



Teacher - parent collaboration to support learners on the autism spectrum: A PALAR approach

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DECLARATION

I, MOLELEKENG CYNTHIA RAKHOLILE, student no 26482258, declare that this thesis is my own work and that it has not been published in any university. All the sources used in this work have been acknowledged.

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of a large, stylized 'C' with a horizontal line through it, followed by a smaller, less distinct mark.

DEDICATION

This study is dedicated to my late mother, Tlaleng Hadio Elisa Malefane.

Despite all the hardships that you faced as a divorcee, you managed to raise us. Thank you for all the sacrifices that you made. Thank you for always encouraging me to work hard and for your endless support. I don't think I would be where I am today if it weren't for your unconditional love. You stood by me when I was not well. You would always tell me "*Modimo o teng*" during the darkest days of our lives. Through these words, I learnt to trust in God even when things are not going well. Mama, I believe that your spirit was with me throughout the whole project. I will always love you and thank you so much.

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To my husband, Geoffrey Lebeea, when all hope was lost, you became the light in my life. You believed in me and made me realise my potential.

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May the God of the Bible let his light shine upon you.

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ABSTRACT

Education White Paper 6 on Special Needs Education: Building an Inclusive Education and Training System (EWP 6) (DoE, 2001) asserts that all learners can learn and must be supported and guaranteed equal and equitable education. Despite the implementation of White Paper 6, there is still a lack of support for learners on the autism spectrum. Teachers and parents' collaboration is difficult to foster and sustain if they work as separate entities. Due to the illiteracy of some parents, there is also a lack of early diagnosis of learners on the autism spectrum, which leads to a lack of collaboration and support as well. This study aimed to examine collaborative strategies that teachers and parents can adopt to support learners diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder in the Fezile Dabi district, Free State Province, South Africa, through the application of the PALAR approach. The research project was conducted in two schools for learners with special educational needs in the Fezile Dabi district. A PALAR approach was employed to foster effective collaboration in supporting learners on the autism spectrum.

Furthermore, this study was guided by Gardner's Multiple Intelligences (MI) theory as well as Mezirow's Transformative Learning (TL) theory. This study is comprised of a sample of five teachers and five parents as co-researchers. Purposeful sampling was utilised for this study to identify participants who are knowledgeable and experienced in teaching and supporting learners on the autism spectrum (AS). The data generation process was conducted by means of an Action Learning Group (ALG) and through art-based methods and reflective journals, and the data was analysed by the researcher and participants using thematic analysis. The analysis revealed several interconnected themes pinpointing challenges faced by teachers and parents, and strategies for teachers and parents to support learners on the AS. The findings of the study denote a crucial need for collaborative efforts between teachers and parents in supporting learners on the AS. The findings suggest the following guidelines: encouraging and fostering collaboration between teachers and parents; reviewing of policies; effective time management; support programmes for teachers and parents; allocation of adequate resources; development of policies to address stigma; training programmes for teachers and parents and enhancing initiatives towards psychological support. The study contributes to improve implementation efforts towards successful programmes, as teachers and parents collaborate in helping learners. The study will also help address key challenges faced by parents and teachers in collaborating as they support learners, through developed skills, knowledge and strategies specific to their learners in this schools. This study will theoretically contribute to the body of knowledge required for teachers to develop educational methods and strategies that are effective in enhancing learners' multiple intelligences, especially for those on the AS. The study reported on the outcomes, findings and recommendations that will be communicated to the parents, teachers and the Department of

Education (DoE) in their engagements on how to support learners on the autism spectrum. The implications of these findings reach far beyond the confines of the school environment. They indicate that participatory methods can improve professional growth, reinforce community connections, and guide policy choices that emphasize inclusive education.

Key terms: Inclusive education, barriers to learning, autism spectrum disorder, collaboration, support, White Paper 6 on Special Needs Education.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ABA	Applied Behaviour Analysis
ADHD	Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder
ALG	Action Learning Group
APA	American Psychiatric Association
AS	Autism Spectrum
ASD	Autism Spectrum Disorder
CAPS	Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement
DBE	Department of Basic Education
DBST	District -Based Support Team
DCAPS	Differentiated Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement
DoE	Department of Education
DoH	Department of Health
DSD	Department of Social Development
DSM-5	<i>Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders</i> (5th edition)
EWP 6	Education White Paper 6
IEP	Individual Education Plan
ILST	Institutional Level Support Team
ISP	Individual Support Plan
LEGO	“Leg godt”
LSEN	Learner with Special Educational Needs
MI	Multiple Intelligence
NCS	National Curriculum Statement
PALAR	Participatory Action Learning and Action Research
PBI	Peer-based Intervention
SBST	School- Based Support Team
SIAS	Screening, Identification, Assessment and Support
TL	Transformative Learning

TVET	Technical and Vocational Education and Training
UNCRPD	United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

CHAPTER 1

OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) can be explained as a grouping of deficits in interpersonal communication as well as repetitive sensory and motor behaviours that manifest early in the life of a child; the condition is strongly linked to a genetic component and various other factors such as advanced parental age, maternal diabetes, very low birth weight etc. (Lord et al., 2018). This neurodevelopmental disorder extends through the lifespan and is marked by ongoing problems with social communication and social contact, limited and constant behaviours, interests, and activities (Pillay et al., 2021). All over the world, the occurrence of ASD is reported to be growing, and individual children, families, communities and society are impacted by this complex disorder (Mhlele et al., 2023). The same increase in prevalence is true for South Africa, where approximately 28.8 per cent of the population is children younger than 15 years (Statistics South Africa, 2014). In numbers, this means that about 169,286 learners under the age of 15 could be predicted to have ASD and may need specialised health, education and ancillary facilities for assistance. Zeidan et al. (2022) state that the frequency of ASD in the nation mirrors the worldwide trend of one to two per cent of the population. Research done by Pillay et al. (2021) shows a prevalence of 0.08 per cent of children with ASD in the Western Cape and an annual average rise of 15.18 per cent.

Research on ASD and learners on the autism spectrum (AS) and their educational needs in South Africa is still very limited (Meiring et al., 2016). This study aimed to explore collaborative approaches that teachers and parents can use in supporting the learners on the AS, which was achieved by targeting specifically learners from two different schools for Learners with Special Educational Needs (LSEN). The study mainly looked at challenges and experiences of teachers and parents in these LSEN schools, with the focus on level 1 need learners on the AS. Moreover, another focus of this study was also to look at collaborative support of learners on the AS by teachers and parents while not neglecting other needs, as learners on the AS have a broad spectrum of needs, strengths, and capacities as individuals, within each individual autistic learner. It therefore means support by teachers and parents may need to be highly individualised to achieve academically. According to Murray (2015), all schools are regarded as social environments; therefore, learners in the AS enter the educational system already at a disadvantage when compared to normally developing learners. This is why collaboration needs to be established to encourage the success of the learners on the AS.

1.2 BACKGROUND TO STUDY

South Africa is a country with a population of rich racial, cultural, ethnic and religious origins, and the education system reflects the diverse population, with learners and teachers from various linguistic, racial and cultural histories. However, the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996) made education mandatory for every learner from ages seven to 15 (often extended to 18); inequality persists, particularly for learners with special needs (Strohwalde & Horsten, 2024). This stems from the history of apartheid, where resources in special schools were heavily skewed towards white learners (Makhalemele & Nel, 2016). Although public and private schools offer different support levels, limited access to preschool and rigid admission criteria in special schools continue to pose challenges to inclusivity and equity in education, also regarding learners on the AS (Becerra et al., 2014). As a disorder, ASD affects people irrespective of culture, ethnicity, or financial status. Regrettably, the literature that is readily available on learners on the AS, how to diagnose ASD and the influence of ASD on learners and their families comes from the United States and other developed countries (Bauer et al., 2022). Therefore, there is a gap in the literature about the prevalence of ASD and the available and appropriate support for parents and teachers in public schools in South Africa (Erasmus et al., 2021). Nthibeli et al. (2022) reiterate that research on ASD is very much lacking in South Africa. According to Meiring et al. (2016), reliable statistics on the prevalence of ASD are still unavailable in our country, which provides a gap to be researched. Chamber et al. (2017) also argue that South African people, in general, have insufficient knowledge on supporting learners on the AS, referring to the inadequate research in the country, which supports the motive for this research.

As a novice teacher, it has been an honour to work with learners with various abilities and barriers, including learners on the AS. Therefore, I am aware of the problems parents face when endeavouring to understand their children's development. The challenges that confront the teachers in dealing with these learners are enormous, and they range from limited resources and training to systemic issues and cultural and social factors (Manukwana, 2020). Recent years have seen progress concerning the advancement of the policy and legislative framework in South Africa to support parents and teachers teaching learners with barriers to learning, including learners on the AS; however, the success of these policies is yet to be realised. There are many people on the AS with varying abilities, which presents several challenges to teaching and learning (Lord et al., 2023).

1.3 PROBLEM STATEMENT

The World Health Organization (WHO, 2023), in line with the preceding discussion, notes that people on the AS encounter difficulties with social interaction and communication, and their capacities and needs are diverse and evolve. Certain people who are on the AS can look after

themselves without help; others are severely affected and require intense support throughout their lives, which affects their education, employment, and life in the community (Lord et al., 2023).

According to Mzimela (2023), learners on the AS face diverse challenges throughout their lives. These learners have unique needs that pose numerous challenges for teachers. First, they struggle to stay on task or participate in the classroom (Sutton et al., 2022). By that, it means the learners are slow to understand a topic fully because they absorb unnecessary information since they have a short attention span. Furthermore, these learners often lack motivation to learn, and they manifest disruptive behaviour during mealtimes (e.g., crying or running around) (Adams & Matsimela, 2023). Learning new material in class is difficult, especially in a group task that requires discussion, interaction and quick thinking (Al Jaffal, 2022). These learners are often unable to finish a thought or task in the classroom, which can include not submitting an assignment in time (or at all) or lacking an understanding of what is expected from them in the task (Pienaar & Dreyer, 2023). At the same time, this does not suggest that every learner failing to submit an assignment or complete a task is on the AS, but that learners with ASD fail to submit assignments because of executive functioning deficits (APA, 2013; Little, 2017). Also, learners on the AS must master learning strategies and rules, and break down information to grasp the whole concept taught to them (Edward, 2015).

At the same time, teachers are also confronted with challenges in catering for learners on the AS, such as a lack of sufficient knowledge and training to manage the learners and complex lesson delivery, which can be time-consuming (Nthibeli et al., 2022). Large classes make it difficult for teachers to identify a learner on the AS, as early signs of ASD are difficult to detect, and appropriate measures for support and the right type of curriculum taught (the current curriculum is too rigid) add to the teacher's task (Little, 2017; Roberts & Simpson, 2016). Moreover, Adams and Matsimela (2023) posit that learners on the AS have distinctive and individualised nutritional specifications which require training and skills to address adequately. Edward (2015) asserts that other factors confronting teachers entail a lack of training and promotion of the inclusion policy, inadequate support systems from the district level, poor parental participation, inadequate accessibility of inclusion resources like a safe and calm learning environment, and a lack of school funding to develop teachers' competence to teach learners on the AS.

Research has been carried out on the distinctive challenges that learners in the AS present to teachers and parents alike in South Africa. However, no or limited original existing research regarding support for learners diagnosed with AS in the Fezile Dabi district in the Free State Province, South Africa, is available, especially research conducted using the Participatory Action Learning and Action Research (PALAR) approach. For that reason, by writing this dissertation, I seek to make a significant contribution to the topic through the PALAR methodology, which encourages collaboration between teachers and parents in finding solutions to the needs of learners on the AS. According to Wood and Zuber-Skerrit (2015), the PALAR approach is a

process of recurring cycles that encourages a shared identification of needs, planning of appropriate action, implementation, evaluation, and further reflection. For this reason, this approach was employed in the study to provide contextually relevant insights and intervention approaches designed to address the unique challenges and opportunities of supporting learners in LSEN schools in the Fezile Dabi district in the Free State Province in South Africa.

1.4 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1.4.1 Primary Research Question

- ❖ How can teachers and parents in the Fezile Dabi district collaboratively use the PALAR approach to support learners on the autism spectrum?

1.4.2 Secondary Research Questions

- ❖ What are the challenges and experiences of teachers and parents in the Fezile Dabi district regarding learners on the autism spectrum?
- ❖ How do parental perceptions and experiences influence their involvement in support methods for learners on the autism spectrum?
- ❖ What guidelines can teachers and parents use to support learners on the autism spectrum?

1.5 RESEARCH AIM AND OBJECTIVES

The primary research purpose of the study was to examine collaborative strategies that teachers and parents can adopt to assist learners on the autism spectrum in the Fezile Dabi district, Free State Province, South Africa, through the application of the PALAR approach.

- ❖ To identify challenges and experiences of teachers and parents in the Fezile Dabi district regarding learners on the autism spectrum.
- ❖ To understand the level of parental perceptions and experiences that influence involvement in support techniques for learners diagnosed on the autism spectrum in the Fezile Dabi district, Free State Province, South Africa.
- ❖ To recommend guidelines that educators and parents can use to support learners on the autism spectrum.

1.6 CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION

Conceptual clarification is about defining and describing major aspects that will be used in the research (Bringmann et al., 2022). The study will employ the crucial concepts and sources described in the following sections.

1.6.1 Inclusive Education

Education White Paper 6 on Special Needs Education: Building an Inclusive Education and Training System (EWP 6, DoE, 2001) states that inclusive education represents systemic development by incorporating alterations and adjustments in content, learning styles, techniques, frameworks, and strategies in education to enable learners to overcome all hindrances to become successful (Murungi, 2015). It highlights the necessity of the adaptation of the educational system to the diversity of learners, with the aim of making sure that each learner has the same opportunity to learn and succeed, independent of the individual differences or obstacles that they might be facing.

Nel et al. (2016) posit that it is highly implicit in having a single vague or universal explanation of inclusive education, as the context of countries, schools, classrooms, learners, and their general needs vary profoundly. According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2017), inclusive education recommends that all learners learn together in the same environment while considering their diverse needs. Maguvhe (2015) states that inclusive education is a human right and learning should be inclusive of all learners, affirming their democratic rights by assimilating values and forming beliefs that celebrate the innate differences between learners and society.

For this study, inclusive education is viewed as an educational approach, holistic and systemic, but also inclusive of all learners and stressing individual strategies that are in line with the unique requirements of learners on the AS. This perspective is consistent, as the study inquires and evaluates collaborative solutions between the educators and guardians in AS learning support using the PALAR method within the Fezile Dabi educational district.

1.6.2 Barriers to Learning

Barriers to learning are those aspects that may prevent or make it difficult for the learner to access their full potential. These hindrances can be physical, cognitive, emotional, cultural or societal factors that inhibit a learner from attaining their learning goals (Mampe, 2016). A child having a barrier will encounter intrinsic barriers and, consequently, need a range of levels of support as per their challenges to optimize learning abilities and achieve their full potential academically. According to the *Policy on the Screening, Identification, Assessment and Support* (SIAS, DBE, 2014), the term “learning barrier” refers to “difficulties that arise within the education system as a whole, the learning site, or the learner him/herself, which prevent access to learning and

development” (p. 7). There are other barriers which could be experienced, ranging from societal and environmental to even extreme poverty, coupled with abuse or neglect manifesting as hindrances or barriers to a child’s learning (O’Doherty et al., 2018). For this study, this concept was applied, as the study focused on learners who face learning challenges, especially those on the AS.

1.6.3 Autism Spectrum Disorder

ASD is a “neurodevelopmental disorder that is associated with deficits in social interaction, communication, and the presence of restricted and repetitive behaviours” (Mukherjee, 2017, p. 307). Faja and Dawson (2017) maintain that ASD is a diverse series of disorders which are exemplified by unique challenges and may substantially vary in severity and symptoms among persons.

The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (5th edition) (DSM–5) (APA], 2013) asserts that ASD is inclusive of problems in social communication areas as well as interaction, which are seen to recur across various contexts, and have their manifestations in distortion in nonverbal cues essential for social relations, and difficulties in establishing, sustaining, and comprehending relationships (Hollander et al., 2022). Moreover, these features are within the determination of DSM-5 as present in the early stage of development, which then causes difficulties in social or work relations, or other important areas present in life (APA, 2013). This concept was explained as the study focused mainly on learners in the AS.

1.6.4 Collaboration

Collaboration can be explained as a model of interaction whereby groups of people work together to reach a common goal or activity (Keyton, 2017). Collaboration is of paramount importance in the development of individuals and their educational plans, which is critical to how educational plans are implemented (Ní Bhroin & King, 2020). According to Bansal et al. (2019), “Collaboration can be classified as voluntary, consortia, federation, affiliation and merger. It can occur at four different levels: within disciplinary, interdisciplinary, multi-disciplinary, and trans-disciplinary” (p. 137). Collaboration was used as the study seeks to promote and improve cooperation among teachers, parents and other stakeholders.

1.6.5 Support

Support can be described as any effort which can be used to strengthen effective teaching and learning (Bojuwoye et al., 2014). *White Paper 6* (DoE, 2001, p. 19) values the training of professionals to concentrate on “supporting all learners, educators and the system as a whole so that the full range of learning needs can be met”. According to Yoro et al. (2020), support means all activities that can assist the potential of the school to meet the different learning needs of learners. The study examined the support that is given to learners on the AS.

1.6.6 Education White Paper 6 on Special Needs Education: Building an inclusive education and training system

EWP 6 (DoE, 2001) is the basis for the implementation of inclusive education. White Paper 6 lays out a foundation for enhancing an inclusive education and training structure in South Africa, with a focus on the alterations that are required to accommodate diverse learning requirements (Swart & Pettipher, 2019). In this study, White Paper 6 was utilised as the basis for the implementation of inclusive education.

1.7 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

A theoretical framework is a vital component of any research because it forms the foundation. At the same time, existing theories serve as a compass to give direction in the development of new arguments that will be made in the study (Garvey & Jones, 2021). Theories explain phenomena in a range of social science disciplines, and enable the researcher to draw connections and make predictions. Collins and Stockton (2018) define a theoretical framework as an explanation of the way things work. This study was informed by Gardner's (1983) Multiple Intelligences (MI) theory and Mezirow's (2009) Transformative Learning (TL) theory. Gardner's (1993) MI theory posits that each person has different learning strengths. Gardner first argued that people have eight different intelligence areas, but he would later add one more intelligence area the year after he published the theory (Cavas & Cavas, 2020; Davis et al., 2011). Gardner named these nine intelligences as visual-spatial, musical-rhythmic, bodily-kinesthetic, existential, naturalistic, intrapersonal and finally, interpersonal (Shearer & Karanian, 2017). Gardner posited that the human person is a very complex being with no limits on the number of areas of intelligence they can manifest, although sometimes people may fail to excel in most other intelligence areas and excel in just one (Woolfolk, 2016, p. 149).

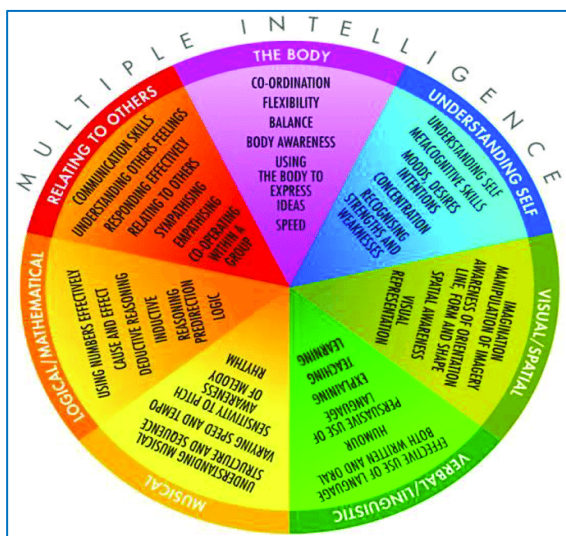


Figure 1.1: Multiple Intelligence Theory (Gardner, 1993)

both inclusive and accommodating of ongoing reflection and reshaping by teachers and parents (Christie et al., 2015). Thus, a transformative approach is when not only the educational agenda adapts to address the problem areas for learners on AS specifically, but stakeholders are also challenged to expand their understanding. Therefore, a more flexible environment can be created.

The integrated theoretical framework was vital because the purpose of the research was to uncover and boost the collaborative approaches between teachers and parents. The integration of the TL principles, as well as the recognition of MI, was a powerful mechanism for attending to the special educational requirements of the learners on the AS in the Fezile Dabi district, Free State province, South Africa, thus paving the way to a broader educational dialogue on creating favourable and effective learning environments.

1.8 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

According to Creswell and Plano Clark (2018), research methodology refers to a set of guidelines employed to classify, specify, process, and examine information relating to a specific topic. Research methods are the processes, approaches, or techniques used to collect and analyse information to explore new data further and allow the researcher to respond to the research problem (Nind, 2020). Here, it was proposed to use PALAR as a research methodology for the exploration of collaborative strategies of teachers and parents for the support of learners on the AS within LSEN schools.

1.8.1 Research Paradigm

According to Okesina (2020), a research paradigm can be defined as the researcher's worldview or beliefs that guide the research. This research study focused on how teachers and parents can collaboratively work to support learners on the AS. To analyse this phenomenon and provide a solution to the stated problem, as the co-researcher in this study, I decided to employ the transformative paradigm because it is grounded on the belief that knowledge is power, and by constructing and spreading knowledge, society can be changed for the better (Gambrell, 2016; Schulte et al., 2020). This method is characteristically participatory and pragmatic, as it aims to have a good impact in complex social contexts by signifying that knowledge creation is a social process (Omodan, 2022). The transformative paradigm allowed us to develop and modify collaborative practices that lead to better enhancing educational support for learners on the AS.

PALAR reinforces the reflection and iteration of practices by involving teachers and parents, leading to an improvement in educational practices (Wood, 2019). According to Alharahsheh and Pius (2020), a paradigm includes several components, including ontological, epistemological, and axiological assumptions.

1.8.1.1 *Ontological assumptions*

Creswell and Poth (2018) describe ontology as the study of the nature of reality. Ontology is critical as it helps researchers determine their level of certainty and helps them understand the importance and relevance of the data they collect. PALAR strives to promote learning that results in ontological transformation, which is a prerequisite for constructive, desirable and long-lasting change (Wood, 2020). I motivated the participants to work together and be aware of the challenges and experiences that learners with ASD face, which guided them to create sustainable strategies to support learners with ASD. Antwi and Hamza (2015) describe ontology as “the way the investigator defines the truth and reality” (p. 218). Such an understanding is crucial because it permits the study to consider different dimensions, perspectives, and experiences of the stakeholders, which will help to build a better understanding and better results for the study.

1.8.1.2 *Epistemological assumptions*

Epistemology examines the nature and the scope of knowledge (Creswell & Poth, 2018). It is interested in how people are informed and how they know the truth. According to Gray (2014), epistemology deals with adequate and sustainable types of knowledge. It is important as it mainly affects how a researcher will take part in a study that they will investigate (Moroi, 2021).

PALAR places itself under a critical and transforming paradigm of knowledge creation (Zuber-Skerritt, 2018). This approach focuses on comprehending nature by means of mental processes which undergo substantial transformation due to group interaction (Wood, 2019). Its fundamental pillars are that knowledge should set people free and create social equality (Wood, 2020). In light of these epistemological principles, this research investigated and hopefully changed not only the researcher’s but also the participants’ perspective of educating learners on the AS. The objective was to have a deeper understanding that could help to formulate strategies and enhance practices.

1.8.1.3 *Axiological assumptions*

The axiological assumptions underpinning this study are of a transformative paradigm, which states that ethical research should foster social justice, including human rights (Mertens, 2009). This paradigm promotes research ethics to reduce power disparities and promote disadvantaged views (Creswell & Poth, 2018). It also indicates the researcher’s and participants’ values and prejudices, which play a significant role in research outcomes. The study respected the values and contributions of all participants; hence, the findings will impartially mirror the participants’ inputs and points of view. Teachers’ and parents’ perspectives and experiences were included in this study to honour their expertise and research efforts.

The participation-based nature of PALAR implies that the study design and methods can be dynamic and adjustable to the desires and suggestions of the participants. This flexibility is

important for building meaningful collaboration with all the stakeholders who feel appreciated and involved.

1.8.2 Research Design

As Creswell (2021) explains, a research design consists of the selection of methods and strategies that give structure to the inquiry to offer solutions to the research problem. According to Clark et al. (2021), a research design is a structure upon which the investigation is built. It includes research questions and types of evidence used to answer them. The present study took PALAR as its methodological approach, enabling participants to act as the co-creators of knowledge (Zuber-Skerritt, 2018).

Wood (2020) defines PALAR as a “transformative, collaborative and democratic approach to educational research” (p. 1). According to Zuber-Skerritt (2015), PALAR is a process that fosters active learning, and it is interdisciplinary, challenge-driven, and grounded in reality. It promotes inclusivity and focuses on social justice, and learning is collaborative as it involves collaboration with and mutual support from the community. This methodology was suitable for the investigation and development of collaborative approaches that can promote learning of learners who are on the AS in South Africa, to change the situation on individual, group, and organisational levels.

As PALAR promotes a shared vision through establishing relationships, and participants must establish a relationship with the researcher, an Action Learning Group (ALG) (Wood, 2019) was created to bring about change in how participants think and act. In my role as a member of the ALG, I created a conducive environment and transparency to bring about an understanding of the issue in question, rather than just managing the group. I was also sharing within the group and reflecting on its functions. Participation develops self-consciousness and overall understanding, which are relevant for developing productive dialogues (Grandy, 2018).

The study was conducted through iterative cycles defined by action research principles (Wood, 2019), including:

1. Reflection on current pedagogical approaches and guidelines that are used to support learners on the AS.
2. Identifying what needs to be done based on collective discussions between parents and teachers.
3. Programming and implementing processes that provide for collaborative educational support.
4. Evaluating the strategies and their influence to find out whether they are successful in educational environments.

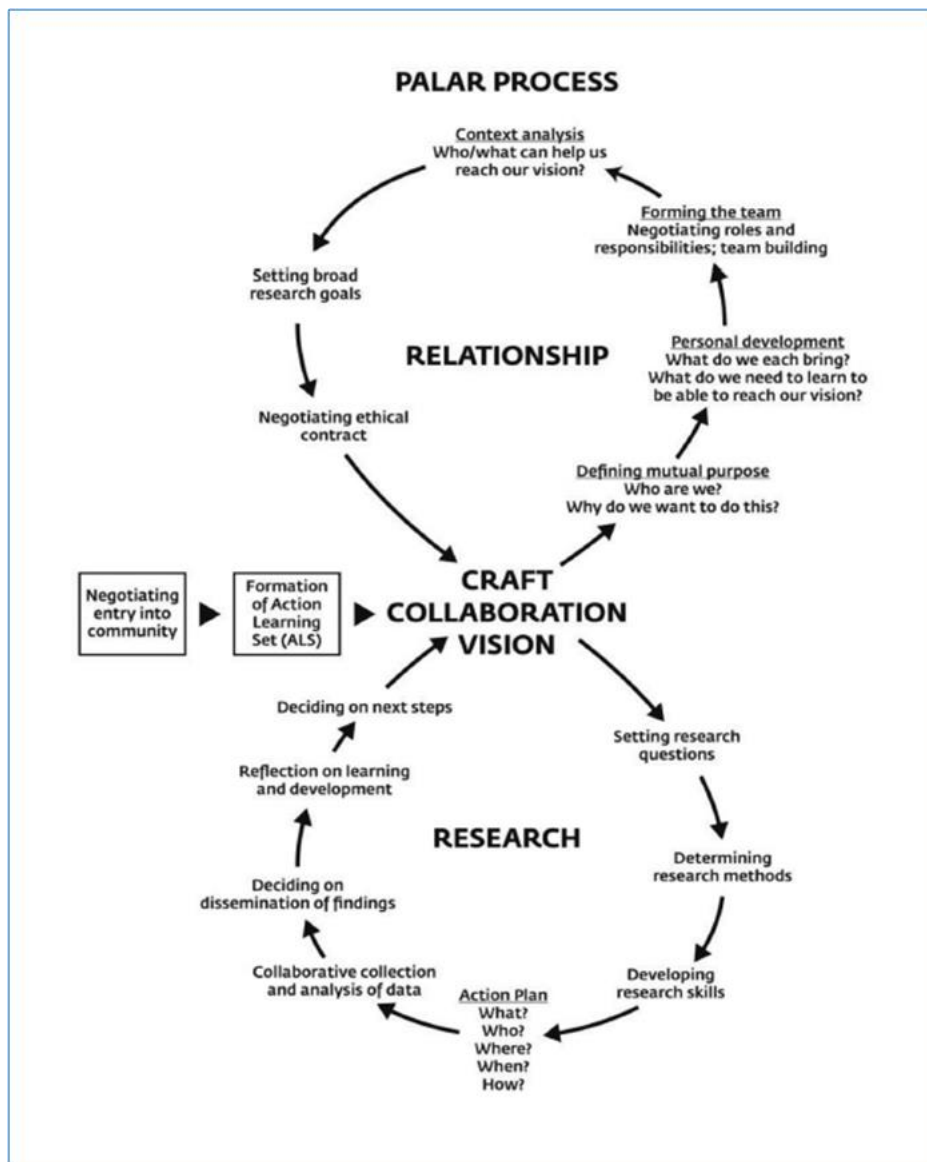


Figure 1.3: The PALAR research cycle (Wood, 2019)

As shown in Figure 1.3, the PALAR research cycle (Wood, 2019) embeds this iterative and collaborative approach in a visual manner, emphasising the constant dialogue between theoretical research and practical implementation. This figure shows how PALAR is a cyclical phenomenon, with all phases being a stepping stone for another and, therefore, an environment for sustainable educational improvement (Zuber-Skerrit et al., 2015).

In essence, the research design is made to be participatory, reflective, and transformative, aiming to develop and implement effective collaborative strategies which are meant to place learners who are on the AS in a favourable position within the South African educational context (Vaughn & Jacquez, 2020). This method addressed the research questions and also the educational policy and practice more broadly.

1.8.3 Research Methods

Research methods are processes, procedures or approaches employed in data or evidence collection, or in analysis, to investigate new data or create a better understanding of a discussion (Christensen & Rasmussen, 2021). The research methods in this study considered how participants were selected as well as how data were collected.

1.8.4 Participant Recruitment

Bryne (2021) asserts that a one-size-fits-all strategy does not exist, or a level of preference and exception in the selection of participants. Many steps may need to be followed to find and engage the appropriate target population members. First, I worked with both the identified special schools to find participants. This partnership will enable access to inclusion-qualified teachers and parents (Creswell & Poth, 2018). To provide openness and encourage voluntary involvement, I hosted information sessions about the study. Teachers and parents who were interested were invited to an introductory meeting to ask questions and show their interest. The participants were teachers who were teaching learners on the AS from two different schools for learners with special educational needs, together with parents of learners on the AS in the Fezile Dabi district of the Free State Province, South Africa. The schools selected are categorised as SID schools. One LSEN school is situated in a small township characterised by extreme inequality, which is very rooted in unemployment, which makes it reliant on the informal economy, supported by workers employed on surrounding farms. The school enrolls learners on the SID. Most of the teachers are not well-trained and equipped to deal with learners on the AS. The school is fairly adequately resourced to provide support for learners living with SID. The second LSEN school is situated in an urban area surrounded by better infrastructure and socio-economic environment. It is a well-resourced school; however, the teachers are not specialised in providing support for learners living with SID. This study employed the deputy principals as the impartial persons with no authority from their offices, as they were the gatekeepers and helped with informed consent. These persons were selected for their impartiality and ability to explain the study procedure and answer possible participant queries (Bos, 2020). The schools were chosen considering the different socio-economic status and backgrounds of learners, to gain an inclusive view on practices and support for learners on the AS. This heterogeneous collection caters to both the examination of distinct obstacles and solving problems in various situations.

Participants were chosen based on the criteria described below. The criteria for participating teachers were:

- A minimum of three years of teaching experience is evidence of established professional competence in this field.
- Experience teaching in the early learning phase, as this phase is particularly relevant for early intervention of ASD support.

- Direct experience with parents of learners on the AS, providing practical insights into the challenges and effective strategies within public school environments.

The criteria for participating parents were:

- Parents must have a child who is diagnosed with ASD and is prepared to disclose this information.
- Parents with children with special educational needs who have been at school for a minimum of two years.

The aim of this targeted selection was precisely to enrich the research with perspectives that are practical and based on experience, which in turn enabled the study to be more useful and relevant to educational practices in the real world.

1.8.5 Population and Sample

Population can be described as a set or group of all the components on which the research findings are to be applied (Satishprakash, 2020). For this study about the collaboration of teachers and parents to support learners on the AS in South African schools, the population included educators and parents from two different schools for learners with special educational needs within the Fezile Dabi district of the Free State Province, South Africa. These schools were selected to serve as authentic information-rich key informants, providing a broad range of experiences and learning environments. Such variations ensure that one can have an overview of all the various methods of supporting learners on the AS and how effective they can be in many environments.

Sampling, a key step in data collection, is selecting a subset of the population from a large group, to engage in the study (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). As Lakens (2022) notes, the sampling process collects extensive data and requires fewer resources. According to Zhao (2021), it is impractical to undertake a study which involves the entire population, and thus, some of the population is selected to participate in the study. The sampling method used was purposive sampling to select individuals who have direct participation in educating learners on the AS. This involved teachers who are experienced in working with learners on the AS, and parents of children who are on the AS and are actively involved in their children's education. Through examining individuals who have had first-hand exposure and encounters, the study intended to make a detailed analysis of the practical challenges and achievements of the current ASD education approach.

The sample included teachers currently teaching learners on the AS, who are considered the best possible source of data due to their direct experience with learners experiencing educational challenges associated with ASD. Due to the distance between the two towns, two ALGs were formed, whereby the first ALG consisted of six members, including one participant playing both roles as a parent and a teacher, including the researcher, and the second ALG consisted of six participants, also including the researcher.

1.8.6 Data Collection

Data collection will incorporate art-based methods that promote open and detailed sharing of experiences and views from the participants (Vist, 2016). From the perspective of Butler-Kisber (2018), the inherent capacities of art enable the participants to narrate the difficulties of expressing complex emotions in verbal or written forms. These techniques, which are sketching, collage-making and photography, allowed the participants to illustrate and tell their personal and professional stories of supporting learners on the AS. Throughout the data collection, all sessions were recorded, and reflective journals were used to allow the participants and myself to reflect on our experiences, opinions, feelings, and challenges during the research project.

1.8.6.1 Cycle 1: Establishing relationships and understanding contexts

The first cycle of data collection was aimed towards building relationships within the participant group and gaining a deeper understanding of the educational contexts for learners on the AS. This was realised through two joint sessions. In the first session, participants generated visual art that represents their perspectives and experiences (Greenwood, 2019). During the first session, the participants also determined the needs, the purpose, and the roles and responsibilities of the team. It involved context examination to identify who should take part and what resources will be needed. The participants were allowed to engage in meaningful discussions and share their backgrounds, teaching experiences and perspectives on supporting learners on the AS. There was a warm-up activity where strength cards were utilised to discuss the strengths of the participants, and they were requested to draw a picture on the back of the card that represents their strengths. During the information session, the informed consent forms and ethical agreement forms were completed with the participants to ensure their voluntary participation and the protection of their rights. The participants and I formed an ALG that consisted of ten members who met frequently to work collaboratively on the research project. In this cycle, the ALG addressed the first secondary research question:

- What are the challenges and experiences of teachers and parents in the Fezile Dabi district regarding learners on the autism spectrum?

The ALG used illustrative drawing as well as reflective journals to collect data. Drawing encourages active participation and solid proof of participants' recollections, thoughts and feelings, which capacitate participants to recognise social issues and to take steps towards social change (Mitchell et al., 2011). This is a reliable method to utilise at the inception of the project, as some participants may be reserved or not confident, and drawing can encourage them to relax in order to engage more in discussions. Participants were assured that how they draw is not important. The participants were requested to draw a picture and take a photo of the picture. The pictures were then combined and pasted on a board to be examined. Throughout the cycles, the sessions were recorded and transcribed. This cycle built a foundation for open dialogue and trust,

which are basic blocks for constructive dialogue and sincerity in future phases. The ALG members and I reflected on all the activities of the day to identify any arising matters that could be addressed in the following cycle.

1.8.6.2 *Cycle 2: Exploring experiences and challenges*

In this cycle, there were three sessions that took place on three different days. During the first session of Cycle 2, the ALG members and I analysed the data as captured during the previous cycle, and any matters arising from the reflections in Cycle 1. In the second session, the participants used collage-making as a tool to further their exploration of their own experiences and struggles of supporting learners on the AS (Bogumil et al., 2017). The ALG addressed the secondary research question:

- How do parental perceptions and experiences influence their involvement in support methods for learners on the autism spectrum?

Here, the cycle aimed at identifying general themes and individual situations existing in various school contexts. The discussion on the collages was noted down, which provided qualitative evidence in abundance. Such a loop guides in identifying places where collaboration between teachers and parents is either very successful or needs adjustments. At the back of each collage, the participants wrote a brief description about why they chose those specific pictures. After the completion of the collages, the ALG members discussed and reflected on the collages that they had created. ALG members worked collaboratively to identify themes in the data they had collected. Reflective journals were used to record the findings by the participants. I transcribed the recordings for the next meeting.

1.8.6.3 *Cycle 3: Strategising and solution-finding*

This cycle started with a relationship-building session to reflect on Cycle 2, and the ALG members and I carried out data analysis. Discussions and questions emanating from Cycle 2 were discussed by participants, looking mainly at additional needs and new questions arising. The ALG then addressed the last secondary research question:

- What guidelines can teachers and parents use to support learners on the autism spectrum?

The last step was a fishbone analysis and a structured brainstorming session targeted at identifying areas for further improvement (Lee, 2020). This technique guided participants to identify the source of their problems. Through such measures, the group will be able to design focused interventions and strategies that will promote better support for learners on the AS. This phase was very important since it enabled us to turn our individual and communal experiences into clear plans that the school will be able to implement. All along the learning cycles, the art-based methods were not only utilised as means of expression, but also as facilitators of dialogue

and reflection, the two essential elements in efforts to improve educational attainment for learners on the AS (Bogumil et al., 2017). The knowledge developed through this PALAR stays with the participants, and this is continuously refined and validated by the participants, which ensures that it remains relevant and applicable to real-life situations. ALG members undertook reflections during Cycle 3, and an analysis was done by the researcher.

1.8.7 Data Analysis

The data analysis procedure for the study involved orderly and meaningful interpretation of the data collected by art-based instruments within the context of supporting learners on the AS. As described by Lester et al. (2020) and Van de Vijver and Leung (2021), data analysis is the planned manipulation of data to extract relevant information. For the study, thematic analysis was chosen as the main analytical technique based on the guidelines of Braun and Clarke (2022), who define it as a method for finding, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data.

Thematic analysis was ideal for this type of study as it has the advantages of flexibility and effectiveness, which are obviously significant for the analysis of a variety of data generated through art-based methods. Ozuem et al. (2022) suggest that thematic analysis offers multiple epistemological perspectives and provides in-depth analysis of multiple types of data sets. Here, the ALG focused on the analysis of similarities and contrasts between the teachers and parents in regard to their interaction with learners on the AS. In all the cycles, the meetings were recorded and transcribed. In the first meeting of the next cycle, the ALG analysed the data and found the themes.

The first step in the thematic analysis process was familiarisation with the data, which was conducted through the examination of the transcripts, collages, and other artefacts. This stage played a significant role in generating codes for the data. Coding was employed as the second analytical step, which involved assigning descriptive labels to data sections that represent different experiences and perspectives related to AS support strategies. These codes were categorised into groups that correspond with broader themes in the data set. Such a thematic structuring can be efficient as it allows for the comparison of experiences and strategies discussed by participants to draw forth common challenges and effective practices in ASD education.

Thereafter, the themes were reviewed and related to one another and to the theoretical framework of the study. It was clear to what extent they are interconnected to one another, and particularly how they affect ASD support. Peel (2020) underlines the value of thematic analysis in exploring the complexity of the opinions of participants, which is a key point for this study aimed at developing collaborative learning strategies.

In this study, the systematic exploration and discussion of these themes was objective towards the development of a holistic comprehension of the role of collaboration between educators and parents in helping learners on the AS. The results of this research will not only contribute to

academic knowledge but also to practical application in schools, which can be used to create targeted interventions that address the recognised needs and hurdles in ASD education.

Table 1.1: Braun and Clarke's (2006) six steps for thematic analysis

Step 1: Become familiar with the data	Firstly, the sessions were recorded, and the recordings were transcribed and analysed. I repeatedly read the transcripts and made notes on ideas and patterns.
Step 2: Generate initial codes	Immediately after I had familiarised myself with the data, the coding process started, whereby the ALG identified and labelled parts of the text that are applicable to the research questions. E.g., "resources".
Step 3: Search for themes	The ALG combined different codes that were related to one another and created meaning out of them.
Step 4: Reviewing themes	The ALG checked whether the themes support, contradict or overlap with one another. Subthemes were also identified.
Step 5: Defining and naming themes	After the themes were reviewed, the ALG defined and labelled the themes and afterwards wrote up the themes and their meaning.
Step 6: Writing the report	The ALG members and I reported on the findings of the study.

1.8.8 Quality Criteria and Trustworthiness

Ensuring a research study is credible under the umbrella of PALAR is the essential condition for its trustworthiness. Neethling and Nel (2021) emphasise the fact that in PALAR, the research needs to be plausible, credible, and hence, legitimate. As defined by Hamilton et al. (2020), careful research design and data collection are of great significance for the mentioned qualities. In this study, the dedication to honest evidence stands behind the credibility of its results. Herr and Anderson (2014) assert that criteria for validity include process, outcome, democratic, catalytic and dialogic validity. The criteria in the table below were utilised to strengthen the validity of this study.

Table 1.2: Criteria for validity

Research goal	Validity criteria	Relevance to this study
1. The generation of new knowledge	Dialogic and process validity	Collaborative reflection and conversation with co-researchers.
2. The achievement of action-oriented outcomes	Outcome validity	The research problem was observed from the co-researcher's perspectives and based on their experiences.
3. The education of the researcher and co-researchers	Catalytic validity	The researcher was part of the ALG that reflected on the development of the research.
4. Results that are relevant to the local setting	Democratic validity	Data was collected and transcribed in collaboration with the ALG.
5. A sound and appropriate methodology	Process validity	The knowledge developed from this study was feasible and promoted lifelong learning among the co-researchers.

(Source: Herr & Anderson, 2005)

1.8.8.1 Process validity

Process validity is concerned with participant relationships and an ongoing series of actions. This study was based on the 7Cs and 3Rs, which are the PALAR core principles, namely, communication, commitment, compromise, collaboration, competence, critical self-reflection, and coaching, that are functionalised through the mechanisms of relationship, reflection, and recognition, respectively. During the research, the researcher ensured that different methods were utilised to collect data to meet the research aims.

1.8.8.2 Dialogic validity

Dialogic validity ensures the formation of new knowledge through a rigorous dialogue process. This study included teachers and parents who formed an ALG. Having a record of these interactions and making sure that all contributors' voices are integrated into the decision-making process validates the whole created knowledge.

1.8.8.3 Catalytic validity

Catalytic validity refers to how the study contributes to changing the mindset of the stakeholders with respect to the issue. This sort of validity becomes important in PALAR studies, which focus on the modification of cognition, affect, and behaviour (Neethling & Nel, 2021). This work used a dialogic approach that points to some realisable inputs, which can result in education reforms, and will touch on the support structures for children on the AS.

1.8.8.4 Democratic validity

Democratic validity is a guarantee that all research presentations are well-balanced and objective to all who read them. By including and respecting all the partners of PALAR transparently and fairly, democratic legitimacy was ensured. This notion assisted the researcher as well as the participants to work collaboratively, and promoted constant participation.

1.8.8.5 Outcome validity

Outcome validity entails the eventual utility of the study, perhaps by offering something that can be applied in the community and in the arena of people's practices and lives. Through this study design, we recorded both the expected and unexpected outcomes, offering a more complete picture of how the intervention affects the participants and their working environments (Shufutinsky, 2022).

These principles are beneficial because by adhering to them, this study was able to offer feasible and applicable recommendations on how teachers and parents can work collaboratively to improve educational support for learners on the AS, and these tips will not only be theoretically sound but also practically practicable.

1.9 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Ethical behaviour can be defined as behaviour that is regarded as being either conscientious or improper, which is an important issue to consider in research, especially with research relating to humans and animals (Bertram & Christiansen, 2020). Protecting participants by applying applicable ethical principles is crucial to all research. The deputy principals of both LSEN schools were employed as the gatekeepers for this research, as they are unbiased persons who were familiar with the selected schools for learners with special educational needs. Throughout the study, I adhered to ethical principles and ensured that all participants were treated fairly and equally, and respected.

- Firstly, I obtained ethical clearance from the North-West University Ethics Committee before commencing with the study, ensuring that the research adheres to ethical guidelines and standards.

- I also obtained permission from the Free State DoE to conduct my research.
- Thereafter, I obtained permission from the principals and school governing bodies (SGBs) of the selected special schools to conduct the research.
- I received everyone's informed consent and made sure that they are aware of the study's objective, what it entails, their rights, and that their participation is voluntary. Participants also signed the written consent forms to take part in the research.
- Privacy as well as confidentiality of all participants was respected during the reporting of the findings of the study.
- Participants were allowed to ask questions to understand their roles better, as well as the aim of the study and the findings of the research.
- Participation in the study was voluntary. Participants were made aware that they were free to withdraw from the study at any time they feel, without repercussions, and their decision will be honoured.

1.9.1 Anonymity and Confidentiality

Anonymity means that participants' identities will not be known (Gajjar, 2013), while confidentiality is an ethical safeguard of the privacy of human beings during data gathering, analysis, and reporting (Allen, 2017). According to Akaranga and Makau (2016), confidentiality means not having the right of access to the research data, as well as the identities of the participants not being known. In PALAR, it is not necessary to keep the participants anonymous, but for the purpose of this study, I kept the identities of the participants anonymous. All participants and schools were given pseudonyms in this research to protect their identities. Maintaining anonymity requires careful data preservation and processing. During reflection sessions, recordings were preserved on a password-protected device, and tangible notes and papers were sealed in a filing cabinet. Access to the data was limited to the study team. This project protected participants' privacy by securing data and using pseudonyms (Wang et al., 2024). Participants were informed of confidentiality procedures and ensured that their data would be used only for this study and not shared with other parties without their permission. Careful reporting of results ensured confidentiality and data security. Throughout the research project, I adhered to the Protection of Personal Information Act (POPIA), Act No. 4 of 2013 (RSA, 2013).

1.10 CHAPTER SUMMARY

In this chapter, I described the background and rationale for this study, explained the research problem and identified the knowledge gap. The research questions, aims and objectives were described and followed up by a discussion of the concepts relevant to this study. A discussion of the theoretical framework underpinning this study and the research methodology followed. The data collection methods and analysis were defined and discussed. Thereafter, issues concerning

the validity and trustworthiness, as well as ethical considerations of the study, were highlighted. In the next chapter, the theoretical framework, as well as a comprehensive literature review that will discuss the specific research problem, is outlined.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW RELATED TO COLLABORATIVE SUPPORT BY TEACHERS AND PARENTS, AND CRITICAL DISCUSSION OF THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS UNDERPINNING THIS STUDY

2.1 INTRODUCTION

In Chapter 1, an overview of the research study was presented, the research problem was explained, and the aim of the study was described, as well as the research methodology that will be followed. Chapter 1 also described the critical need for teachers and parents to collaborate well by supporting learners on the AS. It identified several challenges faced in properly addressing the needs of learners on the AS (Matolo & Rambuda, 2022). Challenges are compounded by a lack of training, resource limitations, and a lack of collaboration and communication between parents and teachers (Legodi-Rakgalakane & Mokhampanyane, 2022).

This chapter summarises and then investigates the body of literature pertaining to the focus of this study, aligned with the research objectives, to study collaborative strategies of parents and teachers in supporting learners on the AS. This literature review aims to provide theoretical grounding, investigate past research, and identify some research gaps in this investigation. This review starts with a discussion on the global and African move towards inclusive education, and the policies and practices that will foster the South African setting.

In addition, this chapter will explore ASD as a challenge for learning, focusing on how it affects the development of learners, plus the difficulties teachers and parents encounter. The role of collaboration in addressing these challenges, as well as effective teaching strategies, is also explored. Gardner's (1983) MI theory and Mezirow's TL theory (1999) are used in terms of their importance in facilitating support and collaboration. Consequently, this chapter sets forth the foundations of the research by clarifying the foundational knowledge of key issues and approaches for supporting learners on the AS.

2.2 IMPLEMENTATION OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION GLOBALLY AND IN THE AFRICAN CONTEXT

Research on inclusive education globally is essential for comprehending and tackling the obstacles encountered by marginalised learners, encouraging fair access to quality education, and formulating effective approaches for establishing inclusive learning environments that advantage all learners (Ainscow, 2020). It will assist this study to pinpoint the obstacles to inclusive education, including insufficient resources, discrimination, and ineffective policies, and guide the development of strategies to eliminate those obstacles, and guarantee that all learners,

including those with barriers to learning from marginalised backgrounds, can access quality education. Globally, this study will focus on two countries, the United States of America and Canada, because of South Africa's similarities with the United States of America, as it grapples with a segregated school system characterised by inequalities and funding disparities, while aiming to address such problems. In the case of Canada, the focus is on learning from a well-resourced top-performing system, to understand how to improve our local systematic issues.

In the African context, research on inclusive education is pivotal in understanding various challenges and opportunities regarding its implementation, and its response to effective inclusive education systems, while also making certain that policies and practices remain pertinent and culturally attuned (Kinuthia, 2022). African countries encounter a variety of challenges, such as limited resources, cultural differences, and historical inequalities, which require research to customise inclusive education strategies and implementation (Muyambi & Ahiaku, 2025). Conducting research within the African context can assist this study to pinpoint the training and resource requirements of teachers to aid inclusive education and equip them with the skills and knowledge necessary to address the diverse needs of learners successfully. With reference to the African context, this study considered Tanzania, drawing parallels as both nations emerged from a colonial background. This is how to approach the challenges towards a better, improved, inclusive education system.

2.2.1 Inclusive Education in the United States of America and Canada

According to Sokal and Katz (2020), the United States and Canada have seen a great change in inclusive education in the several decades that have passed, which were guided by legislative framework, judicial requirements, and the movements of advocacy. Sider et al. (2024) reiterate that in the United States, the free and appropriate public education (FAPE) guarantee is a cornerstone of inclusion as well as supporting children on the AS under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004). Individualised Education Plans (IEPs) as part of IDEA require that each child has a plan developed focused on specific learning goals and the support needed (Giddings, 2023). In Canada, provincial regulations also play an important role in the formation of Canada's inclusive education policies and perspective, by putting an emphasis on equity and how to incorporate varying needs (Thompson et al., 2015). Specifically, the jurisdiction governing school boards in Ontario under the Education Act (1990) requires that school boards provide special education services for all eligible learners, including those on the AS (Gallagher et al., 2024).

However, most importantly, while both countries support a commitment to inclusion, their implementation of that commitment is different. Federal IDEA funding in the US has created incentives for compliance, while critics contend that there is uneven distribution of funding between states and, consequently, access to resources (Cornett & Knackstedt, 2020). The

current situation, however, in the US is different and very challenging. As Donald Trump introduced the Department of Government Efficiency (DoGE) led by Elon Musk, this initiative seeks to reduce federal spending, fraud, and abuse (Mehta, 2025). This will, in turn, reduce allocations to various programmes and lead to mass layoffs. President Trump's administration is said to be moving "special needs" to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), an agency that announced its own drastic cuts, which will then affect IDEA (Mehta, 2025). Canada's decentralised education approach, in contrast, allows provinces to develop policies that match local contexts; that has benefits but also leads to inconsistencies in the delivery of services (Winzer & Mazurek, 2016). In both countries, specific interventions for learners on the AS have been explored in mainstream classrooms in different ways, such as Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA) and social skills training. As Slee (2018) suggests, such interventions are good but may lead to a focus on remediation rather than actual inclusion, arguing for a move toward more holistic strategies.

It should also be mentioned that the success of inclusive education in these countries has been driven by advocacy and judicial decisions (Sider et al., 2024). Landmark cases in the Board of Education have allowed schools to establish the principle for schools that allow enough support to facilitate significant progress instead of having access alone (Yell, 2019). In Canada, changes have been made, for example, to include progressive practices such as sensory-friendly classrooms and peer support programmes (Lord, 2020). However, both countries continue to have problems. There is often a problem with teacher preparedness, as studies note that many teachers feel unprepared to meet the needs of the infinite number of learners on the AS (Chu et al., 2020). Despite efforts to bridge this gap, critics argue that professional development initiatives tend to be shallow and ignore systemic roadblocks, including large class sizes and insufficient funding (Bartels & Vierbuchen, 2024).

However, many mainstream schools, thanks to ASD-specific interventions, have included learners on the AS. However, critics suggest that they can be overly rigid and fail to recognise the autonomy of learners (Kapp et al., 2019). Towards encouraging social inclusion, Canada has adopted social narratives and peer-mediated interventions, and while they are effective, their implementation is strongly associated with the school environment and teacher engagement (Sider et al., 2024). This should always be accompanied by systematic support and regular assessment to ensure that the chosen intervention programme responds to the needs of the learner on the AS.

2.2.2 Inclusive Education in Tanzania

Tanzanian and South African approaches to inclusive education vary due to the differences in their socio-economic, cultural, and policy backgrounds. In Tanzania, a community-based approach is based on the value system of *ujamaa*, which translates to familyhood, a concept that

posits that people share a responsibility for one another (Sakata, 2021). This model has empowered learners through the development of community-based facilities, such as the community-based resource centres for learners on the AS. The use of community-based programmes in Tanzania has provided both advantages and disadvantages. As much as community-based programmes are effective in engaging and empowering communities to use their own resources, they are constrained by irregular funding, and lack of technical knowledge and skills (Mauma, 2023). For example, parental advocacy groups that share information on ASD have been useful in creating awareness, although they do not offer proper education support (Harrison et al., 2016). Pre-service education or teacher training is a contentious issue in Tanzania. In Tanzania, the study made by Bhalalusesa (2023) revealed that many teachers had inadequate awareness of ASD and did not know how to integrate learners with this disorder into classrooms. Most training programmes are of short duration and do not meet the multiple needs of learners on the AS (Mgonja & Mwila, 2023). In Tanzania, a lack of resources is also among the frequently-reported difficulties by learners doing assignments and tasks on their own (Mgonja & Mwila, 2023). The accessibility to specialist instruction supplies and distinctive technologies in Tanzania remains limited, although even more constrained in rural areas (Bhalalusesa, 2023).

The National Education Policy (NEP) of 2016 and the National Strategy on Inclusive Education (NSIE) of 2017 were created by Malawi to achieve inclusive education. There is no national inclusive education policy in Malawi that stands alone. The country provides the nation's broader goals for inclusive education from the NEP (Malawi Ministry of Education, 2016) and aims toward inclusive education from the NSIE (Malawi Ministry of Education, 2017). The NSIE (Malawi Ministry of Education, 2017-2022) did not fail as a guiding framework for inclusive education, for similar reasons that the NEP (Malawi Ministry of Education, 2016) did not succeed. Malawi established the NSIE (2017-2021) "as a way of moving from the special education system to the newly introduced inclusive education system" (Ishida et al., 2017, p. 19). The National Education Policy (Malawi Ministry of Education, 2016) and the National Strategy on Inclusive Education (Malawi Ministry of Education, 2017) guide every level of education in Malawi, such as encouragement of education in inclusive environments, advancement of inclusive education and integration of inclusive education within teacher training programmes. The NSIE (Malawi Ministry of Education, 2017) identified elements that prevent learners from participating in and within the education system in Malawi. The primary factor identified is insufficient experience, skills and knowledge of teachers to effectively teach in diverse classrooms and implement curriculum differentiation strategies (Malawi Ministry of Education, 2017-2021).

2.2.3 Inclusive Education in South Africa

South Africa has embraced a policy-based system spearheaded by the EWP 6 (DoE, 2001) that articulates direction for developing inclusive education (Engelbrecht, 2018). South Africa, through EWP 6 (DoE, 2001) and SIAS (DBE, 2014), has made significant strides in the implementation of

inclusive education policies. Using a policy-driven approach, South Africa can rely on the structural provisions and compliance with frameworks like the Salamanca Statement (Tlale, 2023). However, its implementation has been accused of being slow and non-uniform, especially in rural schools which do not have adequate provisions to support learners on the AS (Pather & Slee, 2018). South African research indicates that, despite training teachers on integration, the modules are more of a formal nature, and teachers are not prepared for real situations (Mushambi, 2023). This has resulted in higher dependency on special schools, therefore negating the spirit of inclusion enshrined in EWP 6 (Slee, 2018). In South Africa, a lack of resources is also a challenge; several schools in the poorer communities lack even the most fundamental commodities, not to mention ASD-focused solutions (Ndlovu, 2020). Arendse (2020) suggests that the inequities inherent in funding for several schools make educational problems worse, such that learners in rural areas are more vulnerable.

2.3 POLICY FRAMEWORKS INFORMING INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN SOUTH AFRICA

In South Africa, Pather and Slee (2018) reiterate that the government has exhibited commitment towards the implementation of policies that would enhance the inclusion of learners with disabilities. These policies also form part of approaches for putting into practice inclusion and non-discrimination in education. The following section analyses some of the principal policies that address the promotion of inclusion in South Africa, including their aims and problems, as well as their potential consequences.

2.3.1 The Salamanca Statement

The Salamanca Statement, which was formulated at the World Conference for Special Needs Education in 1994 (UNESCO, 1994), aims to be a guide to the inclusion of children with disabilities. It embraces the provision of education systems for all learners, especially those with disability, in mainstream schools. EWP 6 of South Africa has borrowed strongly from the Salamanca proclamation, notably the concepts of equity, access, and participation (Naicker, 2024).

The Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994) reasserts the need for teachers to be trained appropriately, as well as going further to argue that resource distribution must be effective, as the implementation of inclusion is not just an act of policy but the recognition of a right (Ainscow et al., 2019). Yet, implementing these principles in practice is still a problem in South Africa. As various authors acknowledge, inequalities in access to resources and problems with the management and allocation of resources prevent the realisation of the vision outlined at Salamanca (Engelbrecht, 2020). However, the focus on multisectoral involvement in promoting the rights of children aligns with the goals of this research to strengthen teachers and parents' cooperation for learners on the AS.

2.3.2 Education White Paper 6 on Special Needs Education: Building an Inclusive Education and Training System

Inclusive education in South Africa is enforced by the EWP 6 (DoE, 2001) policy, which is the cornerstone for recognising and minimising barriers to learning, with the aim of improving the access of every learner to their human right to education. This right is allowed by the Bill of Rights (1996), that highlights the significance of equal access and rights to education for all irrespective of their gender, religion, and racial background (DoE, 2001). It focuses on the principle of affirming access to quality learning for every learner, especially those who have learning difficulties. To this end, the policy seeks to create an integrated education system through converting all the schools in the system into all-in-one schools, that equip them with facilities to cater for learners with disabilities, including learners on the AS.

