

Inclusion of Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders in Mainstream Primary School Classrooms: Zimbabwean Teachers' Experiences

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Abstract

The shift in paradigm from exclusion to inclusion in education in Zimbabwe, in alignment with the global world, has resulted in a significant number of children with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) being educated in mainstream primary school classrooms. Consequently, new demands are being made on teachers who are not necessarily adequately prepared for these children. The current study, embedded within the phenomenological approach, interpreted 24 Zimbabwean primary school teachers' responses to individual semi-structured, in-depth interviews on their experiences in the inclusion of children with ASD in mainstream classrooms. Despite participants' apprehension and uncertainty about inclusion, they held positive attitudes and commitment to its practice based on its entrenchment in human rights and social justice. Participants confronted and strategized on curriculum and instruction, communication, social and behaviour issues that interfered with the inclusion of children with ASD in mainstream

classrooms. In-school and out-of-school support systems and resources, including the Zimbabwe Schools Psychological Services and Special Needs Education Department, teacher assistants, parents and educational psychologists supported teachers in the inclusion of children with ASD in mainstream classrooms. Professional development of teachers would assist them to support the inclusion of children with ASD in mainstream classrooms. Further research on the experiences of other stakeholders, including typically developing children, school administrators and parents in the inclusion of children with ASD in mainstream classrooms is needed.

Keywords: *Autism Spectrum Disorders, children, inclusion, teachers, mainstream primary schools, Zimbabwe*

Introduction

Since the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, 1948), a human rights and social justice agenda has guided educational policies of several countries and the United Nations (Pantic & Florian, 2015). Entrenched within this agenda, the educational policies of several countries mandate the rights of all children to equal valuation as members of the mainstream school education system regardless of their differences, including disability, religion, race, ethnicity, culture, gender, social and economic status, ability and health (Avramidis & Kalyva, 2007; Ballard, 2012; Humphrey & Symes, 2013). Consistent with these systemic movements in the educational systems, Zimbabwe adopted inclusion in 1994 (Chireshe, 2013; Mandina, 2012). In Zimbabwe, the pursuit of inclusion is evidenced by the Zimbabwe Education Act of 1987 as revised in 2006 (Majoko, 2013; Mpofu & Shumba, 2012) which mandates the education of children with disabilities in the mainstream school system. Inclusion is viewed as a value system which enshrines the entitlement of all children to equal access to learning, achievement and the pursuance of excellence in all domains of their school education (Ballard, 2012).

Inclusion embodies 'how' the education system can accommodate children with diverse learning needs (Pantic & Florian, 2015), constituting the promotion, where feasible, the processes of achievement, acceptance and participation in mainstream school classrooms of children with diverse learning needs (Florian & Spratt, 2013). Propelling the impetus for inclusion in

Zimbabwe and the global world are its benefits to both children with and without disabilities and to societies (Chireshe, 2013). Whereas inclusion fosters well-being, social, cognitive and language skills in children with disabilities, it develops in typically developing children awareness of their own abilities, assisting others, empathy, tolerance and compassion (Chandler-Olcott & Kluth, 2009) and combats discriminatory societal attitudes towards disabilities (Eldar, Talmor & Wolf-Zukerman, 2010). ASD is characterised by problems in communication (delay or lack of language development), social development (lack of development of peer relationships, impaired non-verbal behaviour), resistance to change and ritualistic behaviour (American Psychiatric Association, 2012). It is among the most common childhood neurological disorders in the world (Humphrey & Symes, 2013).

Rationale for the study

Since Zimbabwe has been in pursuance of inclusion for more than two decades, a significant number of children with ASD are educated in mainstream primary school classrooms (Chireshe, 2013). Since the inclusion of children with ASD is among the most complex and poorly conceptualised domains of education globally (Symes & Humphrey, 2010), Zimbabwean mainstream primary schools are struggling to successfully and effectively include children with ASD (Majoko, 2016). Thus, in Zimbabwe, comparable to the global world, research into teaching strategies, techniques and approaches for successful and effective inclusion of children with disabilities including ASD in mainstream schools is imperative (Mandina, 2012). The practice of inclusion is, nevertheless, not the simple application of particular pedagogical methods as it is hinged on the attitudes, knowledge and experience of teachers (Hinton et al., 2008). As regards children with ASD who are considered among the most challenging for successful inclusion in mainstream school education the world over (Symes & Humphrey, 2010), this is a critical consideration. Based on a literature search, there is a dearth of studies on teachers' experiences in inclusion of children with ASD in mainstream primary school classrooms in Zimbabwe.

