

Factors which Enhance or Hinder Meeting the Educational Needs of Autistic Children in Western Cape Province, South Africa: A Parents' Perspective

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Abstract

There is growing interest in autism spectrum disorder (ASD) as a result of the increasing prevalence rates, and because children with ASD find it particularly challenging to enter the educational system. The present study explored the perceptions of parents of ASD children by identifying the factors which enhanced or hindered their children in receiving quality education. Four focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted with 10 purposively selected participants per discussion group. A semi-structured interview guide was used to collect data. Data were analysed using ATLAS.ti. The key themes which evolved were: developmental and educational awareness and support (enhancement); the education system (hindrance); developing the capacities of teachers with specialised training (hindrance); and financial needs (hindrance). The present study recognizes that there are enhancements and hindrances that affect children with ASD and their educational development.

Keywords: *autism spectrum disorder, parent's perceptions, educational needs, barriers to learning.*

Introduction

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) affects 1 in 88 children globally and is 4 times more common in boys than in girls (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2012). A similar finding by Baio (2012) was that boys were 5 times more likely than girls to be diagnosed with ASD. The aetiology of ASD is still unknown and the present increase in the number of diagnoses is concerning (Cannell, 2017). In addition, South Africa's prevalence of ASD is unknown due to a lack of research conducted in the country and Africa in general (Ametepee & Chitiyo, 2009). However, Autism South Africa (2012) has predicted that 933 new cases of children with ASD would be diagnosed each month, i.e. 216 cases per week and 31 cases per day (Autism South Africa, 2012). Meanwhile, in Western Cape Province, South Africa, there are currently 1 684 children diagnosed with ASD (Pillay, Duncan & de Vries, 2017).

Given the global statistics, it is evident that many parents will be faced with challenges related to their children's educational development. Therefore, parents should aim to teach their child from an early age and start by teaching them the basics. However, many parents are challenged and find it difficult to teach a child diagnosed with ASD. Teaching basic skills such as communication to a child with ASD is not easy for parents to do and can be rather stressful (Altieri & von Kluge, 2009). Therefore, it is best that children with ASD should be in a schooling environment and taught by an appropriately trained teacher. Parents are faced with various issues surrounding education, and experience many challenges in placing their child in the most suitable school. Parents face the reality of knowing that their child is 'different' and that meeting their needs will not be easy compared to a child with no special needs (Carlsson, Miniscalco, Kadesjö & Laakso, 2016). As a result, in South Africa, special needs education and inclusion has been made a priority, with the education department guided by the White Paper 6 policy developed in 2001 which promotes children's basic right to education and allows them to exercise this right. Countries such as Australia, and many European countries, have identified the need to accommodate all learners with special needs and consequently they have implemented inclusion within the classroom. This approach indicates that South Africa is not the only country striving for an inclusive education system. South Africa is working towards providing education in the least restrictive manner, the right to access public education, and with proper instruction. This expectation is intended to meet the international standards set by many countries for achieving the inclusion criteria (Srivastava, de Boer & Pijl, 2015).

However, in South Africa, special needs education of disadvantaged children from low-income communities has tended to exclude the black majority. South Africa's history of apartheid had an influence on the accessibility of special needs education. According to apartheid policy, white learners with special needs had access to schools that were well-resourced, whereas black learners with special needs were systematically under-resourced. Therefore, it became imperative for the South African education system to change this situation, especially post-apartheid, as equal opportunities should be available to all children with and without special needs. The White Paper 6 addresses the need for more inclusive education, with the lack of schooling and resources having been identified (Lomofsky & Lazarus, 2001). The White Paper implementation was put in place 20 years ago, but the landscape of special needs has not changed much

(Engelbrecht, 2006). In Western Cape Province, many schools suitable for special needs learners have been identified, but a study by Mthimunye (2014) found that not all schools accommodate learners with ASD. Furthermore, parents are weighed down by many factors that affect their children's educational needs.

Aim of the study

The aim of the study was to explore parents' perceptions of the factors which enhance or hinder the educational needs of autistic children.

Research question

What are the factors that enhance or hinder the educational needs of autistic children?

