

EXPLORING EDUCATIONAL SUPPORT FOR NEURODIVERSE LEARNERS IN RURAL SOUTH AFRICA: AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY

Habeeb Omoponle ADEWUYI¹, Joyce DAVHANA², Fumane KHANARE³

^{1,2} Department of Educational Psychology, University of Johannesburg, South Africa

³ University of Western Cape, South Africa

Abstract

Supporting neurodiverse learners is grounded in the principles of inclusive education and has increasingly become a global movement. While neurodiversity and associated learning impairments may not be cured, learning outcomes can be enhanced with appropriate support. This study examined the acceptance and support of neurodiversity in rural communities in South Africa. The study was anchored in Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory, examining the needs of neurodivergent learners in a rural context to help them reach their full potential. The 'qualitative research' approach was adopted. Autoethnography was employed as the study's methodology. Data were thematically analysed as the gathered information was transcribed and examined to identify the essential supports available for neurodiverse learners. The results were reported based on the five support themes: (a) awareness at schools, (b) Parent and teacher involvement, (c) Oversized classrooms, (d) Learning materials, and (e) Time allocation and rigid curriculum. The findings indicated that additional efforts are still required to support neurodiverse learners. By amplifying the voices of those directly involved in the education of neurodiverse learners, this autoethnographic study seeks to foster collaboration and sustained change within the education systems of rural communities in the Global South.

Keywords: Neurodiversity, Rural areas, Learner, Perception, Support

1. Introduction

Neurodiversity is a new term that became popular in the late 1990s. It is a term that aims to change how people view disability related to brain function; it is a positive way to reflect on how different brains function and to embrace variations (Bradshaw et al., 2015). Neurodiversity refers to differences in how the brain works and how individuals process information differently (Walker, 2020). Among other disabilities that fall within neurodiversity, the most well-known include ASD (autism spectrum disorder), ADHD (Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder), and learning disabilities. Learners whose brains function outside the usual standards as determined by society are called neurodivergent (Walker, 2020). According to Carruthers (2020), neurodivergent learners will experience challenges in their cognitive, behavioural, and social abilities in school settings. There is no cure for neurodiversity; professionals work holistically and use a treatment plan that best suits the child's needs.

In South Africa, particularly in rural areas, there is still a long way to go to optimise learning for the neurodiverse population in rural schools (Comerford, 2025; Roy & Jain, 2021). According to the study by Bertilsdotter et al. (2020), parents in rural schools have extremely low levels of knowledge about neurodiversity, which is the most significant challenge because not knowing what the problem could be hinders the provision of relevant support, as the problem is unknown or misinterpreted. During work-integrated learning at a full-service primary school, the class capacity was 40. Most learners struggled to learn and lacked the support they needed. According to observations, teachers are not well-trained to cater to them, and this may be because the school was changed to a full-service school. No training was offered to meet learners' needs, and learners progressed to the next class even when they had not yet mastered the content, because teachers lacked patience.

According to Statistics South Africa (2016), Neurodivergent learners are at a high rate of dropping out. The high school dropout rate is caused by insufficient support from those around them; in a rural context, this is due to a lack of knowledge, which is the main problem because support cannot be offered without understanding the problem. Parents may be in denial because of the elevated levels of stigma that are associated with neurodiversity, and in other areas, this topic is taboo. A lack of knowledge may lead to learners being removed from mainstream schools and placed in special needs schools. The stigma associated with that leads parents to remain in denial even when they can see that the child is struggling, and this can lead learners to lose interest in learning as they feel discouraged that they cannot do tasks other learners can. Having grown up in a rural area

and attended a rural school, one can attest that neurodiversity is a foreign concept in a rural context, and when a learner was struggling at school, that will be explained in terms of a lot of things but not explained in terms of how their brain may be functioning but instead, they do not pay attention in class, or they are unstable. It would even be explained in terms of a call.

1.1 Purpose of the study

The purpose of the study is to raise awareness of neurodiversity in rural settings. To educate caregivers, the community, teachers, and parents in accepting neurodivergent learners. It also offers recommendations on supporting neurodivergent learners at school and home.

1.2 Research questions

2. The following research questions guided the study:

- i. What is the perception of and level of understanding of neurodiversity among the teachers, parents, and other rural community members?
- ii. How can awareness and acceptance of neurodiversity expand among the teachers, parents, and other rural community members?
- iii. What challenges do neurodivergent learners in the rural context face?
- iv. How can neurodivergent learners be supported in the rural context?

