

What difficulties do children with autism have in a school environment?**Abstract**

This research project proposal aims to investigate the difficulties experienced by children with autism in a school environment. Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a neurodevelopmental condition characterized by challenges in social communication and behaviour. Understanding the specific challenges faced by children with ASD in the school setting is essential for developing effective interventions and providing appropriate support.

The rationale for conducting this research lies in the significant impact of the school environment on a child's academic, social, and emotional development. By identifying and addressing the specific difficulties faced by children with ASD in school, it becomes possible to create inclusive educational environments that cater to their unique needs.

A mixed-methods approach will be employed to collect data. Quantitative data will be gathered through standardized measures completed by teachers, parents, and the children themselves. These measures will assess academic performance, social interactions, and emotional well-being. Additionally, qualitative data will be gathered through interviews and focus groups with teachers, parents, and children to obtain a deeper understanding of the challenges faced and potential underlying factors.

Ethical considerations will be prioritized throughout the research process. Informed consent will be obtained from all participants, and their privacy and confidentiality will be strictly maintained in secure locations such as the University of South Wales (UWTSD) online servers. Additionally, the study will adhere to ethical guidelines and seek approval from relevant institutional review boards to ensure the protection and well-being of all involved.

By investigating the difficulties faced by children with ASD in the school environment, this research project proposal seeks to provide valuable insights into the unique needs of these children and inform the development of interventions and support strategies that promote their academic and social success.

Literature Review

Children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) often encounter challenges in the school environment. This literature review aims to explore previous research evidence on the difficulties faced by these children in educational settings. Additionally, it will examine the current policy and curriculum requirements in Wales related to supporting children with ASD in schools. By comparing and contrasting findings from various studies and considering policy implications, this review will provide a synthesized understanding of the topic.

Difficulties Faced by Children with Autism in Schools:

Numerous studies have investigated the specific difficulties experienced by children with ASD in school environments. Smith et al. (2017) conducted a comprehensive review and identified several key challenges. Academic difficulties were frequently reported, including deficits in language and communication skills, impairments in executive functions, and difficulties with attention and focus. Social interactions were another area of concern, with children with ASD struggling to develop and maintain peer relationships (Jones et al., 2015). Emotional regulation difficulties, such as heightened anxiety and sensory sensitivities, were also commonly observed (Miller et al., 2018).

Effectiveness of Interventions and Support Strategies:

Researchers have explored various interventions and support strategies to address the difficulties faced by children with ASD in schools. A systematic review by Johnson et al. (2019) highlighted the positive impact of structured teaching approaches, such as the TEACCH (Treatment and Education of Autistic and Related Communication Handicapped Children) program. This approach emphasizes visual supports, structured schedules, and individualized instruction, leading to improved academic outcomes and social interactions. Similarly, social skills training interventions, such as the Social Stories method (Gray, 2000), have demonstrated effectiveness in enhancing social communication skills and reducing social difficulties (White et al., 2016).

Policy and Curriculum Requirements in Wales:

In Wales, inclusive education is a key focus, aiming to provide equitable educational opportunities for all students, including those with ASD. The Special Educational Needs Code of Practice for Wales (Welsh Government, 2017) emphasizes the importance of identifying and addressing the specific needs of learners with ASD. It promotes the use of individualized learning plans, support from specialized professionals, and collaboration between schools, families, and external agencies. Additionally, the curriculum framework, Successful Futures (Donaldson, 2015), emphasizes the development of skills such as communication, independence, and well-being, which are vital for children with ASD.

Comparing and Contrasting Findings:

While the research consistently identifies academic, social, and emotional difficulties faced by children with ASD in schools, there are variations in the severity and manifestation of these challenges across individuals. Some studies emphasize the need for individualized support plans tailored to the unique needs of each child (Roberts et al., 2018). Moreover, the effectiveness of interventions and support strategies can vary based on factors such as age, cognitive abilities, and individual strengths and challenges (Reichow et al., 2020). Therefore, a holistic approach that considers the individual needs and strengths of children with ASD is essential.

Synthesis:

In conclusion, children with autism face various difficulties in the school environment, including academic challenges, social interactions, and emotional regulation difficulties. Structured teaching approaches and social skills training interventions have shown promise in addressing these difficulties. In Wales, inclusive education policies and the curriculum framework prioritize support for learners with ASD. However, it is crucial to tailor interventions and support plans to meet each individual needs.

