Exploring The Experiences Of Educators Teaching Learners Diagnosed With Autism: A Case Study Of A Public Special School At Umlazi District (South Africa)

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Abstract

The focus of this study was to explore the educators' experiences of teaching learners diagnosed with autism. The study was conducted at a special school in Umlazi district and used 8 participants. Participants were purposively selected based on their number of years of experiences in teaching learners with autism. The theoretical framework for this study is provided by the Education White Paper 6, which aims to build an inclusive education system. This policy on Special needs provides the framework for development of an inclusive, holistic, differentiated and integrated education and training system by embracing the diversity of learners needs. It is a system that enhances learner diversity and acknowledges that learning takes place in different socio economic contexts. This chosen framework based on the concept inclusion, forms a strong framework for this study since teaching and learning are intertwined and to teach learners with autism required effective teamwork. The study used a qualitative research in which a case study approach was adopted. Therefore, in order to explore the educators' experiences in teaching learners diagnosed with autism, an interpretivist paradigm was used. The data generation

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processes was obtained through semi-structured interviews, focus group interviews and narratives to get insight and quality data. During interviews, open ended questions were used and other questions arose naturally. The semi-structured interviews were used to enable us to get deep information by probing participants' responses. This has assisted to elaborate on incomplete answers by being flexible and getting clarification on the experiences of educators teaching learners diagnosed with autism. The researchers set meetings into two sessions, grouping participants in 2 groups of 4 educators according to their numbers of years of experiences of teaching learners diagnosed with autism. These educators were given questions in advance ahead of group discussions to be aware of the topic concerned and to make them feel comfortable during discussions. The narrative approach also called 'story telling' was used by the researcher to give voice to the participants to elaborate on their own experiences. Thus asking educators teaching learners diagnosed with autism to tell their own stories about their experiences of working with these learners gave deep insight and better understanding of their personal lives and added valuable data to the research. The overall findings of the research show that teaching learners diagnosed with autism is challenging. These challenges are located at two key levels (educators'/teachers' level and other stakeholders' level) of the educational system. It requires understanding of autism and effective supports by various role players or stakeholders at those key levels in order to truly provide effective teaching and learning, and by doing so, improve learners' performances. Firstly, at the level of the educator/teacher who need to be empowered and change attitude in order to be able to provide the required support to the learners. Secondly, at the level of the other stakeholders/ other professionals such as support staffs, assistant teachers, parents, district, school therapists, school

nurse, SMT, SGB, SBST, DBST, Social worker, Psychologist and community members in order to promote effective teaching and learning for our learners. The findings also reveal that teaching learners with autism is a complex task because autism is a complex disorder and each learner is unique and different. Therefore, educators' experiences of teaching learners diagnosed with autism differ from one another because every learner is unique and every educator experience the daily challenges differently in various contexts.

Keywords: *Autism, Inclusive education, Special needs*

INTRODUCTION

Over the last decade of the 20th century, the world went through numerous changes in political, economic, socio-cultural and environmental systems, which left many countries shifting directly or indirectly to new approaches to adjust to the new reality. Across the globe, inclusive education approach emerged as a main international policy at the World Conference on Special Needs Education (SNE) (Education, 1994). The purpose of the Salamanca conference was to promote education as a fundamental human right by focusing on the fundamental policy shifts crucial for the development of inclusive education. Since the demise of apartheid, internationally, the South African Government has pledged to put the children first by becoming signatory to the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and giving children special recognition in the Bill of Rights of the South African constitution. This is to ensure that children rights are upheld and provision is made to enable all children to achieve their full potential. Locally, various education policies and laws have been designed and changed to promote the

