



**Exploring the experiences of educators
working with children on the Autism Spectrum
in schools for learners with special education
needs in the North West Province**

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Mini-dissertation accepted in partial fulfilment of the
requirements for the degree Master of Science in
Counselling Psychology at the North-West University

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“Surely, your goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life,
and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.” – Psalm 23:6 –

Firstly, I want to give all the praise and honour to our generous **heavenly Father**. For His goodness, love, favour, and grace indeed follows me wherever I go. Thank you, Lord, for this life-changing opportunity.

I would also like to acknowledge the following persons who made this research study possible:

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SUMMARY

Exploring the experiences of educators working with children on the Autism Spectrum in schools for learners with special education needs in the North West Province

Keywords: Autism Spectrum Disorder, learners with special education needs (LSEN), educators, qualitative research, learners with disabilities

The aim of this research study was to explore and describe the experiences of educators working with learners diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in special needs schools in the North West Province of South Africa. The prevalence of ASD is on the rise worldwide, which means the number of learners with ASD in classrooms are increasing each year. Educators are expected to provide high-quality education, even though the increasing prevalence of learners with ASD might pose new challenges in the diverse classrooms of schools for learners with special education needs (LSEN). This research study was conducted to gain an in-depth understanding of the experiences of these educators, with the hope of developing new insights into the management of ASD within a special needs classroom.

A qualitative research study, with a phenomenological research design, was used for this research study. The purposive sampling method was followed to recruit participants from the North West Province in South Africa. Participants included in the research study were educators (seven female and one male, aged between 42 and 62) working with learners with ASD at four LSEN schools. Data were collected in the form of audio-recorded in-depth interviews conducted with participants on an online platform. The data were transcribed, and the process of thematic analysis was followed to derive valuable themes from the data.

The thematic analysis applied to the data collected from in-depth interviews produced the following themes: Educators experience typical behaviours and symptoms associated with ASD in the classroom; Factors in both the education and home environment of learners with

ASD contribute negatively to educators' experiences of learners with ASD; Knowledge about ASD provides pleasant experiences of learners with ASD; Know the learner to teach the learner; Using personal strengths can lead to optimal experiences of learners with ASD; and Educators implement useful strategies to ensure pleasant experiences in the classroom. Future studies can focus on learner-educator ratio and group composition in LSEN classrooms. The findings of this research study can be used for the development of informative programs about managing learners with ASD for parents with children on the Spectrum and educators employed at LSEN schools.

PREFACE

- The stipulated guidelines by the North-West University in the A-rules are adhered to within this mini-dissertation.
- Section 2 (the presented article) will be submitted to the *Journal of Psychology in Africa* (JPA) for possible publishing.
- This mini-dissertation complies with the guidelines established by the American Psychological Association (APA, 6th edition). Section 2 (the presented article) of this mini-dissertation was compiled according to the author guidelines specified by the JPA.
- Chronological page numbering is followed, starting with Section 1 and ending with Addendum C.
- A qualified language practitioner conducted the language editing of this mini-dissertation (see Addendum C).
- Ethical Approval was obtained for this research study (see Addendum A).
- The North West Department of Education provided the necessary goodwill permission for this research study (see Addendum B).
- Data collection for this research study occurred in the preferred language of the participants. English and Afrikaans interview questions were established and stated accordingly during the interview process.
- The submission of this mini-dissertation for examination purposes (in fulfilment of the requirements for the master's degree in Counselling Psychology at the North-West University) was approved by the research supervisor, Prof Werner de Klerk.
- This mini-dissertation was submitted to Turn-it-in (similarity index 5%).

PERMISSION LETTER FROM SUPERVISOR

I, Prof Werner de Klerk, herewith grant permission for Alicia le Grange to submit this mini-dissertation for degree purposes.



7/03/2021

Prof Werner de Klerk
Programme Administrator (Research Psychology)
Associate Professor / Research Psychologist
School of Psychosocial Health
North-West University
Potchefstroom

DECLARATION

I, Alicia Le Grange, declare that this research study with the title “Exploring the experiences of educators working with children on the Autism Spectrum in schools for learners with special education needs in the North West Province” is my own work. This research study serves as completion of my master’s degree in Counselling Psychology at the North-West University. This work has never been submitted for examination. All relevant parties provided consent to conduct this research study. Throughout this mini-dissertation, the necessary acknowledgement is provided to all reference material.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'A. Le Grange', is written over a horizontal line.

Alicia Le Grange

6/03/2021

Student number: 22797769

Date

STRUCTURE OF MINI-DISSERTATION

This mini-dissertation includes three sections. Section 1 (see pp. 1-13) offers a literature overview to create the necessary context and background for the topic of discussion. Section 2 (see pp. 14-46) provides the article in which the methodology followed in this research study is described, the findings are discussed, and a conclusion is given. Section 3 (see pp. 47-51) offers a critical reflection of the researcher regarding the research study and an overview of contributions. Possible further application of the research study is also provided.

SECTION 1: INTRODUCTION

Introduction

Section 1 of this mini-dissertation consists of a thorough overview related to the topic of interest to ensure a clear understanding of the critical aspects relevant to this research study. Reviewed concepts include: 1) Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD); 2) schools and education for learners with special education needs in South Africa; 3) statistics regarding learners with ASD in special needs schools in South Africa; 4) educators in a special needs school setting; 5) common challenges encountered in a special needs school setting; 6) behaviour that challenges, and lastly, 7) level of support required by learners on the autism spectrum in special needs schools. The problem statement and aim of the research study concludes Section 1 of this mini-dissertation.

Literature Overview

For this mini-dissertation, the following terms were investigated for Section 1 – Literature overview: *special education, special schools, Autism Spectrum Disorder, learners with special education needs and challenges faced in the special needs classroom* by consulting numerous databases, such as Science Direct, Google Scholar, JSTOR, and EBSCOhost.

Autism Spectrum Disorder

Each year there is an increase in the number of children diagnosed with ASD. According to Baio et al. (2018), one in 59 children in the United States of America (aged eight years) has ASD. ASD prevalence in children had risen dramatically since researched in 2002 when one in 150 children were diagnosed with ASD at the time (Baio et al., 2018). A study done in 2007 indicated the prevalence of ASD to be six out of 1000, which was determined to be consistent across cultures and ethnic groups (Dombrowski, 2019). The rise

in ASD could be attributed to the expanded criteria for diagnosing ASD in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, fourth edition text revision (DSMIV-TR), greater awareness of ASD than before, or it could be due to a genuine rise in the occurrence of ASD (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

Unfortunately, there is little research available on the estimated number of children with ASD in South Africa. The lack of information available on the number of children with ASD in the South African context could be attributed to the lack of assessments standardised for the South African population, making it difficult to diagnose ASD (Chambers et al., 2016). However, trained clinicians in South Africa have access to the Autism Diagnostic Observation Scales-2 (ADOS-2), which is the gold standard when it comes to evaluating a child with a suspected risk for ASD (Chambers et al., 2016; Smith, Malcolm-Smith, & De Vries, 2016).

The diagnostic conditions for ASD are described in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, fifth edition (DSM-5) (American Psychiatric Association, 2013) as shortfalls in social communication and interaction, which includes less expression of feelings, affect or interest; poor non-verbal communication and difficulty in forming relationships with others. Other essential conditions for ASD are repetitive behaviour patterns, the behaviour developed at a young age, and the behaviour causes significant impairment in the child's day-to-day functioning (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). There is a considerable variation in the severity of ASD and is organised into three groups depending on the amount of support the person with ASD needs (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). The three groups are explained in the DSM-5 as "requiring support", "requiring substantial support", and "requiring very substantial support" (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, p. 52). Although the diagnosis of ASD is based on evidence of functional impairment, the individual profile of functioning over life spheres can differ to a

great extent, depending on the individual's level of development and the context (Mahdi et al., 2017).

Schools and Education for Learners with Special Education Needs in South Africa

According to the DSM-5 (American Psychiatric Association, 2013), intellectual disabilities are prevalent among children with ASD, indicating that many learners on the spectrum with an intellectual disability, attend schools for learners with special education needs (LSEN). LSEN schools offer extensive education programmes to learners who need high levels of support (Department of Education [DoE], 2001).

LSEN schools as opposed to inclusive schools. According to the Education White Paper 6 (2001), learners with disabilities will attend schools which provide them with the level of support they require. Learners in need of low-intensive support join ordinary schools, learners requiring moderate support should attend full-service schools, and learners requiring high-intensive levels of support attend LSEN schools (Education White Paper 6, 2001). Inclusive education aims to accommodate every learner, irrespective of disability, to ensure equal opportunities to all learners (Education White Paper 6, 2001). Inclusive education is different from mainstream and integration education since all learners' differences are acknowledged by meeting the needs of each learner and offering support, while building on their similarities (Education White Paper 6, 2001).

LSEN schools accommodate learners in need of high-intensive levels of support and possess the necessary resources to assist learners in acquiring an education and increase adaptive behaviours. LSEN schools can become resource centres in their districts that offer their expertise, professional staff, and resources to inclusive schools to accommodate learners with special education needs (Education White Paper 6, 2001).

