



Floating on Water: A Phenomenological Study of Teacher Challenges in Adapting Instruction for Students with ASD



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Abstract

This qualitative research finds that there are multi-layered challenges faced by general education teachers as they adjust instruction to meet the needs of kids with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in comprehensive and special education programs. With the growing prevalence of ASD diagnoses globally, it is teachers who are increasingly being charged with the responsibility of accommodating such students in regular classrooms and in doing so these circumstances create a significant disconnect between the generalized strategies of education and the actual classrooms. As an example of interpretivist agenda and a phenomenological approach, the researcher engaged 15 teachers in semi-structured interviews to get their current practices and specialized perceptions. Thematic analysis of the statistics indicated that the total of 8 core themes were identified, the difficulties of instruction, the difficulties of behavior management, the deficiency of specialized training, the lack of institutional support, the limitations of classrooms, the strategies related to coping, the need to collaborate, and the specific guidelines on how systematic improvements can be made. Some of the major insights include the teachers who frequently find it difficult to modify courses and manage sensory-emitted behavior outpourings in the absence of formal, ASD-specific training. The paper finds that positive inclusion requires more than just tutor will, but general modifications, such as the introduction of autism-specific expert training, hiring of special support personnel, and utilizing flexible teaching methods.

Key Words

Autism Spectrum Disorder, Inclusion Education, Special Education Challenge, Communication Barrier, Teaching Strategies and Needs

Introduction

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a neurodevelopmental state generally associated with difficulty in social interaction, limited interests and repetitive actions. These characteristics are described in the "Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM 5)" published by the American Psychiatric Association (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). In recent years, the number of children with an ASD has grown worldwide which means that additional students with autism are now enrolled in both normal and special education classrooms. The World Health Organization (2021) informs that autism impacts millions of children from all over the world and underlines the need for appropriate educational support to help them thrive academically and socially (WHO, 2021).

Teachers play an important role in supporting the education and growth of students with ASD, primarily inclusive and special education settings. However, adapting the teaching practices in order to satisfy the different requirements of such students can be extremely challenging. Children with ASD may often have differences in the

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way they communicate, process sensory information, care, and behavior instruction. These differences can have a great impact on how they learn and interact in the classroom. Because of this, traditional means of teaching are not always as effective and tutors often have to make adjustments to their teaching policies, approaches to classroom organization, and valuation methods.

In spite of the increasing emphasis on broad education, many tutors still find the task of working with students with ASD to be challenging. Some of the most common problems include: limited professional training, lack of specific teaching resources, large class sizes, time limitations and lack of institutional support. In addition, it may be that teachers struggle to understand the very broad range of capabilities and needs of students with autism as ASD manifests differently in each student. As a result, teachers often have to find ways to create individualized learning strategies, implement separated instruction, and deal with difficult manners, all of which can be challenging, both professionally and emotionally.

These tasks are often even better in developing countries and education organizations with poor capitals. Teachers in these settings may have fewer opportunities for qualified development and fewer opportunities for support services, such as therapists, psychologists, or special education experts. Cultural theories, parental expectations, and attitudes toward handicaps could also play a part in the understanding and speech about autism. Such issues could interfere with the quality of educational instruction provided to students with ASD. It could become more difficult to effectively apply general educational strategies. Qualitative research could be very helpful in examining the aforementioned issues since it is focused on developing a deep understanding of the experiences of the people. Interviews, observations, and reflective journals could enable the researchers to study the real-life experience of the teachers and the strategies they are using. By hearing the voices of the teachers, a person could gain a deeper understanding of the realities of the classroom, as well as the difficulties faced by the teachers in dealing with students with ASD.

Therefore, the aim of the present study is to explore the challenges faced by teachers in adjusting teaching for children with autism spectrum syndrome. By investigating the skills of teachers in a close way, the study aims at emphasizing the problems that teachers are facing in broad and special education classrooms in a crucial way, both practically, emotionally, and expertly. Ultimately, the discoveries might repay existing studies and generate useful references for optimizing teacher training, supply of resources and institutional support. In doing so, the study hopes to encourage further broad, responsive and effective educational practices for students with ASD.

