



Teachers' Strategies of Including Learners with Autism Spectrum Disorders in Mainstream Classrooms in Swaziland

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Abstract: Successful inclusion of students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in general education classrooms can be challenging and may require additional supports for teachers. The purpose of this study was to explore the strategies that teachers use in including learners with autism spectrum disorders in the mainstream classrooms. This qualitative study draws on a purposive sample of 36 teachers who have experience teaching children with ASD within three primary schools that practice inclusive education and have rich cases of learners with ASD in Eswatini. Through the use of focus group discussions, individual interviews and observations data was collected on teachers strategies they employ in their teaching. Conventional content analysis were used to analyse data and thematically presented. Teachers reported several strategies including: pictography, learner fixations, routine, motivation, and sitting arrangement. Conclusions are made that teachers in the mainstream classrooms have knowledge on some of the strategies for including learners with ASD. However, they are not well capacitated to implement these strategies. Teachers recommended frequent workshops for teachers on strategies to employ in teaching children with ASD in the mainstream classrooms. Coming with assessment tools that are realistic to our society in terms of development and inclusive education programmes would yield positive results.

Keywords: Autism Spectrum Disorders, Inclusive Education, Mainstream, Special Education, Strategies, Swaziland

1. INTRODUCTION

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is one of the most common childhood neurological disorders (Autism Society Canada, 2010), which is characterised by problems in communication, social development, ritualistic behaviour and resistance to change (American Psychiatric Association, 2012). Although ASD varies significantly in character and severity, it occurs in all ethnic and socioeconomic groups and affects every age group. Despite the efforts of numerous scientists, the cause of ASD is still unknown, but it is likely that genetics and environment play a role (National Research Council, 2001).

Statistically, one percent of the world's population has autism. In developed countries like the United States of America, 1 in 68 births are children with ASD. That resembles a tenfold rise in the past 40 years. The autism rates in USA are ranging from 121 cases in 10000 people in Arizona and Missouri, 60 cases in 10000 people in Alabama and 42 cases in 10000 people in Florida, (Autism Society, 2014). The situation in Africa on aspects of autism remains unclear. It was noted that the knowledge about ASD in Africa is actually low (Bokare, & Muir, 2011). However, some countries in Africa do have formal statistics on ASD although, compared to the first world countries, they still lag behind in terms of mechanisms to deal with ASD. Swaziland is still at its awareness stage as far as Autism is concerned. This includes the leadership, legislature, health sector and the community at large. This makes it difficult for learners with autism to access basic services. There appears to be no documentation of the prevalence of autism in Swaziland due to insufficient funding for basic survey on autism. However, 6 in 10 children that visit the kingdoms' public hospitals exhibit symptoms of autism, (Autism Swaziland, 2013).

Children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) are increasingly being placed within mainstream classes (Lindsay, Proulx, Thomson, & Scott, 2013). With more students with ASD in mainstream classrooms, teachers are expected to be well equipped with strategies to handle children with ASD in the mainstream class. Researchers such as: (Horrocks, White, & Roberts, 2008; Lindsay et al., 2013)

have indicated that many teachers struggle to meet the needs of learners with ASD. With the social and behavioural impairments of children with ASD, teachers often face considerable challenges in appropriately managing their needs (Bowe, 2004; Wilmhurst, & Brue, 2010; Lindsay et al., 2013). Research shows that many teachers feel unprepared to support students with ASD socially, academically, and behaviourally (Hinton et al., 2008; Horrocks et al., 2008; Symes, & Humphrey, 2010). De Boers and Simpson, (2009) state that, one of the most important challenges in working with students with autism in integrated classrooms is inadequate knowledge about ASD and lacking access to consultation support and advice. The purpose of this article is to provide evidence-based strategies used by teachers to facilitate the inclusion of pupils with autistic spectrum disorders (ASD) in mainstream schools in Swaziland.