Statistics regarding Learners with Autism Spectrum Disorder in LSEN Schools in the North West Province, South Africa

According to the Department of Basic Education (DBE), there are about 7 395 learners with special needs enrolled in thirty-two LSEN institutions in the North West Province (DBE, 2018). These learners are taught by approximately 652 educators (DBE, 2018). A total of 56 learners with ASD (as their primary disability) attend LSEN institutions in the North West Province (DBE, 2018). Although the number of learners with ASD might not seem like a lot for the North West Province, each learner with ASD requires a considerable amount of support from their educator. With a learner-educator ratio of 11.3 (in LSEN Schools in the North West Province), educators must divide their attention and time amongst 11.3 learners whom each requires varying levels of support (DBE, 2018). With 32 LSEN schools, the North West Province offered many opportunities to obtain rich data from educators who are working with learners with ASD.

Educators in an LSEN School Setting

Educators employed at LSEN schools received the necessary training (a diploma or degree in special education) to fulfil their role as special needs educators (Boujut, Dean, Grouselle, & Cappe, 2016). Even though these educators received the necessary training, one study found a positive correlation between special needs teachers' level of burnout and the number of learners with ASD in their class (Boujut et al. 2016; Brunsting, Sreckovic, & Lane, 2014). Educators working with learners in LSEN schools are subjected to a substantial amount of stress since these educators experience diverse challenges and expectations, complex demands, and stress-inducing factors unique to this line of work (Kiel et al., 2016).

Special needs educators are inclined to leave their profession at a higher rate than educators working in the general school setting (Kiel et al., 2016), especially educators with less experience in the field of special needs education (Kumedzro, 2018). A single study done

in Ghana indicated that educators employed at special schools had negative perceptions with regards to their job satisfaction (Kumedzro, 2018). These educators' negative perceptions were mostly related to dissatisfaction with earnings, and the perception that teaching in LSEN schools is too demanding (Kumedzro, 2018). Another study determined that educators working with learners on the autism spectrum tend to have a positive attitude towards working with learners with ASD if they have access to an ASD network that could provide support and information (Rodríguez, Saldaña, & Moreno, 2011).

Common Challenges Encountered in an LSEN School Setting

LSEN schools generally accommodate a unique variety of learners requiring high levels of support (DBE, 2014). Learners attending LSEN schools have different needs related to their cognition, hearing, vision, communication, or behaviour amongst others (DBE, 2014). Learners in special needs classrooms are therefore diverse and present with considerable differences in behaviour, intellectual and physical ability, as well as different levels of support required (DBE, 2014). A study done in the Western Cape found that learners with severe and profound intellectual disability showed higher rates of problem behaviour, communication difficulties, and anxiety than learners with mild and moderate intellectual disability (Molteno, Molteno, Finchilescu, & Dawes, 2001). The study also indicated that male learners with intellectual disability were more disruptive, more self-absorbed, and more explicit in displaying autistic behaviours (Molteno et al., 2001). Another study determined that learners with ASD often suffer from co-morbid anxiety disorders, with separation anxiety being especially prevalent under learners with ASD (Ben-Itzhak, Koller, & Zachor, 2020).

Learners with ASD tend to withdraw from social interactions that can have an unsettling emotional impact on their peers leading to poor relationships with peers and sometimes educators as well (Boujut et al. 2016). Educators teaching in special needs

classrooms must make use of differentiation techniques to meet each learner's specific needs (DBE, 2011). The diverse group of learners with whom educators at LSEN schools work poses a significant challenge in managing the classroom efficiently as well as maintaining a positive attitude towards the challenging behaviour of learners.

Behaviour that Challenges

Learners with intellectual disability are more prone to display behaviour that challenges their educators or family members (Nicholls, Hastings, & Grindle, 2020). Behaviours that tend to challenge others could manifest a range of different actions, from destructive or self-injuring behaviour to aggression that makes it difficult for others to work with or be with the learner (Nicholls et al., 2020). One study explored the prevalence of behaviour that challenges among learners with intellectual disabilities and found 53% of the population included in the study displayed at least one type of behaviour that challenges (Nicholls et al., 2020). Furthermore, 36.4% of these learners displayed self-injurious behaviour, 30.2% aggressive/ destructive behaviour, and 25.9% displayed stereotyped behaviour (Nicholls et al., 2020). An increased likeliness to exhibit behaviours that challenge others was found amongst learners with low adaptive behaviour and a diagnosis of ASD (Nicholls et al., 2020). Learners with ASD often present with challenging behaviour that leads to disruptions in the classroom. Behaviour that challenges as displayed by learners with ASD could arise from the behaviours described in criteria B of the DSM-5 (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). These behaviours consist of stereotyped or repetitive motor mannerisms, inflexibility, ritualised patterns, preoccupation with specific ornaments, or extreme reactions and aversions to stimuli (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

Stereotyped and repetitive behaviours are often a way of coping with anxiety caused by sensory processing difficulties (Joosten & Bundy, 2010). Tantrums, irritability, fearfulness, or a tendency to get upset quickly (all characteristics of anxiety) can be observed

in learners with ASD (Joosten & Bundy, 2010). ASD, together with severe intellectual disability and impaired expressive and receptive communication abilities, were found to be predisposing factors leading to behaviours that challenge (Chiang, 2008). Behaviours associated with ASD that challenge teachers could end up in frequent interruptions within the classroom.

Level of Support required by Learners on the Autism Spectrum in LSEN Schools

For the diagnosis of ASD, the severity is determined by the level of support the child needs daily. Learners with ASD also receive a specifier when diagnosed by a clinician to indicate the level of support required, falling under “requiring support, requiring substantial support, requiring very substantial support” (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). The support needed by learners with ASD is mostly related to social communication and assistance with restricted, repetitive behaviours (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

Assisting a learner with ASD based on the unique level of support required can be a significant challenge in a special needs classroom, where the average educator work with 11.3 learners (DBE, 2018). A special needs educator must use specially designed methods of instruction and use additional aids and services that are in line with each learner’s individualised educational program to ensure learning takes place (Anthony & Campbell, 2020). Furthermore, the educator should preferably be knowledgeable about evidence-based practices to improve the behaviour, language, social, and life skills of learners with ASD (Anthony & Campbell, 2020). It is often expected of special needs educators to meet the individual needs of each learner with ASD, as advised by different professionals working with the learner, such as speech pathologists (Anthony & Campbell, 2020).

Problem Statement

The experiences of educators working with learners with ASD in LSEN schools in the South African context are under-researched. The only study the researcher could track down was a doctoral thesis done by Weber (2015) on “Teachers’ experiences of teaching learners with an Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in the mainstream classroom”, which is closely related to the area of interest of this research study. While many learners with ASD attend LSEN schools, little information is available on how they are coping in LSEN schools. It is essential to understand the experience of educators working in this environment daily while tending to the well-being of both educators and learners in these diverse classrooms.

This research study will specifically focus on educators teaching children with ASD in LSEN schools in the North West Province, South Africa. In South Africa, there are only nine specially adapted Autism schools available (Star Academy, 2018). Thus, most children with ASD with co-morbid intellectual disability must attend LSEN schools. Another option for children with ASD is to be home-schooled or to attend private schools or institutions.

Sharing the findings of this research study with educators could ensure a better learning environment for learners with ASD and possibly improve the well-being of educators who work with learners with ASD. The findings might indicate areas in need of change in the LSEN education system for both educators and their learners with ASD. New information regarding ASD, specifically in the South African context, might arise from this research study. Such information could be valuable in future studies or to other professionals involved in the treatment and management of ASD.

Aim and Research Question of this Research Study

This research study aimed to explore and describe the experiences of educators in the North West Province, South Africa, who are working with learners with ASD in LSEN schools. The research question navigating this qualitative research study was as follows:

What are the experiences of educators teaching learners with Autism Spectrum Disorder in North West Province (South Africa) LSEN schools?

Conclusion

As previously mentioned, the experiences of educators working with learners with ASD in LSEN schools in the South African context are under-researched. Section 2 (presented in article format) of this mini-dissertation will provide the necessary overview of the research study to contextualise the ultimate discussion of the findings to answer the main research question and aim.

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SECTION 2: ARTICLE

This article will be submitted for possible publication in the *Journal of Psychology in Africa*. Thus, there will first be a summary of the author guidelines for this specific journal, followed by the article.

Instructions for Authors

Manuscripts

Manuscripts should be written in English and conform to the publication guidelines of the latest edition of the American Psychological Association (APA) publication manual of instructions for authors. Manuscripts can be a maximum of 7 000 words.

Submission

Manuscripts should be prepared in MSWord, double spaced with wide margins and submitted via the journal's Editorial Manager system. Before submitting a manuscript, authors should peruse and consult a recent issue of the *Journal of Psychology in Africa* for general layout and style.