The EWP 6 (DoE, 2001) requires various actions and strategies for addressing and eliminating barriers to learning. These include the staff, management, and governing bodies' orientation to support the inclusion; also, the acknowledgement of educators, including those of learners on the AS, as the main source for inclusive education and recognition as early as possible of learners experiencing barriers to learning. Majoko (2017) affirms that in inclusive education, educators are essential in effective service provision because of identifying barriers to learning as early as possible, as well as early intervention. According to Donohue and Bornman (2014), inclusive education in South Africa fosters participation, full access, acceptance, and success of learners with barriers to learning, including learners on the AS, by maximising their self-development while learning in mainstream schools. However, EWP 6 states that learners with severe intellectual barriers to learning, as well as those with low-functioning ASD, are placed in special schools.

The EWP 6 recognises that the degree of support needed to meet individual learners' needs may be different, and schooling systems need to be equipped to meet the different levels of support needed (DoE, 2001). Special schools, mainstream, or full-service schools should be adequately equipped to meet the different levels of support needed. Provision of support to learners, educators, and the schooling system as a whole is predominant in the implementation of inclusive education. The EWP 6 recognises the necessity for support teams in the successful implementation of inclusive education. These support teams comprise institutional-level support teams (ILST), which include the schooling community who are responsible for identifying barriers to learning and collaborating with the circuit- and district-based support teams (DBST).

The EWP 6 (DoE, 2001) finds that certain barriers to inclusion stem from the broader context or culture and calls for an ecosystem solution to these barriers (Walton & Engelbrecht, 2024). It focuses on the first steps and intervention, provision of support and the development of teacher training. However, Engelbrecht (2020) suggests that its implementation has been facing some challenges, such as inadequate resources and teaching facilities, poor training for teachers, and

poor compliance with change. Pillay et al. (2022) note that rural schools do not have adequate infrastructure and teaching personnel to accommodate learners on the AS, leaving the gap between policy and practice.

2.3.3 Policy on Screening, Identification, Assessment and Support

The Policy supports the EWP 6 on the *Screening, Identification, Assessment, and Support (SIAS)*, implemented in 2014, which offers a systematic way of articulating the learning difficulties (DBE, 2014). In the context of the policy described, the developments aim to simplify approaches that consider early identification and intervention so that all learners can learn exceptionally well. It uses a three-tier support framework that sorts the learners into groups in accordance with their levels of need.

The SIAS document is most applicable to learners on the AS, as it places a lot of focus on Individual Support Plans (ISP) for every learner. The policy means that teachers, parents, and specialists will all be involved in the decision-making for the learner's education. Nevertheless, the process was initiated to uncover various difficulties in its execution (Ledwaba, 2017). Matolo and Rambuda (2022) suggest that most schools, especially those in areas surrounded by poverty, have limited capacity to conduct proper assessments or even offer the necessary support.

Furthermore, the SIAS document has been accused of having too much paperwork, which may hamper early intervention (Donohue & Bornman, 2018). While for other learners with a disability, such delays have some effects, for learners on the AS, it can compound developmental delays and learning. However, the policy in question is still far from achieving goals set by the South African Constitution; however, it is still a modest attempt to increase inclusiveness of education in the country (Pather & Slee, 2018). It enhances collaboration and early intervention that corresponds to the aims of the study to examine methods that will enhance the learning of learners on the AS through partnerships.

The SIAS policy's main aim is to supply a framework for instructors, District-based support teams (DBSTs), School-based support teams (SBSTs), parents, and the school to utilise in order to enhance a learner's involvement in class (DBE, 2014). It sets out clear roles and responsibilities to administrators, teachers, SBSTs, DBSTs, and parents. The SIAS document provides recommendations for early identification and support to determine the kind and amount of support needed. With reference to the protocol and the policy of the SIAS, it means that educators, SBST, and DBST should all be utilised to assist in the screening, identification, and assessment process for learners with barriers to learning. The SIAS policy also highlights the basic necessity that both educators and parents should take part in the implementation of the plan. McKenzie and Dalton (2020) assert that EWP 6 gives directives to the SBST and DBST to function towards the provision of support in schools and districts by following the SIAS guidelines on learner enrolment in special schools, and recognising the role that teachers and parents play.

2.3.4 White Paper on Disabilities

The White Paper on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (DSD, 2016) broadens the social integration of learners with disabilities in South Africa, as it covers practically all barriers which such learners encounter in a variety of sectors, including education (Gupta, 2018). It seeks to ensure that barrier-free facilities, policies, and better public awareness can serve everyone living in the country.

The EWP 6 states some principles where schools should apply the universal design for learning and reasonable accommodation for Learners with Disabilities, among them those with ASD (Pather & Slee, 2018). It also highlights parental engagement and cross-sectoral cooperation to enhance learning (Donohue & Bornman, 2018). Nevertheless, supporters claim that it has numerous strategies to promote gender equality, but it does not contain legal measures to implement those strategies, which affects its effectiveness in practical activities (Walton & Rusznyak, 2019).

The policy has its basis and support from international policies such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), and this gives relevance to the policy (Chibaya et al., 2022). They advocate for the engagement of all the key players in the system to promote the practice of learning that is favourable to learners on the AS.

2.3.5 The Differentiated Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement for SID

The South African Differentiated Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (DCAPS) (DBE, 2018) is a policy enforced by the Department of Basic Education (DBE) to modify the current Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) to accommodate learners who need high support in order to develop skills and be independent. The National Curriculum Statement's (NCS) CAPS (DoE, 2011) was used by special schools prior to the introduction of the DCAPS for learners with severe intellectual disabilities. The DCAPS was planned to strengthen curriculum implementation in the classroom. It complements the SIAS policy (DBE, 2014). One of the basic rights of every learner is to have access to the curriculum (Marishane et al., 2015). This curriculum must be not only accessible, but the differentiation of the curriculum must cater to all learners. According to Marishane et al. (2015), curriculum differentiation refers to a tactic that includes alteration, adjustment, and expansion of methodologies, instructional and assessment approaches, and curriculum material. The DCAPS was planned to accommodate the curriculum needs of all learners, including the needs of learners on the AS. It is contended by many teachers, parents and professionals that ASD presents a unique learning barrier that needs separate and specialised intervention strategies, curricula, and programmes (Partlo, 2017). A differentiated

curriculum, such as the DCAPS, enables every aspect of the curriculum to be adjusted to meet the varied traits of learners, including learners on the AS.¹

DCAPS (DoE, 2018) is a framework policy for differentiated curriculum and assessment to cater for learners with severe intellectual disabilities. While not specifically designed for ASD, children with this learning barrier can benefit from DCAPS because it allows for a great deal of flexibility by which the needs of learners on the AS, especially those with severe developmental delay, can be met (Lombardo, 2015). The academic subjects of NCS from Grade R to 5 should be reduced in content and theory, such that learners with Severe Intellectual Disabilities can learn. In relation to ASD, differentiation is outlined in terms of four features in the DCAPS, which are:

- Content differentiation
- Learning environment differentiation
- Teaching methods differentiation
- Assessment differentiation

According to Ameen (2020), DCAPS pays particular attention to the functional skills and personal activities of daily living that include verbal and non-verbal communication, understanding of interpersonal relationships, and other skills. This approach is consistent with the complexity of the needs of learners on the AS, who need special intervention to achieve educational goals (Ameen, 2024). However, its application has been hindered by inadequate training and support for teachers and in most schools in the rural and other disadvantaged areas (Donohue & Bornman, 2018).

Nevertheless, Ameen (2020) suggests that DCAPS is an important positive advancement as far as the inclusiveness of perspectives on teaching and assessment for learners with learning difficulties is concerned. It is aligned with the principles of the study, as it aims to identify partnership approaches for implementing needs-centred practices for learners on the AS in the mainstream and special education systems. When supplemented by collaborations and capacity development, DCAPS can therefore be a useful resource in the process towards more inclusion of differently-abled children in educational settings (Solomon et al., 2024). Educators need to understand this as a diagnosis of ASD, including severity markers based on the degree of impairment. It is therefore helpful as it provides an assessment framework, allowing and assisting teachers in the identification of specific learning difficulties and needs, which subsequently aid in the diagnostic process. Hence, the level of support is guided and determined by the level of support required by each learner. It therefore says teaching learners on the AS is mostly need-

¹ The DBE decided in 2017 to change the name of the DCAPS curriculum to CAPS for SID learners Grade R-5 but at most provincial departments of education the name DCAPS are still used even if it is not the official name.

based as outcomes must fit in with each learner's needs to be taught. There is no proof in the literature regarding whether the current DCAPS falls within the Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) framework in South Africa (Solomon et al., 2024). According to Rens and Louw (2021), at the end of the programme, learners will only obtain a Certificate of Attainment.

Table 2.1: Overview of the DCAPS curriculum

Grade R-3 (5-13 years old)	Grade 4-5 (14-18 years old)
Home Language Mathematics Life Skills • Personal and Social Well-being • Physical Education • Creative Arts	Home Language Mathematics Life Skills • Personal and Social Well-being • Physical Education • Creative Arts Skill subjects (Vocational subjects/ Electives): A minimum of three skills and a maximum of four skills.

(Source: DoE, 2018)

Inclusive education intends to change the educational environment with its policies by systematically identifying and eliminating barriers to learning, hence it is important that in the following section we look at these barriers, with a main focus on ASD.

2.4 BARRIERS TO LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT

Børte et al. (2023) reiterate that barriers to learning and development are defined as the obstacles which deny the learner's ability to receive quality learning, succeed academically, and engage in the learning process. These barriers may be caused by systems, environment, socio-economic factors or individual factors, and all of them have different implications for learning and teaching (Singh, 2019).

2.4.1 Barriers to Learning

Barriers to learning are a broad category of impediments which can have a huge influence on the learning achievements of learners (Singh, 2019). In general, Adelman and Taylor (2018) reiterate that these barriers are divided into systemic, environmental, socio-economic, and intrinsic barriers.

Systemic barriers are defined as system barriers common to the education system, including inadequate teacher training, the standardisation of courses, and poor support for learners with learning disabilities (Hanreddy & Östlund, 2020). These systematic abnormalities result in exclusion of learners, especially those who require certain accommodations to enable them to learn.

Environmental barriers are related to conditions that exist outside the classroom, like schools' facilities, geographical location, and resource availability (Takyi et al., 2021). Learners with disability who attend, for instance, rural schools discover that there is a shocking deficiency in professional establishments and personnel to cater to these needs, and this affects the issue of education disparity (Donohue & Bornman, 2018). To worsen the situation, Engelbrecht (2018) reiterates that large classes and a lack of teaching aids make it difficult for learners with specific needs to learn effectively and enhance their achievement.

The socio-economic factors are most likely to be the most prominent, and they always target the learners with poor backgrounds (Engelbrecht, 2018). A lack of education and poor health due to poverty, inadequate nutrition and the absence of health facilities can also hamper child learning and school attendance, leading to low academic achievement (Ndlovu, 2020). For example, Walton and Engelbrecht (2024) discovered that learners from poor backgrounds are likely to go to bed hungry or lack even simple requirements, and this leads to their poor performance in school.

Intrinsic barriers are those which are learner-related, such as physical disability, mental ability, learning, and behavioural issues (Singh, 2019). Other conditions, such as ASD and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), fall under this category. Hence, there is a need for exceptional support for learners with these conditions in a classroom setting (Pienaar & Dreyer, 2023).

The dynamics of these barriers explain why the implementation of inclusive education is challenging. Education challenges like those mentioned in the context of South Africa EWP 6 are addressed through policies that suggest system improvements and consolidation, but, in practice, the outcome differs (Engelbrecht, 2018). According to Motitswe (2025), several issues complicate the practical application of inclusive education policies, affecting both mainstream and specialised educational settings. Engelbrecht (2020) posited that even though those policy frameworks are important, there is a need for intersectional interventions that address the barriers to the experiences in education for people with disabilities.

2.4.2 Autism Spectrum Disorder as a Barrier to Learning

Hodges et al. (2020) note that ASD is broadly recognised as a complex condition of development, characterised by constant challenges in social interaction, language, and nonverbal communication, accompanied by limited and repetitive behaviours. The features of ASD lie on a

spectrum, being manifested by individuals in a variety of severities and symptom mixes (American Psychiatric Association, 2015). Baxter et al. (2015) state that the existence of ASD is on the rise across the globe, approximating 1 in 59 children as per the Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (2015). In South Africa, the documentation of the ASD occurrence is limited. Still, Franzsen and Pretorius (2023) suggest that it is similar to global trends, due to an underreporting that is a result of the diagnostic challenges.

Learners on the AS must handle a lot of educational hurdles that are mostly caused by the impediment of social cues and communication that may interfere with the ways of interacting with fellow pupils and teachers. The authors Nthibeli et al. (2022) further reiterate that while implementation of inclusive education in terms of EWP 6 (DoE, 2001) in South Africa is yet to materialise fully, schools are still struggling to adjust to demands posed by learners on the AS.

According to Pawlett (2017), ASD remains a complex learning barrier since it inhibits learners academically, socially, and emotionally. As a developmental disorder which affects communication, behaviour and social interaction, ASD has manifestations that need to be managed through education, and hence calls for differential education interventions (Iles, 2021). Manifestations of ASD can be managed through education by establishing structured environments, using visual aids, guaranteeing clear communication, and addressing individual needs, while also encouraging positive relationships among peers. Wood (2023) reiterates that learners on the AS have academic challenges when it comes to composing in a normal class setting where learning is influenced by group work and fast-moving lesson plans. These learners may have sensitive skin and have trouble attending to instruction in noisy or visually cluttered classroom environments (Mukherjee, 2017). Further, poor executive control will affect their capacity to be organised and follow through necessary instructions and academic work, hence falling despite innate ability (Pienaar & Dreyer, 2023). This supports the findings that individualised teaching approaches like visual instruction and the use of structures are critical in overcoming these gaps to make learning possible for the learners on the AS (Pawlett, 2017).

ASD socially affects the child by limiting their ability to play and interact with peers and build friendships. Most of the learners under this category find it hard to understand gestures and signs, among other ways of conveying messages, as well as how to form interaction patterns with other people (Faja & Dawson, 2017). It is for this reason that learners end up feeling socially awkward, become victims of bullying or get excluded by their peers, which in turn affects their self-esteem during the entire school term (Alugbue, 2024). These challenges may, however, be reduced through peer-mediated interventions as well as engagements in classroom inclusive practices that embrace and accommodate learners on the AS.

PALAR plays an essential role in catering for the custom needs of learners on the AS within the educational structure (Malan, 2022). Wood (2019) emphatically states that PALAR involves

multiple stakeholders, teachers, parents and in some cases the learners, in a process of action and reflection which facilitates the development of contextualised educational interventions. Case studies in South Africa show how PALAR can indeed contribute to substantial progress for learners on the AS, especially in their Individualised Education Plan (IEP), to enable them to perform better academically and relate at school with ease (Morena, 2017).

Despite an increase in research on ASD and an education strategy for the barrier, there is still a lot to be done, particularly in developing nations like South Africa. Hume et al. (2021) note an insufficiency of longitudinal studies tracking the progress of ASD educational programmes over time, which would provide necessary evidence for the concept of the long-term effectiveness of different educational models. Moreover, research in South Africa that explores the cultural and socio-economic aspects of ASD is very rare. Further studies are needed to show how those factors contribute to the implementation of ASD-specific educational strategies and transfer of PALAR models to local circumstances (Aderinto et al., 2023).

2.5 DEFINING AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER

The Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (2015) describes ASD as a permanent neurodevelopmental disorder that impacts the development of brain areas associated with social interaction and communication. The DSM–5 (APA, 2013) defines ASD as characterised by limited, repetitive patterns of behaviour, interests or activities as well as ongoing deficiencies in social communication and engagement. As stated by Wearmouth (2017), individuals with AS struggle with connecting to others and social contexts from a young age, characterised by a significant inability to use language proficiently for communication and a strong, anxious need to preserve consistency. Landsberg et al. (2019) characterise ASD as a complex variable, neurologically driven, widespread developmental disorder that affects both the development and functioning of the brain.

Pawlett (2017) highlights that with the continuous rise of learners identified with ASD, it is essential for educators and support staff to understand how to assist these learners on the AS. He further claims that teachers are required to use effective practices and strategies, such as multimodal intervention and visual aids for challenging behaviour, so that the learners get the appropriate education.

Barriers to learning do not exist in a vacuum; they often show up as teaching challenges, as would be reflected by the following section.

2.5.1 Teachers' Challenges and Experiences in Teaching Learners on the Autism Spectrum

Stevens (2024) suggests that the challenges of teaching learners on the AS differ depending on the teacher, context and behaviour control abilities. Cahyo et al. (2021) further suggest that specific challenges are also attributed to the trainer's education, classroom context, and behaviour control abilities. Such difficulties are further magnified by system factors, a lack of resources, and learner needs; hence, an understanding of teachers' experience teaching learners on the AS is crucial (Cook & Ogden, 2022).

2.5.1.1 Lack of Training and Professional Development

Engelbrecht et al. (2017) discovered that poor competence was a significant barrier to the successful implementation of inclusion. Cook and Ogden (2022) suggest that one of the prevalent problems is a lack of preparation for teachers in utilising effective ASD-related interventions that help to address the differentiated needs of learners on the AS. Parents believe that a teacher's lack of training will ultimately have an impact on their child's capacity for growth and learning (Mthimunye et al., 2018). ASD is a deficit that most teachers are unsure about, as they learn about it along their teaching practice (Pillay et al., 2022). Hence, this dearth in professional development is apparent in rural/underprivileged schools where expert training is hard to come by (Pather & Slee, 2018). Pienaar and Dreyer (2023) have argued that the teachers feel unable to comprehend and, therefore, to support the application of science-based practices such as Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA) or the use of sensory integration for learners on the AS. Teachers lament that they lack the necessary training for inclusive classrooms, and that they lack the knowledge and experience to support learners who face barriers to learning (Robledo Montecel, 2018). According to Mfuthwana and Dreyer (2018), they lack the skills and feel demoralised to help these learners succeed.

In addition, most standard teacher training programmes in South Africa lack content focused on ASD education; instead, there is general content in inclusive education (Donohue & Bornman, 2018). Cook and Ogden (2022) suggest that this generalised strategy is unable to account for the elaborate issues that ASD presents, including sensory processing issues, fixation, and communication impairments. As a result, the teachers use trial and error practices because they are limited within their options, and this makes the job draining. According to Engelbrecht (2020), inclusion of modules tailored for ASD in any teacher education programme is needed to effectively improve teachers' literacy and capability to address any situation related to ASD. Many people think that educators require specialised training to assist learners on the AS, and currently, such training is not accessible (Attard & Booth, 2023). The study conducted by Van der Steen et al. (2020) emphasise the lack of teacher preparation as a barrier to effective classroom inclusion strategies. According to Larcombe et al. (2019), ongoing professional development and training

for teachers are essential. They should focus on the application of instructional strategies that will support learners on the AS in achieving academic success. Therefore, teachers must be trained to acquire practical professional skills, such as the use of different curriculum delivery methods, and to comprehend how learners learn in different ways, so that they can address the various demands of their learners (Daniyan, 2015; Vlok, 2016).

2.5.1.2 Classroom Dynamics and Inclusivity

Teaching learners on the AS who are in classes with other learners is not easy because sometimes the teachers are pulled between catering for the needs of a learner who is a 'neurodivergent' and those who are developing according to conventional standards (Cook & Ogden, 2022). Teachers in ordinary public schools are supposed to provide Individual Education Plan (IEP) implementation, modify their lessons, and control learners' learning rates while following numerous standards and having large classes (Mkwanazi, 2023). The IEP is a comprehensive document that outlines the specialised educational programme and services tailored to meet the different needs of an individual learner (Roy, 2023). IEP is a vital instrument that makes sure that learners on the AS get personalised education that meets their different needs. It plays a crucial role in supporting the educational success of learners on the AS. Through the provision of customised goals, accommodations, and services, an IEP make sure that every learner on the AS gets the support they need to reach their full potential (Roy, 2023).

Planning in education involves a structured method of formulating strategies and actions aimed at reaching specific goals, whether they are long-term or short-term. This process encompasses analysing the current situation, establishing developmental objectives, prioritising initiatives, and ultimately, overseeing the plans to make necessary adjustments and refinements as required (Khalilov & Taghiyev, 2024). According to Shea et al. (2018), those teachers teaching learners on the AS may find it difficult to manage group work, times of change, and non-scheduled periods of time, since these disrupt the flow of class and the learning of the other learners. For learners to perform optimally, teachers have a crucial role to play, with time management as another aspect of allocating priorities and putting work into that allocation (Sayari, 2017). According to Ahmad et al. (2020), time management's impacts are directly linked to issues with planning and resource constraints. Numerous rural and township schools in South Africa do not achieve satisfactory performance due to the inefficient use of teaching time (Maile & Olowoyo, 2017). Inadequate planning appears to be an important reason for the decrease in instructional time in schools (Massawe and Majokava, 2022).

Furthermore, Mzimela (2023) reiterates that while inclusive classrooms are another concept which is widely promoted these days, it is still difficult to provide appropriate accommodations for learners on the AS because, for instance, there are usually no visual schedules, sensory spaces or tools, or accessibility technologies. According to Mpangane et al. (2024), the lack of such

resources results in extra work for teachers, who have had to develop implementable solutions in tandem with handling their other teaching-related tasks. All these problems are compounded by the inadequate supply of teaching assistants, which makes teachers struggle with tough classroom situations on their own.

2.5.1.3 Behavioural Management and Emotional Demands

Pawlett (2017) suggests that one of the most demanding tasks in teaching learners on the AS is how to handle behavioural issues. A large part of these behaviours can include temper tantrums, aggression and self-injurious behaviours, especially if the child is unable to cope with sensory processing, changes in the daily schedule, or is struggling with verbal and non-verbal communication (Faja & Dawson, 2017). Unfortunately, most teachers are not trained in appropriate methods of handling behavioural problems. They may use aversive tactics, or neglect the behaviours, which they are likely to worsen and further hinder the learner (Wood, 2023).

Furthermore, Anderson (2021) notes that these behaviours become burdensome and create high stress levels, resulting in teacher burnout and huge turnover rates. Burnout and stress are reported by teachers all around the world, which can cause anxiety and depression (Agyapong et al., 2022). According to Shook (2020), there are indications that most teachers receive very little or no encouragement and may feel overworked because of having to be constantly on the alert and ready for action, as well as managing their emotions. Teachers often get overwhelmed with feelings of hopelessness owing to the inability to address the social-emotional needs of their learners while at the same time trying to meet teaching responsibilities (Cook & Ogden, 2022).

According to Setlhare et al. (2016), underfunded South African schools have several psychological stresses that have an impact on teachers' wellbeing, including bullying and the stigma attached to educating learners on the AS. He further contends that schools lack the resources and tools necessary to meet teachers' psychological needs. The study conducted by Mahwai and Ross (2023) showed that teachers felt unsupported by social workers in the district-based support teams (DBST). In South Africa, psychologists working at former Model C schools offer counselling services; tuition fees pay their wages (Manci, 2016). However, most communities and schools lack access to social worker and psychologist services because of budgetary constraints in schools (Mayeza & Bhana, 2017).

2.5.1.4 Systemic Barriers and Advocacy

The lack of resources, policies, and administrative support also poses a web of systematic obstacles and barriers to teachers (Mkwanazi, 2023). While it is true that documents such as the EWP 6 and SIAS mean well regarding promoting inclusive education, their application in practice is different (Matolo & Rambuda, 2022). Inclusive education strongly focuses on adapting the curriculum because it encourages the full participation of all learners in the teaching and learning process (DBE, 2014). Currently, there is no specific curriculum or syllabus available for learners

on the AS (Sumbane et al., 2023). Engelbrecht et al. (2016) affirmed that policy documents are often developed with unclear goals and lack specific implementation guidelines, leading to the inability to achieve the desired outcomes. There is insufficient clarity regarding the level of inclusiveness in EWP 6 (Hudson et al., 2019). According to Adewumi and Mosito (2019), unclear policies have created difficulties for effective implementation. Policy must always be established with a focus on how it will be put into action, as this will guide the creation of the intended policy (Pollack Porter et al., 2018).

According to Du Plessis and Mestry (2019), teachers need to receive the necessary support to successfully fulfil the demanding duties entrusted to them by the community. Nonetheless, schools, parents, the DBE, and provincial education departments often do not provide the necessary support that teachers require to carry out their daily teaching responsibilities (Hay et al., 2021). Teachers encounter difficulties, such as insufficient support from the DBST.

Special schools are often poorly funded and do not have the facilities and resources for supporting each learner, which is why teachers are left to fight for their learners' learning while dealing with institutional shortcomings (Engelbrecht, 2020). Scarcity of resources is the greatest difficulty confronting the inclusive education system in South Africa (Donohue & Bornman, 2014).

For this reason, a lack of cooperation between teachers, parents, language therapists, and psychologists in providing interventional procedures weakens the impact of those initiatives (Pather & Slee, 2018). According to Wood (2023), ASD education needs to promote partnership and interdisciplinary practices to ensure that the diverse problems associated with ASD are solved. When school leadership and the community back the efforts of the teachers, the teachers will stay the course and assist their learners to achieve better results (Shook, 2020).

In response to the above challenges and experiences, it is required of teachers to implement teaching strategies to support learners on the AS adequately. The following section will discuss those strategies.

2.5.2 Teaching Strategies for Learners on the Autism Spectrum

Academic, behavioural/organisational, and social development of learners on the AS requires proper teaching techniques to be adopted by educators in teaching practices (Pawlett, 2017). These tactics must be individualised with respect to the learner factors and situations within learning environments. This section explores key teaching strategies across four domains: These four domains include academic, behavioural, organisational, and social strategies.

2.5.2.1 Academic strategies

According to McDougal et al. (2020), learners on the AS cannot grasp abstract concepts and need precise instructional academic approaches. Visual supports such as charts, schedules, diagrams and the like are among the methods used, since it has been noted that learners

understand information in the context of graphic displays better than texts (Wood, 2023). Visual tools also minimise the use of words since there are cases where learners may have difficulty processing what is being said (Petersson-Bloom & Holmqvist, 2022).

Differentiated instruction is another important strategy, in which the activities are varied, considering factors such as learners' abilities and preferred learning modes (Reis & Renzulli, 2018). For example, the learners who are visual learners can benefit from multimedia or rather relevant demonstrations and even motions (Alabi, 2024). It helps that every learner interacts with the curriculum at their own capacity, which promotes learning and minimises stress.

Moreover, Sandra and Kurniawati (2021) demonstrated that there are positive effects on learners of the AS when teaching strategies include procedural speaking, using clear modelling, and sequential instructions. In the view of Batool et al. (2022), scaffolding allows progressive acquisition of mastery to ensure that the learners' understanding and confidence in tackling the complex task are enhanced.

Task analysis is one of the strategies that can be used to assist learners on the AS. As Hume et al. (2021) asserts, that to assist learners learn smaller steps, other techniques such as time delay, video modelling and reinforcement are frequently employed to help learners learn smaller steps. For some learners on the AS, even simple tasks can show complex frustrations. By teaching smaller steps sequentially and identifying potential problems within steps, a well-crafted task analysis can mitigate these difficulties (Booth et al., 2021).

Peer-based instruction (PBI) and intervention give learners more chances to practice and react to social and academic material by offering a structure where learners enhance and support instructional content in the classroom (Mahoney, 2023). For learners, AS PBIs can be used to set individualised supports through the use of peers in inclusive classroom settings. In academics, PBIs encourage learning by providing learners with expansions in opportunities to react and learn through peer observation and modelling (Mahoney, 2023).

According to Thomas et al. (2020), video-based instruction and prompting have been functional in teaching different skills to learners on the AS, including spelling, answering interview questions, writing, and obtaining flexible living skills. Simultaneous prompting, frequently incorporated with verbal prompts, has appeared to be effective in teaching single reading (e.g., sight words) (Collins et al., 2017) and mathematics skills (e.g., telling the time, identifying shapes) as well as academic skills (e.g., mathematics equations, research skills) (Heinrich et al., 2016).

LEGO® therapy can be described as a play-based, all-encompassing and well-organised intervention founded on the LEGO® building system (Davidson, 2015). It was developed by an American psychologist, LeGeoff, after noticing two children with ASD engage in unstructured play with LEGO® sets. LEGO-based therapy is a group-based social intervention which seeks to help learners with ASD develop their social and communication skills (Bei et al., 2021). Moreover,

LEGO® therapy can be used to enhance and practice Executive Functioning skills like self-control, working memory, and attention. It can assist learners on the AS to direct their attention to the task, remember instructions, and modify their actions accordingly. These cognitive processes are vital for the satisfactory accomplishment of building tasks and can potentially exert a beneficial impact in other areas of life (Lindsay et al., 2017).

2.5.2.2 Behavioural strategies

According to Wong et al. (2015), behavioural strategies are grounded in Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA) principles. These strategies incorporate elements of other targeted interventions, such as prompting and reinforcement. Cook and Ogden (2022) reiterate that learners on the AS present with behavioural difficulties and therefore call for prompt and appropriate action in management. Meindl et al. (2020) suggest that one best practice that has gained popularity is positive reinforcement, which involves a process where only good behaviours are reinforced in an endeavour to make people repeat them. For instance, reinforcing positive behaviour through verbal encouragement, offering tokens or tangible things in exchange for performance of specific tasks, improves learning among the learners and fosters a positive learning environment (Mukherjee, 2017).

McGrath (2018) suggests that the use of functional behaviour assessments (FBAs) helps teachers determine the exact causes of certain behaviours and to come up with proper treatments for those behaviours. Thus, knowing the primary antecedents, like sensational concerns or communication difficulties, it is possible to prevent behavioural issues (Pienaar & Dreyer, 2023). This assessment is especially useful to control intervention outcomes in cases with disruptive/aggressive behaviours (Bernick, 2019).

Self-regulation techniques: Self-regulation strategies are also an important aspect in teaching learners how to control their emotions and their responses (Etkin, 2018). These methods may include using meditation and breathing, handling of balls that consist of different feels, or using earplugs or a headset, or directing the learners to take a break when learners seem to lose focus due to overstimulation of the brain (Laurie, 2022). Teachers should be able to adopt some of these practices within a daily schedule so that learners with an ASD diagnosis can be relieved of the daily stresses of learning. According to Pandey et al. (2018), working memory, time management and organisation play a significant role in self-regulation, thereby necessitating abilities, strategies, and interventions to successfully apply self-regulation to attain academic and behaviour achievement. Edossa et al. (2018) pinpoint three vital elements within self-regulation: emotional self-regulation, behavioural self-regulation and cognitive self-regulation. Housman (2017) asserts that emotional self-regulation comprises recognising and responding to your inner emotions to control your individual reaction correctly. Some of the emotional strategies that one can employ to support learners on the AS may include taking a walk with them, pointing their

attention and ideas to positivity, or using grounding practices (for example, you ask a learner to name four things he sees in the class). Emotional self-regulation can be utilised to support learners on the AS by bringing their energy down or increasing their energy to complement the needs of the situation.

Learners who are proficient at behaviour self-regulation strategies can successfully finish tasks, prioritise their task at hand and put effort into challenging tasks (Hart et al., 2022). Behavioural self-regulation may consist of setting a goal and self-control towards that goal. According to Hart et al. (2022), the utilisation of a self-monitoring system, such as a daily checklist, to check improvement increases self-determination.

2.5.2.3 Organisational strategies

Stark and Lindo (2023) suggest that learners on the AS also need assistance, especially in organising their work, since they may have deficits in executive skills needed in organising their work, setting priorities, and time management. Such variations can be easily overcome through the implementation of structural processes, which are basic when attempting to solve the aforesaid challenges. Learner timetable consistency purposefully maintains a system and makes the learner feel safer, and minimises confusion or worry over fresh schedules due to unforeseen circumstances (Pawlett, 2017). Visual timetables and calendars can even enhance their capacity to organise time well.

Task division, which involves the process of dividing one entire task into several sub-tasks or sequential steps, can also be of tremendous help (Prat & Steward, 2020). This approach ensures that learners work on one aspect at any one time, thereby minimising the load on the memory and enhancing the possibility of task accomplishment (Cook & Ogden, 2022). For example, in a writing activity such as a composition or an essay, one can set stages for brainstorming, outlining, writing, and proofreading, each of which is characterised by differences in the instructions and learning objectives to be achieved.

Checklists and other types of graphic organisers also help develop organisational skills, which would allow learners to monitor their progress as well as to handle tasks independently (Yavani, 2018). Objects such as coloured folders or specific bins for classroom supplies used by learners in their work area may assist learners in learning organisation and minimise extensive instructions from the teacher (Ameen, 2020).

2.5.2.4 Social strategies

According to Pienaar and Dreyer (2023), learners on the AS often experience social difficulties in learning due to trouble with observing social cues, gazing, and reciprocal communication. That is why peer-mediated interventions facilitate appropriate skills by providing neurotypical peers with structured activities during which they interact and cooperate (Nthibeli et al., 2022). Thus, it

supports meaningful inclusion; the learners on the AS get to practice courtesy and proper behaviour among other learners (Veerasamy, 2024).

Role-playing and modelling: Other methods, such as role play and modelling, also enable the learners to perform the social scenes experimentally (Parwoto et al., 2024). In turn, the teachers can act out typical encounters, for instance, greeting a peer, or handing over something, and help the learners to learn how it is done. This practice helps to create confidence and enables the learners to be exposed to the real social-related situations (Mukherjee, 2017).

Circle-time activities and group projects are aimed at encouraging children to interact with other children (Pawlett, 2017). These activities empower learners on the AS to engage in group work, learn concepts on group work, and exercise peer relationships (Wood, 2023). However, these related activities need to be managed so that all learners, who should be involved, report that they were welcomed and supported.

Social communication tools: Farzana et al. (2021) suggest that assistive technology, which encompasses picture exchange systems or speech-generating systems, is very useful to learners who are non-verbal or have limited verbal skills. These tools enhance the ability of the learners to convey their needs and feelings, and reduce destructive behaviours, thus encouraging good social relations (Pienaar & Dreyer, 2023).

Because this study is about the collaboration between teachers and parents, it is also important to reflect on the challenges and experiences of parents. The next section will discuss that.

2.5.3 Parents' Challenges and Experiences in dealing with learners on the Autism Spectrum

Hosseinpour et al. (2022) reiterate that parents of learners diagnosed with ASD face several difficulties in obtaining information and materials, gaining expertise on their child's condition, and fulfilling their parenting duties. These difficulties can lead to long-term effects on the young child and their development, as well as on the family.

2.5.3.1 Access to resources

A scarcity of resources is one of the biggest challenges facing the inclusive education system in South Africa (Donohue & Bornman, 2014). The lack of access to resources is one of the most common struggles for parents of learners on the AS out there today (Hosseinpour et al., 2022). Sayed and Ahmed (2015) emphasise that a high-quality education cannot exist without adequate resources. Atanga et al. (2020) assert that this issue of resource scarcity must be resolved to ensure that all learners, regardless of their learning challenges, receive the help and opportunities they need to succeed in the educational system. In South Africa, early intervention services, including speech therapy, occupational therapy, and behavioural interventions and retreats, are rare, or available to a few selected urban areas or private institutions, thus leaving out families in

rural or marginalised areas (Pillay et al., 2021). Moreover, the cost of these services is relatively expensive, and it has a squeezing effect on families that can barely afford to meet their child's educational or therapy needs and other basic needs (Ndlovu, 2020). According to Vohra et al. (2014), families with learners on the AS are more likely to have financial hardship and require more money to pay for medical expenditures than families with children who have other challenges. This barrier could be a shortage of funds for critical resources such as assistive technology, specialised textbooks, or other materials, as well as instructional materials designed for learners with various learning needs (Beyene et al., 2023).

Poorer family functioning and worse marital satisfaction are often attributed to financial demands and the concomitant issue of a parent being unable to work, or only able to work a restricted number of hours, because of the challenges of raising a child with special needs (Kuhlthau et al., 2014). According to Larcombe et al. (2019), parents may experience financial hardship as a result of schools receiving insufficient funding. To enable better access to care, including qualified medical personnel, specialised facilities and schools, and the availability of suitable equipment and resources, funding for ASD should be given priority (Adams, 2024).

2.5.3.2 *Understanding Autism Spectrum Disorder*

Another key concern is the low level of awareness and knowledge about ASD at the family level and in the wider society (Pienaar & Dreyer, 2023). Stevens (2024) suggests that another critical issue is the lack of awareness and understanding of ASD, both within the family and in the broader community. Lockwood Estrin et al. (2021) assert that parental training is one of the challenges they encounter as parents of children on the AS. Parents often find it hard to understand the ASD issue, which results in frustration, guilt or helplessness (Mukherjee, 2017). This lack of understanding is made worse by a poor show from schools that offer little or no assistance to parents in the form of information or training (Shook, 2020). Mthimunya et al. (2018) found that learners on the AS are less likely to be genuinely accepted and included in everyday life because parents and the community are not given enough accurate information about ASD. However, parents with children on the AS also suffer cultural prejudices and misconceptions, which may worsen isolation for parents since they cannot seek support or fight for the needs of the child (Akande, 2024). Adams (2024) stipulates that most people have a limited understanding of ASD; therefore they harbour misconceptions and negative stereotypes about ASD and its effects as a barrier to learning. Health care practitioners' ignorance of ASD may cause a delay in identifying learners on the AS and in initiating early intervention (Jubr, 2018).

According to Castillo et al. (2020), misconceptions about ASD and its underlying causes continue to exist, despite the important genetic results in ASD research. These misconceptions worsen the challenges faced by individuals with ASD and their families, causing families to put off getting a diagnosis or treatment for their children out of fear of being left alone and subjected to unfair

treatment (Aderinto et al., 2023). Yu et al. (2020) assert that the education and treatment of families impacted by ASD may be negatively impacted by misconceptions about its causes.

2.5.3.3 Stress

Parents of learners on the AS have notably high levels of parental stress, which is characterised as the psychological anguish brought on by the demands of parenting (Kiami & Goodgold, 2017). According to Keenan et al. (2016), parents of learners on the AS frequently suffer higher levels of stress than parents of typically developing children or children with other disabilities. Nguyen et al. (2025) found that most parents had high levels of stress, with the most common symptoms being cognitive and physical. According to Aderinto et al. (2023), in order to reduce the burden on caregivers and improve the quality of care, as well as the well-being of learners on the AS in these circumstances, a comprehensive spectrum of support services is required, including financial help, education, and accessible interventions. According to Mazibuko and Shilubane (2020), caregivers expressed financial difficulties, a lack of access to resources, and psychological and social stress.

2.6 COLLABORATION BETWEEN TEACHERS AND PARENTS

Parent-teacher collaboration is frequently viewed as a parent-teacher-learner triangle where they are interconnected, which can make an environment conducive for providing support for learners (South Africa Education, 2016). These partnerships are indispensable and are most useful in the design and implementation of tailored education packages that address the pressing needs of learners with barriers to learning. Hume et al. (2021) emphasise that joint efforts to establish such an environment facilitate not only school learning but home-based learning as well, which is vital for learners on the AS. Naidoo and Govender (2022) have illustrated in their research the positive contribution of parent-teacher communication to the development of socio-emotional and educational outcomes for such learners using consistent strategies across environments that ensure learning and adaptation skills are reinforced.

Shook (2020) reiterates that teachers, parents and other players in the learner's life should therefore work hand-in-hand to ensure provision of success for learners on the AS. Teachers believe that working together with parents is crucial and should involve good communication, setting up similar learning spaces at home and at school, taking part in school decision-making, with parents monitoring their children's academic progress, volunteering at school events, and working with the community at large (Bruck et al., 2022). However, various negative factors discourage such collaboration, making efforts towards offering uniform support hard to achieve. According to Chen et al. (2020), the lack of collaboration among stakeholders has a detrimental effect on the experience of learners on the AS, especially those transitioning into mainstream primary school.

2.6.1 Negative Factors Affecting Collaboration

2.6.1.1 Communication gaps

Shook (2020) recapitulates that parent-teacher communication is widely regarded as one of the biggest challenges that hinder collaboration between parents and teachers. Frequent communication between teachers and parents is essential for productive collaboration, especially for learners on the AS (Aljafari, 2019). Lack of proper communication may result in a lack of coherent support approaches, which is the main issue that keeps learners on the AS from receiving the stability they require (Mukherjee, 2017). According to Thornton (2015), a lack of collaboration has numerous consequences that point to an inability to plan, coordinate, and work together to support learners on the AS. Parents complain that teachers are uninterested or unavailable, while teachers ignore parents as if they are uninterested in their problems (Akande, 2024). This leads to a chronic breakdown in communication, leading to a cycle of mistrust and disengagement consistent with learners' isolation (Pawlett, 2017). Al-Hamad et al. (2023) discovered that poor communication may lead to major problems in the educational system, such as misunderstandings.

Further, Akande (2024) suggests that language and cultural barriers may widen these communication barriers. For learners in multilingual classrooms, parents and teachers may not speak the same language or share the same cultural beliefs, which may leave them unprepared to support a learner on the AS (Engelbrecht, 2020). Problems of differences in directions and goals, as well as in expectations and roles, prevent the smooth working of the teams. Meaningful parental involvement, according to Watt (2016), requires parents to actively participate in their child's education, while also highlighting the significance of teachers and parents working together in a collaborative, communicative, and cooperative manner for the sake of the child.

2.6.1.2 Differing expectations

The second problem refers to the lack of concord between the parents' and teachers' expectations, needs, and optimism in relation to the child, as well as discrepancies in the ways they address the problem (Wood & Happé, 2023). Whereas teachers always aim at academic success, parents will always have success defined by their child's social and emotional development (Wood, 2023). These divergent priorities may create a conflict in deciding the distribution of resources, teaching-learning approaches, or management of learners' behaviour, leading to tension between the stakeholders. Colizzi et al. (2020) state that because of the unforeseen changes in their routines and timetables, learners on the AS often feel frustrated, anxious, apprehensive, or tense.

Also, the parents may put in place high expectations of schools, especially when they exist in areas of limited resource endowment (Wood & Happé, 2023). In addition, teachers may fail to see just how involved with the parent they are and fail to recognise the effort they put in as experts.

This might lead to frustration on the part of the teacher and the parent, thereby worsening the prospects for cooperation (Pienaar & Dreyer, 2023), according to Zhang and Spencer (2015). Teachers must actively involve parents in the development, implementation, and oversight of their children's intervention and IEP plans. This will ensure that learning may be applied in family, school, and community settings (Barton & Harn, 2014).

2.6.1.3 *Systemic Issues*

Lack of policy coherence, insufficient funding, and highly strained systems of education severely undermine collaboration imperatives (Engelbrecht, 2020). South African legislation, EWP 6, and the SIAS policy remain all-encompassing frameworks for cooperation, even if the implementation of its provisions remains arbitrary and half-baked (Pillay & Tlale, 2024). Due to considerable workloads, which include amplified class sizes, extra administrative responsibilities and tutorial work, teachers are not well-positioned to spend quality time interacting with parents (Pillay et al., 2022).

Furthermore, Bonfim et al. (2023) found that there is fragmentation of care, as there is no direct communication or collaboration between the academic team and the therapy team to help the learner on the AS. According to Cook and Ogden (2022), poor system coherence and poor funding produce various negative impacts on collaborative practices.

2.6.1.4 *Stigmatisation and social isolation*

According to Turnock et al. (2022), the social stigma associated with ASD is one of the reasons why individuals do not engage in collaboration. Parents may feel judged or blamed for the child's condition, thus avoiding contact with teachers or other parents (Mukherjee, 2017). Likewise, teachers may have prejudices or misconceptions about ASD that may affect their readiness to work as a team (Chen et al., 2020). According to Galan-Vera et al. (2022), stigmatisation is a way to promote social isolation. As in the case of children and young adults, this stigmatisation guarantees a continuation of isolated and disconnected living, thereby preventing potential problem-solving on a macro scale (Deguchi et al., 2021). Adams (2024) asserts that reducing the stigma attached to ASD and disability is essential to promoting early intervention and diagnosis. Boshoff et al. (2018) found that some parents believed friends and family disregarded their worries about their child, in a meta-analysis comprising 1,178 parents.

Professionals and the general public initially blamed parents for the development of ASD and later for the negative behaviours associated with ASD (Kenny, 2015). According to Alareeki et al. (2022), parents felt blamed by society and the community, especially for their child's actions. The idea that mothers are to blame for their children being on the AS is said to have been changed by later researchers like Lorna Wing (Happé & Frith, 2020).

2.6.2 Strategies for Teachers to Foster Collaboration with Parents

Coordination of effective teacher–parent and other stakeholder multilateral partnerships is useful in supporting learners on the AS (Deguchi et al., 2021). The benefit of a collaborative approach is that there is coordination in working, tackling issues together in the development of the learner across all settings. This section provides recommendations on how to improve teacher–parent cooperation, including the regular meetings between teachers and parents, joint professional development, and teams’ development of action plans (Vlcek et al., 2020).

2.6.2.1 *Teacher-parent meetings*

In addition to promoting inclusive teaching practices, a cooperative, courteous, and supportive environment between parents and educators guarantees uniformity in academic, social, emotional, and behavioural norms throughout the curriculum, schools, and homes (Azad et al., 2020). Teacher-parent communication is basic, and the best way to ensure that it always transpires is through meetings (Major, 2023). Such meetings afford an opportunity for exchange of information, ideas, and concerns raised, as well as appraisal of progress made. So, when basic/agreed goals in the classroom are decided, the structured meetings at fixed intervals are helpful for keeping teachers and parents posted. These interactions, according to Mukherjee (2017), play a crucial role in enhancing the relationship between educators and families to achieve a common goal. Woodcock and Woolfson (2019) claim that through consistent communication and teamwork, colleagues can support one another emotionally, offer direction and counsel, and encourage inclusivity in the classroom.

There is one way that is effective, and that is by using the Individualised Education Plan (IEP) as a focus (Alkahtani & Kheirallah, 2016). These meetings can address the learner’s academic behaviour and social learning needs, and must include parents and teachers (Ola-Williams et al., 2024). By creating such goals, they can see the overall progress, possible obstacles, and changes that should be made in the processes of the support strategy.

To increase the efficiency of such meetings, schools should also provide clear communication structures on expectations and responsibilities (Ola-Williams et al., 2024). This can assist in sorting out miscommunication, setting expectations, and making people responsible for activities. Costa et al. (2023) suggest that facilitators should employ aids, including charts or progress graphs, to enhance the transparency of the discussions. Building a strong relationship between educators, parents, and learners requires a common knowledge of their needs (Hodges et al., 2020).

2.6.2.2 *Shared training programs*

Vlcek et al. (2020) suggest that one of the crucial approaches for encouraging cooperation is the use of workshops for teachers, parents, and learners. Training equips both groups with vital

information and skills necessary for the handling of learners on the AS. These programmes may include ASD-specific teaching intervention, behaviour modification and communication handling (Mukherjee, 2017). This means that teachers as well as parents get an opportunity to share knowledge during the joint training sessions, thus developing empathy. According to Bateman et al. (2022), these sessions can be useful in bringing the two sets of stakeholders together so that they are able to understand and probably respect each other's roles and experiences. For example, parents get information about the classroom structure and approaches to teaching, and in the meantime, teachers learn more about the learner's home setting and family circumstances.

2.6.2.3 Collaborative action plans

One of the key goals is that all stakeholders must act together to achieve intended objectives, and this can only be made possible through the development of collaborative action plans (Azad et al., 2021). These plans give specific goals, tasks, time frames, and assessments as to how the learner on the AS will be helped. According to Engelbrecht (2020), coherent action plans are always critical as they improve the efficiency in collaborations through putting different actors in an organised plan.

These should be completed together with the teachers, parents, therapist, and other management personnel to ensure an action plan is developed (Vlcek et al., 2020). This should ensure that the plan responds to the diverse needs that the learner is likely to present, while it also takes advantage of the profession of each of the participants (Mukherjee, 2017). For instance, an action plan for a learner with sensory issues must be an action plan for the school setting, sensory diet at home, and consultation with an Occupational Therapist (OT).

While implementing change, one useful method of developing collaboration in action plans is the use of SMART: Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound (Nair et al., 2021). Interestingly, this approach assists stakeholders in developing specific and achievable objectives that depend on the time horizon and tracking (Easley, 2024). For example, a SMART goal could be that the learner will communicate on the communication board to express basic needs with 80% accuracy within a period of three months.

2.6.2.4 Fostering a collaborative culture

Other than these strategies, Vlcek et al. (2020) suggest that there is a need to cultivate principal and teacher collaboration, both within the school and outside the school environment. However, it calls for conscious diligence that must be directed towards instilling respect and effective open communication with all the stakeholders involved. Engelbrecht (2021), on the same note, calls for leadership involvement. This view holds that principals are in a strategic position to encourage collaboration among staff and give them the necessary support to collaborate.

Other ways in which collaboration may be promoted include the formation of support groups among parents within the school (Bunijevac, 2017). Such groups create a forum where parents can compare different experiences and methods, and offer one another moral support. Consequently, these groups can help families build a connection with educators to encourage their cooperation and communication (Cook & Ogden, 2022).

2.6.2.5 Policy and system-level support

Last but not least, Snell-Rood et al. (2020) reiterate that there should be supportive policies and systems in an institution for the purpose of a common goal of support. Teachers, learners, parents, and administrators should agree on issues such as how teachers and parents will communicate with each other, how conflicts will be handled, and how decisions will be made about learners' education. They should also ensure that there is some time for collaborative endeavours such as policy planning sessions and professional development sessions (Admiraal et al., 2021).

2.7 TEACHERS' AND PARENTS' COLLABORATION AND SUPPORT FOR LEARNERS ON THE AS

According to Vlcek et al. (2020), collaboration and support define the creation of welcoming school settings that meet various demands of learners on the AS. This section explores three pivotal dimensions: academic help, emotional help, and parental engagement (Bonfim et al., 2023). All the dimensions are useful in creating a great learner environment for learners on the AS to enhance their education, their emotional status, and their ability to mix with other learners in school.

2.7.1 Academic Support

Learners on the AS also require support in academics through the development of individualised plans, as well as individualised teaching tools for use in class and the learning environment (Costa et al., 2023). Lesson plans differentiated for each student are important, where one particular lesson might work according to an Individualised Education Plan (IEP) (VanBergeijk, 2021). According to Srivastava (2024), the above plans allow instructors to establish workable objectives and work around possible challenges. Engelbrecht (2020), however, notes that the implementation of IEPs fails to provide a consistent application, especially in low-income schools, where the teacher may not have adequate skills or time to put the plan into practice.

Another important factor is teaching aids that are appropriate to the barrier (Sandra & Kurniawati, 2020). These, such as visual displays, objects of touch and feel, and technological input, address the socio-sensory or socio-cognitive learning profiles of individuals on the AS (Ameen, 2020). As mentioned by Pienaar and Dreyer (2023), visual schedules and social stories assist learners in

managing daily planning, expectations and aims, decreasing or preventing anxiety and increasing understanding. On the same note, Uherek-Bradecka (2020) notes that the overuse of adapted material may lead to learners being separated from other class activities, hence the recommendation is for a blend of it with other forms.

2.7.2 Emotional Support

Laurie (2022) suggests that cognitive support for learners on the AS is all about emotional support, as this goes a long way to build the learners' resilience, confidence, and self-esteem. In this regard, the broad strategy of building an inclusive school climate is one of the additional and foundational measures. Engelbrecht (2020) reiterates that an inclusive climate in education embraces respect and provides equal opportunities to all learners. It includes changing an organisation's culture by embracing diversity and fighting stigma. Pather and Slee (2018) are of the same opinion, that peer education has the potential to help learners develop empathy and tolerance towards their fellow learners. However, Harmon (2024) suggests that such practice only has a short-run solution and may not really have a long-term strategy of eradicating prejudices within the school system.

Supportive care refers to the provision of access to counsellors as well as psychological services to the patient (An et al., 2020). These services are helpful in assisting the learners on the AS to overcome some of the feelings that they may display due to sensory integration issues or social conflicts. School-based counsellors who have learned ASD-specific techniques can help learners improve their emotional well-being considerably, according to Laurie (2022). However, Mkwana (2023) states that there continue to be few of these specialised professionals in many South African schools, especially in rural areas, and that there is a need for investment in training and hiring.

2.7.3 Parental Involvement

Wood and Happé (2023) point out that active parental involvement cannot be ignored in the process of supporting learners on the AS, since parents are involved in transferring the learners' environment from home to school. In academic and social activities, the tutor makes sure that the learner is constantly reinforced within different contexts. According to Chen et al. (2020), parental involvement is first realised through communication between parents and teachers. This communication makes it possible to discuss observations on the needs, desires, and accomplishments of the learner so that a team approach to solving issues is enhanced. Nonetheless, Akande (2024) points out that several times the communication may be hampered by cultural and linguistic diversity, and hence it requires interpreters or information in more than one language.

Parents also support by facilitating learning strategies as practised at school. For example, acting out of social stories or applied behaviour analytical methods that are taught at school may be

useful in reinforcing learning strategies. According to Rosenbrock et al. (2021), whenever the parent is an active participant in the practices, then the learner on the AS will probably record enhanced social relations and/or reduced instances of defiance. On the other hand, Pillay et al. (2022) point out that it is important to note that not all parents are able, or willing, to devote the time, money or expertise to put these strategies into practice, and schools should offer entrées and support to parents.

The challenges discussed above do not exist in isolation but are embedded within broader theoretical considerations. The following sections, therefore, discuss the theoretical frameworks adopted in the study.

2.8 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

In education research, a theoretical framework gives direction in a systematic approach to evaluating and unravelling phenomena (Creswell, 2021). The present study is grounded on Gardner's (1983) MI theory and Mezirow's (2009) TL theory, which were combined to form a powerful theoretical lens to examine collaboration and support patterns for learners on the AS. These theories are especially important, as they stress a personal approach and critical thinking, which are vital in meeting the demands of the learner with ASD and engaging parents in the learning process (Malka & Fine, 2024).

2.8.1 Gardner's Theory of Multiple Intelligences

Howard Gardner's (1983) MI theory postulates that intelligence is not a single, bound faculty but is a collection of different forms or varieties of exceptionality. There is a variety of intelligences, according to several researchers, and each intelligence often functions independently from one another, each with unique strengths and limitations (Gardner, 1983). According to Tsai (2016), the advancement of various intelligences in learners is significantly influenced by several factors, including age, marital status, gender, parental education and engagement, and academic performance. Intelligence is not a single, unchanging, and unified entity (Yavich & Rotnitsky, 2020). Because people have different strengths, Gardner's MI theory can help learners better understand how they learn. As teachers, we have to consider the best method for our learners to learn. According to Gardner (1999), humans possess a core set of intelligences. Each person learns and comprehends information differently. By applying Howard Gardner's MI theory to our teaching methods, we can create a more stimulating learning environment that focuses on learners' areas of strength and expands their perspective (Gardner, 2020).

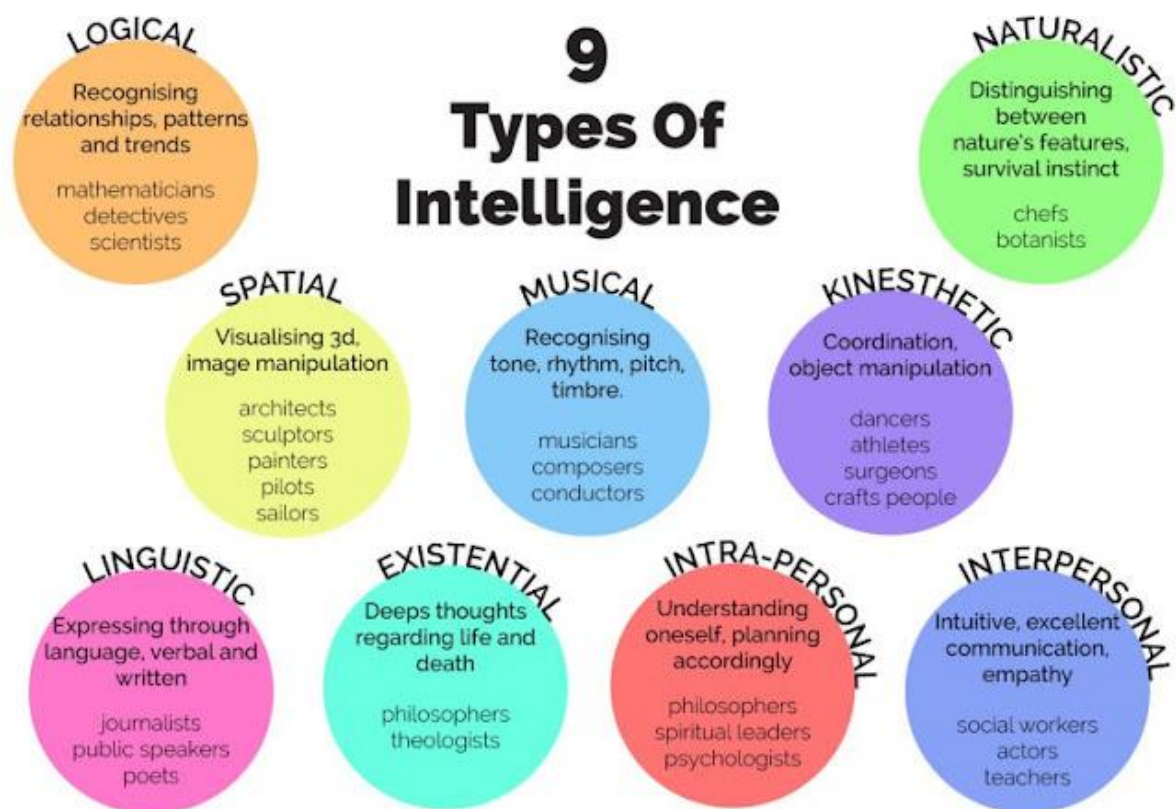


Figure 2.1: Howard Gardner's nine types of intelligence (Suryadisabilities, 2023)

Gardner at first described eight intelligences and finally nine intelligences, wherein logical, mathematical, linguistic, musical, body and kinaesthetic, spatial, interpersonal, intrapersonal, naturalist and existential intelligences are included. On this note, this theory is relevant when it comes to educating learners on the AS, because it encourages a diversified style of learning that acknowledges the strength of individual learners (Gardner, 2020).

The problem under consideration is the use of teaching strategies based on the MI theory in relation to learners on the AS, which correlates with their profiles. For example, learners on the AS may possess superior skills in particular areas of learning, such as the music or spatial mode, but have significant social deficits. From these, a teacher can form lesson plans that will incorporate the learner's assets, which, when tapped, will increase learner participation and understanding. For instance, applying visual-spatial skills within a learning environment to a learner within this category of learning style can help define otherwise abstract math concepts (Shearer & Karanian, 2017).

In the case of ASD, this is a disorder that can impact a person's learning abilities to varying degrees. Some people on the AS can operate at a high level, whereby ASD is less noticeable. In contrast, other people with ASD are highly noticeable and are not able to function without support

(Duvall, 2020). Accordingly, the MI theory makes a big difference in the teaching and helping of children with AS who have different learning abilities. The theory is advantageous for learners on the AS who may demonstrate varied strengths and weaknesses across the domains since it offers a more refined approach to acknowledging and helping their unique abilities. Teachers who are aware of MI can, therefore, use strategies that can suit their learners who are on the AS (Wreede, 2022).

