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Parental Participation in Supporting the Development of Communication Skills in Autistic Children

Abstract

Parental participation, when conducted appropriately, can support the development of communication skills in autistic children within various learning environments. Paquette and Ryan (2001) state that the microsystem of a child can play a major role in impacting the development of the child as family, community and school structures directly expose the child to learning situations.

The aim of this research is to understand the nature, extent and impact of the parents' demographics on parental participation in supporting the development of communication skills in autistic children.

Three special-needs schools within the King Cetshwayo District, KwaZulu-Natal, participated in this research.

This research used a mix of qualitative and quantitative approaches and a phenomenological design when dealing with the social, emotional and educational implications of autistic children for the role and level of participation parents have in their children's development of communication skills at school and home.

It was noted that educators favoured sensory-enhancing activities, sign language (which is taught to all learners), and picture-exchange methods to develop communication skills in learners. These techniques require practice and consistent use in different contexts. Parents experienced difficulties scheduling sufficient time due to work situations.

Bissoli (2014) found that children's communication skills are influenced by the people around them. The need for more parental engagement in Autism Spectrum Disorder education and training will aid in enhancing the development of skills in children.

Keywords: Parental Participation, Autism Spectrum Disorder, Education, Development of Communication Skills, Special Needs Awareness.

Introduction

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a spectral disorder that affects an individual's ability to communicate, interact with and relate to others. It affects not only an individual, but the entire family unit. Owing to the nature of this disorder, communication between adults and autistic children can become challenging. Fewster and Gurayah (2015) state that ASD is one of the most stressful childhood development

disabilities for parents to cope with. The stress on the family can also be felt by the autistic child, both at home and in other common social environments such as school.

The education of the autistic child varies and requires specialised teaching strategies to meet his/her educational needs, resulting in learning being expanded from the confines of the classroom into the other structures within the child's microsystem, like the home. Kaminsky

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and Dewey (2001) noted that having positive family relationships can be a crucial foundation of social growth and development of a positive self-image. Autistic children require special education in teaching them communication skills, among others. The call for more inclusive schools is pronounced, and educational institutions are under pressure to respond to the call for inclusive education. McConachie and Diggle (2005) state that the greater the level of parental involvement the more opportunities autistic children have in engaging in different learning situations. Many educators were said to share a similar experience. They found learners progressed better in skills development and academic achievement when there was active parental participation, as noted by Munje and Mncube (2018).

Theoretical Framework

Social Learning Theory

Social learning theory (SLT), as conceptualised by Bandura (1971), states that learning within a child takes place through observation followed by imitation, and then an implementation of observed and imitated skill which he calls modelling. The key concept in SLT is that learning and learning of new behaviours are a continuous “back and forth” interaction between cognitive and environmental influences. SLT outlines the impact stimulation within a child’s environment can have on the learning of new knowledge and behaviours. Consistency in positive reinforcements can

increase the learning of new behaviours and knowledge (Bandura, 1971). Social learning in and around education requires teacher participation in activities as much as it requires learner participation. As noted by Kumpulainen and Wray (2002), there needs to be interaction between learner-educator, learner-learner, learner-parent and parent-educator. Traditionally the educator-learner interaction was controlled by the educator, but Kumpulainen and Wray (2002) emphasise new research showing a balance in interaction is required for successful learning to take place. Hence the need to emphasise greater parental participation. SLT applied to the education of autistic children provides the perspective of educating children through the promotion of social interaction between parent and child, educator and child and parent and educator. This interaction is important to the process of learning as the child is the consistent element in the interaction.

Two-way Communication Theory

The two-way communication model by Mersham and Skinner (1999) depicts the process of communication and then the development of communication. Figure 1 graphically displays individuals switching roles from being “the communicator” and “the recipient”. For communication to be successful, both individuals participate in interpersonal communication achieved through the equal exchange of information.



Figure 1.

Model Communication Process

The two-way communication theory is modelled around the bidirectional communication process. The model has a message sender and a message receiver. It elaborates how a message is sent by a sender and received by a receiver. The process is reversed when the receiver responds to the sender, and takes on the role of the sender. There are factors that act as “noise” (barriers) that can interrupt the communication process.

