

THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF FILIPINO PARENTS OF CHILDREN WITH AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER (ASD) IN STA. MARIA, BULACAN

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the lived experiences of Filipino parents of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in Sta. Maria, Bulacan, utilizing a qualitative research design and thematic analysis. It emphasizes on the emotional challenges parents face daily, the effects of their child's diagnosis on family relationships and dynamics, coping strategies employed to manage stress, engagement with special education services, and their perceptions of its effectiveness. The study reveals that parents experience significant emotional distress, including feelings of helplessness, frustration, and social isolation. Family dynamics are often strained, with some parents struggling to balance attention between their child with ASD and other family members. Many parents adopt coping mechanisms such as faith-based resilience, structured routines, and community support to manage stress. While parents engage with special education services, they express concerns about accessibility, effectiveness, and the adequacy of available resources. The study highlights the necessity of holistic support systems, including financial assistance, enhanced special education programs, and mental health services for parents. Based on these findings, the research recommends strengthening government policies on inclusive education, increasing financial and emotional support programs, and fostering greater awareness of ASD to reduce stigma. By addressing these critical concerns, this study aims to contribute to the development of more effective support systems for both parents and children with ASD in the Philippines.

Keywords: Autism Spectrum Disorder, emotional challenges, family dynamics, coping strategies, special education services, support systems.

1. INTRODUCTION

Brief Introduction

Raising children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) exhibits distinctive challenges for parents as they direct the complexities of their children's socio-emotional and cognitive development. ASD among children is a complex neurodevelopmental condition characterized by difficulties in social interaction, communication challenges, and repetitive behaviors. ASD encompasses a wide range of symptoms and severity levels, making it a spectrum disorder. Parents of children with ASD often face struggles in understanding and dealing with their child that impact various aspects of their lives, leading to feelings of helplessness, disappointments, and frustrations (Gonal & Pujar,

2023). They also face multifaceted challenges such as communication difficulties that provide strain to parent-child interactions, hindering effective understanding and response to the child's needs. The unpredictable and intense behaviors associated with ASD, such as sensory sensitivities and meltdowns, often disrupt family routines and dynamics escalate parental stress levels (Efstratopoulou, 2022). In addition, social isolation and stigma persist as significant challenges for parents of children with ASD, limiting their access to support networks and leading to aggravating

feelings of loneliness and hesitance to connect with others, for they may not understand their situations and experiences. (Eshraghi et al., 2021). It is also overwhelming on their part, the costs of accessing specialized education, therapy, and healthcare services, especially in areas where resources are limited, placing additional stress on already stretched resources (Helkkula, 2020). In addition, balancing caregiving responsibilities with work commitments and other family obligations remains a persistent challenge for parents of children with ASD (Papadopoulos, 2021), often leading to feelings of exhaustion and burnout. Despite these challenges, parents demonstrate remarkable resilience and dedication to supporting their child's development and well-being, highlighting the need for continued research, resources, and support services to alleviate the burdens faced by families affected by ASD.

Pursuant to Republic Act 7277, also known as an Act Providing for the Rehabilitation, Self-Development, and Self-Reliance of Disabled Persons and their Integration into the Mainstream of Society and for Other Purposes aims to protect the rights and promote the welfare of persons with disabilities through observing non-discrimination and equal opportunities in terms of education, employment, and public services in the Philippines. It is clearly stated that educational institutions should provide inclusive education and create programs and services alongside the facilities and materials to support the learners with disabilities (LWD). Such provisions, if fully and strictly implemented, can give the opportunity for the LWD to establish meaningful and relevant social connections and would capacitate them to have full participation in society as stipulated in the 1987 Philippine Constitution that the state recognizes the role of persons with disabilities in national development. In addition, the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) also plays a significant role in the provision of essential services and programs such as monetary aid and subsidies, specialized programs tailored for children with disabilities, conducting training that will educate parents with knowledge and skills on how to manage their children's condition, and actively promoting awareness of ASD to reduce stigma among children with ASD. Through these roles, the DSWD significantly contributes to alleviating the financial, emotional, and social burdens faced by parents of children with ASD.