Strategies for achieving successful inclusion that have been used specifically with students with autism in general education classrooms include priming, prompt delivery, and visual schedules (Crosland, & Dunlap, 2012). Priming consists of allowing a student to preview information or an activity before the student actually engages in that activity. Research has shown priming to be effective in increasing social interaction with typical peers (Zanolli, Daggett, & Adams, 1996). Prompting strategies have been successful in supporting the inclusion of students with autism. Prompts that supplement the general instructional routine are often needed to elicit responding to academic or behavioural activities for students with autism. According to Crosland and Dunlap, (2012) visual schedules have been used as a strategy to increase predictability for students with autism. Schedules can be used to visually communicate upcoming events, facilitate transitions between activities, and increase student independence. For students with autism to be successful in general education classes some degree of independent academic functioning is necessary. Prior research (Harrower, & Dunlap, 2001) has indicated that whereas successes have occurred in increasing independence under close adult supervision, removal of supervision has resulted in the reappearance of challenging behaviour and decreases in appropriate behaviour

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) stipulates that all children “should enjoy a full and decent life, in conditions which ensure dignity, promote self-reliance and facilitate the child’s active participation in the community” (Article 23). Inclusive Education is geared towards providing education to all learners regardless of their background (Engelbrecht, 2006; Makoelle, 2012). It is regarded as a process of widening the participation of learners within the pedagogic discourse. The international literature on inclusion is extensive and can be roughly divided into the following four types that focus on: curriculum, and how it may act as a barrier to learning (Clough, & Corbett, 2000); school improvement, whereby school organization is viewed as an educational area that may be used to foster inclusion (Ainscow, 2010; Ainscow, Dyson, Goldrick, & West 2012); disability, whereby the physical or psychological attributes of the learner render him or her a victim of exclusion; and inclusive pedagogy (Florian, & Kershner, 2009; Florian, & Linklater, 2010).

Lindsay, Proulx, Thomson and Scott (2013) assert that the provision of inclusive and accepting social climates within schools is necessary to help children reach their full potential and for them to feel important, welcome, and appreciated. Lindsay et al., (2013) outline seven essential elements that can be used to guide an inclusive education programme. These elements include: visionary leadership, collaboration, refocused use of assessment, support for staff and students, funding, effective parental involvement as well as curricular adaptation and effective instructional practices. They argue that applying best-practice elements of inclusion may be difficult for teachers who are including students with high-functioning autism within their class. It is very important for teachers to engage in professional learning activities and programmes so to better capacitate themselves for ASD learning environment. Emam and Farrell (2009) state that, teachers are reporting that they often feel ill-equipped and anxious about meeting the needs of the learners with ASD. Not only teachers, principals too have reported their lack of training and information on how to lead school programmes that meets the needs of ASD learners (Horrocks, White, & Roberts, 2008)

This study was informed by Levy Vygotsky’s socio-cultural approach. This approach stresses the importance of the role of social interaction in the development of the child’s cognition. He strongly believes that community plays a central role in the process of “making meaning”. He emphasizes on two major principles of theory i.e. the more knowledgeable other and zone of proximal development (ZPD). The knowledgeable other is one who is better than the learner with respect to a particular task,

process or concept. These are the parents, teachers and at times the child's peers. The zone of proximal development is the difference between what a child can achieve independently and what the child can achieve with the guidance and encouragement of a skilled partner (Vygotsky, 1978).

2. METHODS

2.1. Research Design

The qualitative case study research design explored the strategies for including children with ASD in mainstream classrooms.

2.2. Sample

This study drew on a purposive sample of 36 teachers to gain a better understanding of strategies used by teachers when including children with ASD in their classrooms. This study used three primary schools that practice inclusive education and have rich cases of learners with ASD in Swaziland. The mainstream schools were identified through the Ministry of Education. The Head teachers and special education teachers in the schools assisted in identifying the participants who met the selection criteria. The participants were teachers who deal with learners with autism in the mainstream classrooms and they had at least one year experience in teaching learners with ASD in the mainstream.

2.3. Data collection Instruments

Focus group discussion, individual interviews and observations were employed as a way of collecting data. In each case, two focus groups were set up and each group consisted of 6 members. Three observations in each case were made. The observations assisted in establishing the strategies used by the teachers of learners with ASD and the way the learners responded to the teachers and the strategies. The interviews were administered to 3 teachers from each school. Teachers who participated in the individual interviews were those who proved to have vital and detailed information concerning strategies of including learners with ASD.