In the same way, parents need to have adequate tools to communicate with their children, so that their children can understand and reciprocate in response. First and foremost, there needs to be a mutual medium of communication. Autism Spectrum Disorder uniquely affects an individual’s ability in such a way that one method of communication, with one child, may not work in the same manner as another, with another child. The researchers propose the following model, Figure 2, which

displays the interaction between parent-child, parent-educator and child-educator.

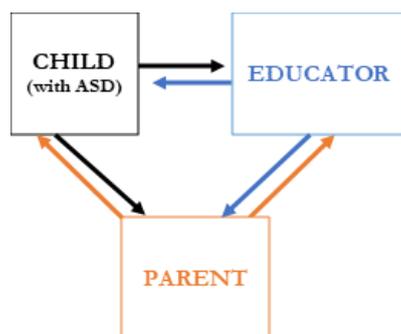


Figure 2

Proposed conceptual framework for parental participation

This model highlights the tri-directional communication in the teaching and learning process. It emphasises the parent/caregiver as a contributor to children's developing skills. The communication gap that exists between the child (who is developing new communication skills) and the parent can be closed. The parent, the child and the educator are part of the model of parental participation in developing communication skills in children. Using what has been discussed in the SLT and two-way communication model, we understand that social learning is an important way to develop communication skills. For a skill to be reinforced, especially in autistic children, routine and consistency in the practice of the skill needs to be followed.

Communication between the parent and the educator can aid in bridging the communication gap between parent and child. This communication gap is created and reinforced by a lack of communication tools that enhance understanding between parent and child. Dameh (2015) notes that the educator becomes a means of bridging the gap, through interaction with the parent. Classroom observation and integration, workshops and small group activities allow the parents and educators to communicate and interact. The educator provides insights, through progressive feedback, to the parents, allowing them to become more skilled in the communication tools taught to the child. The child, without directly engaging the parent, is still communicating and sharing observable information. Sharing these observations can assist the educator in further personalising the educational intervention strategy to assist the child.

The aim of teaching autistic children communication methods is to give them a way to communicate with others. By free flow

engagement of all three elements that make up the model in Figure 2, the child will benefit. The implementation of the communication intervention strategies by the parent can give the child the opportunity to practise these new skills in a variety of environments outside the classroom (Hamilton, 2016).

Literature Review

Parental participation is essential in implementing intervention plans, especially the role they play in their child's development of communication skills – from the steps they take to ensure a proper diagnosis, preparing and becoming more informed about ASD, to what kind of programmes can be used to engage their children. There are many children requiring specialised education attending schools that are not equipped to cater for their needs. They are in a situation where they are failing in education systems that are not inclusive, or do not have any access to formal education at all. Bateman (2013) mentions one of the reasons for this is that there are only nine fully equipped government schools that are tailored for assessments in South Africa. He goes on to estimate that approximately 135 000 autistic children are not getting the specialised education they annually require. To date, almost all awareness and healthcare initiatives based in sub-Saharan Africa have been based on HIV, TB, malaria, and other communicable diseases that are prevalent in Africa (Boonzaier, 2017). African countries lack resources, and must look to Western and European countries for research and expertise in the field of mental health as there are many other social and political issues that take precedence. Nearly all advances in the field of ASD and mental health come from more well-resourced countries. In a gathering of representatives of 14 African countries during the International Child Neurology Association Meeting on ASD in Africa in 2014, information based on the assessing and treating of ASD was presented. Challenges centred around the fact that there are no valid diagnostic tools custom-designed for the cultural factors of individuals in the diverse African context (Ruparella et al., 2016). This reveals the need that exists, a gap that needs to be bridged between parents' awareness and the current education system within the context of South Africa, and Africa at large.