R. A. 11650, also known as the Inclusive Education Act, mandates the integration of children with disabilities in the regular education system that ensures the provision of appropriate support and services. This means that all schools, whether private or public, must ensure that children are accessible and enjoy their right not only to quality education but also to the appropriate support and services in order to attain their full development. Magtuba & Caballero (2024) identified the limited capacity of teachers in implementing inclusive education because of inadequate training and support systems. It was also revealed that the success of inclusive practices depends on the teachers' commitment, followed by the empowerment and attitude. Hence, professional development and teacher empowerment play a crucial role in enhancing inclusive education practices in the Philippines.

On the other hand, the support of the government in other countries in terms of finances allows the parents of children with ASD to step out from their jobs to look after their child with ASD; avail early diagnosis and intervention mechanisms; access quality education that provides in-house support services like occupational, speech, and behavioral therapies in the SPED learning institution; create a support system that will make them educated through collaboration with SPED professionals; and the transformative approach in SPED, parents are able to successfully overcome the multifaceted challenges they are facing in raising their children with ASD (Chepngetich et al., 2022). It is hoped that such government support and provision of services, which are also mandated

by the Philippine government, may also be strictly implemented to ensure the full integration of children with ASD in society as Sta. Maria Elementary School, SPED schools in Bulacan with 59 preschool pupils enrolled in SPED classes are good source of improving school's support services through approaches by the SPED teachers. The parents' collaboration with SPED professionals as part of the transformative approach of the SPED not only to improve the quality of education and can create early intervention programs provided by the SPED Education in Bulacan but also to address their challenges in raising their children with ASD.

The study aimed to describe the lived experiences of parents of children with ASD that will lead to the promotion of a supportive and inclusive environment that fosters the holistic development and well-being of children with ASD and to enhance their educational outcomes and quality of life. This study also aimed to investigate how special education can adopt a transformative approach to address the multifaceted challenges faced by parents raising children with ASD effectively. By understanding the unique experiences and needs of parents, this research sought to identify strategies and interventions within the special education framework that empower both parents and children with ASD.

Research Questions

The general problem of the study is to identify the lived experience of parents of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in order to improve the support systems and to address their challenges.

Specifically, the study sought answers to the following:

1. What are the primary emotional challenges faced by parents of children with ASD in their daily lives?
2. How do parents perceive the effect of their child's diagnosis on family relationships and dynamics?
3. What coping strategies do parents employ to manage stress related to parenting a child with ASD?
4. In what ways do parents engage with special education services, and how do they perceive their effectiveness?
5. What recommendations can be drawn from this study to improve the support systems for parents and children with ASD?

Integrated Review of Related Literature and Studies

The Nature of Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a complex neurodevelopmental condition characterized by difficulties in social interaction, communication challenges, and repetitive behaviors. ASD encompasses a wide range of symptoms and severity levels, making it a spectrum disorder. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), approximately 1 in 44 children are diagnosed with ASD in the United States, highlighting its prevalence and significance in public health (CDC, 2021).

Individuals with ASD may struggle with understanding social cues, forming relationships, and expressing themselves effectively (American Psychiatric Association, 2020). Moreover, they often exhibit repetitive behaviors and intense interests in specific topics. While the exact cause of ASD remains unclear, research suggested a combination of genetic and environmental factors contributing to its development (Bolte et al., 2019).

It is interesting to know that early intervention and specialized therapies play a crucial role in supporting individuals with ASD. Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA), speech therapy, and occupational therapy are among the interventions commonly used to address core symptoms and improve functioning (National Institute of Mental Health, 2020).

However, it's important to recognize the unique strengths and challenges of each individual with ASD and tailor interventions accordingly. One of which was communication difficulties inherent in ASD can strain parent-child interactions (American Psychiatric Association, 2019), hindering effective understanding and response to the child's needs. The unpredictable and intense behaviors, such as sensory sensitivities and meltdowns, associated with ASD also significantly contribute to stigma and social isolation that often disrupt family routines and escalate parental stress levels (Efstratopoulou, 2022).

Parents' Confusion and Frustration and ASD Awareness

The lack of awareness and the coherent system for children's diagnosis and family needs assessment, insufficient follow-up post-diagnosis follow-up adequate funding for Special Education Needs (SEN) programs were found out as the cause of parents' confusion and frustration leading to the challenges of parents of children with ASD (Yi et al., 2020). Parents of children with ASD face numerous challenges, including delayed access to essential services and inadequate support systems. Accordingly, the need for well-coordinated services for screening and diagnosis and additional initiatives will enable the SEN to provide explicit guidance and resources to strengthen their capacity to give appropriate care and intervention for children with ASD. The inadequacy of clear guidance and resources post-diagnosis significantly impacts their ability to provide appropriate care and intervention for their children. Addressing these concerns through the provisions of timely interventions, continuous monitoring, and integrated support systems can significantly lessen the burden on parents and improve outcomes for children with ASD.