transformation and meet the needs of the current education system that provide quality education for all learners. These policies changes were, for the mainstream schools as well as for the special school context and were adapted to the special school context in which this study is conducted. The selected sample for this study was Maendeleo public special school located in a suburb, south of Durban in the province of KwaZulu Natal. The researcher selected this special school because of the interest and the belief that it would provide a rich authentic data to explore this study. The selected special school has 603 learners with various disabilities among which are 42 learners with autism spectrum disorder, 44 educators (1 principal, 2 deputy principals, 41 teachers among whom there are 5 HOD) and 41 support staffs (24 assistant teachers, 3 drivers, 4 security guards, 4 ground staffs, 6 cleaners). The school also has 3 therapists (speech, occupational and physiotherapists), and 1 nurse who works with educators to provide effective teaching and learning at the school. The governance and management of the school is based on decisions of the School Governing Body (SGB) and the School Management Team (SMT). The special school has 5 departments which are Junior, intermediate, middle, senior and autism. Recently, the pilot project of a new department of Children with Severe to Profound Intellectual Disabilities (CSPID) was launched. The CSPID project has 2 units of CSPID classrooms. The autism department is comprised of 5 units of autism classrooms, 5 teachers and 5 assistant teachers. It benefits from the service of the school therapists, school nurse, social worker, School Based Support Team (SBST) and District Based Support Team (DBST) when needed. It is coordinated by an HOD who is part of the SMT. The selected public special school also caters for learners by providing school transport and feeding scheme. It liaises with private sector and other governmental departments such as, the Department of Health (DOH), the Department of

Social Development and Welfare (DSDW) and the Department of Justice by collaborating with local clinic, social worker and police when necessary. Furthermore, the selected special school plays a critical role in the implementation of an inclusive education system. It collaborates with other schools (specials and mainstreams) and the surrounding community through various projects such as autism awareness, gardening projects, HIV and Aids awareness, community policy forum, Early Childhood Development and addressing barriers to learning programmes to capacitate the community. Special educators or special education teachers are professionals who work for children with disabilities (including autism) on a day-to-day basis. Autism is defined as "a complex, variable, neurologically based pervasive developmental disorder that influences both the development and functioning of the brain" (Landsberg & Kruger, 2014). Autism is "a pervasive developmental disorder characterized by severe deficits in social interaction and communication, by an extremely limited range of activities and interests, and often by the presence of repetitive, stereotyped behaviors" (The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, 2007). For the purpose of this study, "autism" will refer to a neurological disorder characterized by deficits in social interaction and communication, restricted imagination and behavioral difficulties. Children with autism have unique learning characteristics that differ widely from typical learning children as well as children with other types of disabilities. It is, thus, crucial for special educators to update their knowledge regarding identification and management of children with autism. For the purpose of this study, teaching refers to developing the child/ learner with autism holistically (physically, socially, emotionally, intellectually and normative development) by meaning of the daily programme or activities in a special school. In South Africa, autism remains little understood despite, the recognition that it is increasingly becoming

diagnosed across all spheres (Grinker, 2007). According to figures used by Autism South Africa, the prevalence is 1:158 (Peeters, 1999). A disparity between sexes indicates that males are affected far more than females. In Autism it is 4:1 while in Asperger syndrome it increases to 9:1 (Waterhouse, 2000). The present study was therefore aimed to carefully examine the perceptions of educators teaching learners with autism, to understand how these educators negotiate their daily teaching activities and, to explore the effects of these teaching activities on the educator's well-being.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Exploring educators' experiences of teaching learners diagnosed with autism was the focus of the study. As this deals with human (Hick, Kershner, & Farrell, 2009) experiences and their interpretation of the world, the research moved towards a qualitative research design that is descriptive, interpretive and explorative (Vos, 2002). The interpretive method and the phenomenological approach were selected as we were dealing with participants'/educators' experiences of teaching learners diagnosed with autism which is their everyday realities/experiences. This has provided insight into the experiences of a chosen group of people (Greeff, 2011), the educators teaching learners diagnosed with autism. To gain in-depth insight into the study, individual interviews, focus group interviews and narratives (telling stories) were conducted. To generate data, 8 educators were interviewed using the individual semi-structured and the focus group interviews asking open-ended questions as well as the narrative. The profiles of the participants interviewed to generate data for this study are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Profile of the participants interviewed

No	Name of educators (Pseudonyms)	Qualifi-cation	Years of Teaching Experience	Years of teaching Learners with Autism	Gender	Race	Phase/Level
1	Apple	HBED	28	4	Female	Coloured	junior
2	Banana	NPDE	4	2	Female	African	Junior
3	Cherry	BED	18	7	Female	African	Intermediate
4	Grape	PGCE	6	2	Male	African	Middle
5	Kiwi	BED	11	4	Female	African	Middle
6	Lemon	HBED	9	8	Male	African	Senior
7	Mango	BED	25	1	Female	African	Senior
8	Orange	PGCE	2	1	Female	African	intermediate

The semi-structured interview is a conversation with a purpose (Greeff, 2011). Furthermore, Kumar (2011) points that the semi-structured interview is used in order to generate more data related to the topic. Therefore, this approach was to explore the participants' experiences asking them questions such as; tell me about your everyday experience of teaching learners diagnosed with autism and how does it influence your life?

