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Research Article

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

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Abstract

Many autistic learners who require substantial support, including learners with co-occurring intellectual disability, attend South African LSEN (Learners with Special Education Needs) schools. However, limited research has explored educators' lived experiences of teaching autistic learners in LSEN contexts. This qualitative research study employed a phenomenological design to examine educators' experiences in LSEN schools in the North West Province, South Africa. Eight educators (seven female, one male; aged 42–62) from LSEN schools participated in individual in-depth interviews. Data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis. Educators described autism-related behaviours, including sensory sensitivities, communication challenges, and behaviours that disrupted learning, alongside persistent resource constraints and safety concerns in classrooms with complex learner profiles. Environmental factors, particularly learner-educator ratios, class composition, routine changes, and learners' home circumstances, shaped educators' capacity to provide effective support. Participants reported that increased autism-related knowledge, building rapport with learners, and drawing on personal strengths such as flexibility and problem-solving enabled more constructive classroom responses. Findings highlight the need for context-responsive training and support programmes for educators and caregivers, as well as school-level planning that takes class composition and support needs into account in LSEN settings.

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

Introduction

According to Issac et al. (2025), over the past 50 years, Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) has transformed from a narrowly defined, rare childhood condition into a widely recognised, researched, and backed lifelong disorder. It is now understood to be common and highly diverse (Issac et al., 2025). The number of children diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Conditions (ASC) increases each year (Issac et al., 2025; Neggers, 2014; Murray, 2015). The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that autism affects 0.76% of children globally, with higher incidence rates in developed countries (Zeidan et al., 2022). According to Burns et al. (2026), it is thought to affect one in every 100 children globally. Although a consensus has not been reached on the factors contributing to the rise in ASC prevalence amongst children, possible contributing factors include expanded diagnostic criteria, improved screening measures, greater ASD awareness, or a genuine rise in the prevalence of ASD (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2022; Neggers, 2014).

According to APA (2022), the diagnostic conditions for ASD are described as deficits in social communication and interaction, such as diminished expression of interest and affect, and poor non-verbal communication. Furthermore, individuals with ASD may experience repetitive behaviour patterns and difficulty in forming relationships with others (APA, 2022). Moreover, these ASD conditions cause significant impairment in the child's day-to-day functioning (APA, 2022). ASD severity is organised into three groups, which are dependent on the amount of support that is required (APA, 2022). The three groups are categorised as 'requiring support', 'requiring substantial support', and 'requiring very substantial support' (APA, 2022). Furthermore, intellectual disabilities are prevalent in children with ASD (APA, 2022). Therefore, many learners with ASD in South Africa attend LSEN schools, which offer extensive education programmes to learners who need high levels of support (Pillay et al., 2022a; Pillay et al., 2022b).

South African Context

Large-scale data mostly originates from localised school-based studies in the Western Cape Province of South Africa. According to Pillay et al. (2022b), 0.1% of the childhood population in the Western Cape Province of South Africa has been diagnosed with ASD. Unfortunately, national research on the prevalence of ASD among South African children is lacking and can be partly attributed to the lack of assessments standardised for the South African population (Chambers et al., 2016; Pillay et al., 2022b). Although trained clinicians have access to the Autism Diagnostic Observation Scales-2 (ADOS-2), difficulties have been experienced in accommodating language variations in the South African context (Chambers et al., 2016; Smith et al., 2016). However, with less than 1% of ASD research taking place in Africa, the experiences of educators working with learners with ASD in LSEN schools in the South African context are under-researched (Franz et al., 2017; Pillay et al., 2022b).

Learners with ASD often present with challenging behaviour, which can lead to disruptions in the classroom, creating challenges for educators (Nicholls et al., 2020; Sumbane et al., 2023). These behaviours range from destructive or self-injuring behaviour, stereotyped or repetitive motor mannerisms, inflexibility, ritualised patterns, extreme reactions to stimuli, and aggression (APA, 2013; Nicholls et al., 2020). The effects of these disruptions on both educators and classmates are a topic yet to be fully explored in the South African context. Furthermore, Pillay et al. (2022a) suggested that to meet the diverse and growing educational needs of learners with ASD, further research on the experiences of various stakeholders, including educators, needs to be conducted. Listening to educators directly identifies systemic gaps, such as the need for targeted

training, managing challenging behaviours, and resource allocation, allowing schools to implement practical, long-term support systems.

Problem Statement

Two studies focusing on educator experiences in the Limpopo and KwaZulu-Natal Provinces have been conducted (Sumbane et al., 2023; Weber, 2015). However, LSEN schools accommodate a variety of learners requiring varying degrees of support, which creates a challenge for educators in LSEN schools (Pillay et al., 2022a; Sumbane et al., 2023). Furthermore, no research has been undertaken to explore the experiences of educators in LSEN schools in the North West Province of South Africa. Pillay et al. (2022a) found that to facilitate the inclusive education of learners with ASD, it is important to understand the views of various role players in multiple contexts. Therefore, the goal of this qualitative research study was to focus on the experiences of educators teaching learners with ASD in LSEN schools in the North West Province, South Africa.

