

## Awareness of Autism in urban school teachers

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### Abstract

Autism is a neuro-developmental disorder and the prevalence rate of this condition has shown an alarming increase in the recent years globally. The condition is seen more in school going children and many a times when the condition is mild in nature, there are high chances that the condition may go unidentified. Hence it becomes important for teachers to be aware and sensitized about the condition. The current study was carried out to assess the awareness of autism in school teachers, The study varied from the previous studies carried out in this direction as the questionnaire used in the study tapped a multitude of aspects on autism from the terminologies used to the deficits seen. It was observed that the teachers were aware of the terming, but had confusion regarding the identification of features and associated conditions seen in Autism showing that there is a need to sensitize the teachers in depth for enabling optimum participation in teachers

**Keywords:** sensitization; knowledge; awareness; policy; early identification

### Introduction

Communication disorder can be generically described as a condition where an affected person would demonstrate a deficit in sending and receiving signals. It may also affect one's ability to process and grasp the verbal and non verbal signals exchanged during the process of communication. This definition applies to any speech and language disorders, in other words based on the process affected the communication disorder can be classified as speech hearing and language disorder. After China, India is the world's second most populous country. India now accounts for about 18% of the world's population (1,423,488,840 people). (<https://countrymeters.info/en/India>)

As per the data derived through the latest survey carried out in the year 2011, the National Survey Sample Organization (NSSO) recorded a total of 2.21% disabled population in the country. Out of this, 18.9% are known to have hearing impairment, 7.45% are known to have speech impairments, and a total of 5.61% can have intellectual disability, a condition associated with lower IQ. Furthermore, the data shows that rural areas accounted for 69% of the overall impaired population, while urban areas accounted for 31%. Autism is a neuro-developmental disorder associated with communication problems, limited social interaction, and restricted or repetitive activities and interests ([DSM-IV-TR]; American Psychiatric Association, 2000). Autism is usually identified in school-aged children. It is commonly known that these individuals have distinct learning features that set them apart from other students and need that

teachers have specialized knowledge (Simpson, 2005a). People with ASD frequently have the following characteristics, according to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5), children with autism can have difficulties communicating and interacting with others, restricted interests and repetitive behaviors and symptoms that impair their capacity to perform at school, work, and in other aspects of their lives. Its prevalence has been reported to be increasing globally in recent years, with 1/100 people currently affected (Lord et al, 2020). It is quite obvious is that the prevalence of ASD has dramatically grown in recent years globally, regardless of rate variations and potential causes of this increase (Alcantud Marín et al, Smiley et al, 2018). Teachers are primarily in charge of implementing educational policies, and their attitudes are an important factor in this regard. A study was done to comprehend the perceptions of specific learning difficulties among Malaysian mainstream primary school teachers and the structure of the country's present literacy support programme. Forty-one teachers participated in individual instant message interviews and focus groups on social media to get the data. The results show that the existing curriculum is based on theories of remediation and that teachers have demonstrated good levels of remediation understanding but not yet neurodiversity understanding. It offers suggestions for the professional growth of teachers (Rahman et al, 2019). In this regard, the success of inclusive education for children with ASD depends critically on teachers' attitudes toward including them. Teachers must get knowledge of the characteristics of autism and the

requirements of autistic children. Teachers in schools have the power to alter procedures and have an impact on how pupils with autism are taught. The knowledge that instructors possess has the potential to affect change, either by providing justification for action or by enabling a person (or institution) to take different or more effective action (Drucker, 1989).

The classroom interactions of students with ASD as well as interactions within the educational community may be significantly impacted by teachers' views about the inclusion of students with ASD (families, peers, other teachers, etc.). As a consequence, they serve as a foundation for turning inclusive policies into actual inclusive practices. It must be remembered that attitudes do not develop overnight. They are fashioned and sculpted by the experiences and instruction they have had. In this regard, research on teachers' attitudes toward including kids with ASD is crucial since it allows for the development of those attitudes.

Teacher's experience also constitutes an important variable in the creation of positive or negative attitudes (Alport, 1954). Spending time with someone who has autism positively affected opinions toward the condition (Hernández, 2021; Kuzminski, 2019). It is commonly known that the learning styles of students with ASD are very different from those of neurotypical students, necessitating the expertise of teachers (Simpson, 2005b). It is necessary to conduct research to ascertain the training requirements for these teachers as well as whether teachers are aware of the educational methods that are essential for the progress of students with autism. The aim of this study is to assess awareness among teachers about autism.

