



Challenges of Parental Role in Enhancing Academic Performance of Learners with Autism Spectrum Disorder in Eswatini Mainstream Primary Schools

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.47814/ijssrr.v7i5.2019>

Abstract

Learners with autism spectrum disorder in Eswatini mainstream primary schools are showing high academic failure rate. In spite of that, the learners' parents have not been adequately capacitated on matters related to mainstreaming the learners into regular schools, yet by virtue of being parents, they are pillars of their families. This qualitative, phenomenological, interpretivism study sought to explore and understand challenges of parental role in enhancing academic performance of learners with autism spectrum disorder in Eswatini mainstream primary schools. Data were collected through individual interviews, focus-group interview and document analysis, whereby we used interview guides, an audio-recording system and a document analysis form to extract data from fifteen purposively sampled male and female parents and teachers of the learners with autism spectrum disorder from four mainstream primary schools in Eswatini. One striking finding of this study demonstrated that a major challenge for parents was lack of effective communication due to their absence in their meetings. Hence, schools should consider using modernised modalities of holding parents' meetings, like Microsoft Teams to allow the parents to juggle their multiple roles through a robust multi-disciplinary approach for strengthening collaboration among stakeholders.

Keywords: *Academic Performance; Autism Spectrum Disorder; Learners; Mainstream School; Parent*

Introduction

As per the aim of the Inclusive Education Policy draft of 2008, in 2010, the Kingdom of Eswatini (formerly called Kingdom of Swaziland), introduced inclusive education, in all public and private schools across all levels of the education sector (Swaziland Ministry of Education and Training, 2008). This educational reform mandates learners with mild to moderate special education needs access to quality education in schools in their neighbourhood, thus, bestowing them the opportunity of staying in their

family units (McKenzie et al., 2020). However, learners with autism spectrum disorder (hereafter referred to as ASD) in Eswatini mainstream primary schools are showing escalated numbers in academic failure rate, and most of them drop-out before reaching secondary school (Swaziland Ministry of Education and Training, 2018).

According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders Fifth Edition, ASD is a neurodevelopmental, biologically determined disorder that manifests as an array of impairments which involve social interactions, imagination and communication skills (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). In the case of learners with ASD, this disorder manifests as persistent deficits, like hardship in initiating social interaction or sharing of interests and emotions (Elliott, 2021), and these problematic behaviors adversely interfere with the learners' education. In spite of mainstreaming these learners, their parents have not been adequately capacitated on means of aiding the learners to achieve optimally in terms of academic goals.

In compliance to the constitutional right of all citizens promulgated in Section 30 (1) of the Constitution of Swaziland of 2005 which advocates for respecting and dignifying persons with disabilities (Government of the Kingdom of Swaziland, 2005), Eswatini developed the National Disability Policy of 2013, which is mandated to ensure mainstreaming of persons with ASD in all levels of society (Deputy Prime Minister's Office, 2013), and the National Education and Training Sector Policy of 2018 which highlights the need for parental involvement in education of learners (Government of the Kingdom of Swaziland Ministry of Education and Training, 2018). Regardless of such a gigantic drive, this policy framework neither provides measures through which parental involvement can be achieved, nor provide guidelines with regard to the nature of role parents should play as a means of enhancing academic performance of the learners. Disappointingly, the Annual Education Census Report of 2019 is silent about the existence of learners with ASD (Eswatini Ministry of Education and Training, 2019). This hidden existence of the learners with ASD may be the reason why the parents remain an untapped resource, hence, it propelled us to conduct this study.

Research Aim

The study sought to investigate challenges of parental role in enhancing academic performance of learners with ASD in Eswatini mainstream primary schools.

Research Question

The main research question for this study was: 'What are challenges of parental role in enhancing academic performance of learners with ASD in Eswatini mainstream primary schools?' In light of this research question, our sub-research questions were:

- a) What are factors which negatively influence parental role in enhancing academic performance of learners with ASD in Eswatini mainstream primary schools?
- b) To what extent do challenges of parental role affect enhancement of academic performance of learners with ASD in Eswatini mainstream primary schools?