According to Armstrong (2020), the MI theory signalled a significant change in education, as teachers are now better prepared to deliver lessons and activities in a variety of ways. While many schools seem to have redesigned their teaching methods to consider these MIs, many schools are still stuck in the past. According to Woolfolk (2014), teachers should make sure that various subjects are taught in a variety of suitable ways, and differentiate their instruction to build a meaningful relationship with each learner.

The MI theory highlights the significance of making the most of human intellect (Gardner, 1999). He claims, "Since each human being has their own unique configuration of intelligences, we should take that into account when teaching, mentoring, or nurturing. As much as possible, we should teach individuals in a way that they can learn. And we should assess them in a way that allows them to show what they have understood and to apply their knowledge and skills in unfamiliar contexts" (Gardner, 1999, p. 7). For learners to completely apprehend concepts, ideas and theories, they should be taught in multiple ways (Gardner, 2020).

Gardner's MI theory classifies human intelligence into different forms, which are outlined below:

- **Spatial-visual intelligence:** According to Gardner (1983), it is believed that people with spatial-visual intelligence are more conscious of their own surroundings or physical space. Charts, graphs, pictures, paintings, video and verbal imagery are the most effective learning tools for people with spatial-visual intelligence. People with spatial-visual intelligence can work as architects, artists, photographers, etc. (Gardner, 2020). The approach will be to incorporate and encourage activities that involve visualising, and making models and imaginary pictures. Drawing and sketching while they play games like chess stimulates creative thinking around obstacles.
- **Bodily-Kinaesthetic intelligence:** Gardner (1983) asserted that people with bodily-kinaesthetic intelligence have a strong awareness of their bodies. They are typically very athletic and skilled with their hands. Bodily-kinaesthetic intelligence can assist learners on the AS by improving focus, attention and promoting active learning and engagement. Some professions can comprise professional athletes, surgeons, dancers, builders, or soldiers (Gardner, 2020). This intelligence will be applied by combining and merging lessons into physical activities using body movements, including motor skills, dancing, obstacle courses, and different poses and movements like Yoga in learning.

- Musical intelligence: According to Gardner's (1983) research, people with musical intelligence are perceptive to metre, timbre, pitch, and rhythm. Generating song and rhyme can assist learners on the AS to learn new information. This intelligence is believed to have a fundamental connection to linguistic intelligence (Gardner, 2020). This intelligence will be applied through incorporating music into learning, whereby it will assist teachers to use music in a variety of subjects, such as teaching vocabulary through songs, or creating musical mnemonics to help with memory.
- Linguistic intelligence: People with linguistic intelligence are exceptionally skilled at reading, writing and language acquisition skills (Gardner, 1983). They are sensitive to the order and meaning of words. They learn best by listening and through discussions. Among these professions are those of writers, teachers, public speakers, and journalists (Gardner, 2020). The use of language for learners on the AS is invaluable, and it is very important to use spoken words for communication. This intelligence will be applied through talking to them, displaying written words while promoting spelling, and pronouncing those words through practice. Language-based games will be used (e.g. Scrabble, and pictures related to words of their customised environments to point and learn from).
- Logical-Mathematical intelligence: People with logical-mathematical intelligence are highly skilled in logic, numbers, reasoning and conducting scientific research (Gardner, 1983). They demonstrate logical reasoning and perform remarkably well on conventional IQ tests. They can work as mathematicians, doctors, economists and engineers (Gardner, 2020). The application of this intelligence in this study will be to expose learners to basic mathematical learning and challenges to enhance the mathematical learning experience, simple addition, subtraction and multiplication.
- Interpersonal intelligence: Humans with interpersonal intelligence are sensitive to the emotions, motivations and temperaments of other people (Gardner, 1983). They are also able to empathise with others with ease. This intelligence can assist learners on the AS to learn through group work, discussions and interaction. Examples of careers may include educators, psychologists, and politicians (Gardner, 2020). This intelligence will be applied to help learners on the AS in the inclusion of working together as groups and as a team to do certain tasks. Enforcing collaboration and communication among team members through activities that require working together as a team in this way also promotes peer teaching where applicable.
- Intrapersonal intelligence: Gardner (1983) found that people with intrapersonal intelligence are very self-aware and are sensitive to their own emotions, aspirations and fears. This intelligence can assist learners on the AS to learn through self-directed learning. Gardner (2020) maintains that there is no distinct career for people with intrapersonal intelligence, but this thinking should be an objective for every person in a

complex society. The application of this intelligence will be through encouragement of self-awareness through self-reflection (e.g. writing journals, simple breathing exercises, and meditation). It will help learners on the AS in personal goal setting, individual activities, and achievements.

- **Naturalistic intelligence:** Individuals possessing naturalistic intelligence can make significant distinctions about nature (Gardner, 2020). This intelligence can assist learners on the AS to learn the material by relating it to real-life situations. Careers may include biologists, ecologists, and farmers. This intelligence will be applied by imitation of different animals in sounds and movements, and also observing and using the natural environment in the learning processes (e.g. counting how many eyes and legs each has).

However, the MI theory has been criticised that it hasn't amassed enough empirical or scientific backing, nor has it offered dependable, trustworthy, or valid measures by which to evaluate its fundamental intelligences. As stated by Waterhouse (2023), the MI theory does not possess empirical validity or scientific testability, since Gardner has not established standardized measurement models to differentiate or reproduce his suggested domains. Although most critiques of MI theory concentrate on its technical application of the term "intelligences" and on testing the validity into teaching and learning, it appears that there is no correlation between MI theory and its learning strategies (Willingham et al. 2015). Luo and Huang (2019) assert that MI theory lacks substantial scientific evidence or ambiguity when it comes to measuring learners' learning in a curriculum grounded on MI theories. The MI hypothesis has faced criticism for lacking empirical evidence and being inconsistent with the findings of cognitive neuroscience. Neuroscience research does not support the idea of distinct neural modules for each intelligence, and factor analyses usually show a strong general intelligence (g) factor rather than separate, independent intelligences (Waterhouse, 2023).

As this study is based on Gardner's theory and Mezirow's theory, it will now shift towards discussing Mezirow's theory in the following section.

2.8.2 Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory

According to Mezirow's TL theory, which was developed in 1978, learning is more than the accumulation of information but the reconstruction and questioning of meaning and perspectives (Mezirow, 1978). This theory is especially appropriate for discussing collaboration and support for learners on the AS, because it focuses on the need to encourage learning within groups, and encourage the growth of self-reflection among professionals and caregivers (Malka & Fine, 2024).

Mezirow et al. (1990, p. 1) state that "Transformation theory is based on the belief that we are beings that create meaning." He further states that "learning involves using previous understandings to form new or modified interpretations of one's experiences and leveraging this

to inform future actions” (Mezirow et al., 1990, p. 5). TL highlights the concept that individuals can alter their thinking patterns when faced with new information or experiences, particularly in the context of adult education and learning (Altinay & Altinay, 2018). The ability to assess one's thoughts, patterns, opinions, and the environments in which they were formed, such as one's family, is facilitated by TL (Christie et al., 2015). TL theory is vital to both adult learning and coaching as it promotes rethinking (Cox, 2017). TL theory is based on the premise that individuals learn through observation and constructing meaning from personal experiences (Flemming, 2018).

According to Ota et al. (2022), TL is a learning theory that emphasises the ability of adults to change their thinking in response to new knowledge and experiences. Mezirow discovered that critical thinking and examination can change one's understanding (Dunn-Jensen et al., 2021). Cox (2017) asserts that critical thinking plays an essential role in transformational learning as it cultivates the skills necessary to integrate new information, develop new values and belief systems, and enable changes in behaviour. The TL is grounded in two main sets of assumptions: humanistic and constructivist assumptions, that centre the individual as the primary unit of analysis; and assumptions derived from critical theory, which emphasises the social as the key unit of analysis (Flemming, 2018). Palmer and Whybrow (2014) affirm that critical reflection and the questioning of assumptions are at the centre of Mezirow's theory. According to Terblanche (2018), TL theory fosters self-awareness, reflection and a sense of urgency through questioning values, beliefs, assumptions and perspectives.

Mezirow (2018) posits that TL occurs in three phases: experience, critical reflection, and action. This way of critical reflection allows teachers and parents to reconsider prior assumptions regarding ASD and to modify their approaches to affect the learner positively, for instance, a teacher who interprets that learners' disruptive behaviours are defiance, but over time, discovers that such behaviours stem from sensory processing disorder and therefore changes classroom behaviour regulation approaches (Fleming, 2018).

According to Mezirow and Taylor (2009), we can, therefore, conclude that TL theory focuses mainly on individual transformation during learning processes as a paradigm shift in a specific worldview. The core of Mezirow's theory, hence, says that we make meaning of the world based on our own experiences. Moreover, according to Christie et al. (2015), we challenge our assumptions and paradigms to a level where we find them wanting in order to transform them.

As noted by Goharimehr and Bysouth (2017), TL theory may overemphasise the individual change process component and does not pay enough attention to the sociocultural process. However, this critique is valid only when TL theory is used within participatory approaches, such as PALAR, which is based on both collaborative and systemic thinking (Zuber-Skerritt et al.,

2015). In this study, TL theory stresses the significance of purposeful dialogue between teachers and parents to reach agreement about the learner's requirements and address them as a team.

The 10 phases of TL according to Mezirow (2000) are shown in Table 2.2.

Table 2.2: The 10 phases of transformative learning

The 10 phases of transformative learning and their description	Application to this study
A disorienting dilemma-At this stage, a learner encounters an experience that can shake up their understanding of how the world operates. A disorienting dilemma may be an effective method for encouraging cognitive flexibility by compelling learners on the AS to face and reassess their fixed beliefs (DeAngelis, 2019).	Therapists can use disorienting dilemmas to assist learners on the AS examine their feelings, interpersonal issues, and other difficulties. It can assist learners on the AS to learn from one another and develop a new point of view.
Self-examination with feelings of fear, anger, guilt or shame – the learner responds to the dilemma emotionally, often in a dismissive way.	This will be applied by teaching relaxation methods and mindfulness exercises to aid with emotion regulation and stress management of learners on the AS.
A critical assessment of assumptions – the learner reflects on what they believed before the dilemma and how that belief has been questioned by that dilemma	In this study, a critical assessment of assumptions was applied by helping learners on the AS to evaluate their unique needs, learning styles, and preferred method of communication and interaction. It will help learners on the AS to manage difficult behaviours and foster positive relationships.
Recognition that one's discontent and the process of transformation are shared – at this stage, the learner recognises that they are not alone in these animosities. Others have faced similar situations and feelings. By comprehending the process of transformation, learners on the AS, teachers, and their families can collaborate	It can create more supportive and inclusive settings for learners on the AS, enhancing their well-being and stimulating their capacity for growth and development.

to create environments that encourage development (Đurišić & Bunijevac, 2017).	
Exploration of options for new roles, relationships and actions – the learner starts the process of "learning the new rules" that came because of the dilemma and their response to it. It is important to promote connectedness in the school environment, since it's the main place for learning social skills and forming friendships (Foster et al., 2017).	By discovering relationships, actions, and new roles, learners with AS can build strong relationships, develop social skills, and reach their utmost ability.
Planning a course of action – the learner becomes in charge of their own experience and starts thinking about a different future, one where they can gain from the alteration in perspective.	In this study, planning a course of action can be applied by guiding learners on the AS by using structured routines and visual aids. Learners on the AS can benefit from clear routines and visual aids (for example, schedules, visual timers) since they typically thrive with predictability and structure. This can help lessen worry and encourage participation.
Acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing one's plans – the learner searches for what they need to do to be successful on their new path.	It can help learners on the AS to build communication skills, self-advocacy, and social interaction.
Provisional, trying new roles – the learner begins to perceive themselves differently and tries out new identities in the new world.	It can assist learners on the AS to become confident and more independent. Trying new roles will help learners on the AS to reduce fear of change and anxiety.
Building competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships – the learner acquires the new skills.	This would be applied to help learners on the AS to handle challenges and overcome obstacles by increasing their confidence in dealing with different circumstances.
A reintegration into one's life based on conditions dictated by one's new perspectives – the process concludes with the learner fully accepting the entire journey of their life story.	By applying this, the learner on the AS can be assisted in developing new perspectives on themselves, others, and their surroundings through experiment, experience and reflection.

(Source: Mezirow, 2000)

With reference to my research, a PALAR approach to research will be used, of which TL theory will be able to help us evaluate the deficiencies in our worldview and individual assumptions in relation to supporting learners on the AS. This theory supports a learner-centred approach; hence, it will help us provide valuable information as it facilitates the learner's anatomy, cooperation and participation during the process of learning (Baumgartner, 2019). It will help us in critical reflection of individual learners on the AS in the learning process, not only learners but teachers, parents and relevant stakeholders inclusively.

2.8.3 Integration and Application of Theories

The combination of Gardner's MI theory and Mezirow's TL theory can be deemed as a concrete and holistic model that can serve as a framework for meeting multiple needs of learners on the AS. Whereas MI theory is centred on the identification and development of the individual skills (Duvall, 2020), TL theory encompasses the mutual and ongoing activities that correspond to the creation of potent supportive approaches (Malka & Fine, 2024). Collectively, these theories underlie the partnered approach at the core of this research, which aims to reconcile home and school contexts.

A real-life example of these integrated theories is the development of synergistic action plans in synergy with the set of intelligences defining the subject-learner. For example, a learner with a musical learning profile and weak linguistic abilities will probably require music-related activities in both academic and play areas. For the same reason, parents and teachers can consult with one another in learners' management and develop critical discussions about the utility of the identified strategies (Malka & Fine, 2024). This dual focus helps guarantee that the interventions designed for the learners are both individualised and flexible, serving to attend to the learners' academic, social, and psychological-emotional development.

In addition, these theories point to the need for Continuing Professional Development that incorporates knowledge of MI coupled with practice-based learning (Cornish, 2024). For instance, sessions designed to help novices appreciate a learner's strengths can be followed by similar sessions that help parents and teachers review some practices they implement. Tsai et al. (2020) have also confirmed this approach as effective by pointing out that incorporating critical reflection along with individualised teaching increases both learner participation and stakeholder participation.

The integrated framework also accounts for system-level factors, including resource constraints and communication breakdowns (Malka & Fine, 2024). Using this concept of change at both the self and social levels enables the stakeholders to work towards influencing the changes within

policies to enhance education for all. For example, the education managers in a school can come up with policies that foster positive, supportive relations between teachers and parents, and embrace the use of assessments based on MI and the Triad of Learning and Teaching practices in their policy of Inclusive education (Duvall, 2020).

2.9 SUMMARY

This chapter analysed the concept as well as the application of Inclusive education in relation to learners on the AS. The conversation included international and continental opinions on the extent to which education may be inclusive, and the focus was on the South African context. In this focus, the subtle forms of disorder with a focus on AS to ascertain the academic, social and emotional profiles of learners, and the requisite learning and developmental methods to support those learners were considered.

The literature also explored the dynamics of the teachers' and parents' involvement, and the development of the collaboration between teachers and parents. The major concerns of teachers, such as inadequate training and classroom management, and the difficulties experienced by parents in terms of resources, knowledge, and understanding of ASD were analysed side by side with strategies that might help to promote integration. Supported by Gardner's Theory of MI and Mezirow's TL theory, the theoretical framework was comprehensive and strong enough to support reflection activities and strength-based learning.

This review leads to Chapter 3, where the research methodology of the present study, which assumes a participatory and action research paradigm, will be described. The methodology will therefore capitalise on this, presenting a systematic way of coming up with a workable plan on how best to address the needs of each learner on the AS in an inclusive school setting, while at the same time promoting a positive learning environment for them.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

3.1 INTRODUCTION

The preceding chapter discussed the literature on inclusive education, policies, and practices that will foster the South African setting. It further explored ASD as a challenge for learning, focusing on how it affects the development of learners, including the difficulties teachers and parents encounter. The role of collaboration in addressing these challenges, as well as effective teaching strategies, is also explored. Gardner's theory of MI (1983) and Mezirow's TL theory (1999) are used in terms of their importance in facilitating support and collaboration.

This chapter establishes a comprehensive understanding of the philosophical principles that underpin the research investigation. Research does not exist in a vacuum; it is shaped by the beliefs held by researchers regarding reality, knowledge, and values (Chilisa, 2024). A clear identification of the research paradigm and its assumptions supports methodological transparency and coherence throughout the study. The research design adopts the transformative paradigm, which fulfils the participatory and democratic principles of PALAR.

The chapter begins with a discussion of the selected research paradigm, explaining how its principles influence both the study objectives and research methodologies. The research explores three fundamental philosophical foundations: reality-aspect ontology, knowledge epistemology, and ethical value axiology. The analysis examines each assumption in relation to PALAR methodology, demonstrating its impact on research design principles. The research method fosters a participatory environment by involving teachers and parents as active participants, who lead inquiries aimed at creating positive change.

The chapter breaks down these philosophical foundations to illustrate how the methodology was selected and what data collection and analysis approaches will be employed. The research methodology is not random; it is deliberately designed within an educational framework that promotes justice and empowerment for learners on the AS.

3.2 RESEARCH PARADIGM

The research paradigm serves as a foundation of beliefs and operational procedures that guide inquiry processes and shape researchers' perspectives on reality, knowledge, and methodology (Regmi, 2024). This study utilised a transformative paradigm to facilitate collaboration between teachers and parents in supporting learners on the AS. Research guided by the transformative

paradigm achieves its goals through participatory and action-oriented methods that promote equal rights and empower socially-disadvantaged groups (Mertens, 2022).

The transformative paradigm diverges from detached objective methods, recognising that all inquiry occurs within specific political, social, and cultural contexts (Chilisa, 2024). The active transformation of reality is a core requirement of this research approach, as opposed to merely describing or explaining reality. Systems that hinder learners with barriers to learning from full participation are prevalent in inclusive education settings (Nthibeli et al., 2022), making this approach particularly valuable in this field. The adoption of the transformative paradigm empowers teachers and parents to play authoritative roles in knowledge creation, which is central to this research.

PALAR inherently aligns with the transformative paradigm. The research method combines democratic elements with critical thinking, personal empowerment, and collaborative community-based action (Wood, 2020). The PALAR methodology transforms study participants from traditional research informants into active co-researchers who collaboratively identify problems, design interventions, and assess changes. The cyclical participatory research design follows the transformative paradigm by generating knowledge directly linked to social transformation (Sankofa, 2025).

While the transformative paradigm enriches research, it also presents multiple challenges for researchers. Structural research, as outlined by Fàbregues et al. (2023), requires researchers to navigate the conflicting demands of empowering participants while managing self-imposed agendas. The essential component of reflexivity compels researchers to continuously examine their positions and the power dynamics related to their research throughout the entire process (Arnold et al., 2022). This study incorporates reflexive practices through journaling for self-reflection and participative decision-making mechanisms within the ALG, as well as feedback interventions with research participants.

3.2.1 Ontological Assumptions

Ontology explores both reality and the nature of existence. Individual realities are products of social constructivism, characterised by multiplicity and power-based human relations (Regmi, 2024). Personal perceptions, social standing, identity, and environmental context shape the concept of reality. Therefore, ontology was a fundamental element for research on teacher-parent collaboration, as participants' backgrounds and cultural heritage significantly influence their life experiences.

A participatory and relational ontology is at the heart of PALAR (Wood et al., 2020). The research process incorporates active participants who emerge as subjects carrying their personal realities through the research journey. Participatory reflection combined with joint actions allows participants to create fresh understandings of their mutual realities, which they transform through

practical implementation. The concept introduced by Neethling and Nel (2021) demonstrates that participatory research needs to recognise the fluidity of reality when working with complex social issues, including inclusive education.

Learning professionals must understand multiple realities because they need this understanding to support learners on the AS who have various needs. The research conducted by Pillay et al. (2021) indicates that ASD demonstrates many support requirements and behavioural features across a spectrum, making generic solutions worthless. An ontological position built on multiplicity lets this research give significance to specific contextual knowledge shared by teachers and parents instead of attempting comprehensive universal conclusions. Instead of treating this diversity as a shortcoming, professionals view it as a valuable resource, which bolsters innovation and further enriches the cooperative teamwork. The members of the ALG discussed their social perspectives concerning the difficulties they encounter in supporting learners on the AS.

3.2.2 Epistemological Assumptions

Epistemology examines the foundations and criteria of knowledge. The study interprets knowledge as a socially formed concept that emerges from investigative dialogue and critical analysis when collaborative learning happens within contextual fields (Chilisa, 2024). The transformative paradigm rejects outside-observer-based knowledge acquisition since it acknowledges that researchers form knowledge together with participants through their mutual exchanges and the way power structures and personal experiences influence these interactions (Omodan, 2020).

PALAR adopts an epistemological position based on participation and dialogue according to Wood et al. (2020). The process of knowledge co-creation happens through a cycle of action followed by reflection, which allows all participants to interact as partners with equal status. The learning process described by Pender (2023) transforms when people reflect on their underlying assumptions to develop broader and inclusive worldviews. The research labels teachers and parents as experts who provide fundamental expertise needed to establish effective partnerships regarding learners on the AS.

As the participants in this study became aware of each other's knowledge, abilities, experiences and beliefs, collaborative knowledge generation took place within the ALG. Every member of the ALG brought genuine, context-related knowledge to the discussions, whereby all the members could reflect. Meaningful discussions inside the ALG were crucial because of this.

3.2.3 Axiological Assumptions

According to Mintz (2019), axiology refers to the character of ethics and values that respectfully support social fairness. Axiology examines how values and ethics are involved in the process of doing research. Honesty, trust, respect, loyalty, accountability, and integrity form the foundation

of action research. These values guide the axiological assumption of this research. According to the transformative paradigm, research becomes more ethical due to its role in enhancing human rights, justice, and promoting equality (Mertens, 2022). According to Kivunja and Kuyini (2017), research that modifies public perception about injustice and promotes social justice and human rights is the axiology that informs the application of a transformational researcher. Researchers must completely immerse themselves in the community they are studying to achieve this. This includes research into cultural practices, social conventions, ethics, values, and everyday activities of the targeted audience (Williams & Duke, 2025). The researcher acknowledges the communities for who they are and are treated responsibly. As ALG members, we all agreed that parents and teachers should work together to help learners on the AS reach their full potential.

PALAR's research orientation upholds ethics by emphasising respect, acceptance, and empowerment (Wood et al., 2020). Researchers in PALAR are instructed to design collaborative settings where all members are paid attention to, and all opinions are weighed similarly among participants. Ethics were followed by obtaining consent, not sharing participants' details, and by consensus agreement and ongoing reflection on power in the research group. The researcher, as well as the participants, made sure that respect served as the foundation of our relationship.

In social-justice-oriented research, researchers address solutions to the issues they have identified (Chilisa, 2024). This research develops practical advice, information, and tools for teachers and parents to help learners on the AS. A researcher has a duty to respect participants' rights, and their knowledge and ability to act are more important than following certain methods.

3.3 RESEARCH DESIGN

A research design is a process that is taken by a researcher to answer research questions in a legitimate way (Khanday & Khanam, 2019). According to Marshall and Rossman (2018), a research design is a methodical strategy and structure used in an investigation to collect data for answering specific research questions. A research design enables the implementation of a study in a way that clarifies how research questions will be answered. This research design adopted PALAR to accept and encourage democratic change by allowing participants and the researcher to work and reflect collaboratively to bring the change (Wood, 2024; Zuber-Skerritt, 2018). The PALAR framework allowed participants to work together by studying their approach and discovering answers to challenges, always through an ongoing learning process.

Action research is a democratic and inclusive research methodology for generating knowledge (Bradbury, 2015). PALAR is a "special kind of action research that integrates various concepts and processes, including lifelong learning, collaborative action research, participatory action research and action leadership" (Zuber-Skerritt, 2018:521). It combines practice and theory, action and reflection, to develop solutions to real-world problems. According to Wood (2020),

PALAR is a “transformative, collaborative and democratic approach to educational research” (p.1) whose goal is to and change people’s lives. PALAR comprises action learning (AL) and participatory action research (PAR). According to Wood (2020), foregrounding AL involves prioritizing it within an AR method to facilitate participation by all, reduce power dynamics and ensure that everyone feels like they belong in the study.

Zuber-Skerritt and Wood (2019) state that action research participants should think critically about a wide range of topics, including their current situation, behaviours, attitudes, circumstances, and emotions, to raise their consciousness of the possibility of change and development. Action research uses repeated phases of action and reflection (McNiff, 2017).

Research participants are involved throughout the process, starting with identifying problems, coming up with strategies and putting them into action. Getting involved in action and engaging people is necessary for managing social issues since this helps to support learners on the AS at various levels (Omodan et al., 2022). According to Wood et al. (2020), PALAR emphasises relational accountability and responsible data collection since the researcher has a greater role in supporting and empowering all participants. Participants learn through action, interaction and cooperation to become part of the change for themselves (Wood, 2020).

PALAR provides a solution to one of the major problems of educational action research, which has been that action research today is not rich in theory (Rabin et al., 2024). PALAR adopts the process connecting research-learning-actions, which promotes the growth of both theory and practice. By employing PALAR as a methodology, this research demonstrates its commitment to collaborative involvement, reflective practice, and practical results, creating an opportunity for ongoing progress in educational environments. By applying PALAR in this study, we can provide a systematic approach for examining the challenges and experiences that teachers and parents face while supporting learners on the AS.

3.3.1 PALAR Research Cycle

The PALAR-built research cycle consists of multiple phases, and every one of them involves reflection, planning, action, and evaluation time. According to Wood et al. (2020), PALAR can result in growth and development over time, but it does not progress in stages, as traditional learning methodologies do. The cycle encourages participants to seek greater knowledge and employ more effective strategies following each iteration, since it forms a cumulative strategy. Three separate cycles were set up to guide teachers and parents in finding joint approaches in this research investigation.

The initial research process allowed for strengthening relationships and finding out about the work settings of participants. Trust should be built, especially through open talking, because the participants wanted to make sure they could offer sincere opinions about helping learners on the AS. Cornish et al. (2023) maintain that real participation in research relies on actual engagement,

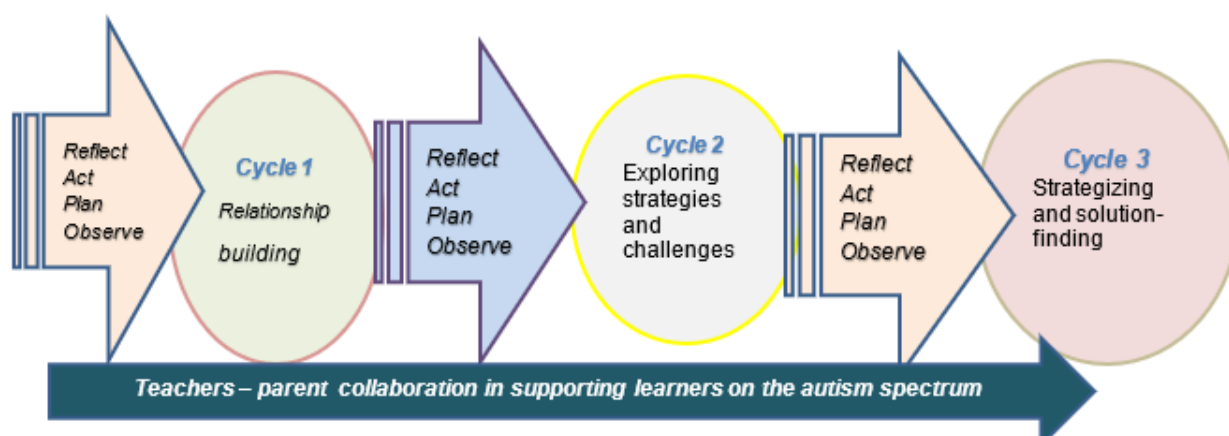
which comes about only through strong personal relationships, creating collaborative working methods, developing a shared understanding of the issue, observing, collecting, and producing materials, jointly analysing data, and strategizing and implementing actions. Using both illustrative activities and discussions helped the participants share their first thoughts and reach common ground at this step.

The second research stage allowed participants to express all their challenges and successes using arts-based tools such as making collages. According to Setlhare (2021), PALAR's methods work well because they collect much richer data than what verbal methods capture alone. The use of collages allowed participants to show their views on supporting learners on the AS, even if they could not use language or had limited cognitive skills (Culshaw, 2019). The collaborations in making collages let participants look back and recognise themes, which gave them a better sense of how others feel (Mkhize-Mthembu, 2023).

The Fishbone analysis was chosen in the third cycle as a structure for brainstorming to help the ALG identify the main solutions for their problems. Fishbone analysis was a long-standing management technique that became part of participatory research (Lee et al., 2024) to help the ALG discover major problems that prevented teachers and parents from collaborating.

All the phases of the PALAR framework featured TL through looking at assumptions and then acting on them (Cranton, 2023). While doing research, participants were accountable to others by putting effort into both the study outcomes and the empowerment of their peers. Using the scientific design, which divided the research into PALAR cycles, allowed teachers and parents to get involved and develop ways to support all learners.

Unlike regular strategies, PALAR research focuses on issues that affect local communities rather than conducting research on far-reaching issues (Wood et al., 2020). Localised knowledge generation becomes essential in the South African educational context, because imported models fail to work due to resource, training, and support disparities (Mzimela, 2023). This study used the iterative cycles of PALAR research to develop strategies, which integrate both theoretical principles and practical operational capacity, along with awareness of lived experiences in the Fezile Dabi district of teachers and parents, alongside their children who are on the AS. Figure 3.1 explains the different cycles of the research process.



Cycle 1	Cycle 2	Cycle 3
Relationship- building. What are challenges and experiences of teachers and parents in supporting learners on the AS? ➤ Illustrative drawing, ➤ Recorded discussions and reflective journal	How do parental perceptions and experiences influence their involvement in support methods for learners on the AS? ➤ Collages ➤ Reflective journal and recorded discussions	What guidelines can teachers and parents use to support learners on the AS? ➤ Fishbone diagram, ➤ Reflective journals and recorded discussions

3.3.1.1 Cycle 1: Establishing Relationships

The research was initiated by focusing on participant relationship development alongside an in-depth analysis of their context. The initial phase of PALAR requires relationship-building (Wood et al., 2020), which demonstrates that trust, along with respect and openness, forms the basis for actual collaborative dialogue and critical conversations. Participants engaged in introductory activities that combined story-sharing with illustration-based techniques to exchange their professional experiences (see Section 4.4). The artistic techniques enabled people to express their feelings freely while avoiding negative opinions from others. During this cycle, illustrative drawings were selected as the preferred technique for generating data (see Figures 4.2-4.3). All the participants engaged in an illustrative drawing activity to answer the first secondary research question: *“What are the challenges and experiences of teachers and parents in supporting learners on the autism spectrum?”*

Reflective journaling entered the phase to promote regular critical self-reflection (see Annexure I). Research participants benefit from journaling because it helps them identify hidden assumptions and monitor their development (Neethling & Nel, 2021). As Cycle 1 progressed, participants developed shared group values, where they respected each other and maintained privacy, and a real commitment to genuine involvement that would benefit future research sessions.

3.3.1.2 Cycle 2: Collage Making

During this cycle, the collages were used as a data collection method to answer the second secondary research question: *“How do parental perceptions and experiences influence their involvement in support methods for learners on the autism spectrum?”* Cartwright (2024) notes that using arts-based techniques, such as collage-making, helps bring out deeper aspects of life than usual verbal methods. The participants compiled their collages, which included pictures, words, and symbols, exploring how parental perceptions and experiences influence their involvement in support methods for learners on the AS (see Section 4.9).

Participants reflected by presenting their collages in group sessions, explaining what each collage represents and its meaning, as they engaged in the process of finalising them. The dialogical process built greater understanding and sympathy among participants, and it revealed that many people struggled with isolation, and lack of resources, and the importance of trust and communication during those difficulties. Collage-making allowed the participants to process and arrange their thinking systematically as they move ahead with finding solutions and unite under a common plan to address their discontent. The probing questions were asked as a tool used to guide, engage, and facilitate the collage-making process. The ALG engaged in a meaningful discussion exercise to analyse data in generating themes.

3.3.1.3 Cycle 3: Fishbone Analysis

The participants reflected on the previous cycle to address the third research question: “*What guidelines can teachers and parents use to support learners on the autism spectrum?*” Fishbone analysis was applied by participants during the third cycle to find out what was causing the issues that were recognised earlier. Industrial problem-solving is a common way to use Fishbone analysis, as shown by its growing adoption and its popularity within the research community as an investigation tool (Lee et al., 2024) (see Section 4.15; Figure 4.11.). All participants participated in organising the problems using a fishbone diagram into the main categories of Collaboration, Resource Limitations, Policy Restrictions, Lack of Support, Time management, Psychological needs, Lack of Understanding of ASD, Parental Stigma and Isolation (see Figure 4.9).

The participants were able to recognise the links between personal, workplace, and community factors affecting how much they can help learners on the AS. This cycle resulted in practical and effective strategies and guidelines to achieve the PALAR’s objectives, which went further than just diagnosis.

Chapter 4 provides an in-depth discussion of the three PALAR cycles.

3.3.2 The Seven Cs of PALAR

Wood et al. (2020) have narrowed down the main concepts in the PALAR process to Seven Cs, namely communication, commitment, compromise, collaboration, competence and critical reflection alongside coaching. The research adhered to the seven major principles that influenced how all the interactions between the researcher and the responding participants occurred throughout the study.

Table 3.1: The 7Cs of PALAR

The 7Cs of PALAR	Application to the study
Communication	Effective communication skills were very important among the members of the ALG to enhance the comprehension of information which was correctly ascertained during the process. All the participants were allowed to express themselves without any prejudice. Purposeful discussion was used in this study, which assisted us in attaining productivity while keeping a good working relationship.

Commitment	The ALG members owned the exercise reflected by their commitment to one another and to the research as well, regarding the final results.
Competence	According to Miranda et al. (2017), competence refers to particular abilities required for an individual to carry out a specific task successfully. Participants discussed what they were lacking as teachers and parents, and then the ALG developed strategies to fill the knowledge gap in order to work collaboratively. Experienced individuals shared best practices and personal experiences, which enhanced the participants' abilities to help learners on the AS.
Compromise	The compromise solution was found in the negotiation between participants, where everyone learned to back the needs of others and keep the main group's aims alive. Many educational partnerships between teachers and parents usually begin with disagreements (Nthibeli et al., 2022). In this study, during Cycle 1, we did encounter some disagreements between teachers and parents, which usually emanate from different perspectives; however, during the relationship building, we engaged with each other and amicably solved our differences.
Critical reflection	Critical reflection was done through the use of reflective journals and purposeful discussions. It assisted the study in making intended decisions and amendments to improve the results of the study. Participants in the research design were able to study their activities deeply and

	reflect on their core beliefs as a result of journaling and group analysis.
Collaboration	Wood (2019) states that collaboration is a distinct feature of PALAR because it is an approach that involves participation. The ALG members shared skills and ideas to achieve a common goal. Collaborative learning became smooth because of peer interaction and beneficial feedback during participation.
Coaching	Coaching. As part of the ALG, I organised and led all meetings while also acting as a coach throughout the study. I inspired the participants to perceive one another as mentors who reflect on each other as we learn together.

Following the Seven Cs closely allowed the research to achieve high standards of methodology and illustrate the teamwork they aimed for between teachers and parents.

3.3.3 The Three Rs of PALAR

According to Wood (2019), relationship, reflection, and recognition are important elements that promote the development of participatory understanding of participants' development and learning, as well as the enhancement of the phenomenon they are examining.

Veles and Danaher (2024) testify to the importance of developing a good relationship, looking back on changes, and acknowledging effort as essential components of becoming transformed through research participation. The participants adhered to the three Rs as follows:

Building **relationships** was the most significant foundation that guided the research process and development of a safe atmosphere in which the ALG members felt comfortable sharing their knowledge and experiences. A lack of intense relationships between researchers and participants would have made it more difficult for participants to participate authentically in both research activities and collaborative actions.

Reflection became a shared experience that occurred independently and together within each PALAR cycle. The programme incorporated reflective journals, discussion sessions, and creative activities, which helped participants examine their assumptions and emotions as well as their

previous practices. In accordance with Cranton (2023), reflection enables TL so that people can advance from basic understanding to deep perspective changes.

Recognition played an essential role in helping participants feel ownership and achieve validation throughout the process. The group respected every input and recognised every individual contribution. Through their first-hand experiences, the participants gained authority as knowledgeable sources, because their insights and emotions received equal value to formal expertise (Grill & Andalibi, 2022). Recognition was given to all members of the ALG (see Section 4.15).

3.4 RESEARCH METHODS

This section outlines the research methods used for this investigation. Research methods include the defined techniques, alongside tools, and data analysis approaches (Regmi, 2024). These methods were derived from the transformative paradigm (see Section 3.2 paragraph 2) and the PALAR methodology (see Section 3.3 paragraph 2), as both prioritise participatory research methods that are directly linked to specific contexts (Wood et al., 2020). The researcher strategically selected her research methods to enable participants to actively serve as co-researchers throughout the research process, regardless of their prior ability to reflect on their experiences before developing practical solutions to enhance support systems for learners on the AS.

The research methodology involved purposefully selecting participants through recruitment, using artistic data collection approaches and analysis methods that incorporated participant involvement. The study held firmly to a strong ethical framework throughout which protected voluntary consent, preserved participant privacy, and respected their valuable input. The following sections describe the participant recruitment procedure and the chosen data collection approach, together with the analysis steps.

3.4.1 Participant Recruitment

According to Robinson (2024), purposive sampling is employed to enlist professionals for participant selection, as this research approach targets individuals who have comprehensive expertise or specialised insights related to the research topic. The participatory design of PALAR led researchers to select participants as more than just informational sources, because they had the ability to transform knowledge through dialogue and collaborative work (Neethling & Nel, 2021).

The recruitment procedure started through interactive sessions conducted between the researcher, parents, and teachers at the two LSEN schools in the Fezile Dabi district of Free State Province.

The schools selected are categorised as SID schools. One LSEN school is situated in a small township characterised by extreme inequality, and very deeply rooted unemployment, which make it reliant on the informal economy, supported by workers who work on surrounding farms. The school enrolls learners on the SID. Most of the teachers are not well-trained and equipped to deal with learners on the AS. The school is fairly adequately resourced to provide support for learners living with SID. The second LSEN school is situated in an urban area surrounded by better infrastructure and socio-economic environment. It is a well-resourced school; however, the teachers are not specialised in providing support for learners living with SID. The Free State DoE granted permission before teachers and parents' meetings could proceed (see Annexure B). The researcher provided volunteers with explanations about study goals as well as participant requirements at these meetings. Before study participation, all subjects received information sheets along with consent forms through which the researcher clarified the participants' complete rights, which included the freedom to leave anytime without any adverse consequences (see Annexure E and F).

The study used eligibility standards to identify participants who possessed first-hand experience related to ASD. Teaching experience of three years focused on learners on the AS became the requirement for teachers, while parents eligible to join the study needed to have children diagnosed with ASD enrolled at the LSEN schools. The chosen criteria effectively selected participants who could provide valuable experiential knowledge during the collaborative research inquiry. The ALG included nine members, composed of five teachers, four parents and myself, who acted as a participant-facilitator (see Section 4.1). The selected group composition delivered benefits from multiple viewpoints without creating challenges to productive group engagements through its limited size.

3.4.2 Data Collection

The study adopted participatory data collection methods based on PALAR methodology as well as the principles of the transformative paradigm. The study utilised arts-based and reflective techniques to understand participant experiences because knowledge originates from social interactions and appears both tacit and emotional (Regmi, 2024).

Research that aims to study emotional and experiential transformative processes should utilise arts-based approaches because they make research on individuals on the AS most effective (Vist, 2016). These methods allow participants to express themselves through means other than spoken word interviews, so they can assert valuable insights that remain hidden otherwise. The combination of creative activities allows research participants to connect more deeply with investigations while eliminating power distinctions and developing reflective thinking.

The data collection procedure comprised three PALAR cycles, which utilised activities aimed at promoting investigation and team-based learning approaches. Participants experienced two kinds

of meaning-making activities throughout each cycle, while receiving structured feedback and recording their group conversations. The research data was collected primarily through illustrations and journal reflection (see Annexure G and H) as well as collage creation and audio-recorded discussions, and fishbone diagrams (see Annexure I & M and Section 4.15; Figure 4.11). The study was conducted in English even though one participant was struggling to speak English but was allowed to speak in mother tongue; the co-researchers agreed that the researcher translate what was said, which was captured in audio and then transcribed verbatim to preserve and reflect authenticity. The research activities delivered valuable qualitative findings while actively supporting the main components of PALAR, which stand for participation, action and reflection.

The recurring process of gathering information allowed each phase to benefit from previous findings, which strengthened both the understanding progression and the collaborative knowledge development process (Wood et al., 2020). The research approach successfully meets Robinson's (2024) requirement for effective participatory research through its implementation of flexible data generation methods, which respond to the research context.

The following section provides an expanded analysis of each data gathering technique.

3.4.2.1 Illustrative drawing

According to Leavy (2018) and Theron (2012), visual research methods are effective in enhancing research that relies on verbal material, and facilitating access to levels of understanding and experience that are hard to articulate in words. An illustrative drawing was included as the introductory task in the first research cycle to capture how participants view ASD support. Illustrative drawing is a good data collection method to use at the beginning of the research, as some of the participants may still be shy, and that will help them gather their thoughts. Participants were told that how they draw does not matter. Tamari (2024) points out that emotions and deep thoughts that are hard to identify consciously can be revealed through drawing. Participants were told to make art that showed both what they experienced and the problems they faced. When participants drew, their art pieces sparked conversations in the ALG and allowed them to share and better understand each other's feelings. Illustration was a resource for collecting the needed information and, at the same time, supported the formation of relationships between all participants as per the key principles of PALAR (Wood et al., 2020) (See Section 4.4).

3.4.2.2 Reflective journals

Rowan (2019) describes reflective journals as credible sources of information from the members of the ALG, in which we express thoughts and emotions regarding the principles of a positive relationship-focused approach method and modifications related to it. During ALG meetings, the participants and I engaged in discussions, exchanging our insights and perspectives, which prompted thoughtful consideration of the newly acquired information. Nga (2016) states that

reflective journals boost motivation, develop critical thinking and creativity, and enhance overall learning. Reflective journals are simple to maintain and can be utilised at any time. I kept a reflective journal to assist me in reflecting on daily events throughout the whole research process (see Annexure J).

All participants kept a reflective journal throughout the study, putting down their changes in feelings and thoughts and their growing questions. Reflecting is valuable in transformational learning as it empowers participants to examine their beliefs and behaviours (Cranton, 2023). Participants were able to examine their own feelings and perceptions privately by journaling and so generated much useful qualitative data for the study. Participants were advised to speak sincerely, without caring about grammar or sentence structure rules, since genuine self-expression was highly valued. Guidelines were often given to participants, helping them to explore topics and problems and relate them to the experiences they had accumulated in supporting learners on the AS. In answering the research questions, participants were brainstorming and noting in their respective journals, which were later used as a reference to answer questions. During data analysis, the participants would refer back to their journals (see Annexure I)

3.4.2.3 Collages

Masinga et al. (2016) suggest implementing this arts-based approach to help participants visually express a comprehensive representation of their understanding and ideas, which can promote active involvement, thoughtful consideration, and self-reflection. Collages were made in Cycle 2 to show what was similar and what differed between the participants' lives. Collages represented the experiences and feelings of participants' collaboration in supporting learners on the AS. Day et al. (2024) observe that collages help participants put together an image that communicates various parts of what they are feeling and experiencing. Participants used magazines, newspapers, photographs, and art materials to represent their ideas on supporting learners on the AS by creating illustrations (see Section 4.9; Figure 4.6). Discussions about the collages encouraged participants to construct meaningful stories, and thematic analysis was performed. Using this technique helped to gather valuable research, motivated participants and involved them more in the research process. After the completion of Cycle 2, the transcriptions were read by the researcher, and the ALG members collaboratively analysed the data.

3.4.2.4 Recorded discussions

Team discussions were audio-recorded so that we could later hear and study how participants communicated and understood one another during the research. Recording the conversations provided the researchers with a large amount of information to use in their research (Regmi, 2024). Each discussion within the research process contained structured sessions for promoting fair participation while maintaining critical dialogue, which aligns with the democratic principles underpinning PALAR. The transcribed audio recordings were given to participants for member

checking purposes to validate the accurate representation of gathered data (see Annexure M). The recorded materials enabled continuous assessment of team progress through time during all research periods.

3.4.2.5 Fishbone diagram

The fishbone diagram served as an analysis tool during Cycle 3 to explore the core factors behind participant challenges and went by the names *Ishikawa* or cause-and-effect diagram. According to Lee and Park (2020), fishbone diagrams provide effective benefits to both participatory and complex problem analysis sessions. Participants worked together to build main challenge classifications (including communication problems and resource constraints), after which they broke down individual contributing elements. Through this visual and collaborative approach, participants could systematically examine the many dimensions of their issues and develop solutions to improve teacher-parent collaboration for ASD support. The ALG members engaged in discussions to find solutions to common problems that they have identified (see Section 4.15; Table 4.5).

3.4.3 Data Analysis

The team selected thematic analysis to evaluate the qualitative data, which resulted from drawings, journals and discussions along with the creation of collages. Thematic analysis represents an adaptable research method for analysing and reporting qualitative patterns which suits participatory and arts-based research more than other approaches (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

Analysis of data occurred through collaboration with the ALG for achieving both democratic validity and co-ownership of results. The data analysis followed Byrne's (2022) six-phase framework, starting with (1) repeated data evaluation through reading and listening, followed by (2) initial code development, (3) theme discovery, (4) critical review of themes, (5) theme definition and naming and ending with (6) final report preparation. The identification of codes and themes occurred through inductive methods using participants' actual words and experiential data, but was also influenced by the research questions (See Annexure M and Section 4.6).

Throughout the analytical process, participants engaged in critical reflection sessions, which allowed them to question research assumptions as well as help develop thematic interpretations collectively (see Sections 4.7, 4.11-4.13). By adopting this method, researchers made sure their data analysis process remained participatory because it was a genuinely cooperative venture that lined up with transformative and PALAR approaches as described in Wood et al. (2020).

Through triangulation, researchers combined multiple data sources, which made the study more credible and trustworthy, as they gained a comprehensive understanding of the required collaborative methods to assist learners on the AS (Bhandari, 2023). To ensure triangulation, data

analysis was done by comparing data generated from illustrative drawings, collages and fishbone diagrams.

3.5 QUALITY CRITERIA AND TRUSTWORTHINESS

Any research requires dedication to quality and trustworthiness because this ensures the credibility of dependable, meaningful findings (Regmi, 2024). According to Cho and Cho (2023), validity entails assessing whether the assertions made by the researcher regarding knowledge align accurately with the participants' knowledge and their experiences. In PALAR, the research must be reasonable, believable, reliable, and consequently justifiable (Johnson & Christensen, 2017).

According to Wood (2020), in action research, validity cannot be evaluated using the same framework as in more objective research methods.

Herr and Anderson (2014) have recognised five criteria that assess internal validity in action research: process validity, dialogic validity, catalytic validity, democratic validity and outcome validity. These criteria were applied to improve the validity of my research.

3.5.1 Process Validity

Leuverink (2019) describes that process validity emphasises the importance of selecting the appropriate research method to tackle the research problem, and conducting the research in an organised manner. Process validity means that research is systematically checked for its research value and strong and appropriate execution, in relation to the research context (Neethling & Nel, 2021). Process validity guarantees that issues are addressed in a manner that promotes continual learning. The inclusion of participant reflection in PALAR cycles enhanced the validity of the study process (see Figure 4.5). In this study, several methods of data generation were utilised to ensure data triangulation. "Triangulation" can be described as a method of confirming the truth and accuracy of information using various techniques for data validation (Bertram & Christiansen, 2020). The participants engaged in illustrative drawing (see Figure 4.2 – 4.3), reflective writing (see Section 4.8), small group discussions, and collage-making (see Figure 4.6) to analyse the research process, identify challenges, and make adaptations to the way they approach the research. Continuous reflection on learning and processes by the group enhanced this validity. In this study, the ALG looked into the findings and experiences at the beginning and end of each meeting to ensure the achievements of its desired goals, and as a method towards continuous learning.

According to Wood et al. (2020), the adaptive and dynamic character of PALAR allows it to establish a tendency of gradual learning and improvement through its participatory approach. The research process was quite authentic and participant-dependent; due to the repeated

discussions, the involvement of participants altered the cycles of research. Process validity was not looked at later in the inquiry, but was important at the beginning of the inquiry. The insights gained from this study will be lasting and will promote continuous learning among the participants.

3.5.2 Dialogic Validity

According to Leuverink (2019), dialogic validity pertains to the methods researchers employ to utilise feedback and interact with other researchers. The goal of dialogic validity is to develop new knowledge. Dialogic validity is the extent to which findings are determined by collective discourse among project members (Cartwright, 2024). Dialogic validity was also maintained in holding group discussions in which participants were allowed to contribute and comment on what they do, and verify research results collectively. The ALG members engaged in data analysis to ensure transcriptions were correct.

Chilisa (2020) states that participatory research dialogue should be more than information exchange, but should be a way to develop knowledge created by all when various perspectives are valued. The study obtained honest and impartial views of participants through viewing and interpreting recorded group discussions and transcribing data.

During the data analysis process, the participants gave an overview of the thematic findings of the study. Appropriate research methodology used allowed participants to speak, not only about the experiences but also further encourage trust, which is crucial in translating knowledge into action, according to the PALAR framework (Wood et al., 2020).

3.5.3 Catalytic Validity

Catalytic validity refers to the ability of the study process to effect change in the participants, enhance their understanding and motivate them to engage more in social activities (Herr & Anderson, 2015). Mertens (2021) defines catalytic validity as the level of impact a research process has on releasing a participant's potential for significant changes in life. The design of PALAR cycles progressed research participants from reflective stages to strategic planning and problem-solving activities, to foster catalytic validity (see Section 4.15).

Each research-based task, including illustrative drawings and collages alongside fishbone analysis, functioned on two levels, because they served both data-collection and assumption-challenging, along with barrier-detection and action-spurring objectives. Southworth (2022) noticed that engaging in important reflection is necessary for TL as it helps people change their perspective on their future. Participants reflected on their learning, highlighting insights that could result in lasting changes in their perception of their lives and situations. Through collaboration as an ALG to analyse data, we successfully collected evidence of alterations in the participants' behaviour, attitudes and emotions.

All the participants reported improved confidence, a better grasp of how to collaborate, and increased knowledge and understanding following the process. The study proved that it created substantial change in ASD learning support, as participants changed their actions and mind-sets through practice and belief.

3.5.4 Democratic Validity

According to Herr and Anderson (2014), democratic validity requires an accurate depiction of the various viewpoints of all participants in the research, as well as a clarification of how the results relate to the local setting. Researchers made sure to set up inclusive venues that let teachers and parents discuss and make decisions in a way that valued their input. Democratic validity embodies the essence of collaboration among participants involved in the research study (Herr & Anderson, 2014). Collaboration guarantees that the solutions are relevant and applicable to the participants. In this study, collaborative learning was important.

Certain strategies were used by the research team to make sure all individuals could participate equally, such as giving participants opportunities to lead and discuss, then agree on the solution. Omodan (2022) points out that including a wide variety of voices in research can help projects succeed in dealing with difficult social issues.

Respecting linguistic and cultural diversity, plus experiential discrimination, made it evident that working with people from different backgrounds is necessary to develop lasting support for learners on the AS. Research methods worked as tools and as the final product within the democratic process study.

3.5.5 Outcome Validity

In assessing outcome validity, the researcher confirms if the question has been addressed, and whether the solution to the problem has been recognised and implemented. According to Pavez (2021), outcome validity pertains to the effectiveness of the research and the extent to which practical results are accomplished. Valid research outcomes help determine if the suggestions for solutions are effective now and in the future for the investigated problems (Sankofa, 2025). To strengthen the legitimacy of the study, the researcher must provide proof of unforeseen findings (see Section 4.12.2) (Wood, 2020). In this study, the researcher and participants made sure that the research objectives that were established during the ALG were achieved by presenting the proof of the participants' change in viewpoints, beliefs, and concepts. Participants had the opportunity to discuss the results of the study in relation to the initial collaborative vision. The results were shaped, not solely by my objectives, but also through shared consensus with the involved participants. Strategies were designed for this study to help teachers and parents work closely with identified Learner with Special Educational Needs schools (LSEN schools) (see Section 4.16). In Cycle 3, using the fishbone analysis tool gave participants the framework to identify the key themes for their issues and work on strategies as a group. In Rabin et al. (2024),

the knowledge developed in participatory research should be turned into steps that add value to the community. The research ensured that the outcomes fit the priorities and capabilities of those involved to develop responses that are useful and applicable in their own teaching environment.

3.6 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Resnik (2015) describes ethics as the standards of behaviour that distinguish between what is deemed acceptable and what is considered unacceptable. Following ethical guidelines protects the credibility of research, ensuring that it is genuine, free of unnecessary mistakes, and has the support of the participants (Singh, 2019). It is vital to adhere to ethical guidelines when conducting research to avoid misinterpretation of data or falsification. I obtained ethical clearance from the NWU Research Ethics Committee and made sure I adhered to ethical measures set by the University throughout the study (01083-25-A2, see Annexure A). I then obtained permission to conduct my research from the Free State DoE (see Annexure B). Thereafter, permission was granted from the principals and school governing bodies of the two LSEN schools to conduct the research. A recruitment letter was sent to the participants explaining the aims and objectives of the study (see Annexure E).

Studies with human participants must consider ethics to ensure all participants are respected, and work is done ethically. Participants benefited from privacy, confidentiality, and autonomy due to the Protection of Personal Information Act (POPIA) (RSA, 2013) throughout the course of the research project. Each participant gave their free informed consent after receiving (see Annexure F) complete information about their rights while being able to exit the study at any time without consequences.

The research design adopted relational ethics as an ethical practice framework to highlight that researcher-participant interactions and relationships must be of high quality (Chilisa, 2024). All research activities incorporated principles that granted participants full respect for their dignity, along with recognition of their knowledge and experiences, to make them active researchers who held both agency and voice.

The study practised ethical reflexivity because researchers conducted regular debriefings and feedback sessions to address potential emerging ethical concerns. Through this approach, research activities followed both established ethical standards and transformative goals, which sought to both secure the participants' rights and grant them respect.

3.7 ANONYMITY AND CONFIDENTIALITY

The protection of participants' well-being, along with proper management of personal information, depends on both anonymity and confidentiality principles. The researchers implemented rigorous systems to protect individual participant privacy along with their information.

All participants obtained pseudonyms within transcripts as well as in reports, while school names remained anonymous throughout all publications. The research team kept records of all data on the NWU MS drive preserved by the Project Head's drive, which only the researcher could access. Participants did not need to reveal any identifying information when discussions began. The researcher stored both electronic and physical notes and consent forms on the NWU MS drive of the Project Leader at Potchefstroom Campus in secure office cabinets following POPIA requirements (Republic of South Africa, 2023).

All members of ALG established a group-wide confidentiality agreement, which stressed the necessity to protect all shared information with privacy. The participants received frequent notifications about their privacy rights, and specific information regarding the boundaries of confidentiality in disclosing detrimental situations.

The study operated under complete visibility regarding data usage during its entire duration. Research participants received information about how their study data would be dedicated to research projects, while any external data-sharing needed written permission from participants. According to Banks (2022), the protection of confidentiality stands as a necessary basis for establishing trust in participatory research, because it creates a safe environment for participants to share genuine and open information. The study protected ethical standards and relational trust by following these principles, which are essential for both PALAR and transformative inquiry research.

3.8 CHAPTER SUMMARY

The research employed a thorough presentation of its paradigm strategy, along with design techniques, methods and trustworthiness procedures. The research used the transformative paradigm and PALAR methodology to build a process which empowered teachers and parents to work together for AS learner support.

The research design used iterative cycles of PALAR to conduct illustrative drawing and reflective journaling, while also using collage-making and fishbone analysis, which produced data analysed through thematic analysis. Data validity and participant-driven findings were both enhanced by the researchers thorough use of process, dialogic, catalytic and democratic outcome quality standards.

The research prioritised ethical requirements for consent and confidentiality and respect in relationships in all parts of the study, which matched the transformative framework that advocates social justice and human dignity. Because of the comprehensive security measures the researchers applied to protect participant anonymity and preserve data safety, they established trust relationships that protected participant rights.

The next chapter presents the data analysis and interpretation gathered throughout each cycle, highlighting the various themes, challenges, and creative solutions that arose during the research process and reflection on three cycles. It will further discuss the research findings.

CHAPTER 4

DATA ANALYSIS AND RESEARCH FINDINGS

4.1 INTRODUCTION

The main aim of this research was to answer the question *“How can teachers in the Fezile Dabi use the PALAR approach to support Grade 1-5 learners on the autism spectrum academically?”* In the previous chapter, I discussed the research methodology that was used during this research study. In this chapter, I present and discuss the data generated from the participants. Themes and sub-themes will also be discussed. The data collection process was conducted through three cycles. In the first cycle, the relationship with the co-researchers was formed. The participants were collaboratively strengthening relationships, and strength cards were utilised in this cycle to know the strengths of the participants. In this cycle, the first secondary question was addressed: *“What are the challenges and experiences of teachers and parents in the Fezile Dabi district regarding learners on the autism spectrum?”* The second cycle started with the reflection on cycle one. During this cycle, the second research question was addressed: *“How do parental perceptions and experiences influence their involvement in support methods for learners on the autism spectrum?”* Participants used collages to gather data. In the third cycle, the participants reflected on Cycle 2, and the third research question was addressed: *“What guidelines can teachers and parents use to support learners on the autism spectrum?”* The co-researchers came up with guidelines that teachers and parents can use to support learners on the AS.

4.2 BIOGRAPHICAL DETAILS OF THE PARTICIPANTS

This research was conducted in two Learners with Special Educational Needs Schools (LSEN schools) in the Fezile Dabi district in Free State. Due to the distance between the two towns, two ALGs were formed, whereby the first ALG consisted of six members, including one participant playing both roles as a parent and a teacher, including the researcher, and the second ALG consisted of six participants, also including the researcher. Purposive sampling was used to select the participants.

