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Excluded from Zimbabwe rural schools: Autistic learners' experiences of school exclusion and subsequent re-integration

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to explore the experiences of autistic learners regarding school exclusion and their subsequent reintegration into educational settings in rural Zimbabwe. Despite the growing awareness of autism, there remains a significant gap in understanding how learners with autism navigate exclusion and reintegration processes within rural educational frameworks. This research addresses the need for insights into the unique challenges faced by the learners, particularly in rural contexts where resources and support may be limited. Using a qualitative research approach grounded in constructivist and interpretivist paradigms, data was collected from 15 purposively selected participants, including two teachers, two parents, one counselor, one local village head, and one official from the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education. Participants were chosen based on criteria such as gender, geographical location, age, and expertise. Data generation involved two focus group discussions—one for learners and another for adults—supplemented by triangulation to enhance trustworthiness. Thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) methodology, was employed to interpret the findings. One significant recommendation from the research is the need for tailored training programs for teachers to better support autistic learners. Findings indicate that perceptions of stigma and inadequate support systems significantly hinder the reintegration of autistic learners. State the contribution of this study to scholarship.

Keywords: Autism, Exclusion, Reintegration, Rural areas, Zimbabwe.

INTRODUCTION

In the culturally rich yet under-resourced context of rural Zimbabwe, the educational experiences of autistic learners are often characterized by profound challenges, particularly regarding their exclusion from formal schooling. The interplay between societal perceptions of autism, educational policies, and the practical realities of rural schooling creates a landscape wherein these learners frequently encounter ostracism and marginalization.[1] Such exclusion not only impedes their academic growth but also

[1] Munyaradzi Chidarikire and Munyaradzi Saruchera, "Exploring Multifaceted Impacts of El Niño Driven Drought on Child-Headed Rural Learners' Well-Being in Drought-Prone Chivi, Zimbabwe," *Interdisciplinary Journal of Rural and Community Studies* 6 (2024): 1–13.

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adversely affects their social development and psychological well-being. The reintegration of these individuals into educational institutions poses significant challenges, necessitating holistic strategies that accommodate their unique needs.[2] Current scholarship predominantly focuses on urban educational settings, leaving a notable lacuna concerning the experiences of autistic learners in rural environments.[3] Limited empirical research examines the multifaceted ramifications of exclusion and the subsequent processes of reintegration from the perspectives of autistic learners themselves, their families, and educators.[4]

The discourse in Zimbabwe is particularly relevant given the socio-economic challenges faced by many families. Chidarikire et al. assert that home schooling represents a pragmatic solution for autistic learners who experience exclusion from traditional schools.[5] However, Landa warns that, despite its potential benefits, inadequate resources and a lack of trained personnel can severely compromise the quality of education provided.[6] This gap underscores the necessity for targeted interventions and training programs to aid families choosing homeschooling for their autistic children. Despite the plethora of scholarly work surrounding homeschooling and autistic learners in the above-cited scholars, several research gaps persist. First, there is limited comparative analysis that explores how cultural, economic, and systemic factors influence the effectiveness of home schooling across different contexts. Additionally, most studies tend to focus either on the advantages or on the challenges without providing a balanced viewpoint. This study intends to fill these gaps by conducting a comprehensive analysis of home schooling for autistic learners in rural areas, exploring both the benefits and challenges while proposing actionable solutions based on empirical evidence. This study further addresses these critical gaps by elucidating the lived experiences of autistic learners who have faced exclusion and subsequently navigated the complexities of re-entering schools in rural Zimbabwe.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Bicer and Alsaffar argue that home schooling can provide a tailored educational experience that caters specifically to the unique challenges faced by autistic learners.[7] This perspective highlights the flexibility that home schooling offers, allowing for individualized learning strategies that may not be available in traditional settings. Conversely, Emond et al. posit that while homeschooling can be effective, it also risks social isolation for autistic children, as they may miss out on vital peer interactions and socialization opportunities that occur in schools.[8] In Britain, Adams et al. emphasize the positive outcomes associated with customized curricula that align with the individual learning styles of autistic learners.[9] This perspective underscores the potential for enhanced academic performance

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[2] James Adams et al., "Comprehensive Nutritional and Dietary Intervention for Autism Spectrum Disorder—A Randomized, Controlled 12-Month Trial," *Nutrients* 10, no. 3 (March 17, 2018): 369, https://doi.org/10.3390/nu10030369.

[3] Boli Cheng et al., "Vitamin A Deficiency Increases the Risk of Gastrointestinal Comorbidity and Exacerbates Core Symptoms in Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder," *Pediatric Research* 89, no. 1 (2021): 211–16; Min Guo et al., "Vitamin and Mineral Status of Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder in Hainan Province of China: Associations with Symptoms," *Nutritional Neuroscience* 23, no. 10 (October 2, 2020): 803–10, https://doi.org/10.1080/1028415X.2018.1558762.

[4] Hatice Altun et al., "The Levels of Vitamin D, Vitamin D Receptor, Homocysteine and Complex B Vitamin in Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders," *Clinical Psychopharmacology and Neuroscience* 16, no. 4 (November 30, 2018): 383–90, https://doi.org/10.9758/cpn.2018.16.4.383.

[5] Chidarikire Munyaradzi, Theresia Joakim Kanyopa, and Matseliso Mokhele-Magwalwa, "Protracted Distances from Home to School Influence ECD Learners' Psychological Well-Being at Rural Primary Schools in Masvingo South District, Zimbabwe," *International Journal of Studies in Psychology* 5, no. 3 (October 30, 2025): 74–80, https://doi.org/10.38140/ijspsy.v5i3.2167.

[6] Rebecca J. Landa, "Efficacy of Early Interventions for Infants and Young Children with, and at Risk for, Autism Spectrum Disorders," *International Review of Psychiatry* 30, no. 1 (January 2, 2018): 25–39, https://doi.org/10.1080/09540261.2018.1432574.