Parents and caregivers are a resource that are sometimes overlooked or often not engaged. There could be instances when teachers and parents come together for the benefit of the child, but although the desire may be there, the resources are lacking. Communication of awareness will provide parents both in rural areas, as well as within the general public, with

information that will help them avoid misdiagnosis and encourage appropriate treatments. Engaging in a more intensive awareness campaign, not just in the developed areas but also in rural areas, can begin the process of change in how people view mental health and mental disorders. These misunderstandings and perceptions may stem from cultural and traditional ideas, which can be perpetuated by fear of stigma and the lack of information.

Barriers in Parental Participation

Barriers exist all around us. They are found in social interactions, communication, the learning and development of skills and acquisition of information. Preece and Levy (2018) corroborate this by stating that children who attend schools that give them the specialised education they need, will do so while experiencing a variety of barriers that limit progress in the development of sufficient communication skills. One of the barriers involves the learner's family system and the role it plays in their educational journey. Lindgren and Doobay (2011) express the importance of family support and parental participation in the development and educational journey of a child, as they can ensure a more comprehensive care strategy. The participation of parents must be done in a manner that benefits the child in terms of the extent and type of support, the needs of the child, and the demographical differences that must be acknowledged in each individual family. The culture, language and age of the parents are a few of the factors that will affect the nature and extent of their participation in supporting the development of language and communication skills in autistic children.

Parental Participation in Special Needs Institutions

From the beginning of a child's life, parents or primary caregivers are the first ones to communicate with a child. Spending a large amount of time with the child helps him or her to absorb and learn new ways to communicate their needs to those around them. The same applies to autistic children. Parental involvement with them from an early age has helped to better develop their cognitive skills (Parveen, Hussain & Reba, 2016). Huang (2013) eloquently states that, in the past, schooling institutions were viewed as the highest authority in education. However, current research shows learning activities carried out at home by parents are more meaningful to the child's intellectual and social development than the education system. The perception that schools are equipped, and that parents should not interfere, is a big barrier

to progress. Parents, together with educators, play one of the biggest roles in a child's life with regard to learning and education. Consistency is key; the acquisition of language relies on different social situations, environments and routines that are kept consistent. Supporting one's child can be done through many avenues. Participating in school events and meetings, or volunteering for school activities allows the parents to view their child not only in social, but also in learning settings. Parents observe their children more closely as they engage with them at home and in social settings. Being present at school would open a new dimension for observation, interaction and support. This is supported by Moon (1996), who states that parents need to fill in the gap where schooling institutions cannot reach. Parents are referred to as the best educators children need, as they add to the development of the children's emotional, intellectual, physical and social skills.

According to the nature vs nurture argument, in nurture, children learn about their place in the world through what they are exposed to in their environment. Autistic children require the same exposure as children without ASD, even if they interpret it differently. Communication plays an essential role in this learning process, as both verbal and non-verbal forms of communication are expressed. There are new ways of communication being constantly developed and improved to embrace the diversity of people in the world. In looking at how people can be helped in communicating effectively, Killmeyer and Kaczmarek (2017) have noted a growing interest around barriers and limitations in communication. Early on, infants and toddlers show signs of responding to the behaviour and actions of caregivers.

Joint Attention (JA) is the term given when one is following or directing another person's attention to an event or object that is shared with that person. This can be done through various gestures, like pointing, and physical interaction with the object or event with the purpose of leading or directing another to it (Siller & Sigman, 2002). According to previous research in this area, autistic children respond to JA by following the gaze or gestures of caregivers to different objects when directed. This entirely depends on the severity of their disorder. Killmeyer, and Kaczmarek (2017) discuss how autistic children can be engaged socially with the intention of communicating using JA and engagement. Sharing attention toward an object that the child is engaged with can lead to assisted learning similar to scaffolding (Fosnot & Perry, 1996). Also described as the process of assisted learning, scaffolding aims at allowing a child to learn while being supported by someone. The process of scaffolding, in the context of autistic children, would depend on their severity and

their ability to recall and use basic skills that can be developed further (Iris Centre, 2019).