Table 4.1: Biographical details of the participants

Code given to the participant	Gender of the participant	Age of the participant	Race of the participant	Qualifications	Teaching experience
P1 (Teacher)	Female	44	White	BED in the Foundation Phase	21
P2 (Teacher)	Female	39	White	BED Hons	17
P3 (Teacher& Parent)	Female	41	White	BED Snr and FET	17
P4 (Parent)	Female	36	African	Diploma in Administration Clerk	N/A
P5 (Teacher)	Female	48	African	BED Honours	13
P6 (Parent)	Female	26	African	Matric	N/A
P7 (Parent)	Female	40	African	Marketing Management N4	N/A
P8 (Teacher)	Female	36	White	BED Honours	3
P9 (Parent)	Female	38	Black	Social Auxiliary Work N5 Higher Certificate in Management	N/A
P10 (Researcher)	Female	40	African	BED Honours	7

4.3 OVERVIEW OF THREE CYCLES OF PALAR

In this study, I employed three cycles of PALAR, whereby LSEN teachers and parents were participants. Cycle 1 consisted of two sessions, wherein the first session we focused on relationship building and the second session focused on answering the first secondary research question: *“What are the challenges and experiences of teachers and parents in the Fezile Dabi district regarding learners on the autism spectrum?”* The art-based method that was incorporated was illustrative drawing (see Section 3.4.2.1). In Cycle 2, we used collages (see Section 3.4.2.3)

to answer the second secondary research question: *“How do parental perceptions and experiences influence their involvement in support methods for learners on the autism spectrum?”* Lastly, during Cycle 3, we collaboratively use fishbone analysis (see Section 3.4.2.5) to answer the third secondary question: *“What guidelines can teachers and parents use to support learners on the autism spectrum?”*

Table 4.2: Summary of three cycles of PALAR

Cycle 1	
Research question	“What are the challenges and experiences of teachers and parents in supporting learners on the autism spectrum?”
Purpose	➤ Relationship building with the participants ➤ Formation of ALG ➤ Purposeful discussions on the challenges and experiences of both teachers and parents
Data generation instruments	- Recorded discussions (see Annexure M) - Reflective journals (see Section 3.4.2.2) - Illustrative drawing (see Section 3.4.2.1)
Cycle 2	
Research question	“How do parental perceptions and experiences influence their involvement in support methods for learners on the AS?”
Purpose	• Purposeful discussions on parental perceptions and experiences that can influence support methods and strategies for learners on the AS • Collage making • Discussing the collages using ALG discussions
Data generation instruments	- Recorded discussions (See Annexure M)

	- Collage making (see Section 3.4.2.3) - Reflective journals (see Section 3.4.2.2)
Cycle 3	
Research question	“What guidelines can teachers and parents use to support learners on the AS?”
Purpose	- Finding common themes to answer the research questions - Identifying guidelines for the identified theme, Fishbone diagram
Data generation instruments	- Recorded discussions (see Annexure M) - Fishbone diagram analysis (see Section 3.4.2.5)

4.4 DISCUSSIONS OF FINDINGS THAT EMERGED FROM CYCLE 1

4.4.1 Cycle 1: Relationship Building

Before this session, there was an information session to which all the interested participants were invited by the researcher. The deputy principals of the two LSEN schools acted as the impartial persons in assisting with the informed consent forms. After signing the informed consent forms, the ALG was formulated (See Annexure N). The primary aim of Cycle 1 was relationship building with the participants, whereby the ALG was formulated to form a professional working relationship. ALG meetings were held separately, as the two LSEN schools are in two different towns. One of the ALGs consisted of six participants, including the researcher, and the other ALG consisted of six participants, whereby one of the participants played the role of a teacher as well as the parent of a learner on the AS. The purpose of the ALG meetings was to establish a mutual relationship which was necessary for building trust and a supportive environment, ensuring collaboration and managing power disparities. We followed the outline of the relationship cycle in the PALAR process. In following the relationship cycle, the ALG agreed on a research question, planned how to answer it, implemented the plan, analysed the data, and made reflections. During this meeting, the strengths cards were used to ascertain the strengths of each member as well as their different contributions to this study. Those strength cards were used to determine their roles and responsibilities.

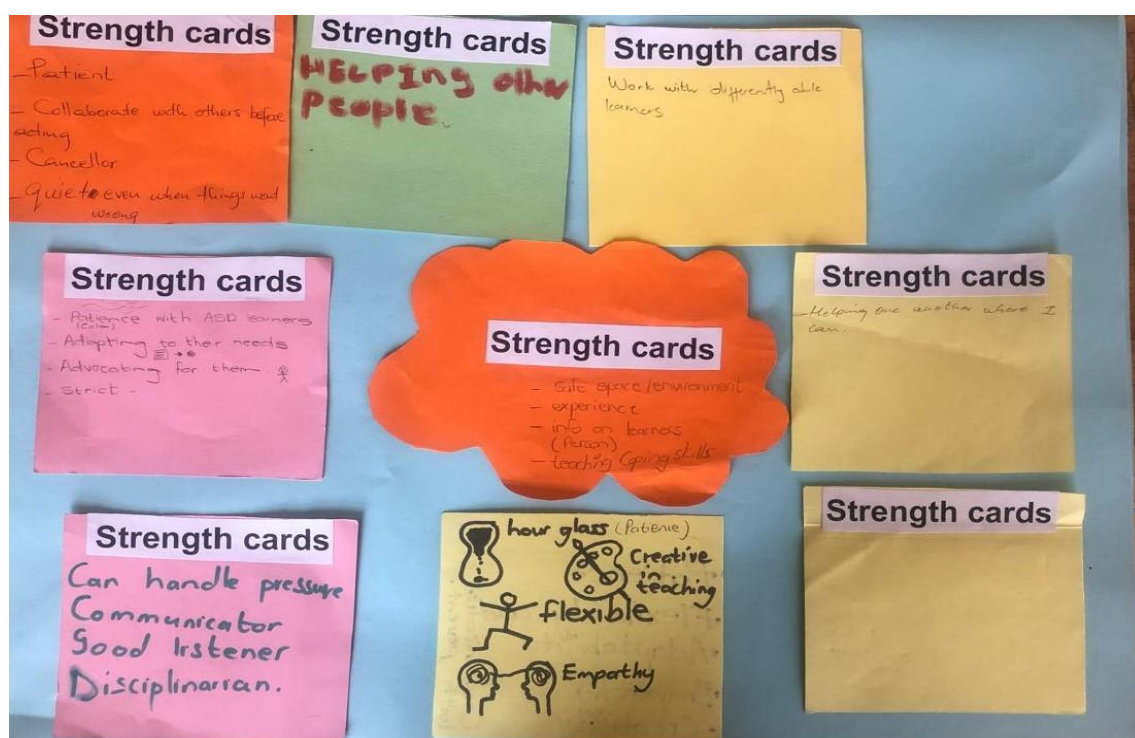


Figure 4.1: Strength cards for relationship building

Cycle one consisted of two sessions that took place on different days, where the first one was relationship building, followed by the second session, which started answering the first secondary research question. *“What are the challenges and experiences of teachers and parents in supporting learners on the autism spectrum?”* This study employed illustrative drawing as a data collection method for co-researchers to make sense of their challenges and experiences. According to Mäkelä et al. (2014:3), drawing is an “exploratory, sense-making process in which the observer and what is observed are indissolubly designed together in a physical, material space/time relationship”. Hurdley (2019:4) concurs that “participants spending time on a drawing, become engaged, and as a result they become more devoted to the research.” The participants had all the resources required to engage in this art-based method activity. During this session, the participants were more relaxed and enjoyed this activity, as they were now familiar with this art-based method. I led them with probing questions to facilitate their participation. The probing questions helped them to start drawing their challenges and experiences in supporting learners on the AS. After all the participants had drawn their challenges, they collaboratively engaged in a discussion, whereby individual drawings were discussed. The use of reflective journals was explained to the participants.

All participants made recorded discussions, illustrative drawing and reflective journals. According to Zuber-Skerrit (2011), collaboration and reflection are PALAR characteristics. Audio recordings of the meeting were transcribed verbatim by the researcher (See Annexure M)

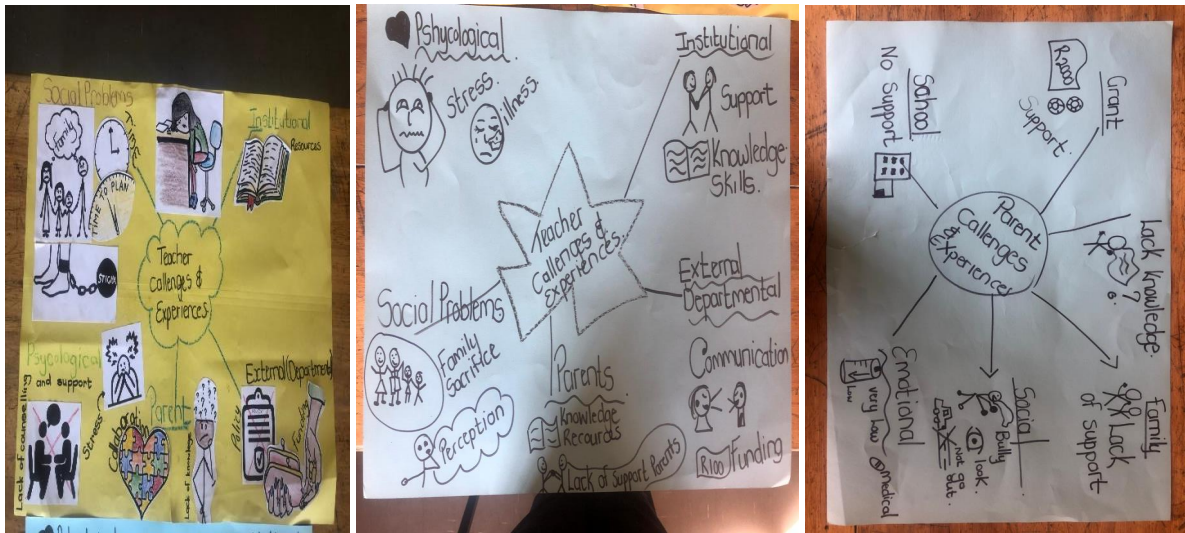


Figure 4.2: Illustrative drawings from LSEN School 1 (see Annexure H)



Figure 4.3: Illustrative drawings from LSEN School 2 (see Annexure H)

4.4.2 Reflection on Relationship Building

As stated in the Zuber Skerit and Wood framework (2019), the main objective was to build a relationship with the co-researchers. Most of the participants knew each other, as they worked together. The ALG was already formed during the information session.

At the beginning of our session, most of the co-researchers were so excited to build the relationship, but at the same time, they were a bit sceptical about drawing as a method of data collection, as some of them they were saying they didn't know how to draw. The co-researchers engaged in an interactive discussion about their experiences. It was a very informative session. The success of this cycle stemmed from simple connections established, which paved the way for influential collaboration efforts.

4.4.3 Data Analysis

In this study, the first step in analysing data was data familiarisation. This activity commenced with handing out transcripts to all participants, followed by the researcher loudly reading the data several times as they quietly followed, identifying, circling and highlighting similarities and common themes. The co-researchers used distinct colours to identify various codes.

The next step was the composition of codes, whereby the coded data was compared to find the most often occurring notes, and to make sure there were no duplicates. To create the themes, we separated the codes into groups and labelled each group. That was followed by writing them on the sticky notes and collaboratively placing them on the board.

Rectification was our next step, which involved substantiating the identified themes in relation to the literature to achieve the required accuracy. This was followed by searching for links between the themes in order to determine how the research question was answered. Collaborative discussions and engagements led to agreement and identification of themes. The data analysis session ignited their interest, participation, and their passion to share and be actively involved.

In this last step, a narrative was created that represented the research findings, which allowed the researcher to describe and connect various themes to answer the first secondary research question: *“What are the challenges and experiences of teachers and parents in the Fezile Dabi district regarding learners on the autism spectrum?”*



Figure 4.4: Data being analysed

Table 4.3: Themes and subthemes from Cycle 1

Theme 1: Teachers and Parents' Collaboration					
Subthemes					
Communication	Lack of understanding of ASD	Lack of resources (Financial issues)			
Theme 2: Psychological barriers					
Subthemes					
Stigma	Stress	Lack of counselling			
Theme 3: Institutional and external challenges					
Subthemes					
Lack of resources	Lack of support	Policies	Curriculum	Lack of training and knowledge for teachers	Planning and time management

4.4.4 Theme 1: Teachers and Parents Collaboration

4.4.4.1 Lack of communication between stakeholders

According to Aljafari (2019), continuous communication between teachers and parents is crucial for a fruitful collaboration, particularly for learners on the AS. The findings that emerged from this study revealed that there is a lack of communication between the parents and teachers. Both support the learners on the AS, but pull in different directions due to non-communication. According to Mukherjee (2017), the absence of effective communication may lead to inconsistent support strategies, which is the primary reason why learners on the AS do not get the stability they need. For learners in multilingual classrooms, parents and teachers may not speak the same language or share the same cultural beliefs, which may leave them unprepared to support a learner on the AS (Engelbrecht, 2020). Some of the co-researchers agreed that communication is minimal to non-existent.

“There is no communication between parents, and because sometimes even when we try to call parents, some of them don’t come to school, only a few do.” P2 (Teacher) (LSEN School 1)

“We are not working together; there is no communication between us.” P9 (Teacher) (LSEN School 2)

This lack of communication, as captured by both parents and teachers, has multifaceted implications, indicating an inability to plan, coordinate, and collaborate in supporting learners on the AS. This is supported and captured by Thornton (2015). Teachers disregard parents as if they are indifferent to their issues, while parents gripe that teachers are unengaged or inaccessible (Akande, 2024). As a result, communication breaks down over time, resulting in a cycle of mistrust and disengagement that is consistent with learners' isolation (Pawlett, 2017). Additionally, Bonfim et al. (2023) state that care is fragmented because there is a lack of direct communication and collaboration between the academic team and the therapy team, which is necessary to support the learner on the AS.

It has been indicated that meaningful parental involvement necessitates that parents actively engage in their child's education, while also emphasising the importance of collaboration, communication, and partnership between teachers and parents for the benefit of the child (Watt, 2016). Increased parental engagement, effective communication, and continuous interaction are crucial throughout each stage of development for a learner on the AS. In research done by Al-Hamad et al. (2023), it was found that a lack of communication can result in significant issues in the educational system, such as misunderstandings.

4.4.4.2 Lack of understanding of ASD

Parents narrated that when they received a diagnosis of ASD, it was their first time hearing the term, but they learn to accept their children's situation as time went by. Although they have accepted and learned, they have realised that in their environment, the same thing does not happen, since their extended families and friends do not understand what ASD is. According to Stevens (2024), another important factor is the lack of knowledge and comprehension of ASD, both within the family and in the larger community. According to Mthimunya et al. (2018), due to a lack of the right information provided to parents and the community about ASD, the chances of learners with ASD being truly accepted and included in everyday life are low. The following was said by one of the participants:

"The family, the siblings, because sometimes they do not understand the condition of the child with ASD, they take it as favouritism, they don't understand it at all. They think the child is treated specially." P9 (Parent) (LSEN School 2)

Participant 2 also concurs with participant 9, that there is a lack of understanding of ASD

"From my side, we did not know what Autism is." P6 (Parent) (LSEN School 2)

Participant 1 was also in agreement with the two participants by saying:

"Lack of knowledge, so the lack of knowledge was for them to support their own kids." P1 (Teacher) (LSEN School 1)

This confirms findings in the literature, that parental training is one of the challenges they face as parents of the learners on the AS (Lockwood Estrin et al., 2021). It is frequently challenging for parents to comprehend the ASD problem, which leads to feelings of guilt, helplessness, or anger (Mukherjee, 2017).

Participant 3 shares similar views:

“But in the early ages, because of the lack of understanding of autism and my child’s needs, they didn’t give me the right support that I needed.” P3 (Teacher) (LSEN School 1)

According to Jubr (2018), the diagnosis of learners on the AS and the implementation of early intervention may be delayed by health care professionals due to a lack of understanding of ASD. As a barrier to learning, Adams (2024) asserts that most individuals have a restricted understanding of ASD and, as a result, hold misconceptions and unfavourable attitudes about ASD and its consequences. However, because parents are unable to advocate for the child's needs or seek assistance, parents with children on the AS are also subjected to cultural prejudices and misconceptions that can exacerbate their isolation (Akande, 2024). According to Shook (2020), this lack of knowledge is exacerbated by the fact that schools provide little or no support to parents in the form of information or training.

4.4.4.3 Financial issues

Financial difficulties and restrictions are among the major requirements and issues facing parents of children on the AS (Hosseinpour et al., 2022). The expenses that these families incur are different from those of typical families. The therapeutic, care, and rehabilitation process is the most significant of these expenses and financial obligations. Financial demands, with the accompanying problem of a parent being unable to work, or just able to work limited hours due to the demands of caring for a child with special needs are frequently blamed for poorer family functioning and decreased marital happiness (Kuhlthau et al., 2014).

The parents, as well as teachers in the ALG, expressed the financial burden, whereby parents feel that a lack of available resources impacts their finances.

“And then another challenge is finance. As a parent, sometimes I am faced with financial burden; caring for the child with ASD can drain you financially.” P9 (Parent) (LSEN School 2)

“Financial burden, yeah, and the medical aid doesn’t pay for all medications. So, you always have to go pay. Yeah, and it’s expensive medication.” P3 (Teacher) (LSEN School 1)

“We cope with it now, it’s a struggle because we need to go to Bloemfontein, as I said, it’s petrol money to go, and it’s a lot of money they ask for one session, and they want to see

your child at least two months in a year, in the beginning and the end of the year.” P3 (Teacher) (LSEN School 1)

This finding corroborates the literature in research done by Larcombe et al. (2019), which found that the lack of funding made available to schools can also result in a financial burden for parents. Funding for ASD should be prioritised to facilitate improved access to care, such as trained healthcare professionals, specialised centres and schools, and availability of appropriate tools and resources (Adams, 2024).

4.4.5 Theme 2: Psychological Barriers

4.4.5.1 Stigma

Parents frequently encounter emotions of guilt, shame, and a sense of inadequacy. The South African National Mental Health Policy Framework and Strategic Plan, established in 2013-2020, has emphasised that stigma is a significant obstacle that must be tackled to enhance the quality and accessibility of mental health care. Due to social stigma, individuals may feel overwhelmed by stimuli. Consequently, it becomes easier for social groups to exclude them. As a result, parents may find themselves unable to attend family reunions, or they may cease attending altogether, as they believe their children are not understood. Similarly, stigmatising children and young adults guarantees a continuation of isolated and disconnected living, limiting the ability to solve macro-scale problems (Deguchi et al., 2021). One of the parents said the following:

“Bongata ba maloko a rona ha ba dule mona Viljoenskroon ba dula Parys. Ha ona le kopano ya lelapa ha re kgone hoyla hobane ha ona motho atla mohlokomelang, hape ha ona motho a moutlwisisang ntle le batswadi.”

[Most of our family’s members don’t stay in Viljoenskroon; they stay at Parys. If there’s a family gathering, we are unable to attend because there’s no one who will take care of him and understand him except the parents.] P6 (Parent) (LSEN School 2)

“Stigma, this misunderstanding from society regarding ASD, which sometimes leads to social isolation, for me as a parent and my child, sometimes we face public judgement and shame, and it impacts the well-being and the stigma also affects and strains the relationship within the family.” P9 (Parent) (LSEN School 2)

In research done by Turnock et al. (2022), it was found that one significant issue arising from a lack of awareness about ASD is its contribution to problems like stigmatisation, social rejection, discrimination, and bullying, which affect not only diagnosed learners but also their families. According to Mukherjee (2017), it may be problematic for parents to communicate with teachers or other parents because of judgment.

Participant 3 said the following:

“They will look weird to you, and they will think there is something wrong with your child. It’s like a bullying way, saying things or making comments like that.” P3 (Teacher) (LSEN School 1)

The study conducted by Galan supports the above findings (Vera et al., 2025), whereby he found that stigmatisation serves as a means of fostering social isolation. From parents’ experiences, they have observed that a lack of understanding regarding ASD is frequently associated with stigmatisation. The absence of information about ASD can lead to the formation of unrealistic perceptions and a deficiency in empathy, as it is challenging for learners to adjust to social settings, and they may struggle to articulate their thoughts and feelings. The study conducted by Chen et al. (2020) showed that teachers might harbour biases or misconceptions about ASD, which could raise concerns about their willingness to collaborate as a team. According to Adams (2024), to encourage early intervention and diagnosis, it is crucial to lessen the stigma associated with ASD and disability.

4.4.5.2 Stress

According to Keenan et al. (2016), the stress level experienced by parents of learners on the AS is often greater than that of other parents of typically developing children, or children with other disabilities. Parental stress, defined as the psychological distress experienced due to the demands of parenting, is remarkably high among the parents of learners on the AS (Kiami & Goodgold, 2017). Most of the co-researchers in the ALG admitted that they are stressed due to the challenges that they face in supporting learners on the AS. They said:

“Psychologically, as I said, it causes stress and anxiety sometimes because you don’t understand your child’s behaviour.” P9 (Parent) (LSEN School 2)

“And psychologically it affects me also because I also see someone to get the medication for myself as a teacher, also as a parent, just to stay above and keep the family together because it is a lot of pressure on the family.” P3 (Teacher) (LSEN School 1)

“Now it’s difficult for us. Because it’s a lot of pressure, little things that pile on one another that make it difficult for us.” P2 (Teacher) (LSEN School 1)

The findings are in line with research conducted by Nguyen et al. (2025), where the study revealed that most parents experience elevated stress levels, with cognitive and physical stress symptoms being the most prevalent. Teachers all around the world are still experiencing stress and burnout, which can cause anxiety and depression (Agyapong et al., 2022). He further states that teachers’ health can be negatively impacted by burnout, which is a risk factor for poor physical and mental well-being. The study conducted by Aderinto et al. (2023) highlights the necessity for a full range of support services, such as financial aid, education, and accessible interventions, to lessen the load on caregivers, and enhance the quality of care and the welfare of learners on the AS in these

situations. The above findings are also supported by Mazibuko and Shilubane (2020), who reported that caregivers reported psychological and social stress, financial hardship, and a lack of access to services.

4.4.5.3 Lack of counselling

Setlhare et al. (2016) indicated that under-resourced South African schools display various psychological stressors that affect teachers and their well-being relating to bullying and stigma associated with teaching learners on the AS. He further states that schools are not equipped or resourced to address the psychological needs of teachers. Most teachers feel that working with learners on the AS causes them stress and stigma from general society, and they feel that there is no counselling or psychological support forthcoming from the Department. Hence, they indicated that as a last resort, they ultimately have to go to consult privately. The following was said by one of the co-researchers:

"I have three challenges, the first one is counselling. That's what counselling simply means: we don't get counselling regarding our stress and emotions in our school." P5 (T)
(LSEN School 2)

Participant 8 also concurs with other participants by further stating that:

"We don't get any counselling regarding our emotions, because this means with the autism sometimes, we don't know how to communicate with them, and that causes stress for us."
P8 (Teacher) (LSEN School 2)

The other co-researchers also said the following:

"It is a big challenge, so I go to my own psychologist. So, it goes off my medical aid." P1
(Teacher) (LSEN School 1):

"Yes, yeah, me too. I also have to go to the doctor, and he helps me cope. Yes, I have my own psychologist, but the psychiatrist I see in Bloemfontein, so that is extra money for transport." P1 (Teacher) (LSEN School 1)

Most of the teachers feel that this lack of counselling leads to a financial burden, as they must pay for a private psychologist. Psychologists employed by former Model C schools in South Africa provide counselling services, and their salaries are funded by tuition fees (Manci, 2016). However, due to financial limitations in schools, most communities and schools do not have access to the services of social workers and psychologists (Mayeza & Bhana, 2017). This lack of counselling is in line with the findings by Mahwai and Ross (2023), whereby teachers reported that they felt unsupported by social workers in the district-based support teams (DBST).

4.4.6 Theme 3: Institutional and External Challenges

4.4.6.1 Lack of resources

One of the most prevalent difficulties faced by parents of children with ASD is the inability to obtain resources (Hosseinpour et al., 2022). The study further discovered that teachers and parents were experiencing challenges, including a lack of resources. According to Pillay et al. (2021), early intervention programmes in South Africa, such as speech therapy, occupational therapy, and behavioural interactions and retreats, are either rare or only accessible to a few chosen urban or private organisations, leaving out families in rural or disadvantaged areas. Additionally, these services are quite expensive, and they put a strain on families who are struggling to pay for their child's therapy or education needs, as well as other essential needs (Ndlovu, 2020). The co-researchers felt that the lack of resources negatively impacts their ability to support learners on the AS. The participants shared the following.

"No, there is a lack of resources." P5 (Teacher) (LSEN School 2)

"Like my colleagues said, it is because of a lack of resources." Participant number 8 further explained that "We don't have enough noise-cancelling headphones for all the learners that require them." P8 (Teacher) (LSEN School 2)

Parents also feel on their side that there is a lack of resources that impede them from supporting the learners on the AS. Participant 9 said:

"And then another thing is resources. In our community, as you know, we are a very small community with a lack of resources. There are no specialists, social development officers and psychologists." P9 (Parent) (LSEN School 2)

"So, every month we had to take the child to Kroonstad, but we didn't have money." P6 (Parent) (LSEN School 2)

The above findings corroborate the study conducted by Vohra et al. (2014), that families with learners on the AS are more likely to have financial hardship and require more money to pay for medical expenditures than families with children who have other challenges.

Sayed and Ahmed (2015) stress that quality education cannot occur in the absence of resources.

One of the greatest difficulties confronting the inclusive education system in South Africa is a lack of resources (Donohue & Bornman, 2014). This impediment might include a lack of funding for essential resources such as assistive technology, specialised textbooks, or other materials, and instructional materials created for learners with diverse learning needs (Beyene et al., 2023). According to Atanga et al. (2020), it is crucial to address this problem of a shortage of resources to guarantee that all learners, regardless of their learning barriers, acquire assistance and opportunities to thrive in the education system. Moreover, Mzimela (2023) emphasises that

although inclusive classrooms are a commonly advocated concept today, it remains challenging to implement suitable accommodations for learners on the AS. This is primarily because visual schedules, sensory spaces or tools, and accessible technologies are often lacking. As stated by Mpangane et al. (2024), the absence of these resources causes additional work for teachers, who must create practical solutions while also managing their other teaching responsibilities.

4.4.6.2 Lack of support

As stated by Du Plessis and Mestry (2019), it is crucial for educators to obtain the necessary support to effectively carry out the challenging responsibilities assigned to them by the community. However, the schools, parents, the DBE, and provincial education departments frequently fall short in providing the essential assistance that teachers need to execute their daily teaching tasks (Hay et al., 2021). Some participants agreed that there is very limited support from parents, but they found the lack of support from the DoE more frustrating. The co-researchers agreed that they received no support whatsoever from the Department.

“As I have mentioned, there is no support.” P5 (Teacher) (LSEN School 2)

“As a teacher, their support is not enough, even from the department, because we don’t get enough training.” P8 (Teacher) (LSEN School 2)

One of the parents also agreed with other participants regarding the lack of support:

“And you don’t even have support, so it strains you mentally because you spend most of the time looking after this child.” P9 (Parent) (LSEN School 2)

This is confirmed by the literature done by Chingwanangwana (2015), whereby he asserts that teachers face challenges such as a lack of support from DBST. Parents also felt that they didn’t receive support from their families and community.

4.4.6.3 Policies

Policy should always be created with implementation in mind, as this would direct the development of the planned policy (Pollack Porter et al., 2018). Hudson et al. (2019) assert that the success in accomplishing a policy relies on the implementation process. Members of the ALG discussed the implementation of the EWP 6 (DoE, 2001), but even though it is there, they feel it is just a generalisation; it does not have specific interventions for learners on the AS. Participant 5 from LSEN School 2 reported that:

“Policy that is generalising for our learners, even though we have learners with different disabilities.” P5 (Teacher) (LSEN School 2)

Participants 3 and 8 also agreed with Participant 5 by saying the following:

“So, policy is also a problem. Yeah. It’s also a challenge because it’s just generalisation.” P3 (Teacher) (LSEN School 1)

"I also think policies such as White Paper 6 are not carefully thought through." P8 (Teacher) (LSEN School 2)

Engelbrecht et al. (2016) confirmed that policy documents are generally created with vague aims and no execution instructions, resulting in failure to attain the intended objectives. The study conducted by Adewumi and Mosito (2019) at Fort Beaufort district corroborates this, by stating that the lack of policy clarity has presented challenges to successful implementation.

The findings above are in line with the study conducted by Hudson et al. (2019), whereby the literature highlights the lack of clarity on the degree of inclusiveness in the EWP 6. According to Donohue and Bornman (2014), the ambiguity of policies is related to the absence of funding and is intentional. South African laws, EWP 6, and the SIAS policy serve as comprehensive frameworks for collaboration, although the execution of their provisions tends to be inconsistent and inadequately developed (Pillay & Tlale, 2024).

4.4.6.4 Curriculum

Inclusive education places a strong emphasis on curriculum adaptation since it fosters complete engagement of all learners in the learning and teaching process (DBE, 2014). However, the teachers are left feeling inadequate and end up being frustrated because they don't know how to meet the needs of learners and address barriers to learning. Some of the co-researchers felt that the DCAPS is not practical. The following was said:

"We've got the DCAPS, but even the DCAPS, we have multiple diagnoses at the school, yes, they are all SID again, it's all SID with ASD, with Down syndrome, with cerebral palsy, that the curriculum is so restrictive." P8 (Teacher) (LSEN School 2)

Participant 8 further stated that:

"I have said that the curriculum (DCAPS) is not practical for our learners, and it is so frustrating because the Department wants you to do A, B, C, D, and you cannot." P8 (Teacher) (LSEN School 2)

"And the other one, can be curriculum (DCAPS) that is not practical for the learners, in fact, in the school, there hasn't been a curriculum that is meant for our students. Most of the time, we take the curriculum from the mainstream, then they downgrade it to our learners." P5 (Teacher) (LSEN School 2)

Research conducted by Sumbane et al. (2023) reported that there is no particular curriculum or syllabus for learners on the AS.

4.4.6.5 Lack of training and knowledge of teachers

ASD is a challenge that many teachers are uncertain about, as they acquire knowledge about it during their teaching experience (Pillay et al., 2022). According to Engelbrecht et al. (2017),

limited competency turned out to be a major obstacle when trying to put inclusion into practice effectively. It was apparent from the remarks of the co-researchers. The co-researchers didn't feel equipped to handle the challenges that learners on the AS face in the inclusive classrooms.

According to Mthimunye et al. (2018), parents believe that when teachers don't have enough training, teachers' knowledge eventually affects their children's ability to develop and learn. The co-researchers said the following:

"So, we see the autistic signs, but we can't say they are autistic." P3 (Teacher) (LSEN School 1)

"Because we don't get enough training." P1 (Teacher) (LSEN School 1)

Participant 8 concurs with the other participants by saying:

"There is no training. Even though we are a special needs school, not a lot of our staff are qualified as special needs educators and even those that are, I query the quality of training." P8 (Teacher) (LSEN School 2)

Most standard teacher training programmes in South Africa do not include specific content on ASD education; rather, they offer general material on inclusive education (Donohue & Bornman, 2018). Pienaar and Dreyer (2023) argued that teachers were unable to understand, and therefore supported the application of scientific practices such as applied behaviour analysis (ABA) or the use of sensory integration for learners on the AS. The lack of training to meet the needs of all learners could induce a wrong impression about teachers in general. Cook and Ogden (2022) pointed out that this general strategy could not consider the complicated problems associated with ASD, including sensory processing problems and communication disorders.

Research done by Robledo Montecel (2018) confirmed the above findings, that teachers complain that they haven't obtained the proper training for inclusive classrooms and don't have adequate knowledge and experience to assist learners with barriers to learning. They feel demoralised and incompetent to support these learners to succeed (Mfuthwana & Dreyer, 2018). This study also corroborates the findings by Van der Steen et al. (2020), where they highlight the lack of teacher training as an obstacle in successful classroom strategies to promote inclusion. There's a belief that teachers need specific training to work with learners on the AS, and right now, that kind of training just isn't available (Attard & Booth, 2023). Until now, the lack of professional development has been evident in rural and underprivileged schools, where access to expert training is limited (Pather & Slee, 2018). Robledo Montecel (2018) further added that there is a necessity for professional development and training for teachers to equip themselves in order to address barriers to learning in a successful manner. This was reiterated by Larcombe et al. (2019), that continuous training and professional development for teachers was crucial and needed to concentrate on the implementation of instructional methods that will help learners in the AS to

succeed in school. Hence, it is necessary to develop teachers to obtain applicable professional skills such as the application of various methods of curriculum delivery and understand how learners learn differently so they can meet the diverse needs of learners (Daniyan, 2015; Vlok, 2016).

4.4.6.6 Planning and time management

Planning is an essential process in schools (*Section 16A of the South African Schools Act 84 of 1996*), which calls for the principal of the schools to draw plans responding to the demands of achieving the required support for learners who are living with disabilities.

Planning in education refers to the systematic approach of developing strategies and actions to achieve desired goals, whether long-term or short-term, that includes situation analysis, defining development objectives, prioritising programmes, and eventually monitoring to adjust and fine-tune the plans as need be (Khalilov & Taghiyev, 2024). Due to increased workloads that encompass larger class sizes, additional administrative tasks, and tutoring duties, teachers are not adequately able to dedicate quality time to engage with parents (Pillay et al., 2022).

The study showed that teachers struggle with the management of time and planning. The participants clearly illustrate this. The co-researchers said the following:

“I’ve said that we don’t have enough time for learners, and the number of learners per educator and per specialist in school.” P8 (Teacher) (LSEN School 2)

“But the management of time as well. Yes, because there are eleven other learners or more that need attention. So, time management, I have only two hands.” P3 (Teacher) (LSEN School 1)

The study conducted by Ahmad et al. (2020) showed that the effects of time management are directly related to difficulties in planning as well as the scarcity of resources. Teachers have a crucial role to play in the learner’s performance; however, time management is another aspect of allocating priorities and putting work into that allocation (Sayari et al., 2017). The above findings are in line with the study conducted by Maile and Olowoyo (2017), where they stated that many South African rural and township schools are not performing well because of ineffective utilisation of teaching time. Poor planning seems to be a significant factor in the reduction of teaching time in schools (Massawe & Majokava, 2022). Teachers teaching learners on the AS may encounter challenges in managing group work, periods of transition, and unscheduled times, as these can interrupt the class’s flow and hinder the learning process of other learners (Shea et al., 2018).

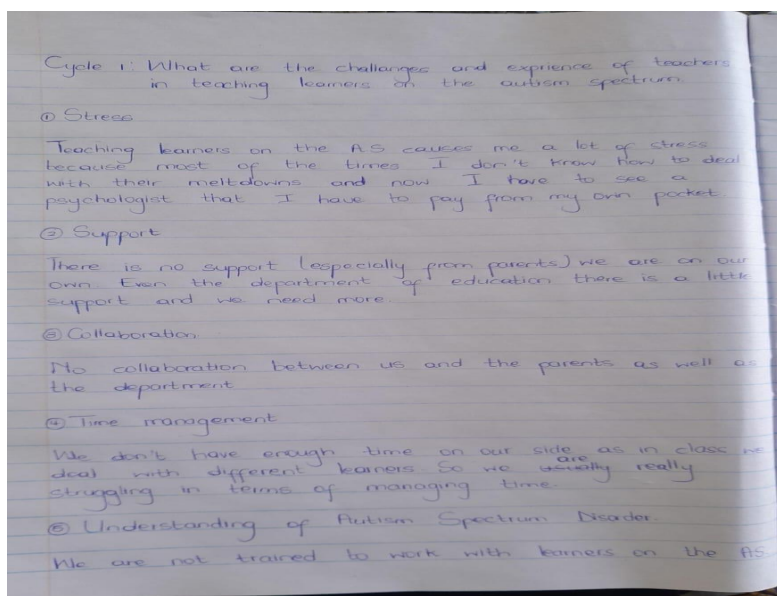
4.4.7 Reflection on Cycle 1

As outlined in the Zuber-Skerritt and Wood framework (2019), the primary aim of Cycle 1 was to establish relationships among the co-researchers and foster mutual trust. Most participants were

already familiar with one another through previous information sessions, which provided a foundation for collaboration.

At the outset, many co-researchers were somewhat sceptical about drawing on the reflective exercises. Some expressed uncertainty, stating that they did not know how to draw or were unaccustomed to interactive strategies such as using strength cards. It was made clear by the researcher that how they drew was not important, as all that was needed was illustrative information sharing, which eased their fears and concerns about drawing. However, as the session progressed, the co-researchers became increasingly engaged in the activities. The discussions that emerged during this exercise proved to be highly informative, as participants shared personal experiences, identified strengths, and reflected collectively.

The success of this cycle emanated from the genuine connections that were established. These initial relational foundations paved the way for collaborative efforts in subsequent cycles, demonstrating the importance of building trust and rapport in participatory research contexts.



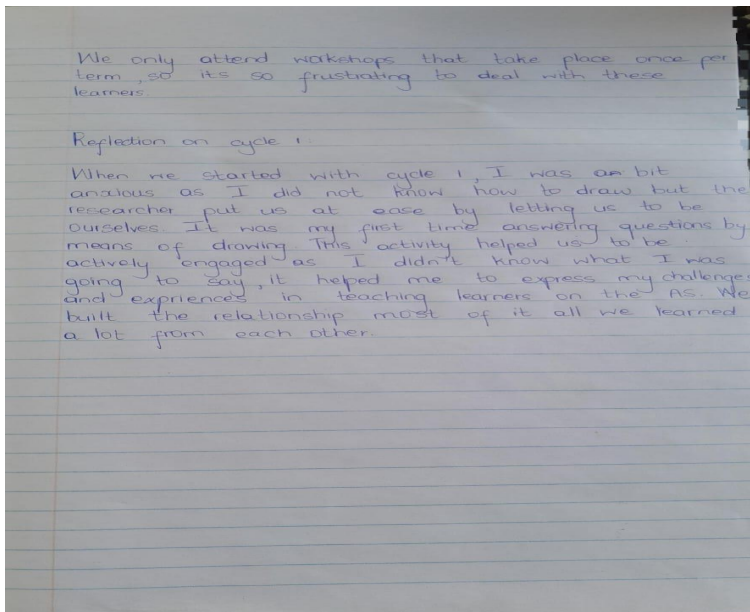


Figure 4.5: Reflective journal of Participant 1

4.4.8 Cycle 2: Exploring Challenges and Experiences

Cycle 2 incorporated collage-making as an art-based method to generate data. The primary purpose of the collage making was to answer the second secondary question: *“How do parental perceptions and experiences influence their involvement in support methods for learners on the autism spectrum?”* The researcher posed the following probing questions. *Find a picture of societal perception that affected you with regard to your learner on the AS. Are there any existing systems? Are you knowledgeable in terms of identifying learners on the AS?* The researcher, as well as the participants, worked together in bringing all the necessary materials to create collages; both the parents and teachers were actively engaged in the collage-making exercise, and they were excited. The following picture captures the co-researchers actively involved in the collage-making process.



Figure 4.6: Collage-making process

The participants created collages as a way to become physically involved and take control of their own experience (Woods & Roberts, 2018). Creative approaches such as collage-making give participants the means to inspect parts of their experiences differently.

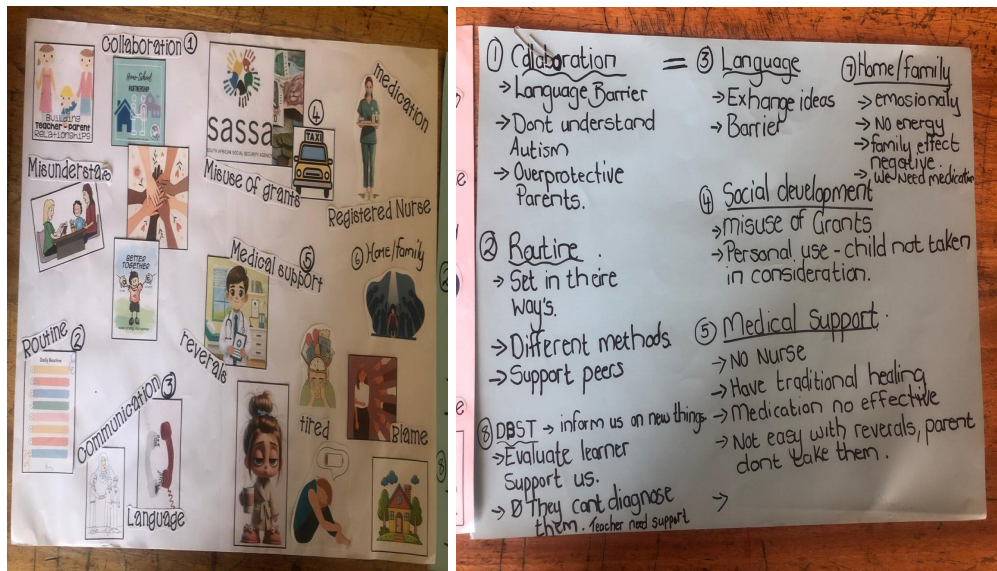


Figure 4.7: Collage created by participants from LSEN School 1 (see Annexure I)

Figure 4.7 shows a collage that was created by participants from LSEN School 1 (see Annexure I).

This study used a collage-making exercise to collect data to promote collaboration and allow co-researchers to engage in meaningful discussions. Collage-making encouraged collaboration and discussions among the co-researchers while discussing and explaining their collages (Mackworth-Young et al., 2020). It promoted an egalitarian and holistic approach to listening to people, enabling them to convey their experience using visual and verbal language. The co-researchers actively participated in this exercise, discovering that collage creation is a useful medium for artistic expression, and simultaneously learning about a useful method for data collection (Wood, 2019).

After the completion of collage-making, the co-researchers were allowed to present and discuss their collages (see Annexure M). In the discussion, some of the participants articulated a concern centred on the misconceptions and myths around ASD, coupled with blaming and isolation. Beyond these concerns, the co-researchers mentioned inadequate resources and a lack of collaboration and communication.

4.4.8.1 Cycle 2: Data Analysis

The researcher employed thematic analysis in the present study, and categorised the data into themes. The first step in analysing data was acquainting myself with the gathered data. I started by distributing the transcriptions to the co-researchers and reading them several times. Each member of the ALG was assigned to read the transcripts, identify themes, write them on sticky notes, and engage in coding. Subsequently, preliminary codes were created for the data after specific phrases had been identified that constituted the second step. In the third step, we began by looking for patterns in the codes to develop themes, as these helped us in extracting information from the data. During the fourth step, we reviewed and refined the themes that were found. Each extract was carefully read to see whether the themes overlapped, whether the theme was supported by the data, or whether there were any inconsistencies. Subthemes were then created from these themes. Then the ALG identified the themes and named them.

After this initial phase of individual thematic analysis, it was discovered that most of the co-researchers had identified similar themes. The ALG then worked together to combine the ideas. To facilitate a common understanding of the data, the sticky notes were grouped on a board and sorted into larger themes. After following the data analysis, I generated the report of the findings as captured by the ALG.

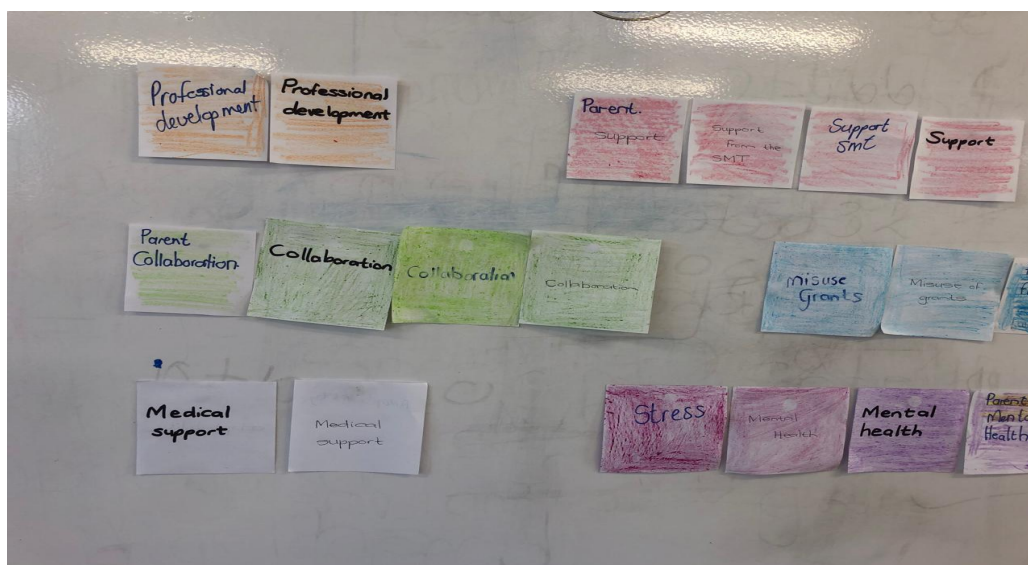


Figure 4.8: Identified themes for Cycle 2

Figure 4.8 shows the identified themes of this cycle. Working together on this analysis didn't just strengthen the accuracy of the results, but it also helped the co-researchers feel like the data really belonged to them, ensuring that the themes we identified actually rang true to what they'd been through in their own lives. Table 4.4 below outlines the different themes that were identified as the main parental perceptions.

Table 4.4: Different themes identified as the main parental perception

Themes	Subthemes
Societal perception	❖ Misconceptions and myths ❖ Blaming and isolation
Resources	❖ Inadequate financial relief from the government ❖ Misuse of grants by parents
Lack of collaboration and communication	❖ Collaboration ❖ Communication ❖ Routine

4.4.8.2 Societal perception

4.4.8.2.1 Misconceptions and myths

Although the robust genetic findings in ASD research are significant, misconceptions persist regarding both ASD and its underlying causes (Castillo et al., 2020). Most of the parents felt that due to a lack of understanding of ASD, people have misconceptions about the disease. According to Adams (2024), many people have little understanding of ASD, and may harbour misconceptions and negative stereotypes about ASD and other impairments. These misconceptions exacerbate the difficulties that people and families with autism face, leading to families not seeking a diagnosis or treatment for their child's condition because they are afraid of being alone and treated unfairly (Aderinto et al., 2023). The participants in their collage-making process said the following:

“Because of lack of knowledge and experience of us parents and society in some families that children on them as are taken to witchdoctors instead of them referred for medical assistance in the right way, so in this traditional doctor they are given medicine that makes them sick or worse, which affect the health of the child and because of this belief they hardly listen to advice.” P9 (Parent) (LSEN School 2)

Participant 3 also supported participant 9 by saying

“Some of the parents tend to go for more traditional healing instead of medication that is not that effective, and bracelets and ropes around the body.” P3 (Teacher) (LSEN School 1)

Participant 9 also agrees with P3 by further saying:

“And they were talking about some people who think it’s witchcraft. Some people think we didn’t do something, what do you call it, a cultural, you know, some cultural ceremony. I did all, I have gone through these processes, I took my child to a graveyard.” P9 (Parent) (LSEN School 2)

Misconceptions about the causes of ASD can adversely impact the education and treatment of families affected by it (Yu et al., 2020). Most of the parents were negatively affected by the misconceptions about ASD.

4.4.8.2.2 Blaming and isolation

Parents were first held responsible by both professionals and wider society initially for causing ASD, and subsequently for the autistic behaviours that many viewed as undesirable (Kenny, 2015). Subsequent researchers, such as Lorna Wing, are credited for helping to alter the perception that mothers are being blamed for causing ASD in their child (Happé & Frith, 2020). Parents felt that they were blamed for their children’s situations. Parents said the following:

“I, as the parent of the learner on the AS, my partner blamed me, as a result, it caused me pain and depression” P9 (Parent) (LSEN School 2)

“I also agree with parent 9, I was also blamed by my own family, saying that my behaviour contributed to the condition of my child, which has been pictured there.” P6 (Parent) (LSEN School 2)

The following was said by one of the teachers:

“The parents perceive that they are all alone, and they are kept separate from society because they are going through things that no one can understand.” P8 (Teacher) (LSEN School 2)

She further stated that:

“Isolation and segregation coz, it’s not just segregation and even before today you never reached out to each other because there wasn’t that connection, that’s why I say isolation and segregation.” P8 (Teacher) (LSEN School 2)

Participant 3 from LSEN School 1 also concurs with the other participants by saying the following:

“Most of the parents who have children that struggle with that are on their own; they need to do everything on their own”. P3 (Teacher) (LSEN School 1)

This finding corroborates the literature of Alareeki et al. (2022), that parents experienced societal and community blame, particularly in relation to their child’s behaviour. In a meta-analysis involving 1,178 parents, Boshoff et al. (2018) discovered that certain parents felt their concerns about their child were dismissed by family and friends.

4.4.8.3 Resources

4.4.8.3.1 Inadequate financial relief from the government

Some of the parents described that they get a grant from the government; however, the grant is not enough to cater for the needs of their children on the AS. Participant 9 from LSEN School 2 emphasised that:

“Even though there is a grant to support our child with ASD, it is not enough because of some of the travelling that we need to do, to go to the specialist to assist our child, so we spend the money on other things like food since they eat specific food.” P9 (Parent) (LSEN School 2)

Participant 3 from LSEN School 1 also added that:

“And obviously, I said finances were a big thing for me because you have to take them to a doctor, which costs a lot of money, and the medication is also very expensive. We have to go to Bloemfontein each time, and we have to pay cash for appointments.” P3 (Teacher) (LSEN School 1)

Participant 8 agreed with the other participants, as she must pay for the training from her own pocket:

“I personally do that because I have an interest in doing my own research and reading articles and going for training that I am paying for myself, but that’s not every educator.” P8 (Teacher) (LSEN School 2)

The above correlates with the findings by Vohra et al. (2014) that families with learners on the AS are more likely to face financial difficulties and need additional income to cover medical expenses more than families of children with other barriers.

From the feedback from the ALG, it became clear that parents are trying their best to cope with inadequate grants, though they do not cover all the costs.

4.4.8.3.2 Misuse of grants

Misuse of grants by parents seems to be a problem for teachers, as they feel that parents don’t care about their children’s education. This misuse of grants was pointed out by the co-researchers as one of the primary problems the teachers experience.

“Sometimes, as educators, we feel there is misuse of the grants by the parents, and I don’t know whether it’s a lack of knowledge or a lack of discipline.” P8 (Teacher) from LSEN School 2

Participant 3 from LSEN School 1 also agreed with what participant 8 said:

“And then medical, misuse of grants is number four”. P3 (Teacher) (LSEN School1)

Participant 2 from LSEN School 2 agrees with two other participants by saying:

“Some learners get bigger grants because of the severity of their intellectual disability, and some of the parents use the grant money for personal expenditures.” P2 (Teacher) (LSEN school 1)

Thus, the data are consistent with Trafford and Swarts's findings (2023), in which one participant felt that there were more “undeserving (devil) than deserving (angel)” beneficiaries of these grants and was upset by their misuse.

4.4.8.4 Lack of collaboration and communication

4.4.8.4.1 Collaboration

In their research, Naidoo and Govender (2022) have demonstrated the beneficial effects of parent-teacher communication on the development of socio-emotional and educational outcomes for such learners, by employing consistent strategies across environments that guarantee the reinforcement of learning and adaptation skills. Hume et al. (2021) stress that collaborative efforts to create such an environment support both home-based and school-based learning, which is essential for learners on the AS. Most of the co-researchers strongly agreed that there is no collaboration between them. Teachers often report minimal support from the school management team, DBST, as well as parents, which affects their ability to provide effective support. In some cases, parents may not be actively involved in supporting their children’s education, leading to communication breakdowns with teachers. The co-researchers said the following:

“So underneath the first one we said collaboration, so for us it is difficult between the parents and for the parents to understand sometimes other teachers telling them about the autism.” P1 (Teacher) (LSEN School 1)

“Parents don’t always understand the concept, so I am writing here that it is collaboration.”
P3 (Teacher) (LSEN School 1)

“So, in terms of the DBST, it is just you who is doing it for yourself, not on the DBST.” P3 (Teacher) (LSEN School 1)

Participant 8 from LSEN School 2 also concurs with the other participants by saying the following:

“Joint collaboration strategies, do you do that? No, because we don’t meet.” P8 (Teacher) (LSEN School 2)

Participant 8 further stated that:

“Our school has a social worker, but we feel we are playing our part; we require collaboration.” P8 (Teacher) (LSEN School 2)

One of the parents from LSEN School 1 felt that there was no collaboration between teachers and parents. The following was said:

“So, did they collaborate with you throughout the process?” and the response was “No, I did that on my own.” P3 (Parent) (LSEN School 1)

Teachers feel that collaboration with parents is key and should include effective communication, creating learning spaces at home and school with similar goods, participating in decision making at school, parents' follow-ups on learners' academic activities, parents' volunteering in school activities, and collaborating with the community at large (Bruck et al., 2022).

This finding corroborates the literature by Chen et al. (2020), that the lack of collaboration among stakeholders was discovered to have a negative impact on the experience of learners on the AS transitioning into mainstream primary schools. Shook (2020) reiterates that teachers, parents, and other participants in the learner's life should therefore work hand-in-hand to ensure provision of success for learners on the AS. Cook and Ogden (2022) assert that inadequate system coherence and insufficient funding lead to several unfavourable effects on collaborative practices.

4.4.8.4.2 Communication

According to the Saudi Minister of Education (2017), when families comprehend their roles in the educational process and maintain ongoing communication with the school continually to learn about their children's academic achievement, this makes a big difference in the school's academic and institutional performance, because it affects how well their children do in school. It is evident from the findings of this study that there is a lack of communication between the stakeholders.

The participants said the following:

“I think it is a frustration because you can't, you have this idea where you want to be, but you can't get there because of the communication, it is not good enough or the understanding of it.” P3 (Teacher) (LSEN School 1)

Participant 8 from LSEN School 2:

“I requested parents to come to school and meet with me, but there was no response; whether it is the parent who never got the letter, because the learner lost it or because the parents are too busy.” P8 (Teacher) (LSEN School 2)

She further stated that:

“But the meeting for me personally, I meet with one parent in a year.” P8 (Teacher) (LSEN School 2)

One of the parents said the following:

“So, there was not a lot given to me about autism. So, it was an everyday struggle for me to understand my child and his needs”. P3 (Parent) (LSEN School 1)

According to research conducted by Al-Hamad et al. (2023), communication between teachers and the families of learners on the AS is restricted to parent-teacher conferences and contacting a parent when a problem or emergency occurs. The main issue that prevents learners on the AS from getting the stability they need is a lack of effective communication, which can lead to a lack of consistent support techniques (Mukherjee, 2017).

4.4.8.5 Routine

According to Colizzi et al. (2020), learners on the AS frequently experience frustration, worry, uncertainty, and tension because of the unexpected shifts in their routines and schedules. Teachers expressed their feelings regarding the routine, as they felt that parental perception affects the routine that they set at school. Participants said the following:

“The routine, so at school we have a specific time to eat, a specific time where they go to the toilet and when the kids go home, either in the afternoon, weekends, or for a hostel learner at the end of the term, they come back to school, no routine.” P8 (Teacher) (LSEN School 2)

“Some learners are also set in their routine that when something else happens at school, it is total chaos, because they can’t adapt a little bit.” P1 (Teacher) (LSEN School 1)

Participant 2 from LSEN School 1 said:

“But I think we will never be able to do this the same as adults because the parent follows a different routine”. P2 (Teacher) (LSEN School 1)

It is important that teachers actively include parents in the creation, execution and monitoring of their child’s IEP and intervention plans (Zhang & Spencer, 2015). This will make sure that learning can be transferred between home, school, and community contexts (Barton & Harn, 2014).

4.4.8.6 Reflection on Cycle 2

Attached below is a picture of a reflective journal, which illustrates the reflection on Cycle 2.

REFLECTION ON CYCLE 2

In the beginning of this stage the teachers expressed their concern as they did not understand the research question they believe in only concern parents. The research had to explain to them about the linkage of how parental perception and involvement affected their collaborative effort in assisting learners, thus by making example of importance of routine maintenance.

As a routine developed at school should be supported by such routine at home to help engender and develop progressive support in both environments.

With their new understanding we resolve to make collage to extract and ascertain data and information was rewarding and very effective. It promoted playful joyful nature of fruitful collaborative engagements of parents and teachers working together to support learners.

This method of collage making elicited needed data in a gratifying manner while provided platform for participants with an outlet to expressing their heart felt difficulties and challenges they face every day in their different environments in their endeavors to support learner with ASD.

The collages they made painted eloquently clear picture of multi-layered complex environment and challenges they encounter and had to confront daily.

With this unconventional method and approach to collecting data we could answer research question while highly engaged and in a immensely fulfilling manner providing rich and diverse data. The collage making followed by deep discussions and engagements provided clear and deeper understanding which helped and facilitated the identification of crucial themes related to the research question. It has formed the base and platform for the next phase of our research process.

Figure 4.9: Reflective journal of Participant 10

4.4.9 Cycle 3: Strategizing and Solution Finding

The main goal of this cycle was to answer the last research question, "What guidelines can teachers and parents use to support learners on the autism spectrum?" The ALG began a collaborative process with an emphasis on pinpointing and choosing issues that needed strategic

interventions. This cycle started with a reflection on Cycle 2, and data analysis was done by the researchers as well as the co-researchers. I distributed the transcripts to the co-researchers, and we highlighted themes and wrote them on a sticky note, as shown in the images below.



Figure 4.10: Identified themes for Cycles 1 and 2

Figure 4.10 shows joint identified themes for both Cycles 1 and 2. Upon completion of individual thematic analysis, it was evident that many participants had identified similar themes. The ALG consolidated the identified themes.

In Cycle 3, the co-researchers made a comprehensive review of the findings of the previous cycles, aligning their focus on the last secondary research question, “*What guidelines can teachers and parents use to support learners on the autism spectrum?*” This cycle employed fishbone diagrams, a powerful tool for brainstorming and solution generation. The ALG identified solutions. The fishbone analysis method was used in this study to provide a methodical, visual, and collaborative approach to finding the root causes of an issue. The fishbone diagram is frequently used as a means of examining cause and effect (Shinde et al., 2018). To combine the data produced for this study, the fishbone diagram was modified for the study environment. The co-researchers were able to use the information to identify, plan, integrate, and consider methods for supporting learners on the AS. The fishbone diagram was constructed as follows.