Research Question

The research question guiding the qualitative research study was: *What are the experiences of educators teaching learners with ASD in North West Province (South Africa) LSEN schools?*

Methods

Approach and Design

Scholars, researchers, and practitioners across various fields of study have mutually come to recognise and prioritise the research process (De Klerk et al., 2023). Therefore, the following approach and design was identified as the most suitable to answer the research question identified. 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 (Neubauer et al., 2019). Therefore, the specific phenomenon was to explore, identify and describe the lived experiences of educators working with learners with ASD in LSEN schools (North West Province, South Africa).

Sample and Procedure

The target population consisted of educators employed at LSEN schools situated in the North West Province, South Africa. Educators willing to participate had to speak English or Afrikaans, have at least one year's experience, and have worked with an ASD learner in the last five years. Eight educators (seven females, one male) at five LSEN schools were purposively selected, with their demographic information available in Table 1. Principals of the schools acted as gatekeepers and informed the staff about the research study. The contact details of the independent person were displayed on notice boards at schools, and individuals willing to participate had to provide written and verbal informed consent.

According to Khumalo and De Klerk (2018), responsible and ethical knowledge production must be prioritised in social science research. Therefore, 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. Participation was voluntary and withdrawal from the research study was allowed prior to the data analysis phase.

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	Setswana	10	10	16
P7	49	Female	Black	Sesotho	16	2	1
P8	59	Female	Black	Setswana	14	9	15

Data Collection

A *demographic questionnaire* was completed which included information on language, gender, age, ethnicity, overall years of teaching experience, years of teaching experience in a LSEN school context, and the number of learners with ASD taught by the educator. Furthermore, individual *in-depth interviews* were conducted to explore participants' experiences, perceptions, and opinions regarding the phenomena being researched. The first question focused on the educator's experience teaching learners with ASD in the LSEN context, while the second question focused on the teaching environment and its role regarding educator experiences. Lastly, *field notes* were made throughout the data collection process to ensure researcher objectivity and to identify possible biases (Phillippi & Lauderdale, 2018).

Data Analysis

The audio-recorded in-depth interviews were transcribed verbatim and underwent a six-step process of thematic analysis as described by Braun and Clarke (2006) to identify themes related to the educators' experiences working with learners with ASD. During the first step, the researcher familiarised themselves with the data through multiple readings of the transcriptions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Secondly, initial codes were generated from the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The third step consisted of clustering similar codes to develop themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Fourthly, themes were refined and reviewed and included in a thematic map (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In the fifth step, the themes were defined and named (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Lastly, the themes were explained and substantiated with examples from the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). 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.

Findings

Bavdekar (2015, as cited by De Klerk et al., 2023) highlights the importance that the findings of a research study should aim to answer the research question which is stated at the beginning of a research study. The following themes emerged from the data analysis (see Table 2) in answering the research question.

Table 2

Themes Regarding Educators' Experiences Working with Learners on the Autism Spectrum in LSEN Schools (North West Province, South Africa)

Theme	Theme Name
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 encountered the following challenging behaviours displayed by learners with ASD during class: 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 general disruptive behaviour. 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. Furthermore, educators expressed that most learners with ASD have trouble with expressive language and communication and sometimes engage in echolalia, repeating words or phrases spoken by someone else. One educator stated the following: *"He will make sounds because the problem is, he cannot express himself, because he cannot talk"* (P8, age 59, female).

Educators also noticed adverse reactions from learners with ASD when they were overwhelmed by external stimuli, which ranged from loud sounds, clothing, or bright light. Moreover, some ASD learners seem to be hypersensitive to specific external stimuli. Concern about learners' safety is important 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 themselves with scissors. One educator 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"* (P3, age 48, female). Another explained: *"[...] at the jungle gym. They do not always realise. He will jump off, right"* (P4, age 54, female).

Sometimes the learners would also hurt themselves or others when they feel overwhelmed or upset; some tend to become aggressive. An educator shared her experience: *"[...] he would grab me by the arm, then he would bite me, but he has not hurt me yet"* (P3, age 48, female). 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 [...] he struck himself hard on the chest with the fists" (P5, age 60, female). Educators reported a range of different behaviours that learners with ASD display in class. Although some behaviours seem to challenge both the educators and other learners, educators also use these behaviours to determine if a learner with ASD is upset and if an adjustment to the learning environment is needed.