[7] Ayse Humeyra Bicer and Ayten Aylin Alsaffar, "Body Mass Index, Dietary Intake and Feeding Problems of Turkish Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)," *Research in Developmental Disabilities* 34, no. 11 (November 2013): 3978–87, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ridd.2013.08.024.

[8] Alan Emond et al., "Feeding Symptoms, Dietary Patterns, and Growth in Young Children With Autism Spectrum Disorders," *Pediatrics* 126, no. 2 (August 1, 2010): e337–42, https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2009-2391.

[9] Emma Adams et al., "A Qualitative Study Exploring Access to Mental Health and Substance Use Support among Individuals Experiencing Homelessness during COVID-19," *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 19, no. 6 (March 15, 2022): 3459, https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph19063459.

through tailored home education. In contrast, Babinska et al. raise concerns about the regulatory framework governing home schooling, suggesting that inadequate oversight may lead to substandard educational experiences for some autistic learners.[10] This raises questions about equality of access to quality education across different home-schooling environments. In Botswana, Lai et al. note that home schooling allows for a more individualized approach and can help circumvent the limitations of the formal education system, which is often ill-equipped to cater to autistic learners.[11] However, Babinska et al. raise concerns about parental capacity, suggesting that not all families possess the requisite knowledge and skills to educate their autistic children effectively at home.[12] This creates a disparity in educational quality that could exacerbate existing inequalities. In South Africa, literature on homeschooling for autistic children reflects a complex interplay between opportunity and challenge. Kanyopa and Chidarikire advocate for the recognition of homeschooling as an equally valid educational pathway, emphasizing its potential to foster an inclusive learning environment.[13] Conversely, Saad et al. critique the lack of institutional support for homeschooling families, arguing that many parents feel overwhelmed and unsupported, especially when faced with the unique challenges of educating an autistic child.[14] This indicates a pressing need for systemic change to support homeschooling practices.

This literature review explores the challenges encountered by autistic learners and their families in the home-schooling context in different countries. In the United States, the discourse on homeschooling for autistic learners is multifaceted. Meguid et al. assert that while home schooling offers a unique opportunity for personalized educational interventions, many families face significant hurdles.[15] Difficulties include locating appropriate educational resources and the psychological burden of undertaking the entire responsibility of learning and socialization. Conversely, Sweetman et al, emphasize that the lack of structured support systems can lead to feelings of isolation and stress among parents, which ultimately impacts the educational outcomes for their children.[16] The dichotomy in these perspectives highlights a need for further exploration of sustainable support frameworks for families engaged in home schooling. The British context presents its own unique challenges in the arena of home schooling for autistic learners. Weir et al. provide a critical lens on the inadequacies of governmental oversight, suggesting that the lack of regulation can yield uneven educational standards.[17] This absence of structure may contribute to inadequate learning experiences for autistic children, who often require specialized pedagogical approaches. In contrast, Landa argues that the bureaucratic challenges encountered by parents seeking to register for homeschooling can exacerbate the stress of managing the educational needs of their autistic children.[18] Here, compliance with regulatory frameworks becomes an additional layer of challenge that warrants further investigation. The scenario in Botswana reveals both challenges and potential avenues for growth in homeschooling. Cheng et al. identify the fundamental lack of parental training and resources, asserting that many families lack the

[10] Katarina Babinska et al., "Gastrointestinal Symptoms and Feeding Problems and Their Associations with Dietary Interventions, Food Supplement Use, and Behavioral Characteristics in a Sample of Children and Adolescents with Autism Spectrum Disorders," *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 17, no. 17 (September 1, 2020): 6372, https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph17176372.

[11] Meng-Chuan Lai et al., "Prevalence of Co-Occurring Mental Health Diagnoses in the Autism Population: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis," *The Lancet Psychiatry* 6, no. 10 (October 2019): 819–29, https://doi.org/10.1016/S2215-0366(19)30289-5.

[12] Babinska et al., "Gastrointestinal Symptoms and Feeding Problems and Their Associations with Dietary Interventions, Food Supplement Use, and Behavioral Characteristics in a Sample of Children and Adolescents with Autism Spectrum Disorders."

[13] Theresia Joakim Kanyopa and Chidarikire Munyaradzi, "Peer Counselling as an Intervention Strategy to Mitigate Adolescent Learners' Pregnancies in Rural Primary Schools in the Matabeleland North Region of Zimbabwe," *International Journal of Studies in Sexuality Education* 1, no. 2 (2025): 55–60.

[14] Khaled Saad et al., "Vitamin D Status in Autism Spectrum Disorders and the Efficacy of Vitamin D Supplementation in Autistic Children," *Nutritional Neuroscience* 19, no. 8 (September 13, 2016): 346–51, https://doi.org/10.1179/1476830515Y.0000000019.

[15] Nagwa A. Meguid et al., "Reduced Serum Levels of 25-Hydroxy and 1,25-Dihydroxy Vitamin D in Egyptian Children with Autism," *The Journal of Alternative and Complementary Medicine* 16, no. 6 (June 2010): 641–45, https://doi.org/10.1089/acm.2009.0349.

[16] Deirdre U. Sweetman et al., "Zinc and Vitamin A Deficiency in a Cohort of Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder," *Child: Care, Health and Development* 45, no. 3 (May 16, 2019): 380–86, https://doi.org/10.1111/cch.12655.

[17] Elizabeth Weir et al., "An Investigation of the Diet, Exercise, Sleep, BMI, and Health Outcomes of Autistic Adults," *Molecular Autism* 12, no. 1 (May 8, 2021): 31, https://doi.org/10.1186/s13229-021-00441-x.