For the focus group interviews, participants were grouped according to their year of teaching experiences and availability. The reason for doing focus group interviews was to obtain multiple viewpoints and perceptions by generating a large amount of concentrated data in a short period of time. Wessel (2008) indicates that the focus group interviews are useful because they communicate a willingness to listen, leaving the participants feeling empowered and supported in a group discussion.

DATA ANALYSIS

Thematic coding analysis was used to analyze data. Braun and Clark (2006) indicate that thematic analysis organizes and describes data set in detail and; furthermore it interprets various aspects of the research topic. Inductive analysis moving from specific data to general categories was utilized. After generating

data from interviews, the researcher prepared and organized data (S.Schumacher, 2014) to facilitate coding then data info were transcribed into segments to make sense of it. Thereafter, categorized data were described and developed into patterns to get more insight. Individual and focus group interviews were analyzed, synthesized, summarized and interpreted.

During the narratives, the researcher focused on the context and quotations of participants by arranging the participants' statements logically aiming to minimize mistakes and give their true meaning. Then framed the narrative in a naturalistic context and phenomenological experiences of participants presenting their own language as, this (S.Schumacher, 2014) enhances the understanding of this study and extends the findings to future research studies and practices. The researchers also used triangulation among the 3 strategies of data generations namely individual semi-structured interviews, focus group interviews and narratives.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The data from semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions and narratives are presented. Three main themes and sub-themes were identified to answer the research questions. Each theme is supported by verbatim quotes from the participants. Slavin (2007) alludes that it is of vital importance to use direct quotations from the participants in data analysis to elucidate and corroborate the arguments. Lavlani (2013) states that the necessary support required by educators may be linked to the manner in which they conceptualize inclusive education. These educators used different intervention strategies such as individual educational programme; support group, peer support and team work with the support of other educators, parents and the SMT to make sure that the learners

under their care are effectively developing (Landsberg & Kruger, 2014). This view is supported by Coetzee and Mienie (2013), who argues that, there should be mutual inclusivity of the educators mandate to observe and promote learners basic human right. Naidu (2016) indicates that support is the cornerstone of successful inclusive education. Collaboration is an important strategy to support inclusive practices. This implies that in an inclusive setting all role players or stakeholders have to support each other for successful results.

THEME ONE: EDUCATORS' UNDERSTANDING OF AUTISM

The educators' understanding of autism varied in their answers to the interview questions. Most of their answers were common and based on the day to day behaviours manifested by learners with autism either in the classroom or on the playground and their background into the society they live. This can be illustrated through the answers provided below by educators when asked, what is Autism? Banana: "autism is a neurological issue in the brain which is not allowing the learner to function normally and make him/her to behave inappropriately or strangely at school". (Probe) can you please tell me more about the child behaving inappropriately or strangely. Banana: The learner may start laughing or crying for no apparent reason, he/she may bites him/herself, and sometimes just collects sticks or rubbish on the playground. It is very strange but I am getting used to it."

Mango: "Autism is a behaviour which the learner sometimes manifests into the classroom or at break which makes him being rejected by his/her classmates or schoolmates. Very often learners with autism do not like to play with others. They like to be alone". "I have asked their parents and they have reported that even at home these learners behave in a strange

way. Most of them enjoy watching TV and they go to bed late. They may also wake up in the middle of the night and start singing no stop."

Grape: "Autism is a mental condition that makes learners to behave badly in the classroom."

(Probe) Can you please tell me what you mean by "to behave badly?"