Literature Review

Adapting teaching for students with ASD is much more than just reducing the complexity of the lesson content (Paisley et al., 2023). It often requires tutors to rethink and rewrite their methods of teaching. Research in specific areas such as English Language Teaching (ELT), advises that the communicative demands of language learning can conflict with the social communication difficulties that are often experienced by students with ASD (Hashim et al., 2022). Problems in devising better syllabus which provides additional support but does not compromise on the academic standard come up regularly from the teachers. One of the major tasks is this lack of consistent framework for making these variations which often leads tutors to trust on the research and trial and error approaches (Brahim, 2022).

Similar challenges can also be seen in other topics. For example, on campus education classes, the main preference for routines and the thin focus typical of many students with ASD can make changes between events challenging. Teachers often see that the ordinary curriculum is not planned with the sensory and routine-related requirements of such students (Obrusnikova & Dillon, 2011). Moreover, many primary school classrooms have

numerous students, making it very difficult for an only teacher to provide individualized attention to each student (Raudeliūnaitė & Steponėnienė, 2020).

Management of behaviors normally associated with ASD is one of the major challenges reported in the literature. Many teachers feel spontaneous to recognize the triggers of behaviors such as emotional outbursts, inattentiveness, or hyper-activity (Welsh et al., 2019). When teachers cannot recognize the communicative purpose behind a student's actions, the learning method can be disturbed, which might lead to frustration for the teacher and the student both (Obrusnikova & Dillon, 2011).

Social challenges may also disrupt social relations in the classroom. Students with ASD can sometimes be mistaken by their peers and may be discovered alone during group activities or combined tasks (Humphrey & Symes, 2011). This exclusion questions the primary objective of general education which emphasizes social participation and integration. As a result, sometimes teachers have to play the role of a mediator between students although they are not trained for such situations formally (Raudeliūnaitė & Steponėnienė, 2020).

A constant theme in the literature is the existence of what researchers call a "preparedness gap." Various teachers believe that they have not been adequately prepared for teaching students with ASD by the specialized training they have received. Some instructors describe their situation as "floating on water," meaning they are trying to manage the situation but are not progressing as well as they can in supporting such students. This issue often shoots from the teacher training programs which are more about special education in general rather than an evidence-based policies that have been planned with utmost specificity for autism (Busby et al., 2012).

This lack of training can shake the confidence and sense of professional skills of the teachers. When tutors feel that they do not have the necessary skills to help their students flourish, their motivation and determination diminish. Therefore, successful addition is not only dependent on material resources, but also is dependent upon teachers' confidence, knowledge and psychological willingness (Busby et al., 2012; Brahim, 2022).

Research also highlights the importance of teamwork in helping students with ASD (Kamps et al., 1994). Ideally, tutors should work carefully with parents, special education specialists, and other experts. However, in several schools this combined approach does not function efficiently. The change into broad classrooms is often challenging, and teamwork between home and school becomes mainly significant in this time period. Studies show that when tutors and parents share a common understanding of a student's requirements, it becomes easier to change the course and assist the child's education (Josilowski & Morris, 2019).

Unfortunately, various teachers describe lack of collaboration with experts such as psychologists or special education professionals. Teachers feel isolated and anxious without expert's guidance to help understand students' sensory and behavioral needs. This lack of combined support can mainly limit a tutor's capability to guarantee that students with ASD actively participate in classroom activities (Raudeliūnaitė & Steponėnienė, 2020).

Although current research has recognized many challenges—including behavioral problems, lack of training, and weak support systems—there is still a need for extra detailed qualitative research (Lai et al., 2014). In particular, there is limited understanding of how tutors make regular decisions in the classroom when balancing academic goals with behavioral management. This study seeks to talk about that gap by examining what it is like to work as a tutor and the choices that tutors make as they go about satisfying these competing demands.

Method

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative research design in order to find out the challenges faced by teachers during the adaptation process of teaching for children with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) in the broad classroom settings.

