International Journal of Humanity Studies
http://e-journal.usd.ac.id/index.php/IJHS
Sanata Dharma University, Yogyakarta, Indonesia

OPTIMIZING PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT IN THE EDUCATION OF LEARNERS WITH AUTISM IN ESWATINI MAINSTREAM PRIMARY SCHOOLS

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https://doi.org/10.24071/ijhs.v8i1.8800
received 9 June 2024; accepted 8 October 2024

Abstract
In 2010, the Kingdom of Eswatini granted learners with mild to moderate forms of autism the right to access education in neighborhood schools. However, the Eswatini Annual Education Census report of 2019 did not make specific mention of these learners' current state of affairs. This qualitative, phenomenological study explored strategies for optimizing parental involvement in the education of learners with autism in Eswatini mainstream primary schools. The data were extracted through interviews and document analysis from fifteen purposively sampled parents and teachers selected from four mainstream primary schools in Eswatini. The data were analyzed thematically. Ethical considerations upheld during this investigation were informed consent, voluntary participation, anonymity, and confidentiality of information that participants divulged. One major finding of this study demonstrates that the deployment of highly autism-qualified teachers is crucial for laying a concrete foundation for parents to use in helping the learners in their studies. Thus, to accrue the involvement of parents in education, the Deputy Prime Minister's office should state guidelines and craft monitoring tools to ensure that schools embrace and support the involvement of parents.

Keywords: learner with autism, mainstream school, optimize, parental involvement

Introduction

The endorsement of the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education in Spain (UNESCO, 1994) which the Kingdom of Eswatini (formerly called Swaziland) signed signaled the dawn of providing quality, non-discriminatory education to learners who require special education (Ainscow, 2020). Disappointingly, owing to that academic achievement is one of the elements which businesses examine when looking for employment (Briones et al., 2021), in Eswatini, the high grade repetition rate among learners with mild to moderate degrees of autism spectrum disorder (hereafter referred to as autism) in mainstream primary schools is a cause of concern, as it accelerates drop-out of these learners before they enroll for secondary education (Swaziland Ministry of Education and Training, 2018).

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The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders Fifth Edition defines autism as a neurodevelopmental, biologically determined disorder that is characterized by a triad of impairments that impacts social interactions, communication, and imagination (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). The social communication and interaction deficits manifest across a variety of contexts, like limited participation in social activities (Ghanouni et al. 2019). Moreover, learners with autism also suffer from bullying (Bergara et al., 2019).

Despite the domestication of inclusive education in Eswatini, the education of learners with autism is still beclouded with several daunting prospects, which include teachers' dwindling capacities to deploy required pedagogies for effectively teaching the learners. Kasongole and Muzata (2020) opine that through homework, the home environment can play a pivotal role in improving the academic performance of all sorts of learners. Nevertheless, in spite of the drastic effort of mainstreaming the learners into regular classrooms in 2010, which necessitates informing all stakeholders of the education fraternity about the incidences of autism in their jurisdictions (Ozerk & Cardinal, 2020), the parents of learners with autism in Eswatini mainstream primary schools are still not adequately involved in matters of supporting the learners.

Eswatini's giant strides taken to remove handicapping features that impede learners with autism from attaining their fullest mental and physical potentials through interface with education include the development of the Constitution of the Kingdom of Swaziland of 2005 (Government of the Kingdom of Swaziland, 2005), the National Disability Policy of 2013 (Deputy Prime Minister's Office, 2013), the National Disability Act of 2018 (Deputy Prime Minister's Office, 2018), Draft Inclusive Education Policy of 2008 (Swaziland Ministry of Education and Training, 2008), and the National Education and Training Sector Policy of 2018 (Government of the Kingdom of Eswatini Ministry of Education and Training, 2018).

Disappointingly, irrespective of the massive drive to bring issues of educating learners with special education needs to the forefront through ratification of such a vast majority of legal and policy framework, none of the above stipulated promulgations explicitly outlines strategies through which involvement of parents in the education of the learners with autism could be optimized. Sadly, the Eswatini Annual Education Census report of 2019 did not account for the existence of learners with autism (Eswatini Ministry of Education and Training, 2019). The undocumented existence of the learners in this vital education management information system seems to be the underlying reason that has prevented the parents from being considered subjects of investigation. The paucity of such crucial information has bottled our minds, thus, warranting us to embark on conducting this investigation.