The importance of Bottema-Beutel, Yoder, Hochman and Watson (2014) conducted research where a parent engaged in an object at the same time as their child in an attempt to influence play, which is an impactful teaching and learning tool. This interaction was known as support joint engagement (SJE), which is a method that has parents present while their child engages with an object without acknowledging the parents' presence. Another method introduced by Bottema-Beutel et al. (2014), was coordinated joint engagement (CJE), which described both child and parents taking turns to focus attention on the play-object. The autistic child soon acknowledged the parents' presence in playing with the object.

Parent Motivation

Parents need to become part of the treatment or intervention process. More parent-based programmes are required to bring all parents to a level of understanding and comprehension of the treatment programmes. Parents who regularly communicate with the schools require practical support groups that not only share information but provide tools that parents can use. The feeling of achievement versus the feeling of helplessness can be a serious influencer in the direct involvement of parents in the child's education. Motivation is something that affects all people in every field owing to the need to accomplish or fear of failing; there is always a drive. McClelland (1985), in Khurana and Joshi (2017), discusses how motivation is linked to people's need for accomplishment. Similarly, parents may be motivated if they feel a sense of accomplishment or progress regarding their participation in their child's education. If adequately equipped with the relevant information and strategies, parents can view their involvement as a benefit to both themselves and the child. However, on the other end of the spectrum they risk the possibility of not achieving, become demotivated, and inevitably withdraw participation.

Dawson-Squibb (2018), in a research project titled "Can ASD-specific parenting programmes work in South Africa?", identified one of the problems experienced in ASD education in South Africa. Parents and caregivers need to be trained efficiently to ensure that the treatment programmes provide the autistic child with the best opportunities, even if the educator is not present. Educators experience difficulties when parents, who are eager to get involved in classroom activities, instead get in the way of the teaching and learning process because they do not have experience and training. Current research shows

that even with the many programmes developed, there are no scientifically validated training programmes available for parents in South Africa (Autism SA, 2017). Parents must rely on internal school support groups and forums.

The Nature of Parental Participation

There are many ways parents can get involved in their children's education that can be influential to their learning and development. Parents can get involved in the schooling process by joining committees and organisations within the school, such as the School Governing Body (SGB) and the Parent-Teacher Association (PTA), and volunteering for school activities and trips. Parents can receive input on how the school functions, and a first-hand account of how the school is managed. Volunteering gives parents an opportunity to engage in special events within the school and interact with other parents. Day-to-day involvement takes the parents directly into the classroom, where they can familiarise themselves with the teaching strategies and educational programmes that their children are engaged with. This allows them to learn how to interact with their children. Communication is the cornerstone of human interaction, and barriers in the communication process can limit one's ability to learn other skills, especially those that require instruction from others. The inability to understand instructions prevents the development in children of much-needed skills, like toilet training or indicating when they are hungry.

There are three different categories of parental participation. The parent who is not involved, the parent who tries their best to be involved, and then there is the over-involved parent. Similarly, Chindanya (2011) states that the parent who is not involved can have many reasons, like working long hours, lacking the literacy to assist in school events, or help with home activities, difficulty in travelling far distances to personally assist in on-site activities, or employing a caregiver to provide support. The involved parent will attend meetings and workshops, participate and volunteer in school events, and assist with home activities. The over-involved parent wants to be a part of every event, and assist the child with every activity, even those the child can attempt on his/her own. This involvement can inhibit the educators' ability to appropriately implement strategies that will be used to educate the child. The incorrect implementation of strategies may nullify the progress of another or show a lack of consistency, making the learning process difficult. This is an example of how the parent can become a barrier in the child's educational development.

A well-known framework associated with parental involvement is Joyce Epstein's Six Types of Parental Involvement. This framework outlines the partnership between the invested parties and how they influence each other. Schooling organisations encourage learning at home by providing the families with information and ideas on how to assist learners with homework at home, and with extra-curricular activities (Epstein et al., 2002).