A qualitative approach was selected because it allows the researcher to gain a greater understanding of the experiences, sensitivities and explanations of the participants. Teaching students with ASD often involves complex instructional, behavioral and cooperative situations. Because of this complexity, qualitative research presents a viable way of exploring the real skills of teachers in the classroom, and their problems in the day-to-day work.

Previous research has shown that educating children with ASD presents numerous challenges, including adjusting the syllabus, managing the classroom behavior, and team up with parents and experts (M. G. Brahim, 2022; Obrusnikova & Dillon, 2011). These challenges are often influenced by reasons such as the classroom environment, the resource availability to tutors, and the level of expert training they have received. For this reason, a qualitative approach allows the researcher to capture teachers' point of view in better detail and understand how they react to these challenges.

More specifically, the study adopted a phenomenological approach, which focuses on understanding the common experiences of those relative to a specific phenomenon. In this research, the phenomenon being discussed is the experience of tutors who adapt teaching for students with ASD in broad classrooms.

Research Approach

The study was directed by an interpretivist research approach, which assumes that reality is designed by people's understandings and the meanings they assign to those experiences. Tutors who work with children with ASD develop their own understanding of classroom tasks, teaching plans, and teamwork with others.

Previous studies support the importance of examining tutors' point of view. For example, Busby et al. (2012) discover that many tutors feel under-prepared while working with students with autism because training programs often provide limited teaching on ASD-specific teaching-strategies. Similarly, research by Raudeliūnaitė and Steponienė (2020) displays that teachers often struggle to implement broad practices due to restricted institutional support and a lack of specific resources.

Research Setting

The study was conducted in schools where children with autism spectrum disorder are trained either in broad classrooms or in singular education settings. These environments naturally include over-all education, tutors who work with students who have a range of learning needs.

Broad classrooms can present unique challenges for tutors because they must support naturally developing students and those with developmental issues such as ASD. As noted by Obrusnikova and Dillon (2011), management of classroom environments that consist of students with autism can be challenging, mainly when teachers must talk about the behavioral issues, communication differences, and the sensory sensitivities.

Participants of the Study

The population for this study consisted of general education teachers who teach students with autism spectrum disorder in inclusive classrooms. These teachers are directly involved in adapting instructional methods and learning activities to meet the needs of students with autism.

Teachers were chosen as the focus of this study since they have an integral role of applying the broad education strategies and regulating teaching policies for supporting various students. Previous studies, such as Busby et al. (2012) have demonstrated that tutors often experience issues related to a shortage of training and the lack of resources. Therefore, their skills and opinions are essential in order to gain understanding for the truths of teaching students with an ASD.

Sample and Sampling Technique

The method of selection used in this study was the purposive sampling method. Purposive sampling is usually employed in qualitative research due to the potential of scholars to make a choice of people who have specific information or knowledge relating to the research topic.

Tutors with direct experience of having taught students with autism spectrum disorder were specifically selected as they were able to provide valuable insights into the instructional tasks in broad classrooms.

The study was conducted with about 15 teachers working in classrooms in broad education or special education. This sample size was considered appropriate for qualitative research as it enables thorough examination of what the participants experienced but at the same time, it is also possible to achieve data saturation where it means that no new themes emerge from the interviews.

Inclusion Criteria

Participants were selected based on the criteria such as: teachers currently working in inclusive or special education classrooms, teachers who have experience teaching students with autism spectrum disorder, teachers who were willing to participate voluntarily in the study, teachers with at least some experience adapting instruction for students with ASD. These criteria ensured that the participants had relevant knowledge and experience regarding the focus of the research.

Data Collection Instrument

The primary data collection device used in this study was a semi-structured interview guide. Semi-structured interviews allow scholars to explore members' experiences in depth while still keeping flexibility to ask follow-up enquiries when necessary. The interview guide involved open-ended questions planned to travel three key areas: instructional challenges, behavioral management challenges, collaboration with parents and specialists. These areas were recognized based on previous research on ASD education. For instance, Brahim (2022) highlights the difficulty of adjusting course for students with ASD, while Obrusnikova and Dillon (2011) discuss the behavior trials tutors often face in class room environments that involves students with autism.