**Materials and Methods**

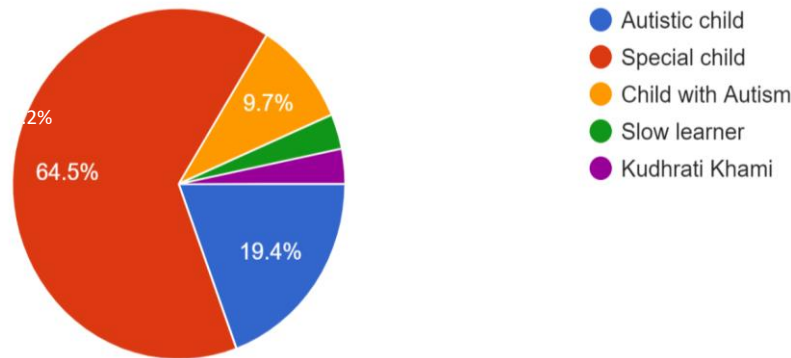
**Participants:** The current study was a cross-sectional study conducted among school teachers. A total of 30 school teachers were taken for the study. The participants were enrolled after informed consent. The

participants were directed to a google form consisting of ten objective questions. The first part of the questionnaire elicited information about their age, gender, school, teaching experience, qualification etc. This part of the questionnaire elicited information on the basic demographic details of the participants.

**Materials and Procedure:** There were specific questions extracting details on attending/conducting sensitization and professional programs in regard to care for special children. While the second part of the questionnaire consisted of some basic questions on the teacher's understanding of diagnosis, symptoms, causes, road to recovery and understanding the educational and communication needs of children with autism from the teacher's perspective. The questionnaire was given to three speech language pathologists for content validation having experience of more than five years working with autistic children. The questionnaire was given to teachers working in schools in Mumbai. The responses were tabulated and analyzed descriptively to understand the teacher's knowledge on causes, symptoms and educational requirements of children with ASD per se and get a wider perspective of teachers on neurodiversity in general.

**Results**

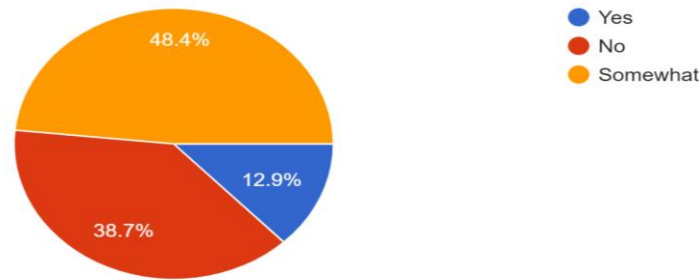
All the teachers who participated in the study were female and belonged to the age group of 35-50 years old. Out of 30 teachers, 10 of them (33.3%) had teaching experience of 5-10 years, 6 teachers (20%) had 10-15 years of teaching experience, 9 teachers (30%) had teaching experience of 15-20 years, and only 5 teachers (16.6%) had teaching experience above 20 years. The next question extracted information about what terms they use to address the neuro divergent kids. As shown in the figure below, the majority of teachers (64.5%) used the term "special child" followed by "autistic child" and "slow learner".



**Figure 1: Terminologies used by teachers to reflect Autism**

Around 54.8% (17 teachers) of the total teachers felt that the parents of autistic children should teach their child to learn adaptive skills and 41.9% of the teachers felt that they should take medical intervention. 48.4% of teachers felt that the cause of autism is related to prenatal maternal causes and 41.9% of the teachers felt that the cause is genetic.

Environmental and multifactorial causes were accounted for by 29% and 22.6% of the teachers respectively. 48.4% of teachers felt that they were only somewhat trained to manage the autistic children whereas 38.7% of the teachers felt that they were not trained. Only 12.9% of the teachers felt that they were trained. This is highlighted in the following figure 2.



**Figure 2:** Awareness of Autism in Teachers

Around 67.7% of the teachers mentioned that their schools do not conduct training programs for managing these children. Around 51.6% of the teachers felt that autism can be diagnosed at 2-3 years of age, 35.5% felt that it can be diagnosed at 1-2 years of age and the rest thought that it can be diagnosed from 0.5 to 1 year. 29% of the teachers thought that children can outgrow autism and 12.9% of them thought they cannot. Rest of them were not sure about this.