Methodology

Participants

The study was conducted in Cape Town, in the Western Cape Province of South Africa. Those who participated in the study came from both low and middle socio-economic conditions. Four focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted, with 10 purposively selected participants per discussion group. Participants were either the mother, father or guardian of a child of school-going age who had been diagnosed with ASD. Purposive sampling allowed for participants to be recruited who were knowledgeable and able to contribute meaningfully toward the area of interest (Bernard, Wutich & Ryan, 2016). This was a heterogeneous sample, with the majority being of black, coloured and white ethnicity. FGDs continued until data saturation was reached, which was indicated when repetitive themes kept emerging (Turner III, 2010). Participants were recruited through special needs schools within the four Cape Town Metropolitan Districts, as illustrated in Figure 1 (Metro North, Metro Central, Metro South and Metro East).

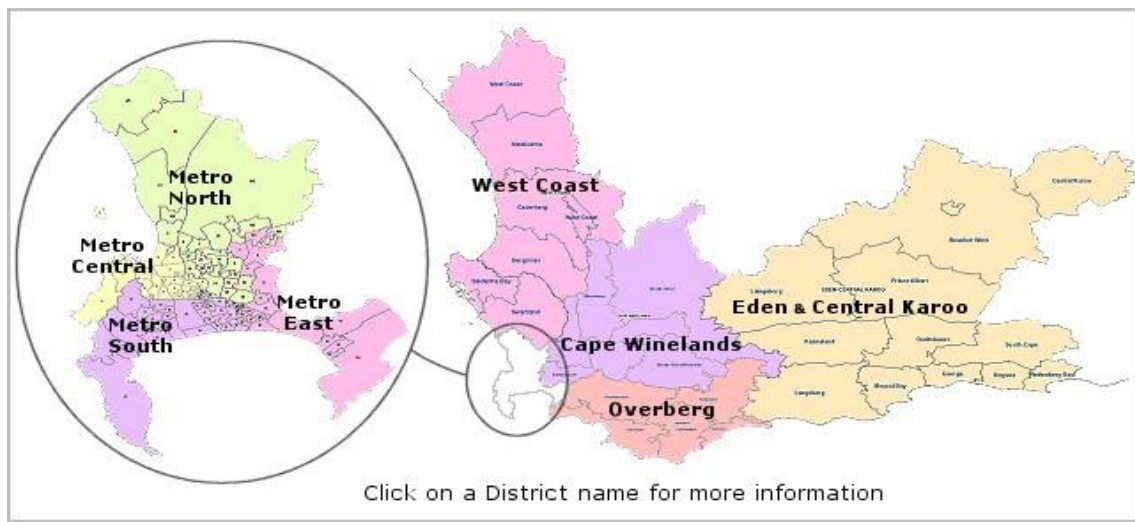


Figure 1. Map of the four urban districts in the Western Cape

(Source: Western Cape Education Department, 2007)

Data collection

Permission was requested from, and granted by, the University of the Western Cape to conduct the study. Approval was then received upon request from the Western Cape Education Department (WCED) to access parents through various special needs school. Letters were sent out, inviting parents to participate in the study. Information sheets were provided and participants had a choice as to whether they would like to participate in the research study. An information session was held prior to conducting the focus groups to discuss the purpose of the research study. Focus group interviews were scheduled for parents who agreed to participate in the study. Upon meeting with the participants, they were handed a consent form for completion. The focus group interviews ranged from 45 minutes to 60 minutes in length. Table 1 comprises the focus group interview guide. Probing questions were asked throughout the FGDs to gain more insight, as the interview questions served as guide.

Table 1: Focus group interview guide

No.	Question
1	What would you say was the biggest challenge after the diagnosis?
2	How did you deal with the diagnosis? Were their key role players within Society?
3	What was your experience finding school placement for your child diagnosed with autism?
4	Is the school addressing your child's needs and do you see improvement?
5	What are your current challenges ?
6	Have your challenges been addressed ? How?
7	Are there resources and services in the community that serve as a support to both you and your child? Accessibility to these services?
8	What would you like to see implemented/changed ? To benefit your child?

Data analysis

Focus group interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed using thematic analysis, following the six steps outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006): (1) familiarising oneself with the data and transcribing, (2) codes were generated; (3) search for themes by collating codes into themes; (4) review the themes in relation to the codes extracted; (5) define and name the themes as part of the ongoing analysis; and lastly (6) generate the final report. ATLAS.ti. was used following the analysis steps. ATLAS.ti. Mac Version 1.6. software was useful for organizing the text and coding the data (Creswell, 2009).