Procedure

Data were gathered through individual semi-structured interviews with tutors. Before the interviews were conducted, agreement was gained from school managers as well as from the participating tutors. Interviews took place in a quiet and comfortable setting which allow participants to speak openly about their experiences.

The data collection process follows several steps such as: participants were contacted and informed about the purpose of the study, consent was obtained from teachers who agreed to participate, individual interviews were conducted with each participant, each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes, with the participants' permission, the interviews were audio-recorded to ensure accurate data collection, the recordings were later transcribed for analysis.

Qualitative interviews are mainly valued because they allow tutors to express their skills in their own words. Josilowski and Morris (2019) note that interviews can offer crucial insights into tutors' experiences with broad education and their exchanges with families.

Data Analysis

The data collected from the interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis, which is a common method used in qualitative research to identify patterns and themes within written data. The analysis process involved various

stages: transcription – the interview recordings were changed into written transcripts, familiarization – the researcher carefully reads the transcripts many times to gain a clear understanding of the data, initial coding – key statements and meaningful phrases were recognized and labeled, theme development – similar codes were grouped together to form broader themes, themes were interpreted in relation to the research questions and existing literature. Through this process, several key themes were identified, which can be summarized as instructional challenges, behavior management challenges, lack of training, and teamwork challenges. These findings were also connected to existing research, e.g., the study by Raudeliūnaitė & Steponėnienė (2020) which describes similar challenges faced by teachers in using general education for ASD students.

Ethical Considerations

The ethical guidelines were adhered to with a lot of caution during the research process. The research participants were obviously informed of the purpose of the research. The research process was absolutely voluntary. The tutors were assured of confidentiality of the responses. The research participants had the right of withdrawing at any stage of the research. All the information gathered during the research was utilized for academic research purposes only.

Result

This research was carried out to get a deeper insight into what it's like to teach students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). From interviews with 15 mainstream tutors, there were eight main themes that came through. They were teaching challenges, behavioral challenges, lack of training, school support, restraints in class, coping strategies, need for teamwork, as well as references for improvement. A major concern that came through again and again was a lack of proper training. For a fact, most tutors are aware that they were not properly educated about autism. They have had to learn on their own through practice. Support from the school was another challenge of huge magnitude. Many of the teachers claimed that they do not get support either by means of aides, specialists, or even basic tools such as visual aids and sensory tools. Without this kind of support, they feel like they are undertaking the task alone, and it becomes even more difficult when it comes to education. Despite all these challenges, the tutors are trying their best to deal with the situation. They are relying on patience, positive reinforcement, and making quick changes. Some of them are using a few policies such as giving the students a break or using tools for relaxation. Teamwork, on the other hand, seems to be restricted. Although a small number of tutors are trying to work with parents by either talking to them or seeking advice from colleagues, there is no support from other experts. However, those who do work together seem to be very cooperative. The findings suggest that with better training of the tutors, reduced scope of classes, and better support from the school, there is a huge possibility of a dramatic change towards inclusion.

Table 1

Theme	Sub-theme	Initial Codes	Explanation
Instructional Challenges	Adapting curriculum	Simplified Language; Curriculum Tailoring	Teachers adapt the content of what they are teaching to make it accessible to their ASD students (for example, "To make worksheet easier to understand I make terminology shorter").
	Distinguishing step	Reducing teaching pace; Repetition	To help kids with ASD keep up with the theme, tutors slow down the speed of the course and repeat orders.