22.6% of the teachers felt that autism diagnosis falls on a linear spectrum. Another 22.6% felt that it does not fall on a linear spectrum. Remaining percent of the teachers were not sure about this. About 74.2% of the teachers mentioned that their schools do not have accommodations to provide support to such children. Around 48.4% of the teachers said that they refer such children to the psychologist, 29% of them reported that they refer the children to the pediatrician, 22.6% to the SLP, 6.5 % to the counselor.

## Discussion

This study aimed to investigate the awareness of neurodiversity among school teachers, specifically regarding autistic children. Whether individuals on the spectrum should be addressed by person-first or identity-first language has been a debate for several years. However, most autistic individuals have expressed that they prefer person-first language. Most teachers have been addressing children on the spectrum as 'special child' or 'slow learner', both of which could have negative connotations. Intervention for autism can be viewed in terms of medical model of disability and social model of disability. Medical model of disability believes that autism needs to be cured or fixed as it is seen as a deficit based disorder whereas social model of disability views autism as a social difference in neurotype which should be accepted and modifications should be made in the environment as needed. 41.9% of the teachers feel that autistic children require medical intervention which could mean they believe in the medical model of disability and rest of the teachers believe parents can teach adaptive skills to autistic children at home. Most of the teachers believed that the cause of autism is due to maternal problems during pregnancy. In the currently known literature, frameworks seem to predominate. Although the data is murky and there are many competing views on the specific nature of this process, the most prevalent modern theory maintains that genetic factors play a significant role in the development of ASD. For instance, whether autism is caused by a rare mutation or a widespread genetic variation (Abrahams and Geschwind, 2008; Buxbaum, 2009). Another viewpoint is typically classified as nurture, where environmental factors play a significant role. In this study, the teachers believed genetic factor had a major role to play in the development of autism.

The current study revealed that only 12.9% of the teachers felt that they were trained, which is supported by the study by Shetty and Rai (2014), where they found that most of the teachers were aware of "autism," yet

they acknowledged that their understanding was insufficient, also, the teachers in their study had a number of false perceptions. Misconceptions about ASD were widespread, according to a cross-sectional research of 164 school teachers conducted in Oman (Al-Sharbati et al, 2013). A study on autism awareness in Karachi included 170 school teachers and found that 57% preferred autism training for teachers, while just 9% had prior training which also reflected in the current study where approximately 67.7% of teachers stated that their schools do not have training programmes for dealing with these children. This outcome could be related to the fact that general school teachers are not adequately prepared to deal with students with Autism, as well as a lack of appropriate in-service inclusion training programs for those teachers. Stone and Rosenbaum (1988) also discovered that teachers had false perceptions of students with autism.

## Conclusions

In general, it is generally understood that School teachers generally know very little about autism. This finding affirms the significance of educator professional development and training in the characteristics and requirements of students with autism. In order to serve this set of kids effectively, all school teachers—regardless of their unique qualifications—should undergo training in educational techniques. There is a dire need for more special education courses with an emphasis on children with disabilities in general education teacher preparation programs. This study has a number of restrictions. The first drawback is due to the very small sample size, which may have impacted how broadly the study's findings might be applied. This study's inability to generalize may possibly be due to the study's exclusion of special education teachers from its sample. Since the primary goal of the study was to examine knowledge among instructors in mainstream school, special education teachers were left out for this reason. Future research comparing instructors' awareness of special education programmes with regular education might be instructive. The second drawback is that this study's awareness indicators were based on subjective reports. Most crucially, there is scant evidence to support the idea that attitudes influence behavior. In this situation, it is challenging to forecast how their awareness would manifest in their conduct. On the other side, it's likely that teachers gave what they thought were positive responses in order to avoid giving off the idea that they were not very knowledgeable of the situation. The third potential drawback was the teachers' low interaction rate. According to a large body of work based on the "contact hypothesis" (Brown & Hewstone, 2005), prior interpersonal contact with someone who is impaired, for instance, is likely to erode negative views. According to this perspective, when one side is exposed to the other, prejudice lessens and new understanding develops. As a result, the teachers' opinion would have unavoidably changed if they had more contact. Future research may examine the impact of contact versus noncontact factors on awareness toward children with ASD.

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