Manuscript Format

All pages must be numbered consecutively, including those containing the references, tables and figures. The typescript of a manuscript should be arranged as follows:

- Title: this should be brief, sufficiently informative for retrieval by automatic searching techniques and should contain important keywords (preferably <13).
- Author(s) and Affiliation(s) of author(s): The corresponding author must be indicated. The author's respective affiliation where the work was done must be indicated. An e-mail address for the corresponding author must be provided.
- Abstract: Articles and abstracts must be in English. Submission of abstracts translated to French, Portuguese and/ or Spanish is encouraged. For data-based contributions, the abstract should be structured as follows: Objective – the primary purpose of the paper, Method – data

source, participants, design, measures, data analysis, Results – key findings, implications, future directions and Conclusions – in relation to the research questions and theory development. For all other contributions (except editorials, book reviews, and special announcements) the abstract must be a concise statement of the content of the paper.

Abstracts must not exceed 150 words. The statement of the abstract should summarise the information presented in the paper but should not include references.

- Text: (1) Per APA guidelines, only one space should follow any punctuation; (2) Do not insert spaces at the beginning or end of paragraphs; (3) Do not use colour in text; and (4) Do not align references using spaces or tabs, use a hanging indent.
- Tables and figures: These should contain only information directly relevant to the content of the paper. Each table and figure must include a full, stand-alone caption, and each must be sequentially mentioned in the text. Collect tables and figures together at the end of the manuscript or supply as separate files. Indicate the correct placement in the text in this form <insert Table 1 here>. Figures must conform to the journal's style. Pay particular attention to line thickness, font and figure proportions, taking into account the journal's printed page size – plan around one column (82 mm) or two-column width (170 mm). For digital photographs or scanned images, the resolution should be at least 300 dpi for colour or greyscale artwork and a minimum of 600 dpi for black line drawings. These files can be saved (in order of preference) in PSD, PDF or JPEG format. Graphs, charts or maps can be saved in AI, PDF or EPS format. MS Office files (Word, Powerpoint, Excel) are also acceptable but DO NOT EMBED Excel graphs or Powerpoint slides in a MS Word document.

Referencing

Referencing style should follow the latest edition of the APA manual of instructions for authors.

- References in text: References in running text should be quoted as follows: (Louw & Mkize, 2012), or (Louw, 2011), or Louw (2000, 2004a, 2004b). All surnames should be cited the first time the reference occurs, e.g., Louw, Mkize, and Naidoo (2009) or (Louw, Mkize, & Naidoo, 2010). Subsequent citations should use et al., e.g. Louw et al. (2004) or (Louw et al., 2004). ‘Unpublished observations’ and ‘personal communications’ may be cited in the text, but not in the reference list. Manuscripts submitted but not yet published can be included as references followed by ‘in press’.

- Reference list: Full references should be given at the end of the article in alphabetical order, using double spacing. References to journals should include the author’s surnames and initials, the full title of the paper, the full name of the journal, the year of publication, the volume number, and inclusive page numbers. Titles of journals must not be abbreviated. References to books should include the authors’ surnames and initials, the year of publication, full title of the book, the place of publication, and the publisher’s name.

References should be cited as per the examples below:

Journal Article

Peltzer, K. (2001). Factors at follow-up associated with adherence with directly observed therapy (DOT) for tuberculosis patients in South Africa. *Journal of Psychology in Africa*, 11(2), 165–185.

Book

Gore, A. (2006). *An inconvenient truth: The planetary emergency of global warming and what we can do about it*. Emmaus, PA: Rodale.

Edited Book

Galley, K. E. (Ed.). (2004). *Global climate change and wildlife in North America*. Bethesda, MD: Wildlife Society.

Chapter in a Book

Cook, D. A., & Wiley, C. Y. (2000). Psychotherapy with members of the African American churches and spiritual traditions. In P. S. Richards & A. E. Bergin (Ed.), *Handbook of psychotherapy and religiosity diversity* (pp 369–396). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

Magazine Article

Begley, S., & Murr, A. (2007, July 2). Which of these is not causing global warming? A. Sport utility vehicles; B. Rice fields; C. Increased solar output. *Newsweek*, 150(2), 48–50.

Newspaper Article (Signed)

Landler, M. (2007, June 2). Bush's Greenhouse Gas Plan Throws Europe Off Guard. *New York Times*, p. A7.

Unpublished Thesis

Appoh, L. (1995). The effects of parental attitudes, beliefs and values on the nutritional status of their children in two communities in Ghana (Unpublished Master's thesis). University of Trondheim, Norway.

Conference Paper

Sternberg, R. J. (2001, June). *Cultural approaches to intellectual and social competencies*. Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the American Psychological Society, Toronto, Canada.

Article

Running Head: EDUCATOR EXPERIENCES OF LEARNERS WITH ASD

Exploring the experiences of educators working with children on the Autism Spectrum in schools for learners with special education needs in the North West Province

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Abstract

Many learners with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) requiring high levels of support, together with low intellectual functioning, attend LSEN (learners with special education needs) schools. Little is known about educators' experiences with learners on the autism spectrum in LSEN schools in South Africa. This qualitative research study followed a phenomenological research design and consisted of a sample of eight educators, of which one is male, aged between 42 and 62, from four LSEN schools in the North West Province. The thematic analysis applied to the data collected from in-depth interviews produced the following themes: Experiences of ASD associated behaviours and symptoms; Education and home environmental factors; Knowledge about ASD; Know the learner to teach the learner; Applying personal strengths, and Implement useful strategies. Future studies can focus on learner-educator ratio and group composition in LSEN classrooms. The findings of this research study can be used to develop informative programs about managing learners with ASD for parents with children on the spectrum and educators employed at LSEN schools.

Keywords: Autism Spectrum Disorder, learners with special education needs (LSEN), educators, qualitative research, learners with intellectual disabilities

Introduction

Each year there is an increase in the number of children diagnosed with ASD. According to Baio et al. (2018), one in every 59 children (aged eight years) has ASD in the United States of America. ASD prevalence in children had risen dramatically since researched in 2002 when one in 150 children were diagnosed with ASD at the time (Baio et al., 2018). The rise in ASD could be attributed to the expanded criteria for diagnosing ASD in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, fourth edition text revision, (DSMIV-TR), greater awareness of ASD than before or it could be due to a genuine rise in the occurrence of ASD (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Unfortunately, there is little research available on the estimated number of children with ASD in South Africa. The lack of information available on the number of learners with ASD in the South African context could be attributed to the lack of assessments standardised for the South African population, making it difficult to diagnose ASD (Chambers et al., 2017). However, trained clinicians in South Africa, have access to the Autism Diagnostic Observation Scales–2 (ADOS-2), which is the gold standard when it comes to evaluating a child with a suspected risk for ASD (Chambers et al., 2016; Smith, Malcolm-Smith, & De Vries, 2016).

The diagnostic conditions for ASD are described in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, fifth edition (DSM-5) (American Psychiatric Association, 2013) as shortfalls in social communication and interaction which includes less expression of feelings, affect or interest; poor non-verbal communication and difficulty in forming relationships with others. Other important conditions for ASD are repetitive behaviour patterns and that the behaviour developed at a young age and the behaviour causes significant impairment in the child's day-to-day functioning (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). There is a significant variation in the severity of ASD and is organised into three groups depending on the amount of support the person with ASD needs (American Psychiatric

Association, 2013). The three groups are explained in the DSM-5 as “requiring support”, “requiring substantial support”, and “requiring very substantial support” (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, p.52).

According to the DSM-5 (American Psychiatric Association, 2013), intellectual disabilities are prevalent under children with ASD, indicating that many learners on the spectrum, with an intellectual disability, attend LSEN schools. LSEN schools offer extensive education programmes to learners who need high levels of support (Department of Education [DoE], 2001).

South African Context

The experiences of educators working with learners with ASD in LSEN schools in the South African context are under-researched. The only study that could be found was a doctoral thesis done by Weber (2015) on “Teachers’ experiences of teaching learners with an Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in the mainstream classroom”, which is closely related to the area of interest of this proposed research study. While many learners with ASD attend LSEN schools, little information is available on how they are coping in LSEN schools. Learners with ASD often present with behaviour that challenges educators, which leads to disruptions in the classroom. Learners with intellectual disabilities are more prone to display behaviour that challenges their educators or family members (Nicholls, Hastings, & Grindle, 2020). Behaviour that tends to challenge others could be a range of different actions, from destructive or self-injuring behaviour to aggression that makes it difficult for others to work with or to be with the learner (Nicholls et al., 2020). An increased likeliness to exhibit behaviour that challenges was found amongst learners with low adaptive behaviour and a diagnosis of ASD (Nicholls et al., 2020).

Behaviour that could be experienced as challenging by others, as displayed in ASD could arise from the behaviours described in criteria B of the DSM-5, such as stereotyped or repetitive motor mannerisms, inflexibility, ritualised patterns, preoccupation with specific ornaments, or extreme reactions and aversions to stimuli (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Stereotyped and repetitive behaviours are often a way of coping with anxiety caused by sensory processing difficulties (Joosten & Bundy, 2010). Tantrums, irritability, fearfulness or getting upset easily (all characteristics of anxiety) can be observed in learners with ASD (Joosten & Bundy, 2010). ASD, together with severe intellectual disability and impaired expressive and receptive communication abilities, were found to be predisposing factors leading to behaviours that challenge others (Chiang, 2008). The challenging behaviours associated with ASD could end up in frequent interruptions within the classroom. The effects of these disruptions on both educators and classmates is a topic yet to be researched.