Theoretical Framework

This study employed Mowder's Parent Development Theory and the Bronfenbrenner's Bio-ecological Systems Theory. In the subsequent paragraphs we discuss each of these theories.

Parent Development Theory

Propounded by Barbara Mowder, Parent Development Theory (Mowder, 2005) is rooted in the belief that parents' engagement in school-family relationships increases parental desire to be involved in education. For this study, this theory was ideal from the standpoint of facilitating parental role through multi-disciplinary collaboration among a wide range of professionals, like speech and occupational therapists, teacher-counselors and psychologists. The Parent Development Theory is comprised of six predominant factors as briefly described below.

Bonding: Bonding refers to the love, and also the affection which the parent feels and displays towards their child (Mowder, 2005). In this study, bonding focused on challenges parents encountered in their effort of trying to strengthen their bond with the learners while concurrently enhancing the learners' academic performance.

Discipline: Discipline refers to methods which are adopted by parents to teach their children to live according to a designed set of consistent rules, and also strategies that the parents utilise to ensure that those limits are upheld (Rekha & Satapathy, 2017). In this study, discipline denotes challenges that parents encountered in utilising strategies which they had set to ensure that the learners with ASD made the most of their right to enrol in mainstream school settings which accords them the opportunities to undertake out-of-school academic tasks under their parents' supervision.

Education: Education entails teaching and guiding through communication and information (Mowder, 2005). In this factor we analysed the challenges parents faced in their role of advising and guiding the learners in carrying out homeworks.

General Welfare and Protection: Mowder (2005) asserts that each parent is obliged to meet basic needs for their children. Parents should as well ensure the children's protection from both internal and external harm (Rekha & Satapathy, 2017). In this factor, focus was on challenges parents met in providing basic needs and protecting the learners from all sort of harm in all aspects of their education.

Responsivity: According to Mowder (2005), responsivity denotes the extent to which parents responds to the needs of their children. Thus, this study looked at challenges parents met when trying to respond to the learners' needs in health care services and school uniforms.

Sensitivity: Sensitivity denotes the manner in which parents perceive what their children are communicating and align their responses accurately (Shobowale-Benson, 2021). Therefore, in this factor we looked at challenges parents faced in interpreting and probing further to get meaning of hidden feelings portrayed by the learners with ASD.

Bio-ecological Systems Theory

The Bio-ecological Systems Theory was founded by Urie Bronfenbrenner, a developmental psychologist (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) to elucidate how a series of nested systems of the environment impact on human development. These five systems namely the micro-, meso-, exo-, macro- and chrono-systems are as explained hereunder.

The Micro-System: This first and innermost system constitutes interpersonal relations of the developing individual and members of systems where they actively participate physically, psychologically and socially (Mabaso, 2020). In this system, focus was on how siblings, relatives, friends and teachers negatively impacted parental role to enhance academic performance of learners diagnosed with ASD who are educated in Eswatini mainstream primary school settings.

The Meso-system: This second system of human development takes into account the link between two or more micro-systems (Yang, 2021). Therefore, focus in this system was on how parental role at home affected and was affected by the other systems, as well as how parental involvement at school negatively influenced parental role in the entire systems of the theory.

Exo-system: The exo-system incorporates the links between settings which do not have a direct link to the child, hence, in such setting, the child does not participate actively (Brien, 2019), but the system may nevertheless affect what happens to the child. Inactive settings include the community, health services, parents' place of work, country's education system and various professionals who partake in the process of implementing educational policies and programmes. In this system, we analysed the quality of collaboration between parents and the wide range of stakeholders of the education fraternity.

Macro-system: This system consists of the wider pattern of ideology and organisation of social institutions common to a particular social class or culture (Brien, 2019). Hence, we focused on parents' challenges in relation to different inherent pressures, norms, prejudices and stereotypical behaviours from school level.