"Eish… for example, when you talk to them, they ignore you and do not pay attention to you as a teacher." "Furthermore, they are noisy, distractive and do not listen. They disturb other learners in the classroom. Their behaviour is unpredictable especially when it is hot and mostly when school opens after a holiday." From the answers given by educators on their understanding of autism, it is shown that those with many years of teaching learners with autism have a sound knowledge of the concept and could clearly explain in their own words what autism is all about. This can be illustrated by the statement given below by Lemon: Lemon: "Autism is a neurological condition characterized by the triad of impairments on the learner thinking and social imagination, social understanding and behaviour, as well as social communication. It may be associated with sensory issues that are very common and you can see the learners walking on his/her toes, biting his/her fingers and also smelling other learners or their food." "Learners with autism also have a problem with colours especially with bright colours." The description of autism as given by different participants also reveals a description that embraces the social model of inclusive education. It includes the context of teaching and learning taking into account, both the formal as well as the informal education. The context in this case is not only the classroom where learners interact with each other, teachers, the curriculum and the extra curriculum, but also taking into consideration the social factor including the families,

communities, and the environments where these learners and teachers are living.

THEME TWO: EDUCATORS' UNDERSTANDING OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

The data revealed that there is a mix understanding of this broad concept, which could be based on the teaching and learning experiences of these educators or either on their various working context. The answers given below are illustration to this finding:

Apple: "Inclusive education is about minimizing barriers to learning in order to maximize learners' performance." (Probe) Can you please tell me more about "barriers to learning?"

"Barriers to learning are anything that prevents the learner to perform to his fullest. These barriers can be internal barriers like a child suffering for a chronic condition, for example TB, HIV and will be absent to school for a long period or external barriers which are very common in our society dominated by poverty, unemployment. These barriers impact on the child learning and consequently affect his school performance negatively. In many cases we have seen learners dropping out of school before completing the year." Lemon: "Inclusive education is about adapting the curriculum to allow slow learners to understand the content. It is about differentiating the curriculum when teaching and using various teaching strategies to make sure that learners' needs are accommodated." "It is about accepting that all learners can learn provided that they are given the needed support by the school and their parents." Orange: "In my view inclusive education is a new practice that allows us to separate learners from mainstream schools and special schools. It is about moving learners who cannot cope to mainstream school and place them in a special school."

Banana: "Inclusive education is just another change that the government or department of education has come up with to help learners with disability by sending them to a special school as they are slow and have to learn in their own pace. They need extra support in order for them to achieve." (Probe) what do you mean by "learners with disability"? "These are learners with challenges and who cannot learn in mainstream schools because they are slow and they are having learning disability. Some of these learners are epileptic, others down syndrome, but majority of them are having behavioral problems and usually are aggressive and bully." Cherry: "Inclusive education is about embracing diversity and acknowledging that all learners have a right to education and should be provided with a system that is flexible and change to accommodate their need in order for them to perform to their best." "It is about accepting that the child with disability is taken care of not only at home by his parents, but also by the school and the community where that child belongs. For me it is like raising a child within the 'Ubuntu spirit' when it comes to our education system." From the above answers the educators understanding of inclusive education revealed that inclusive education is a broad concept, which can be defined in many ways depending on the context. However, these answers and quotes from educators teaching learners diagnosed with autism show that their understanding of inclusive education impact significantly on its implementation and consequently have effects on learners' academic performance. The more they understand this concept, the better they would be motivated and ready to implement it and provide required support to learners. In contrast, the less they understand this concept, the more reluctant and resistant they would try to make change and embrace it. The following statements also illustrate their good understanding of inclusive education. Kiwi: "Inclusive education is about change and this change needs to start with me". She added saying that "it is

about providing opportunities so that every child or person is able to learn." Grape: "For me inclusive education is about acceptance, change of attitude and integration." These above mentioned statements by participants are supported and shared by the resolutions of the Salamanca conference, where governments around the world met and framed "Education for All" (EFA) based on inclusive education system policies related to their respective historical contexts as their commitment to providing quality education for all; (Mitchell, De Lange, & Thi, 2008). The educators responses mentioned above are also supported by the Education White Paper 6 which arose out of the necessity for change to be made to the provision of education and training so that it is responsive to the diverse range learning needs. The Education White Paper 6 also outlines that inclusive education and training is about changing attitudes, behaviour, teaching methodologies, curricula, the environment to meet the needs of learners (WP6, 2001).

Furthermore, the Education White Paper emphasizes that education for all learners is our constitutional responsibility. This is clearly stateted in the constitution of South Africa that every person has the right to basic education and training for which the states must continually make provision and which it must make accessible to everyone (Gasa, 2011).