Problem Statement

LSEN schools generally accommodate a unique variety of learners requiring high levels of support (Department of Basic Education [DBE], 2014). Learners attending LSEN schools have different needs related to their cognition, hearing, vision, communication, or behaviour amongst others (DBE, 2014). The combination of learners in special needs classrooms, makes the classroom diverse as they present with considerable differences in behaviour, intellectual and physical ability, as well as different levels of support required (DBE, 2014). Educators teaching in LSEN classrooms must make use of differentiation techniques to meet each learner's specific needs (DBE, 2011). The diverse group of learners, educators at LSEN schools work with, poses a great challenge in managing the classroom efficiently and maintaining a positive attitude towards the challenging behaviour of learners. It is important to understand the experience of educators who work in this environment daily,

to tend to the well-being of both the educators and learners finding themselves in these diverse classrooms.

Goal of the Research Study

This research study specifically focused on educators teaching children with ASD in LSEN schools, North West Province, South Africa. In South Africa, there are only nine specially adapted Autism schools available (Star Academy, 2018). Thus, most children with ASD, together with an intellectual disability or who requires high levels of support, must attend LSEN schools. Another option for children with ASD is to be home-schooled or to attend private schools or institutions. The research question which navigated this qualitative research study was as follow: *What are the experiences of educators teaching learners with Autism Spectrum Disorder in North West Province (South Africa) LSEN schools?*

Method of Investigation

Approach and Design

A qualitative research approach with a phenomenological research design was used for this research study. Phenomenology has a strong focus on discovering the meaning a person attaches to a lived experience (Creswell, 2007). Phenomenology is, therefore, a suitable design for this research study, since the researcher was interested in the in-depth exploration of the lived experiences of educators working with learners with ASD in LSEN schools.

Sample

For this research study, the target population consisted of educators employed at LSEN schools situated in the North West Province, South Africa. All thirty-two LSEN schools in the North West Province were considered. However, only five of these schools indicated that learners with ASD attended the school and were willing to allow their

educators to participate in the research study. The five schools where the participants are employed, all fell in the category of schools for severely intellectually disabled learners (SID schools). Principals of the selected schools acted as gatekeepers and informed the staff about the research study. Participants who showed interest to participate and who met the requirements of the well-defined inclusion criteria were selected for this research study. Also, educators had to speak English or Afrikaans, have at least one year's experience as an educator and must have worked with a learner on the autism spectrum in the past five years.

The contact details of an independent person (a registered research psychology intern with the Health Professions Council of South Africa [HPCSA]) were displayed on a notice board at the schools. Interested participants contacted the independent person, confirming willing participation by signing an informed consent document. The final research sample consisted of eight voluntary participants (educators) from four schools in the North West Province (seven females and one male educator, three being Black in ethnicity and the other five White). The teaching experience of all participant varied in years of experience in both mainstream and LSEN school settings (see Table 1).

Table 1

Participant Demographic Information

Participant number	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Home Language	Years of teaching (Overall)	Years of teaching (LSEN)	Learners with ASD
P1	42	Female	White	Afrikaans	14	6	8
P2	62	Male	White	Afrikaans	31	20	5
P3	48	Female	White	Afrikaans	18	12	2
P4	54	Female	White	Afrikaans	22	11	14
P5	60	Female	White	Afrikaans	27	10	7
P6	49	Female	Black	Tswana	10	10	16
P7	49	Female	Black	Sotho	16	2	1
P8	59	Female	Black	Tswana	14	9	15

Data Collection

Different data methods were used in the research study. First, the participant was asked to complete a *demographic questionnaire* to gather background information of each participant. The demographic questionnaire included questions regarding the participant's language, gender, age, ethnicity, overall years of teaching experience, years of teaching experience in an LSEN school context, and the number of learners with ASD taught by the educator.

Second, an individual *in-depth interview* was conducted to explore participants' experiences, perceptions, and opinions regarding the phenomena being researched. The two open-ended interview questions that guided the interview were structured sufficient to focus on the phenomenon of interest, but flexible enough to allow the discovery of new ideas and themes (Creswell, 2007). The development of the questions also considered Moustakas' (1994, as cited in Creswell, 2007) guidelines for asking in-depth interview questions appropriate within a phenomenological research design. The first question focused on the experience of the educator teaching learners with ASD in the LSEN context, and the second question focused on aspects in their teaching environment that played a role regarding their specific experience.

Lastly, *field notes* were made throughout the data collection process to ensure the researcher stayed objective and reflected on any biases or personal perspectives that might have arisen within the researcher. Field-notes also held additional benefits such as to encourage the researcher to pay close attention to smaller details, as well as identifying possible biases (Phillippi & Lauderdale, 2018).

Data Analysis

Before data analysis, the audio-recorded in-depth interviews were transcribed verbatim. The transcribed data underwent a process of thematic analysis as described by

Braun and Clarke (2019), to identify themes related to the educators' experiences working with learners with ASD. The six-step process of thematic analysis comprised the following. Firstly, the researcher engaged herself in the data to become familiar with the content (Braun & Clarke, 2019). The researcher followed a process of reading and re-reading the transcriptions. The second step was to identify interesting aspects of the data that aligns with the research question. Initial codes were formed from these interesting aspects (Braun & Clarke, 2019). As many codes as possible were gathered from the data and organised into a list. The researcher thirdly organised the identified codes into clusters that touch on similar ideas to derive themes within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2019). The fourth step was to review and refine the identified themes as well as organising the themes into a thematic map (Braun & Clarke, 2019). During the fifth step, themes were defined and named. The last step involved writing the report whilst explaining the themes and including examples from the data (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

Trustworthiness

The model of trustworthiness created by Lincoln and Guba as described in Nieuwenhuis (2016), was carefully applied to ensure trustworthiness. Aspects such as credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability were considered (Nieuwenhuis, 2016).

Credibility was ensured by presenting an accurate account and dense description of the lived experiences of educators working with learners with ASD (Nieuwenhuis, 2016). Credibility was achieved through the accurate transcription of the in-depth interviews, active engagement with the data during the data-analysis stage (code and re-code phase), as well as using an objective co-coder (a registered intern counselling psychologist at the HPCSA).

According to Lincoln and Guba (as cited in Nieuwenhuis, 2016) the transferability of data is vital in qualitative research since it provides the reader with the opportunity to transfer

parts of the finding to their own context. Therefore rich, descriptive data with a thorough explanation of the context of the research study is provided to allow the reader to apply the data to his or her own context if it is similar (Nieuwenhuis, 2016). Contextualisation will also enable further research studies to compare the data and apply it to other populations. The methods used in this research study was recorded accurately, and demographic data were collected to ensure that comparison is possible for future studies.

The dependability of data was ensured by following the research design meticulously and noting all practical steps as it happened (Nieuwenhuis, 2016). The researcher repeated the same interviewing and data-collection process with all participants. The researcher also kept a journal (as prescribed by Nieuwenhuis, 2016) wherein aspects of the process was noted down.

Confirmability refers to the neutrality of the findings in that the findings are not influenced by the researchers own biases but formed according to the participants' experiences (Nieuwenhuis, 2016). Confirmability was ensured through keeping a journal and recording a clear trail (audit trail) of the procedures followed throughout the research study (Nieuwenhuis, 2016). The researcher remained as objective as possible throughout the research study and included the assistance of a co-coder (bound by a confidentiality agreement) to ensure trustworthiness.

Ethics

Ethical approval for this research study was obtained from both the Health Research Ethics Committee (HREC) of the North-West University with the ethics number NWU-00332-20-A1 and from the North West Department of Education, South Africa. After receiving legal approval from all the parties involved, the selected schools, their principals, and governing bodies were contacted for goodwill permission to conduct the research study. Following goodwill permission, an assigned independent person explained the research study

to interested participants and provided the researcher with the participants' contact information. The researcher provided the interested participants with an informed consent document (containing all legal and ethical information regarding the research study) to be signed in agreement with the provided document. The informed consent document was concurrently signed through virtual interaction by the researcher and the participant together with eyewitnesses on both sides. An opportunity for questions was provided before the signing took place. Participants were also reminded of their voluntary participation, and that withdrawal was allowed up until the data analysis phase. The importance of confidentiality and the steps taken to ensure confidentiality was also emphasised during the signing of the informed consent document. All participants were allocated a participant number that was used in all data collected to protect the participants' personal information.

Interviews were scheduled at a convenient time for the participant and were virtually conducted through means of an online platform (Zoom) or telephone call. Participants were encouraged to make use of a safe and comfortable space available to them where they would not be interrupted. At the start of each interview, verbal consent was obtained before commencing with the interview. The safeguarding, storage and protection of all findings and data related to this research study is the responsibility of the North-West University.