Epstein's framework of Six Types of Involvement (Epstein, 1995) provides clear guidelines that deal with parental involvement. The following is summarised in the context of engaging parents in participating in the education of their autistic children:

Type 1: Parenting: Helping all families establish home environments to support children as students. Also referred to as home-school partnerships, workshops and family support programmes can enhance the quality of the home environment which gives children security and consistency. Home-based engagement provides support to and instils self-confidence in the child. Chindanya (2011) looks at the importance of home-based involvement and how it has far greater benefits for the child than school-based involvement, in terms of assisted learning and more practice in communication skills and stronger skill development.

Type 2: Communicating: Designing effective forms of school-to-home and home-to-school communication about school programmes and children's progress. The Compass School (2016) notes that parents prefer both digital and handwritten communication; this fosters a rapport between educators, parents and the institution as open communication moves back and forth.

Type 3: Volunteering: Recruiting and organising parent help and support. Parents are an invaluable resource that should be used by the school to enhance the teaching and learning process. The parents' active role in school activities creates a positive atmosphere for success in academic achievement amongst learners. Seeing familiar faces sets learners at ease in a social situation, leaving them more open to communicating.

Type 4: Learning at home: Providing information and ideas to families about how to help students at home with homework and other curriculum-related activities, decisions and planning. Parents are not always equipped to assist their children, especially when faced with specialised programmes designed for children with special needs. Bhekimpilo (2015), in a study based on the relationship between literacy levels and parental involvement, discovered that higher literacy levels are associated directly with higher levels of parental involvement. Parents require

support in the form of training to assist learning at home efficiently.

Type 5: Decision-making: Including parents in school decisions, developing parent leaders and representatives. Power has now moved away from the school management to the community in the decision-making process. Educational decentralisation encourages and empowers parents and community members to get involved in improving school management (Quan-Baffour, 2006). By involving parents in the decision-making of the school system, parents have the ability to play a larger part in their children's education as well as hold the institution to a higher standard. School-based involvement can be interpreted as families that participate in school decision-making and activities that influence the way the learners engage with school. Children get support in different ways. Parents can be active participants in the classroom, or engage in physical activities with an indirect influence on the child.

Type 6: Collaborating with the community: Identifying and integrating resources and services from the community to strengthen school programmes, family practices, and student learning and development. Bringing community initiatives into school environments allows learners to have more exposure to extra-curricular skills and experiences. ASD is distinguished by a social deficit, therefore every opportunity should be taken to encourage the child to engage in the social and educational experience. Engaging with the familiar faces of family and community members can have a huge influence on learning processes and the development of communication skills. As characterised by the Ecological Model of Child development (O'Connor & McCartney, 2007), it emphasises that the family and community environment can affect the child's skill development both directly and indirectly. The role of the parent is one that influences the way the child interprets their environment, which affects the way they learn and develop their mental capacity. Parental stimulation can lead to a completely unique educational experience for an autistic child. Chindanya (2011) also brings in a negative effect of parental involvement, or lack thereof, by discussing how parental involvement can lead to educators giving certain learners more attention, either because there is pressure from the parents, or to make up for the lack of parental involvement.

The Extent of Parental Participation

The amount of time a parent spends invested in their child's educational progress can correlate directly to the successful development of the child. As substantiated by Desforges and Abouchaar (2003), activities in the home with

children, before they engage in formal education, provide them with skills, values and a good self-concept which is key in transitioning into a new social environment while enhancing the child's development. Children from different social classes have different achievement levels which relate to the involvement of the working-class parent.

Availability of caregivers/parents in supporting their children's educational careers influences the security of the child. Children become attached to the person that provides care for them. Children with a stronger sense of emotional attachment achieve higher levels of success compared to those with insecure attachments (Van Ljzendoorn & Van Vliet-Visser, 1998, as cited in O'Connor and McCartney, 2007). The time invested in schooling activities and educational guidance at home influences the development of the child's social and emotional stability, and his/her self-concept. How much caregivers/parents are involved in the educational career of their child depends on their willingness or availability to communicate with the educator regarding the progress of the child. Communication with educators is a form of indirect participation, and can be an essential tool for caregivers/parents who are unavailable to be actively present at meetings or school events. Caregivers/parents can acquire information from the educators, ask questions and share observations.