Making educational institutions more inclusive may involve teachers in a painful process of challenging their personal discriminatory practices and attitudes (Ballard, 2012). Thus, continuous research into provision for children with disabilities including ASD in mainstream

education is a necessity for improved service delivery (Mandina, 2012). Teachers are central in the successful inclusion of children with ASD (Emam & Farrell, 2009; Florian & Spratt, 2013). Although a number of researchers explored teachers' perceptions of their professional competence as regards teaching children with ASD internationally (Humphrey, & Lewis, 2008), this is the first study to be executed within the Zimbabwean education system. Embedded in qualitative methodology, the present study interrogated teachers' experiences as a springboard for ascertaining the adequacy of their preparation through self-reported competence. Specifically, the present study sought to answer the following research questions: What are the experiences of teachers in inclusion of children with ASD in mainstream primary school classrooms in the Midlands educational province of Zimbabwe?; What issues do teachers confront in inclusion of children with ASD in mainstream primary school classrooms in Midlands educational province of Zimbabwe? and What systems and resources support the inclusion of children with ASD in mainstream primary school classrooms in Midlands educational province of Zimbabwe? The subsequent section presents teachers' challenges in the inclusion of children of children with ASD.

Teachers' challenges in inclusion of children with ASD

Owing to the placement of children with ASD in mainstream classrooms, teachers are obligated to successfully and effectively include these children often with a limited or an absence of guidelines and training (Horrocks, White & Roberts, 2008; Lindsay, Proulx, Scott & Thompson, 2013). Consequently, several schools struggle to meet the full range of needs of these children (Humphrey & Lewis, 2008; Leblanc, Richardson & Burns, 2009). Teaching practices and strategies for children with ASD is a key 'gap' in the knowledge and information base for special educational needs provision (Humphrey & Parkinson, 2006). Thus, teachers of children with ASD experience tension in managing the challenges these children present in social and emotional understanding (Barnes, 2009; Leach & Duffy, 2009). Such tensions include the anxiety teachers feel over the ability to meet the needs of these children while simultaneously meeting the needs of other children in the school classroom and these can determine the quality of teacher-child interactions (Humphrey & Symes, 2013).

Teaching children with ASD may need specific approaches that are unfamiliar to regular teachers (Leach & Duffy, 2009). Similarly, strategies that can be used can differ with the child's age, setting of the classroom and the included child (Hess, Morrier, Heflin & Ivey, 2008). It is, consequently, fundamental to equip teachers with as many strategies as possible (Lindsay et al., 2013). Whereas teachers, nevertheless, perceive that acquisition of these approaches and strategies would make a positive difference to their practice in classrooms, several presently lack the training for adequate support of these children (Emam & Farrell, 2009) and feel ill-prepared to meet their full range of needs (Humphrey & Parkinson, 2006). Because of the lack of training, teachers endure anxiety and stress (McGillicuddy & O'Donnell, 2013) and lack the confidence to manage and effectively include children with ASD in lessons (Humphrey & Parkinson, 2006). As regards special educational needs, training can also culminate in teachers having a more positive attitude towards inclusion (Horrocks et al., 2008). This is critical as positive attitudes towards inclusion are reported as a second prerequisite to successful inclusion of children with ASD (Emam & Farrell, 2009).

Although teacher training and attitudes towards inclusion are critical in inclusion, consideration of the wider-school context is also of importance (Florian, 2012). There is, indeed, a call for a paradigm shift from focusing on child deficits to a reviewing of whole school approach, practices and learning styles (Horrocks et al., 2008; Majoko, 2013). As regards the inclusion of children with ASD, it is argued that 'schools need to buy in wholesale to inclusion if its successful practice is to be realised' as positive outcomes are unachievable by a few staff members (Barnes, 2009). Teachers believe that additional support from a teaching assistant is indispensable, for children with ASD and their counterparts (Emam & Farrell, 2009). Without a shift in the attitude and approach of the whole organisation, it will fail children with ASD (McGillicuddy & O'Donnell, 2013). In whole school inclusion, all staff is required to have a clear and shared understanding of the aims and expectation of inclusion within their educational institution (Florian & Spratt, 2013); Eldar et al., 2010) and senior management support (Hess et al., 2008). Teachers believe that more needs be done to create inclusive social environments within classrooms (Hinton et al., 2008)

Challenges of inclusion to children with ASD and their peers

Difficulties in social interaction characteristic of children with ASD place these children at risk of negative social outcomes (Humphrey 2008). Children with ASD are more likely to spend their break and lunch times alone, and less likely to engage in co-operative interaction with children with no special educational needs (Humphrey & Symes, 2013). Children with ASD are approximately 20 times more likely to be socially excluded at school in comparison with other groups of children (Humphrey, 2008). Similarly, children with ASD are up to three times more likely to be bullied, are less likely to be socially supported and are more likely to be rejected than their counterparts (Symes & Humphrey, 2010).

Although all children may benefit academically and socially from positive relationships with their teachers (De Boer & Simpson, 2009), those with ASD may be challenging in this respect (McGillicuddy & O'Donnell, 2013). The exhibition of disinterest in interaction and behavioural problems of children with ASD can result in teachers less likely to have positive relationships with them (Eldar et al., 2010). Nevertheless, research cautions against generalisation from what is appropriate for typically developing children to their peers with ASD (Natof & Romanczyk, 2009). For instance, certain aspects of the child-teacher relationship may be irrelevant for children with ASD. Although the child-teacher relationship lacks an impact on the academic inclusion of children with ASD, it has been established to determine the extent of their social inclusion (Leach & Duffy, 2009). Teachers' more negative relationships with children with ASD results in less social acceptance of these children by their typically developing counterparts (Humphrey, 2008). Provision of appropriate training to teachers for successful inclusion of children with ASD within their classrooms is a strategy for minimisation of negative social outcomes (Hinton, et al., 2008; Leblanc, et al., 2009).