Trustworthiness

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985) trustworthiness is a pivotal when conducting research to maintain rigor. Trustworthiness is ensured by ensuring the following is maintained the credibility, confirmability, dependability and transferability of the study. Credibility was ensured by using purposive sampling and this eliminates the bias factor in the selection process. Participants were informed that they could exist the process at any time should they feel they no

longer want to participate in the study, leaving participants that are wanting to add value to participate. Transferability was maintained by ensuring full understanding of the research setting and context in which the research was conducted, thus the study included multiple districts. Dependability and credibility has close ties, the study is presented in a detailed manner should the research be conducted similar results will be obtained, all details pertaining to the study was closely examined and documented. Conformability in this study was maintained throughout conducting and keeping audit trails of and revisiting the audio tapes and transcriptions ensuring the participants views are being uttered in the most accurate way possible.

Results

Four main themes emerged from the analysis: developmental and educational awareness and support; the education system; developing the capacities of teachers by means of specialised training; and financial needs. Table 2 presents the themes including the categories.

Table 2: Themes and sub-themes

Themes	Sub-themes
1. Developmental and educational awareness and support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Lack of community awareness ▪ Lack of parental knowledge and support ▪ Family and community support
2. The education system	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Accessibility to schooling ▪ Alternative schooling ▪ Waiting list for school placement ▪ The need for more schooling facilities
3. Capabilities of teachers with specialised training	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Adequate teacher training ▪ Teachers' negative approach
4. Financial needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Finding it difficult to cope financially ▪ Private schooling/interventions/special crèches are expensive ▪ Reducing the cost of schooling for children with ASD ▪ Financial sacrifices

Developmental and educational awareness and support

Parents maintain that the development of their child is imperative and their educational needs must be met. However, there are factors that concern parents that serve as a hindrance. These include lack of community awareness, and lack of parental knowledge and support and family and community support. The lack of autism awareness among parents, family members and the community as a whole is imperative to be turned around, to allow development of the autistic child and to prevent labelling and stigmatizing. Community support and educational initiatives can make a difference in the development of the affected children.

Lack of community awareness

The need for more awareness initiatives for the broader community will minimize stigmatizing and labelling. Parents commented on perceptions that the community have of children with autism. For instance, one parent said:

'I think that's where everybody's perception comes in. When a child is autistic, it is Down syndrome. That is what everybody thinks.' (FG2 participant 3).

Furthermore, parents expressed their concerns about the lack of community awareness:

'Then most people couldn't understand the child again. You go to church, he is running up and down. People are, like, is this child naughty? Is the child crazy? What's wrong?' (FG4 participant 2)

'So, when I initially told my whole family, they just told me, say Down syndrome, not autistic. The child is not Down syndrome, but I didn't say it was Down syndrome.' (FG3 participant 6)

'And even if you are walking in the mall, at church or anywhere, other people will know about it. Then they're not judging misbehaviour but that they have autism, something like that.' (FG1 participant 2)

Lack of parental knowledge and support

Parents are in need of more knowledge, insight and skills to assist their child at home, thus letting parents feel more empowered. One parent had the following to share:

'There is of course this assistance should help us how to help our children, at the school also, it is important. The school also, because it is important for the parents to know how to be with the child at home.' (FG3 participant 8)

There is a lack of information for parents regarding the options available to them for educational and development support:

'Another thing is information. I think if you want to look for information on the internet, it is so limited.' (FG3 participant 1).