Research aims and questions

The main aim of this study was to investigate and understand strategies that could be used to optimize parental involvement in the education of learners with autism in Eswatini mainstream primary schools. In light of the above, the primary research question of this study was, 'What strategies can be utilized to optimize parental involvement in educating learners with autism in Eswatini mainstream primary schools?' In a quest to answer this research question, we guided the study by utilizing the following sub-research questions:

a) What strategies can be used to ensure that human and material resources in Eswatini optimize parental involvement in the education of learners with autism in mainstream primary schools?
b) How can stakeholders in the education fraternity dispel negative societal perceptions that hinder effective parents' involvement in the education of learners with autism in Eswatini mainstream primary schools?

Theoretical Framework

As a point of departure, the theoretical underpinning of this study lies in the utilization of Parent Development Theory (Mowder, 2005) and the Bio-ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). In the subsequent section, we briefly discuss these two theoretical lenses.

Parent Development Theory

Parent Development Theory (Mowder, 2005) is a six-dimensional theory that was developed by Barbara Mowder, and it views parenting as continuously altering perceptions of parenting expectations and attitudes in response to the needs of the developing child as they change from time to time (Bradley, 2020). This theory was most appropriate because it is rooted in the coalition of multiple experts, like therapists, psychologists, and special education teachers at the forefront to encourage parents' active participation in education, as such a coalition affords the learners the best educational services in an environment that provides best resources. Below we provide a brief explanation of each of the six dimensions of this theory.

Bonding: This term refers to the parents' love and affection for their child (Mowder, 2005). In this study, bonding looked at ways through which parents used home resources to strengthen their bonding with the learners.

Discipline: It refers to the standards that parents set for a child, as well as the means through which parents uphold the standards they have set. In this study, we focused on strategies that parents set for themselves and for the learners, to try and achieve optimized opportunities to be involved in the education of learners with autism.

Education: This term implies techniques that parents employ in order to teach, as well as guide children through maintaining communication and imparting them with information (Mowder, 2005). The focus of this dimension was on how teachers helped parents to utilize both in-school and out-of-school resources to guide the learners in doing homework.

General welfare and protection: Parents are obliged to provide basic needs to their children, and further keep the learners safe from all sorts of harm (Rekha & Satapathy, 2017). In this factor, we analyzed the role teachers and therapists played in enhancing parental involvement in in-school and out-of-school activities to protect the learners from being subjected to psychological, emotional, and physical harm.

Responsivity: Mowder (2005) posits that responsivity is the degree to which parents respond to the daily needs of their children. Hence, our focus was on the strategies that teachers set up to enable parents to be responsive to the academic needs of learners with autism and also to motivate the learners to thrive for academic excellence.

Sensitivity: This term refers to an accurate understanding of the meaning behind the behavior of the child and attending to the child's needs. Hence, we looked at strategies that parents, teachers, and out-of-school communities used to optimize parental involvement in addressing the learners' academic and social needs.

Bio-ecological Systems Theory

The Bio-ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) was propounded by Urie Bronfenbrenner, a Russian developmental psychologist. This theory views the environment as a multi-layer of five interrelated systems: the micro-, meso-, exo-, macro-, and chrono-system. Underneath, we describe each of these five systems.

The micro-system: This is the child's closest area of direct participation (Soyege, 2020), comprised of structures that include family, school, neighborhood, and church (Guy-Evans, 2020). Bronfenbrenner (1979) postulates that in micro-system relationships are bi-directional, that is, they impact both away from the developing child and also towards the child. In this system, we focused on resources through which the family and school can optimize parental involvement in the endeavor to successfully educate learners with autism in mainstream primary schools.