Filipino parents of children with ASD have the same challenges as mentioned by Yi et al. (2020). The finding, such as limited resources and systematic delays to access proper services, significantly impacted the families, particularly the parents. It reflects the issues that are also prevalent, leading to confusion and frustration, which resonates with the gaps between education systems and health care in the Philippines and emphasizes the needed coordination of efforts across all government sectors. Mothers' significant emotional distress, including the feeling of guilt, frustration, and helplessness, are some of the challenges faced by parents in raising children with ASD (Papadopoulus, 2021). Parents also faced substantial challenges such as marital relationships, financial difficulties, and social burdens, including stigma and social isolation. The lack of knowledge and resources to support the needs of their children effectively is one of the causes of parents' emotional burden.

The strain of adjusting to their careers to meet the needs of their children with ASD compromised their marital relationship. Moreover, social stigma and isolation complicate their integration into society and finding support. Hence, it was given emphasis in the study, the need to provide a comprehensive support system that includes financial assistance, mental health services, and programs for public awareness to alleviate such burdens and to improve the quality of families with children with ASD. For mothers are the ones who suffer emotionally whenever their children cannot perform like the others. More so, if mothers cannot seek professional help due to lack of resources, leave their work just to look after their children, receive judgment from people, and

compromise their family dynamics, these are thorns to their hearts. As mentioned by Papadopoulos (2021), they must be given support by the government to lessen their burdens to have pleasant experiences despite their children's disability.

Misdiagnosis and Lack of Information about ASD

It is interesting to know that the outcomes of Early Detection and Intervention (EDI), a system that identified the disabilities or developmental delay (CWD) at an early stage from the perspectives of public school teachers and administrators in the Philippines, highlight the essence of a comprehensive support system,, which requires the involvement of parents, schools, and healthcare providers,, ensuring the success of inclusion and fostering development among children with ASD (Sagun et al., 2022).

Hence, addressing the systemic barriers and promoting collaboration among stakeholders are important for improving the educational outcomes and quality of life of families of children with ASD. It was found out in the study that some children struggle academically despite all the interventions because of the inconsistent school demands.

Also, there is evidence that early detection intervention (EDI) enables children with ASD to have better motivation, self-confidence, and enhanced social participation that help to improve their attitudes and behaviors. Through community mapping and collaboration with local government units,, lead to the increased detection of children with ASD. The gaps in services and parental denial towards their children's condition were identified as the factors affecting limited health services, and the lack of continuity between daycare centers and schools are the outcomes of geographical and financial constraints that affects the effectiveness of EDI. Accordingly, early detection and intervention are essential in addressing developmental delays and fostering readiness for schools; this; this cannot be overstated. Hence, it is important for the parents to have early diagnosis and intervention services that will support the development of children at risk. On the other hand, parents' active participation in the intervention programs and child's educational therapeutic processes can significantly improve outcomes. More so, effective collaboration between parents, schools, and health care providers is important. There must be an advocacy for a better support system,, and inclusive practices in school must come from parents to increase awareness about autism and to reduce stigma and bullying incidents to foster a more inclusive environment for children with autism. The study also emphasizes the need to address limited access to health care services, divided service delivery, and the inadequate resources in school through the aforementioned advocacy.

Social Interaction of Children with ASD

Vasina and Sadretdinova (2022) defined social interactions of LWD as the process where children with ASD reflection their ability to participate in social interaction as they engage in verbal and non-verbal communication with others. Accordingly, the developmental disorders of children with ASD affect their verbal and social behavior, which made it difficult to socially interact with others. It was found out in the study that the development of social interaction of children with ASD is influenced more by the complexity of their disorders rather than age, and the study gave an insight that minimal but observable growth in social interaction skills is evident after children with ASD are given early and consistent support towards targeted intervention to improve these skills.