THEME 3: EDUCATORS' PERCEPTION OF CHALLENGES OF TEACHING LEARNERS DIAGNOSED WITH AUTISM

Educating and caring for an autistic child is a severely difficult task to often associate with frustration and disappointment (Woodward & Hogenboom, 2001). Since challenges educators encounter in teaching learners with autism are widely varied, we have therefore tried to explain the most common and obvious manifestations. Despite apparent similarities between

the challenges experienced by educators in teaching learners diagnosed with autism, the causes of the challenges, their manifestations and the attitudes or approaches towards these challenges are mostly diverse. For example, if a number of educators have a challenge with learners' behaviour such as disruptive behaviour, seeking attention, aggressive behaviour, refuses to play or share with others the trigger factors may differ and the approach to overcome or minimize these challenges will mostly depends on the educators' attitude and perceptions of challenges encountered. Educators should be able to know their learners and be in a position to identifie each learner's needs. It is imperative that a good educator should strive for personal professional development which will help him to grow as an individual and contribute to the learners' growth and the school as a whole. Below are sub-themes identified as common challenges experienced by educators teaching learners with diagnosed autism:

1. Learners' behaviour
2. Educators' attitudes and stereotypes
3. The school curriculum
1. 4.Inadequate resources (human and material)
4. Administrative workload demand (paper work)
5. Educators' lack of training
6. Lack of knowledge, stereotype and discrimination from parents and community
7. Lack of basic necessities, poverty
8. Stigma associated with autism
9. Learners' absenteeism
10. Lack of motivation and insufficient salary.

It is also important to indicate that the identified challenges these educators encountered in teaching learners diagnosed with autism can be link to their understanding of the concept "autism" and "inclusive education". Therefore the first challenge

was identified within the educators themselves based on their negative attitude and stereotype. This can be illustrated by various statements quoted above and by the following responses from the participants that "it is a challenge to teach and work with these learners". "They are naughty and do not listen to you… very often you must teach the same thing again and again as they keep forgetting". From the participants' responses, it can also be pointed out without doubt that the learners needs that range from their school, family, and community where they live are not met and this has a significant impact on their performances. The above quoted statements are illustration to what can be corroborated by the response below: Cherry: "It is always a burden and difficult to work with learners diagnosed with autism." This statement also shows that educators need to be trained in order to effectively teach learners with autism. The lack of training is a real challenge to educators' ability to deliver the curriculum and support learners to perform to their full potential. It was also revealed from the educators' answers that there is inadequate material resources. This is very challenging as these educators struggle to create appropriate learning opportunities through conducive learning environment, crucial for the holistic development of learners. This is illustrated in the following responses from educators: Apple: "Although in my class I have only 8 learners, my class is very small and I struggle to set up display tables when teaching some topics." Mango: "During summer, it is very hot and if I take the learners outside on the playground, to control them is not easy. My assistant and I have to run after them and shout all the time." Kiwi: "Working with learners with autism is time consuming and we really need extra hands support especially in the classroom." Grape: "There is a need for more people to come and help us especially during outings and special school events. Believe me it is very hard to contain these learners." The one on one approach of

teaching required that the educator plans and structures his lesson carefully focusing on the needs of each learner. The contact time spent with learners should be beneficial and good resource to both the educator and the learners should be available. In addition to the above mentioned challenges, the educators also claim that learners are often absent. This makes their work even more difficult as most of them are slow learners. This is expressed in the responses below: Orange: "It is really draining to teach learners with autism as a lesson can take you up to 2 weeks before the learners master it." Banana: "Sometimes I wonder myself if ever they will finish the programme." Lemon: "These learners are slow when it comes to grasping the learning content and they need extra-time." Since there are demands from the School and the department to be in order with all the papers, learners' observation daily and monthly forms, reports, records, assessments, as well as involvement in various extra-curricular activities, the educators indicate that time is a challenge and is limited for the teachers to be up to their task. They added that some of their colleagues have either change departments, requested cross-transfer or simply resign because it was "too much" and "difficult to handle." The statement below is a testimony to the above scenario: Kiwi: "I feel like I am running after time and to be honest, I may move out of this department next year." There is a heavy focus on paper work accountability and academic aspects of the curriculum that educators are required to conform to and address. This has resulted in other aspects crucial to teaching and learning such as emotional and social well-being of the learners being overshadowed or neglected. The answer below is an illustration to the above statement: Apple: "I must make sure that my work (administrative work) is up to date so that when documents are requested by the HOD or Principal I am covered." With regard to the parents' attitude, the participants identified parents' negative attitude as a

