TEACHERS’ ATTITUDE TOWARDS AUTISM AMONG PRIMARY SCHOOL PUPILS: IMPLICATION FOR PSYCHO-SOCIAL REHABILITATION AND SUPPORT

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Abstract
This study investigated the teachers’ attitude towards autism among primary school pupils: implication for psycho-social rehabilitation and support. Descriptive survey research design was adopted for this study. The population of the study consisted of 2,347 primary school teachers in Ilorin Education Zone, Kwara State, Nigeria. A total number of 379 primary school teachers were purposively sampled for the study. The researcher used a self-developed questionnaire called “Teachers’ Attitude on Pupils’ with Autism (TAPA)” as data collection instrument. The instrument has two sections; section ‘A’ deals with the demographic variables of the respondents while section ‘B’ contains statements on teachers’ attitude on pupils’ with autism. The questionnaire is designed based on four point modified likert scale of Strongly Disagree (SD), 1; Disagree (D), 2; Agree (A), 3; and Strongly Agree (SA), 4 respectively. The instrument was duly validated by experts. The reliability coefficient index power stood at 0.86. The data were analysed using Independent Sample t-test. The study found that there is a significant difference between male and female primary school teachers’ attitudes toward autism in Ilorin metropolis, Kwara State, Nigeria. In the light of the foregoing, it was recommended that teachers should be encouraged to develop positive attitude toward different types of disabilities especially autism. This will assist in providing the much needed instructional remedial and psychological assistance to them.

Keywords: Autism, psycho-social, gender, rehabilitation, attitude

Introduction
Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) has gained much attention in recent years, as increasingly more children are receiving an ASD diagnosis. Globally, 1 in 160 children is estimated to have ASD, and in the US, estimates of ASD’s prevalence are even higher, at 1 in 59 among eight-year olds (World Health Organization ([WHO, 2019). ASD is understood to be a neurodevelopmental condition, one characterized by early-onset difficulties in social communication and interaction, and unusually restricted, repetitive behaviour and narrowly focused interests. ASD is diagnosed clinically, often in a multidisciplinary assessment assisted by specific diagnostic tests. Rather than the picture becoming clearer after several decades of research, a consensus has emerged that ASD is a complex and heterogeneous disorder (Jacobs, Steyaert, Dierickx & Hens, 2018). This is the case in terms of its phenotypical presentation and with regard to aetiology, treatment, and prognosis. Such complexity and heterogeneity can prove problematic for clinicians, who have the responsibility of applying a diagnosis of ASD to a child, or of treating him/her and his/her parents.
Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) are complex neurological disorders that have a long term effects on the skills and abilities of the child (Osuji & Evanero, 2017). Autism is characterized by impairments in social interaction and communication, possible impairments in cognitive functioning, and often impairments in fine and gross motor skills (Bradford, 2010). Autism is a pervasive developmental disorder that inhibits the normal development of infants and children with the disorder (Umezulike, 2017). Nigerian Autistic Society (2011) consider autism as one of the most distressing form of mental disorder affecting one in every hundred and fifty new born child. A child with severe autism find it difficult to speak, may have difficulty in communication and this have a negative effects on their education and training.

Educating all learners in an inclusive classroom continue to face some setback related to learners’ developmental problems (Geraldina, 2015). Pupils with ASD find it difficult to initiate, engage in and maintain peer social relationships with other students and when they do, it is not deep relationships (Church, Alisanki & Amanullah as cited in Osuji & Evanero, 2017). Most teachers in our inclusive classrooms have failed to identify and recognize learners with disabilities, especially, Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). The reason for this are as a result of knowledge, challenges and attitudes of teachers towards teaching learners with ASD with other learners who are normal in an inclusive classrooms (Busby, Ingram, Bowron, Jan & Lyons, 2012). Generally, students with autism lack concentration in an activity of academic nature, thereby affecting their performance in schools.