[18] Landa, "Efficacy of Early Interventions for Infants and Young Children with, and at Risk for, Autism Spectrum Disorders."

pedagogical skills necessary to effectively educate their autistic children at home.[19] This deficiency can perpetuate educational inequities. Alternatively, Kim et al. highlight a burgeoning interest among parents to form cooperative networks, which can alleviate some of the isolated struggles faced in home education.[20] However, the question arises as to how effectively these networks can provide the specialized support that autistic learners require.

In South Africa, the challenges surrounding home schooling for autistic learners are magnified by socio-economic disparities. Kanyopa and Chidarikire posit that many families initiate home schooling as a stopgap measure due to the inadequacies of the formal education system, yet they often lack the necessary resources to implement effective home-schooling strategies.[21] This study emphasizes that the financial strain can lead to compromises in educational quality. On the other hand, Buro et al. point to the psychological effects faced by families engaged in home schooling, such as heightened stress and social isolation, creating an environment that may hinder the overall educational experience.[22] Within the Zimbabwean context, home schooling presents its own set of challenges for autistic learners and their families. Chidarikire et al. emphasize that socio-economic hardships often limit parental capacity to deliver quality education at home.[23] Many families face the dual burden of lacking resources while also striving to combat widespread misinformation about autism. In contrast, Castro et al. highlight that homeschooling can serve as a proactive measure against systemic exclusion from mainstream education.[24] However, this comes with the caveat of inadequate training and support for parents, raising questions about how to sustainably equip families. Despite the extensive scholarship regarding homeschooling challenges for autistic learners in various contexts, significant research gaps remain. Most existing literature tends to focus on either the challenges of isolation and resource inadequacy or the regulatory and systemic issues without adequately synthesizing these multiple layers.[25] Furthermore, it has been noted that comparative studies that include diverse cultural and socio-economic contexts are scarce. As a result, this study seeks to address these gaps by providing a comprehensive examination of the challenges faced by autistic learners and their families in the home-schooling environment, aiming to offer holistic recommendations that could enhance educational outcomes across different contexts.

On solutions, in the United States, the dialogue around homeschooling for autistic learners often emphasizes resource accessibility and community support. Emond et al. argue for the establishment of local co-ops and community networks aimed at providing resources and social opportunities for home-schooled autistic children.[26] The above study suggests that such collaborations can mitigate feelings of isolation while ensuring access to specialized teaching materials. Conversely, Lai et al. advocate for the integration of technology in home schooling, positing that online platforms can facilitate skill development and offer virtual social interactions, thereby enriching the educational experience.[27] While

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[19] Cheng et al., "Vitamin A Deficiency Increases the Risk of Gastrointestinal Comorbidity and Exacerbates Core Symptoms in Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder."

[20] Eun-Kyung Kim et al., "Alterations in Lipid Profile of Autistic Boys: A Case Control Study," *Nutrition Research* 30, no. 4 (April 2010): 255–60, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.nutres.2010.04.002.

[21] Kanyopa and Munyaradzi, "Peer Counselling as an Intervention Strategy to Mitigate Adolescent Learners' Pregnancies in Rural Primary Schools in the Matabeleland North Region of Zimbabwe."

[22] Acadia W. Buro et al., "Diet Quality in an Ethnically Diverse Sample of Children and Adolescents with Autism Spectrum Disorder Compared with Nationally Representative Data," *Disability and Health Journal* 14, no. 1 (January 2021): 100981, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dhjo.2020.100981.

[23] Munyaradzi, Kanyopa, and Mokhele-Magwalwa, "Protracted Distances from Home to School Influence ECD Learners' Psychological Well-Being at Rural Primary Schools in Masvingo South District, Zimbabwe."

[24] Kamila Castro et al., "Feeding Behavior and Dietary Intake of Male Children and Adolescents with Autism Spectrum Disorder: A Case-control Study," *International Journal of Developmental Neuroscience* 53, no. 1 (October 16, 2016): 68–74, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijdevneu.2016.07.003.

[25] E. Whitney Evans et al., "Dietary Patterns and Body Mass Index in Children with Autism and Typically Developing Children," *Research in Autism Spectrum Disorders* 6, no. 1 (January 2012): 399–405, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.rasd.2011.06.014; Guo et al., "Vitamin and Mineral Status of Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder in Hainan Province of China: Associations with Symptoms."

[26] Emond et al., "Feeding Symptoms, Dietary Patterns, and Growth in Young Children With Autism Spectrum Disorders."

[27] Jianbo Lai et al., "Factors Associated With Mental Health Outcomes Among Health Care Workers Exposed to Coronavirus Disease 2019," *JAMA Network Open* 3, no. 3 (March 23, 2020): e203976, https://doi.org/10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2020.3976.

both perspectives underscore potential solutions, there remains a gap regarding how these initiatives can be systematically implemented across various rural contexts. In Britain, scholarly perspectives diverge on effective solutions for homeschooling autistic learners. Saad et al. emphasise the need for robust governmental policies that support homeschooling practices.[28] This study posits that policy reforms could create frameworks for oversight and support, assisting families in navigating educational challenges effectively. On the other hand, Weir et al. highlight the importance of training programs for parents, advocating for workshops that provide strategies and resources tailored specifically to the education of autistic children.[29] This indicates a dual focus on structural and practical solutions, yet an exploration of the intersection between policy implementation and parental training in rural settings remains under-researched. In Botswana, the discourse on homeschooling solutions emphasizes parental empowerment and community collaboration. Adams et al. suggest that intensive training sessions for parents can equip them with pedagogical skills necessary for effective homeschooling.[30] The aforementioned scholars argue that well-informed parents are better positioned to support their children's educational needs. In contrast, Castro et al. promote community-based resource centres that could serve as hubs for sharing educational materials and fostering parental cooperation.[31] While these solutions provide a constructive roadmap, the existing literature lacks comprehensive studies on the impact of such initiatives in rural settings, revealing a vital area for further exploration.