Children without ASD may experience difficulties trying to understand the behaviour of children with ASD (Humphrey, 2008). This can include struggling to understand that children with ASD behave in certain ways and that they may be nervous or frightened of them (Lindsay et al., 2013). Typically developing children may be hurt when their peers with ASD ignore or reject their social advances (Majoko, 2016). Children with ASD may distract or disrupt the learning of

other children due to disturbances within lessons if regimes are not kept (Emam & Farrell, 2009).

Children without developmental delays may experience frustration and difficulty in accepting the fact that their peers with ASD are treated differently (Leach & Duffy, 2009). This may include certain behaviours that go unpunished and different rules and expectations that apply to those with ASD that they see as unfair (Humphrey & Symes, 2013). They may feel that their peers with ASD ‘get away’ with things (Lindsay et al., 2013). Other children may feel uncomfortable when confronted by inappropriate behaviour from their peers with ASD (Humphrey, 2008). The inclusion of children with ASD, who need a lot of attention, in mainstream classrooms can result in reduced attention from the teachers for the other children if appropriate support is not available in the classroom (Symes & Humphrey, 2013). These children may also resent the extra attention teachers give to their counterparts with ASD (Emam & Farrell, 2009).

Theoretical framework

Inclusive pedagogy (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011), informed the present study. The philosophy is premised on focusing on learning for all children in the community of the classroom instead of only those identified as having ‘additional needs’ (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2012; Pantic & Florian, 2015). Such a focus entails creation of learning opportunities that are adequately availed to ‘everyone’ in order that all children are able to participate in classroom life; extension of what is ordinarily available for all children, creation of a rich learning community, rather than use of teaching and learning strategies that are suitable for ‘most’ alongside something ‘additional’ or ‘different’ for some who experience difficulties; and focusing on ‘what’ is to be taught (and ‘how’) rather than ‘who’ is to learn it (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011; Florian & Spratt, 2013).

Inclusive pedagogy (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011), is also entrenched in rejection of deterministic beliefs about ability as being fixed and the associated idea that the presence of some will hold back the progress of others. Such rejection constitutes believing that ‘all’ children will make progress, learn and achieve; focusing teaching and learning on what children can do rather than what they cannot do; using a variety of grouping strategies to support everyone’s

learning rather than relying on ability grouping to separate ('able' from 'less able' learners); and using formative assessment to support learning (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011; Pantic & Florian, 2015).

Inclusive pedagogy (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011), is further grounded in viewing difficulties in learning as professional challenges for teachers, rather than deficits in children, that encourage the development of new ways of working. Such viewing entails seeking and trying out new ways of working to support the learning of all children; working with and through other adults that respect the dignity of all children as full members of the classroom community; and commitment to continuing professional development so as to develop more inclusive practices (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011; Florian & Spratt, 2013). With respect to Zimbabwean policy and legislative framework, inclusion of children with ASD in their mainstream classrooms is grounded in individual teachers': accounting for difference as an essential aspect of child development in any conceptualization of learning; belief that they are qualified/ capable of teaching all children; and continuous development of creative new ways of working with other stakeholders.

Method

Study Design and data collection

In order to address the foregoing research questions, this study used a qualitative phenomenological framework as it enabled the researcher to capture the essences of meaning underlying how individual participants felt about their presented personal experiences (Bednall, 2006; Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007). A constant comparative approach was used to uncover the meanings participants attached to the ways in which they dealt with specific aspects of their existence (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006).

Participants

Twenty-four (15 male and nine female) teachers, comprising three Early Childhood Education and Development, two Grade 1, four Grade 2, three Grade 3, two Grade 4, five Grade 5, one Grade 6 and four Grade 7, participated in the study. They were purposively drawn from three public primary schools located in low to high socio-economic statuses settings particularly farm,

rural and urban areas in the Midlands educational province of Zimbabwe. Each school had an average enrolment of 600 children. All 24 participants met the inclusion criteria to participate in the study particularly (1) at least an undergraduate qualification with endorsement in primary school education; (2) at least five years' experience in teaching within mainstream primary school classrooms; (3) at least two years' experience in teaching children with ASD in mainstream primary school classrooms; and (4) are presently teaching in a mainstream primary school classroom with a child/children with ASD. The mainstream teaching experience of the participants ranged from seven to over 21 years and their experience in teaching children with ASD ranged from four years to thirteen years. Participants based their interview question responses on five female and nineteen male children with ASD that they were teaching.

Interview Schedule

In education, psychology and sociology, the use of an original semi-structured interview schedule in the generation of data for analysis is a common phenomenon (Cohen et al., 2007; Creswell, 2009). This study used interview schedules (see Table 1) based on a review of interview schedules developed previously within the disability literature. These include Eldar et al. (2010), Humphrey & Lewis (2008), McGillicuddy & O'Donnell (2013) and Lindsay et al. (2013). Six members of the Department of Inclusive Education of the University of South Africa reviewed the interview schedule by commenting on its content suitability and suggesting refinements to the questions before its administration. Its final version constituted seven questions.

