any problem? (P6, 29-03-2019).

Without enough sleep I woke up fatigued in the morning yet with another awaiting task of driving the boy to school and waiting in the school campus for him to knock off then proceed to the market place for my business. Anyway, he has taught us what it means to love another person unconditionally with my wife. (P5, 27-03-2019).

The above findings clearly reveal the kind of challenging experiences parents find themselves in as a result of living with a child with ASD. Although these experiences do vary from one family to the next, parents attested to the fact that it is not an easy experience. They have to move from shock and disbelief to recovery with scours of frustration, anger, and fatigue in their hearts. This finding is similar to Cynthia, Benthany and So Hyun, (2018) who revealed that parents of children with ASD often reported increased levels of stress, depression, anxiety and dissatisfaction which posed a significant risk to the psychological, physical, and social well-being of the parents of the child affected by ASD and so does jeopardize the adaptive functioning of the family as well. Wonani & Muzata (2019) found similar experiences especially among parents getting fatigued and exhausted when their children with ASD failed to sleep early at night. Fatigue affects mental health. Good and sound mental health of every parent is key for better choice making and maintenance of a harmonious home environment. Once the health of parents is compromised, the relationship between the child with ASD and the family together with the surround environment may not be that sound.

Management strategies used by parents

Parents interviewed stated that they relied on strategies such as inner self-strength, school efforts, well-meaning friends and siblings, spiritual guidance, and the provision of an extra good care and training to the child with ASD. Some of the views by some parents were as follows:

The instigated stigma by society has actually built me strong in faith and belief in God and whatever people can say has no impact on me because my conscious tells me am innocent (P5, 27-03-2019).

Sometimes it's just difficult because each behaviour a child portrays is a strange and you can't know how to handle it there and then. As a parent, you just remain disappointed. But teachers helped us how to entice the child to eat because sometimes the child may not even eat if you don't entice him. Personally I do miss the help teachers render to my child when it is a holiday because you have to know now the task is by yourself.....no camp shifting (P5, 27-03-2019).

I have brothers and sisters in some of my children, neighbors and church mates who have helped me pull through. Yes, stigma can be there but what really matters is how you regard yourself before people can place you with a tag. Otherwise, not everybody is bad! (P4, 25-03-2019).

The strategies given by parents in this study were quite limiting in that not much came out, a sign that parents need help in strategies of managing peculiar psychosocial behaviours of their children with ASD. O'Nions, Happé, Evers, Boonen, and Noen, (2017), also doubted the nature of strategies parents employed in managing strange behaviours of learners with ASD. They said some parents even used traditional strategies such as physical punishment to manage naught behaviour (O'Nions, Happé, Evers, Boonen, & Noen, 2017). The irritation and disappointing behaviours of

children with ASD especially when parents are in public places with them can leave parents very disappointed and stressed (Wonani & Muzata, 2019). The most commonly used approach appears to be the directive approach. However, research shows a number of approaches parents' use, which include accommodating the child, modifying the environment, providing structure, routine and occupation, supervision and monitoring, managing non-compliance with everyday tasks, responding to problem behaviour, managing distress, maintaining safety and analysing and planning (O'Nions, Happé, Evers, Boonen & Noen, 2017). Parents' active participation in the education and general social development of their children facilitates academic achievement (Muzata, 2019).

The above findings show that parents, especially the mothers were actually determined against all odds to see their children with ASD lead a better and changed life. This is clear from parents' self-motivation, desire to seek help from others and the Creator as well as the provision of unconditional love for their children. The findings above relate well with Thompson (2000) who indicated that parents who slowly accepted the child's condition, societal criticism and stigmatization towards their child helped themselves to cope with encounters of raising a child with a disability. Similarly, Bronfenbrenner (1979)'s ecological systems sees the bigger role friends to the family, religious beliefs and culture itself plays in the development of a child.

Teachers experiences in managing peculiar psychosocial behaviours of learners with ASD

Through interviews, teachers expressed mixed personal experiences and motivation in dealing with learners with ASD. Most of the teachers gave out their views that they found teaching learners with ASD to be a nice challenge, interesting and worthwhile experience in their teaching career. Some of their voices were as follows:

The behaviours in these guys' interest me so much despite the fact that you have teach, teach and reteach hoping one day they can grasp the concept

but just knowing you are hammering rocks because their behaviour distracts their learning so much (T4, 21-03-2019).