Findings

After applying the process of thematic analysis to the collected data, six main themes were discovered about the experiences of educators working with learners on the autism spectrum in LSEN schools (see Table 2). Appropriate verbatim quotations are provided to support the themes.

Table 2

Themes regarding Educators' Experiences Working with Learners on the Autism Spectrum in LSEN Schools

Theme 1:	Experiences of ASD associated behaviours and symptoms.
Theme 2:	Education and home environmental factors.
Theme 3:	Knowledge about ASD.
Theme 4:	Know the learner to teach the learner.
Theme 5:	Applying personal strengths.
Theme 6:	Implementing useful strategies.

Theme 1: Experiences of ASD associated Behaviours and Symptoms

Educators indicated that learners with ASD display a range of different behaviours that can be challenging to manage in a classroom setting. According to the participants they have encountered the following behaviours displayed by learners on the autism spectrum: meltdowns, withdrawal from groups, the preference to play and work on their own, stereotyped, and repetitive motor movements or use of objects in a stereotyped or repetitive manner, self-injurious behaviour, aggressive tendencies, and in general, disruptive behaviour in class. Educators explained that the learners with ASD in the relevant LSEN schools present with an intellectual disability ranging from being profound to severely intellectually disabled. Most of the learners diagnosed with ASD attending these LSEN schools have trouble with expressive language and communication. Many of the learners cannot express themselves verbally but sometimes engage in echolalia, repeating words or phrases spoken by someone else. One participant stated the following, with others reporting similar experience: *“He will make sounds because the problem is, he cannot express himself, because he cannot talk”* (P8).

Educators would also notice adverse reactions from learners with ASD when they seem to be overwhelmed by external stimuli, ranging from loud sounds, clothing, or bright light, for example. Some learners with ASD seem to be hypersensitive to specific external stimuli, differing from learner to learner. Concern about learners' safety is of utmost

importance to educators since these learners seem to be unaware of possible dangerous situations, and would sometimes engage in dangerous activities, for example jumping off the top of a jungle gym or cutting oneself with scissors. One participant mentioned the following: *“In the beginning, I gave them scissors, and I did not realise that he cannot cut, and then he started to cut himself, he did not start cutting the paper. When I got to him, I was so shocked that he cut himself. Or he could cut, but he did not even realise that he was getting hurt. He just sat there”* (P3). Another explained: *“You know what I have also seen, at the jungle gym. They do not always realise. He will jump off, right. It can be very; it can be very dangerous”* (P4).

Sometimes the learners would also hurt themselves or others when they feel overwhelmed or upset; some tend to become aggressive. Aggressive behaviour can also be described as behaviour that challenges others. An educator shared her experience: *“Then he would come to me, and he would grab me by the arm, then he would bite me, but he has not hurt me yet”* (P3). Another example provided by an educator: *“[...] and he was aggressive, he would push, shove and throw tables around. He hit himself with the fist on his chest [...] It really was not soft punches; he struck himself hard on the chest with the fists”* (P5).

Educators who are working with learners on the autism spectrum report that they experience a range of different behaviours displayed in class. Some of these behaviours help educators to know what upsets the learner and indirectly urges them to adjust the learner’s environment; other behaviours seem to challenge educators as well as other learners attending the class.

Theme 2: Education and Home Environmental Factors

There are several factors mentioned by educators that generally have a negative impact on the experience educators have with learners on the autism spectrum. Firstly, all the participants mentioned that the number of learners in one class plays a crucial role in the

educator being able to manage the class effectively. Too many learners in a class equal a disaster. Educators explain that learners with ASD require much support and demand constant attention. Therefore, educators find it difficult to pay attention to learners with ASD along with the rest of the learners in their class. With LSEN schools accommodating learners requiring high levels of support, each learner has their unique set of requirements to which an educator must respond.

According to the participants' descriptions of their classroom, the average LSEN classroom consist of one educator, one class assistant, and between twelve to seventeen learners with varying disabilities and diagnoses, but who are all intellectually disabled. One educator stated: *"But, like twelve and thirteen children are already too much with two autistic learners in your class. So if there are two autistic learners, in a group of twelve, it is already too many children"* (P3). Others added: *"To supervise all children, you know, it is difficult, because there are fourteen now. You know, one is difficult. And I just say it is unfair towards the rest to place all your attention on him"* (P1), and *"You might have one autistic learner and then three with ADHD, and then you also have learners with Downs in between, that requires your attention. So it is difficult, it is really difficult"* (P2).

With COVID-19 regulations affecting the number of learners allowed in a class, many educators now found the smaller classes more effective compared to the full classes before the onset of the pandemic. A participant mentioned: *"But that is the autistic learner who was hyperactive, so it is going well with him, and I think it is just with attention, and if he were in a big class, he would disappear. I just would not have given him the attention. But now the class is so small"* (P3). Educators agreed that smaller groups seem to work better, not only for the learner with ASD but also for the other learners. The class composition is also an essential factor to consider and should be well thought through before placing learners

together in a class. A participant is convinced that: *“A child must; I think an autistic child must be in a very small group”* (P3).

A third factor that has an impact on the learners with ASD specifically is any change in routine or environment. Educators noted that the learners’ behaviour changes or they tend to become easily upset when there are changes in the environment or schedule. Participants mentioned: *“They do not like it when strangers come into the class. They do not like it at all! They become upset”* (P4) and *“You will laugh, my hair if my hair was different the day. She would turn my head like this, and then she would touch my hair because it looks different to her. She did not like it; everything had to be the same”* (P4).

Lastly, a factor having a crucial impact on educators’ experiences with learners on the autism spectrum is the learner’s domestic circumstances and socioeconomic status. Educators often found that learners present with disruptive behaviour only later to realise such underlying causes as going hungry, abuse at home, or a change in the home environment were to blame. Attending to the basic needs of learners are extremely important before any learning can take place. Participants share their experiences: *“Their home environment has a bigger influence. And many of them are in less fortunate positions at home, because they come to school hungry and you must pay attention to that first before you can pay attention to anything else..., because they are disabled, they are being abused”* (P1) and *“Disabled children are sometimes hidden. An autistic child is hidden at home [...] Not only with Down syndrome or such things, any disability, Autism. Then the child gets hidden. I had it before, where one sees it is his first time or her first time between people”* (P4). Another participant added: *“I always ask the parents, please if anything happened in the child’s life, mother goes on a course, or someone in the family passed away, or a pet passed away, or someone goes to the hospital. Just tell me. Because you often think this child is naughty, but then the child is not naughty, his thoughts are just focused on one thing, and that is not in the class”* (P5).

Educators must keep these factors in mind when working with a learner on the autism spectrum, to ensure the learner's behaviour is not misinterpreted, and to attend to their specific needs.

Theme 3: Knowledge about ASD

A noticeable aspect in almost all the interviews was an openness for learning. Some educators expressed the following: *"You know, you are never too old to learn"* (P5) and *"Yes, a teacher is a lifelong learner"* (P6). The participants emphasised the importance of knowledge about ASD, for knowledge enables educators to understand the learner and communicate with the learner, and in essence, teach the learner. What these participants had in common, was their eagerness to read up about ASD, to attend courses and to learn from other educators who have more experience. A participant pointed out: *"We encourage each other and give support through workshops so that we can learn"* (P8).

They also expressed how their perspectives of teaching learners with ASD changed for the better after they have gained more knowledge about ASD. At first, most of the participants experienced feelings related to self-doubt, exhaustion, and being overwhelmed by the needs and behaviours of learners with ASD. However, after learning more about ASD and how to manage and effectively work with a learner with ASD, most reported a change in perspective and even experiencing joy when dealing with a child on the spectrum. Some participants shared the following: *"It is really interesting; really I'm enjoying since I went to the workshop, I am really enjoying to work with these type of learners, but before, joh, joh, it was chaos [...]"* (P6) and *"I must do a little research. I feel I must enrich myself, with regards to this [...] If I want results, or if I want to enjoy teaching, I must enrich myself in terms of enjoying teaching. If I want serenity in my class, if I want results [...], I feel I want to give the best to that child"* (P3). Knowledge about ASD, therefore, has a direct impact on educators' experiences with learners on the spectrum. Most of the participants also mentioned

that knowledge should not stop with the educator but should be shared with parents and other learners. For example, one participant found it helpful to explain to other learners not to take it personally when a learner with ASD do not want to engage in play.

Some educators expressed their concern regarding parents not understanding their children's condition, resulting in parents not adequately supporting their child's needs. Others mentioned that there are those parents who hold vast knowledge about ASD and even shares their knowledge with the educators. One participant stated: “[...] *I think a big gap is also with the parents. They do not have training about how to handle their children. They also do not know about possible help options that are available to them*” (P5). Openness to learn and to share knowledge is the key to ensure the best interest of the learner is.