2.4. Procedure

The researcher served as a moderator or facilitator in the focus group discussions. Both FGD and Individual interviews were tape recorded and note taking was also done. The interviews lasted between 45 minutes to an hour. For the observations, sitting at the back of the class as a non-participant observer was chosen. This afforded a great chance to observe the teachers implement strategies to include learners with ASD in the mainstream classroom without disturbing the proceedings of the lesson. Notes were taken as the lesson was in progress and was used at data analysis stage.

2.5. Ethical Clearance

Ethical approval was obtained from Ministry of Education and Training to conduct the study to the targeted schools. Participation in the study was purely voluntary and those who consented completed the consent forms. Pseudonyms were used to protect confidentiality and anonymity of the participants. They were also assured that their privacy would not be invaded. They were made aware that they had a right to pull out of the study if, and when they wanted to.

2.6. Issues of Trustworthiness

Credibility and trustworthiness of the data were established through 'member checks' (Guba & Lincoln, 2005) with the participants. Member checks involved going back to participants to clarify data that emerged during discussion for accuracy of responses. Member checks were also conducted with participants to validate the translated content and to correct for any discrepancies of meaning from the language translation.

2.7. Data Analysis

The interviews were recorded and professionally transcribed verbatim. Data was analysed through the use of content analysis according to the basic steps by Creswell (2003) that involves: organizing and preparing data for analysis, reading through all the data, doing a detailed analysis through a coding process, where from a repeated reading of the data, emerging themes were identified, themes from the different cases were compared to identify patterns, and finally interpretation.

3. RESULTS

Strategies of teaching learners with ASD, as reported by the teachers interviewed, are as follows: Pictography, fixations, routine, motivation, sitting Arrangement and Peer tutoring.

3.1. Pictography

The use of pictures in class was one strategy of including learners with ASD in mainstream classrooms that was established in all the focus groups discussions, individual interviews as well as observations. The participants mentioned that learners with ASD cannot respond to the spoken command which makes it difficult to express themselves to other learners and teachers. They have a serious communication shortfall. This causes a huge barrier in the learners understanding of what is actually going on in class. The teachers then use pictures to try and assist learners with ASD to communicate effectively as the lessons continue.

As one teacher shared:

When the bell rings indicating a change of periods, I raise a picture of numbers when it's maths. The learners understand the picture far better than one trying to explain to them using the spoken command. (Grade 1 class teacher).

Another teacher had this to say:

When it's break time, I have to show them a picture of many learners sitting outside and eating together. When I want them to take a break and visit the loo then I will show them a Picture of a toilet. (Grade 2 class teacher).

The use of picture did not only help learners with autism but it also helped the rest of the class since drawings appeal to almost all children in general. It was also observed that this strategy was quite time consuming but was found to be very effective. The autistic learners were different. Some were nonverbal while others had limited speech. The pictures were very useful because they use them to communicate their feelings.

3.2. Routine

Another strategy that was mentioned by most of the teachers in the focus group discussions was that of routine. Learners with ASD do not respond well to change. It is very important to stick to one and the same way of doing things in class. The individual interviews revealed that routine actually minimizes chances of learners getting stressed and throwing tantrums. In case of a change, the new instruction needs to be repeated now and again until the learners grasp it. The following verbal quotes illustrate the above:

If for some reason you come in one morning and start the lessons with English language yet they are used to beginning the day with Science, the non-autistic learners will easily adapt to that and move on but the autistic learners will sit, stare and do nothing because they will be confused by the change. At times they just tell you that this is not how they learn. (Grade 3 Class teacher, Group C).

3.3. Motivation

In the focus group discussions, it transpired that motivation is also a good strategy for including learners with ASD in the mainstream classroom. Every time the learners with ASD do something good and impressive, it is very important to give them a certain reward in order to motivate them to keep up that good behaviour. The individual interviews explained that motivation encourages the learners and boosts their self-esteem. It makes them feel loved, confident and somehow have something to look forward each time a task is given to them. It serves as good strategy because it keeps them interested and looking forward to the next lesson. One teacher remarked:

I asked all the learners to draw something in class. The learner with ASD drew something interesting. I decided to reward her for that. The next day the same learner came to class with another beautiful drawing. (Grade 2 teacher, Group B).