Participants commented and voiced their desire for more training and development to assist their children with their various needs. Participants agreed that they were not adequately equipped with the skills needed to ensure successful interventions:

'Yes, we really need support, we need to have somebody to talk with, maybe first on phone and maybe sometimes we have a physical assistance. Maybe come home. Maybe talk with us. Because for example, as I was saying, we have to self-organise. That means we must know from morning to night this will be our plan.' (FG3 participant 6)

'A lot of parents are not as clued up as we are. What about parents that don't have the resources available to them? That just rely on a system; that cannot challenge; that cannot make the efforts that we can because we are in a more privileged situation to have access to information? Or try things or speak or drive to different schools? What about the parents that don't have access to all of that stuff?' (FG1 participant 7)

'I mean when I find out, at that time I was clueless about autism, I knew about special needs, but it was a first for me and how do I deal with it. I actually went to go and do an autism course so I can be clued up with signs and symptoms.' (FG3 participant 1)

Family and community support

Parents are in need of family and community support as this has a positive impact on parents who need such help and support. The support identified by participants was provided by family members:

'Like my sister them, once a month my son goes for haircuts with my brother and daddy is not involved in the picture. So, then my brother takes him once a month for a haircut. He spends the day. He sleeps over.' (FG4 participant 6).

The contributions and support from various organizations (hospitals and support groups) keeps parents encouraged and up to date with matters pertaining to their child and the larger community services available:

'For me, at the moment, I go to the public nurse. I go to the clinics and everything and get the therapy, we went to House of Hope. So, it is not affecting me so much. All the tablets are all included, I am very happy with this service.' (FG4 participant 1).

Participants reported that this support has a positive impact on the development of the child and ultimately promotes learning and educational development:

'I got my leave day every month. There were no hassles at all. The boss I had back then was also autistic so he was very, how can I say, understanding. I could see he's got a touch of autism because you just know it. [laughter] And then they were very understanding. When it is Autism Day there is a few people there that also have autism, so Autism Day, if you're at work the theme is blue.' (FG2 participant 2)

'Everything is here. So, all the OT is done at school. The speech therapy is done here as well, this is helpful and convenient.' (FG4 participant 3)

'We have hope that they can do better because for us we at least can go to the Western Cape because here we get a lot of assistance here for early intervention and like I personally I can say Autism Western Cape helped me a lot.' (FG3 participant 2)

The education system

Under this theme, parents identified various barriers they experienced related to the current education system. The need for more inclusive schooling and learner support in mainstream schooling will allow more learners to access education and address the waiting period, which will minimize the need for alternative schooling arrangements. Parents mentioned barriers to accessibility to schooling, having to make alternative schooling arrangements, waiting lists for school placement, and the need for more schooling facilities.

Accessibility to schooling

Parents are concerned about many children who struggle to gain access, which ultimately affects the children's development. One parent mentioned:

'So, it wasn't very difficult but I think it was some kind of chance because to find a school because we see now that it is a problem for Max to find a school which we didn't have in Pretoria without knowing anybody just like that.' (FG2 participant 5).

Children are expected to fit particular criteria before gaining access to schooling:

'It took me a while to find an actual placement for him at a school.' (FG4 participant 3)

'But if your child is diagnosed at age four, if you're lucky they will get in at age seven/eight and the reality is if they're 12 and they're not in school then you are not going to get them in school anymore. They're deemed too old.' (FG2 participant 7)

'So, parents and some kids are getting to the school-going age and some kids are getting to the top of the waiting list finally to be told that they don't have the skills to be in school.' (FG2 participant 5)

Parents indicated that the area where they lived had no special needs schools, and they had to search for schools in other communities far away from where they were living:

'Just to add on the school the first question you asked, like on our side in Muizenberg there are no special schools like the one that was there now moved to Durbanville.' (FG4 participant 7).

'Like I said, my son is still on the waiting list at the WCED and I was also given only one school; not [xyz] school, and therefore I took it upon myself to go around to these different special needs schools only to find out that he needed to be at a certain IQ or it was and that really is frustrating.' (FG1 participant 5)

Alternative schooling

Making alternative schooling arrangements is becoming a normal practice for parents as they cannot find a school placement for their child. Learner support in mainstream education will reduce the need for alternative schooling. Participants raised a high level of concern, as they are forced to seek alternative schooling to ensure their child receives the necessary education and meets the developmental and educational milestones.

'So, parents are going the private route because they're desperate to get those skills in place.' (FG3 participant 8)

'It is not that they can't do the mainstream curriculums, it is just that they cannot learn in a mainstream educational setting without learning support.' (FG1 participant 6)

'I managed to stand alone and just took my chance by myself to home school him.' (FG1 participant 2)

Placed on a waiting list for schooling

Children are being placed on waiting lists for school placement, and the waiting periods tend to become lengthy.