The Chrono-system: This system encapsulates the patterning of environmental events and transitions over the life-course of the person (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Thus, focus was on challenges parents encountered in the education of learners with ASD in the current trend of mainstreaming the learners with ASD as embedded in and shaped by the philosophy of provision of quality education to all learners, regardless their diversity (Swaziland Ministry of Education and Training, 2008).

Parental Involvement Framework

For modelling parental involvement, we embedded this study on Parental Involvement Framework (Epstein, 1994), a framework in which Joyce Epstein classifies parents' involvement into: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning-at-home, decision-making and collaborating with the community (Deger, 2021). The basis for using this framework was its strong belief in advocating for maximisation of learning through ensuring that parents, school staff and community members work collaboratively (Epstein, 2009). Below we describe each of the six categories.

Parenting: This category includes activities for the parent, family and the child which assist the family with establishing a home environment that is conducive to support the learning process (Deger, 2021). Thus, focus in this category was on challenges parents were encountering when modifying home environments to make them suitable for enhancing academic performance of the learners with ASD.

Communication: It entails establishing effective modes of communication between the home and school, as well as activities which maximise establishment of meaningful exchanges, through utilisation of multiple modalities about school programs and child's educational progress (Salinas et al., 2019). This study focused on mode of delivery and frequency of teacher-parent communication, and impediments of the same in disseminating information to all stakeholders who are salient for enhancing school programs and policies for optimising educational opportunities for the learners with ASD in mainstream primary schools.

Volunteering: This type of involvement entails home and community activities that solicit parental support to meet the goals of the school to benefit the child (Epstein et al., 2019). In the context of this study, volunteering focused on challenges of parents in volunteering financial support, talents and also time for enhancement of academic performance of learners with ASD in mainstream primary schools.

Learning-at-Home: This category comprises of information and activities which hone parents' skills that are essential for helping the learners with carrying out homework (Epstein et al., 2019). Hence, the study focused on activities that parents were doing to support the learners in after school tasks, and on factors which hindered the parents from offering quality time to assist the learners.

Decision-making: This parental involvement type includes district- or school-level decision making involvement activities which influence all learners, and parent advocacy and child-specific decision-making activities (Epstein & Sheldon, 2019). Therefore, decision-making focused on how the parents were involved in developing, implementing and reviewing school programmes to enhance inclusion of the learners with ASD in the mainstream primary schools.

Collaborating with the Community: This category includes crafting activities that aim at using resources across the community to support learners and schools (Epstein et al., 2019). In this category, we focused on challenges parents faced in accessing resources and services from the community outside of the school to strengthen school programs and family practices to accommodate the exceptional educational needs of learners with ASD.

Review of Related Literature

The Eswatini National Education and Training Sector Policy of 2018 acknowledges that through support, all children can learn (Government of the Kingdom of Eswatini Ministry of Education and Training, 2018). Amongst other support services, success in dealing with the complexities which emanate from parenting learners with ASD is possible through offering counselling to the learners' parents (Chalwe et al., 2021). On those grounds, Benevides et al. (2019) lay great significance on facilitating effective collaboration and communication between professionals and parents of learners with ASD, and these authorities posit that this is possible through strengthening the integration of family-centred services. For instance, Kasongole and Muzata (2020) opine that taking learning further into a home environment provides learners with a sense of responsibility, and as well helps the learners to improve in academic pursuits they have difficulties in.

Macha et al. (2020) revealed that to parents, the social interaction disorders, communication challenges and emotional problems manifesting in learners with ASD caused sleep deprivation. For Deger (2021), parents' low socio-economic status deprived the parents time off of work to become involved in the education of the learners. In another study, Van der Linde et al. (2019) revealed that inappropriate strategies and resources for teaching hinder teachers from accommodating learners with ASD to achieve reasonable educational outcomes. Numisi et al. (2020), on the other hand, reports about absence of formal workshops and discussions on parent-teacher collaboration, and posit that such cripples the maintenance of an intact chain of communication. Similarly, Chalwe et al. (2021) established that in matters of ASD, parents possessed inadequate information.