Theme	Sub-theme	Initial Codes	Explanation
	Visual/multisensory aids	Picture cards; Demonstrations; Hands-on materials	Use of visual and tactile aids (e.g. picture cards, demonstrations) helps ASD students understand concepts more clearly.
	Connecting to interests	Incorporating student interests; Contextual examples	Teachers incorporate students' special interests (e.g. trains or cartoons) into lessons to increase engagement and relevance.
Behavioral Management	Emotional outbursts	Emotional meltdowns; Over-reactions	Educators report that small changes can trigger major meltdowns, requiring calm intervention and de-escalation techniques.
	Attention/focus issues	Easily distracted; Noise sensitivity	ASD students often lose focus (for example, being distracted by noise), so teachers must frequently redirect attention.
	Social interaction deficits	Social isolation; Withdrawn behavior	Many ASD students sit alone and do not join group activities, highlighting challenges in social engagement.
	Sensory sensitivities	Sensitivity to lights/sounds; Sensory overload	Bright lights or loud noises often overwhelm ASD students, causing distress (covering ears, panic) unless accommodated.
Lack of Training	No ASD-specific training	Lack of formal ASD training; Generic SEN training	Teachers reported no formal training specifically on autism (only general inclusion workshops), leading to reliance on self-learning.
	Only general SEN workshops	Generic SEN content; No ASD focus	Available professional development was generic, so teachers felt it lacked autism-specific strategies.
	Learning by experience	On-the-job learning; Trial-and-error	Many teachers learn to teach ASD students through classroom experience and trial-and-error rather than formal instruction.
	Theoretical vs. practical gap	Academic theory; Lack of practical tips	Teachers noted that their training was too academic and did not provide concrete classroom strategies for ASD.
Institutional Support	No specialist staff/aides	Absence of special educators/aides	Schools often have no dedicated special-education teachers or aides, so general teachers must manage ASD students alone.
	Limited resources/materials	No adaptive tools; Lack of sensory materials	Teachers reported a lack of specialized materials (e.g. visual aids, sensory tools) for ASD learning in their schools.

Theme	Sub-theme	Initial Codes	Explanation
	Weak admin support	Inadequate leadership support; Unmet resource requests	Administrative support was lacking (e.g. promises of inclusion were not backed by resources or planning).
	No teaching assistant	Teacher working alone; No in-class support	Many general educators handle ASD students without any teaching assistant or aide in the classroom.
	Rigid curriculum demands	Inflexible syllabus; Time pressure	Strict curriculum schedules leave little flexibility for adapting lessons, making it hard to accommodate ASD students' needs.
Coping Strategies	Patience and calmness	Patience; Soft voice; Calm demeanor	Teachers emphasize remaining patient and speaking softly; for example, <i>"I've learned to stay patient and speak softly, which helps."</i>
	Positive reinforcement	Reward systems; Praise; Encouragement	Use of positive rewards (stickers, praise) is a common strategy to encourage desired behaviors.
	On-the-spot task adjustment	Immediate simplification; Task breakdown	Teachers often quickly simplify or break down tasks in real time when a student appears overwhelmed.
	Sensory breaks and tools	Quiet breaks; Headphones; Comfort tools	Offering brief sensory breaks (quiet time, headphones) or comfort items helps calm students when they become upset.
Need for Collaboration	Parent-teacher communication	Sharing information; Regular updates	Communicating with parents helps teachers learn what strategies soothe the student and provides consistency between home and school.
	Consulting specialists	School psychologist consultation; Expert advice	Teachers seek guidance from specialists (e.g. school psychologists) to find effective strategies for individual students.
	Team-teaching/peer support	Co-teaching; Teacher aides; Peer mentors	Having another teacher or aide in class, or peer support models, was viewed as a helpful way to assist ASD learners.
	Informal colleague support	Peer advice; Strategy sharing	Educators share tips informally (e.g. during staff meetings) since formal training or support channels are limited.
Recommendations	Autism-specific PD	Ongoing ASD training; Professional development	Participants strongly recommend continuous, focused training on autism strategies (<i>"We need real, ongoing training on autism strategies."</i>).
	Hire specialists/aides	Specialized staff; Classroom aides	Teachers suggested hiring full-time special educators or assistants to support ASD inclusion in mainstream classrooms.