'He was on the waiting list two, three, four years – I don't know. They spent a long time like this at home waiting.' (FG4 participant 10).

Participants added that the wait equates to years and, in some instances, they had to make other provisions to ensure no further developmental delays:

'We waited three to six years for a school.' (FG4 participant 10)

'On the waiting list, nothing has happened, had to apply for another place. I was actually told wouldn't it be best for him to be placed in a Montessori School but had no choice.' (FG2 participant 7)

Need for more schooling facilities

Parents need more facilities that can accommodate learners with special needs, and particularly for children with ASD. Parents are frustrated with the lack of schooling facilities and resources within their communities. A child not having access to schooling or who has to wait for a prolonged period could suffer developmental delays, and the educational needs of the child will not be met.

'There's not enough schools. The fact that generally speaking, if we look at autism that's on the rise, one out of three kids now lately, one out of eight kids are on the spectrum, how can it possibly be that the Department of Education is not making provision within mainstream schools for kids who are differently abled?' (FG1 participant 2)

'Like I was saying, we were not going to leave it or remain silent or private. We just want that awareness that at least the society will see a need for those schools.' (FG3 participant 7)

'And I think because there's a limited number of schools, it is also a strain as well. It is difficult to get a school as well. It is a challenge out there but there is no immediate solution that you can help your child.' (FG4 participant 4)

Developing the capacities of teachers by means of specialised training

The importance of training specialised teachers to educate and support learners with ASD is pivotal for the development of every child. Teachers who are trained adequately will know how to deal with the various challenges. A teacher should create a safe and supportive environment and eliminate any negative responses towards learners. Parents identified a lack of adequate teacher training and also teachers' negative behaviour.

Adequate teacher training

Parents mentioned that there is a need for teacher support to equip teachers with classroom skills to ensure quality education. Parents reported that there are teachers who do not know what they are doing, as the following quotes suggest:

'And also, more training to the so-called teachers who are keen to play with these children. Because these children, remember these children are difficult with their own parent. Imagine somebody who is just looking for money.' (F2 participant 6)

'The other school again they didn't know how to handle him. It was like nobody knew how to handle the child.' (FG2 participant 1)

'And also, I think that with saying all of this, that special needs should actually be a priority subject when studying education.' (FG2 participant 7).

Teachers' negative approach

Parents in the present study indicated that some teachers displayed neglectful, maltreating and aggressive behaviour towards children in the classroom. Parents felt that this was due to a lack of training and skills within the profession:

'So, the teacher who replaced her, we don't know if she was really a teacher. She was a bit aggressive and the situation is worse since. So the situation goes these very last months.' (FG4 participant 1)

'The one school actually also ill-treated him in a way, so to speak. Because Ethan kept coming home to say, Mommy, please ask teacher to stop hitting me.' (FG5 participant 7)

'So obviously, if the teacher is going to neglect my child because I mean I went to confront them. We had issues, me myself and my mother. They were very rude.' (FG3 participant 1)

Financial needs

Raising a child with ASD can be very costly, and parents are constantly challenged financially owing to the cost of schools and private schooling and medical consultations. Parents are forced to make sacrifices to ensure the development of their child's education. The obstacles experienced by parents, and the difficulties in coping financially, are because private schooling/interventions and special crèches are expensive; there is a need to reduce the cost of schooling for children with ASD and the related financial sacrifices.

Finding it difficult to cope financially

Parents have had to relocate to a different community or country to seek schooling for their ASD child. Professional healthcare help is needed for guidance and support in meeting the needs of their child:

'Remember, if you have a child with autism, it also puts strain on your finances because you have to be selective on where you stay. There was a time we stayed in a flat. It was upstairs. But the person who was staying downstairs was not happy because of our son's noise and was complaining every day. It ended up getting to you, like you don't want to be in such kind of environment. Then we had to move to a place that is more expensive because we want our son to be safe. We also want him to be happy.' (FG1 participant 5).