Table 1. Teacher Interview Schedule

General questions

- How do you understand ASD?
- What are your experiences in inclusion of children with ASD in your classroom?
- What issues do you confront in inclusion of children with ASD in your classroom?

Probing questions

- What systems and resources support the inclusion of a child with ASD in your classroom?

- What resources, if any, do you feel would further support the inclusion of a child with ASD in your classroom?
- How do you manage the issues you confront in inclusion of a child with ASD in your classroom?
- What strategies, if any, do you use in inclusion of a child with ASD in your classroom?

Procedure

Ethical approval to execute the study was sought and obtained from MoPSE of Zimbabwe, Midlands provincial education offices and principals of participating primary schools. Participants for this study were purposively sampled through contacts with Midlands provincial education offices. In order to establish eligibility and to schedule interview settings and times, individual participants were screened by telephone. Informed consent was sought and obtained from the participants prior to the onset of the interviews. After teachers' verbal declaration of interest, they were emailed both the information about this study and the consent form. Following the receipt of the teachers' signed consent forms, they were contacted once again and suitable interview times and settings were scheduled.

Interviews were conducted in English in a quiet area of each participant's school on interview appointment days at a time outside participants' regular class teaching periods. Before the onset of the interview, each teacher was reminded of the voluntary nature of their participation, the anonymity of all of their responses, their right not to answer any question that they felt were not comfortable with and informed of their right to withdraw from the interview session at any point although none did so. With participants' informed consent, an audio recorder was used in each interview session. No time limit was set in order to ensure consistency in the process of data collection. The interviews ranged from 45 minutes to 80 minutes. Pseudonyms were used to ensure anonymity and confidentiality of the participants.

Analysis

Consistent with the phenomenological approach, inductive thematic content analysis, which is a process utilised to identify and analyse patterns and themes, was used in data analysis (Babbie & Mouton, 2011). In the first level of analysis, the researcher and the two critical readers, who were experts in qualitative research, independently examined individual participant transcripts to determine recurring themes. In order to identify both unique and common themes (Grbich,

2007), the second level of analysis entailed identification of themes across transcripts. Data analysis sought to acquire a sense of overall meaning instead of frequencies (Cohen et al., 2007). In alignment with the qualitative approach, direct quotes were utilised as much as possible in order to entrench study findings and interpretations (Creswell, 2009). The researcher and the critical readers considered it more fundamental to consider the commonalities and themes across all participants. Trustworthiness and accuracy issues were addressed numerous times throughout study. In order to maintain consistency with the research questions, the researcher and the critical readers, began by classification of the statements according to the research questions of the study. The researcher and the critical readers also independently analysed the data so as to address the threats of the accuracy of interpretation. The researcher and the critical readers, thereafter, jointly discussed their analyses which resolved discrepancies through reviewing relevant data. Further, accuracy of interpretation was addressed through colleague checks. Additionally, participants were requested to review the transcripts and, when necessary, add further explanatory information.

Results

The data analysis, based on three research questions of the study, generated three themes, namely, experiences in inclusion, issues and strategies in inclusion and support systems and resources for inclusion. It also generated eight sub-themes, namely, apprehension and uncertainty about inclusion, attitudes towards inclusion, curriculum and instruction, communication, socialisation, behaviour, and in school and out of school support (see Table 2). Illustrative quotes are presented below for each instance.

Table 2. Teachers' experiences in inclusion of children with ASD

Theme	Subtheme
Experiences in inclusion	Apprehension and uncertainty about inclusion, Attitudes towards inclusion
Issues and strategies in inclusion	Curriculum and instruction, communication, socialisation, behaviour
Support systems and resources for inclusion	In school support, out of school support

Experiences in inclusion

Apprehension and uncertainty about inclusion

Inconsistent with inclusive pedagogy which requires teachers to believe and be convinced that they are qualified and capable of teaching all children (Florian & Spratt, 2013), participants experienced apprehension and uncertainty about the inclusion of children with ASD in their mainstream classrooms, as revealed in the following selected excerpts:

‘Soon after the inclusion of the child with ASD in my classroom, I could not imagine it. I was hesitant and uncertain about her teaching and learning’ (Teacher 24).

‘His [the child with ASD] exceptionality was evident to all his classmates. I could not figure out whether or not they would accept him. I was apprehensive about my ability to cope with his pedagogy (Teacher 11).

Referring to their previous teacher education, participants perceived the ‘additional’ professional demands required from them in the inclusion of children with ASD in their mainstream classrooms. They expressed feelings which included denial, disbelief and finally acceptance. This was inconsistent with inclusive pedagogy which requires teachers to account for difference as a fundamental component of human development in any conceptualisation of learning (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011), as confirmed in the following selected excerpts:

‘I felt clueless regarding the management of his [the child with ASD] teaching and learning. His inclusion in my classroom was the most daunting event since I joined teaching’ (Teacher 14).