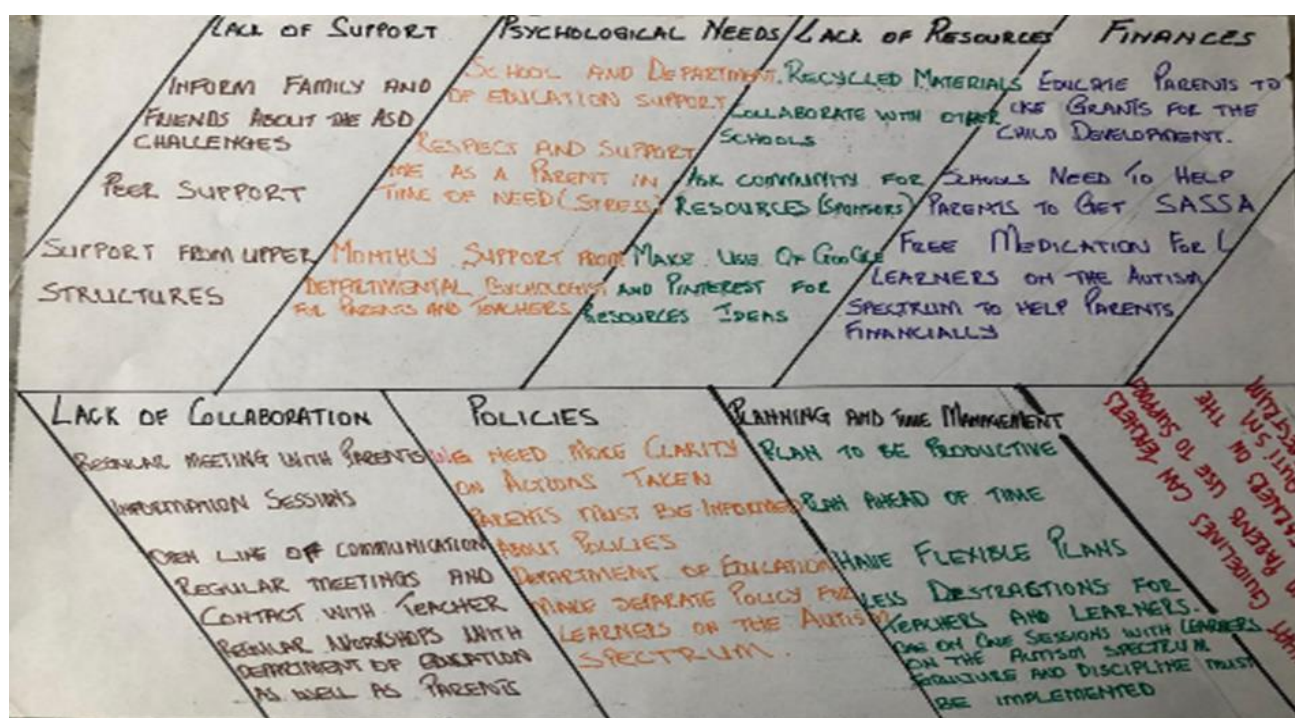


Figure 4.11: Fishbone diagram analysis from LSENS 1 (see Annexure K)

Table 4.5: Strategies identified using the fishbone diagram

Themes	Strategies
Lack of collaboration	- Regular meetings with parents. - Information sessions open a line of communication for parents to keep them informed. - Regular meetings and contact with the school and teachers. - Regular workshops with DBST.
Policies	- We need more clarity on actions taken. - Parents must be informed about the policies, as they are not aware of them. - Maybe the education department can make a separate policy for learners on the AS.
Lack of time management	- Plan to be productive. - Plan ahead of time. - Have flexible plans

	- Fewer distractions for teachers and learners.
Lack of support	- Inform family and friends about the ASD challenges. - We as teachers must speak out and inform teachers, parents and the school to support us. - Peer support. - Acknowledgement from upper structures.
Psychological needs	- The school and the DoE support us when wanting leave for medical reasons. - Respect and support me as a parent in time of need (stressed) - Monthly support from departmental psychologist for teachers and parents.
Lack of resources	- Make use of recycled materials for resources. Parents make use of recycled material. - Collaborate with other schools to use different resources. - Ask the community for resources (sponsors). - Parents also make use of Google and Pinterest for resource ideas.
Finances	- Educate parents to use grants for the child's development and not their benefit. - School helps parents to get SASSA. - Free medication for learners on the AS to help parents financially.
Parental stigma and isolation	- Invite a guest speaker who has personal experience. - Community engagements. - Support groups.

Lack of training and understanding of ASD	- ASD awareness campaign. - Invite guest professionals, e.g., a Doctor trained in ASD. - Help from DoE as well as the Department of Health. - Further research. - Hire a special needs specialist.
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4.4.9.1 Discussion of findings

4.4.9.1.1 Lack of collaboration

A supportive, respectful, and cooperative environment between parents and teachers fosters inclusive teaching methods and ensures consistency in academic, social, emotional, and behavioural norms across the curriculum, schools and homes (Azad et al., 2020). A shared understanding of the needs of learners, parents, and teachers is necessary for fostering a solid relationship between them. (Hodges et al., 2020). The co-researchers collaborated within an ALG to create a framework that would support and advance collaboration enforcement strategies.

According to Woodcock and Woolfson (2019), constant communication and collaboration can help colleagues offer emotional support, provide guidance and advice and promote inclusivity in the school. Schools can also establish clear communication frameworks on expectations and responsibilities in order to improve the effectiveness of such meetings (Ola-Williams et al., 2024). By promoting collaboration among teachers, parents, and the DBST, the co-researchers came up with some of the following strategies. Regular meetings with parents, regular meetings and contact with the school and teachers. Collaboration with other schools, as well as regular workshops with DBST and parents.

The teachers noted that improving stakeholder communication can lead to successful collaboration in providing support for learners on the AS. The co-researchers said the following:

“Or communication, if they cannot come to us, there must be an open line of communication between teachers, caregivers, and parents, because they cannot always. It’s an open line of communication for parents to keep them informed.” P3 (Teacher) (LSEN School 1)

“And then improve communication, and that must be both ways.” P6 (Parent) (LSEN School 2)

“And that must be both ways. So, it must be parents to teachers and teachers to parents. So, for example, if the learner has now gone to a dietitian because they are battling to eat,

the parents must tell us that so that we don't try and force them to eat the Morvite if the dietitian says no, don't eat Morvite." P8 (Teacher) (LSEN School 2)

Additionally, the teachers emphasised that the lack of collaboration could be reduced by routine workshops with DBST and parents, and early identification and support from DBST. According to Vlcek et al. (2020), using workshops for educators, parents, and learners is one of the most important ways to promote collaboration. These meetings can be helpful in bringing the stakeholders together so that they can comprehend and likely respect one another's responsibilities and experiences, according to Bateman et al. (2022).

The following was said:

"I think also we must have regular workshops with the DBST as well as with the parents."
P3 (Teacher) (LSEN School1)

"So instead of only waiting to find out in grade one, when your child almost failing grade one that they are then diagnosed that if we have a screening of Department of Health from an early age, we can pick it up, and then maybe specific pressures that work on the simulation of those learners, because it is different to a child in grade one." P8 (Teacher) (LSEN School 2)

These strategies could foster productive collaboration between the Department, teachers and parents as well. Collaboration with the teacher is key to successful inclusion, because it not only produces support between members but also aids in ensuring that the support provided is consistent.

4.4.9.1.2 Lack of support

EWP 6 (DoE, 2001) makes provision for support by recommending the development of a tier support system and collaboration between these systems. The district-based support teams are responsible for providing a coordinated professional support service that draws on expertise in further and higher education and local communities, targeting special schools and specialised settings.

According to Boyle et al. (2020), parents, SBSTs, DBSTs, and the DBE are among the role players who fail to offer the necessary support and guidance to enable teachers to successfully put inclusive techniques into practice, and support learners with barriers to learning. Makhalemele and Nel (2016) affirm that the DBSTs are inadequately prepared to fulfil their supportive function; consequently, they face difficulties in providing assistance and guidance to the SBST. The DBST is tasked with the responsibility of planning continuous professional development, as well as monitoring and providing support to both teachers and learners concerning barriers to learning (DBE, 2014; Lebona, 2015). The co-researchers emphasised the lack of support systems among

all stakeholders, which consists of parents, teachers, SBSTs, DBSTs and the DoE to address learners' needs effectively.

Participant 3 from LSEN School 1 said the following regarding this problem:

"I think if we can maybe also educate our..., my family about my child's information. So that they can understand all the things about a child with autism. Then they will understand me better and then support me also better." P3 (Parent) (LSEN School 1)

The ALG collaboratively came up with the following strategies to enhance effective support for learners on the AS. They advocated for peer support, informing family and friends about ASD, and acknowledgement from upper structures. The following were said:

"Maybe due to a lack of support, we can talk about community organisations like churches that will do a campaign for the homeless, or the community will do a support package for parents with ASD. I don't know if it falls under lack of finances or support, or both. I am also going to talk about the idea when this learner finishes school, and then what the consideration is. The parents need to be equipped with what happens after school, but also the school needs to get those learners to a point where they are as independent as possible, so they are not burdened, like vocational training, work readiness, work hardening and skills." P8 (Teachers) (LSEN School 2)

"How about on the lack of support, how about informing family and friends about autism challenges?" P7 (Parent) (LSEN School 2)

4.4.9.1.3 Policies

Inclusive education policies support the full participation of learners with various educational needs. Nevertheless, these ideals are frequently contradicted by the reality on the ground. South Africa's inclusive education policy has been well known as 'symbolic implementation' due to a lack of implementation, such as EWP 6, which was considered a crucial intervention when it was released in 2001; however, the implementation has not resulted in significant progress in the Eastern Cape Province (Adewumi et al., 2019). Furthermore, Walton and Engelbrecht (2022) emphasise that inclusive education policy is being implemented poorly because of the absence of political will in South Africa.

Participant 3 from LSEN School 1 said:

"And I think parents must be informed about the policies, because I don't think they are always aware of the policies that are in place at school." P3 (Teacher) (LSEN School 1)

The other participants said the following:

"They can edit their current policy to provide practical input." P8 (Teacher) (LSEN School 2)

"Maybe the Education Department can make a separate policy for learners on the autism spectrum." P3 (Parent) (LSEN School1)

"The Department can make a separate policy for learners on the autism spectrum." P7 (Parent) (LSEN School 2)

The ambiguity in policy has made effective implementation problematic. The co-researchers came up with the following strategies regarding the ambiguity of the policy: maybe the DoE can make a separate policy for learners on the AS, including curriculum adjustment and implementation of the BELA Act, and parents should be informed about the policies. These strategies can help to meet the diverse needs of learners.

4.4.9.1.4 Lack of resources

According to Donohue and Bornman (2014), one of the key difficulties facing the inclusive education system in South Africa is the general scarcity of resources. The co-researchers in the ALG collaborated to come up with resourceful strategies to support learners on AS, including making use of recycled material, collaborating with other schools to use different resources, utilising technology; also community services can maximise the use of resources. One of the participants said:

"Like maybe we collaborate with other schools in terms of resources." P2 (Teacher) (LSEN School1)

Participant 1 from LSEN School 1 also said the following:

"We ask the community for resources, and the parents can also make use of that. And then we can also say you can make use of Pinterest and Google to see what resources you can use." P1 (Teacher) (LSEN School 1)

According to McCart et al. (2014), this difficulty can be solved by developing one's own resources and modifying current ones. One of the participants said:

"We are already making toilet rolls." P8 (Teacher) (LSEN School 2)

Furthermore, the co-researchers in the ALG noted that fundraising and seeking sponsorship could assist as external support for learners on the AS. Participant 1 from LSEN School 1 said:

"Ask the community for resources that they throw away." P1 (Teacher) (LSEN School 1)

4.4.9.1.5 Lack of finances

According to Horlin et al. (2014), families of learners on the AS have a variety of costs associated with their extra expenditure, and these costs have a major impact on the whole family. To tackle this problem, knowing about the caregiver's experience might help in the creation of effective services and strategies that would alleviate their burden in caring for learners on the AS (Hoefman

et al., 2014). In addressing misuse of funds by parents, the teachers collaboratively devised strategies for the management of finances. The following strategies were devised: grant use training, schools hiring parents to assist with the family finances, and government assistance with medication.

One of the participants, who is P2 from LSEN School 1, said:

“So, we must educate their parents about how to use the funds that they receive.” P2 (Teacher) (LSEN School 1)

Participant 3 also agreed with P2 by saying:

“So, we can educate parents to use grants for the child’s development needs and not for their own benefits.” P3 (Teacher) (LSEN School 1)

The following were said by Participants 8 and 3:

“I’m just thinking about finances, that when a school has posts open, even if it’s a support staff, that parents of the learners may get first choice of hiring, or is that like against other basic conditions?” P8 (Teacher) (LSEN School 2)

“Free medication for the learners on the autism spectrum to help parents financially.” P3 (Parent) (LSEN School 1)

Supporting a learner on the AS is often very expensive, leading to financial stress for families. According to Khoaeane and Naong (2015), learners with barriers to learning are not exempt and need more resources than their able peers.

4.4.9.1.6 Psychological needs

According to Ren et al. (2020), children's learning challenges can have a major impact on their parents by causing them more stress, anxiety, and less self-assurance in their capacity to help their children learn. Ntuli et al. (2020) believe that psychological assistance for parents is a crucial strategy for helping families cope with these circumstances. The co-researchers devised strategies to reduce psychological problems as follows: The DoE can provide a psychologist once a month to support teachers and parents, and the school can give support to teachers when they need leave for medical reasons. The co-researchers said the following:

“It can be helpful if the Department can give us a psychologist once a month to support us as a group.” P3 (Parent) (LSEN School 1)

“Maybe we can do support groups with the school social worker.” P8 (T) (LSEN School 2)

“I think the important thing is we as teachers and parents, we have to speak out and inform our colleagues and people if we are maybe tense or stressed out, and they need to know that they can support us.” P1 (Teacher) (LSEN School 1)

4.4.9.1.7 Lack of time management

According to Zhao and Song (2021), teachers have a lot on their plates, including a complete curriculum to teach, which makes it difficult for them to devote attention to learners who need additional attention and support. Most teachers are faced with a lack of time management when it comes to supporting learners on the AS. The restricted amount of time makes it difficult to meet the wide range of needs of learners and implement successful strategies for inclusive education (Graham, 2020).

Preparatory planning and reduced distractions may help teachers and learners stay on their to-do lists, decrease stress levels, and maximise productivity. Reducing interruptions for both learners and teachers may foster an undisturbed learning environment that promotes concentration and participation. The following was said in the ALG,

“Structure and discipline must also be implemented in the class so that those learners don’t exhibit bad behaviour during the day.” P2 (Teacher) (LSEN School 1)

“And limiting the distraction for learners and teachers in the class will also help with our time and so on.” P3 (Teacher) (LSEN School 1)

These strategies may assist in establishing a more productive learning environment, enabling them to effectively allocate their time towards planning, adapting and educating learners on the AS.

4.4.9.1.8 Parental stigma and isolation

Social isolation and stigma contribute to mental, emotional and physical problems (Kumar et al., 2018). According to Sithole-Tetani (2025), the presence of social stigma makes it challenging for parents to take on responsibilities associated with their child's condition. The stigma associated with parents of learners on the AS is both universal and cultural. The co-researchers collaboratively developed the following strategies to prevent stigma and isolation, by inviting a guest speaker who has personal experience of being stigmatised and isolated, community engagement, and a support group. The following was said:

“Maybe sometimes it’s, it’s a mother who has for the last 40 years had a child on the autism spectrum and wants to share their experience?” P8 (Teacher) (LSEN School 2)

“And then here we talk about guest professional speakers.” P6 (Parent) (LSEN School 2)

Parental stigma and isolation can be addressed using support groups, by creating a safe understanding environment, sharing experiences, and offering peer support. These strategies collectively contribute to fostering a culture that rejects stigma and instead promotes an environment that is safe and respectful for all.

4.4.9.1.9 Lack of training and understanding of ASD

As stated by Hosseinpour et al. (2022), in addition to the challenges associated with diagnosing ASD due to the characteristics of this disorder, parents of learners on the AS often struggle to recognise the distinctions between their children and their peers. Considering the complexity of the disease, it is essential to assist parents in comprehending this disorder and recognising the needs and challenges faced by learners on the AS. The teachers, as well as parents, collaboratively developed strategies to overcome the lack of training and understanding of ASD. These strategies comprise an ASD awareness campaign, guest professionals, e.g. a Doctor trained in ASD, and further research. The co-researchers said the following:

“I think if we can maybe also educate our, for me instance, my family about my child's information about him. So that they can understand all the things about the autistic child, then they will understand me better and then support me also better.” P3 (Parent) (LSEN School 1).

“But like I'm saying, you know, on the National Health Calendar, we talk about autism spectrum disorder awareness.” P8 (Teacher) (LSEN School 2)

Participant 8 further stated that:

“I think we could do further research into autism.” P8 (Teacher) (LSEN School 2)

Research indicates that interventions aimed at educating families of learners on the AS have a positive impact on learners in different ways and also influence parents themselves (Vosough Matin & Sari, 2023).

Themane and Thobejane (2019) suggest that inadequate implementation of inclusive education could be linked to insufficient training and expertise. Many teachers believe that they lack sufficient knowledge and skills required to recognise and address particular challenges encountered by learners with barriers (Chew & Cerbin, 2021). The teachers devised the following strategies: help from the DoE as well as the Department of Health, further research, and hiring of a special needs specialist.

These strategies can assist in creating a more inclusive and successful learning environment for learners on the AS. Professional development programmes provide teachers with opportunities to participate in collaborative learning, obtain guidance from seasoned teachers, and remain informed about the most recent research and effective practices in inclusive education (Colognesi et al., 2020). Tshisikule (2014) states that teacher professional development aimed at enhancing learning outcomes positively contributes to the progress of learners.

4.4.9.2 *Reflection on Cycle 3*

Considering the completion of Cycle 3 from my point of view, the majority of the ALG members had not previously used a fishbone diagram; this was a valuable experience for both of us. The collaborative efforts and insightful findings demonstrate that this research endeavour has been successful. Through this cycle, we were committed to addressing the challenges that teachers and parents experience, and coming up with strategies to address these challenges. The enthusiasm and eagerness of the co-researchers to use these strategies in supporting learners on the AS showed a collective will to create a more inclusive learning environment.

4.5 CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter deliberated on the findings of this research study. The responses of the participants were analysed and summarised according to themes. Furthermore, the themes were discussed considering the relevant literature review. An integrative discussion of the findings is presented. The next chapter will present a summary of each study chapter. It will also provide a summary of the literature and the results of empirical investigations. Lastly, it will conclude with a summary of the study, a discussion of its challenges and limitations, an appraisal of PALAR as a research methodology, its contributions, and suggestions for future research.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE RESEARCH

5.1 INTRODUCTION

The previous chapter presented the findings of the study. This chapter will present the synopsis of the findings and the recommendations that will allow collaboration between teachers and parents in supporting learners on the AS, using the PALAR approach. The findings of this study are correlated to the theoretical frameworks, literature, and the four research questions. Lastly, this chapter will succinctly discuss research findings, challenges and limitations of the study, recommendations for further research, and the conclusion will summarise the entire study.

5.2 PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH

The purpose of this study was to examine collaborative strategies that teachers and parents can adopt to assist learners on the AS in the Fezile Dabi district of the Free State Province, through the application of the PALAR approach.

This was achieved by identifying the challenges and experiences of the teachers and parents in the Fezile Dabi district. A PALAR approach was used to elicit information to enhance collaboration strategies between teachers and parents to support learners on the AS. Moreover, collaboration amongst the ALG was used to identify strategies that teachers and parents can use to support learners on the AS. Both personal and professional journeys were developed by this PALAR method, which engaged, encouraged, and enforced participation amongst ALG members; this inscribed lasting experience and a longing to continue to work together beyond the research activities.

5.3 OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY

Chapter 1 described the critical need for teachers and parents to collaborate well by supporting learners on the AS. It presented the overview of the study. The main components of this research are summarised and clearly outlined in this chapter. The study's background, problem statement, research questions, research aim and objectives, as well as concept clarification, were presented. Finally, the chapter included the theoretical frameworks, research methodology and paradigm, research design, research methods, data collection and analysis, quality criteria and trustworthiness of the research, as well as ethical considerations.

Chapter 2 summarised and investigated the body of literature pertaining to the focus of this study, aligned with the research objectives, to study collaborative strategies of parents and teachers in supporting learners on the AS. It provided theoretical grounding, investigated past research, and found some research gaps in this investigation. It also looked into global and African moves towards inclusive education, then explored AS as a challenge in learning, with a focus on how it affects learners' development, and the difficulties found by parents and teachers. It further looked into collaborative efforts, and effective teaching strategies with reference to Gardner's MI theory (1983) and Mezirow's TL theory (1978). Lastly, it set the foundational knowledge of key issues and approaches for supporting learners on the AS.

Chapter 3 established a comprehensive understanding of the philosophical principles that underpin the research investigation. It began with a discussion of the selected research paradigm, explaining how its principles influence both the study objectives and research methodologies. The PALAR approach was used, including collages, reflective journals, recorded discussions, illustrative drawing, and fishbone analysis to acquire data. Chapter 3 further presented participants' recruitment, data gathering technique, data analysis, quality criteria and trustworthiness, ethical considerations, and lastly anonymity and confidentiality of the study.

Chapter 4 presented an analysis of the data and interpretation of the findings derived from the data gathered by the co-researchers. The co-researchers collaboratively used a fishbone analysis diagram to derive strategies to improve collaboration between teachers and parents to support learners who are on the AS. This was achieved through informative discussions presented in the form of themes and sub-themes. The conclusion marked the end of the chapter.

Chapter 5 includes a synopsis of each study chapter. An overview of the results of the empirical research and literature is also included in this chapter. Lastly, this chapter deliberates on the evaluation of PALAR as a research design, limitations and challenges of this study, contribution of the study, recommendations for further research, and presents the summary.

5.4 KEY FINDINGS FROM THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The co-researchers produced data related to the research questions by means of art-based methods, which included illustrative drawing, collage making, reflective journals, and recorded discussions. The research findings were assessed and discussed by the co-researchers in their reflective journals prior to sharing the findings with other co-researchers. The key findings will be outlined in a synopsis below.

5.4.1 Key findings from the first secondary research question

"What are the challenges and experiences of teachers and parents in the Fezile Dabi district regarding learners on the autism spectrum?"

In order to address this research question, co-researchers were assigned the task of making illustrative drawings in Cycle 1 to visually communicate their challenges and experiences in supporting learners on the AS, accompanied by recorded ALG informative discussions. This method helped the co-researchers to convey complex ideas visually, improved their understanding and recollection, and kept the co-researchers engaged.

Thematic analysis methods were used in a collaborative analysis that revealed several common themes pinpointing challenges faced by the co-researchers. The following themes and subthemes emerged from cycle 1: Theme 1: Teachers and Parents' Collaboration; Theme 2: Psychological barriers; Theme 3: Institutional and external challenges. The purpose of theme 1 was to explore lack of communication between stakeholders, lack of understanding of ASD, and financial issues (See Figure 4.2). The purpose of Theme 2 was to explore psychological barriers such as stigma, stress, and lack of counselling (See Figure 4.3), and lastly Theme 3 was to explore institutional and external challenges such as lack of resources, lack of support, policies, curriculum, and the lack of training and knowledge of teachers (See Section 4.4.6.1 - 4.4.6.3). The research's findings showed that co-researchers encountered a variety of challenges as they supported learners on the AS.

5.4.2 Key Findings from the Second Secondary Research Questions

“How do parental perceptions and experiences influence their involvement in support methods for learners on the autism spectrum?”

In addressing this research question, the co-researchers interacted in a collage-making activity in Cycle 2. This art-based method empowered co-researchers to create their own stories and actively engage in the study. Common themes that were identified by the co-researchers were as follows: theme 1: societal perception; theme 2: resources; theme 3: lack of collaboration and communication. The purpose of theme 1 was to look into parental perceptions such as misconception and myth, blaming and isolation (See Figure 4.7). The aim of theme 2 was to explore inadequate financial relief from the government and misuse of grants by parents (See Figure 4.7), and lastly the purpose of theme 3 was to look into lack of collaboration, communication, and routine (See Section 4.4.8.4.1 – 4.4.8.4.3).

5.4.2 Key Findings from the Third Secondary Research Question

“What guidelines can teachers and parents use to support learners on the autism spectrum?”

The co-researchers employed the fishbone diagram in a collaborative manner to address these research questions. The collaborative process of creating a fishbone diagram fostered group participation and helped the co-researchers agree on the problem and its possible causes. The co-researchers displayed willingness to develop strategies that are consistent with each major

theme related to the previous questions (see Figure 4.11 and Annexure K). The co-researcher's strategies reflected collaborative efforts to improve support for learners on the AS.

5.4.3 Key Findings from the Primary Research Question

“How can teachers and parents in the Fezile Dabi district collaboratively use the PALAR approach to support learners on the autism spectrum?”

The PALAR methodology, which was used in this research, motivated the ALG members to collaborate in their search for answers and solutions to the challenges and experiences when this study was conducted (see Table 4.12). The ALG members appreciated the collaboration process because both groups felt supported. It was clear that the members of the ALG had undergone TL, which had influenced their minds. In responding to the primary research question, I use the results from the three previous questions, which are from Cycle 1 to Cycle 3, and suggest strategies particularly suitable for teachers and parents dealing with learners on the AS. The following strategies are listed as follows.

- **Encourage and foster collaboration:**
 - Create support groups for collaborations.
 - Foster open communication.
 - Collaboration should be goal-oriented and intentional.
 - Acknowledge parents' indigenous knowledge, informal expertise on their children, and actively incorporate their experiences, insight and concerns in developing support strategies for their children.
 - Create a conducive environment for all to feel free to participate, to be listened to, and their concerns and contributions valued and accommodated.
- **Review policies:**
 - Policies such as EWP 6, DCAPS and SIAS must be aligned in order to meet the needs of learners who are on the AS, as well as teachers.
 - Involve diverse stakeholders, especially those from marginalised communities, in the policy development and review.
 - Grant resources for education, specifically support services and training, to ensure the policy is implemented successfully.
 - Create a policy that is specifically meant for learners on the AS.
 - Develop a policy that is geared towards collaborative efforts between parents and teachers in supporting learners on AS.
- **Effective time management:**
 - Establish clear objectives that are time-bound in all programmes to help learners.
 - Participatory approach between parents and teachers in setting collective objectives with well-defined roles, responsibilities and timelines to ensure accountability.

- Well-defined, inclusive year plan for teachers and learners in their collaborative endeavours.
- Inclusive monitoring team to evaluate performance and achievements, readjusting and fine-tuning plans with reality.
- **Support programmes for teachers and parents:**
 - Planning and analysis of required support programmes for teachers and parents
 - Define training objectives for collaborative programmes required.
 - Design implementation plan, which is inclusive of monitoring and evaluation, and which will enhance feedback and elaborative reports.
 - The SBSTS, as well as DBST, should be functional to offer support to teachers and parents.
- **Allocation of adequate resources:**
 - Mobilisation of financial resources.
 - Fundraising development by the school in collaboration with teachers and parents towards financing support programmes.
 - Financial budgetary request by the school to the Department to augment existing efforts.
 - Resource planning and acquisition for learner development.
 - The Minister of Education should increase budget allocation for special needs education.
- **Develop policies to address stigma:**
 - Design and promote a community awareness campaign.
 - Construct a team inclusive of DBST, SGB, principal, social workers, government departments and NGOs to foster programme implementation.
 - Encourage community involvement at the grassroots level in tackling the problem of stigma.
- **Teachers and parents training programmes:**
 - Employ a multi-departmental disciplinary approach toward supporting teachers and parents by deploying different professional experts to help both teachers and parents meet the needs and challenges they face.
 - Improve co-operation between schools and universities to help with a pool of expertise from academics as they push towards new solutions, technologies and further research.
 - Workshops should be held for parents to educate them about ASD.
 - The DBST should provide continuous professional development workshops for teachers teaching learners on the AS.
- **Enhance initiatives towards psychological support:**

- The DoE should create a psychologically-safe culture for teachers and parents by raising awareness and implementing programmes.
- The DoE should develop policies that support the mental health and well-being of teachers and parents of learners on the AS.
- Mental health and psychosocial programmes should be implemented in LSEN schools.

5.5 APPRAISAL OF PALAR APPROACH

The PALAR approach as a research design was the best choice because it caused the change that we, as the members of the ALG, had anticipated in this research (Zuber-Skerritt, 2011). As participants, we were able to forge relationships by means of the PALAR approach, as the members of the ALG were able to work together to contemplate our own activities and express our perspectives. We gained lifelong learning in the ALG, as well as improving our professional and personal abilities and understanding, by coming up with strategies that teachers and parents can use to support learners on the AS. According to Wood (2020), PALAR aims at learning and using research to improve one's local neighbourhood. The PALAR design facilitated TL and self-directed learning. Transformative Learning theory and PALAR are interdependent in both their theoretical and practical aspects. Learning is characterized by a dynamic, democratic, collaborative process in both PALAR and TL, rather than the unchanging transfer of knowledge. In PALAR, participants continuously challenge their own assumptions by frequently carrying out critical reflection in ALG. This collective inquiry directly addresses the fundamental principle of transformative learning, which involves reassembling one's current frame of reference into new and inclusive views and habits. Both TL and PALAR seamlessly support each other in practice. In this study, linking TL and PALAR assisted the co-researchers to collaborate in identifying common challenges and critically reflect on their mutual experiences.

5.6 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This research was carried out in the Fezile Dabi District in the Free State Province, South Africa, with only two LSEN schools sampled; consequently, the researcher was limited from ascertaining information from other districts on teachers and parents' collaboration to support learners on the AS. The findings of this study will not be in a position to be applied to every LSEN school in South Africa. Participants in this study are teachers and parents in two different LSEN schools in the Fezile Dabi District. Therefore, their perspective and understanding in this study are based on their own experiences.

5.7 CHALLENGES OF THIS STUDY

The main challenge of this research was the distance between the two LSEN schools, as the LSEN schools are not in the same town. Due to the distance between them, I had to form two ALGs, where I had to meet with them on separate days. This was a very stressful journey for me. Another challenge of this study was the language barrier, as one of the LSEN school parents spoke Sesotho; they were more comfortable speaking Sesotho, so I had to translate Sesotho to English. With the same LSEN school, I had many participants, but due to their responsibilities after school, they had to be excused from the study as they could no longer attend the meetings. Lastly another challenge was that in one LSEN school, a parent had to be excused from the meetings as she had to attend the class with the learner due to the severity of the spectrum of the child. The learner could not be left unattended and if he come with the parent to the meetings, the learner will disrupt the meeting because he was not familiar with some of us.

5.8 CONTRIBUTION OF THE STUDY

The objective of this study, among others, was to help parents and teachers of both schools with strategies and guidelines that they can use to collaborate in supporting learners on the AS. This promotes and advocates for collaborative efforts among parents and teachers. The study further wishes to improve implementation efforts towards successful programmes, as teachers and parents collaborate in helping learners. The study will also help address key challenges faced by parents and teachers in collaborating as they support learners, through developed skills, knowledge, and strategies specific to their learners in this schools. The study provides evidence for the need for local promotion of collaborative programmes to enforce a community-based approach to collaboration in these schools.

Through a participatory approach guided by PALAR, the researcher, parents, and teachers gained valuable experience, skills, and knowledge as collaborators in the research process. This assisted participants in enhancing their skills, knowledge, and awareness towards working collaboratively, and will be the seed from which more effort and awareness will spread to others to show what can be achieved by working together to achieve desired goals.

Through transformative learning theory this study was able to move the emphasis from data gathering to investigating cognitive change, forcing co-researchers to consider "disorienting dilemmas" and participate in logical conversation to alter their views of the world. The application of Transformative Learning theory played a crucial role in the adoption of theoretical explanations for change and development, utilizing unique professional growth models to anticipate vital strategies that needed to be implemented by teachers and parents for effective collaboration to support learners on the AS. Participants were able to enhance their teamwork and critical thinking skills through this.

This study will theoretically contribute to the body of knowledge required for teachers to develop educational methods and strategies that are effective in enhancing learners' multiple intelligences, especially those on the AS. The study will also inform and conscientise parents about different types of children's intelligences, hence promote synergy between parents and teachers in their collaborative efforts in supporting learners on the AS. It will further discourage parents to generalise their children's abilities, making unwanted comparison with other children on AS in their learning process, but help them to collaborate with teachers in creating a learning environment that supports development of various types of intelligences.

5.9 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

The research goals were met. However, further research should be carried out throughout the entire district to determine if the same findings can be found, since this study was carried out only on two schools. It will also be vital to research the effective role needed to be played by SBST in supporting teachers and parents on how to effectively collaborate; to investigate new technologies for more efficient methods to support collaborative efforts of parents and teachers within the Department; to find and explore ways district entities can contribute to formalise and support collaborative programmes by parents and teachers in supporting learners on the AS; and to investigate more effective and evidence-based strategies that both parents and teachers can use collectively to support learners on the AS.

5.10 CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I provided a summary of the preceding chapters and focused on the findings, followed by appraisal of the PALAR approach, limitations and challenges of the study, contribution of the study and recommendations for further research. This study aimed to examine collaborative strategies that teachers and parents can adopt to assist learners on the AS in the Fezile Dabi District, Free State province in South Africa, through the application of the PALAR approach. The study was conducted in two LSEN schools, guided by Gardeners' Multiple Intelligence Theory as well as Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory. Through the use of art-based methods and reflective journals, data was generated and analysed, which revealed three interconnected themes, pointing out challenges faced by teachers and parents in supporting learners on the AS.

The findings of the study explicitly reflected a critical need for collaborative effort between teachers and parents in supporting learners on the AS. The study also highlighted the importance of synergy between parents and teachers in their collaborative efforts to help learners. This study has shown that collaboration in LSEN schools can be significantly improved through collective, reflective engagement among teachers and parents. The PALAR approach enabled co-

researchers to identify challenges, share strategies, and develop solutions in collaboration, while also inspiring a sense of solidarity and agency. The implications of these findings reach far beyond the confines of the school environment. They indicate that participatory methods can improve professional growth, reinforce community connections, and guide policy choices that emphasize inclusive education. Based on the findings, the following guidelines were recommended; encourage and foster collaboration, review policies, implement effective time management, provide adequate resource allocation, and finally, introduce well-developed support programmes tailored towards skills improvement of teachers and parents in their collaborative endeavour in supporting learners on the AS. Teachers and parents can contribute maximally when they collaborate supporting learners on AS towards empowering them to reach their full potential and living fulfilling and joyful lives.

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APPENDICES

ANNEXURE A: ETHICAL CLEARANCE



Private Bag X1290, Potchefstroom
South Africa 2520

Tel: 018 299-1111/2222
Fax: 018 299-4910
Web: <http://www.nwu.ac.za>

Senate Committee for Research Ethics
Tel: 016 103 4440
Email: Feziwe.Mseleni@nwu.ac.za

ETHICS APPROVAL LETTER OF STUDY

Based on approval by the **Education Sciences Research Ethics Committee (EduREC)** on 29 May 2025, the Education Sciences Research Ethics Committee hereby **approves** your request as indicated below. This implies that the North-West University Senate Committee for Research Ethics (NWU-SCRE) grants its permission that, provided the special conditions specified below are met and pending any other authorisation that may be necessary, the study may be initiated, using the ethics number below.

Study title: Teachers and parents' collaboration to support learners on the Autism spectrum: A

PALAR approach

Study Leader/Supervisor (Principal Investigator)/Researcher: Dr H Louw

Student / Team: Ms MC Rakholele (MEd student – 26482258), Prof JA Rens

Ethics number:

N	W	U	-	0	1	0	8	3	-	2	5	-	A	2
Institution				Study Number					Year		Status			

Status: S = Submission; R = Re-Submission; P = Provisional Authorisation; A = Authorisation

Application Type: Single study

Commencement date: 29/05/2025

Risk:

Low Risk

Expiry date: 29/05/2026

Approval of the study is initially provided for a year, after which continuation of the study is dependent on receipt and review of the annual (or as otherwise stipulated) monitoring report and the concomitant issuing of a letter of continuation.

Special in process conditions of the research for approval (if applicable):

General conditions:

While this ethics approval is subject to all declarations, undertakings and agreements incorporated and signed in the application form, the following general terms and conditions will apply:

- The study leader/supervisor (principle investigator)/researcher must report in the prescribed format to the ES-REC:
 - annually (or as otherwise requested) on the monitoring of the study, whereby a letter of continuation will be provided, and upon completion of the study; and
 - without any delay in case of any adverse event or incident (or any matter that interrupts sound ethical principles) during the course of the study.
- The approval applies strictly to the proposal as stipulated in the application form. Should any amendments to the proposal be deemed necessary during the course of the study, the study leader/researcher must apply for approval of these amendments at the ES-REC, prior to implementation. Should there be any deviations from the study proposal without the necessary approval of such amendments, the ethics approval is immediately and automatically forfeited.
- Annually a number of studies may be randomly selected for an external audit.
- The date of approval indicates the first date that the study may be started.
- In the interest of ethical responsibility, the NWU-SCRE and ES-REC reserves the right to:
 - request access to any information or data at any time during the course or after completion of the study;

- *to ask further questions, seek additional information, require further modification or monitor the conduct of your research or the informed consent process;*
- *withdraw or postpone approval if:*
 - *any unethical principles or practices of the study are revealed or suspected;*
 - *it becomes apparent that any relevant information was withheld from the ES-REC or that information has been false or misrepresented;*
 - *submission of the annual (or otherwise stipulated) monitoring report, the required amendments, or reporting of adverse events or incidents was not done in a timely manner and accurately; and / or*
 - *new institutional rules, national legislation or international conventions deem it necessary.*

The ES-REC would like to remain at your service as scientist and researcher, and wishes you well with your study. Please do not hesitate to contact the ES-REC or the NWU-SCRE for any further enquiries or requests for assistance.

Yours sincerely



Prof JJJ de Beer
Chairperson NWU Education Sciences Research Ethics Committee

Original details: (22351930) C:\Users\22351930\Desktop\ETHICS APPROVAL LETTER OF STUDY.docm
8 November 2018

Current details: (22351930) M:\DSS1\8533\Monitoring and Reporting Cluster\Ethics\Certificates\Templates\Research Ethics Approval Letters\9.1.5.4.1 ES-REC Ethical Approval Letter.docm
5 December 2018

File reference: 9.1.5.4.2

ANNEXURE B: DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION APPROVAL LETTER

Enquiries: K.M. Manka
Ref: Permission for Research: M. C. Rakholile
Tel. 051 404 8808
Email: K.Manka@fseducation.gov.za



36 A Strang Street
Ou Dorp
Kroonstad
9499

Dear Mrs. M. C. Rakholile

PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH IN THE FREE STATE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION: FEZILE DABI DISTRICT

This letter serves to inform you that you have been granted permission to conduct research in the Free State Department of Education within the Fezile Dabi District. The details in relation to your research project with the North-West University are as follows:

Topic: Teachers and parents' collaboration to support learners on the Autism spectrum: A PALAR approach.

1. **List of schools involved:** Mphatlalatsane Special School and Johan Slabbert Special School.
2. **Target Population:** Four teachers teaching in grades 1 to 5 and two parents of learners attending at the selected schools.
3. **Period of research:** From the signature of this letter until 30 September 2025. Please note that the department does not allow any research to be conducted during the fourth term (quarter) of the academic year. Should you fall behind your schedule by three months to complete your research project in the approved period, you will need to apply for an extension. The researcher is expected to request permission from the school principals to conduct research at schools.
4. The approval is subject to the following conditions:
 - 4.1 The collection of data should not interfere with the normal tuition time or teaching process.
 - 4.2 A bound copy of the research document should be submitted to the Free State Department of Education, Room 101, 1st Floor, Thuto House, St. Andrew Street, Bloemfontein or can be emailed to the above-mentioned email address.
 - 4.3 You will be expected, on completion of your research study to make a presentation to the relevant stakeholders in the Department.
 - 4.4 The ethics documents must be adhered to in the discourse of your study in our department.
5. Please note that costs relating to all the conditions mentioned above are your own responsibility.

Yours Sincerely,

Mr. MZAMO W. JACOBS
DIRECTOR: QUALITY ASSURANCE, M&E AND STRATEGIC PLANNING

DATE: 13/06/2025

APPLICATION FOR RESEARCH BY M. C. RAKHOLILE. PERMISSION LETTER 12 JUNE 2025. FEZILE DABI DISTRICT
QASME, M&E and Strategic Planning Directorate Private Bag X20565, Bloemfontein, 9300 - Thuto House, Room 101, 1st Floor, St Andrew Street, Bloemfontein

www.fsdof.fs.gov.za

Enquiries: K.M. Manka
Ref: Notification of Research: M. C. Rakholile
Tel. 051 404 8808
Email: K.Manka@fseducation.gov.za

District Director
Fezile Dabi District

Dear Dr. Chuta

NOTIFICATION OF RESEARCH: PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH PROJECT IN FEZILE DABI DISTRICT

This letter serves to inform you that Mrs. M. C. Rakholile has been granted permission to conduct research in the Fezile Dabi District under the auspices of the North-West University. The details in relation to the research project are as follows:

Topic: Teachers and parents' collaboration to support learners on the Autism spectrum: A PALAR approach.

1. **List of schools involved:** Mphatlalatsane Special School and Johan Slabbert Special School.
2. **Target Population:** Four teachers teaching in grades 1 to 5 and two parents of learners attending at the selected schools.
3. **Period of research:** From the signature of this letter until 30 September 2025. Please note the department does not allow any research to be conducted during the fourth term (quarter) of the academic year nor during normal school hours. The researcher is expected to request permission from the school principals to conduct research at schools.
4. **Research benefits:** LSEN schools may discover strategies to support learners on the Autism Spectrum and may improve collaboration between teachers and parents. The research will raise awareness of the important role that teachers and parents play in the support given to learners on the Autism spectrum. The distinctive contribution of the research will be in the advancement of teacher collaboration for supporting learners on the Autism spectrum and will also contribute to existing research that has been conducted.
5. The Sub-directorate of Research and policy will make the necessary arrangements for the researchers to present the findings and recommendations to the relevant officials in the Department.

Yours Sincerely,



Mr. MZAMO W. JACOBS
DIRECTOR: QUALITY ASSURANCE, M&E AND STRATEGIC PLANNING

DATE: 13/06/2025

ANNEXURE C: PRINCIPAL CONSENT FORM

 NWU® NORTH-WEST UNIVERSITY NOORDWES-UNIVERSITEIT YUNIBESITHI YA BOKONE-BOPHIRIMA	Private Bag X6001, Potchefstroom South Africa 2520 Tel: 018 299-1111/2222 Web: http://www.nwu.ac.za Faculty of Education Community Based Educational Research (COMBER) Tel: 018 111 1111 Email: cynthiarakhollile@gmail.com Date: 6 December 2024
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PERMISSION LETTER: SCHOOL PRINCIPAL/OTHER RELEVANT PERSON

I herewith wish to request your permission for your Grade 1-5 teachers who teach learners on the autism spectrum to participate in this research, which involves collaboration between teachers and parents to support learners on the autism spectrum. Prior to granting permission, please acquaint yourself with the information below.

The details of the research are as follows:

TITLE OF THE RESEARCH PROJECT:

Teacher - parent collaboration to support learners on the autism spectrum: A PALAR approach

ETHICS APPLICATION NUMBER

NWU-0108325-A2

PROJECT SUPERVISOR:

DR HANNELIE LOUW

CO-SUPERVISOR:

PROF JULIALET RENS

ADDRESS:

NWU FACULTY OF EDUCATION

POTCHEFSTROOM

CONTACT NUMBER: 018 299 4656

MEMBER OF PROJECT TEAM MEd-Student: MRS MOLELEKENG CYNTHIA RAKHOLILE
ADDRESS: 36A STRANG STREET
OU DORP, KROONSTAD
9499

CONTACT NUMBER: 071 0561838

FACULTY OF EDUCATION RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE

Contact person: Ms Erna Greyling, E-mail: Erna.Greyling@nwu.ac.za, Tel. (018) 299 4656

This study has been approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Education of the North-West University and will be conducted according to the ethical guidelines of this committee. Permission was also obtained from the provincial Department of Basic Education/other relevant body.

What is this research about?

The aims of this research are:

- To identify challenges and experiences of teachers and parents in the Fezile Dabi district regarding learners on the autism spectrum.
- To understand the level of parental perceptions and experiences that influence involvement in support techniques for learners diagnosed on the autism spectrum in the Fezile Dabi district, Free State Province, South Africa.
- To recommend guidelines that educators and parents can use to support learners on the autism spectrum.

Participants

Participants will include two teachers and one parent from each of the LSEN schools based on their willingness and availability to participate in the study

What is expected of the participants?

The participants will be expected to form and engage in Action Learning Groups through three cycles as well as engage in informative discussions throughout the research project. Lastly to answer questions through art-based methods, which consists of: sketching, collage-making and photography.

Benefits to the participants

The participants will be able to voice the challenges and experiences faced by teachers and parents in supporting learners on the autism spectrum, and working as a team through collaboration will also strengthen their relationship within the working environment. The research will raise awareness of the important role that teachers and parents play in the support given to learners on the autism spectrum. The distinctive contribution of the research will be in the advancement of teacher collaboration for supporting learners on the autism spectrum and will also contribute to existing research that has been conducted.

Risks involved for participants

Stress due to limited time in their schedules to participate in the study. The groups may elicit difference of opinions and possible conflict between them.

Confidentiality and protection of identity

It is not necessary to keep the participants anonymous, as participants are not expected to be aware of requirements for anonymity of different research methodologies. All participants and schools will be given pseudonyms in this research to protect their identities. Throughout the research project, I will adhere to the Protection of Personal Information Act (POPIA), Act No. 4 of 2013 (RSA, 2013).

Dissemination of findings

Findings will be communicated to the schools. A booklet will be compiled indicating what action can teachers and parents take to collaborate in supporting learners on the autism spectrum. As soon as the study is completed and the results of the study are available the participants will be notified via email when the meeting will be held.

If you have any further questions or enquiries regarding your participation in this research, please contact the researchers for more information.

DECLARATION BY PRINCIPAL/OTHER RELEVANT PERSON:

By signing below, I agree to give permission for the research to take place with the identified participants in the study entitled:

[Teacher - parent collaboration to support learners on the autism spectrum: A PALAR approach]

I declare that:

- I have read this information and consent form and understand what is expected of the participants in the research.
- I have had a chance to ask questions to the researcher and all my questions have been adequately answered.
- I understand that taking part in this study is voluntary and participants will not be pressurised to take part.
- Participants may choose to leave the study at any time and will not be penalised or prejudiced in any way.
- Participants may be asked to leave the research process before it is completed, if the researcher feels it is in their best interests, or if they do not follow the research procedures, as agreed to.

Signed at (place) _____ on (date) ____/____/20____

Signature of School Principal/Relevant person

ANNEXURE D: SGB CONSENT FORM

 NWU® NORTH-WEST UNIVERSITY NOORDWES-UNIVERSITEIT YUNIBESITHI YA BOKONE-BOPHIRIMA	Private Bag X6001, Potchefstroom South Africa 2520 Tel: 018 299-1111/2222 Web: http://www.nwu.ac.za Faculty of Education Community Based Educational Research (COMBER) Tel: 018 111 1111 Email: cynthiarakhole@gmail.com Date: 6 December 2024
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INFORMED CONSENT LETTER: SCHOOL GOVERNING BODY/OTHER RELEVANT BODY

I herewith wish to request your permission for your Grade 1-5 teachers who teach learners on the autism spectrum to participate in this research, which involves collaboration between teachers and parents to support learners on the autism spectrum. Prior to granting permission, please acquaint yourself with the information below.

The details of the research are as follows:

TITLE OF THE RESEARCH PROJECT:

Teacher - parent collaboration to support learners on the autism spectrum: A PALAR approach

ETHICS APPLICATION NUMBER

NWU-01083-25-A2

PROJECT SUPERVISOR:

DR HANNELIE LOUW

CO-SUPERVISOR:

PROF JULIALET RENS

ADDRESS:

NWU FACULTY OF EDUCATION
POTCHEFSTROOM

CONTACT NUMBER:

018 2852875 / 0836352217

MEMBER OF PROJECT TEAM MEd-Student:

MRS MOLELEKENG CYNTHIA RAKHOLILE

ADDRESS:

36A STRANG STREET
OU DORP
KROONSTAD
9499

CONTACT NUMBER:

071 0561838

FACULTY OF EDUCATION RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE

Contact person: Ms Erna Greyling, E-mail: Erna.Greyling@nwu.ac.za, Tel. (018) 299 4656

This study has been approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Education of the North-West University and will be conducted according to the ethical guidelines of this committee. Permission was also obtained from the provincial Department of Basic Education, District Director of Fezile Dabi district and the school principal.

What is this research about?

The aims of this research are:

- To identify challenges and experiences of teachers and parents in the Fezile Dabi district regarding learners on the autism spectrum.
- To understand the level of parental perceptions and experiences that influence involvement in support techniques for learners diagnosed on the autism spectrum in the Fezile Dabi district, Free State Province, South Africa.
- To recommend guidelines that educators and parents can use to support learners on the autism spectrum.

Participants

Participants will include two teachers and one parent from each of the LSEN schools based on their willingness and availability to participate in the study

What is expected of the participants?

The participants will be expected to form and engage in Action Learning Group through three cycles as well as engage in informative discussions throughout the research project. Lastly to

answer questions through art -based methods, which consists of: sketching, collage-making and photography.

Benefits to the participants

The participants will be able to voice the challenges and experiences faced by teachers and parents in supporting learners on the autism spectrum and working as a team through collaboration will also strengthen their relationship within the working environment. The research will raise awareness of the important role that teachers and parents play in the support given to learners on the autism spectrum. The distinctive contribution of the research will be in the advancement of teacher collaboration for supporting learners on the autism spectrum and will also contribute to existing research that has been conducted.

Risks involved for participants

Stress due to limited time in their schedules to participate in the study. The groups may elicit difference of opinions and possible conflict between them.

Confidentiality and protection of identity

It is not necessary to keep the participants anonymous, as participants are not expected to be aware of requirements for anonymity of different research methodologies. All participants and schools will be given pseudonyms in this research to protect their identities. Throughout the research project, I will adhere to the Protection of Personal Information Act (POPIA), Act No. 4 of 2013 (RSA, 2013).

Dissemination of findings

Findings will be communicated to the schools. A booklet will be compiled indicating what action can teachers and parents take to collaborate in supporting learners on the Autism spectrum. As soon as the study is completed and the results of the study are available the participants will be notified via email when the meeting will be held.

If you have any further questions or enquiries regarding your participation in this research, please contact the researchers for more information.

DECLARATION BY SGB CHAIRPERSON/RELEVANT RESPONSIBLE PERSON:

By signing below, I agree to give permission for the research to take place with the identified participants in the study entitled:

[Teacher - parent collaboration to support learners on the autism spectrum: A PALAR approach]

I declare that:

- I have read this information and consent form and understand what is expected of the participants in the research.
- I have had a chance to ask questions to the researcher and all my questions have been adequately answered.
- I understand that taking part in this study is voluntary and participants will not be pressurised to take part.
- Participants may choose to leave the study at any time and will not be penalised or prejudiced in any way.
- Participants may be asked to leave the research process before it is completed, if the researcher feels it is in their best interests, or if they do not follow the research procedures, as agreed to.

Signed at (place)_____ on (date) ____/____/20____

Signature of SGB Chairperson/Relevant responsible person

ANNEXURE E: PARTICIPANT INFORMATION LETTER

APPENDIX A

 NWU® NORTH-WEST UNIVERSITY NOORDWES-UNIVERSITEIT YUNIBESITHI YA BOKONE-BOPHIRIMA	Private Bag X6001, Potchefstroom South Africa 2520 Tel: 018 299-1111/2222 Web: http://www.nwu.ac.za Faculty of Education Community Based Educational Research (COMBER) Tel: 018 111 1111 Email: cynthiarakhole@gmail.com Date: 6 December 2024
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Recruitment letter

Dear Sir /Madam

Re: Request to participate in research entitled: **Teacher - parent collaboration to support learners on the autism spectrum: A PALAR approach**

My name is **Molelekeng Cynthia Rakhole**, a Master's student in Special Needs Education at North West University (Vanderbijlpark campus). I want to ask for your participation in the study mentioned above.

The study aims to identify challenges and experiences of teachers and parents in the Fezile Dabi district regarding learners on the Autism spectrum, understand the level of parental perceptions and experiences that influence involvement in support techniques for learners diagnosed on the Autism spectrum in the Fezile Dabi district and lastly recommend guidelines that educators and parents can use to support learners on the Autism spectrum.

This study will identify challenges and experiences of teachers and parents in the Fezile Dabi district regarding learners on the Autism spectrum. The research will raise awareness of the important role that teachers and parents play in the support given to learners on the Autism spectrum. The distinctive contribution of the research will be in the advancement of teacher collaboration for supporting learners on the Autism spectrum and will also contribute to existing research that has been conducted.

The following would be required of you should you agree to partake in the study:

- To form and engage in Action Learning Group through three cycles
- To engage in informative discussions throughout the research project
- To answer questions through art-based methods, which consists of: sketching, collage-making and photography.

Following the University's ethical procedure, the following steps will be adhered to:

- The school's permission to conduct the study
- Participation is voluntary
- The participants are free to withdraw from the study at any point
- All data will be kept confidential and results will be reported anonymously. Only the participants and the Project manager will have access to the data
- A copy of the research report will be made available to you if you wish to have it.
- Participation in the study will not cause any harm
- Throughout the research project, I will adhere to the Protection of Personal Information Act (POPIA), Act No. 4 of 2013 (RSA, 2013).

I would greatly appreciate it if you could consider this request.

Kindly fill in the reply slip attached to indicate if you consent to take part in this study or not. Should you need further information on the study, do not hesitate to contact me on 071 0561838 (cell no) or email 26482258@mynwu.ac.za

Kind regards

Students signature:

Student name:

Date.....

ANNEXURE F: PARTICIPANT CONSENT

 NWU® NORTH-WEST UNIVERSITY NOORDWES-UNIVERSITEIT YUNIBESITHI YA BOKONE-BOPHIRIMA	Private Bag X6001, Potchefstroom South Africa 2520 Tel: 018 299-1111/2222 Web: http://www.nwu.ac.za Faculty of Education Community Based Educational Research (COMBER) Tel: 018 111 1111 Email: cynthiarakhole@gmail.com Date: 6 December 2024
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PARTICIPANT INFORMATION AND CONSENT FORM

I herewith wish to request your consent to participate in this research, which involves collaboration between teachers and parents to support learners on the autism spectrum. Before you give consent, please acquaint yourself with the information below.

The details of the research are as follows:

TITLE OF THE RESEARCH PROJECT:

Teacher – parent collaboration to support learners on the autism spectrum: A PALAR approach

ETHICS APPLICATION NUMBER

NWU-01083-25-A2

PROJECT SUPERVISOR:	DR HANNELIE LOUW
CO-SUPERVISOR:	PROF JULIALET RENS
ADDRESS:	NWU FACULTY OF EDUCATION POTCHEFSTROOM
CONTACT NUMBER:	018 2852875

MEMBER OF PROJECT TEAM MEd-Student:	MRS MOLELEKENG CYNTHIA RAKHOLILE
ADDRESS:	36A STRANG STREET OU DORP KROONSTAD 9499
CONTACT NUMBER:	0710561838

FACULTY OF EDUCATION RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE

Contact person: Ms Erna Greyling, E-mail: Erna.Greyling@nwu.ac.za, Tel. (018) 299 4656

This study has been approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Education of the North-West University and will be conducted according to the ethical guidelines of this committee. Permission was also asked from Free State Department of Basic Education, District Director of Fezile Dabi district, School Governing Body as well as the school principal of Johan Slabbert Special School.

What is this research about?

The aims of this research are:

- To identify challenges and experiences of teachers and parents in the Fezile Dabi district regarding learners on the autism spectrum.
- To understand the level of parental perceptions and experiences that influence involvement in support techniques for learners diagnosed on the autism spectrum in the Fezile Dabi district, Free State Province, South Africa.
- To recommend guidelines that educators and parents can use to support learners on the autism spectrum.

Participants

Participants will include two teachers and one parent from each of the LSEN schools based on their willingness and availability to participate in the study

What is expected of you as participant?

The participants will be expected to form and engage in Action Learning Group through three cycles as well as engage in informative discussions throughout the research project. Lastly to answer questions through art -based methods, which consists of: sketching, collage-making and photography,

Benefits to you as participant

The participants will be able to voice the challenges and experiences faced by teachers and parents in supporting learners on the Autism spectrum and working as a team through collaboration will also strengthen their relationship within the working environment. The research will raise awareness of the important role that teachers and parents play in the support given to learners on the autism spectrum. The distinctive contribution of the research will be in the advancement of teacher collaboration for supporting learners on the autism spectrum and will also contribute to existing research that has been conducted.

Risks involved for participants

Stress due to limited time in their schedules to participate in the study. The groups may elicit difference of opinions and possible conflict between them.

Confidentiality and protection of identity

It is not necessary to keep the participants anonymous, as participants are not expected to be aware of requirements for anonymity of different research methodologies. All participants and schools will be given pseudonyms in this research to protect their identities. Throughout the research project, I will adhere to the Protection of Personal Information Act (POPIA), Act No. 4 of 2013 (RSA, 2013).

Dissemination of findings

Findings will be communicated to the schools. A booklet will be compiled indicating what action can teachers and parents take to collaborate in supporting learners on the autism spectrum. As soon as the study is completed and the results of the study are available the participants will be notified via email when the meeting will be held.

If you have any further questions or enquiries regarding your participation in this research, please contact the researchers for more information.

Yours sincerely

(Researcher)
RAKHOLILE M.C

DECLARATION BY PARTICIPANT:

By signing below, I agree to take part in a research study entitled:

Teacher - parent collaboration to support learners on the autism spectrum: A PALAR approach

I declare that:

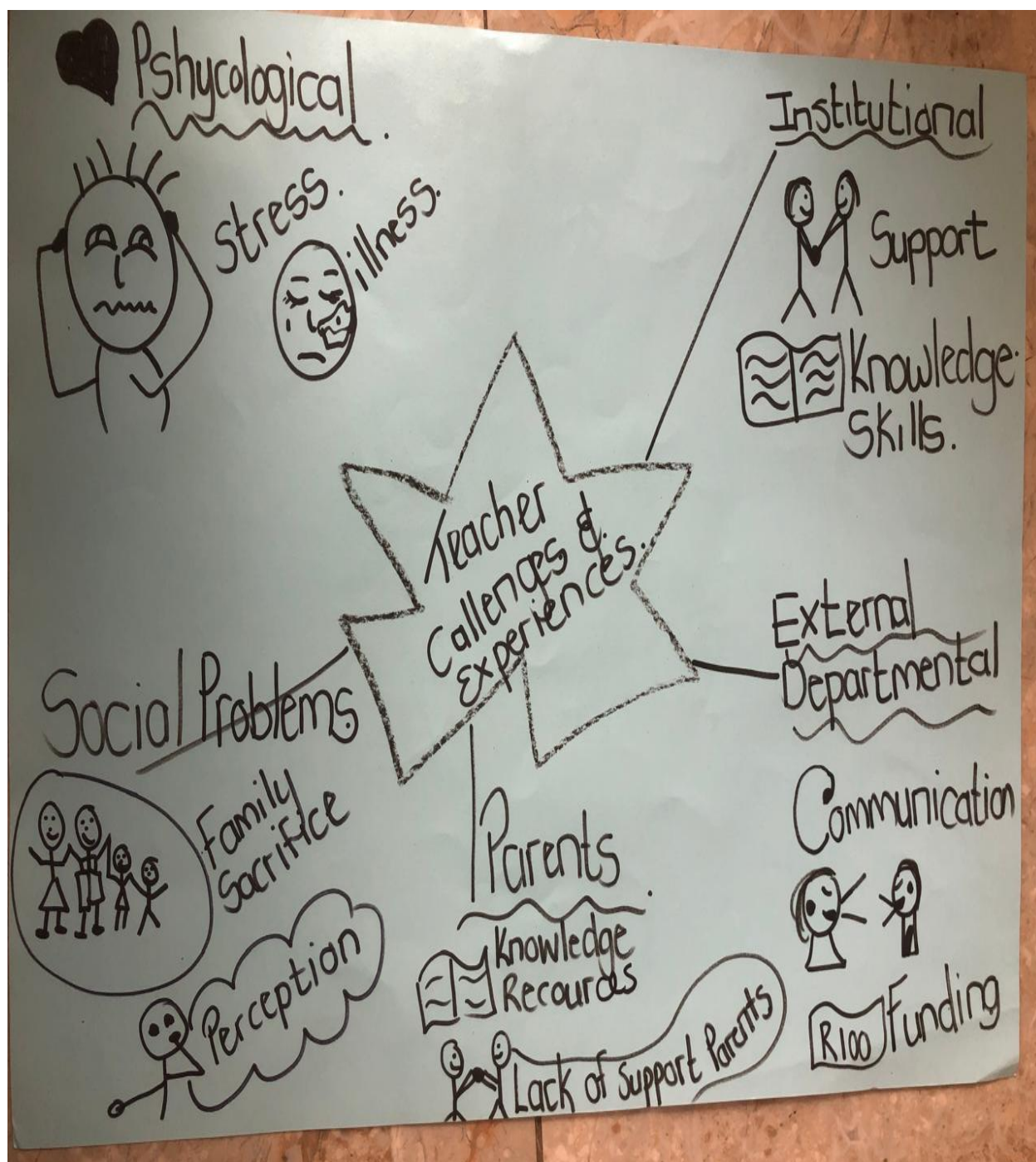
- I have read this information and consent form and understand what is expected of me in the research.
- I have had a chance to ask questions to the researcher and all my questions have been adequately answered.
- I understand that taking part in this study is voluntary and I have not been pressurised to take part.
- I may choose to leave the study at any time and will not be penalised or prejudiced in any way.
- I may be asked to leave the research process before it has finished, if the researcher feels it is in my best interests, or if I do not follow the research procedures, as agreed to.