In their study, Leadbitter et al. (2020) revealed that although parents appreciated the tangible outcomes of Paediatric Autism Communication Therapy to enhance parent-child communication, the clinic settings in which the therapy was delivered were a distance from families' homes, thus, burdensome to the parent and, and as well made the learners lethargic. Moreover, Numisi et al. (2020), showed that parents who had set unrealistic expectations expressed disappointment on the rate of improvement.

While parental competence may entail parents' ability to achieve excellence in child care, Smith-Young (2020) pointed out that parenting a child with ASD is coupled with profound financial obligation, which included restrictive insurance coverage, emanating from situations where some parents quit full-

time work to take care of their children affected by ASD. For private biomedical, educational, therapist-led and social interventions, parents often paid out of their pockets (Gentles et al., 2019). The varying financial standing accords parents with more resources access to diverse intervention, while those who are under-resourced are limited to minimal government services (Reedy et al., 2019).

Research Methodology

The section below briefly outlines the research methodology which we employed when conducting this study.

Research Method

This study was qualitative in approach, and such a research approach enabled us to explore and understand challenges of parental role in enhancing academic performance of learners with ASD in mainstream primary schools from multiple perspectives (Bertram & Christiansen, 2020), as we engaged in utilisation of interviews and document analysis. The study was underpinned by a phenomenology design, and positioned within the interpretivism paradigm, hence, it allowed us to gain further depth through seeking the participants' challenging experiences (Alharahshen & Pius, 2020).

Population and Sampling

The population for this study was parents and teachers of learners with ASD diagnosed according to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders Fifth Edition criteria (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). The participants were a composition of fifteen purposefully sampled male and female parents and teachers of the learners diagnosed with ASD, whom we selected from two public and two private mainstream primary schools of the Manzini region of Eswatini. These schools were located in rural, urban and semi-urban areas.

Data Collection Methods

We collected data using individual semi-structured interviews, and with the participants' consent, we recorded the interviews to allow us to maintain authenticity of the interviewees' responses (Lakshan et al., 2021). The individual interviews allowed us to probe participants' responses, thus, the open-ended questions evoked responses which were meaningful and relevant to the participants which we had unanticipated (Samuels, 2019). Moreover, to enable teacher participants to freely express their views under no obligation of adherence to a strict sequence of questions (Adler et al., 2019), we also extracted data through a focus-group interview. We confirmed authenticity of interview findings by conducting document analysis (Tight, 2019), whereby, we analysed the learners' classwork and study exercise books, workbooks, quiz scripts, test papers, class attendance registers and marks record books.

Data Analysis

We analysed the data through the utilization of thematic analysis, a technique which Clarke et al. (2019) define as a method for identifying, analysing and interpreting patterns of meaning within qualitative data. We did the analysis in accordance with the six basic steps as posited by Braun and Clarke (2006), thereby, we familiarized ourselves with the data, generated initial codes, searched for themes, reviewed themes, defined and named themes, and finally produced a report. Thematic analysis was most

ideal for this study because its inductive nature allowed emergent of themes which answered the research questions (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017).

Ethical Considerations

Before commencement of data collection, we applied for a research ethics clearance from the University of Johannesburg Research Ethics Committee, and through the clearance, we attained permission from the Director of Education in Eswatini to collect data from the selected mainstream primary schools in Eswatini (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). During the study, we adhered to informed consent, whereby we provided participants with sufficient information about this study (Walker, 2018); self-determination, by explaining the right of participants to refuse or withdraw participating at any stage of the study; minimization of harm, by protecting participants from all sort of harm; anonymity, by using pseudonyms (Bhattacharyya et al., 2018) to safeguard identities of data sources from public disclosure; and confidentiality of information participants divulged through keeping all data records in a locked folder in a password-protected computer so that it could be only accessed by us, as researchers.