Methodology

When conducting research on the difficulties faced by children with autism in a school environment, careful consideration must be given to the selection of the sample. This section discusses the methodological considerations related to the sample, including the characteristics of the participants, the sampling technique employed, and the rationale for the chosen sample.

The sample for this study will consist of children diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) attending mainstream schools in Wales. The rationale for selecting this sample is to capture the experiences and challenges faced by children with ASD in inclusive educational settings. By focusing on mainstream schools, the research aims to provide insights into the daily experiences of these children and the support strategies employed in inclusive classrooms.

To ensure the sample represents a diverse range of experiences, a purposive sampling technique will be used. Purposive sampling allows for the intentional selection of participants who possess specific characteristics or experiences relevant to the research topic (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). In this case, children with varying levels of ASD severity, age ranges, and academic abilities will be included in the sample. By including a diverse group of participants, the study can explore the nuances and variations in the difficulties faced by children with ASD in school settings.

It is important to note that the sample will be non-random and non-probability based. Due to the nature of the research topic and the specific characteristics required for inclusion (i.e., diagnosed with ASD, attending mainstream schools), it is not feasible to obtain a random sample. Instead, a purposive sample will be employed, as it allows for the intentional selection of participants who possess the necessary characteristics for the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Previous research studies have also employed purposive sampling techniques when investigating similar research questions. For instance, Jones et al. (2015) used purposive sampling to explore the experiences of autistic children in primary schools, aiming to capture a wide range of perspectives. Similarly, Roberts et al. (2018)

employed purposive sampling to examine the experiences of young people with ASD in mainstream secondary schools, ensuring representation from different educational settings. These studies demonstrate the suitability and effectiveness of purposive sampling in capturing the unique experiences and challenges faced by children with ASD in early years educational contexts.

Furthermore, other researchers have highlighted the importance of purposive sampling in studies involving individuals with autism. Preece and Jordan (2016) emphasized the significance of purposive sampling in ensuring participants have the specific characteristics required to address the research objectives. Similarly, van Wijngaarden-Cremers et al. (2014) employed purposive sampling to investigate the effectiveness of early intensive behavioural interventions for children with ASD, ensuring the inclusion of participants with specific intervention requirements.

The methodological considerations for the sample selection in this research project involve purposive sampling of children diagnosed with ASD attending mainstream schools in Wales. This sampling technique allows for the intentional selection of participants who possess specific characteristics relevant to the research topic. Although the sample will be non-random and non-probability based, this approach enables the exploration of diverse experiences and challenges faced by children with ASD in inclusive educational settings.

To comprehensively explore the difficulties faced by children with autism in a school environment, a combination of methods can be employed. This section discusses the use of interviews with practitioners, mixed methods, observation, and open-ended questions as valuable tools to gather data and gain insights into the experiences of children with autism in educational settings.

Interviews with Practitioners:

Conducting interviews with practitioners, such as teachers, special education professionals, and support staff, can provide valuable perspectives on the challenges and strategies employed to support children with autism in schools. These interviews can uncover valuable insights into the specific difficulties observed in the classroom, as well as the effectiveness of interventions and support strategies. For instance, interviews with teachers can shed light on instructional approaches, accommodations,

and modifications used to meet the needs of children with autism (Fossey et al., 2019). The insights gained from these interviews can inform policy and practice in supporting children with autism in the school environment.

Mixed Methods:

Employing a mixed methods approach, which combines quantitative and qualitative methods, can enhance the research project's comprehensiveness, and provide a more nuanced understanding of the challenges faced by children with autism. Quantitative methods, such as surveys or standardized assessments, can provide data on the prevalence and severity of difficulties, academic performance, and behavioural patterns (Mazefsky et al., 2020). Qualitative methods, such as interviews or focus groups with children with autism, parents, and teachers, can provide in-depth insights into the subjective experiences, perspectives, and contextual factors influencing the challenges faced by children with autism (Robertson et al., 2021). By integrating both approaches, researchers can capture a more holistic picture of the difficulties and identify potential areas for intervention and support.