Research Methodology

Parents are an important factor in the growth of their child, especially during their schooling years. The implications for parental participation in the education of autistic children have been noted. Learners with special needs have unique educational needs and requirements around specialised development programmes. The understanding is that educational institutions with the support of parents work at helping children reach their full potential. They go on to look at external issues that can hinder children's development such as the financial expense of specialised education, non-availability of hands-on participation of parents, unskilled or inadequately trained educators in private and inclusive public schools, etc.

In Zululand, within the King Cetshwayo district, there is a scattering of formal and informal educational institutions that offer services to autistic children. The institutions – both government and independent, but government funded – work at engaging the community with many initiatives. Some of these initiatives, according to AutismSA (2016) include free workshops for families or caregivers who

care for autistic children up to six years old, and other more advanced and tailored programmes.

The researchers, therefore, looked at understanding the nature and extent of parental participation in supporting the development of communication skills in autistic learners. They went on to look at how it affected the learners success in the development of communication skills and application of the skills.

The researchers used a mixed method research approach. This method incorporates qualitative and quantitative research approaches in the study as it allows an integration when analysing data in variables such as culture, political views, religious beliefs and other demographics (Ostlund, Wengström & Rowa-Dewar, 2010). The researchers' interpretation of the material collected from the participants influences the direction of the research. They were aware of their own opinions and bias in order to avoid influencing the analysis of the research data. Using a phenomenological research design aims not just to access and record information, but understand the life experiences of research participants (Brase & Brase, 2013). This approach was ideal when dealing with the social, emotional and educational implications of autistic children regarding the role and extent of participation parents have in their children's development of communication skills at school and at home.

The researchers formulated two interview instruments – in English and in isiZulu (a translator was on hand if it became a requirement). The instruments were designed for parents and teachers, and contained both open- and closed-ended questions. The closed-ended questions were focused on the quantifiable demographical information, leaving the rest of the document open-ended.

The researchers approached three schools: School A, School B and School C. These schools were invited to participate in this research study, which they all accepted after school management understood the nature of the research and its objectives. The educators and parents at School C decided, after many weeks, to withdraw from the study, citing a clash in commitments. Since participation is voluntary, the researchers approached a fourth school, School D, to participate, and they agreed to be a part of this research study.

The participants had to meet a specific criterion pertaining to the study. They were educators and parents of autistic children, attending a Department of Education (DoE) registered school for children with special needs, specifically ASD. The researcher chose the sample size according to the participants relevance within the study. This study focuses on parental participation, and therefore the parent sample was larger (n=10). The educators were

relevant as well, as they had primary contact with learners in the classroom environment, and were given a sample size of n=5.

The three schools (B, C and D) extended invitations to their educators and selected caregivers/parents of autistic learners. From the three schools, a total of ten caregivers/parents were approached by the schools (School B = 4, School C = 3 and School D = 3). Eight caregivers/parents gave consent to participate, and two caregivers/parents from School D declined. The schools invited a total of five educators to participate in the research, to which all five consented (School B = 2, School C = 2 and School D = 1). These participants were proficient in English, and were interviewed throughout a period of seven months when data was collected and then analysed.

Findings

The interview instrument began by requesting the parents’ personal details. This aided the researchers in identifying the various factors that influence the extent to which caregivers/parents from the different schools participated in the research study.

Table 1.

Work schedule requirements and time availability of parents

	a. Working overtime	b. Working through weekends	c. Working on public holidays	d. Travelling long distances for work
PP1	X	X	X	
PP2		X		X
PP3	X			
PP4	X	X	X	X
PP5	X			X
PP6	X	X	X	
PP7		X	X	X
PP8	X	X	X	

The data displayed in Table 1 provide a clear view of the time requirements and constraints caregivers/parents deal with on typical days. These reveal that owing to work priorities, caregivers/parents are away from the home setting and cannot afford the time required to fully participate in everything that is happening in their child’s educational development.