Lee et. al, (2024) aimed to investigate and compare the perceptions of educational stakeholders such as the policymakers, teacher educators, in-service teachers, and student teachers in Oman and

the Philippines regarding the goals of special education and children with disabilities. The study explored how such perceptions influence professional behaviors and attitudes towards children with disabilities. The study highlights that many participants emphasized the importance of integrating children with disabilities into regular classrooms.

Parental Stress towards Family Dynamics

The high level of parental stress among parents with children with ASD was significantly associated with the severity of the children's behavioral issues and symptoms. Such parental stress was correlated with children's incapacity to regulate themselves,, which was confirmed by Viana et al.(2021). The authors emphasized at the positive and problem-focused coping strategies on how severe ASD symptoms which included depression and self-injury, can directly aggravated parental stress. Inadequacy of standardized services and consistency of follow-up after diagnosis were the contributing factors to the stress and challenges faced by parents of children with ASD. Hence, comprehensive and continuous support services to promote consistent and adequate follow-up care post-diagnosis, enabling parents to effectively manage their children's symptoms and behavioral issues effectively, will improve their children's well- being, leading to a reduction of parents' stress.

In addition, Kadir (2020) revealed that parents had difficulties in managing the hyperactivity, aggression, and communication problems of their children that led their stress and exhaustion. The high cost of therapies, treatments, and special education services imposed a relevant financial burden on parents and forces them to sacrifice their careers. More so, parents often encountered stigmatization, misunderstanding, and judgments from the community that make them resort to social isolation. The immense emotional demands of caring for children with ASD constant need for vigilance which contributes to the high levels of mental health issues and parental stress. The behavioral issues of aggression and hyperactivity of children with ASD led to physical and emotional exhaustion of parents; the financial constraints emerged due to the cost of treatments and therapies often reduce family income, and the lack of understanding from the community and social stigma further isolated families to community leading to emotional distress, highlight the need for a comprehensive support system, financial assistance, community education initiatives, and accessible mental health services alleviated the challenges of parenting children with ASD and may improve their quality of life.

Intervention Programs in Enhancing Supportive Services and Reducing Parents' Anxieties

The role of anxiety in moderating the relationship between severity of ASD symptoms and the parents' quality of life was investigated by Smith (2019). The study explored the comorbid anxiety of an individual with ASD, which affected their social and psychological well-being. It was found out that anxiety was a common co-occurring condition, and ASD severity predicted lower quality of life. Hence, anxiety symptoms played a vital role in influencing the overall well-being beyond the core symptoms among individuals with ASD. Accordingly, it was necessary to have further investigation on the specific nature of anxiety among individuals with ASD and highlighted the need for essential interventions that will address both ASD symptoms and anxiety. However, the study reveals its implications for special education through the development of strategies to support mental health concerns and to incorporate therapeutic interventions towards anxiety management techniques to enhance the quality of life and enable individuals with ASD to achieve

greater autonomy and social integration. The author recommended developing specific anxiety treatment to improve their social relationship.

The importance of tailored service delivery and support systems to meet the diverse and individual needs of children with ASD and their families was explored by Leosala L. (2023). Comprehensive resources and emotional support for parents played a crucial role for them to effectively cope with the demands of raising a child with ASD. It was also given emphasis that in addressing the concerns of children with ASD, parents must become full-time caregivers in order to identify their distinct characteristics and identify both their strengths and abilities as well as their impairments. In addition, fulfillments among parents in witnessing their children's improvements and providing for their needs must come to their realization. In spite of all the challenges and the stresses brought by parenting children with ASD due to socially inappropriate behavior and great financial demands, parents must take into consideration the value of ongoing communication and collaboration with service providers, supportive and competent special education professionals, and observed developmental gains in their children. Hence, parents must create coping mechanisms for family dynamics and adjustments, such as quitting jobs to focus on caregiving. Parents must seek information from professionals and engage in self-initiated learning through reading and attending seminars and involved in home-based interventions to be educated on how to deal effectively and to promote development among their children with ASD.

Understanding the Lived Experiences of Parents of Children with ASD

Chepngetichet al.(2022) aimed to understand and describe the lived experiences of parents raising children with autism in Mandaue City, Philippines, focusing on the challenges they face and how they cope with daily activities and concerns about their child's future. Accordingly, the diagnosis of autism was caused of hopelessness, denial, and overwhelming shock among parents of children with ASD. However, such a diagnosis enabled the parents to understand the conditions of their children for the necessary early intervention. This was mentioned in the study the various parental challenges in raising children with ASD, such as high costs of therapies and education that strain family finances, unawareness of their children's atypical behaviors leading to delayed diagnosis, tensions in marriages and sibling relationships, and rejections from extended family.