We accept to receive these children just as they come from their home. We agree to change their nappies, bath them (learners) and feed them one by one. What else can a teacher do? Very few of us would agree to handle such learners with inadequate skills for self-upkeep! (T1, 03-2019)

We also deserve to receive learners who can fluently speak and take care of themselves like any other teacher under the ministry of education. So, we are fair enough to accept such an enormous responsibility of handling learners with ASD. We agree to take up the parental role of which one without a good heart cannot manage even with all the highest qualifications on the land! It's like a vocation for us! (T6, 10-04-2019).

The above excerpts are positive expressions of teachers' interaction with learners with ASD. It is clear from the revelations by teachers above that not all hope is lost for a child with ASD. Teachers regard such children as valuable resource for the school due their unique contribution to the learning process.

However, teachers also expressed negative behaviour towards learners with ASD as well and as follows;

As you can see this class has only three learners with ASD condition while the rest are not. While we appreciate the aspect of inclusiveness in school, the learners with ASD do disturb the learning process through self-ejection from the learning or abrupt shouts and screaming (T5, 01-04-2019)

It is not easy to meet the individual needs of learners with ASD in an overcrowded classroom environment like this. However, given a one to one contact, some of these learners would definitely make it academically to a certain extent (T4, 21-03-2019).

We get tired when it comes to intervening in such disturbing behaviours like changing nappies, screaming amid lessons, forcing a child to do a task, walking about in class, general lesson disruption, touching objects and sometimes one's private parts as though something is itching. These are really unique individuals! (T3, 20-03-2019).

If you take lightly the matter of security, then you should be ready for court cases and police investigations if one child goes missing and worse if that child loses his or her life through untimely death while in astray! (11-03-2019)

From the above findings, it is clear that the learning environment was not supportive enough to learners with ASD consistent with the 'disabling' learning environment noted by Simui, Kasonde-Ngandu, Cheyeka, Makoe, (2019); Simui (2018), Simui, Kasonde-Ngandu, Cheyeka, Simwinda & Ndhlovu, (2018) prevailing in Zambia. Teachers had some negative experiences in their interaction with learners with ASD which were so exhaustive, risk taking, and a drawback to an effective learning and teaching process. Studies by Edward and Priscilla (2016) also revealed that ASD does present emotional behavioural problems which may involve truancy, delinquency, drug and substance abuse and other antisocial behaviours so challenging to teachers. According to Alberta Learning (2003), so many myths about individuals with ASD have been mooted, that they avoid eye and social contact yet there are different types of this disorder, many of them display affection and demonstrate a preference for social activities over solitary pursuits. It is therefore important to recognise that every person with ASD is unique (Alberta Learning, 2003). However, it is admitted that all children display characteristics related to difficulties in communication, interaction, learning, unusual challenging behaviours, unusual patterns of attention, anxiety and unusual responses to sensory stimuli (Alberta Learning, 2003).

Management Strategies used by teachers

Teachers interviewed applied quite a variety of management strategies to manage undesirable behaviours in learners with ASD. Some of the strategies included getting extra training to expand on personal knowledge about ASD; setting individual goals children; honoring child's interests and choices; use of both negative and positive reinforcements; team work; collaboration with parents; and building a warm environment of interaction within and outside class. Some of the backing teachers' voices are as follows:

You undergo all the training but then you create kind of your own philosophy and pedagogy. I think it's incredibly important not just to learn about Autism but to learn what makes these kids tick and how to reach them. You don't have to be an Autism expert but you really get a sense of how they learn (T4, 21-03-2019).

It is important to know what works as reinforcement for each child in terms of likes and dislikes (T3, 20-03-2019).

Let the children know they have someone safe they can lean on and talk to. . . You should build a really good relationship with the child and with the parents and make sure the child has some friends at least to talk to, you know, try to be a fair father or mother to all in the classroom (T5,01-04-2019).

I really think building a good solid relationship with the kids with any kind of disability really helps to cement things and makes them feel more confident and more comfortable in the classroom (T1, 11-03-2019).