Trustworthiness of the Study

In this study, we ensured trustworthiness through credibility by utilising step-by-step thematic analysis as posited by Braun and Clarke (2006); transferability by providing data sets and descriptions which are rich enough to allow other researchers to be able to make their own independent judgments about the study's findings to different contexts; dependability, through utilising instrument triangulation (Lemon & Hayes, 2020), by employing the convergence of individual interviews, focus-group interview and document analysis; and confirmability through checking the internal coherence of the data, the findings, the interpretations and the recommendations (Guba & Lincoln, 1981 cited in Huttunen & Kakkori, 2020).

Findings and Discussion

Findings of the study are categorised into three themes: lack of effective communication, incompetence of support systems and parents struggle to juggle enhancing academic performance of learners with ASD and other aspects of their lives. Each theme is elucidated below.

Lack of Effective Communication

Effective communication refers to communication which brings positive results to improve the situation under consideration. The significance of effective parent-teacher communication is an essential element in educating learners with ASD (Numisi et al., 2020). In response to when and how parents' meetings were announced and conducted, School B, Parent Participant 1 responded by citing lack of communication among stakeholders. He was quoted saying:

We usually have not less than three meetings per year. Parents' meetings are held after lunch, usually on Saturdays. Usually, I don't attend. Her father and I are employed and sometimes we work even on weekends.

Echoing the above sentiments, School B, Parent Participant 2 shared that:

Parents' meetings are held at least once per term, on Saturdays, usually after lunch. I have never attended any. At that time, I am at work.

Moreover, School D, Parent Participant 1 said:

Three times per year, on school days, at around 9:00 a.m. That time doesn't suit me. I am usually at work. They way of inviting us varies from time to time. Sometimes they send verbal messages, like, telling the learners. They also send invitations through short written notices.

In School A both parent participants mentioned that they did not attend parents' meetings. School A, Parent Participant 1 said:

I no longer attend them. I attend only issues that specifically pertain to my child.

Parent Participant 2 in this school said that:

At least once per term. I've never attended any parents' meeting because at that time, I am at work. In fact, I prefer going straight to my child's teachers. For invitations, they send verbal announcements, and sometimes the child comes home with a written notice.

During the course of the day, most parents were expected to report at work. The finding of parent participants having to ensure job security at the expense of attending their meetings is in alignment with that of a study conducted by Deger (2021) which revealed that parents' low socio-economic status deprive the parents time off from work to get meaningfully involved in matters of educating their children.

On whether issues of mainstreaming learners with ASD were among the issues discussed during parents' meetings, parent participants showed that such issues were never given the due attention they deserved. School B, Parent Participant 1, who criticised the manner at which her child was educated was quoted saying:

I blame the government because these children cannot be educated the same way it is done with the other learners. Government is failing inclusive education.

Similarly, School D, Parent Participant 1 said:

The chances are so slim, and seriously this is what demotivates me to attend.

School A, Parent Participant 1 purported that:

I attended a few and I found that they did not benefit me.

School B, Parent Participant 1 showed uncertainty by mentioning that:

I am not sure because I sometime miss meetings. This is my child's sixth year since 2017 but I've never heard any issue about them being discussed.

Teachers' individual interview responses also revealed lack of effective communication, and this was reverberated during teachers' focus-group interview. The severity of insufficiency of communication channels was revealed by teachers from the same school who mentioning that in their school, there were neither parents nor staff meetings. School C, Teacher Participant 1 alluded that:

No, we never discuss such. The challenges differ from learner to learner, so we deal with the challenges arising in that particular learner. We never call parents for meetings.

School C, Teacher Participant 2 shared that:

We don't have staff meetings. From my arrival in 1996 until now, I've never heard of even one parents' meeting.

School D, Teacher Participant 2's response was more similar to that of School C, Teacher Participant 1. She mentioned that:

We handle the issues with the learners, not with the parent.