The meso-system: This system elucidates the ultimate impact of the relationship between two or more micro-systems as the child develops (Guy-Evans, 2020). In the case of educating learners, Magano (2020) notes that parental involvement entails parents' visits to their child's teachers, whereby in the presence of the learner, the learners' work should be reviewed. Hence, in this context, we focused on how human resources, namely teachers and in-service education and training department lecturers can create the least restrictive environments that are conducive to intensifying opportunities for the involvement of the parents in educating learners with autism.

The exo-system: It encompasses links that exist between settings that although not involving the child directly (Brien, 2019), the child does nevertheless, significantly experience the negative or positive forces between the setting of their sphere of operation and the other settings. Thus, we focused on how communities, health services, and the entire education system designed tailor-made activities and services to optimize parental involvement in educating learners with autism.

Macro-system: This system encloses the micro-, meso- and exo-systems, and it constitutes the administrative or political hierarchy, traditions, and opinions within the culture and society in which the child develops (Soyege, 2020). In this system, we analyzed measures that head teachers, as administrators used to curb handicapping environments which constrain maximized parental involvement in the education of learners at home and school.

The chrono-system: It encapsulates the time of occurrence of environmental events as they unfold throughout the course and development of the child (Soyege, 2020). Hence, we focused on strategies through which resources in the community, health services, and the country's education systems could be effectively and efficiently used to optimize parental involvement in relation to the current trend of inclusion of learners with autism.

A review of local and international literature

Operationalized through the National Disability Plan of Action 2015-2020, the National Disability Policy of 2013 is authorized to inform and sensitize families about the unique needs and rights of persons with autism, and further ensure that they are successfully mainstreamed in all levels of society, beginning from the home, as the first and most fundamental setting of society (Deputy Prime Minister's Office, 2013). Chalwe et al. (2021) opine that to enable parents to efficiently navigate the complexities of obtaining resources, support, and maintaining motivation that emanates from parenting learners with autism, the parents require counseling.

Shattnawi et al. (2020) report that to cater to the exceptionality of learners with autism, some parents find themselves compelled to quit their full-time jobs. While struggling with the reduced family income, which comes with the loss of full-time jobs, the state of schools, on the other hand, often requires parents to boost the academic aspect of the learners with autism by hiring private special education teachers. Notably, in the United States of America, Helkkula et al. (2020) revealed that for tuition, parents of learners with autism are offered discounts.

Although inclusive education is embedded in a social justice paradigm, parents are engulfed with mainstream schools' neglect and isolation of learners with autism, and the absence of autism-appropriate curriculum and assessment tools (Yaacob et al., 2021). While adequately trained teachers are entrusted with producing positive scholastic results, Numisi et al. (2020) showed teachers' ill-preparedness and inadequacy of skills in teaching learners with autism. Moreover, in an effort to explore profiles of private and public autism-specific schools in the Gauteng province of South Africa, Erasmus et al. (2019) established that according to principals' perspective, autism-specific schools were the best educational placement for learners with autism.

Adigun, Mosia, and Mngomezulu (2023) believe that making fathers guest speakers on 'career days' can strengthen the bonding between fathers and their children, and could also serve as a prudent strategy for the maximization of the fathers' involvement in their children's education. In another study, Marais (2020) established that teachers held the view that talks, workshops, seminars, and support groups are significantly essential for equipping parents with crucial information that they need for optimization of their involvement in the teaching and learning of learners with autism. Moreover, utilization of these fora is also paramount for eliminating and reducing teacher-parent conflict by keeping teachers well acquainted with current information and trends in the education of learners with autism, for instance, additional sources available to provide extra help for the learners with autism (Omolayo et al., 2020), as it has been observed that conflicts arising from unrealistic expectations damage teacher-parent relationship (Numisi et al., 2020).

Method

The subsequent section discusses the methodology which underpinned this study.

Approach, design, and paradigm

This study was guided by a qualitative research approach, and such an approach was prudent for describing experiences and situations from the participants' perspective (Davidson, 2019), and also enabling us to explore and understand strategies for optimizing parental involvement in educating learners with autism in mainstream primary schools from multiple perspectives (Bertram & Christiansen, 2020), hence, the use of interviews and document analysis. To seek the strategies, we utilized a phenomenological design, and the interpretivism paradigm (Alharahshen & Pius, 2020).