Theme 4: Know the Learner to Teach the Learner

Educators experienced progress with learners when they know the learner's specific interests and dislikes, and they can utilise this knowledge about the learner to encourage him to work and participate in class activities. Educators emphasised the uniqueness of each learner with ASD. Everyone has their own interests, mannerisms, comforts, and triggers. Educators found that they achieve much more with the learner if they are attuned to the specific needs of the learner, engage with the learner through introducing something that is of interest to the learner, and when they have established a good rapport with the learner. Possible triggers can also be avoided if one knows what generally upsets that specific learner. One participant explained: “*There are two things that you should establish. First, you must figure out what triggers the autistic learner, right? What is his trigger that sends him on a meltdown or causes that typical non-verbal demeanour? And then you must look at what is his; I do not know, what do you call it? A positive trigger? Something that calms him down. [...] Then you can try to [...] manipulate yourself and your whole environment to avoid those triggers*” (P2). Others added: “*You know what, I've experienced that they seem as if they are*

on their own planet, but if you bring them closer to you. They bond with you, they understand you, they do whatever I ask them to do [...]” (P7) and “[...] never leave the child thinking that he does not know, because often, what should I say? The situation that she is in. Rather try something. Try to find out what does he or she like a lot. And capitalise on it to see if maybe you can teach her something to do in future” (P7).

The participants emphasised having a special bond with the learner, which takes time and effort to establish, but holds many benefits for the learner and rest of the learners in the class. A participant stated: *“You will not achieve anything if you do not have a connection with the children”* (P1). Knowing the learner, therefore means one can educate the learner. The participants further explained that it is vital to use all available resources to learn more about the learner’s background, diagnosis, circumstances at home, typical behaviour, and triggers to understand and know the learner. Three participants mentioned the following: *“You understand them more. You are right there with him... Yes, understanding, knowing, understanding more information about this learner, you can understand them better. When he speaks to you, he will show you maybe by hand, or take this from you, and then you know what he or she wants. So, now, because he cannot express him or herself, that is what he or she wants”* (P8).

Theme 5: Applying Personal Strengths

Working with learners on the autism spectrum requires particular strengths that educators either have or develop. These strengths are often part of the educator’s character, while others report they had to work on a certain skill until it became part of their daily practice in the classroom. The participants mentioned several personal attributes that they have found to impact their experiences with learners with ASD. Adaptability, flexibility, and the ability to solve problems are crucial in the LSEN school context. As a participant mentioned: *“It keeps it exciting, because you, you know, as a teacher you must be able to*

think on your feet. You must always be able to think on your feet, and you know, if you see something is not working, you have to make another plan as quickly as possible, in order to adapt the learning situation to suit the learner. You have to think quickly” (P1). Another mentioned that educators should be creative and able to think out of the box: “I think a teacher working with such children must, in any case, be very creative. If you are not creative, you will not be able to plan ahead and make plans to make things work for them” (P1).

Participants also hold the belief that all the learners can achieve something; one must keep trying and work hard to see progress. Participants have experienced learners accomplishing achievements the participants at times thought were out of reach. The participants explained that educators are hopeful; they believe in the learners and use their drive and perseverance to encourage these learners: *“We will not just leave him. I feel he is placed there to learn to function as best he can. And that which does not work today, I must try again until it works or I must think of something else” (P3) and “These learners, they can learn, they really can learn. At least this year, since from last year, she knows two shapes: a circle and a triangle. And it took me two full years” (P7).*

Another virtue that is important to bring to the table is patience. It can be challenging to work with learners on the spectrum, except for having the heart and passion for this vocation, participants accentuated the value of patience during their interactions with learners with ASD: *“My big thing with an autistic child, is you have to have patience. Routine and patience, if you do not have patience, you will not make it” (P4), and “The effort must go hand in glove with patience” (P7).*

Lastly, educators who have optimal experiences with learners on the autism spectrum can create a safe space for the learner, value trust, and always act responsibly. One participant described this concept eloquently: *“You know what, trust. The learner, children must know*

they can trust you. That is one of the most important things. If he walks in, he must feel as if he is at home. He must know, okay, this is my space. And then, you can achieve a lot with a child when he feels like it is his home” (P1).

Theme 6: Implementing Useful Strategies

Managing a diverse group of learners, each with their own needs and behaviours, can be tough. The educators who participated in this study agreed on some fundamental strategies to manage their classrooms to ensure everybody attending the class has the best experience possible while also creating the ideal environment for learning to take place. These educators found structure, discipline, and a set routine as crucial elements to maintain in the classroom, especially as these three practices are preventative measures that make learners with ASD feel safe and limit unnecessary meltdowns: *“You must be calm at first, and then the big thing I realised here is they must have a routine” (P4), “But I like it that there are no bells, I think it helps a lot and that the children have such a structure” (P3), “Some educators, they have class and timetables, but mine is a routine, it is a daily program” (P6) and “You must also have grace, but discipline is very, very important. You must be strict with them. You will get results out of it” (P3).*

Furthermore, educators must provide the necessary support, attention, and motivation to learners. Educators often experience that learners with ASD struggle with basic skills necessary for everyday tasks, such as using the toilet or feeding oneself. Participants agreed that it is vital to challenge each learner to practice these skills. However, at the same time, educators need to provide the necessary support and meet the learner on their comfort level. Depending on the level of functioning of the learner, educators employ practical ways of demonstrating instructions or even physically assisting a learner to teach them basic life skills. Participants reported that many learners with autism need continuous encouragement and assistance to perform a small task. Therefore, they often take up a lot of the educator’s

attention. Two participants explained: *“So, most of the time, I have to pull him in, come and let us do this”* (P7) and *“With his food as well, we must tell him to eat; we must tell him the whole time to eat; otherwise, he will sit and do nothing. So you have to go to him the whole time and say eat, so he takes a lot of attention because you have to focus on him the whole time”* (P3).

Educators also realised that they must assist some learners with ASD with necessary life skills first before they can move on to scholastic activities. They are assisting the learner in accomplishing essential skills, such as feeding and cleaning oneself. Educators strive to help learners become less dependent. Challenging them every day to practice these skills is one of the main goals when working with learners on the autism spectrum in LSEN schools. A learner that can help himself is not only much more manageable in a classroom, but it also has a positive effect on their self-esteem. Small wins encourage them to try something else. Other strategies used by these educators to elicit positive reactions from the learners and to encourage them is by creating some positive competition in the group and using learner-to-learner instruction for some tasks. One participant explains her tactic: *“A simple thing when you tell the one ‘you have washed your dishes well, very good’ and he was not in the mood to wash his dishes, or he said he was not going to do it, and now he sees how you praise the other one for the good deed he has done, it motivates him to do the same. Then they do it without you even having to focus on him. I think in a group situation it is easier”* (P1).

Differentiation is another necessary strategy used by educators to meet learners on their level, but this approach also helps to manage the learners. Differentiation demands thorough planning from the educator but ensures each learner reaches their full potential effectively: *“[...] your differentiation has to be there because your more advanced learner becomes bored in the class and then becomes naughty and difficult and then your problems start. So, you must keep them focused. Your planning and your work that you give them, you*

must try to keep them busy the whole time; otherwise, you lose control of the class and then it becomes chaotic” (P1).

Although differentiation is an effective strategy, educators also stressed the importance of challenging each learner in line with their ability by not making a task too easy for them. This way all learners are encouraged and challenged to do the best they can in developing skills to become more independent. One educator explains her approach to differentiation: *“I gave them the opportunity, then some thread others crocheted and stuff, I started with crocheting and then simplified the task to making pom-poms. And those who could not do it, again moved to a simpler task, until everyone could do something. But I challenged them all to do the difficult crocheting work” (P1).* Repetition of activities, every day, lead to progress with many learners with ASD. As described by the participants: *“And with every day, every day’s repetition, he starts doing something differently” (P3)* and *“There is some that, with repetition, eventually spoke, but not a conversation, but I can hear words [...] I repeat the same songs. And then one day that child will sit there in his corner, or where he is jumping, or whatever he is doing, then I would, for example, hear ‘Jesus loves me’. I do the same thing every day” (P4).*

Learners with ASD often present with meltdowns or act out when they feel overwhelmed. Educators shared their experiences of effective strategies when they are dealing with a learner who is upset and difficult to calm down. They have found physical activity such as taking a walk with the learner to be useful. They would also remove the learner from the triggering situation, try breathing exercises, fold a weighted blanket over the learner, or touch the learner by rubbing their back or hold their hand. Many of the participants were surprised by the effectiveness of physical touch since they were under the impression that learners with ASD did not like touch. The participants mentioned: *“[...] especially with those who start to hurt themselves and stuff, most of them reacted to deep presses. I*

personally think physical release, you know running, jumping breathing and a few yoga stretches and stuff that I do with them, and especially the breathing stuff, that I have seen worked wonderfully” (P1) and “Then I rub his back, and you can see he becomes calmer” (P4).

Discussion

To answer the research question, the experiences of educators were explored, identified, and described. Educators experiences of learners with ASD primarily evolved from learner behaviour in line with well-known behaviours typical of children with ASD described in the Diagnostic Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, fifth edition (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Learners with ASD require varying levels of support. They struggle with communication, social-emotional reciprocity, and has difficulty with adjusting their behaviour to changes in their environment (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

Educators further experienced that learners with ASD often displayed stereotyped and repetitive motor movements, speech, or object use (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Some learners with ASD also tend to become hyper-reactive to external stimuli or changes, and would require assistance from the teacher to cope with the stimuli or to solve the problem on their behalf (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Educators experienced that stereotyped and repetitive behaviours often interfered with classwork. They also found that they could delay repetitive behaviours by encouraging the learner to complete a task before allowing time for repetitive behaviours (Joosten & Bundy, 2010); almost using the repetitive behaviours as a reward after the learner participated in classwork.