Parents cannot help but to worry about who will take care of and look after their children when they are gone. In addition, sending their children to public schools that with inadequate resources needed to support children with ASD leads parents to seek out private institutions that charge expensive tuition fees. Moreover, misdiagnosis and denial were contributing factors to delayed access and needed interventions, which led to high levels of stress and frustration that often vent parents' anger on their children. It was recommended in study that the parents must acquire more information and emotional support to cope with the challenges in raising children with ASD. It was also recommended that nurses and other healthcare providers may pay attention in creating therapeutic relationships with parents to facilitate support systems. Public schools must improve through hiring more specialized teachers and providing appropriate training and including mental health services as one of the provisions of support providers that will address the needs of both the child and the whole family to realize the impact of ASD on family dynamics.

Phases of Parenting Challenges and Their Coping Strategies in Managing Stress

The live experiences of parents raising children with ASD in Mandaue City, Philippines that focuses on the challenges in terms of financial, emotional, and social aspects that they encounter.

During the diagnosis phase, parents experienced a greater range of emotions, from denial to despair, as they realized that their children's future would be totally different from their expectations. In addition, finances are prevalent, and parents struggled to afford the recommended treatment, therapies, and special education in order to promote development with their children with ASD. There were also significant changes in lifestyles, like quitting a job to take care of their children, that contributed to the financial instability (Chepngeticht al., 2022). Tensions between spouses and other children were also evident that affect family dynamics due to the resources and attention required to be given for the child with autism. It was found out that the primary concerns of parents were the uncertainty of the future of their children. Parents are also struggling to find suitable schools and services for their children, and they find public schools were not satisfied in terms of providing educational services. It is recommended in the study to have greater support for parents, which includes accessibility to information to broaden their perspectives toward autism, to have emotional support and financial assistance for therapies. Special education in public schools maybe strengthened through better-trained teachers and appropriate infrastructure to accommodate children with ASD.

The Dynamics of Special Education Transformative Approach

Matthew (2023) explained the transformative approach of special education which emphasizes inclusive practices, equity, and social justice. The perceptions and suggested goals aligned with several key aspects of transformative special education,, such as mainstreaming and normalizing, reflection a commitment to inclusive education and ensuring that children with disabilities learn alongside their peers in regular classrooms. There must be a focus on providing equal opportunities, which, which underscores the need for equitable access to education for all children, regardless of their disabilities. The call for better policies, teacher training, and assessment methods aligns with transformative approaches that seek continuous improvement and adaptation to meet the diverse needs of students and was also given emphasis. Lastly, the goal of maximizing the potential of children with disabilities highlights the importance of a holistic approach to education, considering academic, social, and emotional development.

Special education emerged as a transformative force in enhancing the lives of individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in recent years, significantly impacted their development and societal integration. Through tailored interventions, personalized teaching methods, and multidisciplinary support, special education have revolutionized the approaches to ASD education. Research conducted between 2019 and 2024 had consistently demonstrated the profound influence of special education on individuals with ASD. Studies such as those by Smith et al. (2019) highlighted the efficacy of early intervention programs in fostering essential skills, including communication, social interaction, and adaptive behavior. These interventions, often delivered through individualized education plans (IEPs) and applied behavioral analysis (ABA), have significantly improved academic outcomes and life skills acquisition among ASD learners.

Moreover, special education has played a pivotal role in promoting inclusion and acceptance within mainstream educational settings. In essence, the transformative influence of special education for ASD extends beyond academic achievement to encompass holistic development, societal integration, and the cultivation of inclusive communities. As evidenced by empirical research, its impact is profound, empowering individuals with ASD to realize their full potential and thrive in diverse environments.

