The Community's Disposition Towards a Child with Autism Spectrum Disorder: A Case Study

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Abstract

The primary objective of this case study was to explore the experiences, coping mechanisms and learned insights of the community towards a child with an autism spectrum disorder. To collect the necessary data, there were seven significant individuals in the lives of a child who participated in the study. These participants were utilized purposively and were taken into consideration. Data gathered through in-depth interviews were coded and presented through thematic analysis. Results revealed that the participants experienced challenging behavior, communication problems and impaired social interactions, and needed prioritized attention towards a child with autism spectrum disorder. The community employed various coping mechanisms, including positive reinforcements, communication aids, and ensured foremost consideration. The participants learned to accommodate autistic differences, develop acceptance and a positive outlook, and continue to provide a consistent support system to the ASD child. The researchers recommend having a structured support system, providing varied resources and tools, enhancing community awareness and education, supporting long-term development; and conducting further research on this study.

Keywords: Autism Spectrum Disorder, Case Study, Community's Disposition, Experiences

1. Introduction

Autism spectrum disorder is a neurological and developmental disorder that has several impairments. These include difficulty in interacting with others, communicating, learning, and behaving (National Institute of Mental Health, 2024). ASD learners vary their level of challenges in terms of social interaction and communication. They have also atypical patterns of activities and behaviors, including transitioning from one activity to the next, focusing on details, and unusual reactions to sensations. The level of support and societal attitudes from the stakeholders determine the quality of life these individuals may have (World Health Organization, 2023).

In the United Kingdom, the community's disposition towards autistic individuals is negative. Only 43% of ASD individuals feel that they are accepted in society, whereas 48% are oftentimes accepted (Keating, et al., 2021). In Jordan, children with autism spectrum disorder who are integrated into regular schools receive an average level of acceptance from their family, school, and society. This suggests that the community sometimes views these learners as a problem, excluded, or often misunderstood (Al-Shenikat, 2022). Even in South Africa, ASD children experience cultural prejudices. Some Africans claim that autism spectrum

disorder is an illness, brought about by the ancestors as a form of punishment for the family's wrongdoings or the child's misbehavior. Others believed that this situation was linked to supernatural causes or external supernatural forces. 60% of the South African population utilized traditional medicine and consultations with traditional healers to better understand the problem (Phetoe, et al., 2023).

Furthermore, in the Philippines, parents confirmed that the family's state of equilibrium is affected by having a child with an autism spectrum disorder. Work-life balance is somewhat difficult. Hence, they face a lot of challenges, making them vulnerable to experiencing higher levels of stress and dealing with more complex situations (Roxas, et al., 2022).

The pressing concerns mentioned above have caught the researchers' attention. The negative perspective and the limited social acceptance of learners with autism spectrum disorder are alarming. Nevertheless, there are few current studies published in this field. In today's era where inclusivity has been fully implemented, the researchers hope to fill this gap by providing adequate information on the community's disposition towards the child with ASD, making this person a purposeful and productive individual and letting her participate in a constantly evolving society.

1.1. Research Objectives

This study aimed to explore the community's disposition towards a child who has an autism spectrum disorder. Specifically, this study sought to answer the following questions:

1. What are the lived experiences of the community towards a child with autism spectrum disorder?
2. How do they cope with their difficulties towards her?
3. How do the experiences of the participants shape their attitude and commitment to continue helping the ASD child?

1.2. Theoretical Lens

This study is anchored on Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1977), which posits that human development is shaped by multiple interconnected environmental systems. This theory emphasizes the significance of comprehending how different systems interact with one another and their long-term impact on individuals. Bronfenbrenner proposed that a child's environment is made up of multiple interconnected layers, with each layer surrounding and encompassing the one within. These five interconnected systems; microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem are organized according to the level of impact on a child's development and are arranged from close, immediate settings to a larger societal structure. Each layer represents a unique layer of environmental influence on a learner's individual growth and behavior. Hence, this theory provides a framework to understand how each layer of a child's environment can shape the community's attitudes and behaviors toward children with ASD, highlighting the importance of multi-level support and understanding.

Bronfenbrenner's innermost layer, the microsystem, concerns the persons within close contact with the individual daily. It includes the members of her family, friends, classmates, and teachers. Mutual interaction exists between can affect and influence the individual's development and behavior. The child's confidence and social skills will be determined by the level of support and kind of relationship the involved persons give.