3. Literature Review

When embarking on a journey to change perceptions and raise awareness about supporting neurodivergent learners in a rural context, drawing on ideas from scholarly literature is critical. Context, when it comes to neurodiversity, has no meaning, as all individuals from different contexts can experience neurodiversity. Giving context meaning will lead to the needs of neurodiverse individuals not being addressed (Mitran, 2021). The review presents a different perspective from positive psychology to construct new knowledge on neurodiversity in the rural context, the challenges faced by neurodiverse learners in this context, and the awareness and support that can be provided to neurodivergent learners in this context.

4. Perceptions of Neurodiverse Learners

Neurodiversity is a term still unknown by many, and in the rural context, it is even worse. However, many people have heard of disorders that fall under the umbrella of neurodiversity. In the rural context, drawing from personal experiences, neurodiversity is not well interpreted as it is seen as a child being stupid when they cannot meet the expectations at school, and in some instances, when a child does not meet societal expectations, the child might be bewitched, and most African parents will not look for alternatives to explain the difference in behaviour. Humans spend almost all their lives trying to determine what is wrong with them or their loved ones. Positive psychology encourages individuals to start focusing on areas of strength. Society defines what is expected and does not seek to understand or embrace differences (Dervan et al., 2024; Woodset et al., 2018).

According to Roy & Jain (2021), there is limited to no knowledge of neurodiversity. The government should employ educational psychologists in rural schools, which will help spread awareness of neurodiversity and help parents know what and where to get support when they have a neurodivergent learner (Pillay, 2020; Onyemah and Omojonle, 2017). Awareness and acceptance of neurodiversity will, to a greater extent, help parents in rural areas better understand what is happening with their learners and support them. However, little can be done regarding diagnoses and treatment after that, as many rural learners cannot afford treatment, and external support from the Department of Education will be needed. Mitran (2021) argues that counsellors should bring their best abilities to educate parents or caregivers in rural areas, as they are a source of hope in places where neurodiversity is poorly understood. Psychologists, counsellors, and teachers can work together to promote awareness by running neurodiversity campaigns at rural schools, inviting parents, caregivers, and learners.

5. Challenges of Neurodivergent Learners

Parents or caregivers of learners who are neurodivergent experience shame and inferiority compared to parents. This comes with the stigma associated with neurodiversity. Learners struggle to understand what might be wrong with them, especially in a rural context where understanding of neurodiversity remains low, which makes them feel they are not capable of achieving and can lead them to lose interest in their education (Singer, 2017). Neurodivergent learners have impaired inter-personal communication skills, and they are prone to feelings of anxiety; this can lead to lower overall wellbeing from childhood throughout their lifespan. As a result, a

decrease in overall wellbeing will have adverse effects on self-esteem, relationships with friends and family, self-confidence, and motivation (Fernando, 2025).

While these are some of the challenges that neurodivergent learners face, learners with neurodiversity in rural settings face these challenges twice as often as those in urban contexts, and there is little support available due to limited resources. Merfin-veitch et al. (2020) further note that in areas where Neurodiversity is not accepted, neurodivergent learners are affected even more.

6. Support for Neurodivergent at rural schools.

The following are important steps in supporting Neurodivergent learners at rural schools:

- Prioritising and valuing relationships was found to be one of the best themes for supporting neurodivergent learners in the education context. Teachers should build relationships by being empathetic, respectful, warm, actively listening, and getting to know the interests of neurodivergent learners. They should encourage neurodivergent learners to form relationships with their peers, help them make friends, and address any bullying that may arise because of their diversity. When neurodivergent learners have friends, it can boost their self-esteem as they positively value one another. Teachers should educate learners in classrooms about neurodiversity; when learners are armed with knowledge, they will understand and be able to be inclusive of their neuro-diverse peers (Chapman, 2020).

- Teachers should be flexible; according to Merfin-veitch et al. (2020), to cater to all learners in the classroom, having different teaching strategies is essential, e.g., singing content-related songs and having visual learning materials, which could be a challenge in a rural context, as there are no printers or limited resources. Have a plan to set goals with neurodivergent learners in a classroom so they can track progress in small milestones. Allowing neurodivergent learners to choose which task they want to start with first will increase their interest, as they feel they are in charge, and encourage them to ask for help when they are struggling (Onyemah and Omoponle, 2017). Parents or caregivers of neurodivergent learners should work with teachers to agree on what works best for them, which can be adapted at home.