Another teacher shared:

I usually give a time out to a learner who behaves well in class. I usually say they should break 15 minutes earlier and go home. When this happens the others envy the learner and also strive to do better. The learner receiving the time out also gets even more encouraged to behave. (Special education Teacher, Group A).

3.4. Sitting Arrangements

It was established during the focus group discussions that it is very important for these learners to be strategically positioned in class. Their sitting position can determine the failure or success of inclusion. The teachers who were interviewed said they made their learners with ASD sit in front of the teacher as they need a lot of attention; therefore, they need to be within the reach of the teacher. Also, the learners with ASD are made to sit next to non-autistic learners make them feel included in the class.

One teacher had this to say:

I decided to share my desk with my autistic student. In that way I keep a close eye to his tasks and other needs. (Grade 3 class teacher).

He continued:

I make my autistic learners sit next non-autistic learners. They get to the point where they understand each other because they spend so much time together inside and out of class. These peers become a good tool in including these learners.

The sitting arrangement allows the teacher to closely monitor them as lessons progress. It was proven by observations that once the learner loses attention, the teachers try a different strategy since they can see the learner in close proximity.

3.5. Peer Tutoring

Another strategy employed by teachers was peer tutoring. It was observed that during the class sessions learners with ASD quickly lost concentration. In Case A when one of the learners with ASD lost focus, the teacher then quickly called out the name of a friend to the child and asked him to attend to the learner. The peer in this observation was there to keep the learner with ASD stable so that the teacher peacefully continues with the lesson without having to occasionally attend to the autistic learner. In case B, the peer tutoring strategy was used but what was observed was that when the assigned peer tried to attend to his friend the lesson continues without the two of them participating in learning. This made it appear as if they were playing in the midst of an ongoing class. In Case C, the same thing took place the only difference was that the teacher would occasionally check on the two learners assisting each other. Another teacher noted that it is very important for teachers dealing with learners with ASD to have the ability to understand and implement strategies for the successful inclusion of these learners. The observations revealed that most teachers in the mainstream classrooms are not well equipped to work with learners with ASD especially in a mainstream setting.

4. DISCUSSION

This study explored teachers' strategies in including children with ASD in mainstream classes. According to Crosland and Dunlap, (2012) improving social inclusion of children with ASD is important not only for their social and academic development but also to provide typically developing children with an opportunity to develop a tolerance and appreciation for others who are "different"

The findings showed that teachers were using different strategies to include learners with ASD. The participants expressed that involving the learner's peers to help explain the concept and activities that take place in class is productive. However, observation proved that they do not put this strategy to proper use because they do not monitor the peer tutoring sessions. This gives the impression that teachers do believe in this strategy but they do not have enough time to actually implement it properly due to the big numbers they have in the classrooms yet it is such an important strategy if used correctly. Due to the lack of time, they find themselves tempted to leave all the work at the hands of the peer tutoring learner yet he (peer) also needs supervision to check if he is doing the right thing.

I believe that with proper monitoring, peer tutoring can indeed be a very effective strategy in including learners with ASD in the mainstream classroom. Bowe, (2004) asserts that assigning your student with autism spectrum a peer buddy is a great idea for a number of reasons. It teaches the peer patience and tolerance, and it gives the peer responsibilities. Humphery (2006) is also of the belief that the relationships pupils with ASD have with their peers can be both a barrier and an enabler to their successful inclusion in school. This is also in line with Vygotsky's theory which stresses on the fundamental role of social interaction in the development of cognition. However, the overall analysis from this study was that as much as the teachers were aware of what an effective strategy this can be, they did not use it effectively.