‘With all children functioning at significantly different cognitive levels in my class, the inclusion of a child with ASD meant more professional demands from me’ (Teacher 1).

Attitudes towards inclusion

Although participants were apprehensive and uncertain about their preparation for

inclusion of children with ASD in their classrooms, they held positive attitudes and commitment to the practice. Participants' attitudes were in alignment with inclusive pedagogy which is embedded in teachers' commitment to enhance the achievement of all children whilst safeguarding the inclusion of those who are vulnerable to exclusion and other forms of marginalisation (Florian, 2012;). One participant reported that, 'consistent with our national and global policies, including the constitution and conventions, all children, including those with ASD, need to be afforded their fundamental right to an inclusive education'. Another participant added, '... from Western Christian, African Traditional Religion, Ubuntu and human rights and social justice perspectives, it is the responsibility of every stakeholder to strive for the inclusion of children with ASD and other conditions in education' (Teacher 24). Another participant reported that, 'due to my social, cultural, moral and legal obligation to include all children in my classroom, I finally accepted him' (Teacher 6).

Inclusion issues and strategies

Participants revealed that, as they progressed from denial to acceptance of inclusion of children with ASD, they adopted issue specific strategies to facilitate the practice, which emerged as four sub-themes presented below. Similarly, inclusive pedagogy is embedded in learning of all children in the community of the school classroom (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011),

Curriculum and instruction

Participants revealed that they utilised pedagogical practices which were based on their teacher education and experience to include children with ASD in mainstream classrooms. Similarly, inclusive pedagogy requires teachers to strategize on addressing exclusion and underachievement in teaching and learning (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). For instance, participants who had in-service training on special needs education reported that they had inadequate professional development in the inclusion of children with ASD hence 'kept referring to the few lecture notes in their teaching. These notes included teaching methods, strategies and techniques such as direct instruction, exploratory learning and simulations' (Teacher 5). Another participant added, 'I use Individualised Educational Plans for him and his peers without developmental delays for effective teaching and learning. I learnt how to design and implement these plans during my in-

service training' (Teacher 11). On the other hand, participants who were more experienced in teaching, but lacked training in inclusion of children with ASD, expressed that they based their lessons on their 'teaching experience in lesson planning and delivery every school day which equipped them with deductive and inductive teaching strategies' (Teacher 17).

Communication

Participants confronted several communication issues including the lack of functional and verbal communication presented by children with ASD. Cognisant of this, participants established and used the communication abilities of individual children with ASD to provide needs-responsive interventions. Participants reported that their communication interventions were grounded in daily life experiences and environment of individual children with ASD. Similarly, inclusive pedagogy requires teachers to embed teaching and learning in the social-cultural contexts of children (Florian & Spratt, 2013). For instance, one participant reported that 'since my learner with ASD lacks functional language, I pair gestures that are used in his daily life with speech while teaching. I relate my teaching to his home and community life and daily experiences' (Teacher 19). Another participant expressed that, the child with ASD 'misunderstands abstract language. I therefore teach using concrete language and immediate examples to eliminate abstract concepts. I always teach in context' (Teacher 22). Similarly, another participant revealed that, 'I reinforce appropriate behaviour such as asking to go to the toilet appropriately and ignore inappropriate behaviour such as screaming when signalling to want to go to the toilet. I always positively reward socially and culturally approved behaviour' (Teacher 2).

Socialisation

Participants perceived that children with ASD were socially and educationally excluded in mainstream schools because of their impairments in the social domain including deficits in social cues, responsiveness and social interactions. Participants cited that children with ASD engaged in lonely activities in and outside the classrooms. One participant expressed that the child with ASD 'functions in a fantasy world. He plays alone during break, lunch or sporting time' (Teacher 6). Another participant reported, 'my learner (the child with ASD) lacks interest in responding to typically developing peers because she is interested and emotionally attached to the non-living world including clay cows' (Teacher 20). Participants expressed that they used

several intervention strategies including teaching social skills, supervision of social interactions, use of short social stories, provision of specific social rules, reinforcement of positive social interactions and fostering in typically developing children an understanding and accommodation of their peers with ASD. Similarly, inclusive pedagogy is premised on extension of what is ordinarily available for all children (Pantic & Florian, 2015). One participant cited that, 'I craft easily seen, understandable and daily applicable social rules including turn-taking to provide the child with ASD and those without the condition positive social interactions' (Teacher 18). Another participant expressed that, 'I teach social skills such as befriending to children with ASD and their typically developing peers for social interaction' (Teacher 3). Similarly, another participant articulated, 'I use children without developmental challenges as peer models, ball games and pair work in academic work' (Teacher 23).

Another participant revealed that, apart from teaching typically developing children to understand their peers with ASD through inclusion of disability issues into pedagogy, he adapted curricular and co-curricular activities such as classroom lessons and sport and recreation activities to the ability levels of all children and nurtured a collaborative culture in her classroom to 'facilitate inclusion'. Another participant who had training in special needs education added, 'I use collaborative approaches including pair work and group work in teaching physical education, numeracy, literacy and art education to acculturate the child with and that without ASD to celebrate and accommodate each other' (Teacher 15). Similarly, inclusive pedagogy requires teachers to focus on *what* is to be taught (and *how*) instead of *who* is to learn it (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011).