Educators also expressed using their personal strengths and tried and tested strategies to manage and accommodate the behaviours displayed by learners with ASD. When the educators utilise these strengths and strategies combined with knowledge about ASD, they tend to encounter frequent constructive experiences with learners on the autism spectrum.

More positive experiences and progress made by the learners had a beneficial impact on both educators' well-being and behaviours displayed by learners with ASD.

When educators manipulate the class environment to accommodate the learner's preferences, educators found that behaviours that challenged others and meltdowns became less intense and less frequent over time. Most importantly, one can only manipulate the class environment if you have invested time to observe and bond with a learner to become aware of their specific needs, triggers, likes, and dislikes. Meltdowns are typically involuntary reactions to a situation in which learners feel trapped and causes them to feel overwhelmed (Bedrossian, 2015). By lessening the opportunities from which a learner with ASD feel the need to escape, educators enhance the experiences of all learners in the classroom and create an environment conducive to learning.

Implications for South African Context

Educators struggle to offer learners with ASD the attention and support they require, when the classes are overcrowded and when many learners requiring high levels of support are grouped in one class. The educator-learner ratio in LSEN schools in South Africa needs further investigation to identify the ideal ratio that could have a favourable effect on learners with ASD, educators employed at LSEN schools, and all learners attending LSEN schools. There is also a high demand for LSEN schools since there are often long waiting lists of children waiting for admission into various LSEN school. The learner-educator ratio can also be addressed if there are more LSEN schools available to accommodate learners with special educational needs and learners requiring high levels of support.

Projects addressing not only ASD, but also other diagnoses, syndromes, and disabilities are of utmost importance in the LSEN school community, but also in general. Awareness and information about ASD are crucial, to provide the necessary care and support to learners with ASD, their parents, and caretakers. Educators working with learners on the

autism spectrum should be encouraged and funded, if possible, to attend workshops about ASD and share their knowledge and experiences with other educators employed at the school during times set aside for in-service training. By sharing knowledge and helpful strategies with in-experienced educators, educator perspectives about learners with ASD might be more positive to start with, and educators might find it easier to adjust and attend to the learner's needs if they understand the learner better.

Limitations of the Research Study

Limitations for this research study include a small sample not representative of all ethnic groups of the North West Province; therefore, generalisation to the broader population of educators employed at LSEN schools in the North West Province is not possible. Furthermore, only five schools from thirty-two LSEN schools listed in the North-West Province indicated that they currently have learners with ASD and consequently had educators with experience about learners on the autism spectrum. These five LSEN schools also turned out to fall in the category of SID schools, specifically adapted for learners with severe intellectual disabilities and learners requiring high levels of support. Therefore, the findings are more representative of LSEN schools that specifically fall under the category of SID schools. Only educators from four of the five LSEN schools that provided goodwill permission were included in the research study since the educators from the fifth school showed no interest to participate. Educators employed in LSEN schools without learners with ASD were automatically excluded since they did not share the phenomena being researched. Other schools were unreachable during the phase when participants were gathered; possibly due to the strain of COVID-19 regulations.

Conclusion

The aim of this research study was to discover, identify, and describe the experiences of educators working with learners on the autism spectrum in LSEN schools in the North

West Province of South Africa. The findings portray different aspects of educators' experiences with learners with ASD and provided a deeper insight into the lived experiences of these educators daily professional lives while working with learners on the autism spectrum. Themes that emerged from the data collected represent different facets of the complexities of ASD and the role educators play in educating learners on the autism spectrum. Behaviours of learners with ASD as experienced by educators working closely with them emerged, together with educators' willingness to understand learners with ASD and to gain more knowledge regarding ASD. The importance of investing the time to get to know the learner with ASD was emphasised, as well as considering the situational factors of each learner and the teaching environment. Lastly, educators experienced optimal interactions with learners on the autism spectrum if they utilised their strengths and incorporated helpful strategies to manage the classroom environment and encourage the learners to function optimally.

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SECTION 3: CRITICAL REFLECTION

Section 3 comprises a personal reflection of the researcher (Mrs Alicia Le Grange) regarding her experiences of completing this research study.

Critical Reflection

In presenting a comprehensive account of the researcher's experiences of this research process, the following elements will be discussed: the topic, the ethical approval process, and the impact of COVID-19, gathering participants, data collection, data analysis, the findings of the research study, and the write-up thereof.

Interest in Topic

Learners with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and their well-being has been an interest of mine since I worked as an educator at a school for learners with profound to severe intellectual disabilities. As an in-experienced educator, I was overwhelmed and challenged by the behaviours displayed by the learners with ASD in my class. I struggled to find the right entry point to engage the learners in classroom activities and often felt disheartened when my attempts did not result in any changes. My inexperience, lack of knowledge, and idealistic thinking in facing the difficulties learners with ASD experience made it difficult to make progress in class. I also felt guilty for focussing a lot of my attention on the learners with ASD in my class while there were thirteen other learners also requiring attention. I felt the need to find a better way of working, and understanding learners with ASD specifically in the learners with special education needs (LSEN) school context, for the sake of the learner with ASD, the educator teaching the child and the rest of the learners attending the class. Therefore, the interest in the chosen topic for this research study. I started reading up about the topic and realised there is a gap to explore, identify and describe the experiences of educators working with learners on the autism spectrum in LSEN schools.

Ethical Approval and the Impact of COVID-19

During the first year of my studies, my attention was directed at composing a thorough research proposal to obtain ethical clearance to initiate the research study. With the guidance of my research supervisor, we managed to move effortlessly through small-group approval, with minimal changes we had to make and obtained approval from COMPRES, also with minimal changes during the first year of my master's degree. In the second year, we were given the green light by HREC around March, to start to approach the Department of Education for legal approval and the schools aligned with the proposed population, for goodwill permission.

Unfortunately, the impact of the COVID-19 regulations called my research study to a halt. Nobody could travel, and educators were not at school. My initial proposal was to conduct in-depth interviews in person, and I was to travel to the educators and interview them at the schools where they are employed. For about three months, we waited for the COVID-19 regulations to lift, to continue with data collection, only to realise we had to make amendments and adapt to this very strange situation. There we were again, back to ethical approval for a second time. Gaining ethical clearance to commence (continuation-COVID-19-guidelines) with my research study was a significant setback in my initial planned timeframe. It was also challenging to make the amendments since you must plan around many new possible obstructions, we were not familiar with previously. We wanted to avoid a third round of ethical approval since it can be time-consuming.

Gathering Participants

From the thirty-two LSEN schools in the North West Province, only five schools indicated that they accommodate learners with ASD and gave goodwill permission that educators from these schools may participate in the study. I was hopeful that there would be many educators interested in participating in the study since five schools ought to offer ample

participants meeting the requirement of the inclusion criteria. I am very grateful to all the participants who reached out, offering to participate in this research study. I quickly had four interested participants but then experienced a momentary halt that left me worried about the completion of the research study. Educators from one of the bigger identified schools showed no interest – ironically the one I thought could easily provide participants meeting the inclusion criteria.

There were a few interested participants who did not have experience with any learners with ASD but that only became clear during the signing of the informed consent document. These participants, regrettably, did not qualify to take part in the research study. Some candidates were under the impression that the interview was a training opportunity after the research study and their possible involvement were clearly explained. Their eagerness to participate for the sake of training, even though they had the wrong impression, made sense after looking at the findings, especially considering the value these educators place on gaining new knowledge about ASD. Another two could also not be included, since I was familiar with them from the school I was employed at previously. Luckily one school contacted me offering six of their educators, who are interested in participating. The informed consent and data collection phase moved quickly from there onwards. It was an enormous relief when we reached an adequate number of participants to complete this research study with enough data.

Data Collection

The process of obtaining informed consent was much different from before the advent of COVID-19 in that every interaction with participants had to realise virtually necessitating alternative forms of communication. Lockdown proved a well-timed opportunity to familiarise oneself with novel social media platforms like Zoom. Unfortunately, few of my participants were familiar with alternative forms of virtual communication, leaving us to

make the best of the resources we had available and conducted interviews either over the telephone or Zoom.

Using an online platform like Zoom for the interviews was a blessing and a challenge. The advantages of using Zoom was that I saved valuable time not having to travel or to apply for leave to conduct interviews. The interviews could be scheduled in between other work-related priorities, which was beneficial to me as a researcher in a demanding full-time internship. Recording the interview was easy since Zoom has a built-in recording function. Some interviews flowed without any obstructions, but an unstable and changeable signal combined with technical problems with sound or video inhibited communication, resulting in interviews being rescheduled or conducted telephonically.