According to Parental Involvement Framework (Epstein, 1994), parental involvement entails involving parents to be part and parcel of school decision-making bodies and committees. The habit of schools of not having a convenient time for parents' meetings interferes with the parents' right of collectively advocating for educational reforms to improve education of learners with ASD in mainstream schools. It robs parents the opportunity of being active decision makers in the education of the learners by sharing ideas which can thereafter be disseminated to different spheres of the Bio-ecological Systems Theory (Epstein, 1994) in effort to uproot all misconceptions levelled on learners with ASD and their parents. Moreover, the act of a majority of parents resorting to disassociate themselves from parents' meetings portrays self-exclusion at its highest degree, thus, it is one which needs to be attended to with the highest degree of intelligence because it becomes a self-made cubicle for shunning any means of crafting of policies which can be utilised to improve the education of the learners with ASD in mainstream school settings.

Incompetence of Support Systems

To enhance parents' efficacy to successfully navigate the complexities which emanate from parenting learners with ASD, parents require counselling (Chalwe et al., 2021). Parent participants stated that opportunities availed by the schools were not enough to lead the learners to academic excellence. School B, Parent Participant 1 was quoted saying that:

You find that the learner is in a classroom where the teacher is not trained on issues of autism. I know there are areas in which she is not capable in, but at the end of the year, the teachers tell her to proceed to the next grade. The development is far less than my expectation.

School C, Parent Participant 1 sadly mentioned that:

Academically, it is still a challenge. We try doing exercises here at home, but they are far below what she should be learning.

School D, Parent Participant 1 posited that:

He struggles a lot at school, and here at home I can't help him learn the way his classmates are learning. To me that's a sign to show that it's difficult for both his teacher and I.

In the face of teacher participants, the way head teachers were distancing themselves made the involvement of parents to be a mammoth task. School A, Teacher Participant 2 alluded that:

The management is not well versed with the programme such that I don't get support on issues, like, head teacher asking parents to intervene. I have to rely on improvising for providing myself with curriculum for these learners. Even for planning lessons, I struggle because I have to individualise the lessons, yet there are no accommodative teaching aids.

School B, Teacher Participant 2 echoed the above teacher participant by explaining that:

Teaching aids are usually not accommodative to the learner.

On the contrary, School A, Teacher Participant 1 disputed her fellow teacher's assertion of management which seemed to remain aloof. She said:

The office works hand in hand with us teachers, like, it provides teaching assistance. Our school sometimes asks people who are knowledgeable of special education needs to help us.

Promoting the learners with ASD to next grades while they have not mastered grade appropriate skills is tantamount to academically excluding the learners, thus, robbing the parents means of helping the learners to attain hope and confidence towards self-actualisation. This finding confirms one from Numisi et al. (2020) where parents expressed disappointment because they had set unrealistic expectations. Moreover, labelling head teachers as not considerate enough to source accommodative teaching aids corroborates with literature from Van der Linder et al. (2019), whereby insufficiency of resources to enable curriculum modification through task-analysis restricted support that teachers rendered to help the learners with ASD to achieve reasonable educational outcomes. With such incompetence of the school as a meso-system of Bronfenbrenner's Bio-ecological Systems Theory (1979), the quality of education offered by the teachers to the learner with ASD during instruction may be tremendously compromised, hence, the foundation laid in class becomes too shallow for the parent to build on while trying to help the learner with studies at home.

Notably, some parent participants narrated how their socio-economic status made them feel incompetent. School A, Parent Participant 1 said that:

My role is limited by funds. There are things I feel like I should be doing more for him but I can't. I live at 'Bhunya' and every Friday I need to take him for private therapy, and that's R620.00 per Friday. He takes supplements, about E400 at clicks. Sometimes he beats his forehead or mouth and he has blood clots. The medication for that is also expensive, small bottles cost around E900 and maybe they are around E1200 today.

School A, Parent Participant 2 also lamented her financial incompetency by purporting that:

We pay for therapy and it is too expensive for us. That causes us to sometimes miss the sessions, not because we no longer need the therapy but because of financial constraints.