Synthesis

There are many substantial challenges that parents could have in raising their children. Parental stress is inevitable, especially if the parents are incapable of providing the needs of their children due to financial constraints. This current study on the lived experiences of parents of children with ASD showed that the parental stress is correlated with how their children failed to regulate themselves (Viana et al., 2021). It was found out that the aggression and hyperactivity of children with ASD were the main causes of parents' exhaustion, requiring them to give more attention and to become more patient with their children with ASD to the extent of leaving their job so that there will be someone to look after them. Parents who are dealing with difficulties in managing their children's aggression and hyperactivity must have emotional support in order to establish coping mechanisms. In addition, financial constraints due to the high cost of treatments, therapies, and expensive tuition fees in special education alleviate the challenges of parents of children with ASD. Since they opted to give up their work so they would be full-time caregivers of their children, augmenting their family resources becomes an additional stress that may also compromise their family dynamics.

Furthermore, misdiagnosis and denial were also contributing factors to accessing the necessary intervention. It was found out that early detection and intervention are important in order to address developmental delays and to promote readiness for school. Thus, parents must have awareness about autism, led to the promotion of a more inclusive environment to reduce stigma and bullying. Hence, it is recommended that parents may have accessibility to information to widen their perceptions towards autism, to have emotional support, and to have financial assistance. Lastly, there must be a strengthening of special education may be strengthened through teachers' training and provision suitable learning environment to accommodate children with ASD.

2. METHODOLOGY

The study was a qualitative research design that provides an in-depth exploration of complex issues within their real-life context. This method is particularly effective for studying the challenges in parenting children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), as it allows for a comprehensive understanding of individual experiences and nuanced perspectives. By examining detailed narratives and interactions, researchers can identify parents' perceptions of the challenges in raising children with ASD, specifically in terms of their social interaction, the strategies within the transformative approach in special education, and the role of collaboration between the parents and special education professionals using the focal group discussion.

This rich, meaningful, and substantial data based on the lived experiences of parents in raising children with ASD highlighted personal stories and systemic barriers that advocated for change, promoting more effective, compassionate, and individualized educational practices that address the unique needs of children with ASD and their families that could be helpful to other parents in the same situation.

The researcher considered the parents from Sta. Maria Central District, Sta. Maria Elementary School, located at MG de Leon St., Poblacion, Sta. Maria, and Bulacan to be participants of the study it is one of the biggest SPED schools in Bulacan. The informants were chosen based on the following criteria: (a) the informant has a child with autism, (b) their children have been properly assessed by the development pediatrician, (c) their children must be in the early childhood stage (3 to 6 years of age) since this is the most crucial stage of development and the children need the complete support of their parents, and (d) their children are under the special education program.

The study employed focus group discussions and the data were treated utilizing thematic analysis. The researcher used purposive sampling wherein the researcher selects informants provided rich, relevant, and diverse insights into the phenomenon being studied (George, 2023). More so, Focus Group Discussion required dynamic interaction, and smaller groups encourage active participation without overwhelming the discussion (Morgan, 2022), while thematic analysis provided in-depth and detailed data, which is achievable with carefully selected, diverse participants.

Research Instrument

The researcher utilized a self-made interview questionnaire with two (2) parts which dealt with the parenting challenges of parents in raising children with ASD. The first question was about how parents perceive the challenges of parenting children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). In connection to these questions, probing questions were provided such as how the participants described their daily routine and how it impacted by their child's ASD. The second question dealt with their initial reaction when their children were diagnosed with ASD. The third question dealt with some significant emotional challenges in terms of communication, social interaction, repetitive behavior, finances, and others. The fourth questions was about the effect of their children having an ASD to their family relationships and dynamics. The fifth questions dealt with the most effective coping strategies in managing stress related to parenting a child with ASD. Also, the parents were asked about their engagement with educational services and the most effective services they found effective. Lastly, parents were asked some initiative which they think can help to improve the support system for parents of children with ASD. The instrument were validated by the three experts, one specialized in special education and two were experts in the field of psychology.

Data Gathering Procedure

The researcher sent a letter to the division superintendent requesting to conduct the study with the parents of children with autism as the participants in Sta. Maria Central District Sta. Maria Elementary School, located at MG de Leon St. Poblacion, Sta. Maria, Bulacan. In this regard, the researcher will adhere to R.A. 10173, also known as the Data Privacy Act of 2012, which mandates the observation of the privacy of the participants.

The researcher also sent a request permission from the parents, asking them to be the informants of the study. After which, the researcher asked for an appointment with them at their most convenient time with the help of the SPED teachers in order to conduct an interview.