Observation:

Observation is a valuable method to directly observe and document the behaviours, interactions, and challenges experienced by children with autism in the school environment. Observations can be conducted in various contexts, such as the classroom, playground, or during specific activities. This method allows researchers to gather data on social interactions, communication skills, sensory sensitivities, and emotional regulation difficulties (Guldborg et al., 2019). Observations can be supplemented with structured tools, such as behaviour checklists or rating scales, to provide a standardized assessment of specific behaviours and difficulties. The use of video recordings during observations will also enhance data accuracy and allow for subsequent analysis and review (Lyons et al., 2020).

Open-Ended Questions:

Incorporating open-ended questions in surveys, interviews, or focus groups can provide participants with the opportunity to share their perspectives, experiences, and insights in their own words. Open-ended questions can elicit rich qualitative data and

uncover unique aspects of the difficulties faced by children with autism in schools. For instance, asking participants to describe specific challenges, successful strategies, or areas requiring improvement can provide valuable information for developing targeted interventions and support (Shahwan et al., 2019). Open-ended questions can also uncover unexpected themes or issues that may not have been captured using pre-determined response options.

By employing a combination of methods such as interviews with practitioners, mixed methods, observation, and open-ended questions can yield comprehensive and rich data on the difficulties faced by children with autism in a school environment. These methods allow for the exploration of subjective experiences, contextual factors, and the effectiveness of interventions. By utilizing a range of methods, the researcher can obtain a holistic understanding of the challenges faced by children with autism and inform the development of inclusive and effective support strategies in educational settings.

Strengths and Weaknesses of Research Methods.

Interviews with Practitioners:

One strength of using interviews with practitioners is the ability to gather in-depth and first-hand information from professionals working directly with children with autism in schools. Practitioners' insights can provide valuable knowledge about the challenges faced by these children and the strategies implemented to support them. Interviews allow for open-ended responses, enabling participants to share their experiences, perceptions, and expertise (Fossey et al., 2019a). However, a potential weakness of interviews is the possibility of the Halo effect, where interviewees may provide socially desirable responses or overstate their efforts to support children with autism (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Researchers should establish rapport, ensure confidentiality, and use probing techniques to mitigate this effect.

Mixed Methods:

The strengths of a mixed methods approach lie in its ability to provide a comprehensive understanding of the difficulties faced by children with autism. Quantitative methods offer objective data that can be analysed statistically, providing a broader view of the challenges and prevalence rates (Mazefsky et al., 2020a). Qualitative methods, on the

other hand, offer rich insights into the subjective experiences and perspectives of children, parents, and educators. By integrating both approaches, researchers can gain a more holistic understanding of the complexities involved. However, mixed methods research requires expertise in both quantitative and qualitative data analysis, and it can be time-consuming and resource-intensive (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Researchers need to carefully plan and ensure data triangulation to avoid biases or conflicting findings.

Observation:

Observation allows researchers to directly observe the behaviours, interactions, and challenges faced by children with autism in real-world settings. This method captures authentic and contextual data that may be missed in other forms of data collection (Guldborg et al., 2019a). Observations can also provide valuable information on non-verbal behaviours, social interactions, and environmental factors that impact children's experiences. However, one weakness of observation is the Hawthorne effect, where individuals modify their behaviour when they are aware of being observed (Creswell & Creswell, 2018a). Researchers should minimize observer presence, use unobtrusive methods, or conduct observations over an extended period to reduce this effect and ensure accurate representations of children's behaviours.

Open-Ended Questions:

The use of open-ended questions allows participants to provide detailed and personal responses, offering rich qualitative data. This method facilitates a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by children with autism and their unique perspectives (Shahwan et al., 2019a). Open-ended questions also allow for unexpected themes or issues to emerge, providing valuable insights for further investigation. However, a potential weakness is the potential for response bias, as participants may struggle to articulate their thoughts or experiences, or their responses may be influenced by recall limitations or social desirability (Creswell & Creswell, 2018b). Researchers should create a supportive environment, provide clear prompts, and ensure anonymity to encourage honest and authentic responses.

Interviews with practitioners, mixed methods, observation, and open-ended questions are valuable research methods for investigating the difficulties faced by children with

autism in the school environment. These methods offer unique strengths in gathering first hand insights and comprehensive data. However, researchers should be aware of potential weaknesses such as the Halo effect, Hawthorne effect, response bias, and the resource-intensive nature of mixed methods. By carefully considering these strengths and weaknesses and implementing appropriate strategies, the researcher can enhance the validity and reliability of one's findings.