- Managing Neurodiverse Behaviour: teachers should support neurodivergent learners in understanding and managing their behaviour. They should monitor and let learners know which behaviours and rewards are accepted. This has been proven to be one of the best ways to manage behaviour (Lawton & Kasari, 2012).

- Creating inclusive environments is important for learners to feel accepted and valued in a classroom, as this will make them feel free to engage in learning. A classroom should have clear routines and rules so learners know what is expected of them. A classroom where learners do not feel excluded because of their neurodivergence will promote learning (Merfin-veitch et al., 2020).

- Embedding inclusive environments: learning at rural schools could be inclusive for neurodivergent learners when teachers actively apply different modalities of teaching, e.g., visual, kinesthetic, and auditory learning styles. Information should be presented in a way that matches the interests of neurodivergent learners (Merfin-veitch et al., 2020). According to Merfin-veitch et al. (2020), adaptations to teaching instructions and general learning should accommodate neurodivergent learners in rural schools. Technology was suggested as a way to support neurodivergent learners in rural schools; however, this could pose challenges in such contexts due to significant challenges. For example, in the area where this study is focused, some learners come from places that still do not have electricity; in a case where neurodivergent learners should be supported with technology devices that require electricity or need to be charged, this will be difficult for them to use such devices at home (Olanrewaju and Omoponle, 2017). In rural classrooms, virtual reality will be hampered by network connectivity.

6.1 Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework best suited to this study is Constructivism, which can be applied within a qualitative research approach. Constructivism holds that people construct knowledge from their experiences and interactions with others. Knowledge is built using a variety of perspectives (Dawadi et al., 2021). According to Kodom et al. (2019), the underlying question of constructivism is "How do people in each setting perceive and explain the truth, and how does that perception shape their behaviour as well as those they interact with? When looking at neurodiversity, particularly in a rural context, many perceptions guide and shape particular behaviours. Knowledge is constructed through interaction with others. Traditional religious beliefs influence how individuals in a rural context view neurodiversity; some explain it in terms of a calling, and others view it as a mental illness, and they believe that neurodivergent individuals will not be successful. How communities in a rural context have generated the meaning of neurodiversity guides their behaviour, which has led to prominent levels of associated

stigma (Laitila, 2018). The first step in reflecting positively on neurodiversity will be to educate most people in rural areas about it to effect change in the constructed knowledge they hold. This will help neurodivergent learners receive early diagnoses and interventions, so learning can be optimised.

Figure 1: Characteristics of the constructivist paradigm.



Figure 1 above shows how knowledge about neurodiversity was constructed through social interaction and the history of certain cultures in rural areas, and how they responded to this knowledge (social action). The critical position towards 'taken-for-granted' inside will be classifying neurodiversity as being for whites.

7. METHODS

This study employed the auto-ethnography. According to Murphy et al. (2022), autoethnography is a qualitative form of structured reflection where the researcher uses personal experiences to contribute to the study. This study was conducted and reported in accordance with the Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research (COREQ). The methodology was appropriate for this study because it allows the researchers to educate people in the rural context about neurodiversity and will help transform the lives of neurodivergent learners in the rural context.

For this study, purposive sampling was used. A purposive sampling is selecting a sample based on desired characteristics (Andrade, 2021). The sample consists of (5) neurodivergent learners in Kgalabatsane, located in the northwest province of South Africa. The neurodivergent learners are in the rural context. Methods of data generation used in the study are observations, journaling, and personal history. The researchers engaged in self-study, drawing from their own experiences through words and journaling. Observations helped in understanding how neurodiversity is perceived in rural areas. Journaling helped keep a record of observations on how neurodiversity is perceived in rural areas. Lastly, personal history provided an overview of experiences as individuals who grew up in rural contexts and attended rural schools, explaining how neurodiversity was viewed and the conversations one had with teachers who teach neurodivergent learners in rural contexts.

Thematic data analysis was used. This analysis checks patterns of themes and then creates researcher-generated themes (Lochmiller, 2021). This was suitable for self-study, as it provided the researcher with insight into current levels of knowledge on neurodiversity in the rural context and what still needs to be done to achieve the research objectives. Ethical considerations are essential when conducting research. The researchers obtained informed consent, maintained confidentiality, and protected participants from any harm, and participation was voluntary.

8. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The findings of this study indicate a gradual increase in the levels of education and awareness regarding neurodiversity in rural schools. However, this positive trend is juxtaposed against significant, persistent challenges. The central themes that emerged from the data—namely, the nature of available support for neurodivergent learners and the multifaceted challenges they encounter—paint a complex picture. These findings suggest that achieving true inclusivity for neurodivergent learners in these contexts remains a considerable challenge, highlighting systemic shortcomings within the current educational framework.

9. Theme 1: Disparities in Awareness Between Parents and Teachers

A foundational theme was the imbalance in knowledge and awareness between teachers and parents. Teacher training programmes universally include compulsory modules on educational psychology, equipping educators with fundamental skills to identify learners who may diverge from typical developmental or learning patterns. In the observed rural schools, this manifests as a teacher's ability to recognise when a child is underperforming relative to peers and to communicate this concern to parents subsequently. However, the effectiveness of this communication is hindered by a significant knowledge gap. Research by Makaya (2025) in Zimbabwe similarly found that while parents and teachers value collaboration, challenges such as denial and poor communication often hinder effective support for learners with autism.

As noted in the literature, parents with lower levels of educational attainment often struggle to contextualise and understand the characteristics of a neurodivergent child (Huang et al., 2020). This is particularly salient in rural contexts, where many parents have limited formal education. A study from rural South Africa by Mahadew (2024) confirms that impoverished rural communities face unique challenges in early childhood care and education, including limited parental capacity to engage with developmental concerns. Consequently, when presented with information that challenges their existing understanding, parents may struggle to interpret the child's difficulties accurately. This often leads to alternative explanations rooted in local beliefs or denial, rather than to acceptance of a neurodevelopmental difference.

Reflection 1: Growing up attending a rural school, the concept of neurodiversity was absent. My first exposure to terms like 'neurodiversity' and 'psychology' was at university. During my entire school career, I never encountered a school psychologist. My parents, whose education was also limited, possessed only the knowledge and beliefs prevalent in our rural context, which did not include neurodiversity. When a teacher first attempted to explain my own learning challenges, it was an entirely foreign concept. It would likely have been the same for me had I not had the opportunity to attend university, though access to technology and information would have slightly mitigated it. For my parents' generation, the disconnect was complete.

Despite these challenges, the data suggests a positive shift. Increased access to further education, supported by bursaries targeting rural communities, means a growing cohort of younger parents has a greater, albeit incomplete, foundational understanding of learning disorders. Furthermore, the proliferation of mobile technology offers a pathway for informed, proactive parents to re-search and better understand a teacher's observations, thereby gaining crucial information about their child's needs and potential support strategies.

Theme 2: The Critical Role of Parent-Teacher Involvement and Its Impact on Learner Wellbeing

For educators in rural schools, supporting neurodivergent learners is a complex task that is significantly impeded without a collaborative partnership with parents. Effective support requires a unified approach to help the child understand their own neurodiversity, fostering self-acceptance and demonstrating that academic and personal success is attainable. However, this collaboration is often fraught with difficulty. Observations from the field indicate that parents, particularly those with lower levels of education, may place immense academic pressure on their children, viewing educational success as a pathway to a better life. For a neurodivergent child, this pressure can be profoundly challenging and counterproductive. Research from rural Tennessee by Hardin and colleagues (as cited in Pytko, 2025) highlights that access to proper mental health resources, including diagnostic tools, can be life-changing for students. Yet, such resources remain scarce in rural districts.

Observation 1: I accompanied a friend to her son's school. The son is doing grade 4, and failed terms 1 and 2, and is always in trouble at school.

This observation underscores the need for a holistic approach to supporting the neurodivergent learner, one that addresses their emotional and social needs. The behaviour described can be interpreted through the lens of Maslow's hierarchy of needs. The third level of this hierarchy, 'Love and Belonging,' posits that individuals must feel a sense of acceptance and connection to others to be motivated (Kanmodi et al., 2021; Daugherty, 2013). A child who feels neglected at home or misunderstood by impatient teachers may seek a sense of belonging and positive attention elsewhere. In a classroom setting, this can manifest as disruptive behaviour intended to impress peers, creating a negative cycle. When this fundamental need for belonging is unmet, it directly impacts classroom performance and daily functioning. This sense of alienation can be exacerbated by common school practices, such as academic ranking or ability grouping, which can further damage the self-esteem of neurodivergent learners. The lack of understanding, rooted in low levels of neurodiversity education, prevents these learners from having their basic psychological needs met, hindering their ability to progress to higher levels of learning and self-actualisation.