Theme	Sub-theme	Initial Codes	Explanation
	More ASD resources	Visual aids; Sensory tools availability	Provision of autism-specific resources (visual aids, sensory tools) was frequently requested to support instruction.
	Smaller classes/co-teaching	Reduced class size; Team teaching models	Smaller class sizes or co-teaching arrangements were recommended so teachers can better attend to ASD students' needs.
	Clearer inclusion policies	Defined guidelines; Administrative care	Teachers wanted clear inclusion policies and administrative backing (e.g. quotas, funding) to make serving ASD students feasible.

Discussion

The findings from this study make clear a simple truth: Tutors are trying to reach a balance with the demands of their syllabus, as well as the separate demands of students with ASD-and that's not easy.

For example, one tutor told me how they slow down teachings and they repeat teaching instructions again and again so one student has the chance to keep up. While this is helpful for the student, it also disrupts the pacing of the entire class. This pressure between covering the syllabus and catering for the individual learners is one that most tutors face. Behavioral challenges were also another big issue. A lot of times, the tutor is not prepared when the student has collapses or when they are overloading. For a tutor not trained on how to handle such cases, they have to rely on their instincts, which is a stressful position for them, especially when they are trying to run a class. Lack of autism-specific training is another issue. Most of the tutors said that their professional development was only on inclusion in general, not on autism-specific policies. As a result, they are forced to rely on trial and error, as they learn on the job. School care is another factor that played a vast role. For a teacher to be able to be broad-minded, they have to have helpers, specialists, and materials. Otherwise, they are on their own, and no matter how broad-minded they are, they are still going to be in a tricky position. On a more positive note, there are ways in which the tutors are managing. However, the collaboration, especially with the parents and the experts, is still not taking place as it should. It is a gap between the general purpose of education and what the tutors can actually achieve without the proper support. In short, based on the study, it is a gap between the general purpose of education and what the tutors can actually achieve without the proper support.

Conclusion

To conclude, teachers are encountering some serious problems when they are dealing with ASD students. These problems are adapting instructions, behavior, and restricted training and resources. What seems to be most striking is that there is a big gap between education policies and reality. Although broad education is promoted, most times, teachers don't have tools to make it work efficiently. This research gives tutors a chance to speak, showing them what they are experiencing in their daily lives. It is also showing that educating inclusion is not just a matter of demanding more from tutors, but changes are required at a system level.

Implications

Policy

There needs to be real investment in support for autism, i.e., hiring experts, providing proper training, and giving institutes the potential they need. There also needs to be flexibility in strategies to allow tutors to make changes as they see necessary.

School Leadership/Administration

Schools should ensure the hiring of qualified professionals, teacher training, and an environment conducive for insertion. Communication between teachers and parents should be promoted.

Teacher Education / CPD

The teacher education plan should include specialized education on autism instead of special education. Constant development of expert development should be accessible for tutors so that they are educated.

Classroom Practice

Tutors can enforce a few policies such as the utilization of visual aids, structured routines, and positive reinforcement. Working with co-teachers can too greatly influence a change.

Limitations

The study is based only on a small number of 15 tutors, hence the discoveries may not spread everywhere. Moreover, this study is based only on self-reported practices, hence the answers might also be influenced by personal favoritism.

Recommendations

On the basis of the findings in this study, several practical steps can be taken to recover the informative experience of students with ASD in general classrooms. First, there is a definite need to develop specific development plans for autistic students that are not only based on theoretical knowledge but also focus on practical classroom policies. Tutors should also consider receiving proper training to help them cope with the problems faced by students with ASD, as well as to become familiar with proper instructions and specific needs of autistic students. In addition, schools should also focus on hiring experts like special education tutors and classroom helpers who can help students with ASD and minimize the pressure on general tutors. Proper access to coaching resources is equally important. The institutes should focus on ensuring proper access to visual aids, sensory materials, and assistive materials that can help in making education more accessible and interesting for students with ASD.. At the training level, there should be dedicated modules on autism in universities and teacher education programs to help prepare teachers. A better collaboration between tutors and parents is also important, as frequent communication can be useful to establish consistency between home and institute policies. Finally, ongoing research and evaluation of class room practices should be encouraged to determine the most effective practices for supporting students with ASD and to ensure that broad education strategies are correctly implemented.

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