'Like for me, he doesn't speak right. He struggles with his speech. I want to take him to the speech therapist, but there's no money.' (FG1 participant 8)

'My pocket says no. My mind, my heart says take him there but the pocket says no.' (FG4 participant 4)

Private and government schooling/interventions/special needs crèches are expensive

The high cost of children with special needs allows only those who can afford it to benefit from these services. Parents are aware of the importance of schooling but feel that they are simply unable to provide this for their child. Participants raised great concern regarding the costs involved, as schooling is an important part of a child's development but the cost is a barrier:

'For us, we were used to it but it is not that easy to get in a special crèche, pre-school. It is really expensive, especially private schooling and interventions. So, it is not that easy, it is so expensive. It is more like out of budget.' (FG5 participant 8)

'The least that they charge is three point six, if I can say that. Per month. So, let's say R3 600 per month for fees. Then there's extra lessons per hour at R30. So, per month we're talking about R8 000. You need R10 000, anything from about R7 000 to about R22 000 per month. That is very expensive.' (FG5 participant 2)

'Schooling is very expensive. Because I remember when we were going to kick start so you pay like about R5 000 just like your normal school fees. And now you have for him it is just R5 000 for him to be there and not having any lessons or anything.' (FG3 participant 7)

Reducing the cost of schooling

The cost of schooling is beyond many parents' budgets and they are unable to afford it. For children with ASD, bursaries could be made available for schooling or subsidising its cost. One parent stated:

'Like in terms of finances, I try to look for finances like maybe bursaries or some kind of assistance. But it seems there is nothing. You can't get any financial assistance. And to

make matters worse, you are also a foreigner as well. It becomes worse because you don't get any support that you can get from anywhere. So, it is just out of your own pocket of which it is difficult as well.' (FG3 participant 1).

Bursaries could give many ASD children the opportunity to gain from the education system.

'Or reduce the prices. If the prices are subsidised, then we don't need cash to take care of our children. But we need a reasonable payment. Just a reasonable payment like for a normal child.' (FG2 participant 5)

'Even if they can do like bursaries, then you just go straight to the school.' (FG5 participant 1)

Financial sacrifice

Parents are forced to make financial sacrifices to ensure their children receive some form of education. Some parents reported having to quit their full-time employment so as to put their own needs aside to ensure that the needs of their child are met.

'It was tough, we just have to sacrifice. We just have to say okay, this is what we have so let's do it. The first priority is our child. We give our child the priority. Then we live without. That is all we do.' (FG4 participant 5)

'You are in debt but that's what we do because it is your child.' (FG2 participant 1)

'Then I couldn't stay at home anymore. I had to go and work. I stayed at home for a year.' (FG1 participant 9)

'That's why I say three different schools and it was up till this point I thought, you know what, I'm going to stay at home and that is what I did last year.' (FG3 participant 5)

Discussion

This study explored the factors which enhance or hinder the educational needs of children with ASD. The findings of the study identified the education system, enhancing teachers' skills by means of specialised training, and financial needs as factors that hindered the educational development of children with ASD. Among the four themes that emerged, developmental and educational awareness and support was identified as an enhancement.

Developmental and educational awareness and support

According to Zuckerman, Sinche, Mejia, Cobian, Becker & Nicolaidis (2014), lack of knowledge is a concern raised globally as parents and the broader community are not well-informed about ASD. Parents were concerned about the limited level of knowledge that they have acquired, as well as the community and indeed teachers. Parents expressed their appreciation for the support provided by the community and, even though there is a lack of knowledge and awareness, family and friends strive to support the ASD-affected family. A study conducted by Dillenburger, McKerr, Jordan, Devine & Keenan (2015) revealed that educating society would reduce the likelihood of misdiagnosis and stigmatisation, and improve the quality

of life for the ASD child, thus promoting social inclusion. Parents reported on the support groups available and the affect these have on their well-being by providing coping strategies. Furthermore, Jones, Hastings, Totsika, Keane & Rhule (2014) found that parental support assists with the psychological processing and coping on a day-to-day basis. Support groups provide general emotional support and validate their feelings, thus providing them with a support network so that they feel they are not alone.