Sampling

The participants of this study were a composition of fifteen male and female parents and teachers, amongst whom were seven parents and eight teachers of learners with autism. Due to our anticipated desire to extract rich and relevant data, we purposively sampled from four public and private mainstream primary schools situated in the Manzini region of Eswatini.

Data collection

For collecting data, we employed individual semi-structured interviews, focus-group interviews, and document analysis. In readiness for conducting the study, we designed separate individual interview guides for the parents and teachers, a focus-group interview guide for teachers of learners with autism, and a document analysis form. Before taking each of these instruments to the field for data collection, we sent them to a specialist in the field of special education needs for expert validation. After a thorough review, we amended all items that appeared seemingly vague or less beneficial for extracting data relevant to answering the research question. For instance, in order to safeguard participants from experiencing fatigue, we reduced the number of interview questions.

As observed by Wishkoski (2020), semi-structured interviews enabled us to have more control over the subject of inquiry, as their flexibility accorded us an opportunity to ask follow-up questions by deviating from the pre-formulated key questions when needed to pursue a response in more detail arose (Cohen et al., 2018). We administered individual interviews, ranging from 30 to 60 minutes long in venues that were suggested by the participants, and the rapport we established earlier with the interviewees enabled them to provide rich, detailed accounts of the subject at the heart of the study (McGrath et al., 2020). From the teacher participants, we also collected data through a focus-group interview, thus, enabling the participants to interact spontaneously with each other (Gundumogula, 2020), and at this juncture, allowing the subject under investigation to be tackled without having to follow a formulated strict series of questions (Adler et al., 2019). The data collected through interviews were authenticated through an audio-recording system. Moreover, to supplement the responses from interviews, we engaged in document analysis (Bingham et al., 2019), whereby, we analyzed learners' exercise books, workbooks, and class attendance registers.

Data analysis

We analyzed the data using the six basic steps of thematic analysis as posited by Braun and Clarke (2006). Since the thematic approach of analysis is a method

for identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns of meaning within qualitative data (Braun et al., 2019), we, thus, familiarized ourselves with the data, generated codes, searched for themes, reviewed the themes in relation to the codes extracted, defined and named the themes, and lastly we compiled a report.

Ethical aspects considered in the study

Ethical considerations which we adhered to were informed consent, whereby participants declared their consent to participate by endorsing signatures in consent form reply slips which we provided to them; self-determination, whereby participants' dignity and freedom of choice to partake, refuse or withdraw participating at any stage of this study was not coerced by any means of intimidation emanating from fear of incurring penalties (Creswell & Creswell, 2018); minimization of harm, by safeguarding participants against becoming stressed (Arifin 2018); anonymity, by ensuring high level of privacy of data sources through assigning pseudo-names to participant parents, teachers and schools; and securing confidentiality of information participants divulged. Prior to undertaking this study, we secured authorization from the Faculty of Education Research Ethics Committee of the university (Creswell & Creswell, 2017), and also from the Director of Education in Eswatini.

Measures of trustworthiness

In this study, we anchored trustworthiness through the four pillars: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability as outlined by Guba and Lincoln, (1981), cited in Huttunen and Kakkori (2020). We established credibility by presenting supporting evidence to prove that the findings accurately reflected the data that we collected (Johnson et al., 2020). To ensure transferability, we provided thick descriptions that were rich enough to make judgments about the findings' transferability to other contexts (Merriam & Grenier, 2019). Furthermore, we **s**afeguarded dependability by providing documentation of clear, logical notes of how each stage of the study was undertaken (Maree, 2020), so other researchers could follow the audit trail (Leavy, 2020). Moreover, we guaranteed confirmability through establishing transparency in all the steps we undertook throughout the entire research process, and thoroughly ensured that we never at any stage fabricated the data.

Findings and Discussion

Below are the findings of this study, categorized into two themes: deployment of autism-specific trained teachers and raising awareness at all levels of society. Each theme is elucidated below.