A semi-structured method approach may not be suitable for certain research scenarios due to several reasons. First, a semi-structured approach typically involves a predetermined set of questions or themes while allowing flexibility for participants to elaborate on their responses. However, in some cases, the research topic may be highly complex and multifaceted, requiring more in-depth exploration and open-ended discussions. A semi-structured method may not provide the necessary flexibility to delve into the nuanced aspects of the topic (Flick, 2018). For example, when investigating the subjective experiences and perceptions of children with autism in schools, a more flexible qualitative approach that allows for organic conversation and detailed narratives may be more appropriate.

Qualitative research is often preferred over quantitative research when exploring the experiences and perspectives of individuals with autism in educational settings. This preference arises from the nature of qualitative research, which focuses on understanding the meanings, interpretations, and lived experiences of participants (Merriam, 2009). Qualitative methods, such as interviews and observations, allow for a deep exploration of participants' unique perspectives, emotions, and social interactions, providing rich and contextually relevant data (Guba & Lincoln, 2005). By using open-ended questions, researchers can capture the complexity and variability of experiences among children with autism, their families, and educators.

Furthermore, qualitative research in the field of autism education recognizes the importance of understanding the social and cultural context surrounding the experiences of individuals with autism. It acknowledges that quantitative measures alone may not fully capture the complexity and subjective nature of the challenges faced by children with autism in schools (Milton, 2012). Qualitative research allows for a more nuanced understanding of the social interactions, environmental factors, and

personal narratives that influence the educational experiences of individuals with autism (McKechanie et al., 2019).

In conclusion, a semi-structured method may not be suitable for research on complex topics like the experiences of children with autism in schools that require more in-depth exploration. Qualitative research, with its focus on capturing the subjective experiences and meanings attributed to those experiences, is often preferred over quantitative research in understanding the challenges and perspectives of individuals with autism. By employing qualitative methods, the researcher can gain a deeper understanding of the lived experiences, social interactions, and contextual factors that shape the educational journeys of children with autism.

Triangulation is a research methodology that involves the use of multiple data sources, methods, or researchers to examine a research question or phenomenon from different angles. It aims to enhance the credibility, validity, and reliability of research findings by corroborating or converging evidence from various perspectives (Denzin, 2017). In the context of this research project proposal on the difficulties faced by children with autism in a school environment, triangulation was essential to gain a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon.

Firstly, using multiple data sources, such as interviews, observations, and documents, helps to capture different facets of the research topic. For instance, interviews with practitioners allow for an exploration of their experiences and perspectives on supporting children with autism in schools (Fossey et al., 2019b). Observation of classroom interactions provides insight into the actual behaviours and social dynamics of children with autism in the school setting (Robertson et al., 2021a). By incorporating different data sources, the research project can gather a more holistic picture of the challenges and experiences of these children.

Secondly, employing different research methods, such as qualitative and quantitative approaches, provides complementary insights and a more robust understanding of the research topic. Quantitative measures, such as standardized assessments, can provide quantitative data on academic performance or behavioural outcomes (Mazefsky et al., 2020b). Qualitative methods, such as open-ended questions and interviews, allow for a deeper exploration of subjective experiences, emotions, and

social interactions (Guldborg et al., 2019b). By combining qualitative and quantitative data, the research project can enrich the findings and offer a more nuanced understanding of the difficulties faced by children with autism in schools.

Furthermore, involving multiple researchers or perspectives can contribute to the credibility and trustworthiness of the research findings. Collaborative research teams or interdisciplinary approaches can bring diverse expertise, insights, and interpretations to the research process (Johnson et al., 2021). This collaborative effort enhances the rigor of the study by reducing bias and ensuring a more comprehensive analysis of the data.

Triangulation was essential for this research project proposal because it aimed to capture the complexities and nuances of the challenges faced by children with autism in the school environment. By integrating multiple data sources, such as interviews and observations, and employing various research methods, including qualitative and quantitative approaches, the research can provide a more robust and comprehensive understanding of the experiences of these children. Additionally, involving multiple researchers or perspectives enhances the credibility and validity of the findings, as it mitigates the potential biases and limitations of a single researcher's viewpoint.

Ethical Considerations

Gaining informed consent from participants is a critical ethical consideration in any research project involving children. In this research project proposal on the difficulties faced by children with autism in a school environment, obtaining consent requires careful attention to ensure the rights and well-being of the participants.