The above findings reveal that teachers generally find the teaching of learners with ASD to be exciting and challenging at the same time. To some teachers, it is an opportunity to learn more about a variety of strategies to employ in behaviour management of ASD. However some teachers described the teaching of such learners as a burden because to some extent, they felt as if they were not employed to be teachers but rather to be maids. To such teachers,

handling a learner with ASD was perceived to be a more tasking and stressful activity especially that such learners find it difficult to excel academically as expected. This observation is however challenged by literature which states that when better collaboration strategies between teachers and parents are put in place, academic achievement is recorded. Collaboration with parents in managing psychosocial behaviours of learners with ASD has been reported to yield positive results in terms of improved academic performance and improved student social adjustment (Josilowski, & Morris, 2019). Similarly, Robertson, Chamberlain and Kasari (2003) argue that if a teacher cultivates a positive relationship with learners with ASD, learners are likely to display better behaviour. Several strategies can be used to teach and specifically include learners with ASD in classroom learning. Thwala (2018) reported strategies such as pictography, learner fixations, routine, motivation, and sitting arrangement as effective for teachers to use in managing Autistic behaviour.

Study Limitations

The current study relied heavily on experiences of parents and teachers to elicit information on the felt challenges of teaching and managing learners with ASD. For further research, given the challenges of engaging Autistic children in a research, it would be critical that other learner friendly strategies such as Photo elicitation and drawings are used to generate evidence from the primary target group as demonstrated by Eliadou, Lo, Servio & Simui (2007).

Conclusion

Based on the findings, the study concludes that peculiar psychosocial behaviours observed in ASD learners include individualistic nature, obsessiveness with things, over sensitiveness to stimuli, hyperactivity, sexual inappropriate, aggression, truancy, tantrums and selectivity on food stuffs, games and toys. These behaviours bordered on disordered social interaction, delayed language and communication skills, emotional outbursts and sexual disorder. It must however be mentioned that these individual traits were

observed to be in variation from one child to the other. Learners with ASD are in different categories. They do not exhibit the same features although generally their behaviours fall within identified categories presented in this paper. However, the environment in which a learner with ASD develops should be positive to help the child develop social skills and learn accordingly. A non-supportive environment has negative influence on the child's development while a supportive environment has positive influence on child. Should the environment be non-supportive on a child who already has a disability, the impact may be two way, towards and away from the child. While it is admitted that learners with ASD pose challenges to both teachers and parents, the way they are handled may determine their positive or negative development. If the child with the condition does not receive the much needed affection and labeled negatively as troublesome, the child's situation may worsen and a worsened situation in the child's behaviour in turn affects the family. It is therefore important that ASD is well managed to avoid the negative effects it poses to worsen.

Recommendations

Based on the study findings, the following recommendations were made:

1. The school has a responsibility to help parents form and join social support groups in order to get social, moral, and emotional and any other form of support, knowledge and skills of managing peculiar behaviour in learners with ASD.
2. Teachers are encouraged to link closely with parents and guardians to help parents improve their skills in managing peculiar psychosocial of behaviours of children with ASD.
3. The administrators in the special units of this study should create a deliberate program to educate and counsel parents and guardians living with children with ASD.
4. The Ministry of General Education should provide special units with occupational and behaviour therapists to help with behaviour training of learners with ASD so that teachers

concentrate on teaching. This calls for a multidisciplinary collection of experts to handle learners with ASD in special units.

5. Teacher training /education to should consider the imparting of skills to manage peculiar psychosocial behaviours of children with ASD.
6. The government through the Ministry of Community Development and Social Welfare in liaison with the Ministry of General Education should ensure that parents to learners with ASD are provided with financial support to lessen the impact of expenses incurred in seeking both education and psychosocial care services for their children with ASD.

References

- Alberta Learning (2003). Teaching Students with Autism Spectrum Disorders. Teaching Students with Autism Spectrum Disorders – ERIC files.eric.ed.gov > fulltext.
- Attwood, T. (1998). *Asperger Syndrome: A Guide for Parents and Professionals*. Jessica Kinsley 1. 85302-577-1.
- Aylaz, R., Yilmaz, U., & Polat, S. (2012). Effect of difficulties experienced by parents of autistic children on their sexual life: A qualitative study. *Sexual Disabilities*, 30 (4), 395– 406.
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The Ecology of Human Development*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press.
- Carolyn, Casey & Ashlea (2017). *Self-reported Stress among Adolescents Siblings of Individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder and Syndrome*. <https://www.researchgate.net> publication.
- Chansa-Kabali, T., Nyoni, J. and Mwanza. H. (2019). Awareness and Knowledge Associated with Autism Spectrum Disorders among University Students in Zambia. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*. 49, (9) 3571–3581
- Children with autism: Parenting, schooling, and social inclusion of autistic children. In K., J., Ripoll, A. L., Comunian, & C. M. Brown (Eds.). *Expanding Horizons. Current research on Interpersonal Acceptance* (pp. 103-125). Boca Raton, FL: Brown/Walker Press.