Behaviour

Participants confronted behavioural issues including unusual obsessions and compulsions, unusual sensory experiences and repetitive use of objects presented by children with ASD. These interfered with the inclusion of these children in mainstream classrooms. One participant, for instance, posited that, 'unusual obsessions with desires, objects, ideas, and sporting activities and compulsive behaviour patterns including humming, licking and sucking hampers social cohesion of the child with ASD with the rest of the class' (Teacher 12). Another participant expressed, 'the child I teach is hypersensitive to touch, has baseless phobia, expresses fear in unusual ways

and verbally outbursts' (Teacher 8). Another participant added, 'because of his unusual sensitivity to sound, he is easily unsettled by sudden or loud sound and overwhelmed by excessive verbal direction'. Participants reported that they used several intervention strategies including reinforcements, academic modifications, environmental adaptations and structured routines. Similarly, inclusive pedagogy requires teachers to shift their focus from "most" and "some" children to "everybody" in teaching and learning (Florian, 2012). One participant posited that, 'I reinforce preferred activities of the learner with ASD and those without the condition upon completion of tasks' (Teacher 1). Another participant added, 'I have sensitised typically developing learners to maintain low levels of noise in the classroom. I am always on guard regarding early signs of behavioural disorders' (Teacher 21). Similarly, another teacher articulated,

'... in order to lower the potential for anxiety for the learner with ASD, I prepare and explain any changes about the daily routine. I put picture symbols including donkeys and bold texts that draw his attention on the schedule to show change in routine such as change in break time and then verbally and visually remind him of the upcoming events a few minutes before transition' (Teacher 5).

Support systems and resources for inclusion

Participants revealed two forms of support systems and resources for the inclusion of children with ASD in mainstream classrooms, namely, in school and out of school support. Similarly, inclusive pedagogy requires engagement of teachers in collaborative actions to address issues requiring responses beyond the classroom (Florian & Spratt, 2013),

In school support

Participants reported that teacher assistants supported them in inclusion of children with ASD in mainstream classrooms. They cited that, teacher assistants attended to both children with and without ASD. Similarly, inclusive pedagogy is embedded in teachers' involvement in professional and social networks seeking to optimise social justice (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). One participant expressed, 'She is trained in management of children with ASD including handling temper tantrums presented by the boy in our class' (Teacher 13). Another participant

explained that, because of experience, ‘the assistant teacher is confident in the face of explosive outbursts from the learner with ASD and is always in total control of all the children’ (Teacher 9). The other participant revealed that all teacher assistants at their school had served their institution for at least five years because of their professional preparation for children with ASD. All participants acknowledged that adequately professionally prepared and experienced teacher assistants were fundamental in the inclusion of children with ASD in mainstream classrooms. One participant expressed, ‘... working with an assistant teacher with the know-how, know-with and experience in ASD this year, the inclusion of the learner with ASD in my classroom is on track’ (Teacher 4). Participants revealed that out of school support was integral in the inclusion of children with ASD in mainstream classrooms.

Out of school support

As primary socialisation agents of all children, including those children with ASD, parents provided participants with critical support including knowledge and information in inclusion of these children. This was in alignment with inclusive pedagogy which requires substantive engagement of stakeholders including families in decisions about education (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). Through collaboration and discourse with parents in scheduled and unscheduled parent-class teacher meetings, parent classroom visits and their own home-visits, participants synchronised ‘home grown’ and ‘school grown’ interventions which exposed children with ASD to consistent academic and behaviour management frameworks. Educational psychologists supported participants and children with ASD as they assessed these children and provided teachers with psychotherapy and inclusive pedagogy management strategies. One participant revealed, ‘I only realised after the educational psychologist had gone that my stress level had subsided and I had standby strategies to use with my child with ASD’ (Teacher 7).

Participants cited that the Zimbabwe Schools Psychological Services and Special Needs Education Department afforded them individual and institutional capacity building in the inclusion of children with ASD through fostering in them positive attitudes, skills, competencies, understandings and provision of responsive services and programmes. Similarly, inclusive pedagogy is grounded in stakeholders’ sharing responsibility within school for the outcomes of all children (Florian & Spratt, 2013). Participants reported that the department afforded them

several services including assessment, staff development on inclusion and advocating for the awareness of children with disabilities including ASD and inclusive school education among role players including peer teachers, school heads, communities and parents. As one teacher presented, ‘the Schools Psychological Services and Special Needs Education Department staff presents demonstration lessons and observes my lessons and advises me on how to improve on inclusive teaching and learning’ (Teacher 3). Similarly, another participant articulated, ‘the Schools Psychological Services and Special Needs Education Department assessments facilitated early diagnosis and intervention of the learner with ASD I teach’ (Teacher 21).