challenge. This is seen as very often learners are left to the mercy of the school and educators. Parents will hardly answer your phone calls to discuss matters that concern their children, very often they are avoidant and tend to accept whatever you say or suggest instead of positively contribute to their children teaching and learning. Sometimes they come with a negative attitude and tend to fight the teachers or blame them for their children slow pace or learning and slow progress. The following answers attest to the above: Cherry: "it is demotivating when parents are not supporting you for the benefit of their children." Mango: "Often, they call you when it is time to apply for their children special grant." Orange: "They do not even read letters or the message book. Very often they do not reply to letters. If you send a letter on Friday, you still find it on Monday in the learners' school bag." Lemmer, Meier, and van Wyk (2013) indicate that teachers need to be knowledgeable about all parents in order to communicate effectively as well as work together as equal partners. This is important because parent diversity can be a valuable asset to a school, but also a source of conflict, especially when the school and home environment are quite dissimilar. It is crucial to indicate that learners' growth and the development of their basic skills and general knowledge are primarily influenced by their parents. Therefore as the primary caregivers, parents should be the role model as this influences their children performance at school. If parents have a negative attitude towards the school their children may learn from them and display the same attitude and a lack of interest in their learning. Venter (2007) states that, parents who lack the basic necessities have too little energy to pay sufficient attention to the children's cognitive and intellectual development. He further indicates that the children are then left to themselves for the greater part of the day and consequently they have little opportunity to come into contact with learning

opportunities. Below is presented few answers from participants as illustration to

Venters' above mentioned statement. Banana: "Parents spend most of their time at work, trying hard to provide food on the table…so they do not have time to do the school work follow up with children." Mango: "Most of my learners' parents are from poor socio-economic status and rely on the grant money to survive…they do not care about discussing their children progress." Apple: "It is hard to say but, parents also keep their children at home on outing/excursion days only because they cannot pay the entrance fees." The above responses show that parents are struggling to provide for their children basic needs and do not have time to focus on their education. It is therefore clear that their low socio economic status and lack of basic needs have a direct impact on them and their children academic development and progress. With regards to stereotype and stigma about autism the following statements are testimony to the challenges faced by educators in teaching special schools.

Kiwi said: "My neighbor laughs at me when I escort learners in the buses saying I am manifesting autistic tendencies" Orange said: "They call me names only because I teach in a special school. Sometimes, this makes me feel down and demotivated when I think about it." Lemon: "My sister said to me, I must be careful and leave special school before is too late … I may become autistic or one of them." The above statements reveal that there is a stigma associated with autism and related conditions in our society. Many people still believe that by working with learners with autism, or in a special school, you will end up developing autism in the long run or after some years because of stress and difficult working conditions. There is a stigma that you are at risk or vulnerable to develop autism

or related   psychological conditions. The stigma is also linked to the cultural and religious beliefs. There is also a belief that having a child with autism is a curse or a bad luck. In many cases the blame is put on the woman's family. The father of a child with autism usually feel ashamed and in other instances even divorces. This is common in community dominated by the patriarchal system where women are still discriminated and marginalized. and is illustrated by the following answers: Mango said: "During parents' interviews, I have discovered that most of my learners are from a single parent family and leaving with their mothers or gogos." Cherry said: "It is shocking and painful that some of my learners are taken for cleansing ceremonies to take out the bad spirit as the culture allows it." Apple said: "Parents have decided to stop the medication and take the child to church for few days of prayer." When asked to talk about their own perceptions of the challenges' effects on learners' academic performances, the participants' answers were common. Their answers revealed that the challenges they face have negative effects such as, problems to participate in a group, withdrawal, low self -esteem, anxiety, aggression, difficulty transferring skill learning from one setting to another, generalization, absenteeism, which lead to poor academic performances of learners. The various answers from the educators on this theme revealed that learners can be dealt with through proper planning of differentiated activities keeping in mind their various needs and acknowledging that learning is a process and learners are different. Therefore teaching should be differentiated to cater for different learning methods and context. It is important that the teacher set up objectives and realistic goal in order to attain the outcomes of different activities.