- Comer, J.P and Haynes, N.M (1992). *Parent Involvement in the Schools: An ecological approach. Education and Society, 3*, 271 – 277.
- Edward, K. and Priscilla G. (2016). Relationship between Teachers' Perception of Causes of Challenging Behaviour and the Choice of Management Strategies among Learners with Autistic Spectrum Disorders. *Journal of Education and Practice, (7)*, 2, 80.
- Eliadou, A., Lo, W.M., Servio, S., & Simui, F., (2007). Using children's drawings to investigate racial inclusion in a school in England. *EENET Newsletter articles*, 11.
- Geraldina, E. (2015). Teachers' knowledge and perceived challenges of teaching children with autism in Tanzanian regular primary schools. *International Journal of Academic Research and Reflection, (3)*, 5, 2015ISSN 2309-0405 Progressive Academic Publishing, UKPage36www.idpublications.org.
- Halladay, A.K. Bishop., P. Constantino, J.N., Daniel., A.M., Koenig, K., Palmer.K., Messinger.D., Pelphrey.K., Sanders, S.J., Singer.A.T., Taylor.J.L., & Szatmari, (2015). Sex differences in autism spectrum disorders: summarizing evidence gaps and identifying emerging areas of priority. *Molecular Autism, 6* (36).
- Hannah, L. (2001). *Teaching Young Children with Autistic Spectrum Disorders: A Practical Guide for Parents & Staff in Mainstream Schools and Nurseries*. NAS publication ISBN 1899280324.
- Hartmann, Ashley (2012). Autism and its Impact on Families- Retrieved from Sophia, the St. Catherine University Repository Website:[https:// Sophia.stkate.edu/msw-papers/35](https://Sophia.stkate.edu/msw-papers/35).
- Jordan, R. (1997). *Educating Children and Young People with Autism (Guides for Special Education, No 10)*, Paris UNESCO.
- Josilowski, C. S., & Morris, W. (2019). A Qualitative Exploration of Teachers' Experiences with Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder Transitioning and Adjusting to Inclusion: Impacts of the Home and School Collaboration. *The Qualitative Report, 24* (6), 1275-1286. Retrieved from <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol24/iss6/6>.

- Kalabula. D.M. (2007). *Special Education in Zambia*. Lusaka: Musumali Press.
- Khasakhala, E. & Galava P. (2016). Relationship between Teachers' Perception of Causes of Challenging Behaviour and the Choice of Management Strategies among Learners with Autistic Spectrum Disorders. *Journal of Education and Practice*, (7), 2, 80.
- Kourkoutas, E., Langher, V., Caldin, R., & Fountoulaki, E. (2012). Experiences of parents of
- Lindsay, S., Proulx, M., Scott, H., & Thomson, N. (2014). *Exploring teachers' strategies for including children with autism spectrum disorder in mainstream classrooms*. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 18 (2), 101-122
- Lindsay, S., Proulx, M., Thomson, N., & Scott, H. (2013). Educators' Challenges of Including Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder in Mainstream Classrooms. *International Journal of Disability, Development and Education*, 60, (4), 347–362.
- Lynch S.L & Irvine A.N (2009). Inclusive Education and Best Practices for children with autism spectrum disorders: an integrated approach, *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 13 : 8, 845-859; Doi: 10.1080/13603110802475518.
- Ministry of Education (1977). *Education Reforms*. Lusaka Zambia Education Publishing House.
- Ministry of Education (1996). *Educating Our Future, National Policy on Education*. Lusaka: Institutional Suppliers.
- Muller, E., Schuler, A.L., & Yates, G.B. (2008). *Social challenges and supports from the perspective of individuals with Asperger syndrome and other autism spectrum disabilities*. *Autism*, 12, 173–190.
- Reid, G., & O'Connor, J. (2003). *The autism spectrum disorders: Activity selection, assessment, and program organization*. *Palaestra*, 19, 20-27.
- Muzata, K.K. & Ndonyo, T.M. (2019). "The Practice based Model: A Proposed Training Package for Special Education Trainee Teachers in Zambia" In: M.K. Banja (ed.). *Selected Readings in Education Volume 2* (pp. 23-41), Lusaka: Marvel Publishers.