When these individuals learn about autism spectrum disorder, it may provide appropriate understanding and an inclusive environment, directly impacting the child's experiences.

The second level, the mesosystem, involves the interaction and connections between different microsystems, like the existing relationship between the child's family and her school. This level is crucial as open communication between parents and teachers can improve the child's support at school, influencing the child's development. A positive and productive collaboration promotes unity and encourages a supportive attitude toward the child.

The third level, the exosystem, encompasses the child's environment including the community, local government, family friends, and the media. Though it may indirectly affect the child's development, still, it still shapes the child's well-being and support system for the policies crafted and the resources provided. They should formulate policies for ASD awareness, fostering the community's positive outlook towards them. Further, resources provided such as support groups and specialized programs aid in the child's community inclusion and integration.

The fourth level, the macrosystem, includes the broader society of the individual. This encompasses the values, social norms, customs, traditions, ideologies, and beliefs that shape the individual's development and influence all systems in Bronfenbrenner's model. When the child is understood, supported, and valued in this system, the child is more likely to have a positive outlook receiving the resources they need to thrive.

The fifth and final level, the chronosystem, involves the child's changes and life transitions. It emphasizes the importance of time in a child's growth. The increased awareness and warm acceptance of the community support the children with ASD to grow, learn, and integrate as they progress through different stages of life.

2. Methods

2.1 Research Design

This study utilized a case study qualitative research design. Case study qualitative research involves an in-depth investigation of a phenomenon within its real-world context. It provides researchers with the opportunity to acquire an in-depth understanding of intricate details knowledge about a specific real-world subject (Hecker & Kalpokas, 2024, McCombes, 2023). In this study, the single case exploration allows the researchers to investigate the lived experiences, coping mechanisms, and learned insights of the community towards the child with autism spectrum disorder.

2.2 Participant Sampling

The participants of this study consisted of seven individuals. These are the parents, grandparents, sibling, cousin, teacher, and a neighbor of the child with autism spectrum disorder. Purposive sampling was utilized, which deliberately selects the participants based on their knowledge, relevance, or expertise concerning the research topic. The participants are chosen based on predefined criteria that align with the purpose of the study (Hassan, 2024). In this study, these significant individuals in the lives of the child were purposively chosen because they have close and direct contact with the child.

2.3 Ethical Considerations

This study adhered to the ethical standards ensuring that the participants voluntarily participated the study and signed the informed consent. The participant's name was coded to ensure anonymity. Further, data

gathered were securely stored in a safe file and discarded immediately thereafter. Findings were also communicated properly while maintaining the confidentiality of the study.

3. Results and Discussion

Based on the data gathered, most of the participants shared the same experiences with their disposition towards a child with an autism spectrum disorder. Sample of the original and translated statements are presented.
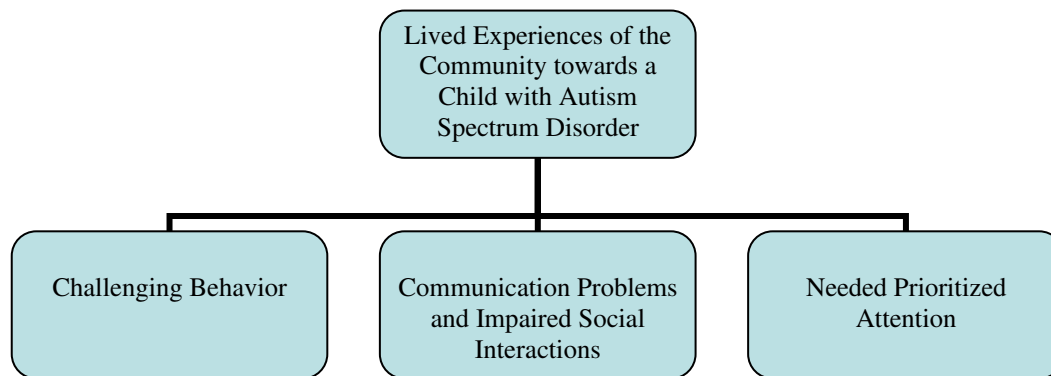
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┌─────────────────────────┐
│  Lived Experiences of the│
│  Community towards a     │
│  Child with Autism       │
│  Spectrum Disorder       │
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| Challenging Behavior | Communication Problems and Impaired Social Interactions | Needed Prioritized Attention |