SUMMARY OF THE FINDINGS

The findings of this study reveal that inclusive education policy in South Africa special schools had embraced the policy of creating conducive environments for teaching and learning for learners diagnosed with autism so that they can perform to their best. However, the implementation of this policy shows that, educators, who have a pivotal role to play in this implementation process, are faced with various challenges which could be considered as internal or external barriers to learning for learners diagnosed with autism. Furthermore, the findings reveal that these educators share positive and negative experiences when teaching learners diagnosed with autism in their classrooms. The summary of the findings focuses on the following:

1. Educators' understanding of autism
2. Educators' understanding of inclusive education
3. Educators' perception of challenges of teaching learners diagnosed with autism

1 Educators' understanding of inclusive education

When asked about autism, the findings revealed that educators teaching learners diagnosed with autism have various views on the understanding of the concept autism. Their views were related to their number of years of teaching learners diagnosed with autism, their personal knowledge, their qualification and daily experiences of teaching learners diagnosed with autism in a particular context. The differences in understanding the concept autism can be linked to the training of the participants, the collaboration and support received from the support team as well as the everyday life experiences of teaching learners diagnosed with autism. This is very significant because educators acknowledge their key responsibility to create opportunities for learners diagnosed with autism to perform to

their full potential and to ensure that they strive and provide quality education. This also requires from educators personal educational development through, workshops, seminars, conferences and CPTD courses. The holistic development of learners diagnosed with autism should be promoted taking into account the specific needs of each learner. The findings show that early identification and intervention are important elements to be seriously considered for better understanding of autism and related conditions. This is also very crucial for successful results when implementing various teaching and learning strategies relevant for learners diagnosed with autism. Landsberg, Kruger and Swart (2014) argued that the complexity of autism increases when additional or secondary impairments have been identified. They further argued that it is possible that autism may occur with any other diagnosable physical, sensory or psychological impairment. Furthermore, the findings revealed that although working at the same school, participants acknowledged diversities amongst learners diagnosed with autism and that each learner is unique and develops in his/ her own pace. This view is supported by Sulaiman, Baki and Rahman (2011) who argued that learners with autism are regarded as having disabilities and have their own unique characteristics and different learning styles.

2 Educators' understanding of inclusive education

The analysis of the findings shows that the educators teaching learners diagnosed with autism had mix understanding of inclusive education based either on their teaching and learning experiences or on their various working context. All participants were asked to give their understanding of this broad concept namely inclusive education. In most cases, educators teaching learners diagnosed with autism have to go behind the call of duty and promote their learners human rights. These educators used different intervention strategies such as individual

educational programme; support group, peer support and team work with the support of other educators, parents and the SMT to make show that the learners under their care are effectively developing. This view is supported by Coetzee and Minnie (2013), who argue that, there should be mutual inclusivity of the educators mandate to observe and promote learners basic human right. These educators should move from theoretical obligation to practical obligation through implementation of their mandate making these rights a reality.

Westwood, (2007) supports this view stipulating that educators need to maintain positive relationships with the principal, other educators and personnel. He adds that this is collaboration in the form of team work as educators help each other to implement the best strategies for each learner. Collaboration is an important strategy to support inclusive practices. Marlow, Kyed and Connors (2006) explain that collaboration goes behind obtaining information from experts and/or just working with someone. It involves the manner in which people work as a team to accomplish clear, shared and negotiated purposes and tasks. This implies that in an inclusive setting all role players or stakeholders have to support each other for successful results.

3 Educators' perception of challenges of teaching learners diagnosed with autism

The findings revealed that educators teaching learners diagnosed with autism faced numerous challenges related to different factors such as: the socio economic, environmental, cultural and religious. These factors in one way or another contribute to the challenges faced by educators teaching learners diagnosed with autism, and therefore, significantly impacted in various areas of learners' development and their academic performances. It is also important to indicate that the findings reveal that these above mentioned factors are

interrelated and sometimes difficult to be isolated when it comes to teaching and learning.