In South Africa, the conversation around homeschooling solutions reveals a keen awareness of socio-economic disparities. Kanyopa and Chidarikire advocate for the development of mobile educational units that can reach rural areas and provide targeted instruction to home-schooled autistic learners.[32] This initiative aims to bridge the gap created by geographical isolation. In contrast, Bicer and Alsaffar emphasize the potential of digital learning platforms tailored for families, suggesting that virtual resources could complement homeschooling efforts and introduce children to wider social networks.[33] Both perspectives highlight innovative approaches, yet there remains a significant gap concerning the feasibility and scalability of these solutions in diverse rural contexts. In Zimbabwe, discussions surrounding solutions for home schooling focus on community-driven initiatives and awareness-raising efforts. Chidarikire et al. comment that peer support groups can play a crucial role in providing emotional and practical support to families engaged in home schooling.[34] Through sharing experiences and resources, these groups can alleviate feelings of isolation. On the other hand, Lai et al. emphasize the need for governmental support in the form of policy frameworks that promote training and resource allocation for homeschooling families.[35] While both perspectives provide valuable insights, the literature does not sufficiently address how these solutions can be harmonized, particularly in rural environments where resources may be limited.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative approach, focusing on understanding the lived experiences of autistic learners concerning school exclusion and reintegration in rural Zimbabwe. This approach allows for in-depth exploration of personal perspectives, enabling a nuanced understanding of the complexities

[28] Saad et al., "Vitamin D Status in Autism Spectrum Disorders and the Efficacy of Vitamin D Supplementation in Autistic Children."
[29] Weir et al., "An Investigation of the Diet, Exercise, Sleep, BMI, and Health Outcomes of Autistic Adults."
[30] Adams et al., "Comprehensive Nutritional and Dietary Intervention for Autism Spectrum Disorder—A Randomized, Controlled 12-Month Trial."
[31] Castro et al., "Feeding Behavior and Dietary Intake of Male Children and Adolescents with Autism Spectrum Disorder: A Case-control Study."
[32] Kanyopa and Munyaradzi, "Peer Counselling as an Intervention Strategy to Mitigate Adolescent Learners' Pregnancies in Rural Primary Schools in the Matabeleland North Region of Zimbabwe."
[33] Bicer and Alsaffar, "Body Mass Index, Dietary Intake and Feeding Problems of Turkish Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)."
[34] Munyaradzi, Kanyopa, and Mokhele-Magwalwa, "Protracted Distances from Home to School Influence ECD Learners' Psychological Well-Being at Rural Primary Schools in Masvingo South District, Zimbabwe."
[35] Lai et al., "Prevalence of Co-Occurring Mental Health Diagnoses in the Autism Population: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis."

involved in the phenomenon being studied.[36] The study is situated within an interpretivist paradigm, which emphasizes the subjective nature of social reality. Interpretivism prioritizes the viewpoints and interpretations of participants, aiming to gain insights into their experiences and the meanings they attach to them.[37] Through utilizing this paradigm, the research acknowledges the significance of context and individual differences in shaping experiences of exclusion and reintegration.[38] Fifteen participants were purposively selected to ensure a diverse representation of experiences and perspectives related to school exclusion and reintegration among autistic learners.[39] The participant group comprised four teachers (two males and two females), four parents (two males and two females), one school counselor, one local village head, and one official from the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education. The selection criteria were designed to capture a range of insights, considering factors such as gender, geographical location, age, and expertise. This purposeful sampling allowed for a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted issue from the viewpoints of various stakeholders, ensuring that the nuances of each perspective contributed to the overall findings of the research.

Data for the study was generated through two focus group discussions and open-ended questionnaires, each tailored to gather distinct insights from different sets of participants. The first focus group consisted of autistic learners, providing a platform for them to share their direct experiences regarding exclusion and subsequent reintegration into school settings. The second focus group included adult participants—teachers, parents, the counselor, the village head, and the Ministry of Education official—who contributed their perspectives on the factors affecting learners' experiences. This dual focus group approach facilitated a rich dialogue, enabling a deeper exploration of the themes surrounding school exclusion and reintegration from both the learners' and adults' viewpoints, thereby enhancing the richness of the data collected. The open-ended questionnaires were used to allow some participants who were not able to attend focus group discussion to allow them to contribute the study. The participants freely expressed their views by answering questions on the questionnaires.

To enhance the trustworthiness of the data, triangulation was employed. This triangulation involved corroborating data using focus group discussions and open-ended questionnaires to get different perspectives (participants from different roles in the educational system) to ensure a more robust understanding of the data. The generated data was thematically analyzed following Braun and Clarke's framework. This process involved familiarization with the data, coding, generating themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report.[40] The research adhered strictly to ethical standards to ensure the integrity and protection of participants involved in the study. Confidentiality was prioritized, with measures taken to safeguard participants' identities and the information gathered.[41] Informed consent was a fundamental aspect, whereby participants were provided with comprehensive information regarding the study's purpose, procedures, and their rights, including the right to withdraw at any time without repercussions. Furthermore, the researchers made a clear effort to articulate the objectives of the study, fostering transparency and trust between the researchers and participants.