The education system

The results of the study reveal that parents found the education system to be inadequate and flawed. Access to schooling is an enormous hurdle, as there are insufficient schools in nearby areas and children have to be placed on extensive waiting lists; this is a global phenomenon (Naicker, 2005). According to Pillay, Duncan and de Vries (2017), there are 1 684 children diagnosed with ASD of whom only 940 have been placed in schools, whereas 744 children are currently still on waiting lists in Western Cape Province, South Africa. Parents expressed the need for more schools, as many children are at home and unable to find placement. According to the study by Pillay, Duncan and de Vries (2017), there are not sufficient schools available for children with ASD, and many children are placed on waiting lists. Ninety per cent of children are placed in special needs schools and the remaining 10% in mainstream schools. Many parents are forced to seek private schooling or make alternative arrangements for their children to receive educational intervention, such as home facilitation (McMenamin, 2017). However, private schooling and home facilitation is very costly and parents invariably find it difficult to sustain.

Developing the capacities of teachers by means of specialised training

In addition to the above difficulties, parents suggest that teachers are not adequately trained to instruct children with ASD, and that the need for suitable specialised training is essential. The lack of knowledge and training ultimately affects the ASD child's ability to develop and learn. Developing countries such as Uganda and Zambia are faced with a similar challenge of teachers not receiving adequate training (Silupya, 2003). The quality of education is compromised as children with ASD require special attention, and training is needed to up-skill teachers so that effective teaching may be implemented. Furthermore, the literature suggests that teacher training has a direct influence on the way they teach and also influences their beliefs and intentions in relation to teaching children with special needs (MacFarlane & Woolfson, 2013). Parents reported on the negative approach that teachers had towards the children they were teaching: neglecting and ill-treating and displaying aggressive behaviour towards them in class. Parents associated this negative behaviour with a lack of training and that teachers are not passionate about what they are doing.

Financial needs

The study results indicated that parents face financial problems and find it difficult to cope with the costs involved, such as for private schooling/interventions and health care. The cost of private schooling for learners with ASD is expensive, and countries such as the United States, Europe and India view the costs as a challenge (Leigh & Du, 2015; Johansson, 2016). The high costs are prohibitive and discourage parents as they may feel coerced to make sacrifices that will make it possible for their child to receive and achieve their educational needs. Research indicates that the costs involved are wide-ranging and high, and include social care, healthcare, education, leisure and housing (Knapp, Romeo & Beecham, 2009). Children with ASD attract higher costs

than those of a child with other disorders, because they incur additional costs for behavioural and communication difficulties (Bebington & Beecham, 2007). The expenses associated with schooling are a hindrance and burden that parents have to bear.

Furthermore, Bronfenbrenner's (2006) ecological model of human development proposes that modification in a child has an influence on other individuals. The lack of ASD knowledge ranging from the parents to the broader community, the flawed education system, the lack of finances and inadequate teacher training have a direct impact on the child as a whole. The child's development is compromised, and these findings suggest that the child is affected by the influence of the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem and the macrosystem, as described in Bronfenbrenner's systems theory (Bush, Eisenhower, Cohen & Blacher, 2017). Parents have identified their barriers and they involve all systems identified by Bronfenbrenner, and one cannot address only one system but all of them as they have a direct impact on one another. Therefore, for a child with ASD who wants to excel and achieve the goals set out for them, one would have to employ a holistic approach involving all systems that have an effect on the child's development.

Limitations

This study had the following limitations:

1. The study conducted focus group discussions, and these might have led to participants not sharing their thoughts and not feeling comfortable about speaking in a group (Rabiee, 2004).
2. The study was conducted in Western Cape Province, which is only one of nine provinces in SA, and therefore the generalizability might be limited to the study context.

Conclusion

The study clearly demonstrates the barriers to education for children with ASD. The need for more awareness and community engagement on matters pertaining to ASD is pivotal. Meeting the need for more schools to address the large number of learners placed on waiting lists will improve the child/learner's opportunity for growth and development and, financially, this will relieve many parents of the excessive costs of private schooling and extra interventions. Teacher training is essential, with up-to-date workshops for both teachers and parents. The insights gained from conducting this study can be applied to the development of intervention strategies to enhance the implementation of inclusive education and address current barriers that are faced in the education system.

Recommendations for future studies

1. Future studies should focus on the quality of training that teachers receive while undertaking their undergraduate teaching qualification. Special needs education is a growing area in the field of education, and the training of teachers should be comprehensive.
2. The study included four urban districts in the Western Cape Metropole; future studies should include rural districts that form part of the Western Cape Metropole for a more generalizable population group.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declare that there are no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

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