10. Theme 3: The Compounding Effect of Oversized Classrooms

A significant structural barrier identified is the prevalence of overcrowded classrooms in government-funded rural and township schools. This is largely attributed to their status as no-fee schools, which makes them the only viable option for families unable to afford private education. This results in classroom environments that are fundamentally not conducive to inclusive education. A recent study from Limpopo province confirms that educators in rural circuits face systemic challenges, including overcrowded classrooms and a lack of specialist support (Frontiers in Education, 2025).

Observation 2: I accompanied a friend to her son's school. The classroom had +- 40 learners, and when we arrived, there were a few minutes left before the school was out. One could tell from the noise that the class was not manageable, and the teacher was trying all she could to keep them quiet so they could finish their work. When we entered the class, one could tell that the teacher had had a long day.

In a class of 40 or more learners, the capacity for a teacher to provide individualised attention and cater to the diverse needs of all students is severely limited. For neurodivergent learners, who often require differentiated instruction and a more supportive environment, this lack of accommodation is acutely felt. The challenges they face are thus amplified; they are not only managing their neurodiversity but are also placed in an environment that, by its very nature, is unsupportive. The consequence is that neurodivergent learners in rural schools face difficulties that are exponentially greater than those of their peers in better-resourced, private institutions. Similar findings emerged from Rouse's (2024) study of rural elementary teachers in Tennessee, which reported challenges with classroom management, limited learning aids, and maintaining safe learning environments when teaching students with autism spectrum disorder.

Reflection 2: It's been two days since we visited the school. The teacher mentioned that referral forms would be filled out for an assessment for my friend's son, a process that could take a long time. As I sit here, I wonder what more I could have done if I were that young teacher we met. She seems genuinely willing to help, but the sheer capacity of the class prevents her from giving each learner the attention they need.

Teachers in these contexts are often doing everything within their power, but their efforts are insufficient without systemic support. As Bervoets and Hens (2020) and Omoponle (2023) suggest, without departmental intervention and early intervention programmes, neurodivergent learners remain stagnant, failing to make academic progress. This can lead to a loss of engagement with school and, ultimately, an increased risk of dropping out (Eddy et al., 2025).

11. Theme 4: Inadequacy of Learning Materials and Resources

The lack of appropriate learning materials is a critical impediment to effective instruction for neurodivergent learners. Many rural schools, including the one visited for this study, rely on antiquated resources such as chalkboards. This lack of basic infrastructure severely limits a teacher's ability to employ diverse pedagogical strategies. Neurodivergent learners often benefit from multi-modal teaching approaches, such as PowerPoint presentations to provide strong visual stimuli for visual learners, or other specialised tools to support those with specific learning challenges. Geduld and Majola (2025), in their study of rural South African families with neurodiverse learners, underscore the detrimental impact of limited resources on early intervention and inclusive practices.

Observation 3: "Your child is struggling with spelling, comprehension, and reading, which is why we are here today, and the class only has limited books that they share as a pair when reading." The teacher explained that the child is struggling with reading, spelling, and comprehension, and suggested that the child read more at home. The school can only lend the book if the parent ensures the child brings it back to school daily, as there is a shortage.

This observation illustrates a deeply concerning reality: a teacher is forced to recommend a home reading intervention while the school itself cannot reliably provide the necessary books. This places an unfair burden on the parent and fails the child. The scarcity of even the most basic resources, such as books, makes targeted interventions for neurodivergent learners nearly impossible to implement. Journalism from the Daily Dispatch (2025) on rural Giyani schools confirms that teachers face shortages of reading materials, posters, and textbooks, forcing them to create their own teaching aids while battling overcrowded classrooms and limited parental support (Ker & Van, 2023; Sherman, 2023).

Reflection 3: Listening to the conversation broke my heart and left me questioning myself. Because the child is close to me, I can assist with books, but would I be able to help all neurodivergent learners who are going through the same? And if I can, how? Will that ever be enough?

This reflection encapsulates the frustration and helplessness felt when confronting a systemic problem. Individual acts of kindness, while valuable, cannot compensate for a system that fails to provide the basic tools necessary for equitable education.

12. Theme 5: The Constraints of Time Allocation and a Rigid Curriculum

The final theme pertains to the structural constraints imposed by the school timetable and the inflexible curriculum. The typical school day is divided into fixed periods of 30 to 50 minutes, within which teachers are expected to deliver content according to a strict annual teaching plan. This "one size fits all" approach to curriculum delivery is fundamentally incompatible with the needs of many neurodivergent learners. Fugill (2025) argues compellingly that the traditional school day, with its rigid timetable, becomes an obstacle rather than a scaffold for students with learning differences, and that fairness does not mean every child has the same day, but that every child has the right one.