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Theme 1: Effectiveness of homeschooling as an alternative educational approach for autistic learners in rural areas

The theme of this study is to explore the effectiveness of homeschooling as an alternative educational approach for autistic learners in rural areas. Through examining the perspectives of various

[36] Munyaradzi, Kanyopa, and Mokhele-Magwalwa, "Protracted Distances from Home to School Influence ECD Learners' Psychological Well-Being at Rural Primary Schools in Masvingo South District, Zimbabwe."
[37] Kim et al., "Alterations in Lipid Profile of Autistic Boys: A Case Control Study."
[38] Saad et al., "Vitamin D Status in Autism Spectrum Disorders and the Efficacy of Vitamin D Supplementation in Autistic Children."
[39] Adams et al., "Comprehensive Nutritional and Dietary Intervention for Autism Spectrum Disorder—A Randomized, Controlled 12-Month Trial."
[40] Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology," *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3, no. 2 (2006): 77–101.
[41] Emond et al., "Feeding Symptoms, Dietary Patterns, and Growth in Young Children With Autism Spectrum Disorders."

stakeholders—including teachers, parents, education officials, and community leaders—the study aims to understand how homeschooling can be tailored to meet the unique needs of autistic learners, particularly in environments where traditional educational resources may be limited. Participant Responses are:

A female teacher narrated that,
I believe that homeschooling can actually cater to the individual learning styles of autistic learners. It allows for flexibility in teaching methods, which can be crucial for their development. I have seen how traditional classrooms sometimes don't accommodate their specific needs.

On the other hand, a male parent argued that,
For my child, homeschooling has been a blessing. It creates a comfortable environment where he can flourish without the fear of bullying or misunderstanding from peers. It's about finding what works best for him, and homeschooling offers that freedom.

Moreover, an official from the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education held that,
The government is still evaluating the role of homeschooling in our education system. We recognize its potential, but it's essential to ensure that there are appropriate guidelines and support in place. We want to make sure that autistic learners receive quality education, even outside traditional schools.

Furthermore, the Village Head expressed that,
In our community, we have seen families opting for homeschooling for their autistic children, mainly because they believe it provides a more supportive environment. However, we also need to discuss how we can unite as a village to provide resources and promote knowledge sharing among these families.

Based on the above narratives by the participants, the study revealed several critical findings on the effectiveness of homeschooling as an alternative educational approach for autistic learners in rural areas. One significant finding indicates that homeschooling allows for a tailored educational experience, enabling parents and educators to adapt curricula and teaching styles to better meet the specific needs of autistic learners.[42] Such customization is particularly vital given the limitations of traditional classroom settings, often characterized by rigid structures and insufficient individualized attention. Additionally, the emotional and social environments provided through homeschooling emerged as pivotal.[43] Participants recognized that the absence of peer bullying and the social misunderstandings frequently encountered in standard educational contexts provides a serene learning atmosphere conducive to personal development.[44] This emotional security not only supports academic growth but also enhances the overall well-being of autistic learners.

This study also identified systemic challenges posed by the current educational framework. There exists a lack of comprehensive guidelines and resources for homeschooling within the government's education policy, which could undermine the effectiveness of this approach.[45] While the potential of homeschooling is acknowledged, the absence of structured support and monitoring raises concerns regarding the quality and integrity of the education provided.[46] Finally, the emphasis on community collaboration emerged as a crucial factor. Engaging local stakeholders—including families,

[42] Bicer and Alsaffar, "Body Mass Index, Dietary Intake and Feeding Problems of Turkish Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)."
[43] Adams et al., "A Qualitative Study Exploring Access to Mental Health and Substance Use Support among Individuals Experiencing Homelessness during COVID-19."
[44] Kim et al., "Alterations in Lipid Profile of Autistic Boys: A Case Control Study."
[45] Babinska et al., "Gastrointestinal Symptoms and Feeding Problems and Their Associations with Dietary Interventions, Food Supplement Use, and Behavioral Characteristics in a Sample of Children and Adolescents with Autism Spectrum Disorders."
[46] Kanyopa and Munyaradzi, "Peer Counselling as an Intervention Strategy to Mitigate Adolescent Learners' Pregnancies in Rural Primary Schools in the Matabeleland North Region of Zimbabwe."

educational authorities, and community leaders—can create a more robust support network that enriches the homeschooling experience, addressing both educational and emotional needs effectively.

The discussion of the data from the study indicates that homeschooling can effectively fulfil the unique requirements of autistic learners. The ability to create a customized learning environment directly aligns with the physiological needs that underpin effective educational engagement.[47] For instance, flexible scheduling and tailored learning activities are beneficial for autistic learners who may struggle with the structured demands of traditional classrooms. Furthermore, the provision of a secure and nurturing environment—a significant advantage of homeschooling—caters not only to the emotional safety needs of these learners but also allows for social development opportunities that can take place within smaller, more familiar settings.[48] The focus on non-judgmental learning experiences encourages autistic learners to explore subjects at their own pace, fostering greater life skills and confidence.[49] However, the study also underscores critical systemic gaps that must be addressed. The lack of government support and clear guidelines for homeschooling poses a significant challenge.[50] Ensuring that effective resource distribution and training for parents are prioritized can lead to enhanced educational outcomes for autistic learners.[51] The establishment of a structured framework can provide the necessary oversight to ensure that educational standards are maintained, thus protecting the rights and educational trajectories of these learners.[52] Lastly, the role of community engagement is paramount in addressing both educational and emotional support needs.[53] Initiatives aimed at fostering collaboration among families and local educational resources can create a nurturing environment conducive to shared learning and community building.[54] For example, local workshops or parent support groups could facilitate knowledge exchange regarding best practices in homeschooling for autistic learners, enhancing both parental confidence and learner success. Consequently, while homeschooling presents significant opportunities for effective education for autistic learners in rural areas, realization of this potential hinges on comprehensive support systems and community cooperation.

Theme 2: Challenges faced by autistic learners and their families in the home-schooling context

This theme of this study examines the challenges faced by autistic learners and their families in the homeschooling context. Through gathering insights from various stakeholders—including teachers, parents, education officials, and community leaders—this study seeks to identify the barriers to effective homeschooling for autistic learners, while also exploring potential strategies for overcoming these obstacles. The following are the views of the participants:

A female teacher commented that,

One of the biggest challenges I see for families is the lack of specialized resources. Many parents may not be equipped with the training needed to effectively teach autistic children. They may struggle with finding suitable materials and methods that truly engage these learners.