Figure 1: Community's Lived Experiences towards a Child with ASD

3.1 Challenging Behavior. Most of the participants replied that they experienced challenging behavior in dealing with the autistic child. These difficulties have been manifested in various ways that would sometimes disrupt or hinder learning and affect people. One participant confirmed that:

"She is frequently in tantrums. Sometimes, it cannot be contained in class" (IDI_P5)

Similarly, another participant expressed that:

"In our house, she usually becomes upset when one activity is switched from one
to another. She is used to the routinary activities" (IDI_P3)

According to the study by Edelson (2022), ASD individuals exhibit multiple challenging behaviors. Based on the survey conducted on 2,327 persons on the autism spectrum, it was found out that more than 40% engaged in both aggression and self-injurious behavior. They are difficult to manage when their needs are not being met.

3.2 Communication Problems and Impaired Social Interactions. Another evident experience of the community towards a child with autism spectrum disorder is the problem with communication and social

interactions. The child displays challenges in the use of language and understanding with everybody during a conversation. One of the participants expressed:

> "Communication is a challenge for her to express her feelings. She mostly answered in parroting words" (IDI_P2)

It is supported by the other participant who stated:

> "It's hard to know what she wants sometimes. She is difficult to handle during our conversation" (IDI_P4)

Impaired social communication [and interaction] is a characteristic of children with ASD (Fuller & Kaiser, 2020). Further, the National Institute on Deafness and Communication Disorders (2020) argued that autistic children may not be able to communicate using speech or language and some may have very limited speaking skills. Most of them have problems with the meaning and rhythm of words and sentences. With these, they possess difficulty interacting with others, especially people of their age.

3.3 Needed Prioritized Attention. Another experience shared by the participants is the need for immediate attention towards a child with autism spectrum disorder. There is a need to understand and address her unique needs, challenges, and strengths to avoid unnecessary happenings to occur. It is conformed with the participant:

> "Yes, I am very attentive to her needs." (IDI_P7)

Also, another participant uttered:

> "With my other child, I have to prioritize her. I need to be there for her always." (IDI_P3)

This experience is agreeable to the study of Banire, et al. (2023) who claimed that detecting the attention of children with ASD is of paramount importance for desired learning outcomes. Hollander (2023) added that the attention-seeking behavior of these individuals is a way for them to communicate their needs, seek social connections, or regulate sensory experiences. Thus, immediate action must be taken.

The themes that emerged such as challenging behavior, communication problems and impaired social interactions, and needs for prioritized attention should be taken into consideration to support individuals with autism spectrum disorder continuously. Knowing and understanding the community's experiences is essential for providing the child with comprehensive aid and reinforcement. Hence, the multiple environments the child has been exposed to contribute to her holistic development.
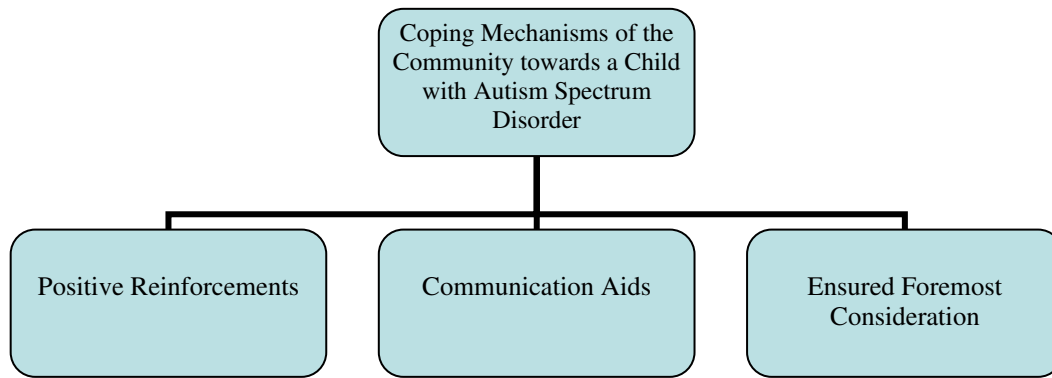
Figure 2: Community's Coping Mechanisms towards a Child with Autism Spectrum Disorder