Children with autism are more likely to have language, communication, repetitive, patterns of behaviour and social skills problems (Jones & Frederickson, 2010; Hayers, 2013; Lindsay, Proulx, DScott & Thomson, 2014). These children are said to have communication deficits exhibit in responding inappropriately in conversations, misreading nonverbal interactions, or having difficulty building friendships appropriate to their age (Geraldina, 2015). The inclusion of students with disabilities in an inclusive educational environment is a successful approach for ensuring that those students develop skills in many different areas of academic achievement, social development and general communication (Alquraini & Gut, 2012). Therefore, same can be applied to children with autism, since most of them experience deficit in those area, therefore educating them in an inclusive education will help them acquire and master skills in those areas.

It is very necessary that stakeholders in education should recognize that students with disabilities require higher rates of interactions than do students without disabilities (Cameron, Cook & Tankersley, 2012). Consequently, educational stakeholders, teachers in particular need to have a comprehensive knowledge of autism spectrum disorder and be able to manage the manifested overt behaviours (Hart &Malian, 2013). This implies that educating children with autism in inclusive classrooms needs teachers who have knowledge and skills of inclusive settings.

It is a general believes that regular class teachers have little or no knowledge regarding inclusive education compared to those in special education (Mader, 2017). Teachers’ views on their knowledge on inclusive education of secondary school students suggest a feeling of frustration and stress in terms of providing appropriate support to children with disabilities because the teachers were not adequately prepared to teach in an inclusive programmes (Sukbunpant, Arthur-Kelly & Dempsey, 2013). Not much training have been conducted on inclusive education in Nigeria. Busby, Ingram, Bowron, Jan, & Lyons (2012) found that all the respondents reported minimal or no training or experience regarding teaching
students with autism. They also revealed that teachers’ education candidates had few opportunities for experiences in teaching children with autism. This implies that most of the teachers who happened to teach classes where children with autism are included, they are less likely to handle them appropriately because of the minimum knowledge and skills they possess towards teaching children with autism in inclusive classrooms.

Conversely, in the study conducted by Soto-Chodiman, Pooley, Cohen & Taylor (2012) respondents indicated that not all of their allocated assistants were sufficiently trained to provide them with the required level of support. They further concluded that adequate training was considered by the sampled teachers as a key component in effectively facilitating inclusive education. Moreover, the teachers perceived the successful implementation of inclusive education to be largely dependent on the provision of professional development training for teachers prior to and during the period they have students with Autism Spectrum Disorder in their inclusive class. Likewise, Jinale-Snape, Douglas, Topping, Kerr & Smith (2005) concluded that teachers should have adequate autism-specific training because it enables them conduct individual assessment of the child, hence, can design an individual education programme that takes account of the individual profile and personality of the child.

With the support provided to children with autism in an inclusive classroom, there exist several challenges in the inclusion of these children (Hill & Sukbunpant, 2013). Several studies have revealed these. A study by Busby et al., (2012) reveals some challenges that some teachers perceive in teaching children with autism. In this study, teachers perceived the teaching of children with autism as a highly individualized and specialized process. The other challenge was lack of effective synergy and collaboration between teachers and parents of children with autism which is seen as time consuming and difficult. Consequently, they perceived children with autism exhibiting abnormal or aberrant behaviour that would not be seen in the average or normal classroom students therefore making the teaching so difficult especially when put together by others without such behaviours. The respondents were of the opinions that autistic children would disrupt the routine of the classroom with special needs for misbehaviour, time constraints, and extra assistance needed for work. Similarly, the respondents assumed that most inclusive education teachers lack the basic knowledge and skills needed to fully include children with autism in their classrooms. All of these indicated that children with autism are more likely to be excluded in regular classes as most teachers find it difficult to handle both children with autism and children without autism.