Reflection from Teaching Practice: When I was doing my teaching practice for Life Orientation in grade 7 at a rural school, I remember there was a time I had to remain behind with learners who did badly on their posters about substance abuse. We only left at 5 pm. The topic was covered in class, and most learners understood it, but learners are diverse, and the time allocation does not cater to neurodivergent learners.

This personal experience highlights that with additional time and support, learners who initially struggled were able to understand the task and complete it successfully. The rigid structure of the school day does not allow for this flexibility. The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee's Centre for Advancing Student Learning (2025) emphasises that structure is support. Still, only when it is flexible, predictable, and inclusive from the start, clear routines reduce cognitive load and anxiety for neurodivergent students (Ndou-Chikwena & Sefotho, 2025).

Observation 4: With time allocations, neurodivergent learners miss out on other content because of concentration spans and slow processing of information.

Neurodivergent learners frequently require additional processing time and may benefit from having content broken down into smaller, more manageable segments. In rural schools, where teachers are under pressure to meet curriculum deadlines and manage large classes, there is simply no space for such accommodations. The relentless pursuit of content coverage thus becomes a barrier to meaningful learning for neurodivergent students, who are systematically left behind.

13. CONCLUSION

People in rural areas have their own beliefs about what causes learning difficulties and have implemented what they think will be the solution, such as praying, performing rituals, and blaming their children for not doing well at school. As knowledge of neurodiversity slowly expands in their context, the resources needed to support neurodivergent learners are limited to schools' resources, such as psychologists, learning materials, and trained teachers with experience teaching neurodiverse learners. Also, levels of education about neurodiversity are increasing as many parents have opportunities to further their education, and some bursaries cater to people in rural areas. There are young parents in the rural areas who understand, though not wholly, but they do have an idea of learning disorders. With access to online devices, if the parent is not ignorant, they can research what the teacher told them and learn more about what their child is going through and how they can support them. The biggest challenge now is the lack of an environment that will successfully support neurodivergent learners in the rural context, due to limited resources, the curriculum we have in South Africa, and teachers who are not well-trained to implement inclusive education in their classrooms.

14. Recommendations

As knowledge of neurodiversity slowly expands in the rural context, research should focus more on what can be done to support neurodiversity, specifically in this context, considering risk factors and the assets communities must support learners. Schools can implement programs that address environmental barriers faced by neurodivergent learners in rural contexts. Schools can partner with parents, communities, and other stakeholders who bring different skills, knowledge, and competencies. The South African inclusive education curriculum must be reviewed, as it is not practical. There should be training for teachers and psychologists, and more and more psychologists should be encouraged to work in rural areas, so that learners have greater access, and, as a result, knowledge of available treatments can expand. Communities can hold group sessions where parents offer one another support and validation.

15. Limitations of the study

Self-study research methodology relies solely on the researcher. Most of the research findings were based on personal reflections, the history of the rural areas, and unobtrusive observation. Data collection methods, such as interviews with parents, could introduce different perspectives into the study.

16. Acknowledgments

The authors are grateful to the authors whose works they used as a resource.

17. Availability of Data Statement

The article and supplementary materials contain the original contributions to the study; for further information, contact the corresponding author.

18. Funding

19. The study was carried out without financial support.

20. Competing Interests

The study's author asserts that no financial or business connections are perceived as a potential conflict of interest.