Signed at (place) _____ on (date) ____/____/20____

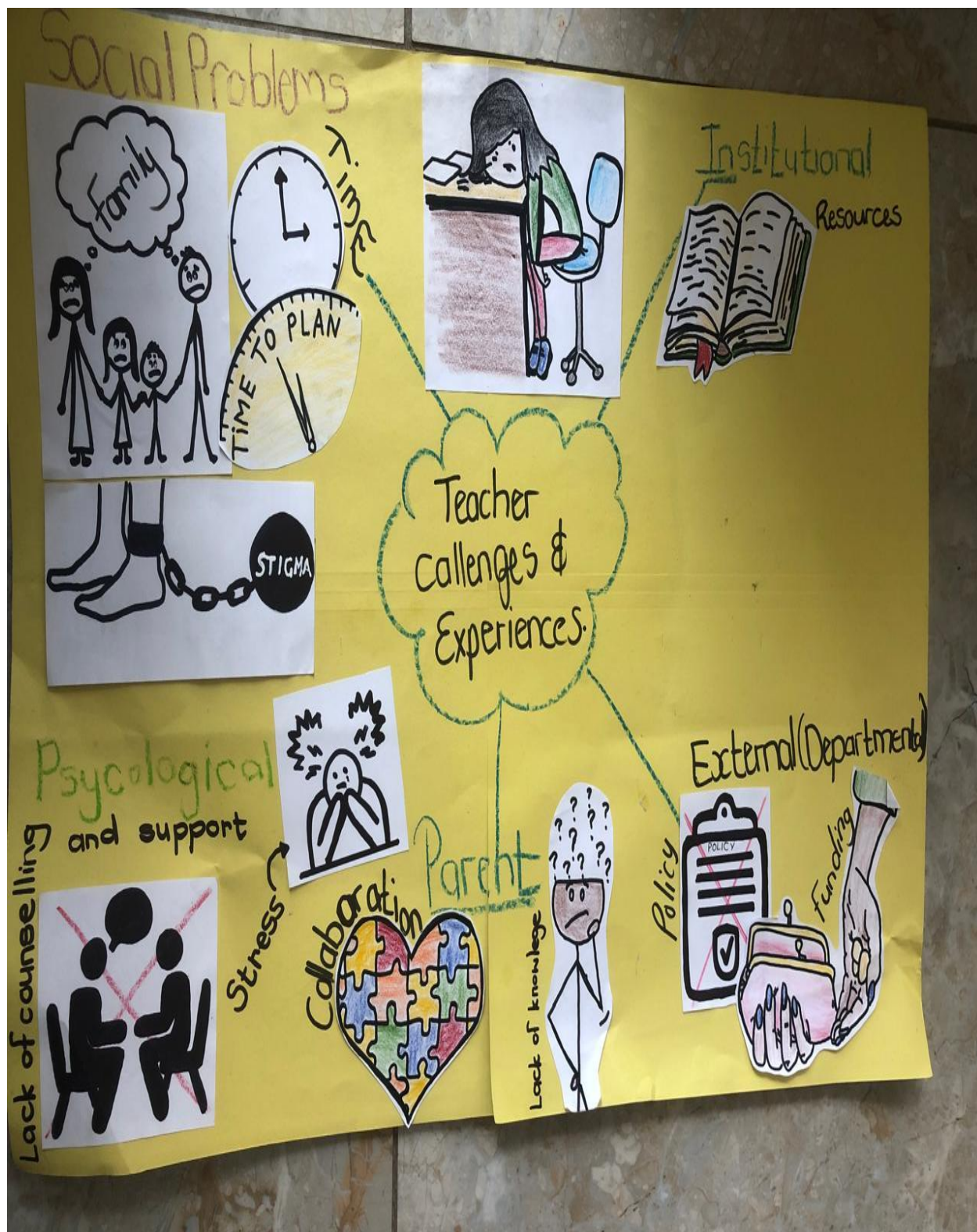
Signature of participant

Researcher

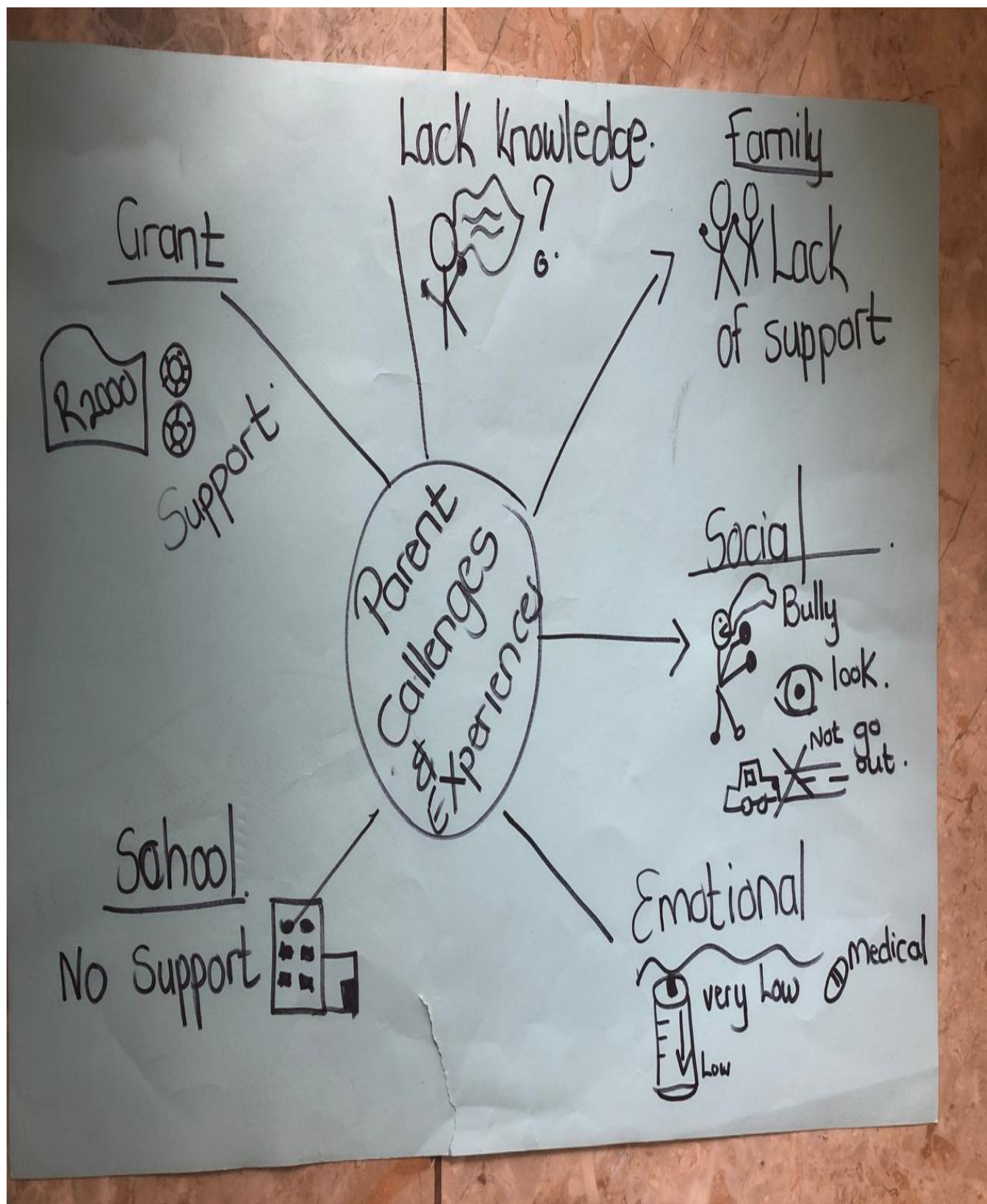
ANNEXURE G: PARTICIPANT DRAWINGS



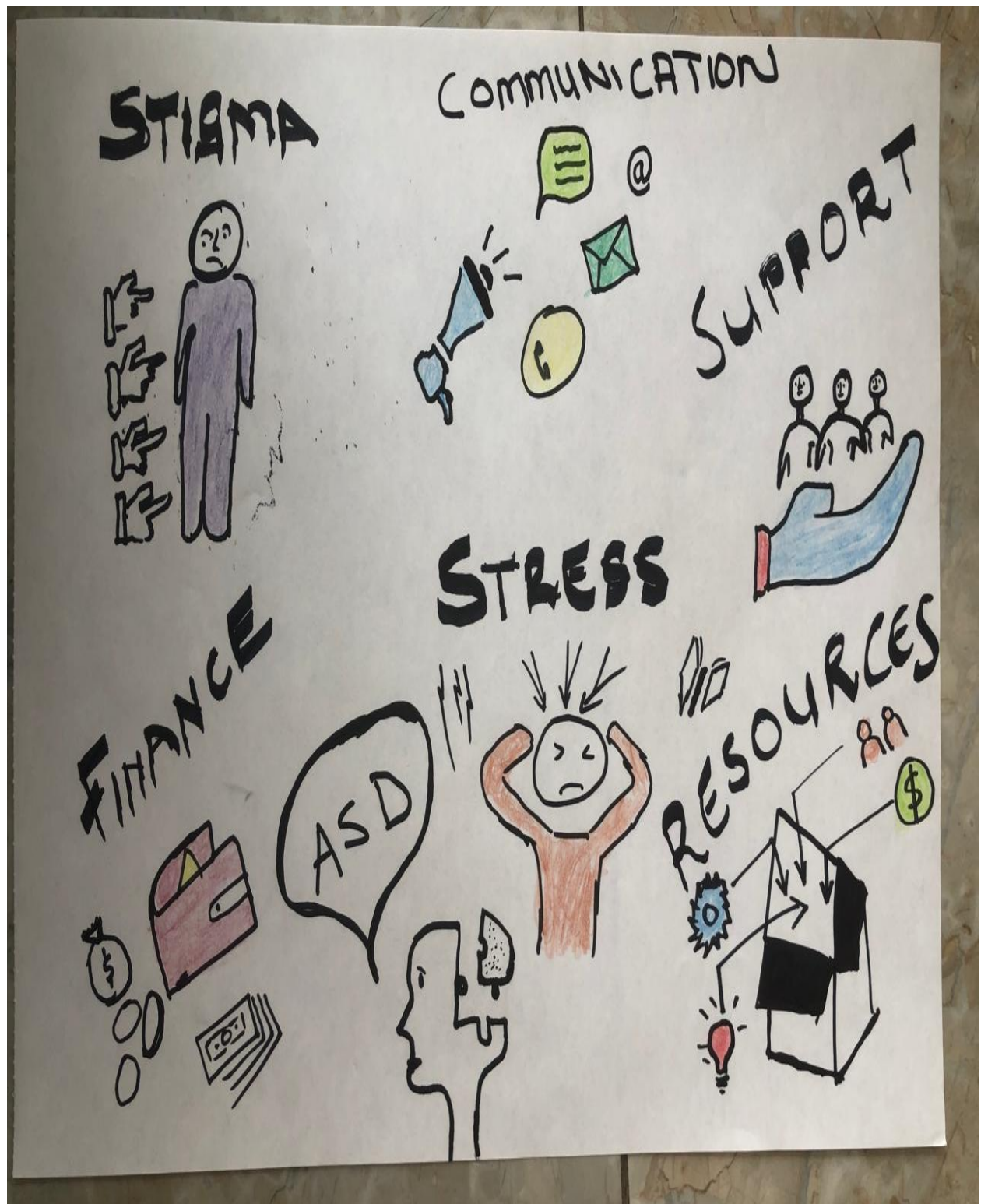
Illustrative drawing of participant 1



Illustrative drawing of participant 2



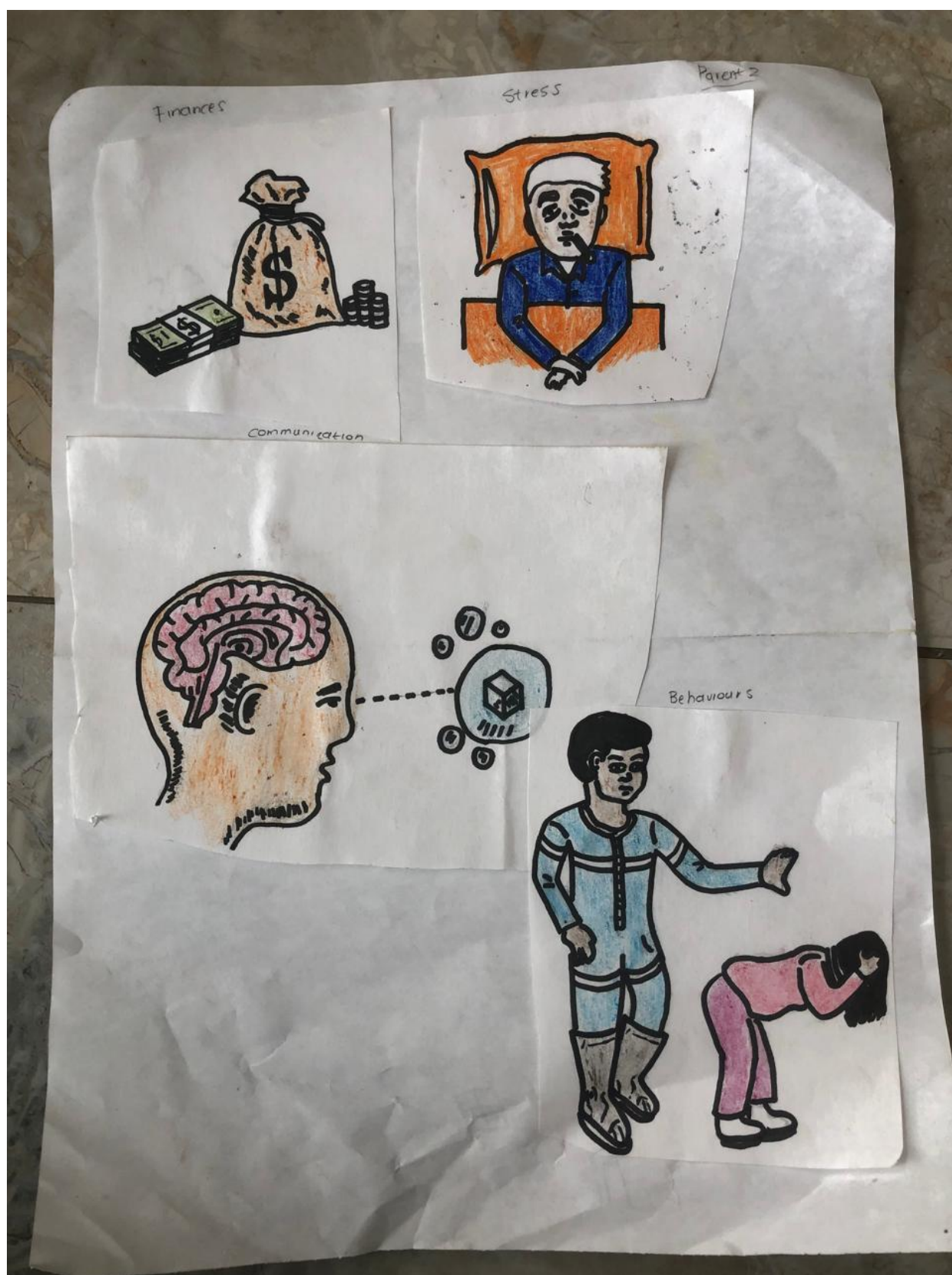
Illustrative drawing of participant 3



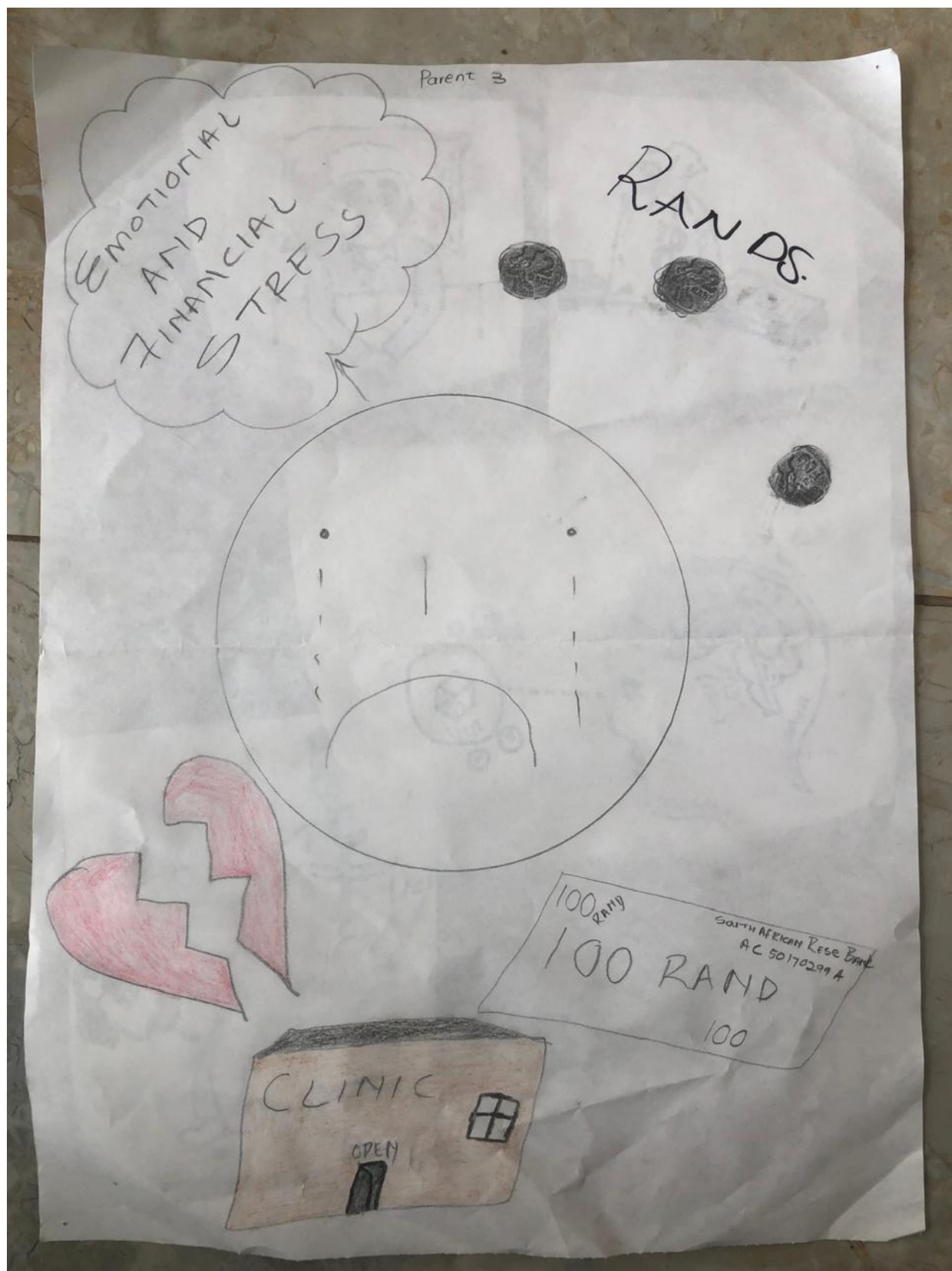
Illustrative drawing of participant 4



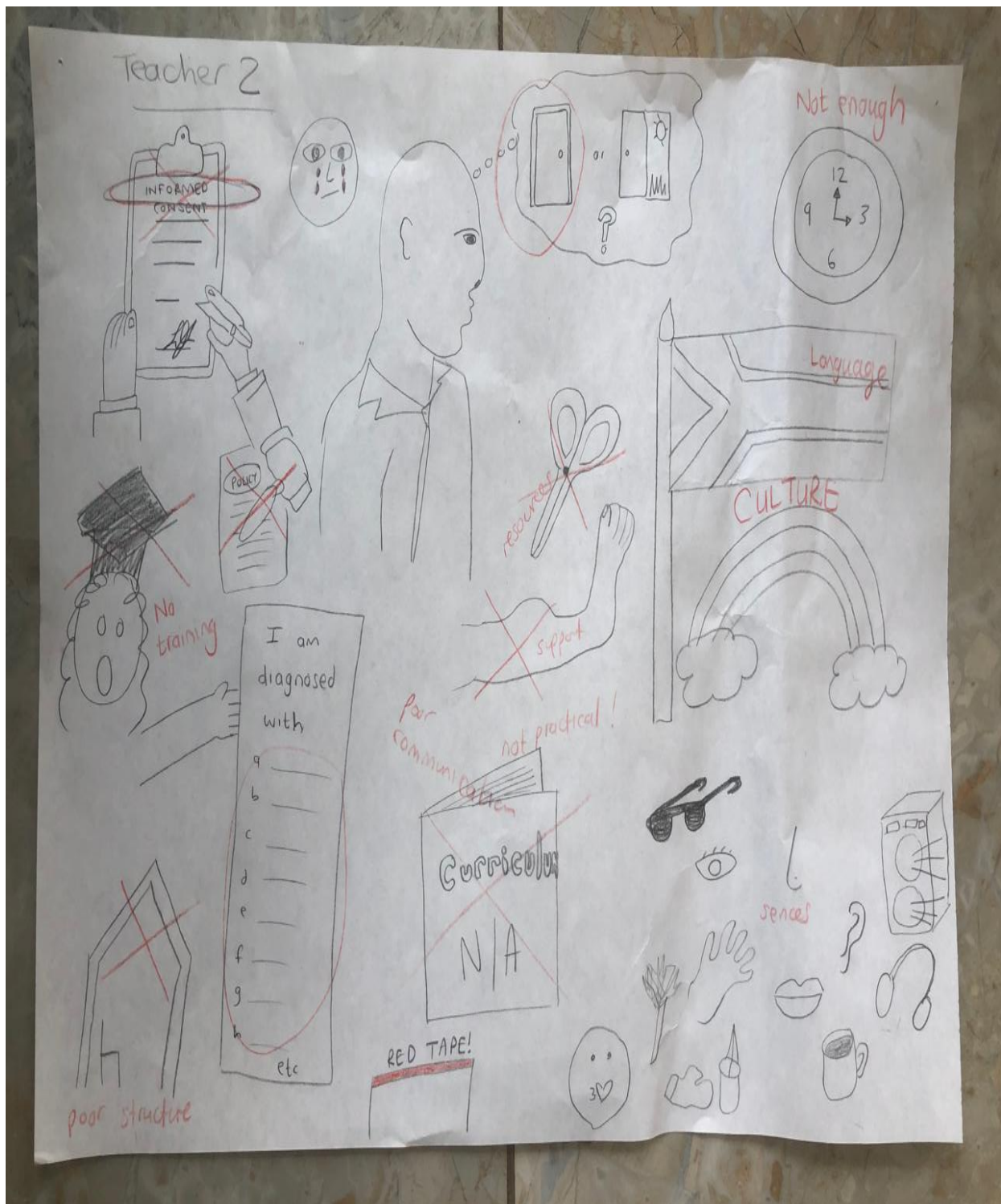
Illustrative drawing of participant 5



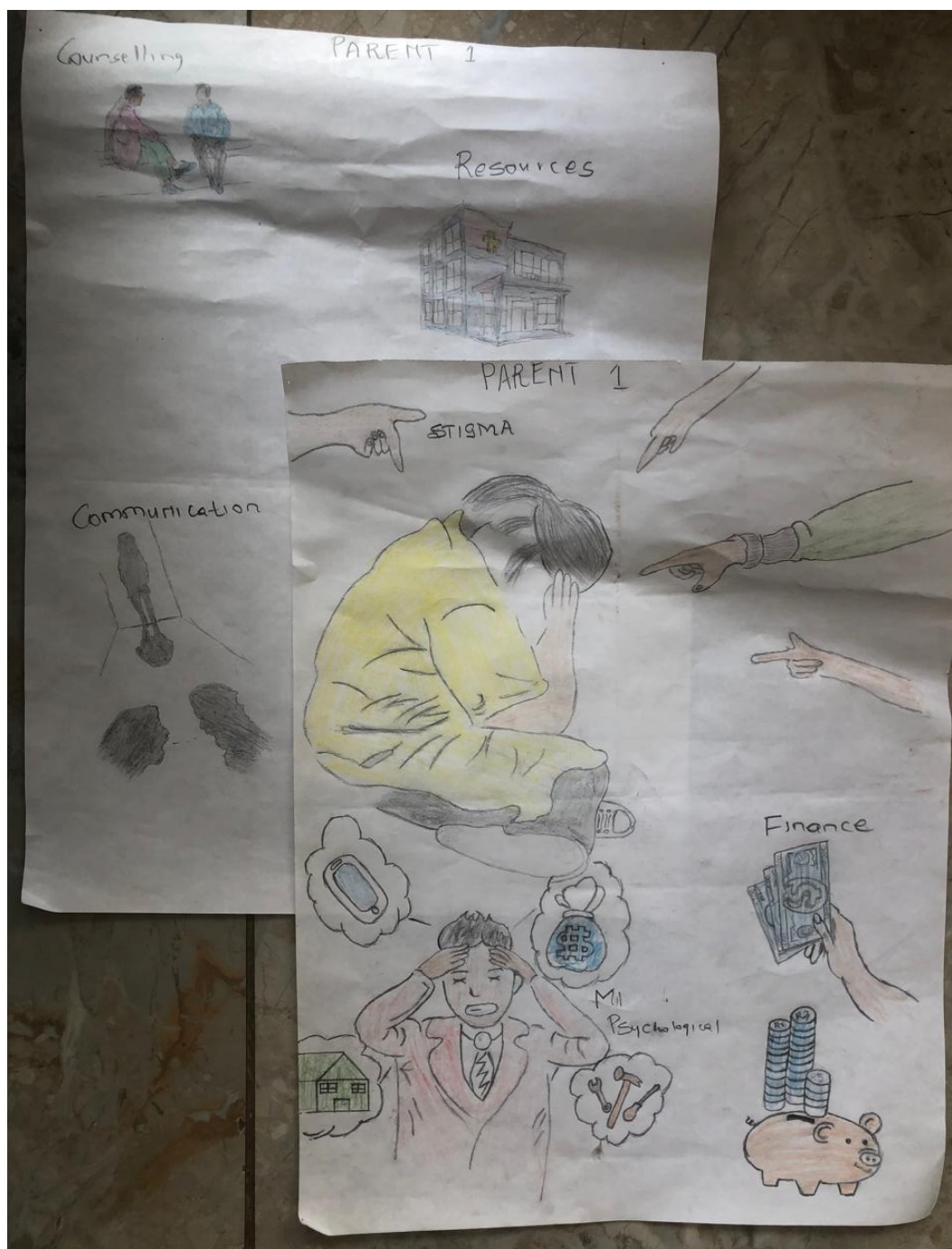
Illustrative drawing of participant 6



Illustrative drawing of participant 7



Illustrative drawing of participant 8



Illustrative drawing of participant 9

ANNEXURE H: CYCLE 1 REFLECTIONS

Cycle 1 : Reflection

I enjoyed relationship building session because for me it was not all about knowing each other but it was all about collaboration, working as a team. Teaching learners on the autism spectrum is very challenging as a teacher, you have to deal with lack of support from department of education curriculum that is not meant for learners on the autism spectrum. Lack of resources is a major problem. Policies that are generalising, we are struggling as we are not trained to work with learners on the autism spectrum, parents also don't understand autism spectrum disorder.

Cycle 1 :

In cycle 1 ; I did visual art to understand Autism learners better. It helped me see things from their perspective. I learned about the team's needs. It was cool to build relationships and get insights into their educational contexts. I enjoyed creating art and sharing my thoughts. It was amazing to see how others perceived Autism learners. Our discussions were insightful, and I gained a deeper understanding of the challenges and opportunities.

Overall, cycle 1 was a great experience. I feel more connected to the team and more aware of the importance of understanding Autism learners needs.

Reflection on relationship building

It was so nice meeting with others teachers even though we work in the same school. For me relationship building session served as an opportunity to express our challenges as teachers and parents. I was scared when we had to draw our strength on the strength cards because I don't know how to draw but the researcher was so friendly and nice putting us at ease because she also took part. I also enjoyed the formation of the AIG. It was my first time hearing it.

Reflection on cycle
Teachers and parents
challenges working in an

inclusive classroom its a challenge for me as I am not trained to work with learners on the autism spectrum. I don't have knowledge on how to support them. Another thing for me its curriculum that is general that expect you to do certain things but at the same time it does not work for learners on the autism spectrum. I really struggle with time management as in my class the learners with different diagnoses. Really planning for me, it always get distracted. I so wish the department can work on their policies because we don't policy for learners on the autism spectrum

Relationship building

We started this session by introducing ourselves and it was so nice because we did not know some of the parents it was first time meeting with them. We used strength cards to give every member the role that he/she has to play in this research. The strength cards determined our roles and responsibilities. The ALS (Action Learning Group) was formed.

Reflection on cycle 1

When we started with cycle 1 I was a bit anxious as I did not know how to draw but the researcher put us at ease by letting us to be ourselves. It was my first time answering questions by a means of drawing. This activity helped us to be actively engaged as I didn't know what I was going to say, it helped me to express my challenges and experiences in teaching learners on the AS. We built the relationship most of it all we learned a lot from each other.

Cycle 1: What are challenges and experience of teachers in teaching learners on the Autism Spectrum

① Stress

Teaching learners on the AS causes me a lot of stress because most of the times I don't know how to deal with their meltdowns and now I have to see a psychologist that I have to pay from my own pocket.

② Support

There is no support (especially from parents) we are on our own. Even the department of education there is a little support and we need more.

3) Collaboration

No collaboration between us and the parents as well as the department

4) Time management

We don't have enough time on our side as in class we deal with different learners. So we are really struggling in terms of managing time.

5) Understanding of Autism Spectrum Disorder.

We are not trained to work with learners on the AS. We only attend workshops that take place once per term. So it's so frustrating to deal with these learners.

Relationship Building : Reflection

As a teacher I really enjoyed relationship building session as for me I took it as an opportunity to meet with the parents. It was so nice to share our teaching experiences. Using strength cards (using drawing) to present our strengths. I did not even understand what a Peter box was aware to know that it. I did not know how to draw.

Cycle 1 : Reflection

For first I was a bit sceptical about answering the research questions using art based method. I did not know where to start but the researcher made it easy for us by telling us how we draw is not important.

Cycle 1:

In cycle 1: I did visual art to understand my child. It was fun and enjoyable. I learn to work in group. It was also creative and fun to work on creative art, and gaining challenges and opportunities.

Overall, Cycle 1 was a great experience and more connected to parents and teachers. I learn about relation building.

26/07/2025 Session.

Today we start by relationship building whereby each and everyone of us introduce herself.

The second part was about our experience with the autism learner/child and how one these different experiences we had.

- Isolation of learner with autism, nearly always want to have their own space or isolating themselves from others.
- Autism learner/children they don't like noise, they will be irritated by noise made by other people but themselves can make a lot of noise.
- They have a behaviour problem/stuttering not listening when talking to them and want to do what they want.
- They are good with numbers and puzzles.

All of this ~~was~~ ^{done} as response done done through visual arts.

- The 3rd activity for the day was when we were writing our strength on the front side of the strength and then draw that at the back of of the card.

- The last part was when we discussing or given opportunity to share ~~background~~ background.

The 1st participant explained that she was working at the same special school, then go to mainstream, ~~experience~~ she came back to work at the same institution. For her it was not difficult to work with learners with special needs because she has a family member with special needs at home.

The 2nd participant who is teaching auxiliary health in school ~~has~~ explained that some of the situation at home.

- Social impact of the family
- Marital relationship
- Siblings relationship
- Lack of support from the family
- Financial problems

Challenges faced by educators:

Emotions

- Stress from pressure of perfectionism.

Policy

- Generalizing policy - not specifically for autistic learners.

- Curriculum form

Counselling

- There is no counselling for educators or any training regarding working with autistic learners
- Lack of support from the department for example the resources

Curriculum is not practical for our learners.

Cycle 1

This cycle one started with relationship building. We started first by introducing and knowing each other.

Firstly the participants were apprehensive, not yet relaxed to communicate and interact as they did not know each other. So the strength cards were used as an ice-breaker.

We used them to define the role and responsibilities, that allowed us to know each other as we started to ask each other questions based on the cards. This allowed us to know each other both as a group.

Relationship Building

As the participants we used strength cards to define our roles and responsibilities. We started first by sharing our experiences and challenges. It was so clear from this session that we face a lot of challenges in supporting learners on the autism spectrum.

Cycle 1

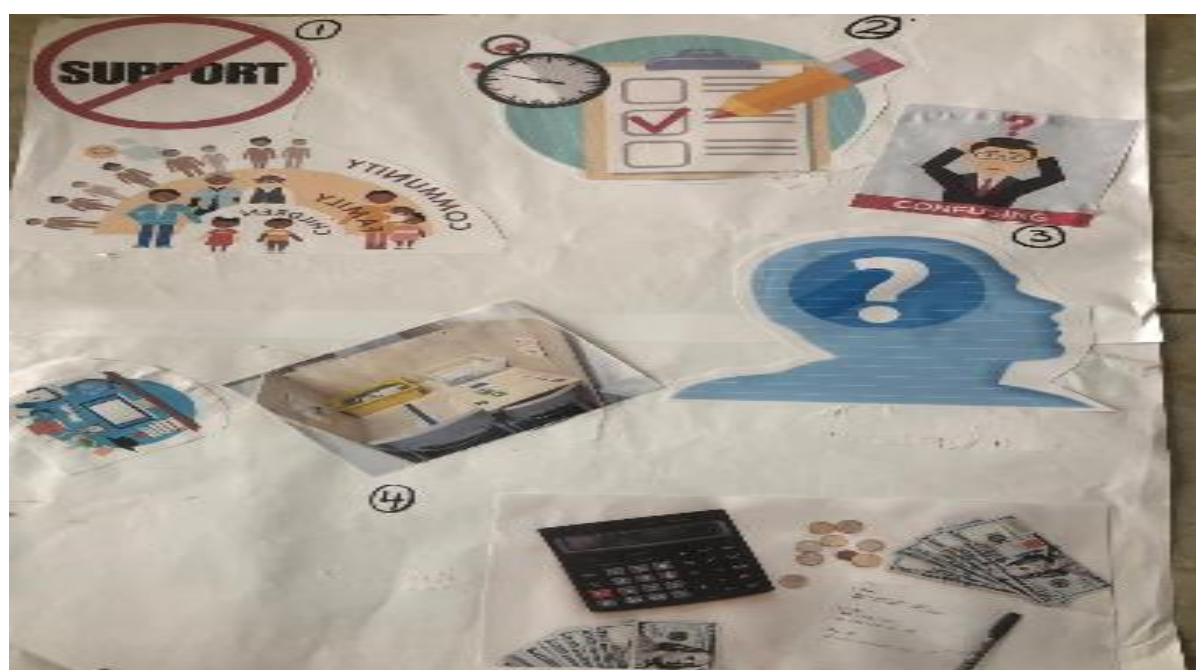
My main challenge is lack of support between us as stakeholders. You are on your own. Families do not support us, we don't get enough support from the school as well as the department of education. We struggle with resources for us to be able to access help for

our kids we have to travel to other places whereby financially we are not stable. Dealing with my kids causes a lot of stress because the community they blame me for my child's condition. I can't associate with other people. I am always at home.

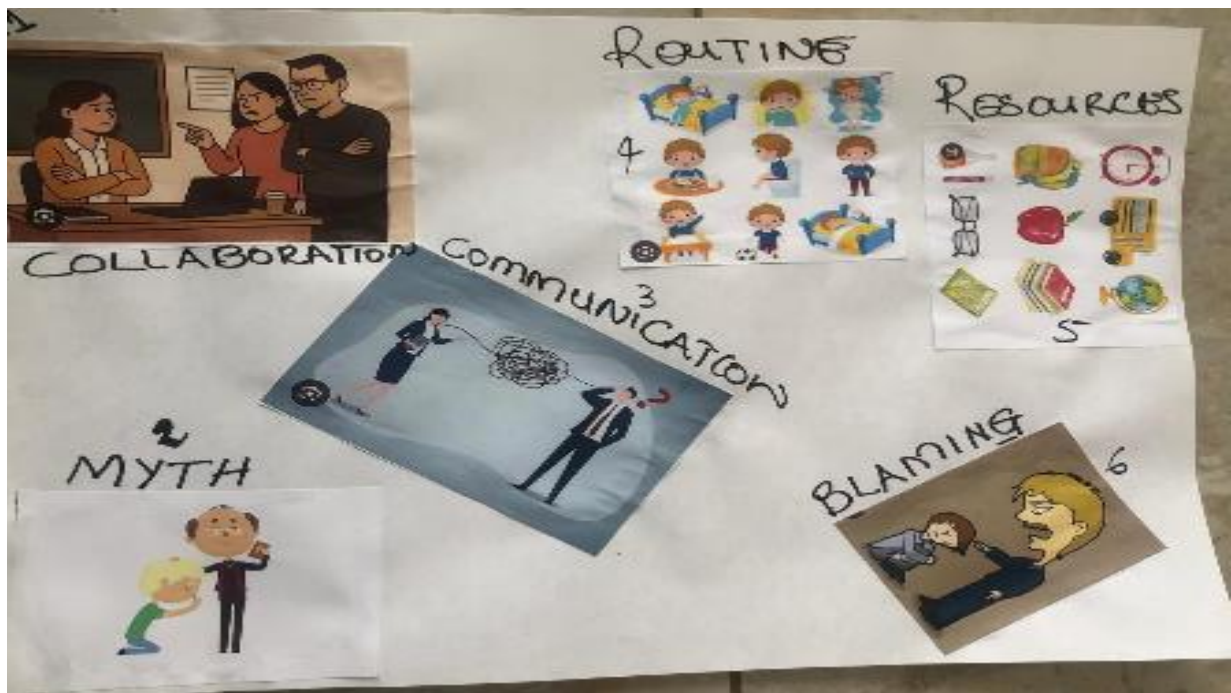
ANNEXURE I: PARTICIPANT COLLAGES



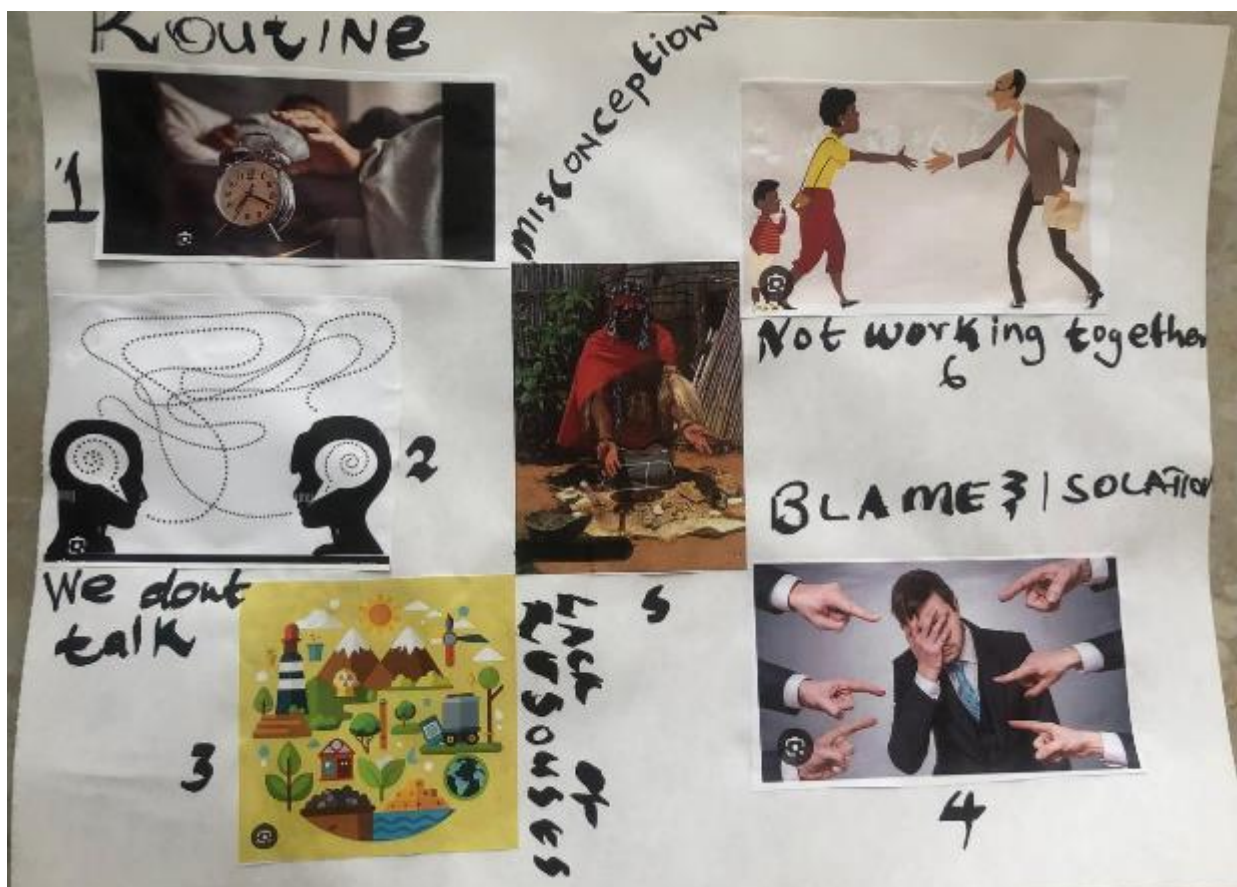
Participant 1 collage



Participant 2 collage



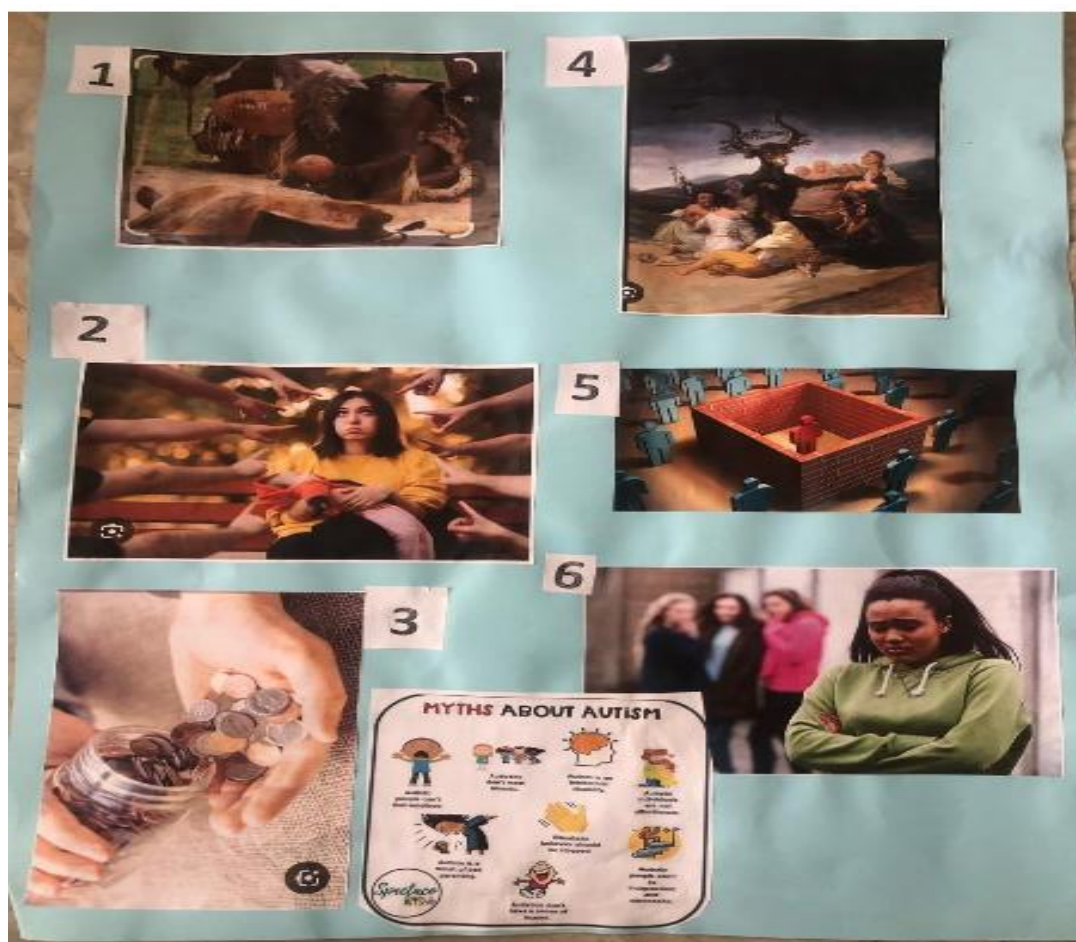
Participant 3 collage



Participant 6 collage



Participant 5 and 8 collage



Participant 9 collage

ANNEXURE J: CYCLE 2 REFLECTIONS

Circle 2:

Cycle 2:

It gave me more experience
on how to support my child.
I realized I'm not alone.
I have a support from the
group as parents and teachers.
Discussing collages with ALG
gave me new sense of community.

Cycle 2: Reflection

~~For me working with learners in the~~
~~ALG group~~

For me there is no collaboration between
us and the parents as well as the
department. Parents do not come to school
when called, no communication. Even
when learners are given letters parents
do not show up. From the side of the
department we have SBT that is not
functional and trained. The department only
provides workshops for generalised barriers
not for learners on the autism
spectrum. The routine that we set at
school is gets disturbed by parents
so it's so difficult for us.

Reflection on cycle 2

I really enjoyed collage making
process as the members of the
ALG we became actively involved
in the research. I did not want
the session to end. My first
experience in answering the
questions using collages.

Reflection on cycle 3

It was really nice working
as a team to come up with

Reflection on cycle 2

Parental perception

I really enjoyed making collages
because it made me to think
out of the box. As teachers,
we really struggle with routine
and I know it's impossible to
have the same routine as
parents. I feel that parents are
also misusing the grants and
that impact on us as teachers
because majority of the
learners at this school they
are 'hostel' learners and when
they don't have money they
don't come to school as a
teacher you have to catch-up.

Cycle 2

As a parent, cycle 2 was eye-opening. creating a collage about my experiences supporting my child with Autism helped me process my emotions and identify patterns. Discussing the collages with the ALG gave me new insights and a sense of community. I realized I'm not alone in this journey. The themes that emerged for better support

Cycle 2 Reflection

Most of us as teachers we are stressed because we don't know where to start. Lack of time management and planning is also a challenge whereby one has learners with different barriers to learning in one class. Lack of resources, support, collaboration and communication poses a big challenge in dealing with learners on the autism spectrum. I learned a lot from members of Action Learning Group.

Cycle 2.

In the beginning of the study the teachers expressed their concerns as they believe did not understand the research question. The researcher had to explain to them that the study did not only concern parents only. The researcher explained the linkage how parental perception and involvement affected their collaborative effort in helping learner with ASD giving example of how routine development established and developed at school should be supported at home to help the learner with continuity. How collective understanding can help to have synchronized effort and plan of helping learners

With their new understanding they resolve to make collages to extract and ascertain data and information, it was rewarding and very effective. It promoted playful, joyous nature of fruitful collaborative engagements of parents and teachers working together to support learners.

This method of collage making elicited needed data in a gratifying manner while providing platform for participants with an outlet for expressing their heart felt difficulties and challenges they face every day in their different environment in their endeavour to help and support learners with ASD.

The collages they made painted eloquently clear picture of multi layered complex environment and challenges they encounter and had to confront daily

With this unconventional method and approach to collecting data we could answer research question while highly engaged and in an immensely fulfilling manner providing rich and diverse data. The collage making provided followed by deep discussions and engagements provided clear and deeper understanding which helped and facilitated the identification of crucial themes related to the research questions. It then framed the base and platform for the next phase of the research process.

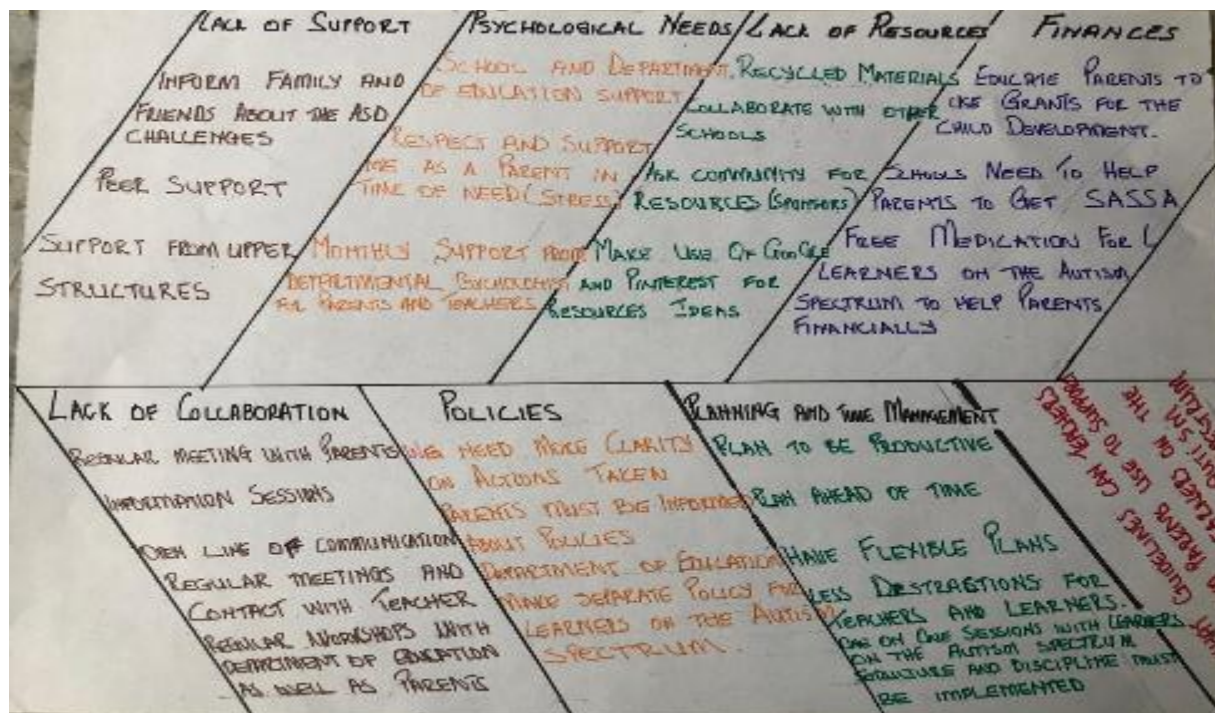
Cycle (2)

We don't communicate with the teachers because we don't understand what ~~the~~ ASD is.

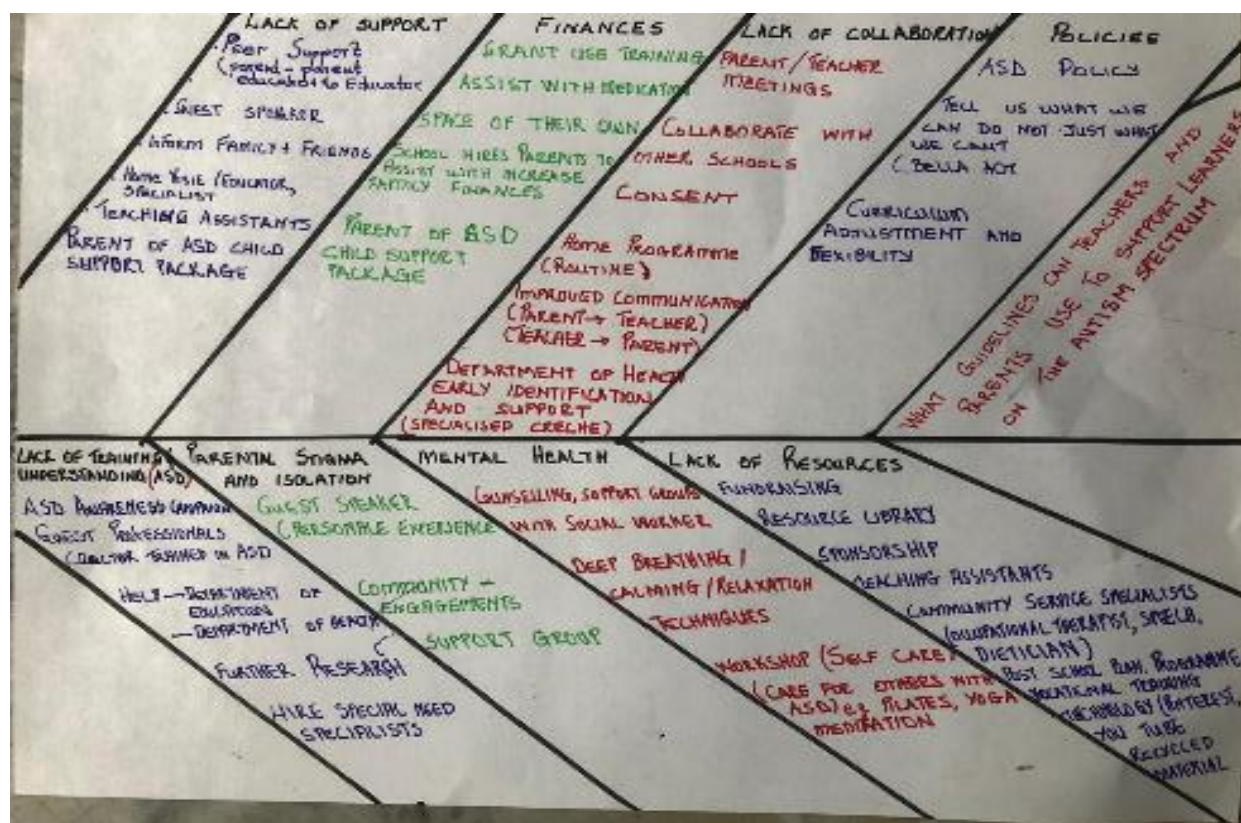
We are not working together

It is so difficult to have a child with ASD because people think your child is bewitched. There's a misconception. The society doesn't understand our ~~learn~~ kids.

ANNEXURE K: FISHBONE DIAGRAM



Fishbone diagram of LSEN School 1



Fishbone diagram of LSEN School 2

ANNEXURE L: CYCLE 3 REFLECTIONS

Cycle 3: Reflection

As members of the Action Learning Group we decided to come up with strategies that can assist us as teachers and parents. I was so happy to use fishbone diagram. We came up with some of the following strategies. ASD policy for policies that are not clear and generalising for lack of resources, resource library etc. The whole research taught me that we need to collaborate with the parents, DBST, SBST as well as community in the Fezile Dabi.

Cycle 3.

I really enjoyed working in an Action Learning Group as it promoted collaborative actions towards coming with joined, inclusive strategies of both parents and teachers in support of learners on Autism Spectrum. It more so promoted our group dynamics, handling and understanding for future collaborative engagement.

Cycle 3: Reflection

I learned a lot from other teachers as well as parents in our ALG meetings. It was interesting to learn parents' challenges as well as teachers and also how parental perceptions and experiences influence their involvement in support methods. Every one participated and working as a team was one of the most important moments as the members of the ALG. I really enjoyed using illustrated drawing, making colleagues and the use of fishbone diagrams to come up with strategies that can assist us.

Cycle 3

As a parent; cycle 3 was about strategising and finding solutions. The relationship-building session helped me reflect on cycle 2's learnings and discuss data analysis with the ALG. Doing a fishbone analysis and structured brainstorming with the group helped identify areas for improvement in supporting my child with Autism. I'm ~~also~~ excited to implement the focused interventions and strategies we designed to promote better support. The ~~ALG~~-based methods used throughout the cycles have been powerful tools for expression, dialogue and reflection. I'm looking forward to see the impact of these strategies in practice.

Reflection on cycle 3

It was really nice working as a team to come up with strategies that can help us as teachers and parents to collaborate in supporting learners on the Autism Spectrum. The use of fish-bone analysis

it was my first time using it. I really enjoyed the whole process. For me it was a learning curve. I can't wait for the publication of this study so that I can implement the strategies in my class.

Reflection on cycle 3

The use of fishbone analysis was a very interesting activity whereby we had to come up

with strategies to support learners on the autism. For me, I took it as an opportunity to go and implement those strategies in my class. I am grateful for this research process as it took me out of my comfort zone.

Cycle 3: Reflection

I learned a lot from other teachers as well as parents in our AIS meetings. It was interesting to learn parents' challenges as well as teachers and also how parental perceptions and experiences influence their involvement in support methods. Every one participated and working as a team was one of the most important moments as the members of the AIS. I really enjoyed using illustrations, drawing, meeting colleagues and the use of fishbone diagrams to come up with strategies that can assist us.

Cycle 3: Reflection

As a parent, cycle 3 was about strategizing and finding solutions. We did a fishbone analysis and structured brainstorming with group to identify where the solution can be resolved. How the government can help through the social grant so that it can help with medicines and food, also how children at school they don't have resources because they made their own. Also we brainstormed the parents need counselling because parents go through a lot with a child with autism, and also they must spread the message in the church.

Reflection

I feel like I have learned a lot from this research group of Cynthia, most of all, I have learned that team relationship is very important. From the first day that we were working together with the parents, educators, specialist and the researcher "Cynthia".

I have learned that there is a gap between the department, school and the community based on what were presented in the collage. The community lack a lot of information regarding the barriers in their children, the school need support from the department regarding the barriers with the barriers and also need more training.

The group discussion was so good and we gained a lot of information. I won't hesitate to join a group or take part in this kind of group in future.

Cycle ③

We came up with strategies as a team that can assist us in dealing with our challenges. We made fishbone diagram and to be honest, I did not know what is fishbone diagram. The whole research project taught me that as a parent I am not alone. From now on I'm going to work with the school as well as the community to teach the communities about ASD as well as those parents who did not take part. The strategies that we came up with I am going to use them.