Alamri and Tyler-Wood (2016) conducted a comparative study of teachers’ attitudes towards children with autism in United States and Saudi Arabia. To determine differences in teachers’ attitude towards autism in Saudi and the U.S., data were gathered, compared, and contrasted from both general education and special education teachers in both countries. The Autism Attitude Scale for Teachers (AAST) is a brief assessment of teachers’ belief that was used in the research. Results indicated significant differences in responses between Saudi and U.S. teachers on 10 of 14 questions asked concerning teacher attitudes towards students with autism. Halloran (2017) examined adults’ implicit and explicit attitudes toward ASD and sought to investigate the impact of gender on participants’ attitudes. Participants (N = 41) completed several explicit measures; The Openness to Autism Scale (OAS), The Attitudes to Autism Scale (AAS) and The Knowledge of Autism Questionnaire (KAQ), participants
also completed an implicit measure, the implicit relational assessment procedure (IRAP). Results revealed that adults had significantly positive attitudes toward ASD. It was also revealed that attitudes did not significantly differ across gender nor were there significant differences across explicit and implicit measures. Similar study also conducted by Halloran (2017) to determine adolescents’ attitudes toward their peers with ASD and investigated the effectiveness of an educational intervention to positively alter attitudes. The study also employed a gender analysis. Participants (N = 31) completed the IRPA, the OAS and the AAS pre-and post the educational intervention. As a result of high attrition rates within the participant sample (N = 15), resulting from failure to reach pre-intervention IRAP criteria, an intention to treat (ITT) analysis was employed. Overall, the intervention had no significant impact on students’ attitudes regarding ASD. However, students reported significantly positive attitudes toward ASD prior to and following the implementation of the intervention. As with the first study, no differences were found across gender within students’ implicit attitudes. Finally, the use of ITT analysis was an exploratory but beneficial element to the current study and a number of differences were reported across the methods of ITT.

The attitude of teachers towards pupils with autism in primary schools is a determining factor for effective instructional programmes and psycho-social support that would cater for the needs of these children. Hence the need to determine the attitude of teachers towards pupils with autism. It is against this backdrop that this study examines teachers’ attitude towards autism among primary school pupils: implication for psycho-social rehabilitation and support.

**Purpose of the study**
The main purpose of this study was to examine the attitudes of primary school teachers towards autism spectrum disorder in primary schools in Ilorin Metropolis, Kwara State, Nigeria.

i. To determine the difference in the teachers’ attitudes towards pupils with autism in relation to gender;

**Research Question**
The study asked the following question:

i. What is the difference in the mean score of male and female teachers’ attitudes towards pupils with autism?

**Null Hypothesis**
H0: There is no significant difference in the mean score of male and female teachers’ attitudes towards pupils with autism in relation to gender.

**Methodology**
Descriptive survey research design was adopted for this study. According to Olayiwola (2010) this research design permits the gathering of information through the use of questionnaires and interviews from a population based on appropriate sampling techniques. This method was adopted because it allows researchers to examine the interrelationship among variables to develop explanatory inferences (Wimmer and Dominick, 2006; Isa 2018). The population of the study consisted of 2,347 primary school teachers in Ilorin Education Zone, Kwara State, Nigeria. A total number of 379 primary school teachers were purposively sampled for the study.
The researcher used a self-developed questionnaire called “Teachers’ Attitude on Pupils’ with Autism (TAPA)” as data collection instrument. The instrument has two sections; section ‘A’ deals with the demographic variables of the respondents while section ‘B’ contains statements on teachers’ attitude on pupils’ with autism. The questionnaire is designed based on four point modified likert scale of Strongly Disagree (SD), 1; Disagree (D), 2; Agree (A), 3; and Strongly Agree (SA), 4 respectively. The instrument was duly validated by experts. The reliability coefficient index power stood at 0.86. The study adopted the 0.64 as the minimum threshold for accepting the reliability strength of the instrument as set by Danjuma and Muhammad (2011). Hence, the instrument was adjudged as adequate for the parent study. The data collected with the instrument was analysed using independent sample t-test.

Results
Research Question
The study asked the following question:
1. What is the difference in the mean score of male and female teachers’ attitudes towards pupils with autism?