Theme 2: Education and Home Environmental Factors

There are several factors that generally have a negative impact on the experience educators have with learners with ASD. Firstly, all the educators mentioned that the number of learners in one class plays a crucial role in the educator being able to manage the class effectively. Educators explain that learners in LSEN require high levels of support, and therefore educators find it difficult to provide learners, including learners with ASD, the attention they require.

According to the educator descriptions of their classrooms, the average LSEN classroom consists of one educator, one class assistant, and between twelve to seventeen learners. 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, age 48, female). 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, age 42, female), 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, age 62, male).

With COVID-19 regulations (at the time this qualitative research study was conducted) affecting the number of learners allowed in a class, many educators found smaller classes more effective. An educator 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, age 48, female). Furthermore, the composition of a class is an essential factor to be considered when learners are placed in LSEN schools: *"A child must; I think an autistic child must be in a very small group"* (P3, age 48, female).

A third factor to consider is any changes in routine or environment. Educators noted that the learners with ASD have frequent behavioural changes and tend to be easily upset by changes in the environment or routine: *"They do not like it when strangers come into the class [...] They become upset"* (P4, age 54, female) and *"[...] 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, age 54, female).

Finally, the learner's domestic circumstances and socioeconomic level have a significant impact on educators' experiences with learners. Educators found that learners present with disruptive behaviour only to realize that underlying causes such as hunger, domestic abuse, or a change in the home environment were to blame. Therefore, attending to learners' basic needs is important before any learning can occur. Educators 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, age 42, female) and *"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, age 60, female).

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

Some educators expressed an openness to learn: *"You know, you are never too old to learn"* (P5, age 60, female) and *"Yes, a teacher is a lifelong learner"* (P6, age 49, female). Educators emphasised the importance of understanding and communicating with the learner to be able to teach. What these participants had in common was an eagerness to learn more about ASD, attend courses, and learn from other educators with more experience: *"We encourage each other and give support through workshops so that we can learn"* (P8, age 59, female).

They also expressed how their perspectives of teaching learners with ASD improved after they learned more about ASD as they felt overwhelmed and exhausted prior to learning more about ASD. However, after learning how to manage and effectively work with a learner with ASD, most participants reported a change in perspective and even experiencing joy when dealing with a child on the spectrum: *"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, age 49, female) 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, age 48, female). Therefore, knowledge about ASD has a direct impact on educators' experiences with learners on the spectrum. Furthermore, educators expressed that knowledge regarding ASD should also be shared with parents and other learners. For example, one educator found it helpful to explain to other learners not to take it personally when a learner with ASD did 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: *"[...] 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, age 60, female). Therefore, openness to learn and to share knowledge is the key to ensure the best interest of learners with ASD.

Theme 4: Know the Learner to Teach the Learner

Educators emphasised the uniqueness of learners with ASD as each has their own interests, mannerisms, comforts and triggers. Educators found that they achieve much more with the learner if they establish rapport and are attuned to their specific needs, dislikes, and interests. Furthermore, triggers can also be avoided if one knows what generally upsets a specific learner: *"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 [...] positive trigger? Something that calms him down. [...] Then you can try to [...] manipulate yourself and your whole environment to avoid those triggers"* (P2, age 62, male). Others added: *"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, age 49, female) and *"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, age 49, female).

The educators emphasised having a special bond with the learner, which takes time and effort to establish, but holds many benefits for the learner: *"You will not achieve anything if you do not have a connection with the children"* (P1, age 42, female).

Furthermore, educators 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: *"You understand them more. You are right there with him... Yes, understanding, knowing, understanding more information about this learner, you can understand them better"* (P8, age 59, female).

Theme 5: Applying Personal Strengths

Working with ASD learners requires 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 such as adaptability, flexibility, and the ability to solve problems. As an participant educator mentioned: *"It keeps it exciting, because you, you know, as a teacher you must be able to think on your feet [...] 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"* (P1, age 42, female). 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, age 42, female).

Furthermore, educators hold the belief that learners with ASD can achieve something, and therefore, educators must keep trying and work hard to see progress. Moreover, educators have experienced learners accomplishing achievements that the educators at times thought were out of reach. Educators are hopeful for learners with ASD and use their drive and perseverance to encourage these learners: *"We will not just leave him. And that which does not work today, I must try again until it works or I must think of something else"* (P3, age 48, female) 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, age 49, female).

Patience in educators is important as it can be challenging to work with ASD learners: *"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, age 54, female), and *"The effort must go hand in glove with patience"* (P7, age 49, female).

Lastly, educators who have optimal experiences with ASD learners can create a safe space for the learner, value trust, and always act responsibly: *"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, age 42, female).

Theme 6: Implementing Useful Strategies

The educators agreed on some fundamental strategies to manage their diverse classrooms to ensure all learners have the best experience possible while also creating the ideal learning environment. 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, age 54, female), *"But I like it that there are no bells, I think it helps a lot and that the children have such a structure"* (P3, age 48, female), *"Some educators, they have class and timetables, but mine is a routine, it is a daily program"* (P6, age 49, female).