Figure 2 presents the coping mechanisms of the community towards a child with autism spectrum disorder. The themes and thematic analysis were formulated based on the conducted in-depth interviews with the participants involved, such as:

3.4 Positive Reinforcements. One of the coping strategies the participants performed was giving of reward after exemplifying the desired behavior. One participant confirmed:

> "I give her educational toys and/or what she likes if she performs well in class."
> (IDI_P5)

Another participant positively stated that:

> "We praised and congratulated her for doing good. We often bring her to public
> places like the mall for her to enjoy." (IDI_P2)

This result aligns with the study conducted by Malaco, et al. (2020) who claimed that the utilization of positive reinforcement can help increase the level of social skills of children with ASD. Further, this motivates the children to behave well and enhances their confidence in working in teams, making friends, and participating in class or in doing household chores. It can have a long-standing effect on the child for she knows what is expected of her to do.

3.5 Communication Aids. Another strategy the participants involved themselves in is engaging in communication tools or devices. The provision of this allows the child to develop sufficient social communication skills. It is confirmed by one of the participants stated:

> "I simply show pictures to communicate with her. She loves colorful pictures.
> With that, we understand each other." (IDI_P3)

It is supported by the other participant:

> "Our way of bonding makes it fruitful by incorporating gestures and actions. I observed that she doesn't talk, so I used sign language at the same time." (IDI_P6)

According to Mang-ombe & Wairungu (2021), the utilization of communication aids helps address the language and interaction problems of ASD children. This is one of the evidence-based strategies, which also include AAC, manual signing, pantomime intervention, eye gaze intervention, picture exchange communication, and facilitated communication. The understanding exists between individuals through the help of these strategies.

Moreover, Our World and Autism (2023) claimed that one of the effective methods to solve the communication barrier is to simplify the language by using clear, concise sentences, and avoid open-ended queries that can overwhelm them. The utilization of visual aids forges a path to communication breakthroughs. Hence, utilizing images or icons to answer questions or convey messages will often lead to positive interactions and diminish the likelihood of misunderstandings. The nonverbal cues the children used like pointing or eye gaze confirm the value of their attempts at interaction and support verbal and nonverbal communication in autism.

3.6 Ensured Foremost Consideration. One salient strategy the participants employ is the prioritization of the child with autism spectrum disorder in various settings. She has encountered unique challenges in all aspects of her life hence, she should be given with utmost concern. This is noticeable in the statement of one of the participants:

> "If I do sit with my sister for a long period, I make sure she is entertained so that she doesn't get bored." (IDI_P1)

Similarly, another participant stated:

> "I am very attentive to her needs. I am also more thoughtful of her essentials, especially that she is an adolescent now." (IDI_P2)

Leosala's study (2023) argued that it is necessary to meet the needs of the autistic child by first establishing support within the home. As these individuals possess unique strengths and needs, so as parents and the community should find ways to provide full-time support to them.

The mentioned coping strategies are essential in understanding the challenges faced by a child with autism spectrum disorder. These are crucial to create a supportive, inclusive, and effective learning environment. Also, this is the best way to support and develop the child's holistic development.
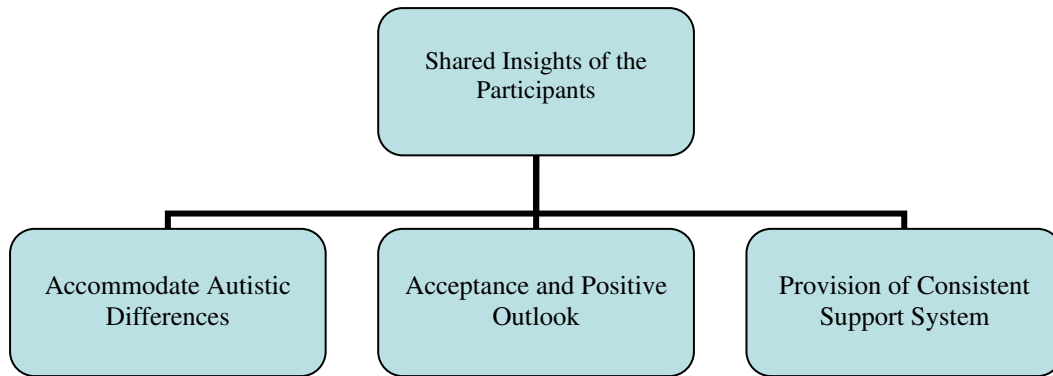
Figure 3: Shared Insights of the Participants