Deployment of autism-specific trained teachers

During training, autism-specific trained teachers are equipped with skills to make them competent in utilizing autism-specific curriculum and assessment tools (Yaacob et al., 2021). The findings of this study illustrate that due to doubting the teachers' qualifications, parent participants never believed that the currently deployed teachers could combat the academic performance discrepancies among learners with autism, hence, some even suggested the establishment of separate

educational settings. In a complaint, School A, Parent Participant 2, a teacher by profession purported that:

> *The Ministry of Education and Training should embrace the learners with autism and should post a special education needs teacher to the school… The head teacher too should embrace the disability and educate herself. Such can make it easier for her to monitor and support the teachers, and then easier for them to give us tips on how to support the learners in studies.*

School A, Parent Participant 1 expressed the need for the government to take giant strides to revamp the education system by saying:

> *I think the Ministry of Education and Training should train teachers for autism because most teachers are learning about our children. Hence, it's difficult for us to be involved in assisting the learners with their studies.*

After analyzing the classwork exercise book for the learner, School B, Parent Participant 2 shared the same sentiments by saying:

> *The school should have relevant qualified teachers to teach our children... For now, I think there should be separate places where these children can be taught, either in this school or in a special school constructed specifically for them. These learners can get a proper education if they can compete among themselves because for now we get minimal support because the focus of the school is on the 'normal' learners.*

The findings show that parent participants feel teachers should be typically trained in various assessments and techniques that are commensurate to the complexities of leading the learners to achieve positive scholastic results in examinations, quizzes, and tests. The findings on parent participants' mistrust of teachers' competency seem to be in alignment with findings recorded by Numisi et al. (2020) where both parent and teacher participants felt teachers had not been adequately trained to handle the complexities of educating learners with autism. Contrarily, the findings contradict those of a study conducted by Helkkula et al. (2020) whereby parents demonstrated a high degree of satisfaction with teachers who were autism-skilled enough to demonstrate a good understanding of special education needs for learners with autism.

The findings also reveal that parents' minimal involvement emanates from an existing misalignment between policy and practice, a situation which makes parents anxious and unable to adhere to Mowder's (2005) dimension of education where parents should use teachers as resources to gain assistance on how to support the learners in doing homework. This finding concurs with one from Numisi et al. (2020) where in Limpopo, unrealistic expectations negatively impacted the teachers-parents relationship. In the context of Eswatini, unless they have upgraded their qualifications to keep themselves abreast with inclusive education,

most teachers who acquired pre-service training earlier than 2010 have with the introduction of inclusive education only received small doses of training through in-service training. Notably, behavioral problems exhibited by learners with autism require a strong intervention, especially one that comprises highly autism-skilled teachers. While Chitiyo and Dzenga (2021) aver that budgetary constraints inhibit the allocation of funds to education, it is, however, imperative to note that without adequate skills and instructional resources, teachers cannot be able to tailor instructional methods to accommodate the exceptional needs of the learners with autism. Consequently, with the minimal information imparted by incompetent teachers, the parents' effort in supporting the learners in studies may yield futile results, thus, a need for relevantly skilled teachers to lay a solid foundation during class time.

Raising awareness in all levels of society

The National Disability Plan of Action of 2015-2020 strives to uproot all misconceptions leveled towards all persons with autism (Deputy Prime Minister's Office, 2013). The majority of parent participants believed that sensitizing the entire society could serve as a brilliant strategy to optimize parental involvement in the education of learners with autism. School B, Parent Participant 1 mentioned that:

> *There should be awareness and ongoing counseling at school level, whereby teachers or any relevant people should see to it that issues of bullying are curbed.*

School A, Parent Participant 2 alluded that:

> *There should be some awareness of some sort, at all levels of society. For example, the first time I heard and learned about it was when I got this child. I got so confused.*

Through their responses, teacher participants also revealed that they, too, as curriculum implementers believed that sensitization could be a pivotal strategy towards optimization of the involvement of parents in the education of the learners. School D, Teacher Participant 1 purported that:

> *Parents are fighting for their children to be accepted, so the school should sensitize the rest of the learner population.*

Similarly, School A, Teacher Participant 1 alluded that:

> *The parents and the entire community have to be counseled. Actually, if they are counseled at the community level prior to enrolling their children here at school, they can be supportive… We too, if parents bring a child to school, we educators should show that the child is gradually growing to be something in the future, like this existence of autism is not the end of life.*

Furthermore, School A, Teacher Participant 2 believed that when the opportunity is availed, teachers too should not be spared from intensive counselling. She said:

> *For teachers, I feel there should be workshops now and again where teachers can be sensitized... and the administration would sensitize parents, thus, they would help, like, where I need to improvise for teaching aids.*

Moreover, School C, Teacher Participant 1 believed that parents should be counseled to train the learners to be active in performing exercises, rather than spoiling the learners by pampering them. She said:

> *Not to give cell phones to sit and play, but to make sure that learners are accorded and supported to do activities to allow practice on speech and gross-motor movement.*

The above findings and those from focus-group interviews demonstrate that while there may be a vast array of verbal communication channels that could be beneficial in optimizing parental involvement in an endeavor to assist the learners to succeed in school, like talking to teachers in person and/or phone calls, as well as written communication channels, like notebooks and learners' progress report cards, parent participants also had hope that workshops and teachers' meetings could be used to foster the two-way communication salient for disseminating information. This finding echoes that of a study conducted by Marais (2020) where workshops, seminars, and support groups emerged as useful systems for disseminating accurate information to various stakeholders. For instance, in the case of head teachers, after being well-informed they can in addition to procurement of accommodative teaching aids inspire parents to cooperate in all matters of educating the learners with autism.

Notable is that the learners' accumulative exposure to bullying may increase the impact of post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms and interfere with the learners' willingness to attend school. While in this study, some parent participants were qualified teachers, the effects of exposure to bullying may compromise the effort of such parents to volunteer their minimal expertise in motivating learners to engage meaningfully in their education. Regardless of such, the Bio-ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) is rooted in the belief that social contexts and the level of the healthiness of relationships a person shares with colleagues, neighbors, family members, and institutional frameworks within their environment all tend to have an influence on the child's overall state of wellbeing (Soyege, 2020). Unless and until curbed, the destructive impact of autism on the learners and their parents struggling within parameters of what is generally considered worth of inclusion in regular school and society will continue to prevail and compromise parental involvement. Thus, the need for vibrant sensitization of people at all levels of Bronfenbrenner's Bio-ecological System can equip the entire citizenry with the necessary information to dispel all misconceptions centered around autism.

Conclusion

The findings reveal that the current widespread dissatisfaction emanating from teachers' incompetence can be mitigated through the deployment of autism-specific trained teachers. Furthermore, the inhumane treatment of parents of learners with autism which manifests through minimal consideration of the academic needs of their children educated in mainstream primary school settings can be eliminated through conducting nationwide training to sensitize the entire citizenry on fostering concrete parental involvement in the education of learners with autism.

Suggestions

The findings show that despite the numerous government policies in place, the supremacy of the drive towards equalization of educational opportunities for learners with autism has not yet received adequate attention, and that jeopardizes the extent to which the learners' parents are involved in mainstream primary schools. Thus, we suggest that to optimize parental involvement, teacher training institutions and the in-service education and training department should increase teachers' efficacy by expanding their scope of inclusive education programs to include vigorous training of all stakeholders on autism. Hence, to ensure that the education of learners with autism is not jeopardized, the Ministry of Education and Training can dispatch a vibrant inspectorate to monitor the implementation and evaluation of educating the learners with autism in mainstream primary schools as well as enhance its potential to yield tangible outcomes for optimal involvement of parents.

Moreover, to accrue the involvement of parents, the Ministry of Education and Training in collaboration with the Deputy Prime Minister's office, as a focal point for disseminating accurate information about disabilities should stipulate guidelines for parental involvement, conduct robust nationwide awareness campaigns to empower the entire broader citizenry, and as well craft monitoring tools for ensuring that schools and the entire Eswatini society embrace and support the involvement of parents in all areas of decision making in the inception, implementation and evaluation of all educational programs pertaining the learners with autism.

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