ANNEXURE M: EXAMPLE OF TRANSCRIBED ALG MEETING

LSEN School 1: Relationship building

Participant 10: Good morning, ladies. I hope you are fine. Welcome to the data collection session. Remember that my study is all about teachers and parents' collaboration to support learners on the autism spectrum using a PALAR approach. Now PALAR stands for Participatory Action Learning and Action Research. So, this is how we are going to work.

We are going to collect data using three cycles. Now whereby the first cycle is the one that we are starting with today, which it has two sessions, meaning we have two sessions in terms of collecting data for the first cycle, and then the second cycle it has three sessions, and then it will be the last cycle. So, the first one is the relationship building, whereby we are going to start forming the ALG, and then we are going to define our roles and responsibilities, and what is it that we need to do, analyse data, reflect on our previous meetings and everyone's view is respected. We are going to engage in informative discussions. All of us we are going to participate.

Participant 10: I'm just a researcher, meaning I'm just depending on your information, because you are the one who has experience working with these learners on the Autism spectrum. So, let me explain Action Learning Group. It means that it is our group that we are going to formulate as the participants. I also gave you the reflective journals, whereby we are going to reflect. Now today we are going to collect data using reflective journals as well as illustrative drawing. How you draw is not important. You don't mind? I also don't know how to draw, but it's fine. We are going to enjoy today's session. It's all about art-based methods.

Participant 10: So today, the first thing that I just want to hear from you is your understanding of the educational context for autism learners. And then what is it that you are going to do? You are going to generate an art that represents your perspectives and experiences on the learners with autism spectrum. Your perspectives as well as your experiences.

Participant 1: So, my experience with them is that you must never think you can put them in a certain box. But I am drawing it.

Participant 10: And then you explain.

Participant 1: I'm drawing now. Everywhere.

Participant 10: Yes, it's fine. Everywhere it's fine. Yes, it's fine. Anything. Okay.

Participant 1: I am going to draw about the language support that I have to give them. Now, the first one I draw is that you need to give them the freedom in the class, in their own space, where

they can feel safe. And then they need support in every concept that you can give them. Okay. I draw about the language support. They cannot speak sometimes.

Then I can give them pictures, visual support to say, I want this or I want this. And they don't need to speak about it. They can use pictures.

Participant 10: That's your experience and perspective?

Participant 1: Yes. One of them. There are a lot, but I think I can give about the language. It's a big thing because some of them are non-verbal or they can speak only a little bit. Okay, okay.

Participant 10: I understand. Next.

Participant 2: First one I don't force anything. My main objective is that they feel safe. First talk and relax and then we can work.

Participant 10: So, that's your experience? Yes. Are there any challenges?

Participant 2: Yes, because you can't just lead them, but you guide them but don't force anything. The other challenge is sometimes mine in my class will especially provoke others to get some attention in class. So, he will do something funny or tease the learners or whatever if he wants that type of answer. So, I'm experiencing that he will try to get that attention by provoking the other learners in the class. Like showing me that I have a problem.

Like for instance one child's name is Michael and he will then call him Michelle. Just to provoke him. Yes, just to provoke him to get that attention. And when you then address him about it, he will usually feel very sorry and explain he did wrong. So, immediately after that he will then feel guilty. The other one is they have individual needs. And me as a teacher must know the triggers. Like for example, if I speak too loudly or the teachers or the learners are arguing, he doesn't like that. Then I have to know I must remove them or I must calm them down. So, I have to be in control of the whole situation. And remember in your class you don't have any... but she's not provoking anything. She's not speaking actually. She doesn't like new people coming into class. So, when there's anyone coming in, she just closes her eyes and looks away. So, I put her in a place she feels safe and can do her thing. And there she can do her thing.

Participant 10: So, in terms of content, how are they? Because when you look at others, they excel in mathematics even though they are on the autism spectrum. They also excel in mathematics, in visual.

Participant 3: They do well when you look at others. Because most of them, even though they have a deficit in one area, but in other areas they can also excel. For instance, mine academically,

he's doing very well. He's doing very well at languages. And his social skills are not that good. But his educational path is good. And that's why you can easily choose a book he knows what to do to do. If I can go back to language. My learner said his first word three years ago. He said, Mama. Now he can repeat after me and he can answer. Simple things like if I ask him, how are you? He can say, I'm fine. But that is all. He cannot speak a lot. But he can repeat after me.

Participant 10: Thank you for sharing your experience. Thank you all for expressing your perspectives. I have already mentioned that we are going to all engage in meaningful discussion in terms of collecting data. Now we are going to have a warm-up activity where we are going to use strength cards to discuss your strength. And then we are going to draw a picture on the back that represents your strength. And also, before that, I just want us to share our background as well as teaching experiences and perspective on supporting those learners. Your background, your teaching experience and perspective on supporting those learners. Meaning when I talk about your background, I just want you to explain who are you, all those things. But no names. Teacher one, teacher two, teacher three, teacher four. Like that.

Participant 1: Do you want names?

Participant 10: No, you can just say your name because now its relationship building. And then in the findings and disseminations, I'm not going to say so and so. So, it's fine.

Participant 3: Just the background. Okay, I'm going to start. I'm teacher Rhetse.

And I'm experiencing this for a long time. We looked after a kid in our home that got autism in a very bad way. But like I said, autism differs from child to child and it depends on how many stages of autism that he's got. So, for instance, mine are coping well in class. It's just when he's not drinking his medication that I can see it in his behaviour. And he's still now in a standing class that helps a lot but we'll see if he needs to move, change classes. Maybe that will have an effect on him.

Participant 10: So, he doesn't want to take his medication at all?

Participant 3: No, he does, but sometimes they don't get it at the clinic because it's maybe not there. Luckily his mother is a very involved mother. So, it's not because he doesn't want to take it. It's because it's not available and sometimes it becomes difficult for you as a teacher if he doesn't have the medication. And if something happens at home or his routine in the morning went totally wrong, you can see it in his behaviour when he comes to school. Or something is wrong.

Participant 1: Okay. For me, I started teaching in level 1 and it was inclusive education there. And I had autistic learners there. Then I came here 15 years ago and I had a lot of autistic learners in my class.

Participant 10: Really? 15 years? I'm going to get a lot of data from you.

Participant 1: And I went on courses, training, webinars and things like that. And every day I had to learn because like the teacher said, each of them are so different. Some of them don't like loud noises. Some of them, I had a learner, I could not put something in my class that is too bright. Because he doesn't like bright colours. He doesn't like that. And yes, to know triggers and to know how I do this and to pick it up before he loses it. You need to see, okay, he's not feeling okay. I think he must maybe stand up a little bit. Go to the bathroom or something to release a little of the, what do you call it, tension.

Participant 10: Okay. Ma'am and you?

Participant 2: I've been at Johan Slabbert, it's my 7th year.

Participant 10: Wow.

Participant 2: And I've also had a few autistic learners in my class. But everyone is different. None of them are the same. So, the one I have in my class currently she talks a little bit compared to some of the learners in my class but not randomly. She wants to sit separate. She closes her eyes if you look at her. She's more relaxed than last year. Last year she was licking everything. This year she's only licking things if there's other learners in the class that's not always there or things are changing. Then she will start licking things again. And in the beginning she didn't want to work at all. Now she's actually pasting her pages in her book and working. Although it's not great, I encourage her and praise her for what she's doing. Okay.

Participant 10: Yeah. I just want to also share my experience though I don't work with learners on the autism spectrum as I work in a mainstream school. But we also experience learners with barriers whereby early identification, it was not done. I remember, I think two years back in grade 8 whereby I teach mathematics. I had a learner, but you can see that this learner is autistic, but he's there in grade 8. What can you do as a teacher? It was so difficult because most of the time he will not be concentrating in class. He 'll always looks outside. So, in terms of early identification, I think it's really needed. We need awareness in terms of early identification because a learner that is not supposed, honestly speaking, to be here, he's actually supposed to be at the special school because some of the learners, they can't even write. Like this boy.

Participant 10: Yes, that's my experience and I see that as much as I have my honours in inclusive education as well as learner support. So, you can see that these learners have challenges, barriers to learning, and as a teacher, some of them you cannot even be able to solve because they don't need me. They need a special intervention. So that's really my experience, especially at the public schools. We have a lot of learners. I think awareness in terms of that and acceptance from parents is really necessary because most of the parents don't accept that their learners have barriers to learning.

Participant 10: And then now we are going to engage in a warm-up activity where we are going to use the strength cards. We are going to draw a picture at the back that represents your strength and then we are going to also discuss that so that when we move forward, we know who is drawing what, who can assist others, and then also who can assist with this. So, I think we can start with that strength card activity.

Participant 1: Can you match with what you had at the back?

Participant 10: Yes. At the bottom you can just write your strength. Let's say, for example, you are good at handling pressure.

Participant 1: That's what I meant for that.

Participant 10: Or you are a good communicator.

Participant 1: I think it's also good if, for me, it's much easier to see her or her strength than my own strength.

Participant 3: So, for me it's a lot easier to say Matilda's got the patience of, I don't know what and I think all her knowledge about it is because she's got a lot of experience with the different learners. So, it's for me much easier to tell her she's got patience and she's knowledgeable about it and for Andries also, for me it's easier to say to her she's got also the patience with the learners. I don't know. I'm a very, because it's different, my classes are different from their classes because I'm doing a lot of writing.

Participant 3: So, yeah, for me, I don't know what's my strength really. Making it safe for the learners.

Participant 1: I think your strength is really... Safe.

And safe OK, but I'm going to write more than one.

Participant 10: It's fine, it's fine.

Participant 2: But now, to make a picture of my words.

Participant 1: OK. This is an hourglass. If you cannot see my picture, it's an hourglass and it says patience. There's a lot of sand as it goes slowly. My next one is flexibility.

Participant 10: So, you are flexible in terms of everything.

Participant 1: Yes.

Participant 10: You are the right participant.

Participant 1: And now I have to think how to draw empathy because I think it is a big thing that you need to have.

Participant 3: You have to have empathy. My child is on the autism spectrum. It's not really, but it's got some of the aspects.

Participant 10: Oh, you also have a child.

Participant 3: But he's on the spectrum. But he's also got his challenges at the main school.

Participant 10: Yeah. So now you are here as a teacher, also as a parent.

Participant 3: Yeah, you can say it like that.

Participant 10: Thank you very much.

Participant 3: It's not always easy for a parent, I don't say autism because they will think your kid is very maltreated or whatever, and he's actually coping very well at school. He's in the top grades and everything. He's very clever. Very clever. Hence, I said to you, they differ most of the time. They differ from one another. And the one kid that my mother is looking after, he's totally on top, he's on diapers, he jumps around and screams most of the time. So, it's different roles.

Participant 3: I can share now my card and my drawing here. So, for instance, I have drawn here. My first thing I think I do very well is I read the information about the child, get the child's background, where he comes from and his parents, that's I think one of my strengths is really knowing the child and then seeing the child as an individual and not differ from the rest of the class. He's also part of the class and I also not make the children aware that he is different. And then to let them feel safe in the class, it's the hands that's keeping him safe.

But my main goal is to help them with coping skills because they must go on because he's now on a higher level. So, he needs to learn coping skills when he's feeling like this, what he needs to do in helping him to go on to the next grade where they are going to stay in the same space for a long time. So, mine is very important to let them know how to cope with the situation.

Participant 10: What is that makes you to know the background of the learner, why specifically?

Participant 3: Because when you have a meeting also with the parents like I had in the beginning of the year, I could have early noticed the things that I need to be aware of in the class and I can know he's using medication and I will ask the parents how do they support him and what do they do to make him feel safe.

Participant 1: For me another one is communication with the mother.

Participant 10: You are a good communicator?

Participant 1: Yes, because his hormones are playing a little bit, I asked her mother is a nurse, I asked her if there's something he can use to calm his hormones a little bit because he was touching me and things like that.

Participant 10: is he a boy or girl?

Participant 1: A boy. He will lift up my shirt and I asked her how do you do that at home. Same thing that happens at home happens at school. So, the mother told me there's an injection it helps a lot. It's very strange.

Participant 2: Can I also add on that mine looks under girls' skirts and I also had the meeting with the parent and he also got the injection.

Participant 1: My other one is adaptability? I have to adapt I cannot expect him to adapt because he cannot understand, so I also have to adapt. I have to keep the noise a little bit down. I cannot let other kids be loud and things like that. And another one creativity in teaching every day I have to think about how am I going to teach him this because communication is not always there and background knowledge is not there and he cannot understand me sometimes so I have to be creative. I told you about empathy and the important thing is to know whether they are naughty or not and they can manipulate you, so you have to know you cannot know whether he is very naughty. You have to know him.

Participant 10: Over to you mam.

Participant 2: I think one of my strengths is patience with that learner and I can't help it. If they can't read and they can't write I try to make the dots so that he can write over them and I think I'm

advocating for them. And the other one I am strict, in the class you have to do what anyone is doing, if you are standing in the line if you are going to get in the class, you also have to stand in the line. Then they know what is expected of them and it has to be repetitive, every time you do the same routine. Go into the line and get in class you have to know where you stand. Take out your back, everyday same thing. you need to make them aware if there's a change in routine like sports day you have to prepare them ahead. Tell them tomorrow remember we have to attend sports day. Remember it's difficult for them to come in and everything is settled. I remind all my kid's minutes by minutes that we are going to break. 10 minutes, 5 minutes I will remind them constantly.

Participant 10: As the researcher I can handle pressure, remember that at the mainstream is so difficult and remember that I teach Grade 12 and they want results so it's so difficult and you have to remember you have to leave other Grades and focus on grade 12. As we are approaching trial exam and final examination we have programmes like last push, whereby you work many hours, I am good at handling pressure and also having a family and travelling from Viljoenskroon to Kroonstad on daily basis; when I arrive at home I am a mother and a wife and also a student. I handle pressure very well even though I have relapses. I am a good communicator with my learners and everyone around me. I teach my learners to communicate in time with me. I have created that safe space with my learners whereby I communicate with them; even if I am at home they come to me and tell me about their personal problems. I am good communicator and a good listener without judging them. I am a disciplinarian; at the beginning of the year I set rules, if you don't follow the rules we are going to fight and there will be consequences.

Participant 2: I also have rules, if you choose to break the rules he knows he is going to stay. If you choose to scream and disrupt you choose not to participate, you choose it is your own choice. If you chose not to listen when I am speaking it's your choice. There are consequences.

Participant 3 reading on behalf of Participant 4: Can I read quickly what Karabo's mother have sent? Karabo gets into trouble on purpose sometimes just to get attention and laughs about it. He forgets simple things like locking the door when he comes outside and we have to repeat the same thing to him over and over again. The medication helps a lot, we have reduced shouting to him. **(Participant 4 could not attend physically but she wrote and sent to the teacher)**

Participant 10: Thank you ladies, see you on our next meeting.

LSEN School 2: relationship building

Participant 10: Good afternoon ladies. Welcome to our first session of collecting data, which is our cycle one. Our cycle one is going to consist of two sessions. The first one is relationship building, whereby we are going to describe our roles and responsibilities and then I also have what we call the strength cards, whereby we are going to have a warm-up activity. We are going to use the strength cards as well as illustrative drawing to draw our strengths. So today, it's just all about knowing each other, our roles and responsibilities, and then how are we going to collect data. So, the first thing that we are going to do, we are going to introduce ourselves. I'm Molelekeng Cynthia Rakholile and ma'am?

I'm Anna Mbojwana.

Okay, I'm Karabelo Daikreshia Diawukadze.

I'm Mamudiki Elisa.

I'm Motlalepula Mirriam Taje.

I'm Polo Sesing.

I'm Kenyaditswe Elisa.

Participant 10: Now, first of all, what is it that we have to do? We have to form the ALG, whereby the ALG stands for Action Learning Group. Now with regards to ALG, it is whereby we are going to share responsibilities. We are going to engage in reflective discussions, all of us, meaning everyone's voice is going to be respected and heard.

All of us are going to participate, meaning we are going to collaboratively engage in this research. So, we are going to find solutions towards the common problem as a team, not as an individual. So, the second step is understanding of the educational context for learners on the Autism Spectrum.

Participant 10: Anyone who can explain the educational context in terms of learners on the autism spectrum? Tell us about the educational context for learners on the autism spectrum? I know you are teaching the learners on the Autism spectrum, right?

Participants: Yes, ma'am.

Participant 11: I don't know whether I understand the question clearly or what. According to my understanding, I would say the autism learners, they are more special. They need their space, they have their comfort in different ways. Like they can get comfort out of things that we are not

aware of. Like my son in my class, Lebusa, if maybe he gets irritated or annoyed, he can drink this thing, what is it? Roll-on. Then I ask the sister, what's going on? He said that's how he can get comfort out of those things. Then he prefers something like, you see this coat of mam, the flashy thing? Yes. So, he can enjoy, if he wears something like, he can touch you... He enjoys something different from others. He is different, like he enjoys his space. He will stay alone in his space. Thank you very much, ma'am, for that.

Participant 10: Anyone? Parents?

Participant 12: I don't have an autism in my class, but they don't like noise. Even if there is a lot of noise, you will see them holding their ears like this. That's the thing that I notice about them.

Participant 10: Okay, thank you very much. Secondly, we are going to generate visual art that represents your perspective as well as your experiences. Meaning that we are going to draw your experiences and your perceptions. When you talk about perceptions, it means how you view a certain thing. we are going to create an activity.

Participant 11: I don't know where are we going to draw? At the bottom. Your experiences. What's your experience? Like a picture?

Participant 10: Yes, you are going to draw your experience.

Participant 11: With those learners, I suppose?

Participant 10: With regards to your experience as well as your perspective. Your experience working with learners on Autism spectrum as well as your perspective.

Participant 11: Oh, my experience? Different learners that I met, how do they react?

Participant 10: Yes, your experience.

Participant 11: Okay, in these years that I've been here? By drawing a picture? Yes. It's a visual art. I get to start. I don't know what I have to draw. In my class, here are the others. He'll be sitting like this in the class. On this row, all by himself. and then the other one, He likes making sounds. You know, besides that one, those puzzles, he was excelling in the puzzles. So, I don't know how to draw it.

Participant 10: How you draw it is not important. Just draw.

Participant 11: That's the one. I'm trying to draw the puzzles. It's fine. No, it's fine.

Participant 10: Hence, I said to you how you draw it is not important. We just want to derive information from it.

Participant 12: And now I'm trying to, to draw myself and... Tshegofatso Blade. Here is Tshegofatso. So, Tshegofatso is loud, when others make that sound, she will put her arms in the ears to show that she gets irritated. That's the explanation.

Participant 10: I will draw my Katleho during the eating time on my Monday when they eat pap and milk. Here is Katleho and then here is the dining hall table. Here is the pap and milk. When he is supposed to eat those pap and milk, he will cry ehehehe..., he doesn't want to eat pap and milk. Okay. Here I'm drawing myself and Lebusa Katleho. When I'm asking him to sit on the chair, Katleho instead of sitting on the chair, he's holding his leg like this. He's not doing this. He's going to sit on the chair, folding his leg like this. He's doing this. Doing this. You see Katleho sometimes put his hands near his ears. It's like that. It's like that.

Participant 13: I'm not going to talk about the name. When we were at the Gold Reef City. He was just putting his hand like this. We wanted to move from one place to another. He didn't want anything because of Gold Reef City. Instead of moving with us, he just wanted to sleep down. We were helped by another teacher who was also scared about the... Anaconda. We didn't know what to do. Because of his fear, he just laid down. He was afraid of Gold Reef City machines and the sound. He was sleeping and crying.

Participant 9: I'm going to draw my son doesn't like to wear shoes. We fight every day to wear shoes. He wants to walk by a foot. So, I'm going to draw there. The feet and also, he doesn't like noise. When he hears noise, he screams and then he will cry. But in himself, he wants to be the one who makes noise, not other people who make noise. This is the home. This is the couch. Yes, and then this is the TV. But mostly he watches YouTube. This thing with children's channels. Those things with animations and cartoons. I kept those things. And another thing, he got very easily irritated by his siblings and sometimes he only plays with them when he wants. But only for a few seconds. And after that, he got bored and when they want to continue to play, he complains of them making noise. They scream around his ears. He does not like that, and another thing is that he likes specific food. Instant porridge. He can eat instant porridge all day. I think he's addicted to it. I don't know. But ever since, he's been like this.

Participant 9: And the other thing, the problem is sometimes, I'm screaming because sometimes I get frustrated as a parent. Because sometimes this behaviour sometimes irritates me. Even though I'm her mother, I have to understand the situation. But sometimes as a mother, I get irritated because of this behaviour. And another thing, why I included his siblings, because also they get irritated sometimes because they think I'm giving him a special treatment. I always have

to explain to them why I have to treat him special. They are children. They don't understand. You know? Because he is different. Yeah, because he is different. I say I'm screaming because I have to repeat one thing many times. Your shoes.

Where is it? Sometimes I think that he has an eyesight problem but he does not. I think it's the lack of focus. Sometimes he'll say, put your shoes on. Where are the shoes? Where? Where? Where? Where? Your shoes. Take your shoes. This is the shoes. You know? Sometimes it's like he can't see. You have to grab something and say this is it. And he'll say, oh, the shoes. Even a simple mug. Take the mug. Where? It is right in front of his eyes. You have to take him by the hand and show. I don't know if that only happens at home or at school but I think I have that problem. It takes much time. I can't have my me time if you know what I'm saying.

Participant 10: Yes. So how do you see Katleho? Is he a problematic child? He has a behavioural problem?

Participant 9: Absolutely. No, it's not because he is always, like I said, he's always on the phone or on the TV. He's not a problem child at all. In fact, he's a very, very good kid. Even if you can say my child was involved in a fight. What is going to worry me is going to be why did he, he was involved in a fight. What was the problem? Now I will think over it. The cause of the problem is not him because I know my child is not a problem child. Even though I get irritated by his behaviour but I know violence is not a violent type. It's quite a child.

Participant 10: Because when you do research they show many symptoms like behavioural problems. They do have a lot of behavioural problems. I'm not saying in terms of fighting but they do have behavioural problems.

Participant 9: Yes, I just observed recently that I thought maybe he's coming into teenage hood but he started to be stubborn. Because he has a speech problem. He wants to back chat but because he's unable you see he wants to backchat. When I say something, he wants to say it but because of the speech I'm always faster and I irritate him. I think it's natural to be too much stubborn. A lot. And then sometimes he's moody. He has mood swings a lot. Then he's happy the next day he's moody the next day he's irritated. He even cries sometimes without no reason. I think that answers it. Like I'm saying at home I don't know if it's well because it's a different environment.

Participant 10: Because hence I said when you do research one of the symptoms is behavioural problems. They show a lot of behavioural problems but not all of them. As much as they show different symptoms in class they are not the same. So, they show different symptoms. Others they have behavioural problems they are so many.

Participant 11: I can say it depends on the environment. Because even me Sibusiso is so young but he's always hungry. If he can clap his tummy he cannot sit he cannot concentrate he cannot do anything and he has sound. I'll give what he wants because of that irritating sound. Because it's a behavioural problem.

Participant 13: Yes. It was so surprising for me to hear that Mamokete has autism. I didn't know about it and I didn't realize it. I don't know what I'm going to do.

Participant 10: Just write your experience about it.

Participant 13: Mamokete when she's sitting on the table, this is a table Immediately when we give Mamokete a pen or whatever she is shaking. Her hands are shaking. I don't know if it's because of autism. It's my first time to hear that learners on the autism are shaking.

Participant 11: Yes, they do that. Okay. She's doing like that.

Participant 12: Shaking and the other thing is she will not respond to you immediately when you speak something or teaching them. She will take her time to respond. After going to another thing then Mamokete will come back to respond to what have you said first before. That's Mamokete.

Participant 9: And you know what I forgot is that sometimes he plays this and he is in another world thinking about something else while you are sitting he will be looking at the roof. You will even say, hi Papi, Papi. It's like he's in another world at that moment. And then this thing of playing with specifically teddy bear or whatever even if it's a doll. And then the focus will be on the eyes. And then we'll break the toy piece by piece and want to put it back together. He doesn't have toys. Everything he breaks he doesn't have nicer things. Everything he has he breaks it. His clothes will tear them. Everything. He destroys everything.

Participant 6: So, at home when we are watching TV Nkosana doesn't want to sit on the sofa. He takes a pillow from the bedroom and sit on it and watch TV. He cuts everything at home. We don't have anything at home. He cuts everything. Everything is his. So, he cuts everything. I am the only one who understands Nkosana at home because he uses sign language to communicate, so I am the only one who understands him.

Participant 14: The other thing, I am confused about the other child. One day they came to my class and he can read words that I am writing on the chalkboard and explain each and every word. I don't know, autism, this autism, I am confused about it. Even the alphabet, he can spell that word correctly, spell it correctly. I am confused, I am confused.

Participant 10: You are confused?

Participant 14: Yes, so that one, they came in my class but he excelled like this and I am writing in difficult words.

Participant 12: What I realized is that the autistic children, most of them they like TV and then they can redo whatever the TV is doing. Like Tshegofatso that I just talked about. She cannot take any instruction but what she does is that when you say Tshegofatso come here, she'll say Tshegofatso come here. Yes, so, they are, Luthando is clever in his way because he can even say things you didn't taught him but Tshegofatso when you put the alphabets at the table he will read them up to Z but when you say Tshegofatso say A, she will say Tshegofatso say A. They are imitators.

Participant 10: To answer that question of Mme in terms of Luthando, there is this theory of Mezirow that I am using in my study as well as Gardner theory, that Gardener's theory it says even though they have learning barriers but they do excel in other things, so like in my study I talk about the visual, mathematics, spatial so they excel in other things. It's just only one part of them that is excluding them in terms of learning but when you look at other parts some of them learners on the AS are good at Mathematics. Even though I don't personally teach learners on the AS will share with you this knowledge about them, will provide you with this theory or information so that you can understand them better as parents.

Participant 12: Yes, like Luthando is only having a problem of writing but other things can cope well and do them. Then Neo very isolated and when having nothing to do start to bite his fingers until blood comes, but when we give him books or something to be busy with he gets calm. Also, medication affect him, like change in medication sometimes make him act wild. Papi also reflect such behaviour as Neo. I never knew he has this problem.

Participant 10: Yes, as it comes to those learners, as Africans our view and perspective is different as some think its witchcraft; it therefore says identification of such learners from early age is important and critical. I teach at secondary school, where I see some of such behaviours indicating autism, but such learners never identified and helped. I remember, not last year or the other year, I had a grade 8 learner in my class who will sit in front lost, I could not understand him but you could see this child doesn't belong in this class, hence early identification is important.

Participant 14: So mme what cause this autism?

Participant 10: There are so many factors which cause this, ranging from genetics, environment, neurological development and others. I'm very happy with your participation in this session and the whole lot of information you have provided, especially to learn about your experience as well as your perspective with your children and teaching them as educators. The second step is that as members of ALG we are going to determine our roles as well as our responsibilities. PALAR

is collaborative, we are going to work together as a team, even in reflecting on this meeting we have, I will provide you with journal which will be used by each to write your own reflections. When we meet again on Thursday we will reflect, so each of you write down reflections of the meeting and everything we did. I am the facilitator. Remember me as the researcher will get information from all of you, working all together as a team and engage in reflective discussions. This session is part of data collection so we are going to sit down as a team and analyse the data. The next step is to share our background, remember this session is all about relationship building.

Background of the participants

Participant 11: When I arrive here the principal was a white man. I went to North West University to further my studies to study special needs education, that's where I have gained more knowledge that some of these kids, its due to their mothers' behaviour like drinking, and some they inherited them. I learned a lot. Also, maternal diabetes, down syndrome. I also have down syndrome.

Participant 12: I grew up in a family whereby my sister's child has a down syndrome, my brother and my cousin they are deaf. I used to go to Thibolloha so even before working here I was used to the environment. I did work at the mainstream before; I can differentiate, I can tell this one is my client. Even at church my pastor has a child on the AS. One thing about them they are clever.

Participant 13: My child has anger issues due to the fact that me and my husband we will fight in front of my child. I was addicted to alcohol but I changed a lot, but the relationship between me and my husband is the same. Due to our problems at home, the school that my son attends they wanted to refer my child to a special school thinking he has a problem, but I managed to change the situation. I wash the learners at the hostel.

Participant 10: Thank you very much for today's session.

LSEN School 1: Challenges and experiences

Participant 10: Okay, good afternoon ladies, welcome to our data collection session. Now today we are going to tackle our first research question, what are the challenges and experiences of teachers and parents in the Fezile Dabi district regarding learners on the autism spectrum? Meaning we are going to talk about your challenges, and then the method that we are going to use is illustrative drawing as well as reflective journals, meaning we are going to draw your challenge as well as your experience, and then you are going to write it on your, what you call this thing, your reflective journals, you have your reflective journals. And then, I just want to find out from you, now how is the management support in terms of time, resource, as well as evaluation? How is the management support in terms of time, resource, as well as evaluation? Meaning when I talk about resource, are you well-resourced for the needs of learners? And then support management skills, challenges faced by educators, support and personal as well as psychological needs.

Participant 1: I think we've got a lot of support for the resources. I think we are okay with the resources.

Participant 2: The thing is, there are too many learners in one class and we don't always have a system. And I think it is so difficult because we need to have more one-on-one time.

Participant 10: So, in terms of resources you are okay?

All participants: Yes.

Participant 3: But the management of time as well. Yes, because there are eleven other learners or more that need attention. So, time management, I have only two hands. Really? I promise. Yes.

Participant 10: So, are you getting support for personal and psychological needs as educators? Remember that you are dealing with learners on the autism spectrum and I do believe somehow as a parent, as a teacher, it affects you. So, do you have that psychological support?

Participant 1: There is a lady that we can contact if we need psychological help. She's from the Department.

Participant 3: And for me it's a no-no. But I don't know.

Researcher: Okay, you can talk.

Participant 2: It's a big challenge. So, I go to my own psychologist. So, it goes off my medical aid and I go to a psychiatrist because I need some medication to cope. And yes. And it affects you.

Participant 1: Yes. Yeah, me too. I also have to go to Dr. Mabuza and he helps me to cope. Yes, I, my psychologist, but the psychiatrist I see in Bloemfontein. So that's extra money for transport. Financial burden. Yeah. And the medical aid doesn't pay for all the medications. So, you always have to... Go pay. Yeah. And it's expensive medication, unfortunately. And it means that sometimes we have to take sick leave. And go to a psychiatrist like Andre said. When it's not here. So, yeah.

Participant 10: Now in terms of policy, are there adequate policy? Do existing policies in line to support the learners and educators?

Participant 1: White Paper 6 is there. And it helps us and it can protect us. Yeah. If an incident happens.

Participant 10: But in terms of support? Of support? Remember that White Paper 6...

Participant 3: But the policy is not there to support actually, isn't it?

Participant 10: Yeah. Remember that even with the White Paper 6, it does not have specific interventions for learners on the autism. So, it's just a generalization of learning barriers.

Participant 3: But I don't think you'll ever get one that's catering to everyone's needs. Yeah. Because it's very different. Especially because we are not...

Participant 10: But So, policy is also a problem.

Participant 3: Yeah. It's also a challenge because it's just generalization. It's just in the general. Yes. Yeah. We are not PID school. Yeah. We are not the profound... Only SID and MID.

Participant 10: And funding... Okay. Before that, I just wanted to find out from... Are there any other external resources that you get from the Department? Any sponsors? Privates?

Participant 2: Not that we know of.

Participant 1: But the Department gave us EAs now.

Participant 2: Just for now.

Participant 1: Educate... Educational assistance. Yeah. And I think it is also a resource. But

Participant 2: it's not for long-term. Remember that.

Participant 3: It's not for long-term. It's not long-term. Yeah.

Participant 10: Now, remember that you have what you call the BELA Act. Yeah. Yeah, the BELA Act. Now, how does it help or distract your ability to work with learners? The BELA Act. Remember now that you are working with learners with barriers to learning. Especially with the autistic ones, whereby some of them, they show behavioural problems.

Participant 2: Now, in terms of BELA Act. The BELA Act doesn't really help us, because it protects the kids more than the teachers. So, in terms of the legislative, we still have challenges as teachers.

Participant 10: And your challenges, Mam?

Participant 3: Well, it's fine. I think it feels to me that if the educators in any case are always on the short end. And that's frustrating to do your passion, like you want to teach, and you are being, what do you call it, being stopped in a way. I think from the Department side, there can be more support for special schools. Especially in the autism spectrum. More schools can also be allocated for them. But the funding is not there. And they don't work. It's a struggle to get them referred and tested.

Participant 3: So, we see the autistic signs, but we can't say they are autistic. They are not diagnosed, so they don't count more on a certain scale. Autistic learners count as six learners equal. And a lot of them, they count as maybe two learners. And then there's a lot of learners with a lot of difficulties. And we have to cope.

Participant 2: They don't take into consideration that you have a class with 15, but if you have two kids in your class that have autism, you can actually add another six kids.

Participant 10: And then, in terms of communication, what form of communication exists and how is it used to inform the parents and all role players in terms of communication?

Participant 1: I think there's a lack of knowledge. I think some of the parents need more intensive learning and we cannot give it to them at all times. Because we have to take care of all the learners and teaching and learning.

Participant 2: And there are some parents who don't care. The other thing is, at the end of the day, your kids are always losing in your class. The autism child is not getting the right education that he needs, and also the learners that surround him don't get the full attention that they need. So, it's always a shortcoming in the class,

Participant 3: I think. For me, it's always like that. It's like building blocks. If you take one out, for instance, your autistic child is having his phantom or whatever, and then you take that block out. And then you take another block out to keep that discipline problem. Then you have to keep that HVAC. And then, after all that blocks, he's going to fall in. And then they end up with no structure.

Participant 10: And then, psychologically, how does this, what you call, all these challenges that you have mentioned, affect you? Especially working with those learners on the autism spectrum.

Participant 3: Because they are not like the others, they are just different. You as a person, your emotional well-being. You are 80% of the time, you are drained. Constantly also thinking of new strategies and new activities and new ways to accommodate that child. And how to make it work in a class with a lot of children. And then you go with this, everything, home, you have children at your home, and then you must be now 100% for them.

Participant 2: That's not possible. A mother and a wife.

Participant 1: A minister's wife. And a hostel mother. And especially now, like this week, we decided to take risks for our own children.

Participant 2: Now it's difficult for us. Because it's a lot of pressure, little things that pile on one another that make it difficult for us. For instance, today, my autism, all week my autism child is not coping well and he's doing weird stuff and strange stuff that he's never done. So, I need to go and figure out what is giving this child the strength, and I must phone the parents and ask the parents, what's going on at home, what's triggering all this stuff. In my situation, the parents don't really care. They are glad to leave our school and it's my problem now. So, I have a really tough day with her today, but I can't phone the mother and ask her what it's about, because she won't answer the phone. And at the end of the day, it's just you and me that's going to support that child.

Participant 3: You are the only safe one for me. Because Mathilda's child will not be safe with me because he doesn't know me. He only knows hers. So, if she's not going to be booked off sick, that's going to affect the class a lot, because that child will not be able to come to school for a while. Am I right? Yes, and it means neglect. A lot of other people. If I give all my attention to my autistic learner, all the other kids, they are neglected. And my own kids, and me even. Okay.

Participant 10: You can continue drawing. Thank you.

Participant 1: Colouring pencils, just to make this one look more colourful. This is collaboration, because we have to close interactions with each other. What do you think it looks like, Retseh?

Participant 3: Okay, and make a note next to it.

Participant 2: Lack of counselling. Yes, another. Go to second. Or you can just write it next to it. Yeah.

Participant 3: Lack of counselling. Support. Psychological. So, it can mean... Where's that thing that we spoke about?

Participant 1: Counselling. Lack of counselling. Counselling, yes. Because counselling and support work hand in hand. Yeah, but support is bigger. That's why I want to write support.

Participant 2: Yes, and support. They're on top.

Participant 10: You can complete your sentence.

Participant 1: And support. And then this one? Lack of knowledge. So, the lack of knowledge was for them to support their own kids, I think. Yeah, and the parents. Parents.

They have a lack of knowledge sometimes.

Participant 10: But you as teachers, you are knowledgeable in terms of supporting these learners.

Participant 3: We do our best.

Participant 1: We try. Yeah. Can we start the sentence? Start it.

Participant 10: Do whatever you need.

Participant 3: This one is going to go under the parent's challenge, not the teachers.

Participant 1: But it is teachers' challenge with them. Because the parents don't know. Don't ask me how I did it. This I've done just once. I look at some pictures and I copy them from the pictures. It helps me to get new ideas. It helps me. It's a lot. And every day there's new ones. New ones. Emotionally, it's draining, but it's a social insult.

Participant 2: Put it there. Yeah. You can just make a little arrow. It's coming along. Like I said, you can put it by here.

Participant 3: Like that. Yeah. Stress. Under psychological.

Participant 10: So, as well as teachers and parents when you are at home you are a parent how does this work stress affect you as a parent?

Participant 2: You are tired. And irritable. My son likes to scare me. Sometimes when I get home I'm not ready for that and I just take out everything on him. Yeah and then I need to explain, sorry, but you know. Actually, it was in my class. So, it does have a little bit of effect. And when I talked about some child, he said that's that one. So, he can connect the dots now or he's starting to connect the dots. The dots are coming on. It's difficult.

Participant 3: It's difficult. And then I have now the autism child at home. So, then I must now see what he sees all the time. So, you're... Oh dankie, dankie, dankie, dankie, dankie.

Participant 1: Maybe you can write lack of support from parents.

Participant 10: And remember that how you draw is not important.

Participant 1: Because that one is now looking like a family. Yes.

Participant 10: Are you working together with parents?

Participant 3: I am.

Participant 10: But you do communicate?

Participant 3: Yes.

Participant 10: Do you sometimes socialize and network to know each other?

Participant 2: Excuse me?

Participant 10: Do you sometimes socialize and network to know each other? With the parents

Participant 2: No. No. You don't do that.

Participant 10: Fine.

Participant 1: You don't have time for that.

Participant 10: Okay. Now here are your... This is your challenges that you have drawn. So now we are going to go to parents' challenges as well as experiences on supporting the learners on the autism spectrum. Okay. And then as a parent, your challenges. Do you get support from friends, from family? Yes. Not in the beginning.

Participant 3: But now I do get support. But in the early ages because of the lack of understanding of autism and my child's needs, they didn't give me the right support that I needed.

Participant 10: And then societal perception with regards to your learner? The perception. With the outside people?

Participant 3: What?

Participant 10: Yes, what's their perception?

Participant 3: It's actually bad because they will look at you as if you are not knowing your child and everything is wrong and the child is not being educated right or something like that.

Participant 10: In the beginning you said there was no support due to lack of knowledge.

Participant 3: Yes, the community, my family did not support me as they needed to do. That can affect the way your child grows up. Socially people will think your child is weird or you did something wrong.

Participant 10: So, it was a challenge for you when you go outside with your child?

Participant 3: Yes, they will look weird to you. Ok like stigmatization. Yes, they will think there is something wrong with your child. It's like a bullying way, say things or make comments like that. I am going to draw a bully. They will look at you differently. From the school side I didn't have the support from them from the beginning and they also have some type like stigma or something that your child is misbehaving or is it because they also don't understand autism in its full concept. And psychologically it affects me also because I also see someone to get the medication for myself as a teacher, also as a parent, just to stay above and keep the family together because it's a lot of pressure on the family, and if you have another child to get the right routine for both of them because his brother does not understand why he get certain things right while he is not allowed.

Participant 10: So emotionally?

Participant 3: Emotionally very drained, and like medically it confuses you. Medication. in terms of your social life? Social life you don't go out that much because you want to spare the humility, so you stay at home because you want to keep your child in the safe environment to control your kid and because there is no routine you can't go to a party and expect it to fit in your routine, you must do what they are doing. No social life. It's really hard.

Participant 10: Yes. On our relationship building session you said the child does not get the grant how are you managing with the treatments and all those things.

Participant 3: We cope with it now, it's a struggle because we need to go to Bloemfontein, like I said its petrol money to go and it's a lot of money they ask for one session and they want to see

your child at least two times a year, in the beginning and at the end of the year. It's like a R3000 per month his medication costs me that.

Participant 10: Thank you, ladies, for today session will meet again next week to analyse this data.

LSEN School 2: Challenges and experience

Participant 10: Good afternoon, ladies. Welcome to our data collection. Today, we are going to tackle our first research question. What are the challenges and experiences of teachers and parents in the Fezile Dabi district regarding learners on the autism spectrum? We are going to collect data using illustrative drawings as well as reflective journals. Now, what's important is that how you draw is not important. So, we are going to draw your challenges and experiences as a teacher and your challenges as well as experiences as a parent.

Participant 10: So, this is what we are going to do. We are going to write that on your reflective journals, your challenges, and then we are going to draw. So, can we start? Can we start? Okay, it's fine. Now, to the parents, are you working together with the teachers?

Participant 9: No. We are not working together. There's no communication between us.

Participant 10: Do you plan together? Are there any collaborative efforts?

All participants: No.

Participant 10: Are there any collaborative efforts?

All participants: No.

Participant 10: Do you sometimes socialize and network to know each other with the teachers?

Participant 9: Never.

Participant 10: Why not?

Participant 9: Because it has never happened.

Participant 10: And then, what are your social experiences or challenges with the outside world?

Participant 9: Not accepting. The outside world, with the community.

Participant 10: And Yes, the challenges that you face with the community.

Participant 9: Stigma. This misunderstanding from the society regarding the Autism. It sometimes lead to social isolation, for me as a parent and my child. We sometimes face public judgment and shame, and it impacts the well-being of the parent as well as my child. And the stigma also affects and strains the relationship within the family.

Participant 9: Can I also include the family?

Participant 10: Yes.

Participant 9: The family, the siblings, because sometimes they do not understand the condition of the child with ASD. They take it as a favouritism. They don't understand it all. They think the child is treated as special. He's a special child. Everything is about him. So, they lack understanding. So, can I talk about all the factors that I face?

Participant 10: Your challenges.

Participant 9: My challenges. Not only from the society? Okay.

Participant 9: Parenting an autistic child, it is a very complex situation that drains me as a parent psychologically mostly. My mental health, it's always at stake due to stress of having to take care of the child. The child care duties, raising this child with an ASD is not an easy task because it is a full-time job, especially if you have no family support. Or they don't understand your child condition. Again, another challenge is lack of time for self-care. If you don't have support from the family members or you don't have enough money to hire a caregiver, you struggle alone to care for the child. And remember that sometimes the child is hyperactive, and as a result, you become scared for their safety as well. And then you spend more time, your entire time, guarding them, which means as a parent you don't have time to look for yourself or to rest or to socialize with other people. So, you don't socialize, you become isolated.

Participant 9: And sometimes you don't even pursue your interest over this. Another challenge is communication. If there's no communication with the child...

Participant 10: Before you go to communication as a challenge, now psychologically, how are those challenges affecting you? Like you said, you talk about the stigma as well as lack of support from your family.

Participant 9: Psychologically, like I said, it causes stress and anxiety sometimes because you don't understand your child's behavior. And you don't even have support, so it strains you mentally because you spend most of the time looking after this child. You neglect other issues surrounding your life.

Participant 10: So how do you deal with the stress issue? Are you seeing someone to assist in terms of that?

Participant 9: Yes, yes, yes. At first when I realized my child has a problem, I seek for support from where I was working there was a psychologist. So, to me it was a blessing because I had someone who's a professional to guide me and to debrief when I don't feel well and she was guiding me how to take care of the child with autism and how to understand him. And eventually I did find my way around him and to accept the way he is now. And then the other challenge I was saying is communication.

Participant 9: You know, verbal communication with a child with ASD is different and very difficult. My child has a problem with speech. It is frustrating sometimes if you can't understand what he's saying and it's difficult to provide emotional support to such a child because sometimes he cannot even express himself. You want to say something and then you think he's saying the opposite. And that thing is also frustrating and we end up both being frustrated because we cannot understand each other. And because of the lack of communication, we don't bond as it's supposed to be between a parent and a child. It's very difficult not being able to communicate with your child, spending time with your child. You know, that mother and child relationship, it's very difficult to have such a relationship with a child with ASD.

Participant 9: And then another challenge is finance. As a parent, sometimes I'm faced with financial burden. Caring for the child with ASD can drain you financially. I'm talking about doctors because these children need specialists. And you know, in government institutions, they take time to get service. So now I opt for private institutions. So, with that, it drains me financially because I have to do everything privately with the private doctors. That's why I said it became a financial burden for me. And then it also affected my job because I was working out of town. My mother was the one who was raising my child and she was the one who understood the child. And my mother passed away. And then because of that, I had to leave my job so that I can take care of this child because there's no one who understands him. So, it has drained me financially because I had to leave my job because of him, to care for him.

Participant 9: And then another thing is resources. In our community, as you know, we are a very small community with a lack of resources. There are no specialists. There are no social development offices. We don't have the psychologist. We have to travel out of town to access those things, even if in the government institutions. You have to travel here to Kroonstad or Bloemfontein, even if it's a referral from the clinic. That's why I say the resources is one thing that contributes to our challenges, caring for the child with ASD because of those resources we don't have at our disposal, near us. So, it's a challenge. Because again, it goes back to finance because you have to travel out of town. You have to incur the costs.

Participant 9: Okay, and another one is, I've talked about stigma. I think, if I've forgotten anything, I think that's it.

Participant 10: And then, parent two, your challenges. And the other thing mme you said is that there's no communication between you and the teacher. I also think that it is also a challenge because you are not constantly communicating with the teacher. There's no communication.

Participant 6: From my side, we did not know what autism is. When we took Nkosana to the hospital, we thought that the nurses were talking nonsense when they said Nkosana has autism. Because when Nkosana was born, and from next door the other child was also born, so we thought they were the same. So, we took Nkosana to the private hospital and we got the referral from private hospital to take Nkosana to the Kroonstad. So, when we got to the Kroonstad, they gave Nkosana, I don't know how to describe those shoes. Those shoes were like this, but if Nkosana had to wear them, he had to wear them banana, for his feet to balance. So, every month we had to take Nkosana to Kroonstad and we didn't have money that every month we have to take the child to Kroonstad.

Participant 10: So, it means that on your first drawing you talk about a lack of understanding of autism because you have to take Nkosana to the private hospital whereby they have to diagnose him, but the diagnosis was not the right diagnosis as they have given him shoes?

And then, secondly, you talk about the finances. whereby, you said that for you, financially, it was draining because you had to travel from Viljoenskroon to Kroonstad every month to get assistance. You can continue.

Participant 6: So, after he was diagnosed, we have to go to the local clinic, where they give us a letter to the Pax, where they made him an appointment with a physiotherapist to assist further. The support was great, as they gave us pamphlets on how to train him to walk and talk and understand him. They also gave us support on how to help Nkosana with his speech. And I think, at Pax they didn't have physiotherapist. And then, they give us a letter so that he can get the grant. He got the grant at a young age. I think he was about 10 months when he received a disability grant. The support was amazing from the family and the government. We did not get any problem from receiving this grant.

Participant 6: Regarding the education, we have no problem because at Mphatlalatsane they register him. And we had an appointment with a physiotherapist, me and him. They had interviewed him. When they interviewed him, they wanted to see if he was qualified to be in school. And he passed the interview. And we used the referral letter that we got from his physiotherapy that he needs to go to a special school.

Participant 10: This session is all about what you face, your challenges, not about the child. Your challenges. Let's say, for example, mathata ao wena o kopaneng le ona ho thusa ngwana anang le Autism. (The challenges) Like the first one, you said lack of understanding of autism. Second, you said finances is also a problem. So, we want the challenges. The first one and the second one is correct.

Participant 6: Bongata ba malapa a rona ha dule mona Viljoenskroon ba dula Parys, ha o nale di family gathering ha re kgone ho ya hobane ha ona motho a tla mohlokomelang and ha ona motho a moutlwisisang ntle le batswadi, so ho kopana le batho ho thata.

Participant 10: (translating): Most of our families don't stay here at Viljoenskroon they stay in Parys. In terms of socializing or family gatherings, the parent could not go due to there was no one take care of the child and no one understands the child except the parents, so socially the parent was suffering.

Participant 10: And then I just want to ask you a question, is there any communication between you and the teachers? You communicate?

Participant 6: No.

Participant 10: Are there any collaborative strategies that you have in terms of helping the child?

Participant 6: No, I can't say.

Participant 10: Okay, fine. Thank you, parent number two. Now we are going to go to teacher's challenges. But first of all, I just want to find out from you teachers, how is the management support in terms of time, resource, evaluation?

Participant 5: As a teacher, their support is not that enough, even from the department, because we don't get enough training, we don't get any counseling regarding our emotions, because this means with the autism sometimes we don't know how to communicate with them and that causes stress for us. It brings a lot of pressure for us because we want to be perfect to make sure that the learners are passing.

Participant 10: Secondly, I just want to find out, are you well-resourced for the needs of the learners in terms of resources?

Participant 5: No, there is a lack of resources.

Participant 10: And then in terms of support, you talk about there's a lack of support from the management. Those are your challenges. And then, are you getting any support on personal and

psychological needs? Remember that you are dealing with learners on the autism spectrum. Now, it's not an easy job. How does that affect?

Participant 5: Sometimes the specialist, sometimes they do like workshops, maybe for an hour or 30 minutes, just to remind us or try to put us at ease when we are working with autistic children. But emotionally no.

Participant 10: But emotionally, as a teacher, are you coping? How does that affect you?

Participant 5: Sometimes it does help, but most of the time we are struggling.

Participant 10: Now, you said that you also attend workshops and training, but these workshops, is it more about new developments in terms of the autism?

Participant 5: It's just a normal workshop, like what is autism, how is their behaviour?

Participant 10: Because there is new research in terms of autism support strategies that you can use as a teacher?

Participant 5: There are no new things, and no follow-ups also. Like, if maybe there was a workshop previously, then next time when we come, they try to find out. They try to find out if maybe you are coping or what. There are no follow-ups.

Participant 10: Now, in terms of, now I just want to talk about the department as a whole.

Are there adequate policies, or do existing policies in the department support the learners and educators?

Participant 5: Not really, because there are policies, but they are not specific for autistic learners. It's just generalization of the police.

Participant 10: Okay, do you get any external resources? Any sponsors, private, in terms of supporting those learners? Now, the other thing that I just want to find out from you is this, new Act, Bela Act? It also affects me as I work in the mainstream.

Now you have learners on the autism spectrum, we understand their behaviours. Now, how does this, what you call this thing, Bela Act, affect you? Because now, remember that these learners, you also have to reprimand them now and then, but this Bela Act, it does not allow that. It does not allow us.

Participant 5: It brings a lot of stress on us. I think even for some of the learners, because they have to socialize with the other learners, we have to follow the rules of Bela Act.

Participant 10: Is it easy for you? Because I can imagine, working in the mainstream they want to go to the bathroom, mam I want to go to the bathroom, and these ones, we say, we take them as normal but what about this one?

Participant 5: Sometimes they have their own reactions.

Participant 10: So, if five of them, they want to go outside, what is it that you do? And remember that you are dealing with people with barriers to learning.

Participant 5: Previously, I used to not let them go to the toilet during the class, but now, these days, I decided to let them go. But I only count, like, maybe only three. And then when those come back, I allow the others to go. Okay.

Participant 10: So, are you working together with the parents?

Participant 5: There's no communication between us and the parents. There's no communication.

Participant 10: Another question that I have for you and then, in terms of collaborative strategies in helping the child at home?

Participant 5: No, because sometimes, even when we try to call the parents, some, they don't come. Let me just say, most, they don't come to school. Only a few.

Participant 10: Okay, thank you. Teacher two. Your challenges?

Participant 8: So many.

Participant 10: Okay Please, talk loudly.

Participant 8: Okay, so my first one is, I drew a picture here of informed consent. Although consent is given, I really battle with that the parents aren't informed of their child's diagnosis. So, as you heard, the part that is easy, so getting the disability grant, that aspect has become smoother for most, some struggle with. But if you ask a parent what is autism, they can't tell you. So how are you getting informed consent if the informing is not present?

Participant 8: I then spoke about policy. I would like to reiterate that I think the Bela Bill is useless if it's not given with instructions of how to. It's a list of you can't. There's nothing that tells us we can for any learner. No matter if they are on the spectrum or not. I also think policies such as White Paper 6 are not carefully thought through. It's a lovely idea to have inclusive education, but when it comes down to the practicalities of that, when you are sitting in a mainstream school with children in a class between 45 and 90 learners, and you have one learner on a spectrum, it is a

challenge. Having no learners is a challenge. Now you throw in learners with different barriers to learning, I think you are asking for trouble.

Participant 8: There is no training. So even though we are a special needs school, not a lot of our staff are qualified as special needs educators. And even those that are, I query the quality of that training. Some of our special needs' educators would not be able to stand up and give a presentation on anything, never mind do the practical implementation in the class.

Participant 8: There is very poor structure. So even in our school that is catered for learners with special needs, we are enforcing rules. So, like at assembly, you must sit on a chair, you must sing the school song and national anthem, and that structure is difficult. So as an educator, it is very difficult to control the learners when they physically cannot handle the loud noise, or they physically cannot sit still any longer and they need to jump up and down. So, then it almost makes you feel like you are not doing your job, because you should be able to control the learners.

Participant 8: One of my greatest challenges is that learners are not just diagnosed with one barrier. So, for example, we've got SID with ASD with ADHD, we've got Down syndrome, we've got cerebral palsy. So that's all the learners. But some learners have multiple diagnoses. So, it's not just saying to the parents, your learner has ASD, all learners on the spectrum, but it's together with this and together with this, which makes the intervention very different.

Participant 8: I then put a frustration here of someone crying. It is very emotional working with these learners. It is very stressful. I do see a psychologist, but I pay for that privately because there are no resources made available to us.

Participant 8: I've also drawn a picture here of even colleagues that I work with. I put a question of, do you have an open mind or a closed mind? Are you willing to learn? Are you willing to try new things? And a lot of the colleagues don't because they are tired and they cannot try another thing because everything they try, it fails, it fails, it fails. So, they actually have given up.

Participant 8: I've said here that there is no support, like my colleague said, lack of resources. I've been at the school for three year and I've been applying for a PECS board and I don't know, just went to the SGB, I haven't heard feedback, but I feel like it's an expensive piece of equipment. And it's not to say that we can't make our own, but to have one per school that we can then make individualized cards for the learners that need it. So even like, you know, and I'm very good at coming up with our own resources and I'm collecting toilet rolls and egg boxes and bottle tops, but to have the real stuff would be very nice.

Participant 8: I've said that the DCAPS curriculum is not practical for our learners and so it's frustrating because the department is wanting you to do A, B, C, D and you cannot. So, then you

feel like you're just making excuses or you're pretending to do a little bit just to say that you are and I feel like we're losing integrity and dignity as educators.

Participant 8: There's no communication between colleagues, never mind between parents, and I do think we are busy trying to resuscitate our SBST, but it is a slow process.

Participant 8: I've said that we have not enough time for the learners and the number of learners per educator and per specialist in the school. There is a language barrier for me. We are an English and Sesotho medium school, but most of the school operates in Sesotho, as well as now we are throwing in ASD where language and communication is difficult. So that's difficult. Also, culture, so being the Rainbow Nation specifically in this community, I shared last time around or we've discussed before things like loud music and autism is a no-go, but any school event there's a loud speaker. Anytime there's outside people coming to do a presentation, it's loud.

Participant 8: We do not have enough noise cancelling headphones for all the learners that require it. When it comes to diet and eating, we have a dining room at our school, we have boarders as well, and NSNP, there's a set budget and a set menu, and it's very difficult to say, no, well this learner can't have soft porridge because they don't like the texture, because if you do it for one, you've got to do it for everyone. So that's a big challenge. We've had a learner now who, for most of this term, has not eaten, and it's not because we don't have resources, it's just she will not eat what we are providing. So that's a concern. Yes, we get a tick, where are having a program but it's not meeting learner requirements. Learners beat me, I have a couple of learners who will come up not because they are angry or hate me but because of their condition and they will smack me. I had learners who when they are angry they can't control their emotions, I almost had my arm broken few times. so there's that aspect and again with the Bela Bill what must I do? So that's difficult and also handling of inappropriate behavior learners trying to kiss each other or dance inappropriately or lying on top of each other, grasping makes it very difficult as well as other senses like vision if things are too bright or are too many as educators we are required to put charts in our class but if the chart has nothing to do with what you are currently doing it is a destruction for these learners. So, I always want say to the educators remove all the charts and when you are doing my body you bring my body chart, you put it away and then you bring the transport chart and you put it away because there's too much stimulation for our learners and that's not Department requirements of educators and I just put here red tape everywhere.

Participant 10: Teacher 1, your challenges so that we can close, the challenges that you have drawn.

Participant 5: Ok I have three challenges the first one is counselling and that one of emotions causing stress and then the policy that is generalizing for our learners even though we have learners with different disabilities in our school.

Participant 5: That one of counselling it simply means that we don't get counselling regarding our stress and emotions in our school, from the department and inside. And that one of stress I have already spoken about it that of emotions is causing stress that is why we need counselling sometimes and then that one of the policies that is generalizing.

Participant 5: And the other one can be curriculum that is not practical for our learners, in fact in our school I haven't seen the curriculum that is meant for our severely most of the time we take the curriculum from the mainstream then they downgrade it to our learners.

Participant 10: What about the DCAPS Curriculum?

Participant 8: We've got the DCAPS but even the DCAPS, we have multiple diagnosis at the school, Yes they are all SID again it's all SID with ASD, with Down syndrome, with cerebral palsy that the curriculum is so restrictive if you are looking at developmental framework so the same as the child must be three months to do this and 6 months to this and we are checking that at the clinic 6 months, 9 months 12 months and 18 months that can carry on until 10 years old. We have framework but we are not looking at that so if the learner cannot match colours there's one way they are going to identify colours, name the colour there's no way they are going to use it appropriately and colour by number so until you reach that milestone so there's no point in trying to push for the higher marks.

Participant 5: And you still have to account, they fail and you still have to account why this learner failed? And then so even if the learner failed they are progressed, pushed through and if they don't fail our school doesn't have the space to actually be promoted.

Participant 10: Thank you, ladies will meet again next week.

LSEN School 1: Collage making

Participant 10: Good afternoon ladies, welcome to our data collection. Thank you. You are welcome. So today we are going to tackle our second research question. So basically, there you have your magazines. We are going to make collages, we are going to collect data using collages. Now the first thing that I want you to do is to find a picture of a societal perception that affected you with regards to your learner on the autism spectrum. This one is directly to the parent. And then, you as a teacher, are there any existing systems? Are you knowledgeable in terms of

identifying learners on the autism spectrum? Are there school resources that assist you in supporting learners on the autism? And then, do you have support from the SMT? And then, are you working together as a team to support learners on the autism? So those are the answers that I want you as a teacher to answer.

Participant 10: Do you use the same methods to assist the learners on the Autism spectrum? And then, how does parental perception and experience affect your systems and methods of helping the child? For example, maybe the parents misunderstanding the child and denying consent. So, it means that the parental perception affects you as a teacher. So, I want you to find those pictures that affect you as a teacher with regards to parental perception and experience.

Participant 1: And this we do now in the magazine to look for pictures?

Participant 10: Yes, we look for the pictures in the magazine and then we are going to do the collage. Okay. Not good.

Participant 3: That one is happy. But I said, that was the game of yesterday. But this magazine, it was the two teams that were playing together.