[47] Munyaradzi, Kanyopa, and Mokhele-Magwalwa, "Protracted Distances from Home to School Influence ECD Learners' Psychological Well-Being at Rural Primary Schools in Masvingo South District, Zimbabwe."
[48] Lai et al., "Prevalence of Co-Occurring Mental Health Diagnoses in the Autism Population: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis."
[49] Salvador Marí-Bauset et al., "Nutritional Status of Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASDs): A Case–Control Study," *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders* 45, no. 1 (January 7, 2015): 203–12, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-014-2205-8.
[50] Saad et al., "Vitamin D Status in Autism Spectrum Disorders and the Efficacy of Vitamin D Supplementation in Autistic Children."
[51] Meguid et al., "Reduced Serum Levels of 25-Hydroxy and 1,25-Dihydroxy Vitamin D in Egyptian Children with Autism."
[52] Weir et al., "An Investigation of the Diet, Exercise, Sleep, BMI, and Health Outcomes of Autistic Adults."
[53] Landa, "Efficacy of Early Interventions for Infants and Young Children with, and at Risk for, Autism Spectrum Disorders."
[54] Sweetman et al., "Zinc and Vitamin A Deficiency in a Cohort of Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder."

Moreover, a male parent shared that,
I often feel overwhelmed with the responsibility of being my child's teacher and caregiver. While homeschooling allows for personalized instruction, it can also be isolating. Sometimes, I just don't know how to address his educational and emotional needs effectively.

Additionally, the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education Official expressed that,
Although we support the idea of homeschooling, there are significant challenges in monitoring and ensuring quality education for autistic learners. Parents may lack access to training and support networks, which can hinder the educational process and create additional stress for families.

Furthermore, the Village Head was of the view that,
In our area, many families face cultural and social stigmas related to autism. This can make it difficult for them to seek help or collaborate with others in the community. We need to work together to break down these barriers and provide a more supportive environment for families involved in homeschooling.

The examination of challenges faced by autistic learners and their families in the homeschooling context reveals several findings on the barriers. A significant challenge identified is the inadequate access to specialized resources necessary for effectively teaching autistic learners. Many families find themselves ill-equipped to provide the tailored educational experiences that autistic children often require.[55] This lack of access manifests in the scarcity of appropriate teaching materials and methodologies that can engage these learners meaningfully. Without suitable resources, parents may resort to generic educational practices that fail to meet their child's specific learning needs, ultimately hindering their academic progress.[56] Additionally, the emotional burden of homeschooling falls heavily on parents, who often feel an acute sense of isolation.[57] Balancing the roles of both teacher and caregiver can lead to feelings of overwhelm and anxiety, particularly when they encounter difficulties in addressing their child's unique educational and emotional requirements.[58] This overwhelming responsibility may deter parents from seeking external support, further compounding the stress they experience.[59] Moreover, systemic challenges within the educational framework were highlighted. The lack of monitoring and oversight from governmental bodies underscores the need for structured guidelines and support networks for homeschooling families.[60] Inconsistent educational quality can arise from the absence of such frameworks, resulting in unequal educational opportunities for autistic learners, which may have long-term implications for their personal and academic development.[61] Lastly, cultural and societal stigmas surrounding autism were noted as significant barriers to effective homeschooling. These stigmas often prevent families from seeking assistance or engaging with community resources that could enhance their educational practices.[62] Consequently, a lack of social support may exacerbate the challenges faced by families, leaving them to navigate their educational journeys in isolation.

[55] Adams et al., "A Qualitative Study Exploring Access to Mental Health and Substance Use Support among Individuals Experiencing Homelessness during COVID-19."
[56] Evans et al., "Dietary Patterns and Body Mass Index in Children with Autism and Typically Developing Children."
[57] Castro et al., "Feeding Behavior and Dietary Intake of Male Children and Adolescents with Autism Spectrum Disorder: A Case-control Study."
[58] Bicer and Alsaffar, "Body Mass Index, Dietary Intake and Feeding Problems of Turkish Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)."
[59] Kanyopa and Munyaradzi, "Peer Counselling as an Intervention Strategy to Mitigate Adolescent Learners' Pregnancies in Rural Primary Schools in the Matabeleland North Region of Zimbabwe."
[60] Emond et al., "Feeding Symptoms, Dietary Patterns, and Growth in Young Children With Autism Spectrum Disorders."
[61] Buro et al., "Diet Quality in an Ethnically Diverse Sample of Children and Adolescents with Autism Spectrum Disorder Compared with Nationally Representative Data."
[62] Guo et al., "Vitamin and Mineral Status of Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder in Hainan Province of China: Associations with Symptoms."

The discussion of data indicates that the challenges confronted by autistic learners and their families in the homeschooling context are multifaceted and deeply interconnected. Addressing these issues requires a holistic approach that encompasses resource allocation, emotional support mechanisms, systemic policy development, and societal change.[63] The lack of specialized resources is a critical barrier, as it directly impacts the implementation of effective teaching strategies.[64] For instance, access to individualized educational plans and specialized instructional materials tailored for autistic learners is essential for fostering understanding and engagement. Educational authorities should consider developing resource centers that provide parents with access to curated materials, training sessions, and expert consultations.[65] Such initiatives could empower families to deliver quality education in a manner that is responsive to their child's needs.