1. Socio-economic factors

The findings show that lack of basic necessities, lack of adequate teaching aids, learners' absenteeism and poor salary are just few socio economic factors that impact significantly on the teachers' daily life. The teachers are demotivated and end up having a negative attitude towards their profession by looking down on themselves and on their learners. Ladbrook (2009) indicates that educators are not sufficiently prepared to address the needs presented by learners, as a result of challenges posed from social settings. The learners on the other hand, end up under performing and notable to fully developed and master the required skills. Lemmer, Meier and van Wyk (2013) indicates that the socio-economic factor play a significant role in determining how a person acts, lives and relates to others. Another common socio economic factor is the lack of parents' involvement. The findings revealed that most of the learners were from poor economic back ground including unemployed parents, single parent family, learners living with grandmothers. It is known that parents who are the primary caregivers of the children should work together with the school for the best interest of the learners. Landsberg, Kruger and Swart (2014) state that when learners with ASD are accommodated at a school, parents should be seen as partners and included to help the teacher understand the learner better. Some parents feel that educators are not doing enough, or they are not up to the task and portrait a negative attitude towards educators, which in turn impacts on their attitudes and the learners' holistic development. These educators also struggle to better understand the learners and therefore, there is a dire need of effective support from parents as stakeholders in order to address their children various needs and better understand

them. Naidu (2016) says that educators agree that learners need to be treated individually, but in order for educators to address individual needs of the learners, they need the necessary support.

2. Cultural and religious factors

It was also found that the stigma, stereotype and discrimination associated with autism play a negative role not only on the learners' academic performances, but also impact significantly on the attitude of educators towards providing effective support to learners who are stereotyped and discriminated. Sleeter (2005) states that many studies carried out in the US have shown that teachers of a dominant cultural group often cherish lower expectations of learners belonging to ethnic minority groups. Furthermore, these teachers have either a deficiency or a difference orientation towards learners (Sleeter & Grant, 2007).

3. Environmental factors

The findings revealed that all the participants have stressed the importance of the positive climate of the classroom when teaching learners diagnosed with autism. This view is supported by Naidu (2016) who states that learning is stimulated by the environment it encompasses. The findings also revealed that some environmental factors impact negatively on the learners' behaviour and academic performance in the classroom. The findings show that the teaching strategies used by educators were adapted to their environment taking into account each learner needs. It is important to indicate that educators should make special adaptation in their management of the classroom environment in order to support the learners' needs. Landsberg, Kruger and Swart (2014) stressed there is a need for teachers to make special arrangements and adaptations within the inclusive classroom situation to ensure that all learners benefit

from the teaching and support. Therefore, it is necessary that learners are in the environment which is conducive so that the learning process can occur.

CONCLUSION

The findings reveal that the educators teaching learners diagnosed with autism face numerous challenges. The study reveals that these educators have both positive and negative experiences. As teaching and learning are intertwined, these challenges not only affect their lives, but also have significant effects on the learners' holistic development. The study also reveals from the participants own perspectives that several other challenges were encountered including: lack of motivation, negative attitudes, inadequate teaching resources, inadequate training of educators on special needs education and inclusive education, the society stigma, cultural and religious influences, anxiety and depression, high demand of administrative work load, lack of conducive teaching and learning environment, inadequate support from parents, inadequate support from teacher-aids, learners absenteeism and the fear of the unknown from teachers. To develop physical, emotional, intellectual and psycho-social well-being and supports to overcome the above challenges becomes the reasons why educators teaching learners diagnosed with autism need holistic support in order to meet their daily lives as teachers in a special school. By receiving holistic support from school, parents and communities, these educators are provided with strategies which develop them into lifelong learners and help them to overcome various challenges they face when teaching learners under their care. This view is supported by the notion that teachers should create safe spaces to learn and address all barriers to learning and to children well-being

(DoBE, SIAS Policy, 2014) (DOBE & Policy, 2014). The needed holistic support should be provided in term of interaction, collaboration and team work between all stakeholders for the best interest of the learners.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The department of health, social development and education should encourage more studies or research on autism and related conditions and provide adequate support to various stakeholders. Further research should be conducted focusing on South African context in order to bring more light on local realities. It is also important to keep in mind the contribution of international studies and new technology for better understanding of autism and related conditions in various contexts.

Acronyms and Abbreviations
ASD: Autism Spectrum Disorder
CPTD: Continuing Professional Teachers Development
DBST: District Based Support Team
DOBE: Department Of Basic Education
SBST: School Based Support Team
SGB: School Governing Body
SMT: School Management Team

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