Participants reported that the provision of staff development on inclusion at national, provincial and district levels supported them. In spite of participants’ acknowledgement of the provision of professional development at these levels, they revealed that they were focused on the inclusion of children with disabilities generically instead of those with ASD. This was in alignment with inclusive pedagogy which requires teachers’ extension of the range of opportunities that are availed to everyone in the learning community of the classroom and school (Florian, 2012), as confirmed in the following selected excerpts:

‘All the national, provincial and district staff development workshops, conferences and meetings that I have attended since I joined the profession were on children with diverse disabilities’ (Teacher 6).

‘Inclusion of children with ASD requires our exposition to staff development that can equip us with the relevant expertise in managing these children’ (Teacher 14).

‘I desperately need staff development on ASD rather [than] generic disability categories’ (Teacher 7).

Inclusive pedagogy requires the teaching profession to develop innovative ways of working with other stakeholders (doing) (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). Participants revealed that it was a combination of in school and out of school support that ‘propelled’ the inclusion of children with ASD in their classrooms.

Discussion

In Zimbabwe and internationally, the paradigm shift from exclusion to inclusion of children with disabilities, including those with ASD, in mainstream school classroom education exerts several demands on teachers who are not necessarily prepared to successfully and effectively manage the challenge (Majoko, 2016). Although the training of teachers on inclusion influences their effectiveness in delivery of inclusive pedagogy (Emam & Farrell, 2009), this study reveals several issues and strategies for inclusion of children with ASD in mainstream school classrooms gleaned from teachers based on their mainstream teacher training and teaching experiences. Upon the inclusion of children with ASD in mainstream classrooms, participants experienced denial, fear, uncertainty and projected increased professional workload regarding pedagogical management and behaviour of these children due to their professional ill-preparation coupled with the educational demands of typically developing children. Similarly, previous studies reveal that, in the inclusion of children with unique and challenging needs including those with ASD, teachers experience increased workload stress levels because of the lack of pedagogical expertise, materials, resources, facilities and services to assist them in coping with the demands and challenges of the education of these children (Lindsay et al., 2013). Seemingly, with adequate professional preparation teachers may report experiences of acceptance and confidence in successful and effective inclusion of children with ASD in mainstream classrooms.

Participants held positive attitudes and commitment to the inclusion of children with ASD in their mainstream classrooms. Participants' strong and positive attitudes towards inclusion are consistent with research which reveals that, although teachers feel professionally ill-prepared for inclusion, they are committed to it (Avramidis & Kalyva, 2007). Participants' positive attitudes towards inclusion was based on the perceived entrenchment of the philosophy in both African and Western world views and practices, particularly national and international legal, social, cultural and religious premises including human rights and social justice principles, Christianity, African Tradition Religion and Ubuntu. Similarly, previous studies reveal that teachers' conceptualisation of inclusion influences their support for it (Pantic & Florian, 2015).

Despite the initial apprehension and uncertainty about the inclusion of children with ASD in mainstream classrooms, participants finally accepted and strategized on the education of these

children, basing it on their teacher education, teaching experience, social, cultural, moral and legal obligations. Inconsistent with previous studies which revealed that professional preparation and development of teachers for inclusion is foundational in their acceptance of its practice (Barnes, 2009; Chandler-Olcott & Kluth, 2009), this study revealed that several factors, including commitment and innovation, impacts on teachers' acceptance of the inclusion of children with disabilities in their mainstream classrooms. Despite participants' strategization on teaching and learning of children with ASD in mainstream classrooms, they were exposed to regular teacher education which did not prepare them for inclusive pedagogy. Nevertheless, the effectiveness of participants' strategies on the inclusion of children with ASD in mainstream classrooms is unknown since they lacked preparation in inclusion. Previous studies reveal that teachers need preparation in inclusion to be equipped with evidence-based practices for successful inclusion of children with disabilities, including ASD, in mainstream classrooms (De Boer & Simpson, 2009; Eldar et al., 2010).

Participants confronted and strategized on communication issues including the lack of functional and verbal communication among children with ASD. Also, previous studies found that children with ASD present communication deficits which need responsive intervention for the successful inclusion of these children in mainstream school classrooms (Farrell, Alborz, Howes & Pearson, 2010). Participants used needs-based interventions for communication including pairing of gestures with speech in communication for those who lacked functional language, use of concrete language for those who often misunderstood abstract language and reinforcement of appropriate communication behaviour to address communication required to facilitate the inclusion of children with ASD in mainstream classrooms. Similarly, previous studies found that the inclusion of children with ASD in mainstream classroom requires teachers to adopt strategies that are responsive to the communication needs of these children (Lindsay et al., 2013). Thus, the use of simple augmentative communication strategies and techniques can support teachers' communication with children with children with ASD who lack functional and verbal communication.

Participants confronted and strategized on impairments of children with ASD in the social domain including deficits in social cues, responsiveness and social interactions through teaching social skills, using short social stories, provision of specific social rules, reinforcement of

positive social interactions and fostering in typically developing children understanding of their atypically developing peers. Similarly, previous studies found that social impairments interfere with the inclusion of children with ASD in mainstream classrooms (De Boer & Simpson, 2009; Natof & Romanczyk, 2009). Participants used several strategies including teaching turn taking, befriending, peer models, ball games and pair work to intervene in the deficits of children with ASD in the social domain. Similarly, previous studies established that social interventions are integral in facilitating the inclusion of children with ASD in mainstream classrooms (Leach & Duffy, 2009). Thus, teachers can entrench intervention on deficits of children with ASD in the social domain in the social-cultural contexts to support the inclusion of these children in mainstream classrooms.