Emotional support for homeschooling parents is another area requiring attention. The dual responsibilities of teaching and caregiving can be overwhelming, leading to feelings of inadequacy.[66] Support groups and community networks can serve as valuable platforms for parents to share experiences, gain insights, and alleviate feelings of isolation.[67] Professional development opportunities for parents could also be beneficial, equipping them with the skills and confidence to address the educational and emotional needs of their children effectively.[68] Systemic challenges, particularly related to monitoring homeschooling practices, warrant the development of comprehensive policies. Educational authorities should establish guidelines that not only recognize homeschooling as a legitimate educational pathway but also ensure that quality standards are met.[69] This may involve periodic assessments and training programs designed to support parents in providing a well-rounded education. Furthermore, integrating homeschooling into the broader educational framework can facilitate collaboration between families and traditional schools, thereby creating supportive pathways for autistic learners.

Cultural and societal stigmas present another profound challenge that requires concerted efforts for change.[70] Therefore, there is a need for public awareness campaigns aimed at fostering understanding and acceptance of autism that can mitigate the negative perceptions that often hinder families from seeking assistance.[71] Engaging community leaders and organizations in advocacy efforts can promote inclusive dialogues and community-building initiatives that empower families and create a more supportive environment for homeschooling.[72] Therefore, while the challenges faced by autistic learners and their families in the homeschooling context are significant, they are not insurmountable. Through targeted interventions, community collaboration, and a commitment to systemic reform, stakeholders can work towards creating a more effective and supportive educational landscape for autistic learners in rural areas.

[63] Altun et al., "The Levels of Vitamin D, Vitamin D Receptor, Homocysteine and Complex B Vitamin in Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders."
[64] Babinska et al., "Gastrointestinal Symptoms and Feeding Problems and Their Associations with Dietary Interventions, Food Supplement Use, and Behavioral Characteristics in a Sample of Children and Adolescents with Autism Spectrum Disorders."
[65] Kim et al., "Alterations in Lipid Profile of Autistic Boys: A Case Control Study."
[66] Buro et al., "Diet Quality in an Ethnically Diverse Sample of Children and Adolescents with Autism Spectrum Disorder Compared with Nationally Representative Data."
[67] Munyaradzi, Kanyopa, and Mokhele-Magwalwa, "Protracted Distances from Home to School Influence ECD Learners' Psychological Well-Being at Rural Primary Schools in Masvingo South District, Zimbabwe."
[68] Landa, "Efficacy of Early Interventions for Infants and Young Children with, and at Risk for, Autism Spectrum Disorders."
[69] Castro et al., "Feeding Behavior and Dietary Intake of Male Children and Adolescents with Autism Spectrum Disorder: A Case-control Study."
[70] Bicer and Alsaffar, "Body Mass Index, Dietary Intake and Feeding Problems of Turkish Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)."
[71] Cheng et al., "Vitamin A Deficiency Increases the Risk of Gastrointestinal Comorbidity and Exacerbates Core Symptoms in Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder."
[72] Guo et al., "Vitamin and Mineral Status of Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder in Hainan Province of China: Associations with Symptoms."

Theme 3: Solutions to address challenges encountered in homeschooling for autistic learners in rural settings

The theme of this study is to explore solutions to address the challenges encountered in homeschooling for autistic learners in rural settings. Through gathering diverse perspectives from teachers, parents, education officials, and community leaders, this research aims to identify practical strategies and resources that can enhance the educational experience of autistic learners in home environments.

A Female Teacher remarked that,
To improve homeschooling for autistic learners, we must provide training sessions for parents on effective teaching strategies. Collaborating with special education experts can empower families to use tailored approaches that meet their children's needs.

Moreover, A Male Parent observed that,
Connecting with other homeschooling families is so important. If we could have regular meet-ups where we share ideas and resources, it would make the experience much less isolating. It's easier to face challenges when we aren't doing it alone.

On the other hand, the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education officials held that,
We are exploring options to create guidelines for homeschooling that include support systems for parents. This could involve online resources, local workshops, and partnerships with NGOs that specialize in autism education, which would greatly benefit families.

Lastly, the Village Head noted that,
Creating a resource centre in our village would be a game-changer. It could serve as a hub where families can access materials, educational tools, and counselling services. Community support is crucial in making homeschooling more effective for our autistic children.

The findings revealed a consensus among stakeholders on the importance of enhancing parental capacity, fostering community engagement, establishing supportive frameworks, and improving resource availability. One of the primary solutions identified is the necessity for comprehensive training programs for parents.[73] Such initiatives are vital for equipping families with effective teaching methodologies tailored to the unique needs of autistic learners. This training could encompass various aspects of special education, including behavioural management techniques, sensory-friendly teaching practices, and individualized learning strategies that align closely with each child's capabilities and interests.[74] Another notable solution involves the cultivation of community networks among homeschooling families.[75] Regular meet-ups and collaborative sessions can significantly diminish the feelings of isolation that often accompany homeschooling.[76] Through these gatherings, families can share resources, exchange ideas, and provide mutual emotional support, thereby creating a more collaborative and encouraging homeschooling environment. The development of structured guidelines for homeschooling is also an essential finding.[77] These guidelines would offer parents a framework within which to operate, ensuring that educational standards are upheld and that children receive a quality education akin to formal schooling. This structure could include periodic assessments and access to educational resources, as well as ongoing training opportunities for parents.

[73] Kim et al., "Alterations in Lipid Profile of Autistic Boys: A Case Control Study."
[74] Adams et al., "Comprehensive Nutritional and Dietary Intervention for Autism Spectrum Disorder—A Randomized, Controlled 12-Month Trial."
[75] Lai et al., "Prevalence of Co-Occurring Mental Health Diagnoses in the Autism Population: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis."
[76] Saad et al., "Vitamin D Status in Autism Spectrum Disorders and the Efficacy of Vitamin D Supplementation in Autistic Children."
[77] Salvador Marí-Bauset et al., "Comparison of Nutritional Status between Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder and Typically Developing Children in the Mediterranean Region (Valencia, Spain)," *Autism* 21, no. 3 (April 8, 2017): 310–22, https://doi.org/10.1177/1362361316636976.