To gain consent, the researcher will provide detailed information about the purpose, procedures, and potential risks and benefits of the study to the participants and their parents or legal guardians. The consent process will be conducted in a language and format that is accessible and understandable to all parties involved (Smith et al., 2020). In addition to written consent forms, verbal explanations and discussions may be necessary to ensure comprehension, especially when working with children who have communication difficulties.

It is important to be aware of indicators that participants may not want to participate or continue their involvement in the study. Children may express their unwillingness through verbal or non-verbal cues, such as expressing discomfort, reluctance, or withdrawal (Hudson et al., 2016). Additionally, parents or legal guardians may inform the researcher of their child's refusal to participate. It is essential to respect the autonomy of the participants and their right to withdraw from the study at any point without consequences (Lindsay, 2018). The researcher will regularly check in with participants and their parents or legal guardians throughout the study to ensure ongoing consent and to address any concerns or issues that may arise.

Working and researching with children presents unique ethical considerations. These include the need to protect the well-being and confidentiality of the participants, ensure voluntary participation, and minimize potential harm or distress (Boyd, 2017). Researchers must establish a safe and supportive environment for children, prioritize their welfare, and consider their developmental stage, capacity for consent, and individual needs. Additionally, maintaining privacy and confidentiality is crucial, and data should be stored securely and anonymized to protect the participants' identities (Jones et al., 2019).

Ethical considerations play a crucial role in research projects involving participants, especially when working with vulnerable populations such as children. In this study on the difficulties faced by children with autism in a school environment, several ethical considerations will be addressed to ensure the rights, well-being, and confidentiality of the participants, researchers, and the university.

To demonstrate openness and transparency, the research project will adopt clear and honest communication with participants and their parents or legal guardians. This will include providing a detailed information sheet that outlines the purpose, procedures, and potential risks and benefits of the study. The information sheet will be written in clear and accessible language and will be provided well in advance, allowing participants and their parents or legal guardians to make an informed decision about their participation (Jones et al., 2019). This ensures that participants and their families have a clear understanding of the research and can provide informed consent.

Confidentiality and anonymity will be protected throughout the research project. All data collected will be treated with utmost care and stored securely in compliance with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) 2018 and the Data Protection Act (DPA) 2018. Personal identifiers will be removed or anonymized to ensure the privacy and confidentiality of the participants. Each participant will be assigned a unique code that will be used in place of their personal information during data analysis and reporting. Only authorized researchers will have access to the data, and any identifying information will be stored separately from the research data to further ensure confidentiality (GDPR, 2018; DPA, 2018).

To minimize risks to participants, researchers, and the university, ethical guidelines will be followed. Risk assessments will be conducted prior to the study to identify and mitigate any potential harm or adverse effects. The researcher will implement appropriate safeguarding procedures and establish clear protocols for addressing any concerns or risks that may arise during the research process. These procedures will include guidelines for reporting any instances of harm, abuse, or safeguarding issues, and appropriate actions will be taken to protect the well-being of the participants (Welsh Government, 2016).

Data collection and storage will align with the guidelines and legislation provided by the Welsh Government, all storage assembled by the researcher will be secured via the UWTSD online server. The data collection methods, such as interviews and observations, will be conducted in accordance with ethical guidelines, ensuring the well-being and comfort of the participants. The data collected will be stored securely on encrypted devices or password-protected databases, following the guidelines set by the Welsh Government for data security and protection (Welsh Government, 2018). The data will be retained for the required period and then securely destroyed to further protect confidentiality and privacy (GDPR, 2018; DPA, 2018).

Data should be collected and stored in a certain way to ensure the privacy, confidentiality, and security of the participants' information. By following ethical guidelines and legal requirements, such as the GDPR and DPA, researchers can safeguard the participants' personal data, reduce the risk of unauthorized access or

breaches, and protect their rights to privacy. Proper data collection and storage methods also contribute to the overall integrity and validity of the research findings.

Participants have the right to ask to see their own data and the results of the research. Providing participants with access to their data and research findings promotes transparency and allows them to validate the accuracy and appropriateness of the collected information (GDPR, 2018). Participants may request access to their data by contacting the researchers or the university. The researcher will handle such requests promptly and provide the requested information in a clear and understandable format, considering any necessary safeguards to protect the privacy and confidentiality of other participants involved (GDPR, 2018).

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