Figure 3 above shows the three emerging themes generated from the shared insights that were dominant in the participants' responses:

3.7 Accommodate Autistic Differences. Almost all the participants expressed the same answers to the questions asked. As to what participants experienced, they were ready to embrace and provide equity and accessibility to the ASD child. This is noticeable in the statement of one participant:

> "I just bring or give the things she likes and essentials she needs." (IDI_P1)

Positively, one participant exclaimed:

> "Yes, in handling them patiently and with care, it helps me become a more effective SNED teacher. I attend to her/their needs in my class." (IDI_P5)

This learned insight is aligned with the results of Thayer, et al. (2024) study which presented that the community members showed accommodating attitudes towards children with ASD. This can be shown through their behavior of inclusive programming, sensory-trained staff, listening to the voices of people with autism, and helping the individual reach their goals.

3.8 Acceptance and Positive Outlook. Another insight shared by the participants is the acknowledgment and full embrace of the ASD child's reality as who and what they are without making unnecessary judgments. Also, they look at the potentials and strengths of these individuals. It can be observed with the participant's statement:

> *"Yes, I learned to be adaptive and acknowledge her, as my daughter with ASD."* (IDI_P2)

It can also be seen in the statement of the other participant:

> "I wholeheartedly accept her as my sibling. We are sisters. I love her and I know she can be of her best despite her situation now." (IDI_P6)

For Shilubane and Mazibuko (2020), the acceptance of children with ASD would help them better deal with these children's conditions. Accordingly, Yaacob, et al. (2022) claimed that parent's acceptance of the child's condition would impact the holistic development of a child. Their acceptance and positivity would transfer the same vibes and recognition of the community with the child's situation. They would become resilient to accept the condition and actively pursue solutions to the problems, look positively beyond the challenges they are facing, and focus on making the best of the options available to them.

3.9 Provision of Consistent Support System. One insight shared by the participants is the provision of their continued assistance, guidance, and resources to the ASD child. It can be seen in the participant's statement:

> "Yes, I am very attentive to her needs. I support my granddaughter all the time." (IDI_P4)

Consequently, it is supported by the other participant:

> "LR no longer exhibits frequent tantrums so we cope by just being there to accompany them." (IDI_P3)

This shared insight aligns with the study of Shilubane and Mazibuko (2020) who argued that providing a strong support system to the child helps in relieving stress. The community surrounding the child including the family, friends, teachers, and stakeholders are effective means of coping with difficulties. Reliable support systems are critical in reducing the adverse psychological effects that might occur in caring for a child with ASD.

The emerged themes mentioned on the shared insights of the participants encourage collaboration, enhance problem-solving, and foster a deeper understanding of the child with autism spectrum disorder. When the community comes together and works hand-in-hand, they can provide and create stronger support for the child in all aspects of her development.

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

This case study highlights the community's disposition towards a child with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). The experiences, coping mechanisms, and learned insights were the questions answered in this study. The findings reveal that the community, such as the parents, sibling, cousin, neighbor, teacher, and grandparents encountered various experiences with the child. The challenging behavior, communication barrier and impaired social interaction, as well as the need for foremost consideration, emerged during the interviews. Despite these difficulties, the community managed to utilize coping mechanisms such as giving positive reinforcements, communication aids, and provision of foremost consideration. Through these efforts, they learned to accommodate autistic differences, foster acceptance and have a positive outlook, and keep up

the giving of a consistent support system. These shared insights increase the community's aid towards the holistic development of a child and empower her to become a purposeful and productive member of society.

With the cited conclusion, it is recommended that a) There should be a structured support system provided; b) A provision of varied resources and tools; c) Enhance the community's awareness and education towards ASD children; d) Support long-term development in all stages of child's life; and e) Conduct further research that would expand the context and participants involved.

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