Going into the first interview I did not know what to expect, and thoughts ran through my mind, hoping I will remember to do everything I set out to do. Interviewing via Zoom was not as enjoyable as in person, but it was sufficient for all practical intent. We were able to gather rich, descriptive data regarding educators' experiences. I enjoyed the human aspect of the conversations, for example, when participants started laughing about funny moments before they even start to share it. I also witnessed genuine care and concern for the learners' well-being. I experienced their joy when they started to share their stories about special moments with learners or when a learner made progress that they thought was impossible. I realised that these participants truly followed their calling and had the best interest of their learners at heart.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

I completely underestimated the time-consuming element of transcriptions. I spent weekends and evenings transcribing the interviews and got very frustrated with my own voice and mannerisms. I do not want to utter the words "It is wonderful ... uhm" ever again. Nevertheless, transcribing the data was such an important step because it allowed me to

familiarise myself with the data and to recognise possible overlaps between datasets. It helped me to start making sense of the data, and I already had a few ideas about possible significant themes after transcribing all the recordings.

Coding and re-coding also took up much time, but was enjoyable too. I was also thankful for bringing in a co-coder to confirm that we both found similar themes that stood out from the data, which also gave me more confidence in the confirmability of the findings.

Findings and Write-up

The findings were very interesting to me. I could relate it to the experiences I had as an educator a few years ago. For me, these findings could assist young educators who are in desperate need to find a starting point to understand learners with ASD and to know what to focus on when working with a learner on the autism spectrum. I felt proud of all the work that went into this research study. When I started writing the mini-dissertation, it was so satisfying to see two years of work coming together. Doubt crossed my mind at times, making me wonder if the findings will be helpful to someone and if it is noteworthy enough. In the end, I did what I set out to do, and am glad to complete this part of my master's degree. I greatly value this irreplaceable experience, and I respect and hold high regard for any well-conducted research study and academic article.

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ADDENDUM A: Ethical Approval Letter of Research Study



Private Bag X1290, Potchefstroom
South Africa 2520

Tel: 086 016 9698
Web: <http://www.nwu.ac.za/>

North-West University Health Research Ethics
Committee (NWU-HREC)

Tel: 018 299-1206
Email: Ethics-HRECAppl@nwu.ac.za (for human
studies)

13 August 2020

ETHICS APPROVAL LETTER OF STUDY

Based on approval by the North-West University Health Research Ethics Committee (NWU-HREC) on 13/08/2020, the NWU-HREC hereby approves your study as indicated below. This implies that the NWU-HREC grants its permission that, provided the general and specific 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: Exploring the experiences of educators working with children on the Autism Spectrum Disorder in schools for learners with special education needs (LSEN) in the North West Province, South Africa																																	
Principal Investigator/Study Supervisor/Researcher: Prof W de Klerk																																	
Student: A le Grange - 22797769																																	
Ethics number:																																	
<table border="1"><tr><td>N</td><td>W</td><td>U</td><td>-</td><td>0</td><td>0</td><td>3</td><td>3</td><td>2</td><td>-</td><td>2</td><td>0</td><td>-</td><td>A</td><td>1</td></tr><tr><td colspan="3">Institution</td><td colspan="6">Study Number</td><td colspan="2">Year</td><td colspan="4">Status</td></tr></table>				N	W	U	-	0	0	3	3	2	-	2	0	-	A	1	Institution			Study Number						Year		Status			
N	W	U	-	0	0	3	3	2	-	2	0	-	A	1																			
Institution			Study Number						Year		Status																						
<u>Status:</u> S = Submission; R = Re-Submission; F = Provisional Authorisation; A = Authorisation																																	
Application Type: Single study																																	
Commencement date: 13/08/2020		Risk: <table border="1"><tr><td>Minimal</td></tr></table>		Minimal																													
Minimal																																	
Expiry date: 31/08/2021																																	
Approval of the study is provided for a year, after which continuation of the study is dependent on receipt and review of an annual monitoring report and the concomitant issuing of a letter of continuation. A monitoring report is due at the end of August annually until completion.																																	

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 principal investigator/study supervisor/researcher must report in the prescribed format to the NWU-HREC: - annually on the monitoring of the study, whereby a letter of continuation will be provided annually, 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 principal investigator/study supervisor/researcher must apply for approval of these amendments at the NWU-HREC, 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 active monitoring. • The date of approval indicates the first date that the study may be started. • In the interest of ethical responsibility, the NWU-HREC reserves the right to: - request access to any information or data at any time during the course or after completion of the study;
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- 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 NWU-HREC or that information has been false or misrepresented;
 - submission of the annual 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.
- NWU-HREC can be contacted for further information via Ethics-HRECApply@nwu.ac.za or 018 299 1206

Special conditions of the research approval due to the COVID-19 pandemic:

Please note: Due to the nature of the study i.e. (in-depth interviews of educators working with learners with ASD at LSEN schools via an online format), this study will be able to proceed during the current alert level, following receipt of the approval letter. No additional COVID-19 restrictions have been placed on the study except that the researcher must ensure that before proceeding with the study that all research team members have reviewed the North-West University COVID-19 Occupational Health and Safety Standard Operating Procedure.

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

- a. Please provide the NWU-HREC with copies of the goodwill permission letters from the governing bodies and the principals of the schools to be included in the study, indicating that the study can proceed.

As the study progresses the aforementioned conditions should be submitted to Ethics-HRECProcess@nwu.ac.za with a cover letter with a specific subject title indicating "Outstanding documents for approval: NWU-XXXXX-XX-XX." The letter should include the title of the approved study, the names of the researchers involved, that the documents are being submitted as part of the conditions of the approval set by the NWU-HREC, the nature of the document i.e. which condition is being fulfilled and any further explanation to clarify the submission.

The e-mail, to which you attach the documents that you send, should have a *specific subject line* indicating the nature of the submission e.g. "Outstanding documents for approval: NWU-XXXXX-XX-XX". The e-mail should indicate the nature of the document being sent. This submission will be handled via the expedited process.

The NWU-HREC would like to remain at your service and wishes you well with your study. Please do not hesitate to contact the NWU-HREC for any further enquiries or requests for assistance.

Yours sincerely,

 Digitally signed by Prof
Petra Bester
Date: 2020.08.14 09:44:41
+02'00'

Chairperson NWU-HREC

Current details: (23239522) G:\My Drive\9. Research and Postgraduate Education\9.1.5.4 Templates\9.1.5.4.2_NWU-HREC_EAL.docm
20 August 2019
File Reference: 9.1.5.4.2

ADDENDUM B: Approval Letter from the Department of Education



education

Lefapha la Thuto la Bokone Bophirima
Noordwes Departement van Onderwys
North West Department of Education
NORTH WEST PROVINCE

Garona Building, Mmabatho
1st Floor, East Wing,
Private Bag X2044,
Mmabatho 2735
Tel.: (018) 388-3433
Fax.: 086-514-0126
e-mail: sgedu@nwpg.gov.za

OFFICE OF THE SUPERINTENDENT-GENERAL

Eng. : Dr T Phorabatho
Tel. : 018 388 3071/3433

To: Prof W de Klerk
North West University (Potchefstroom Campus)
School of Psychosocial Health

From: Ms S M Semaswe
Superintendent-General

Date : 20 July 2020

PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH: MS A LE GRANGE

Permission is hereby granted to you to conduct research in the department as requested, subject to the following conditions:

- You contact the relevant School Principals for your target schools about your request with this letter of permission;
- Considering that your research will involve both Educators and Learners, the general functionality of the school should not be compromised by the research process.
- The participation in your project will be voluntary.
- The principles of informed consent and confidentiality will be observed in strictest terms, and
- The findings of your research should be made available to the North West Department of Education and Sport Development upon request.

Best wishes

Mrs S M Semaswe
Superintendent-General

20/07/2020
Date



STAY AT HOME

WASH YOU
HANDS OFTEN

WEAR MASK & GLOVES
WHEN GOING OUTSIDE

KEEP TO YOUR
DISTANCE

ADDENDUM C: Proof of Language Editing

LANGUAGE PRACTITIONER DECLARATION

Dr Althéa Kotze

Independent, qualified language practitioner

Language editing (English & Afrikaans)

Translation (English-Afrikaans-English)

althea.erasmus@gmail.com
4 Ixia Close
Yzerfontein
7351
South Africa

To whom it may concern

This document confirms that the dissertation listed below was edited and proofread for appropriate English language use, spelling, grammar, punctuation, and style by Dr Althéa Kotze.

MANUSCRIPT TITLE: Exploring the experiences of educators working with children on the Autism Spectrum in schools for learners with special education needs in the North-West Province

STUDENT: A Le Grange

STUDENT NUMBER: 22797769

Dr Althéa Kotze

DATE ISSUED: 14 12 2020

Althéa Kotze - Accredited language practitioner - APED (South African Translators' Institute, no 1001073)
- PhD Afrikaans and Dutch - MA Afrikaans and Dutch - MA Applied Linguistics - BA Hons - BA - PGCE -
4 Ixia Close - Yzerfontein - 7351 - South Africa
+27 (0) 823518509 (m)