- Muzata, K.K. (2017). Curriculum implementation for learners with special education needs: the case of selected inclusive and special schools in Zambia. PhD Thesis, University of South Africa, <http://uir.unisa.ac.za/handle/10500/24571>.
- Muzata, K.K. (2018). Teaching Skills of Special Education Students during Teaching Practice: The Case of the University of Zambia Pre-service Special Education Students. *Multidisciplinary Journal of language and Social Sciences Education*, 1, (1), 103-137.
- Muzata, K.K. (2019). 'The daunting challenge of multilingual education policy in Zambia: Teachers' perceptions' In: O. Funke, (ed). *Multilingualism in the classroom: Teaching and learning in a challenging context* (pp 164-181), Cape Town: UCT Press.
- Myers S., Johnson C. (2007). Council on Children with Disabilities. *Management of children with autism spectrum disorders. Paediatrics*, 120 (5).
- Myers, S.M & Johnson, C.P (2007). *Management of Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders*. DOI: 10.1542/peds.2007-2362.
- Ndhlovu, D., Muzata, K.K and Mtonga, T. (2018). "Special Education in Zambia at Fifty Years and Beyond: History, Current Status and Future Prospects". In: Masaiti, G., *Education in Zambia at Fifty Years of Independence and Beyond: History, Current Status and Contemporary Issues*. UNZA Press: Lusaka. pp. 156 - 168.
- Nyoni, J. and Serpell, R. (2012). The impact on parents of raising a young child with autism: A phenomenological study of parents in Lusaka, Zambia. *International Journal of Disability, Community & Rehabilitation*, 11, (1), Available @ http://www.ijdc.ca/Vol11_01/articles/nyoni.shtml.
- O’Nions, E., Happé, F., Evers, K., Boonen, H., and Noen, I. (2017). How do Parents Manage Irritability, Challenging Behaviour, Non-Compliance and Anxiety in Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders? A Meta-Synthesis. *Journal of Autism Developmental Disorder*. 2018; 48(4): 1272–1286.

doi: 10.1007/s10803-017-3361-4.

- Prince, S. (2007). *Stress, Coping and Psychological well-being: The development of resource manual for parents of autistic children*. Accessed on October 30, 2013 from <http://gradworks.umi.com/3293113.pdf>.
- Reid, G., & O'Connor, J. (2003). *The autism spectrum disorders: Activity selection, assessment, and program organization. Palaestra, 19*, 20-27, 58.
- Robertson, K., Chamberlain, B., & Kasari, C. (2003). General Education teachers' relationships with included students with autism. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders, 33*, 123–130.
- Simui F. (2009). Preparing Teachers for Inclusive Education: A Study of the English Approach. Paper Presented at the *SANORD 2ND International Conference: Inclusive and Exclusion in Higher Education*, Rhodes University, Grahamstown, South Africa, December 7 to 9, 2009.
- Simui, F. (2018). *Lived Experiences of Students with Visual Impairments at Sim University in Zambia: A Hermeneutic Phenomenological Approach* Lusaka: University of Zambia. Unpublished PhD Thesis.
- Simui, F., Kasonde-Ngandu, S. Cheyeka, A.M., Simwinga, J., & Ndhlovu, D. (2018). Enablers and disablers to academic success of students with visual impairment: A 10-year literature disclosure, 2007–201. *British Journal of Visual Impairment, 36* (2), 163-174. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0264619617739932>.
- Simui, F., Kasonde-Ngandu, S., Cheyeka, A.M., Makoe, M., (2019). Lived Disablers to Academic Success of the Visually Impaired at the University of Zambia, Sub-Saharan Africa. *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa. 7* (2), 41-56. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24085/jsaa.v7i2.3824>.
- Thompson, C. E. (2000): *Raising a handicapped child*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, Inc. Publications Africa.

- Thwala, S.K. (2018) Teachers' Strategies of Including Learners with Autism Spectrum Disorders in Mainstream Classrooms in Swaziland. *International Journal of Humanities Social Sciences and Education (IJHSSE)* VoL 5, (12), 78-85. <http://dx.doi.org/10.20431/2349-0381.0512009>.
- Werling, D.M. & Geschwing, D.H. (2013). Sex differences in autism spectrum disorders. *Current Opinion in Neurology*, 26 (2), 146-153.
- Wonani. L. & Muzata, K.K. (2019). Parenting and Educating Children with Autism: Lived Experiences of Lusaka Parents–Zambia. *International Journal of Sciences: Basic and Applied Research (IJSBAR)*, 48, (6), 20 -36.