The teachers from the focus group discussions and individual interviews in the study agreed that using pictures when explaining a concept to the learners with autism is effective. The use of pictography is one strategy that can be effective if done properly. Pictures naturally appeal to all children whether they have a disability or not. I advocate that the use of pictographs should be embraced in Swaziland. Bokare, and Muir, (2011) state that learners with ASD can use pictures at a practical level where they learn to point at the picture to indicate their needs. When children are familiar with a number of pictures, they can be put into a wallet book of pictures that the child carries with him and uses to indicate her needs. He continues to say the child builds up a vocabulary of pictures to meet his own special needs. This is in line with Vygotsky who believes that the environment in which learners grow up will influence how they think and what they think about.

The focus group discussions established that there is more order and cooperation in class if and when the daily routine is not tampered with. Teachers in the individual interviews agreed with this and further shared vastly about their experiences of how learners with ASD just lose control once change comes their way. Once a learner meets a situation outside his daily routine, he or she is most likely to throw tantrums and becomes disruptive. To maintain harmony and order, teachers really need to stick to the daily routine that the learners are familiar with so that nothing comes as a surprise. In the case of change the teachers should make the learners aware that something will disturb their routine. This suggests that without the recognition of routine there is absolutely no way teachers can successfully include learners with ASD in the mainstream classroom. This concurs with Lindsay (2014) who emphasises the importance of consistent, structured routine and advance notice when they would be a deviation in the regular routine.

Lindsay (2014) further added that it is helpful to have the daily schedule pinned up the wall for all the learners to see. Bowe (2004) also attests that routine can be engraved in the learner's mind once teachers get to understand that a picture schedule posted on his desk or a written schedule tucked in his pocket will go a long way in reducing a student's anxiety and making the school experience more pleasant and manageable for him. Having a visual display of the schedule and a structured routine indeed has proven to be helpful for teachers to minimize distress among all children in the classroom, especially with children with ASD. This is line with Vygotsky's theory that emphasises on the knowledgeable other assisting the learners. In this case teachers can assist learners by coming up with a suitable and simple routine for the learners.

Classroom sitting arrangement was viewed as one of the important strategies believed to be successful in including learners with ASD in mainstream classrooms. Levy Vygotsky's theory says that the teacher is one who has to provide assistance. The learner is easily monitored when he is sitting in front of the teacher. In the individual interviews it also transpired that the learners can also be made to sit next to their peers that are not autistic. This, according to the participants, makes the learners to feel loved and part of the class. It was reflected through the observations where learners with ASD were placed in the front rows and were made to sit next to their peers that are non- autistic. These findings tally with Conroy, Maureen, Asmus, Ladwig, Sellers and Valcante (2004), who discovered in their study that if there is an adult to closely monitor a learner with ASD, the rate of disruptive behaviours decreases and the level of student engagement in the classroom rises. This suggests that the position in which the learner is placed in the classroom plays a very important role in the successful inclusion of the learner. However, can be noted that this strategy entirely depends on whether the teacher is well equipped on how to deal with these learners with ASD. Even if the learners can sit close to the teacher their needs will not be met if the teacher is clueless on how to

manipulate sitting arrangement as a strategy to include these learners with ASD. Sansosti (2008) argues that placing focus on where students with disability should be educated can cause teachers to shift away from considering how best to provide instruction to diverse groups of students.

5. CONCLUSION

From the findings of the study, it can be concluded that teachers in mainstream classrooms use strategies such as pictography, fixations, routine, motivation, dedication and classroom sitting arrangements. These strategies seemed to be common in all the three cases from which data was collected. It can also be concluded that teachers in the mainstream classrooms are still not well capacitated for the inclusion of learners with ASD. They need a lot of support from the parents, teacher assistants and the government. The lack of knowledge on how to implement these strategies affects their effectiveness. One can conclude that the needs of the learners with ASD in mainstream classrooms are not fully met since the strategies employed are not effectively implemented.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Since it has been discovered how important it is for teachers to have the proper and differentiated strategies, there is a need for workshops that will bring all mainstream teachers together and equip them on more strategies that can be effectively used in the classrooms. These workshops can also give the teachers an opportunity to share their experiences. There is also a need for all teacher training centres to include inclusive education in their curriculum to avoid having many educators in the mainstream schools that do not have the understanding of the concept. Perhaps coming with assessment tools in the policy that are realistic to our society since the present tools are informed by countries that are far ahead in terms of development and inclusive education programmes would yield positive results.

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