21. References

- Andrade, C. (2021). The inconvenient truth about convenience and purposive samples. *Indian Journal of Psychological Medicine*, 43(1), 86-88.
- Bertilsdotter Rosqvist, H., N. Chown, and A. Stenning, eds. 2020. *Neurodiversity Studies: A New Critical Paradigm*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Bervoets J., and Hens K., (2020): Going beyond the Catch-22 of autism diagnosis and research. The moral implications of "not" asking 'What is Autism?' *Front. Psychol* 10th Novem-ber <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.529193>
- Bervoets, J., & Hens, K. (2020). Going beyond the catch-22 of autism diagnosis and research. The moral case for changing the autism diagnostic threshold. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 11, 529-546.
- Bradshaw, J., Steiner, A.M., Genoux, G., & Koegel, L.K. (2015). Feasibility and effectiveness of very early intervention for infants at-risk for autism spectrum disorder: A systematic review. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 45, 778-794.
- Carruthers, A. (2020). 'I think you need to be a helicopter parent': how mothers of neurodiverse children understand their child's schooling experiences and their role in their child's education (Doctoral dissertation, University of Southern Queensland).
- Chapman, R. 2020. "Neurodiversity, Disability, Wellbeing." In Bertilsdotter Rosqvist, H., N. Chown, and A. Stenning, eds. 2020. *Neurodiversity Studies: A New Critical Paradigm*. Abingdon: Routledge, 57-72
- Comerford, S. A. (2025). Parenting a neurodiverse child during the elementary school years: A parent's autoethnography. *Journal of Autoethnography*, 6(1), 129-149.
- Daily Dispatch. (2025, June 23). Teachers battle the odds to boost literacy at rural Giyani school. *Daily Dispatch*. <https://www.dailydispatch.co.za/news/2025-06-23-teachers-battle-the-odds-to-boost-literacy-at-rural-giyani-school/>
- Daugherty, M. W. (2013). Redefining normal: The path to self-attainment for people with neurodiversity: How do people from the neurodiverse spectrum define self-fulfillment? (Doctoral dissertation, California State University, Sacramento).
- Daugherty, T. K. (2013). Maslow's hierarchy of needs. In *Encyclopedia of Cross-Cultural Psychology* (pp. 841-843). John Wiley & Sons.
- Dawadi, S., Shrestha, S., & Giri, R. A. (2021). Mixed-methods research: A discussion on its types, challenges, and criticisms. *Journal of Practical Studies in Education*, 2(2), 25-36.
- Dervan, M., Egan, M., & Ring, E. (2024). The Supportive Role of Peers in Realising an Inclusive School System for Neurodiverse Learners. *Learn the Journal of the Irish Learning Support Association*, 45, 28-40.
- Eddy, A., Frawley, T., Gavin, B., Quigley, E., & Valeur, C. (Eds.). (2025). *Neurodiversity and Higher Education*. Taylor & Francis.