Furthermore, educators must provide the necessary support, attention, and motivation to learners. Educators often experience learners with ASD struggling with the basic skills necessary for everyday tasks, such as using the toilet or feeding themselves. Challenging the learner to practice these skills, while still providing the necessary support and meeting the learner on their comfort level is vital. 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. Educators reported that many learners with ASD need continuous encouragement and assistance to perform a small task which demands a lot of the educator's attention: *"So, most of the time, I have to pull him in, come and let us do this"* (P7, age 49, female) 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, age 48, female).

Furthermore, educators realised that they must assist some learners with ASD with necessary life skills, such as feeding and personal hygiene, first before they can move on to scholastic activities. Therefore, educators strive to help learners become less dependent by challenging them every day to practice these skills. 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 as small wins encourage them to try something else. Other strategies used by educators to elicit positive reactions from the learners and to encourage them is by creating positive competition in the group and using learner-to-learner instruction for some tasks. One educator explained: *"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, age 42, female).

Differentiation is another strategy used by educators to meet learners on their level while also helping 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 [...] otherwise, you lose control of the class and then it becomes chaotic"* (P1, age 42, female).

Although differentiation is an effective strategy, educators 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, age 42, female). Furthermore, daily repetition of activities leads to progress with learners with ASD: *"And with every day, every day's repetition, he starts doing something differently"* (P3, age 48, female) 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 [...] I would, for example, hear 'Jesus loves me'. I do the same thing every day"* (P4, age 54, female).

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. Moreover, they would 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 educators 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” (P1, age 42, female) and “Then I rub his back, and you can see he becomes calmer” (P4, age 54, female).

Discussion

The experiences of educators teaching learners with ASD in LSEN schools (North West Province, South Africa) 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 DSM-5-TR (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th ed., text rev.; APA, 2022). Learners with ASD require varying levels of support. They struggle with communication and social-emotional reciprocity and have difficulty adjusting their behaviour to changes in their environment (APA, 2022; Berg et al., 2026).

Furthermore, educators experienced that learners with ASD often displayed stereotyped and repetitive motor movements, speech, or object use (APA, 2022). Moreover, some learners with ASD 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 (APA, 2022). Educators experienced that stereotyped and repetitive behaviour often interfered with classwork. Furthermore, educators found that they could delay repetitive behaviours by encouraging the learner to complete a task before allowing time for repetitive behaviours; almost using the repetitive behaviours as a reward after the learner participated in classwork.

Educators expressed using their personal strengths and 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. The 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, educators can only manipulate the class environment if they have invested the 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). Therefore, by lessening the opportunities from which a learner with ASD feels 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 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. Furthermore, there is a high demand for LSEN schools as there are often long waiting lists of children waiting for admission into various LSEN schools (Pillay et al., 2022b). Therefore, the learner-educator ratio can be addressed by providing more LSEN schools (Sumbane et al., 2021).

Moreover, awareness and knowledge about ASD is crucial to provide the necessary care and support to learners, their parents, and caretakers. Therefore, educators working with learners on the autism spectrum should be encouraged and funded to attend workshops about ASD and share their knowledge and experiences with other educators by means of in-service training (Pillay et al., 2022a). By sharing knowledge and helpful strategies with inexperienced educators, educator perspectives about learners with ASD might be more positive, and educators might find it easier to adjust and attend to the learners' needs.

Limitations

A small, non-representative sample was used and therefore generalisation to the broader population of educators employed at LSEN schools is not possible. Furthermore, all educators included in the research study came from SID (Severe Intellectual Disability) schools, specifically adapted for learners with severe intellectual disabilities and learners requiring high levels of support. Furthermore, at the time of data collection, COVID-19 regulations created difficulties in including educators from more schools to participate.

Conclusion

According to Kelly (2025), research has revealed themes in how educators perceive learners with ASD and how efficient these educators believe they would be in educating learners with ASD. The themes across research include educators perceiving they do not have the resources or training to effectively teach learners with ASD, having less belief in learners with ASD possessing the capabilities to learn and be successful in school, and holding negatively skewed attitudes toward learners with ASD (Kelly, 2025).

The aim of this qualitative research study was to explore, 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 their lived experiences while working with learners with ASD. The themes that emerged from the data collected represent different facets of the complexities of ASD and the role educators play in educating learners. Behaviours of learners with ASD as experienced by their educators emerged, together with educators' willingness to understand learners with ASD and to gain more knowledge. 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.

Conflict of Interest

The authors of this article declare that there are no activities, responsibilities, or services in connection with this work that pose as sources of conflict capable of compromising integrity.

Author Contributions

The authors of this work state that the functions of co-authorship were duly facilitated by all members.

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