Participant 1: Okay. But it's the old magazine. Okay.

Participant 3: It's weird. It's weird. Yeah.

Participant 1: Collaboration. I've got one, two pictures. I've got five nice pictures of holding hands. Collaboration with other teachers or with the moms and dads? With the parents.

Participant 3: Okay. I have this. It is in Afrikaans.

Participant 1: It says, our school, yes. Parents must know. Okay. If something may happen,

Participant 10: then I need to let them know about it. So, now what is it?

Okay, so what is it that you are going to do, we are going to make a collage with those pictures and then we are going to number them one, two, three. Then at the back you explain what does that picture mean.

Participants: Okay. Yes. Okay.

Participant 1: And then misunderstanding is actually part of collaboration. Communication is also part of collaboration. I have a misunderstanding stick if you want to use it.

Participant 3: We will put it somewhere in here. There, somewhere. You can stand out a little bit and then the routine, we are going to make that a two. Okay. And then communication three. Grants. Four. So, those are the pictures.

Participant 1: Yes. Okay. And the topics and the readings underneath, what are you going to say? I have a picture here that we can put here for the misuse of grants. Okay. That's a nice picture of a hand with an empty box.

Participant 2: An empty box. Yes. We will do something. That it may be over there but it must be like with the last money. Okay.

Participant 3: And referral. Medical support.

Participant 1: Medication. That's all that you feel at home. When you are at home. I have done this. Yes. I have a picture of a very tired. Your family. Caretaker. Okay.

Participant 3: We are going to paste this just now. So, underneath collaboration. What are we going to say according to the collaboration tools? We are going to write that quickly down here. My writing is not that good, but I will try my best. Or do you want to write?

Participant 2: No, please.

Participant 3: Okay. Okay.

Participant 1: It can be difficult. Because the parents don't understand us always and understand what we want to expect from them. Is that correct?

Participant 10: I think the question is. How do parental perception and experience influence their involvement in support methods for learners on the autism spectrum?

Participant 1: So, underneath the first one we said, we said collaboration. So, for us it is difficult between the parents and for the parents to understand sometimes other teachers telling them about the autism because they don't understand us that well and they don't.

Participant 2: Yes, I think sometimes it is the language barrier and sometimes parents don't realize how severe it is.

Participant 1: Let's start again. Sorry, sorry. Just me holding you up.

Participant 3: And parents don't always understand. Parents don't always understand the concept. So, I'm writing here that it is collaboration.

Participant 1: I'm going to say it is the languages. And another one. A lot of parents tend to be over-protective. I have a picture here of a mom. He may not do this, may not do that because of his autism. So, that over-protective, it falls under collaboration?

Participant 3: Yes, because if they don't want to listen, if you tell them there is something wrong with their child, then they won't listen.

Participant 10: And how does that affect you as a teacher?

Participant 3: It makes it difficult because then you can't move forward with anything because you are staying at the same place and they cannot participate sometimes and the parents don't want to think that their children need referrals to the doctor so that they can get a definite diagnosis. If they have a definite diagnosis it will make it easier for parents and teachers and everyone and the child himself. We will catch that one up now. The next one is routine.

Participant 1: How does routine affect us? Some learners also set in their routine that when something else happens at school, it's totally chaos. Because they can't adapt a little bit. And otherwise, routine, they can disrupt our routine, our class routine. If we want to do or there is something we have to do, they might have an outburst or a meltdown and you can't go on with that. So, it affects other learners as well. Their routine.

Participant 10: So, are you working together as a team to support the learners on autism? I'm talking about this routine thing. For example, as a teacher you set a routine at school, but at home you find that the parent doesn't allow the child to follow the same routine that you have set.

Participant 2: Yes, but I think we will never be able to do this exactly the same as adults because the parent follows a different routine. Because we have a class and we have certain things that are happening at school that are different from things at home. At home, it's much easier to control one child than in one class.

Participant 1: But we need each other. And I have a picture here that I want to show you. It's like a puzzle that fits in. So, we need each other. Yes, we need to support one another.

Participant 10: So as a teacher and parent, do you use the same methods to assist the child?

Participant 2: No, it's different because one thing works for one learner and the same thing might not work for the next learner. Even for two learners in your class, the same thing doesn't work for both learners. So, we will support one another by giving suggestions to try and influence one another.

Participant 3: This is communication, but it's actually the same thing under collaboration. I'm going to just write it next to it because it's the same thing more or less.

Participant 10: And on that collaboration, I just want to ask you something. Do you have meetings with the parents? Yes. How often do you meet?

Participant 3: As soon as we think there's a situation or a problem, we organize a meeting with the parents. And we make use of the ISPs and so forth.

Participant 10: So, what joint collaborative strategies do you come up with the parents when you are having those meetings with the parents?

Participant 2: Will you repeat that question please?

Participant 10: What joint collaborative strategies do you come up with the parents?

Participant 1: You are having a meeting and then there's a... Suggestions about referral. Suggestions about medication to be... because we can't make a diagnosis, so we are just... teachers. We are... Exchange. Exchange ideas because sometimes the learner acts a certain way at school but not that way at home. So, it's nice to see the overlaps and differences.

Participant 3: And maybe something that works at home that we can try at school.

Participant 10: So basically, I'm asking those questions because some of the parents don't stay around here, right? Because some of the learners are from outside and some of the parents are not educated. So, I just wanted to know how does that affect you? Because if you come up with a strategy, some of them might not even understand the strategy. So how does that affect you as a teacher?

Participant 3: I think it's a frustration because you can't...you have this idea where you want to be but you can't get there because of the communication, it's not good enough or the understanding of it. And then medical, misuse of grants is number four. Okay. Okay.

And that was what we said. Misuse of grants. So how do you think this will affect us?

Participant 2: Some learners get bigger grants because of the severity of their intellectual disability and some of the parents use the grant money for personal expenditures. And then, for example, they will let their child sit outside or he or she must walk home. But it's a bit... It's dangerous for that child and we don't like it. And then when we ask why doesn't you get a taxi for that learner, the parent will say, but there's no money. But the child gets the grant. Yeah. They must actually use that bigger grant for something like a taxi for that learner.

Participant 10: So, what about those who are staying outside? don't you have problems when they have to return to school? Let's say they are staying in Koppies now the schools are reopening, the hostel learners.

Participant 2: Sometimes if a week is very short, if there's public holidays or things, they don't usually return because the parents think, oh, there's only three days of school, four days of school. I'm not going to pay for transport if they are not at school the whole week. It feels like if the parents, some parents don't care about their children. And it's more if they feel like it's a disappointment for them for being like that and then they misuse their grant.

Participant 3: Okay, and then we have the medical support. Medical... Medical support. How does this affect us? We don't have a qualified nurse at school who can always help us to give medications to learners because we are not allowed to give any medication to them. So that is one of the things that's difficult for us. And then also if the learner doesn't take this medication at home, then the parents don't go to the clinic and go and fetch their child's medication.

Participant 1: Okay. I just saw the medical support there, the picture for the medical support. Yes. We do not have a registered nurse. No, that's also... And we struggle to get learners referred to the hospital. We fill in everything, but I think the system is so... And the parents... Don't take them. They don't take them there. They ignore it, and it can be... It can affect you.

Participant 2: Yes, a lot, because we can't take them there. And they need... And I think there's not a psychiatrist or paediatrician full-time at the hospital. Not full-time.

Participant 1: No, sorry. But typically, they go once a month. Yes.

Participant 2: Yes, I know. Okay. Okay. Some of the parents tend to go for more traditional healing instead of medical intervention. They take them for herbal medication that's not that effective, and bracelets and ropes around the body

Participant 10: and it also affects you?

Participant 2: Yes, because they need some medication or something to calm them down.

Actually, the medication is not that effective. No, if they have traditional... Yes.

Participant 3: And then the other thing you said is home and family, how it affects us as teachers at home and the family.

Participant 3: We said we are tired when we come home, exhausted. So, I don't know if you want to... Emotionally... Drained. Yes. And if you have a child of your own that's, in other words, challenging, you can struggle then because then you don't have the energy to cope with your own

child with his own problems. And you know how much effort you put in as a parent in your own child so that he can function normally. And you get a little bit mad at the parents for not trying to do the same.

Participant 10: Okay. And then I have a question for you. What is the psychological effect on you as a teacher when the parent will not cooperate to help the child?

Participant 3: Psychological is draining the system, emotionally. And I think then you as a teacher, most, some, no, can't say most of us, but then we need to go see a doctor for antidepressants and to help us cope so that we can help the learners to cope and the parents don't worry. So that they don't see the bigger picture that their actions affect so many more people than just him or her and his family.

Participant 10: And the last question for you, teacher, does the DBST provide you with professional development? And if yes, how?

Participant 2: No, the DBST.

Participant 1: Yes, I think so but it's a long process. Because many people don't understand the learners. And if we ask them, please, we don't know, come and the next day they are here. They are asking us; how can they help us? How can they support us? Do they need to?

Participant 2: They do evaluate. The thing is, they do evaluate, but they can't do anything. They are not allowed to, they can't diagnose. They can't diagnose. So, the only thing they do, they tell us to take the child to the psychologist. I think a paediatrician or a psychiatrist.

Participant 10: So, on the same question, are you informed about new developments, research innovations, and new care and treatment methods to support the learners on the autism spectrum? If there is new development, new research?

Participant 3: I think all of us try to keep up with articles and everything we can get our hands on, but we won't know about the medication. We won't know about that kind of development. So, in terms of the DBST, it's just you who are doing it for yourself, not on the DBST.

Participant 1: There are courses on ESOE, they've got a lot of courses about autism online. But also, if the department you have a course, they will let us know, and we can make it available for the teachers especially for the autistic learners and ADHD. I can't, it was a long time ago. But there's always something online about autism, that you can sit on that.

Participant 1: And I think we can learn a lot from each other also. I went to school with Marty Duplessis, and I asked the teacher there how do you do this? How do you handle this? And it helped a lot. I think that also, if you make 101 autistic learners, you make 100 autistic learners, autistic learners are unique. This child will operate like this, that child will operate like that, and you can't put them in the mould, like with other disorders. Autistic is very difficult. She will know

Participant 3: And many other diagnoses go along with autism, like ADHD and OCD. There's a lot of overlapping. Usually, I think what I've now discovered, is that the child ASD can also have ADHD. There's usually an overlap.

Participant 10: Okay, thank you teachers for your input. Now we are going to go to the parents. As I said to you, ma'am, you should find a picture of societal perceptions that affected you with regards to your learner on autism.

Participant 3: This is the one. I got some pictures also here. For me as a parent I didn't get the support from my family and the community that I needed so it was very difficult and it took a lot of time for my family.

Participant 10: So that affected you in terms of asking support from your family especially in helping the child.

Participant 3: Then I said identification from the education department they didn't support me to see what's wrong with my child if it's really ADHD or is it Autism so identification was also difficult for me. there was no support there to see where the problem lies. Number 3 I said lack of understanding for me as a parent does not know all the things about autism so there was not a lot given to me about autism. so, it was everyday struggle for me to understand my child and his needs and the support was not there.

Participant 10: So, you were unable to support your child because you didn't understand.

Participant 3: Yes, I didn't understand what to do when he is got meltdowns, that was a very bad experience for me. And obviously I said finances, finances were a big thing for me because you have to take them to a doctor it causes you a lot of money and the medication is very expensive. We have to go to Bloemfontein each time and we have to pay cash for the appointment.

Participant 10: And emotionally?

Participant 3: It is hard on the family because you know when you have financially difficulties it affects the whole family but you want what's best for your child.

Participant 10: So, are you receiving any support from social development?

Participant 3: No.

Participant 10: So, you are not receiving anything. Now are the social workers visiting or consulting you with reference to the welfare of the child?

Participant 3: No. That's why is so difficult because you do it on your own. Most of the parents who have children that struggles with that they are on their own, they need to do everything on their own. The schools don't have any more time for that effect or socially. Everybody is on their own, own space. Life is difficult and they don't want to get involved.

Participant 10: And which picture reflects the road that you have travelled with the department of education in supporting the education needs of your child?

Participant 3: I have the support one when he is writing his exams, he will be put in a separate classroom and that one I asked them.

Participant 10: So, I just want to know when the child started schooling.

Participant 3: He started school in grade 1but he was diagnosed when he was doing grade RR.

Participant 10: In that Grade RR was he coping?

Participant 3: No, he was not actually coping at all. They didn't say anything, they were just saying, he is disruptive in class, he is getting meltdowns in class. And as a parent you must know your child and then I realized that something was not right.

Participant 10: So, it means that the teachers were engaging with you through?

Participant 3: No, they were just saying he is naughty or something, they didn't realize or have any knowledge.

Participant 10: So, did they collaborate with you throughout the process, were you informed, explained so that you understand the condition of the child.

Participant 3: No, I did that on my own.

Participant 10: And the referral, how was the referral process?

Participant 3: No referrals. He is still functioning in a normal school. Socially he is not capable.

Participant 10: And what assistance do you get in general?

Participant 3: No, but a little bit from the school now because I will go in and tell them I want the support and I know what can be given from the school. So, I ask for extra time if it's necessary or not. But the professor where he is at said we can ask for support.

Participant 10: Thank you ladies, we will meet next time to analyse the data.

LSEN school 2: Collage making

Participant 10: Good afternoon ladies, welcome to our data collection, whereby we are going to tackle our research question number two, which is how parental perception and experience influence your involvement and support methods of the learners on the autism spectrum. So now what is it that we are going to do? We are going to do collages, the collages for the parents as well as the collages for the teachers. So now I just want you to find a picture of societal perception that affected you with regards to your learner on the autism spectrum.

Participant 10: Find a picture and then paste it on the collage. Here is the glue. Here, it's all about the parents. Find a picture of societal perception that affected you with regards to your learner on the autism spectrum. This one is more related to the parents. And then the teachers I will have yours just now. Which teachers, Are there any existing systems? Are you knowledgeable in terms of that? Are you knowledgeable in terms of identifying learners on the autism? Just find the picture about all those things. Are there any school resources that assist in supporting learners on the autism? Do you have the support from the SMT? So just find the pictures with regards to that. we are going to make a collage.

Participant 10: Remember that as a teacher sometimes you can set up a routine for a child. But what happens? The parent at home does not follow that routine. That also affects you.

Participant 9: This one can also be a family or a small group. It's a witchcraft. And this one, what does it mean? We are on perceptions, not challenges, right? I think something like somebody pointing at the child. Maybe the child is unruly. Unruly behaviour. It's blaming. Blaming.

Participant 9: We're looking for the perception of others on the learner with Autism spectrum or on the family members. I know I'm confused. You're talking about us as parents. You're not talking about the learner. You're talking to us as the parent.

Participant 8: I understand it correctly. But then I become confused with us as teachers. Are we getting enough support or what?

Participant 10: No.

Participant 8: Are we making a collage with this?

Participant 10: Yes.

Participant 9: Let me check the... So, this one doesn't match. It's a lack of... Blame me.

Participant 10: The research question says, let us listen, how do parental perception and experiences influence their involvement in support methods for learners on the autism spectrum? Parental perception and experiences. How it influences their involvement in support methods for learners on the autism spectrum. It means that the teacher supports the learner as well as the parent. But you also have your perceptions as parents. And also, your experiences. But your experiences as a parent, as well as your perceptions, it also affects the teacher at school. Yes. For example, as a parent, you can face societal experience or perception. Like, for example, ill-treatment from the society. And that ill-treatment from the society, what happens to you? Sometimes you become... I don't know how to put it. You are afraid to support your learner due to that misconception or that experience, that you have experienced. Hence you cannot be able to support your child. Or sometimes it's at home or your family. The experience. You get it? Can I... Can I explain it in Sesotho? ke mokgwa ofeng, tsebo or boiphihlelo boo batswadi bo amang le ho susumetsa ka mokgwa oo bankang karolo ditseleng le mererong eka thusang ho support bana banang le Autism? Wa e utlwisisa? (do you understand it). meaning the experience or perception. How it affects you.

Participant 8: So, can I use this picture as an example? Just to see if I understand it. So, this picture we can use because we can say, the parents perceive that they are all alone and they are kept separate from society because they are going through things that no one can understand.

Participant 10: Yes

Participant 8: So, I can use this picture for that answer.

Participant 10: But you can also use this for you as a teacher. Maybe you are alone in that but there is no support from the parents. Like most of the parents, the parents just leave the children at school with teachers. So sometimes it can also affect you as a teacher. You are there alone.

Participant 8: So now we have the five of us who wants this picture. There is another one. And then this one.

Participant 7: Then they don't support you. Information about autistic. And then teamwork.

Participant 8: Teamwork or collaboration.

Participant 10: One minute. Are you still fine? Do you understand the question now? If I experience bullying as a parent, meaning I will not be able to support my child because I'm afraid of the society because I have already experienced bullying from the society. And that affects my experience as well as my perception in support methods. And then who has a good handwriting? Because at the back of this, we have to describe the collages. Number one, what does that collage mean?

Participant 5: Can I go on? Paste, paste. Lorraine are we going to make a collage for teachers?

Participant 10: I think we are going to shot of these numbers. Culverwell, can you please make copies

Participant 8: Like what? Do you want the numbers to go up like 13 to 14?

Participant 10: Like one, two, three, four, five, six, seven. And then at the back you write one and then you explain what does this collage mean.

Participant 8: Ok but, I've got to permanent marker, at the back I can write these numbers.

I'm saying if we run out I must print 13,14,15,16.

Participant 10: No, you just make a copy of this

Participant 8: I think it's best if we write them at the back so that when we go there, everything is...

Participant 10: And then in terms of social development support, do you get support from social workers as parents?

Participant 6: No.

Participant 10: So those are the things that you need to talk about. And how was the road in terms of the learner getting the grant? Are they getting the grant?

Participants: Yeah.

Participant 10: And then how was the road, was it easy?

Participant 7: Yeah, it was very easy. Okay. It was very easy because the school was helping a lot.

Participant 10: Oh, the school was helping a lot. Okay. And then in terms of identifying these learners to the special school, how was the identification process, how was it done? Or you just brought your child to this school? What happened?

Participant 7: Mine went to a school in the normal school.

Participant 10: In the mainstream?

Participant 7: In the mainstream, yes. But he went only for three days because he was in Grade R. He was supposed to do grade 1.

Participant 10: Okay.

Participant 7: So, they saw him in three days in the school and that's it. Okay.

In three days, they see that this child has a problem and they referred him to this special school.

Participant 10: But it didn't take you long because at the mainstream there, we have learners who have barriers to learning, but sometimes some of them, they're not even referred.

Participant 7: No. So, you remember I told you that the grandmother of Thando, didn't want Thando to come here. Okay. So, after that, he stayed at home. He didn't come to school. But... Yeah, but it didn't take long. He came then, they checked him, then they changed him to the special school.

Participant 8: Ok. because here at school, we don't take learners straight from home. They have to go through the mainstream school.

Participant 10: Okay.

Participant 8: The learner needs to be referred to the special school and before they are placed in the special school they are on the waiting list and that takes too long.

Participant 9: And mine also attended mainstream school first, he didn't last long. I think after 3 months they noticed his behaviour and they called me to a meeting to discuss my child behaviour and recommended that he be referred to a special school and they called some psychologist from the department to assess the child so that he can make a referral, it was not long. I think around June my child was here at Mphatlalatsane. I think I am lucky because it didn't take long even though they said there was a waiting list within a month or two he was placed.

Participant 8: It's because you are local. If you are staying at local its easier but if you are waiting for the space at the hostel its very long.

Participant 9: I think mine his teacher was aware of his behaviour, I also told them my child has a problem, already they knew what they are doing, they didn't give him time to adjust in that school, but here he is coping in this school. And I think the other thing that helps is when the parents accept that the learner is having a problem, some parents they don't want to accept that the learner is having a problem.

Participant 7: Can I add something? About Thando, I have accepted that Thando has a problem, but now the teachers are coming back to me, they say they don't see that Thando has something wrong with him, so now I'm confused.

Participant 8: So that's what happens when you remember when they were in the mainstream school, he was really battling to keep up, so it was almost like he was on a different level, but now he is in a school where everyone is on a different level, and so out of everyone he looks like he is doing very well, but he wouldn't cope in mainstream. So rather him be the top of his class in a special school, than failing and repeating and repeating at mainstream because he can't keep up.

Participant 10: Now find a picture which reflects your experience in the social development in helping you cope with your child. Are you receiving any support from social development? Are you not receiving a grant? Is the social worker visiting or consulting you with reference to the welfare of the child?

Participant 9: No,

Participant 8: But we do have a social worker at the school.

Participant 10: And also find the picture which reflects the role you have travelled with the Department of Education in supporting the education needs of your child. Like early identification. And as mme she had already indicated that the child started at crèche and then how old was she? When he started with crèche, was he coping?

Participant 7: At first, they didn't complain, I don't know what it is, they didn't take it seriously.

Participant 10: Ok, now let us focus on the department of education. Did they engage you in terms of Thando?

Participant 7: Where, in Ntsoanatsatsi or here at special school?

Participant 10: From there.

Participant 7: Yes, they did, they called me and engage me.

Participant 10: Did they collaborate with you through all the processes? Were you informed, explained everything, so that you understand the condition of the child?

Participant 7: Yes, they said they see he is very hyper and I must come to the special school to find the space for him.

Participant 10: You had to do that on your own? Didn't they give you a referral letter?

Participant 7: I don't know, I didn't have the referral letter maybe they came by themselves and you know, I didn't have the referral letter. it was only three days and they just told me that they see this and this and this.

Participant 9: With my experience, I remember when he was referred here they called me at the mainstream and discuss his behaviour and the referral. I received a call from Mphatlalatsane for the child to be assessed that's what happened and after that I was told they will notify me when the child will start.

Participant 10: Ok. And then who diagnosed the child? Was it the doctor or a specialist?

Participant 9: From my side, and I've always known my child has a problem. At first, I thought he was suffering from, what do you call it, ADHD. I thought it was that. I took him to a doctor several times, and then the doctor referred him to a child psychologist. From the child psychologist, they referred him to a psychiatrist, where he was assessed by the psychiatrist at the same time and they ruled out that it was autism. Ok. Yes, and then they advised me, because it's not severe, it's mild. The problem was speech and that hyperactive manner, you know. And then they advised me to take my child first to a mainstream. And then if he comes home, then I will opt for a special school. That's how I... What was the question again?

Participant 10: Ok How was the referral process?

Participant 9: Oh, alright. Oh, we were talking about diagnosis.

Participant 10: Yes, diagnosis.

Participant 10: Ok, he was diagnosed by... I took him to a private doctor. And I took him to a private doctor, where he was referred to a psychologist, this child psychologist, and the psychiatrist, and they assessed him, and they ruled out he has ASD. That's how I knew it.

Participant 10: But how was the process for you? Was it an easy one? And emotionally, how it affected you?

Participant 9: Already I was exhausted emotionally. Dealing with something that you didn't understand. I didn't understand what was going on. You can imagine, I was anxious. And then, you know, the community was not making it easy and the family judging your child and they were talking about some people who think it's a witchcraft. Some people they think we didn't do something, what do you call it, of culture, you know, some culture ceremony. I did all, I have gone through those processes. I took my child to the grave yard, to a different, you know, I have gone through those processes, but I have to accept that my child has a problem.

Participant 6: And this one is, but it is psychological.

Participant 9: I think what helped me is, where I was working, we had a psychologist. That's how I was able to do it. You know, we have a session weekly where I will talk about my feelings, and then will give advice how to treat my child, you know. Because he was a child psychologist by profession. I think that's how I managed to cope and accept my child. So, what do you call it, special needs, that's how I came about.

Participant 10: Thank you. Teachers are there school resources that assist you in helping learners on the Autism spectrum?

Participant 8: Yes and no. Do you understand this? There are processes and procedures and systems, but sometimes they are ineffective or slow, and then there is a lot more need for resources, but no action towards them. Okay.

Participant 10: Are you getting any support? From within the school, from the department? In general, the DOE consists of the school and the department.

Participant 8: Yes. I say that hesitantly just because the demand for the support is so great, and it's not feeling like it is felt. Not to say that there is no support, but there is a bigger need for than what there is.

Participant 10: And what kind of support are you looking for?

Participant 8: Sometimes emotional support. Emotional. But I think that you have mentioned the need for training, and not just in theory, for someone to be able to physically show you how. I think some of the actual physical resources, and it's just a lot of the different diagnoses, so things like we have just requested from the finance, and we have also requested from the department, is things like chewables to help with the sensory input, noise cancelling headphones for those learners that are too much in class. You spend your whole time trying to calm down one learner, and not teaching the whole class.

Participant 10: Okay, thank you participant and then are you also working together as a team with the parents to support these learners on the autism?

Participant 8: I would love to say yes, but I'm afraid I think the answer is no, if I look at it objectively.

Participant 10: Okay. Now, do you use the same method to assist the learners on the autism? You and the parents, do you use the same method?

Participant 8: No. For example, the routine. So, at school, we have a specific time where they eat, a specific time where they go to toilet, a specific time, etc., etc., etc. And then when the learner goes home, either in the afternoon, weekends, or for a hostel learner at the end of the term they come back to school no routine. We have to start the routine again.

Participant 10: And the other thing do you have the meeting with the parents as teachers?

Participant 8: We invite parents to the meeting but I am afraid there is a lot to discuss with the parents like things like the budget takes long time to discuss. I think parent's attendance is not 100percent but I know on my side where I requested parents to come and meet with me no response whether it's the parent never got the letter because the learner lost it or because the parent is too busy, but the meeting for me personally I meet with one parent in a year.

Participant 10: In a year? Okay and then. you have already answered this one, I just wanted to ask you how often do you meet but you have already answered that one. What joint collaborative strategies do you come up with the parents? Joint collaborative strategies. Do you do that

Participant 8: No, because we don't meet.

Participant 10: What is the psychological effect on you as a teacher when the parent doesn't want to cooperate to help the child?

Participant 8: For me I feel like I am handcuffed like I want to help but until I get to information, until I get the parent on board. I can do what I do but when the child gets home it's like I must start again and I think there's lot of issues in the government, lot from government for you and you will be tired and that why you get teachers who become typically employees.

Participant 10: And then does the DBST provide you with professional development? the DBST (DISTRICT BASED SUPPORT TEAM) with professional development.

Participant 8: I am going to say No.

Participant 10: And then are you also informed about new developments, research innovations and new care, treatment to support learners on the Autism spectrum?

Participant 8: I personally do that because I have interest of doing my own research and reading articles and going for training that I am paying for myself but that's not every educator.

Participant 10: And you will also get the information from my findings. I hope so. I will show you my chapter 2 when I come here and the findings I will also share with you parents so you learn more about autism and support methods that you can use. Do you know the Lego therapy those are the methods that you can use? You see my chapter 2. Lego therapy, right?

Participant 8: Yes. I am going to sound negative, those therapies are correct when you have the resource, now if we can't have resources at school to share there's no way that individual parent is going to access that therapy. Cost whatever they way it is.

Participant 10: Low cost options to therapy. But that's more of a game will come with it and show you. There are lot of things that I talked about in my chapter 2 that doesn't need money that can help learners on the Autism spectrum that doesn't need money. If the learner has a behavioural problem there are strategies that you can use.

Participant 8: And again, I might sound very negative but when you are in a class of 20 learners you cannot pull out 6 Lego blocks and have a session because you are teaching. Now imagine what do you call that inclusion, inclusive education you cannot have an educator who is not specialized in special needs, managing a class with mainstream with 6/8 learners with special needs and I don't see it working and I am just little negative about it. About those strategies.

Participant 10: Yeah. But at other schools, like they have an Autism school in Bloemfontein whereby they specialize only with learners that are on the Autism spectrum.

Participant 8: But if you look at the class sizes they are much smaller. Yes. Hence here it is so difficult even at the mainstream you cannot have one on one session with them because they have different barriers to learning other they cannot write others cannot do this so it's a lot of confusion for us as teachers.

Participant 10: So, I think now you can write at the back of the collage your number 1, number 2 and then we discuss and end our session for today.

Participant 5: Collage making its nice it's like we are playing. The learners on the Autism spectrum like collage making and they also like colours and they don't want the class to end because they enjoy it.

Participant 9: According to my experience the society they are judgmental for you and your child as well as the behaviour of the child. So, it affects you in supporting your child? Yes, it affects me to support my child and you are afraid to socialize with your child. they also discriminate you and even to help you. You can't even go to them for support?

Participant 7: Are you aware learners on the Autism spectrum they like to make sound, so when you are around the society they judge you, look at you even when you are walking with the child they stare at you in a strange manner because the child is talking alone. Especially when you come to school with your child wearing uniform. Of being isolated or separated from the community, you have no one to relate to.

Participant 8: Meaning you can put it under segregation, isolation and segregation coz it's not just segregation and even before today you never reached to each other because there wasn't that connection, that's why I say isolation and segregation.

Participant 7: You know every school has their own uniform when you come in the morning with your child wearing uniform, special school uniform, people will look at your child and you will see they are also gossiping at the back and it also affects you? Yes, even the learners.

Participant 8: But they need to wear uniform because when our learners are missing we need to tell the police that this one has special needs.

Participant 10: Participant 8, you can read yours for recording purposes.

Participant 8: This one comes from the educator's side we said there is a lack of resources, physical resources and lack of training, training not just theory but practical on how to in your classroom, hands on training. Our school has a social worker but we feel we are playing our part we require collaboration. You see here the umbrella is stopping and a little bit of a rain but we can't be responsible for everything that requires collaboration which currently we want to we don't have it happening at school and it's a question of whether its willingness or logistics for parents to actually meet with us from time its transport money etc. And lack of communication we have broken chain here a lot of time educators feel they are getting blamed that learners are coming to a special school but we are not doing our job and it is our fault and we need to fix it. We find out there are some parents who want to pray away ASD and then when we provide intervention there's no carry over for example here the routine I think we mentioned, but at school we have certain routine which assists the learner in his daily functioning when they go home for weekends and holidays the routine is disrupted and we have to start again. As far as expectation so there is an expectation of normal development even from your road to health card when a child is able to sit and roll and crawl, walk and talk. However the learners on the spectrum do not develop the same way often miss milestones or are delayed and that goes all the way up to what the

expectations are at school so following the set curriculum a learner sometimes held back not because they can't move forward because the curriculum requires them to do ABC and in the last section here we said that educators have challenges were by we don't know where to start with the learners on the spectrum even the smallest thing might feel like a major operation and it requires a lot of time to prepare resources and sit with the learner for extra time. A lot of the time our learners have anxiety around social interactions and takes us a long time to develop that relationship for them to relax for us to be able to actually provide intervention or education and we said that learners although on the spectrum may be delayed in some aspects, in some aspects they can be quiet advanced and we don't know if we can cater for those needs but also sometimes learners can be clever than the educator in certain aspects and there is this feeling that we are not good enough, we don't know enough.

Participant 10: Thank you.

(**Participant 9:** reading on behalf of the other parents)

Parents. Our picture number 1 is societal perception (witchcraft)

Because of lack of knowledge and experience of us as parents and society in some families that children on the Autism spectrum are taken to witchdoctors instead of them referred for medical assistance in the right way. So, in this traditional doctor they are given medicine that makes them sick or worse which affect the health of the child and because of this believe they hardly listen to advices.

Picture 2. Represents family or home (blame)

I as the parent of the learner on the Autism spectrum my partner blamed me as a result it caused me pain and depression.

Participant 6: I also agree with participant 9, I was also blamed by my own family saying that my behaviour contributed to the condition of my child which has been pictured there.

Picture 3. Its social development (child grant)

Even though there is a grant to support our child with ASD it's not enough because of some of the travelling that we need to do, to go to the specialist to assist our children so we spend the money on other things like they eat certain specific food

Picture 4. Societal perception (belief system)

On the belief system my family believed that there is something wrong with my child and so because they believed there was something wrong, they had to take my child to a priest to pray

for him believing that this is once off thing, this ASD is once off thing, it can leave my child with the prayer it was not true because it's the condition that my child is living with. That was one of the perceptions that I faced from the society.

Picture 5: Stigma (isolation)

Sometimes due to aggression and meltdown from the child on the Autism spectrum, and this impulse hugging people take that as annoyance so because of that sometimes they isolate you. As a parent I also isolate myself so that my child cannot be associated with people that judge him. Therefore, I cannot source support from such people that's why I isolate him.

Picture 6: Bullying

As a parent to a child with Autism spectrum I experienced bullying from my friends who were not knowledgeable about this condition therefore it made me to be an introvert and sceptical about people's intention even to those who truly wanted to help.

Picture 7: Misconception and myths

I as the parent found out there's misconception and myth around learners on the Autism spectrum. Some categorize e.g. like albinos as being special and targeted to be killed for traditional medicines for their body parts as they think it will give them powers therefore I as a parent used to fear my child being around other children and society as I feared for his life. I think this fall under picture number 7

Participant 10: We are going to give participant 8 to add on something with regards to her collage

Participant 8: We forgot to say on disability grant sometimes as educators we feel there is misuse of the grants by the parents and I don't know whether its lack of knowledge or lack of discipline for example we wait for the learners to return from the holiday when the school reopens but they said that they will come month end when the grant comes and comes and the learner still doesn't come back to school which takes the space of the other learner and also there is a request from the school to assist with uniforms when the money from the grant supposed to cover for the uniform as well.

Participant 10: Thank you, ladies, we will have our next meeting whereby we are going to analyse this data and I will transcribe this recording and we will analyse this data and find themes with regards to this data.

LSEN School 1: Fishbone analysis

Participant 10: Good afternoon, ladies. Welcome to our data collection session, whereby we are going to tackle our last research question. What guidelines can teachers and parents use to support learners on the autism spectrum? Now we are going to use fishbone analysis to collect this data. But what is it that I'm going to need from you? We are going to write in your reflective journals, reflection with regards to our collages, as well as the data analysis that we had on the previous meeting. So, I can see that on that fishbone we have lack of collaboration, policies, lack of management, off-time management, lack of support, psychological needs, lack of resources, as well as finances. So, we have to come up with the guidelines.

Participant 10: First of all, we start with collaboration. What guidelines can teachers and parents use to support learners on the autism spectrum? We can proceed, we can start.

Participant 1: Okay, the first one is lack of collaborative, we said we should have meetings with the parents.

Participant 3: Why can't we say regular meetings with parents? Is it fine if we say regular meetings with the parents to promote collaboration? Or communication, if they cannot come to us, there must be an open line of communication between the teachers and caregivers and parents, because they cannot always... It's an open line of communication for parents to keep them informed, I think, to keep them informed and coordinated. Also saying meet up with my child's teacher on a regular basis to understand where he is and what improvements I can still do to help him.

Participant 3: I think also we must have regular workshops with the DBST, as well as with the parents. I think that will be all under collaboration. The blue is the teachers' information and the green is the parents' information.

Participant 10: Because now we are coming up with strategies as members of the ALG, not as teachers only, but as members of the ALG.

Participant 2: Okay, are we going to do the policy? Oh, look at me. Okay.

Participant 3: Lack of policies about autism. It makes it difficult to understand for everyone. Some understand, but there's no black and white. I feel a lot of uncertainty. So, I'm going to write here uncertainty and difficult to support.

Participant 10: So, is it a guideline?

Participant 3: We said we need more clearance of action and I think parents must be informed about the policies, because I don't think they are always aware of the policies that are at school. Maybe the education department can make a separate policy for autism learners. That makes it

easier for us at school. Because this generalized one is not working. We're always working in a school setting.

Participant 3: And then the other one is lack of time management because it doesn't always work out as planned. I think also we can have not that much people that are distracting us during the school time and so on. And limit the distraction for learners and teachers in the class will also help with our time and so on.

Participant 1: There's a lot of things that's happening at school that's not in our time frame. And that's what we don't get through our things that we need to get through. So, if you can maybe just put there less distractions for teachers and learners.

Participant 10: Then we can move on to the lack of support. I don't know what you want to say under the lack of support, guys. Lack of support of parents, lack of support of the school.

Lack of support from your family. As a teacher lack of support from other teachers.

Participant 3: They don't understand.

Participant 10: No, this one is actually in terms of support.

Participant 2: Oh, what are we going to do most? I'm forgetting that.

Participant 3: I think if we can maybe also educate our, for me instance, my family about my child's information about him. So that they can understand all the things about the autism child. Then they will understand me better and then support me also better.

Participant 3: So, from me as a parent, I will say knowledge. Knowledge. Inform family and friends about the autism aspects, autism challenges.

Participant 10: What was your suggestion?

Participant 1: I think important thing is we as teachers and parents, we have to speak out and inform the colleagues and people if we are maybe tense or stressed out and they need to know that they can support us. Because sometimes they don't know when to support us right.

Participant 3: And then, we need people that will see the effort that we make, the recognition that we make with the learners. So maybe the higher up teachers and everyone that can maybe help us like the deputy principal or the principal and then to see what we are putting in and then

maybe acknowledge that with things that we are doing. We need acknowledgement from our fellow peers and higher up structures.

Participant 1: We need acknowledgement from our SMT. Yeah, that's what I was looking for. Okay. I'm getting excited. Acknowledgement. Yeah, acknowledgement. Acknowledgement. And we need acknowledgement.

Participant 2: We also need peer support, is this there?

Participant 3: Yes, it is here, but we as teachers must speak up. I will put in here also, because it falls under the point of peer support. That's very important. I think that will be it then.

Participant 3: And then the psychological needs is that I think from the school that the school will understand when a teacher, she needs to go, maybe for medical treatment or go to a doctor and give her the support she needs, because sometimes they don't want the leave to be taken. So, to support school, because it's usually the educational department that declines our leave. School and educational department for medical reasons.

Participant 3: And then also for me as a parent, also support from my family, that they respect me when I am not always on the right mental capacity as what they need me to be. This psychological need also includes stress.

Participant 2: That's what we are talking about here also. Because for us, stress is causing us to take a leave. But the educational department and the school doesn't always want to give us leave.

Participant 3: And the same with me, I get respect from my family when I am stressed out when I come at home and they are not supporting me. It can be helpful if the department can give us a psychologist once a month to support our teachers as well, so that we don't need to take off.

Participant 10: What about the parents?

Participant 2: And the parents. Okay.

Participant 10: The next one is lack of resources. What are the guidelines that we can use to support learners on the autism in terms of lack of resources?

Participant 3: Every teacher can make their resources. They don't need to be a resource of something very expensive and buying stuff. I heard this little thing on the radio.

They talked about autism resources and the lady said, most of the things that we throw away can be used as resources and make into something for resources for the autism learners.

Yeah. Like recycled materials. Recycled.

Participant 2: That's right. Recycled materials.

Participant 3: For example, this is for... And this is for the parents as well. We can ask fellow schools or other schools. We will make use of their resources that they have and then we can switch and return resources with them.

Participant 2: You mean other schools?

Participant 3: Yeah, other schools.

Participant 2: Meaning we are making use of... It means that under this lack of resources, I just want us to find a correct way. Like maybe we collaborate with other schools in terms of resources.

Participant 1: Ask the community for resources that they throw away. And I will say make use... We ask the community for resources and the parents can also make use of that and then we can also say you can make use of Pinterest and Google to see what resources you can use. Make use of Google.

Participant 10: And then what do we put into the finances?

Participant 2: We said... We said that it's difficult for us because it's expensive and we also said that the parents are using the funds for their own use and not for the child's.

Participant 10: So, what are the guidelines?

Participant 2: So, we must educate our parents about how to use the funds that they receive. Okay. And selling not for their uses but only for the learners.

Participant 3: Yeah, read this one. So, we can educate parents to use grants for the child's development needs and not for their own benefits and we ask the school help them to get that grant. SASSA. Yeah. So, I can also say school helps parents to get the SASA especially the Autism, yeah. Free medication for the learners with autism to help parents financially.

Participant 3: I forgot to say the lack of time management. I think we can really make use of one-to-one situations where we can make use of that situation to work with our autism learners.

Participant 2: Structure and discipline must also be implemented in the class so that those learners don't get bad behaviour during the day.

Participant 10: Okay. So, thank you ladies for your input. So, we'll meet again next week whereby we are going to analyse the data. Thank you very much for this very informative session. Thank you, all bye, for now.

LSEN School 2: Fishbone analysis

Participant 10: Good afternoon, ladies. Welcome to our data collection session, whereby we are going to tackle our last research question. What guidelines can teachers and parents use to support learners on the Autism spectrum? Remember that with cycle one as well as cycle two, you have identified themes, whereby you found what are challenges and experiences, parental perceptions, with regards to supporting learners on the Autism spectrum.

Participant 10: Now with regards to that, we are going to find the guidelines that teachers and parents can use. We have our theme number one, which is lack of support. Now we have to come up with strategies. What guidelines can we use in terms of lack of support?

Participant 8: Which direction does the fishbone diagram has to face?

Participant 10: It's fine. It doesn't matter which direction, the other one that we did with other school it was facing left. That one is right. Its fine, don't stress.

Participant 10: Now we have to come up with guidelines that we can use to support, in terms of that lack of support. You want to write it? And then lack of? There are eight, seven. Lack of finances. Others, you can write at the bottom. Lack of finances, and then lack of collaboration and then it's lack of training and understanding of ASD.

Participant 10: At the bottom lack of understanding of ASD. A, yes, of training and understanding of ASD and then you said parental stigma, and isolation. And you also talk about mental health and then lack of resources. Lastly, polices and now we can come up with, as members of the ALG, we can come up with guidelines in terms of lack of support. What is it that we can do to promote support?

Participant 10: Okay. What is it that we can do to promote support in schools?

Participant 7: Oh, I think how about peer support.

Participant 8: There's a lack of support for the teachers and for the parents?

Participant 10: I think there's a lack of both, for both teachers and parents. So what guidelines can we, what strategies can we come up with?

Participant 7: How about peer support?

Participant 8: Is that parents supporting parents and the teachers supporting teachers?

Participant 10: No, Yes, I think she meant in this way, teachers supporting parents, also parents supporting teachers. It can also work as a guideline.

Participant 8: But then that's not peer support, that's why I'm clarifying. Because as an educator, my lack of support is very different to a parent's lack of support. So, I'm saying I agree with peer support, but then it's two. It's educator peer support and parent peer support.

Participant 10: So, what about teacher and parent support?

Participant 8: I think that's all just a collaboration. Okay, fine, okay, fine.

Participant 10: And I'm struggling to pause this thing in the meantime while she's writing, because if you pause it, it goes back. And then the other thing.

Participant 8: Would it scramble everyone's brains if we just came up with ideas and so under which problem it will be in the best fit instead of doing it one one.

Participant 10: Okay.

Participant 8: I'm asking, my brain is too tired to be structured. But if I think of something, can we just wrap it under that?

Participant 10: But you should say it for recording purposes, if you want to go to, if you want to come up with a strategy for lack of finances.

Participant 8: But like I'm saying, you know, on the National Health Calendar, we talk about autism awareness. That isn't under lack of support, but that would be good for lack of, if we do an ASD promotion campaign. But that's where my head is at. The mind does not talk because we are both here. Can I jump? And then you can also, when you come up with an idea, we find it and we jump.

Participant 10: Yes.

Participant 8: Do I have to say that again?

Participant 10: No, you can just write it. I heard what you said.

Participant 8: We could get someone like, I don't know for like, if there's an Alzheimer's and Dementia Foundation that we could get a guest speaker to both support and to train.

Researcher: Okay its fine.

Participant 8: I don't know, do I just call it guest speaker?

Participant 6: To teach about what?

Participant 8: So, to both. The other one, to teach about autism. But the other is, maybe sometimes it's, it's a mother who has for the last 40 years had a child with autism and wants to share their experience. So, you feel, because we take away the feeling of isolation, that I'm all alone, this is my fault. You know what I mean? And then, maybe,

Participant 10: I don't know how to put it. Community. I get what you are saying, but I don't have the correct word for it.

Participant 8: Can I just put guest speaker and if you come up with a word, we can put it.

Participant 10: Okay, its fine. Because I'm just trying to find the right word for it. I understand what you are saying.

And then here we talk about guest professional speakers. So, a doctor training autism or...

Participant 10: Yes, yes. I think here, as we have just said, a doctor training on autism is going to be fine. Lack finances, strategies, that we can come up with. Lack of collaboration and the other guideline that we can come up with, in terms of anything.

Participant 8: For lack of resources, we could do fund raising.

Participant 10: Okay, thank you.

Participant 7: Okay, how about on lack of support, how about informing family and friends about autism challenges? Because it's the same with the first one.

Participant 10: No, it's not the same. Because this one, remember that some of the parents, they don't have support from the family. So, it means that if you inform family and friends.

Participant 8: So, this first one is an example if your family is ignoring you. And you are all alone. You can meet with another parent with a child with ASD. But this one is now you want to say to your family, let me explain to you ASD. And let's have it together. Okay. Okay.

Participant 10: You said lack of resources, fundraising. Yes.

Participant 8: Can we do home visits under lack of support?

Participant 10: Yes.

Participant 8: So, at our school we got the educator, we also got the specialist, the social worker, the OT etc.

Participant 10: And then with also mental health, how about, what do you call, counselling?

Participant 8: Maybe we can do support groups with the school social worker.

Researcher: Yes.

Participant 8: We could ask for help for both Department of Education and Department of Health

Participant 7: And also, on lack of finances.

Participant 8: What about it?

Participant 7: How about also getting maybe free medication for learners? Because...

Participanta1: Are we looking at it realistically or unrealistically, I am just asking.

Participant 10: Yes. This is research. They are just recommendations. At the end of the day, we are researching, and then I will make recommendations. Like most of the parents, they were saying that they struggle in terms of finances with regards to getting the medication. So hence we have lack of finances there.

Participant 8: Here we can have teachers and parents' meetings for lack of collaboration.

Participant 10: And then maybe in terms of lack of collaboration, we can also talk about collaborating with other schools, other teachers. Is it fine?

Participant 6: Yes.

Participant 10: Participant number one, that one is other schools. What? Just write it in full, because it is the strategy I have to take the photo, so that my supervisor can see it.

Participant 8: Collaboration with other schools.

Participant 10: Lack of resources. How about we make our own resources as teachers?

Participant 8: We are already making our own resources. So, like the example I gave you, one of the circles was the PECS board. So, we need to get the original. Once we've got the original, we can then make our own adaption and make our own and our own context specific but we need to see first, is it working with the learner, before we spend money.

Participant 10: Yes, as I said, we can make with recycled material. Is it fine?

Participant 8: But what I'm saying is we are already doing it. So, it's not answering a problem. We are already doing it.

Participant 10: Because what you said, you know, with regards to your challenges, hence we wrote, lack of resources there. It was on the themes.

Participant 8: We were saying there is a lack of resources. We are already making toilet rolls and coke bottles. I can put it, but I'm saying I don't think it's solving the problem because we were already doing that.

Participant 10: Okay, it's fine.

Participant 8: We could maybe do shared resources. So, like our school has a resource centre. So, if there are schools in our area with learners with autism, that they can come and utilize our resources. Almost like having a toy library, like a resource library.

Participant 6: Maybe we should also get sponsors.

Participant 8: I think we could possibly do further research into autism. And then maybe for parental stigma, we need to do more community engagement.

All participants: Yes.

Participant 8: And that can be whatever platform is already in the community. So, whether it's church meetings or like whatever meetings are already happening in the community, that we get involved with those. So that at a grassroots level, there are different pockets of people who understand and are not so judged. We could do, what is this thing called? Oh, my brain is tired today. That thing. It begins with a D. It begins with a D.

Participant 10: I'm not in your mind.

Participant 8: It's a form of therapy, but it's like when you focus on deep breathing. I think it's called DBT, but I don't want to lie to you. Sure. I just call it deep breathing, etc., relaxation techniques. So, when we are stressed and frustrated, we know how to calm ourselves down. Okay, okay. But if I think of a word, I will add it. And then maybe also have like appreciation, like have a day where you invite parents and educators that are working with the learners on the spectrum to come and just have like a... Yoga or palate. A day where you are getting rid of the stress.

Participant 10: It's like socialization day.

Participant 8: But you can also host like a workshop, like a look after yourself. Workshop.

Participant: On the policy?

Participant 7: Maybe we can say they can have their own separate... Department can make separate policy for learners on the Autism spectrum.

Participant 8: They can edit their current policy to provide practical input. So, like available to tell us what we can't do, tell us what we are allowed to do, especially with our learners on the Autism spectrum. Tell us what we can do.

Participant 7: Even we as parents, autism children they also need their own space.

Their own room. Their own space. So sometimes at home we have a small house and we don't have a big house so they don't have space of their own.

Participant 8: I must write this under lack of finances?

Participant 6: Yes.

Participant 8: I put consent. We need to talk about consent so that we can collaborate. So, we spoke about the challenge of informed consent. I think this will help with the informed part. But we still need to get written consent for what we are doing at school. And then remember we spoke about the routine. So, can I almost put you at home programme. If we say the learners must go to the bathroom at this time, at that time, at this time. That's the standard information that you're enforce the same programme. If they are eating but they can only eat butternut and rice not the gravy and you serve it separately so that we are all on the same page.

Participant 10: What do you call it?

Participant 6: And maybe improve the communication.

Participant 10: That one I'm going to miss it, Home programme. Yes. Because now if I have to analyse data, I'll be forgetting home programme. And then I'll have to pause and call you.

Participant 6: And then improve communication.

Participant 8: And that must be both ways. So, it must be parents to teachers and teachers to parents. So, for example, if the learner has now gone to a dietitian because they are battling to eat, the parents must tell us that so that we don't try and force them to eat the morvite if the dietitian says no, don't eat movie. So, I'm just saying the parents must tell the school what's going on. And the same way in the school when we understand something or we say when the learner is colouring in, you must make them sit this way. it's two ways of communication.

Participant 10: And then on the policies, how about we say policies that I don't know how to put it like, like the policy that differentiates between what you call remember that some of the policies like White Paper 6 is generalization of the policy. So maybe we come up with a policy that fits certain barriers. I don't know how to put it, remember that in one of our meetings we talk about the curriculum. If the child wants to do ABCD, you must do ABCD even if that ABCD does not fit.

Participant 8: I'm calling it a curriculum adjustment

Participant 7: Okay, yes. Yes.

Participant 8: Can I add under lack of resources or support little bit early intervention? So instead of only waiting to find out in grade one when your child is almost failed grade one that they are then diagnosed that if we have a screening of Department of Health from an early age, we can pick it up and then have maybe specific crèches that work on the stimulation of those learners because it is different to a child who is developing normally. It doesn't fall under lack of maybe we can put it under lack of collaboration because instead early identification. the Department of Health early identification and support. Example specialized crèche.

Participants: Yes

Participant 8: Could we maybe do something, I'm just thinking finances that when a school has posts open even if it's a support staff, that parents of the learners may get first choice of hiring or is that like against other basic conditions in front of that? I don't know.

Participant 10: This is a tricky one.

Participant 8: But can I say we're looking to it. Yes. Because it helps, I'm going to use you as an example. So, you're at the school, even though then you're not at home just waiting for the grant money, you have the opportunity to be employed to earn more money to assist with lack of finances.

Participant 10: That it is a very good one especially on the parents' side

Participants: Yes

Participant 8: Obviously it has to be appropriate hiring, you can't just hire someone who is mentally drained, who can't smile, who walks like these to be a sport coach. You need to meet the entry requirements for the job.

Participant 10: Can we put support group here for isolation?

Participants: Yes

Participant 6: On the lack of training and understanding of ASD, you said guest professionals, how about we say the department of education hire people who specialized with special needs education, because department can hire me from mainstream to work here at special school without knowing anything about special needs.

Participant 8: Even if not having a specialist that would be main challenge, maybe having teacher assistant in class so that when you are dealing with the whole class the assistant is dealing with the slow learners, learners on the spectrum, learners with ADHD.

Participant 10: Teaching assistants can also fall under lack of support.

Participant 8: The other thing that will be helpful I don't know if we would get it right Occupational therapist at the end of their degree they do community service here but it should be the department of health who funds that but also department of education can have community service here where specialist like OTs, Speech therapist are placed at schools, even the dietitian.

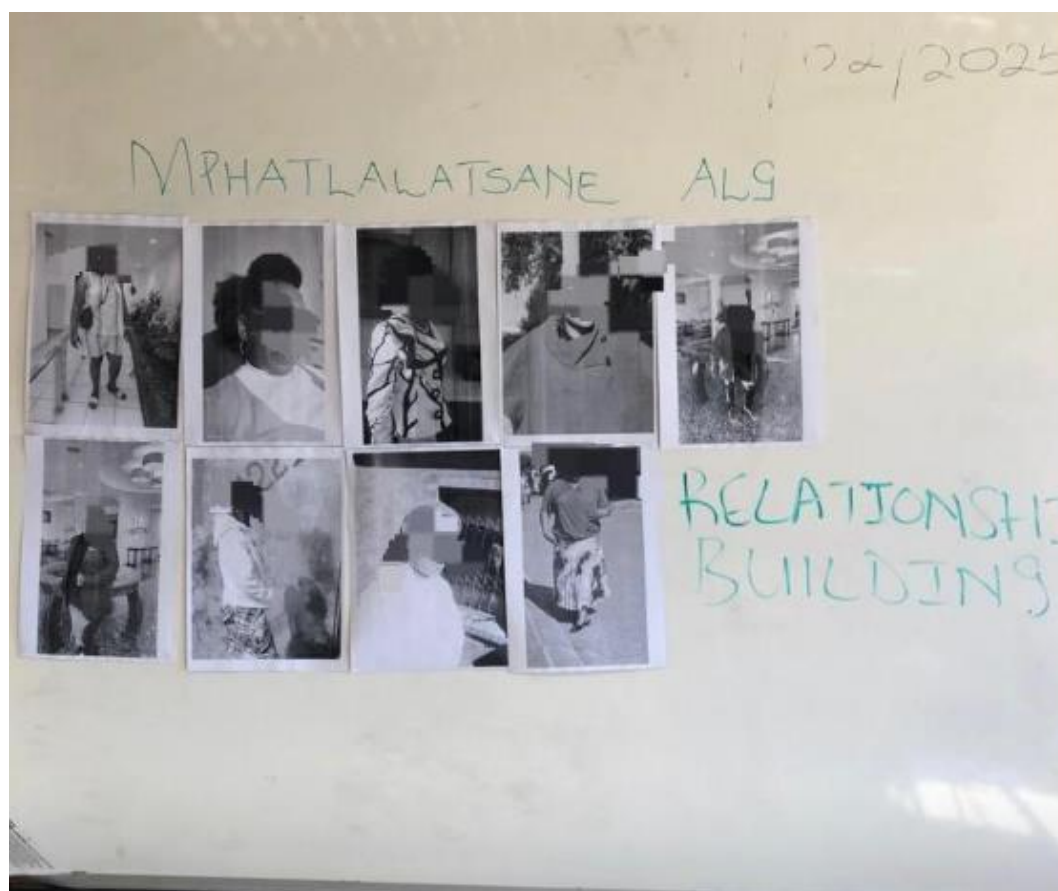
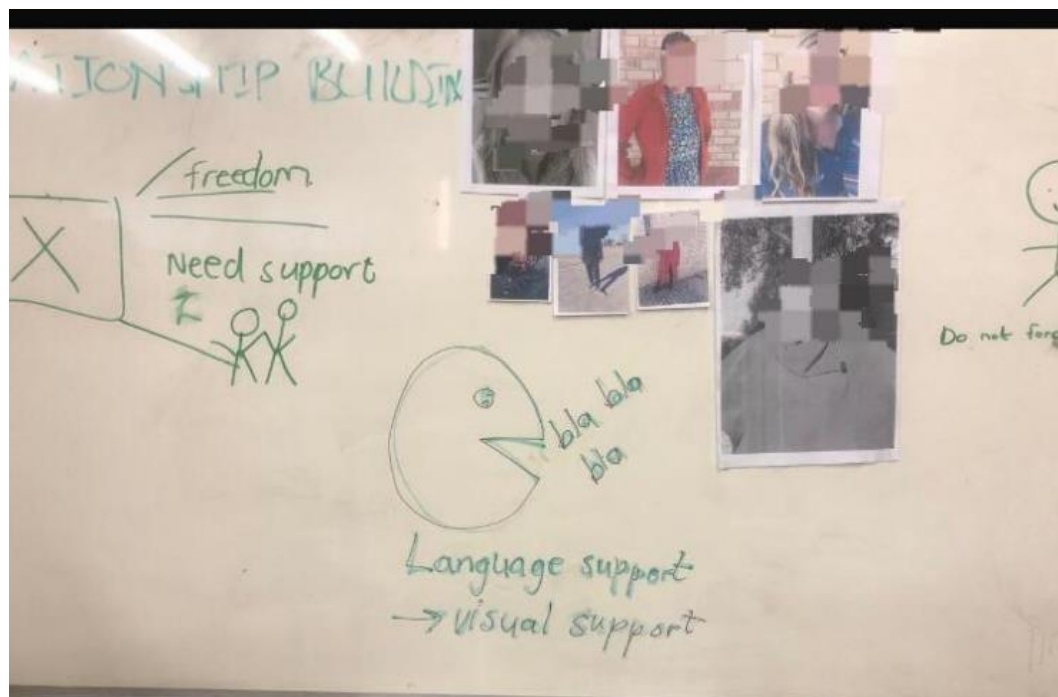
Participant 8: Maybe on lack of support we can talk about community organizations like churches will do campaign for homeless or community will do parent with ASD support package I don't know if it falls under lack of finances or support or both. I am also going to talk about the idea when this learner finishes school and then what .is it consideration? The parents need to be equipped with what happens after school but also the school needs to get those learners to a point where they are independent as possible so they are not burden like vocational training, work readiness, work hardening and skills.

Participant 10: Under lack of resources are you using Pinterest, YouTube?

Participant 8: Maybe we can also include this because not all educators do this same with parents.

Participant 10: Thank you so much please remember on your reflective journal to write your reflections on the cycle 3.

ANNEXURE N: ALG FORMATION



ANNEXURE O: PROOF OF LANGUAGE EDITING

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12/06/2026

This is to certify that the dissertation entitled

TEACHER-PARENT COLLABORATION TO SUPPORT LEARNERS ON THE AUTISM SPECTRUM: A PALAR APPROACH

Submitted by **MC RAKHOLILE**

For the degree of **MASTER OF EDUCATION
(SPECIAL NEEDS EDUCATION)**

At

Has been edited for language by
Mary Helen Thomas (B.Sc. Hons. PGCE)



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ANNEXURE P: TURNITIN REPORT

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ANNEXURE Q: IRIMS CERTIFICATE



Dear Mrs Cynthia RAKHOLILE

26482258, Education

Comber

We are pleased to confirm your attendance of the training on the Integrated Research Integrity Management System (IRIMS) held on **13 August 2024** on Microsoft Teams. It was a pleasure to have you join us for this enriching and informative session.

Your active participation contributed significantly to the success of the training, and we hope that the knowledge and insights gained will prove valuable to you in your professional endeavours.

This serves as a letter of proof of attendance to formally acknowledge your attendance of the IRIMS training session.

We sincerely appreciate your interest and engagement in our training, and we look forward to welcoming you to future trainings and workshops.

If you have any questions or require further assistance, please do not hesitate to contact us.

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Prof Minrie Greef:

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Thank you once again for your participation, and we wish you continued success in your endeavours.

Sincerely,

Prof Minrie Greeff

Mr Kamogelo Sereo on behalf of Prof Greeff