While the Parent Development Theory (Mowder, 2005) advocates for parents to be responsive to needs of their children, parent participants mentioned that although they did see the need for therapy for the learners, financial constraints were a huge stumbling block in accessing the same. This current finding resonates with a finding from a study conducted by Reedy et al. (2019) where diverse resources could be only accessed by parents of learners with ASD who held high socio-economic status. Furthermore, the mention of therapy sessions provided in distant locations is in alignment with Leadbitter et al. (2020) who reported that the travel to the location of the therapy session was burdensome and tiring to both the parent and child.

Teacher participants also pointed out that among parents, there was prevalence of inadequacy of knowledge about ASD. School B, Teacher Participant 1 alluded that:

The parent is not educated, as well as clueless on issues of ASD, so they don't even understand what autism is and how it impacts on the learners' development. Sometimes the parent loses the temper against the learner and says she is full of contempt.

Sharing the same sentiments, School D, Teacher Participant 2 said that:

The parent lacks knowledge on how to handle the child. Also, she has no support group. And when you try to advise her she views you as someone who thinks you see yourself as educated and as someone who should dictate to her.

Teacher participants revealed that parents were not well acquainted with accurate information about ASD, thus, often times associated the learners' behaviour with contempt. This finding concurs with previous findings from Chalwe et al. (2021) which demonstrated parents' inadequacy of information about ASD.

Parents Struggle to Juggle Enhancing Academic Performance of Learners with ASD and Other Aspects of Their Lives

Kasongole and Muzata (2020) opine that at home learners can improve academic difficulties they encountered while they were at school. Parent participants revealed inadequacy of time as a major drawback in the role they wished to play. Citing work commitments, School C, Parent Participant 1 showed pieces of study work they tried with the learner and mentioned that:

I sometimes feel like I am not giving her enough attention. I feel like the studies interfere with our leisure time. Yes! the time for us to bond. Usually when I come back from work I have to cook us supper. You know! I am already tired. I try to help her with studies, but she is also very tired. Soon we feel like sleeping.

School D, Parent Participant 1 also said:

The nature of work that I am doing for a living is also a challenge. As a teacher I am sometimes expected to put aside my work obligations or rather compromise them because there is no way I can leave my child to be alone while doing home works.

Parent participants revealed that assisting the learners with ASD with studies necessitated devoting quality time at the expense of a typically hectic day. The finding from this current study affirms literature recorded by Macha et al. (2020) whereby a myriad of peculiar psychosocial behaviours which manifested among learners with ASD caused parents to suffer sleep deprivation. Sleeplessness may compromise the way parents interact with humans in the micro-, meso- and exo-system levels while navigating various avenues in quest for intervention for the learners.

Conclusion

The study explored challenges which parents encountered in their role of enhancing academic performance of learners with ASD in Eswatini mainstream primary schools. The challenges included lack of communication among the various stakeholders and incompetency of support systems, which also entail parents' struggle to execute the multiple responsibilities effectively to accord quality time to help learners with ASD in mainstream primary schools to achieve optimally in academic goals.

Recommendations

In contemplation of solving the challenges which were revealed by the participants above, we recommend that head teachers and parents, as members of the meso-system should consider using modernised modalities of holding meetings remotely, such as, Microsoft Teams and Zoom, and these meetings should be scheduled for times when most parents have knocked off from work.

The Ministry of Education and Training, should intensively capacitate all parents of learners with ASD with relevant skills for handling the issues of learners with ASD. Experts in the field of ASD, from various quarters of Eswatini should be invited to combat the sense of helplessness by keeping the other

stakeholders abreast with accurate information for overcoming the challenges of parental role in enhancing academic performance of learners with ASD.

Furthermore, the Ministry of Education and Training should consider having a database of learners with ASD in the various schools so that it can establish a budget to furnish the mainstream primary schools with high quality therapeutic services. Addressing the complexity through reducing the financial responsibility in parents can offload the parents who are financially unstable.

Acknowledgement

We acknowledge and sincerely appreciate the assistance we received in varied forms from the participants of this study.

Authors' Contributions

This article is based on the research finding of the first author, as a successful Doctor of Philosophy student which was conducted under the supervision of Dr N.D.M., as the second author.

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