- Fernando, T. (2025). Embracing neurodiversity in education: A review of inclusive practices, policies, and pedagogies. *SchoRes Journal of Education Research*, 2(2).
- Frontiers in Education. (2025). Mainstream educators' understanding of autism spectrum disorder in South Africa's Tzaneen Circuit. *Frontiers in Education*, 10, 1641336.
- Fugill, C. (2025). The clock is the curriculum: Why the school day still shapes who wins—and who walks away. Scotch College Perth. <https://www.scotch.wa.edu.au/the-clock-is-the-curriculum-why-the-school-day-still-shapes-who-wins-and-who-walks-away-scotch-co/>
- Geduld, D., & Majola, E. (2025). Navigating inclusive practices: Experiences of families with neurodiverse learners in early childhood in the Sarah Baartman District, Rural Humansdorp, South Africa. *International Journal of Research in Community Studies*, 7(1). <https://doi.org/10.38140/ijrcs-2024.vol7.1.06>
- Huang, J., John, K. I., and De Wet, A. C. (2022). Parent's and adolescents' perceptions on the embodied joint therapy in adolescents with neurodiverse conditions (Doctoral dissertation, University of Johannesburg).
- Huang, Y., Wang, Y., Wang, H., Liu, Z., & Zhang, X. (2020). Prevalence and factors related to parental perception of autism spectrum disorder in China. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 17(23), 8888.
- Kanmodi, K. K., Nyanzi, L. A., & Nwafor, J. N. (2021). Maslow's hierarchy of needs and the COVID-19 pandemic: A review study. *Journal of Health and Social Sciences*, 6(2), 187-196.
- Kanmodi, K., Fagbule, O., Ogunniyi, K., Ogbuide, M., Samuel, V., Aliemeke, E., ... & Musa, S. (2020). Determinants of sexual practices among secondary school students in Nigeria: Focusing on socio-cultural and school-related factors. *Rwanda Medical Journal*, 77(4), 32-37. <https://www.bioline.org.br/abstract?rw20038>
- Ker, G., & Van Gorp, R. (2023). Embracing neurodiversity: Supporting learners to success. *Contemporary research topics*, 36(5), 36-45.
- Kodom, M., Owusu, A. Y., & Kodom, P. N. B. (2019). Quality healthcare service assessment under Ghana's national health insurance scheme. *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, 54(4), 569-587.
- Laitila, N. (2018). Awareness, Acceptance & Appreciation: A Road to Changing Views on Autism in South Africa.
- Lawton, K., & Kasari, C. (2012). Teacher-implemented joint attention intervention: Pilot randomised controlled study for preschoolers with autism. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 80, 687-693.
- Lochmiller, C. R. (2021). Conducting thematic analysis with qualitative data. *The Qualitative Report*, 26(6), 2029-2044.
- Mahadew, A. (2024). Challenges in early childhood care and education in impoverished rural communities in KwaZulu-Natal Province, South Africa. *Interdisciplinary Journal of Rural and Community Studies*, 6, 1-16. <https://doi.org/10.38140/ijrcs-2024.vol6.21>
- Makaya, P. (2025). Parent-teacher collaboration as a catalyst for enhancing the educational outcomes of children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in inclusive settings in Masvingo District, Zimbabwe. *Journal on Educational Psychology*, 18(3), 23-31.
- Mirfin-Veitch, B., Jalota, N., & Schmidt, L. (2020). Responding to neurodiversity in the education context: An integrative literature review. *Donald Beasley Institute*, 56.
- Mitran, C. L. (2021). A Paradigm Shift: Examining the Experiences, Challenges, Perceptions, and Recommendations of Licensed Counselors and Mental Health Providers Working with Neurodiverse Adults. *North Carolina State University*.
- Murphy, K. J., Griffin, L. L., Nolan, G., Haigh, A., Hochstrasser, T., Ciuti, S., & Kane, A. (2022). Applied autoethnography: A method for reporting best practice in ecological and environmental research. *Journal of Applied Ecology*, 59(11), 2688-2697.
- Ndou-Chikwena, N. N., & Sefotho, M. M. (2025). Stakeholders' perspectives on the inclusion of neurodiverse learners in the mainstream curricula. *South African Journal of Childhood Education*, 15(1), 1622.
- Olanrewaju, M. K., & Omoponle, A. H. (2017). Influence of peer pressure, socio-economic status and social networking on students' academic performance in Oyo state. *Africa Education Evaluation*, 1(1), 1-10. doi 10.26762/aee.201700001
- Omoponle, A. H. (2023). Delinquency Among Senior Secondary School Adolescents: Psycho-Personological Factors: Psycho-Personological Factors. *International Journal of Curriculum and Instruction*, 15(3), 2145-2165. <https://ijci.globets.org/index.php/IJCI/article/view/1380>
- Onyemah, T. N., & Omoponle, A. H. (2022). Child Abuse and Family Background as Predictors of Poor Academic Performance Among Adolescents in Special Schools of Ibadan-Nigeria. *Journal of Lexicography and Terminology* (Online ISSN 2664-0899. Print ISSN 2517-9306), 6(1), 106-119. <https://mines.unza.zm/index.php/jlt/article/view/874>

- Pillay, J. (2020). Social justice implications for educational psychologists working with orphans and vulnerable children in South Africa. *School Psychology International*, 41(1), 37-52.
- Pytko, E. G. (2025). Changing futures in rural schools. *Our Tennessee*. <https://our.tennessee.edu/2025/rural-tennessee-schools-mental-health-resources/>
- Rouse, A. (2024). Least restrictive environment: Elementary regular education teachers' perceptions of including autism spectrum disorder students in the general education classroom in rural school districts [Doctoral dissertation, Lincoln Memorial University]. ProQuest Dissertations Publishing.
- Roy, R., & Jain, S. (2021). Global neurodiverse support systems: Primary research findings on critical challenges and optimised solutions in Mumbai, India. *The Physician*, 6(3), 1-22.
- Sherman, E. (2023). Autoethnography on Autistic Agency: An Autistic-Led and Autistic-Driven Transition Process to Full-Time Academia (Doctoral dissertation, Fielding Graduate University).
- Singer, J. 2017. "Neurodiversity: The birth of an idea. Amazon Kindle eBook, self-published. "
- Singer, J. R. (2017). Expanding approaches for research: Understanding and using trustworthiness in qualitative research. *Journal of Developmental Education*, 44(1), 26-28.
- University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Center for Advancing Student Learning. (2025). Designing for neurodiversity: A faculty guide to supporting all learners. <https://uwm.edu/advancing-learning/designing-for-neurodiversity/>
- Walker, N. (2021). What is neurodiversity?
- Woods, R., D., Milton, L., Arnold, and S. Graby. 2018. "Redefining Critical Autism Studies: A More Inclusive Interpretation." *Disability & Society* 33 (6): 974–979. doi:10.1080/09687599.2018.1454380.