Children with ASD engaged in 'self-isolation' including engagement in lonely play, not responding to their typically developing peers and attachment to the non-living world. Participants used several strategies, including the infusion of disability issues in pedagogy and the institutionalisation of collaborative culture in their classrooms, to foster in typically developing children socialisation and understanding of children with ASD. Similarly, previous studies reveal that disability awareness fosters in typically developing children positive attitudes towards their atypically developing peers (Ballard, 2012). Thus, teachers' strategies for intervention on 'self-isolation' of children with ASD, may need to be targeted at these children and their typically developing peers in order to socialise them to co-exist.

Participants confronted and intervened on several behavioural issues of children with ASD including unusual obsessions, unusual sensory experiences and repetitive use of objects which hampered the inclusion of these children in mainstream classrooms. Similarly, previous studies have found that behavioural impairments hinder the inclusion of children with ASD in mainstream classrooms (Humphrey, 2008). Participants used several behavioural interventions including reinforcement, academic modifications, environmental adaptations and structured routines in response to the needs of children with ASD to facilitate the inclusion of these children in mainstream classrooms. This finding is consistent with previous studies which reveal that responsive behavioural interventions are integral in the inclusion of children with ASD in mainstream classrooms (Barnes, 2009). Participants' needs-responsive interventions for children with ASD, despite their lack of training on the condition, suggest that teachers' attitudes and

commitment rather than specialised training are integral in influencing their intervention on behavioral challenges presented by these children. Nevertheless, the effectiveness of their behavioural interventions is unknown as they were not observed delivering services in their mainstream classrooms.

Participants revealed that they greatly depended on teacher assistants in the management of both children with and without ASD in mainstream classrooms. Participants perceived teacher assistants as knowledgeable, informed and experienced in serving children with ASD based on their daily management of these children. Thus, teacher assistants need comprehensive training and experience in order to adequately support teachers in inclusion of children with ASD in mainstream classrooms. Consistent evidence demonstrates that teacher assistants can shadow children with ASD in mainstream classrooms either at all times or part of the time (Eldar et al., 2010). In pursuance of the inclusion of children with ASD, participants were supported by the parents through the provision of fundamental information including intervention strategies which necessitated consistency between home and school management of the behaviour of these children. Previous studies also reveal that parents are integral in the inclusion of children with ASD in mainstream classrooms (Emam & Farrell, 2009; Humphrey & Lewis, 2008). Teacher-parent collaboration is therefore integral in successful and effective delivery of services to children with ASD.

Educational psychologists afforded participants psychotherapy and strategies for managing the pedagogy of children with ASD. Thus, collaborative cultures between teachers and other professionals can enhance the inclusion of children with ASD in mainstream classrooms. Previous studies reveal that specialised support services and programmes are indispensable in the inclusion of children with ASD (Hinton et al., 2008). The Schools Psychological Services and Special Needs Education Department staff provided participants with support including staff development, advice, assessment of children with ASD and advocacy for awareness of ASD among stakeholders. Previous research shows that individual and institutional capacity building supports the practice of inclusion (Avramidis & Kalyva, 2007; Ballard, 2012). The establishment of structures for delivery of specialised and other related services can support the successful and effective inclusion of children with ASD in mainstream classrooms.

Consistent with previous studies which reveal that teachers need continuous professional development to successfully practice inclusion (Florian & Spratt, 2013), participants were exposed to national, provincial and district support including professional development on the inclusion of children with disabilities in general. Participants were though in need of professional development on management and inclusion particularly of children with ASD. Continuous professional development on inclusion therefore needs to respond to the needs of teachers in serving children with disabilities including those with ASD in order to improve their delivery of services to these children in mainstream school classrooms. Similarly, previous studies found that teachers require professional development that addresses their concerns in order to be effective in improving the pedagogical experiences of both children with ASD and their typically developing counterparts (Humphrey, 2008). This could enhance their positive attitudes and confidence in teaching children with ASD and deepen and widen their understanding of ASD for effective working with assistant teachers.

Limitation

Although the foregoing discussion is in alignment with previous, multiple, independently executed, small-scale qualitative studies and strengthens their findings, the findings of the current small-scale qualitative study is not transferrable to a larger cohort of participants on the same phenomenon in different geographical settings devoid of clarification and supportive evidence. Nevertheless, the present study adds to the literature base on ASD since it provides a phenomenological perspective on teachers' experiences, issues, strategies, support systems and resources for the inclusion of children with ASD in mainstream classrooms. The current study reveals that positive attitudes, professional development and support of teachers are foundational in the inclusion of children with ASD in mainstream classrooms. Nevertheless, further research is needed detailing the experiences of other stakeholders including typically developed children, parents and school administrators.

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