The implications of working long hours, working during weekends and holidays, taking time to travel long distances for work, are that less time is available for extra-curricular activities, homework and practice in language and communication activities. Conversational language in social communication between parent and child is important for the child’s

development. Chindanya (2011) notes that school-based involvement in developing communication skills in children is an essential part of learning new knowledge. However, home-based involvement allows the child to practise and maintain the new knowledge acquired. Therefore, since the home environment is important to the development of skills in a child, one can say that the individuals who are present to assist the child, are important as well.

When parents were engaged regarding their view on the educator’s responsibility to the learner’s education, the theme that emerged was that the educator is the professional in terms of how to help the child as they have resources the caregivers/parents do not have access to. They should therefore develop the child’s ability to communicate in language. Caregivers/parents felt that responsibility for the child’s development primarily rested on the educator. They also noted that they should work with the educators to understand the different communication skills their children are learning so that they could assist the children. The findings revealed that caregivers/parents do not engage much with learners in the classroom setting; however, they are open to attending and interacting with their children during extra-curricular events at school.

Limitations, Future Research and Recommendations

Owing to the sensitive nature of the research and the lack of previous studies in this particular area, the researchers found it difficult to give the topic a South African context, or even a King Cetshwayo district context. There are, however, many online NGO organisations that conduct research and publish articles to edify their online following. Autism South Africa, being most individuals “go-to” website, offers a wealth of information, links and forums. Communication barriers between parents and teachers as well as parents and children hamper progress in education. This research study was limited in the schools approached, and in the number of caregivers/parents that were willing to participate. A more diverse participant group would have added more to the findings of this study.

The preference and convenience of parents in attending extra-curricular events and their social nature leads to the recommendation that the schools incorporate more parent-learner interactive activities that encourage the practice and development of learners’ communication skills. The environment will be familiar and friendly, with more familiar faces in a setting that the learner is accustomed to communicating in. This means that the dynamics that determine social interaction and communication between

the child and caregivers/parents may be different from the home setting. Hosting social events at school with the specific intention of getting parents to use the strategies can lead to them successfully communicating with the child, as practice makes perfect.

To ensure that caregivers/parents and learners optimise the special education system, educators from various local institutes should gather to share expertise and scenarios to discuss solutions to challenges other educators may experience. Owing to the high demand for inclusivity in schools, mainstream schools are now slowly becoming inclusive. Partnering with other schools specialising in special education can be beneficial to both the school management and educators.

Feedback is essential. Educators are recommended to conduct surveys with caregivers/parents to determine whether learners are in fact able to contextualise the communication skills learnt at school, in environments outside the school setting. Being engaged in this manner allows caregivers/parents to become part of their child's learning and development process. The feedback surveys can be used to provide parents with a platform to air their comments, concerns and fears regarding their children.

Creating local support groups for parents with autistic children will be useful. They can meet and discuss ideas on how to address specific issues they are struggling with. This initiative could raise more awareness in the community about ASD, and focus on correcting misunderstandings, stereotypes, and prejudices against children with special needs. By becoming more invested in furthering the current body of knowledge on ASD, parents now can become more knowledgeable about the topic, and keep abreast of current trends and new developments in this area.

Conclusion

Communication is key in all interactions, and parental participation in the support of the development of communication skills is not a passive role. It is an active role; It is a learning role, and it is an observational role. The parent/caregiver must learn alongside the child in order to successfully aid the practice and development of communication skills. Each individual, caregiver/parent, educator, and child have their own role to play. Once the parents overstep their bounds they could run the risk of working against the educators' strategies to help the child develop communication skills.

Parents' are reluctant to ask the more complex questions, and would rather turn to online browsing than to ask the child's educator for assistance (Alli & Mupawose, 2015).

Searching the web for answers is like self-diagnosing an illness because you searched your symptoms online. Parental participation in the education of children will always be a contentious issue for educators. There is room for further observation and study in the involvement of the caregiver/parent in the child's learning environment, interacting with the child, and using the strategies taught. The areas for future research can be taken beyond the traditional classroom and brought into the digital age through the use of technology in the classroom, so as to enhance the possibilities that could aid in the development of communication skills between caregiver/parent and child.

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