Table 1: Descriptive statistics on the difference in the mean score of teachers’ attitudes towards autism spectrum disorder in relation to gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std Dev.</th>
<th>Std. Err</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>207</td>
<td>55.46</td>
<td>11.54</td>
<td>.563</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>172</td>
<td>45.11</td>
<td>20.21</td>
<td>1.292</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Results of descriptive statistics in Table 1 show the mean scores of teachers’ attitudes towards pupils with autism in relation to gender. It indicated the calculated mean value of 55.46 and standard deviation value of 11.54 for male primary school teachers the calculated mean value of 42.00 and standard deviation value of 20.21 for female primary school teachers respectively. The mean difference stood at 10.35 in favour of the male teachers. This implies that male primary school teachers have a positive attitudes towards Autism Spectrum Disorder than the female primary school teachers in the study area.

Hypothesis Testing

H01: There is no significant difference in the teachers’ attitudes towards pupils with autism in relation to gender;

Table 1: Independent Sample t-Test on the difference between teachers Attitudes towards Autism Spectrum Disorder in relation to Gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std Dev.</th>
<th>Std. Err</th>
<th>Df</th>
<th>t-cal</th>
<th>t-crit</th>
<th>Sig (P)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>207</td>
<td>55.46</td>
<td>11.54</td>
<td>.563</td>
<td>377</td>
<td>13.31</td>
<td>1.96</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>172</td>
<td>45.11</td>
<td>20.21</td>
<td>1.292</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Results of the independent sample t-test in table 1 shows that there is significant difference in the teachers’ attitudes towards pupils with autism in relation to gender. This is because the calculated p value of 0.000 was found to be lower than the 0.05 alpha level of significance, while the t-calculated value of 13.31 was found to be higher than the t-critical value of 1.96 at df 377. The calculated mean value of 55.46 and standard deviation value of 11.54 for male primary school teachers is higher than the
calculated mean value of 42.00 and standard deviation value of 20.21 for female primary school teachers. This implies that male primary school teachers have a higher mean response on attitudes towards Autism Spectrum Disorder than the female primary school teachers. Consequently, the null hypothesis is hereby rejected.

**Discussion of the Findings**

The findings of this study showed that there is statistical significant in the attitudes towards Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) between male and female primary school teachers revealed that there was a significant gender difference between male and female primary school teachers on the attitude towards autism spectrum disorder. The findings of this study did not corroborate with that of Alamri and Tyler-Wood (2016) who revealed that attitudes did not significantly differ across gender nor were there significant differences across explicit and implicit measures. The result contradicts that of Park and Chitiyo’s (2011) finding that female teachers are much more likely to exhibit positive attitudes closer to a pupil with ASD. As Park and Chitiyo (2011) posited, socialization differences in empathy can also activate females to display greater positive attitudes in the direction of students with ASD.

**Conclusion**

The teacher is seen role model, a guide, a motivator, a friend and an evaluator to learners and at the same time one of the major significant other within the life-world of a learner. He/she stands in the privileged position not only to be involved with learners for many hours during the day, but to be able to utilise the opportunity. This, therefore places teacher at a vantage position to assist and understand all learners - including learners with behaviour problems. The opportunity is essentially one of assisting learners to become what they are capable of being. The focal point of the findings emanating from this study is that gender affects primary school teachers’ attitude towards Autism Spectrum Disorder.

**Recommendations**

The following recommendations were made based on the findings of the study:

1. Teachers should be encouraged to develop positive attitude toward different types of disabilities especially autism. This will assist in providing the much needed instructional remedial and psychological assistance to them;
2. Both male and female teachers should be given equal training in the knowledge of autism so that they will have a better understanding of autism so as to handle the learners with autism in the classroom well.
3. Teachers on their part should be ready to acquire up-to-date knowledge of autism to handle their learners with the disability in schools.
4. Female teachers should develop positive attitudes towards disabilities in inclusive classrooms, especially autism.

**References**