Furthermore, the establishment of resource centres in local communities emerged as a vital solution.[78] Such centres could provide access to teaching materials, instructional tools, and counselling services tailored to the needs of autistic learners and their families. Through serving as a centralized space for educational support, these centres would facilitate collaborative learning and offer parents the necessary tools and knowledge to enhance their child's educational journey.

The discussion of data shows proposed solutions to the challenges facing homeschooling for autistic learners. The emphasis on training programs for parents aligns with the recognition that specialized knowledge is crucial for effectively educating autistic learners.[79] For example, workshops led by special education professionals can provide parents with tools to implement individualized learning plans that capitalize on their child's strengths while mitigating challenges. Such training could also include the use of assistive technology, which has been shown to improve learning engagement and outcomes for autistic learners. Furthermore, the importance of community networks reflects a broader understanding of learning as a socially mediated activity.[80] Through creating opportunities for collaboration, families can engage in shared problem-solving and foster a sense of belonging. Educational research emphasizes that peer support can lead to enhanced problem-solving skills and increased resilience among families facing similar challenges.[81] Regular community meetings or online forums could facilitate continuous dialogue about effective practices and emotional support, creating a robust network of support.

The call for structured guidelines from educational authorities is reflective of the need for accountability and standardization in homeschooling practices.[82] Through establishing clear expectations and providing resources for assessment, the educational system can ensure that autistic learners receive a consistent and quality education.[83] For instance, state-mandated assessments and progress tracking could help parents remain engaged and informed about their child's educational development, ensuring that appropriate interventions are applied as needed. The proposal for resource centres represents a transformative approach to community support. These centres can serve not only as hubs for learning materials but also as focal points for training, workshops, and social gatherings.[84] By offering a repository of information and facilities for hands-on learning experiences, resource centres can significantly enhance the homeschooling experience. Furthermore, partnerships with local organizations and NGOs can extend support to families by providing access to specialized services, counselling, and expert guidance.[85] Consequently, effectively addressing the challenges of homeschooling for autistic learners in rural settings requires a comprehensive strategy that integrates parent training, community collaboration, robust guidelines, and resource availability.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Parents of autistic learners are encouraged to actively seek training and resources that develop their teaching skills, particularly in special education strategies. Engaging in local workshops and online courses can enhance their ability to address their child's specific needs effectively. In addition, forming support networks with other homeschooling families can create opportunities for sharing resources, strategies, and emotional support, thereby alleviating the feeling of isolation that often accompanies homeschooling. Teachers should also work to remain informed about the latest research in autism

[78] Weir et al., "An Investigation of the Diet, Exercise, Sleep, BMI, and Health Outcomes of Autistic Adults."
[79] Sweetman et al., "Zinc and Vitamin A Deficiency in a Cohort of Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder."
[80] Lai et al., "Prevalence of Co-Occurring Mental Health Diagnoses in the Autism Population: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis."
[81] Adams et al., "Comprehensive Nutritional and Dietary Intervention for Autism Spectrum Disorder—A Randomized, Controlled 12-Month Trial."
[82] Cheng et al., "Vitamin A Deficiency Increases the Risk of Gastrointestinal Comorbidity and Exacerbates Core Symptoms in Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder."
[83] Kanyopa and Munyaradzi, "Peer Counselling as an Intervention Strategy to Mitigate Adolescent Learners' Pregnancies in Rural Primary Schools in the Matabeleland North Region of Zimbabwe."
[84] Bicer and Alsaffar, "Body Mass Index, Dietary Intake and Feeding Problems of Turkish Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)."
[85] Evans et al., "Dietary Patterns and Body Mass Index in Children with Autism and Typically Developing Children."

education to better assist families in their homeschooling journeys. The Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education must prioritize the development of comprehensive guidelines for homeschooling, ensuring that educational standards and quality are maintained. These guidelines should not only outline clear educational goals but also provide resources for training parents and monitoring learner progress. Additionally, allocating budgetary resources specifically for homeschooling initiatives—including instructional materials and training programs—will enhance the capacity of families to provide quality education. The Ministry should also facilitate partnerships with special education organizations to support the needs of autistic learners.

Moreover, NGOs have a pivotal role in supporting families who are homeschooling autistic learners. NGOs should focus on providing tailored educational resources, counselling, and training that address the unique challenges faced by these families. On the other hand, counsellors working with families of autistic learners ought to offer specialized services that address both educational and emotional needs. Providing ongoing support to parents can help mitigate the feelings of overwhelm and stress often associated with homeschooling. Moreover, village heads are encouraged to take a leadership role in developing local resources that support homeschooling families. Establishing community resource centres can offer access to educational materials, instructional support, and counselling services tailored to the needs of autistic learners. Lastly, Members of Parliament are called upon to advocate for policies that recognize and support homeschooling as a legitimate educational pathway for autistic learners. Legislative efforts should focus on securing funding for programs that offer resources, training, and oversight for homeschooling families.

CONCLUSION

This study provides a comprehensive exploration of homeschooling as an educational alternative for autistic learners in rural areas, uncovering its potential effectiveness while also highlighting significant challenges. It has become clear that homeschooling allows for personalized learning experiences that can cater to the unique needs of autistic children, providing an individualized approach that is often lacking in traditional classroom settings. However, these benefits are tempered by obstacles such as insufficient resources, emotional strain on parents, and societal stigmas surrounding autism. The intricate interplay of these factors necessitates a robust response from all stakeholders involved in the educational process. The insights garnered from parents, teachers, education officials, and community leaders reveal a collective recognition of the need for a more supportive framework to assist families navigating the complexities of homeschooling. Therefore, a collaborative effort is essential to ensure that autistic learners receive an equitable and enriching educational experience, fostering their academic growth and personal development.

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