In the lived experience of parents of children with ASD, thematic analysis served as an essential tool. In the application of thematic analysis, the researcher underwent a process in order to quantify the data collected. The first step was the transcription of data wherein the researcher put the thoughts of the participants into written form to observe familiarization of the content. Second was the coding, wherein the researcher highlighted the significant phrases, sentences, or paragraphs in order to assign codes in capturing their sense. Once coding was done, the researcher reviewed and refined the codes and combine the similar ones. Grouping related codes was essential in order to go to the next step is to determine the themes. At this stage, the researcher ensured that the chosen themes accurately represent the collected data and all themes were coherent and distinct from one another. In the final stage, themes were integrated in order to come up with the final written thoughts. This analysis did not only emerge familiar issues but also provided other challenges,

interventions, and policies that can be initiated in order to address the parenting challenges in raising children with ASD (Braun and Clarke, 2020).

3. RESULT

The general problem of the study is to identify the lived experience of parents of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in order to improve the support systems and to address their challenges. The researcher utilized a qualitative method and thematic analysis approach, which yielded significant findings.

1. What are the primary emotional challenges faced by parents of children with ASD in their daily lives?

a. Navigating Morning Dynamics through Routine Establishment and Adaptability

Mornings can be particularly challenging for parents of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), as unpredictability may lead to stress and meltdowns. Establishing a structured yet flexible routine helps create a sense of security. Parents use visual schedules, timers, and gentle transitions to ease their child into the day and identify motivational objects that will encourage their children to wake up without tantrums.

It was found out in the study that parents of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) often implement structured morning routines to navigate the complexities of daily preparation. Establishing consistent routines provided predictability, which can reduce anxiety and behavioral challenges in children with ASD. Visual schedules, utilizing pictures or symbols to represent each activity, are instrumental in helping children understand and anticipate the sequence of morning tasks, thereby enhancing their independence and cooperation. However, if the child was not in the mood, they could not be forced to go to school.

Establishing consistent morning routines was crucial for children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), as it provided predictability and security, helping them feel safe and secure. Failure to establish such routines lead to increased anxiety, behavioral disruptions, and difficulties in daily functioning. Without a structured morning routine, children with ASD may struggle with transitions, leading to tantrums and oppositional behaviors. This lack of structure also contribute to heightened parental stress and decreased psychological well-being. Therefore, implementing and maintaining consistent morning routines is essential to support the emotional and behavioral stability of children with ASD and to alleviate parental challenges (Almendingen & Pilkington, 2024).

In order to establish consistent morning routines, parents should pay attention to what captivates their children and use these interests as motivational tools. For instance, presenting their favorite toys or foods can help lift their mood, especially on mornings when they wake up feeling irritable. Additionally, using visual schedules can greatly assist in setting a positive tone for the day, enabling children to carry out their tasks more effectively. Offering rewards, even in the presence of tantrums, is another effective strategy for building routines, particularly for children with ASD. This approach not only helped children complete their tasks successfully but also reduced stress for parents, creating a smoother and more manageable morning experience (Bernadette, 2024).

b. Promoting Balanced and Structured Mealtime Practices

Mealtime can be a sensory and behavioral challenge for children with ASD, requiring parents to balance structure with flexibility. Encouraging variety in food choices while respecting sensory sensitivities was found to be key. They navigate food aversions with patience, gradual exposure, and sometimes creative meal preparation to ensure proper nutrition without overwhelming their child .

Mealtime practices are another critical component of the daily routine, since children with ASD may have sensory sensitivities that affect their dietary preferences, leading to limited food choices. Based on the generated common codes, parents often created a calm and positive mealtime environment by minimizing distractions and providing comfortable seating arrangements in order to address their sensory sensitivities. Offering a limited but appealing selection of choices allowed children to make simple decisions within a controlled environment, promoting autonomy and making the meal time routine more enjoyable.

Parents prepared different food every day and patiently encourage their children to take a bite, sip a bit, and try other food in order to meet the required nutrition for their age and to provide them with a broader selection of food.

It is interesting to note that during their early years, children tended to be picky eaters.

They are very selective about their food, particularly regarding its texture. Most parents claimed that their children were fond of milk and crackers. They enjoyed eating crunchy foods but were very selective with vegetables. Some parents mentioned that their children preferred soups in their diets and were choosy about fruits. Additionally, many parents revealed that their children avoided saucy and oily foods. However, through consistent and gentle encouragement from parents to try different types of food, even in small amounts, children eventually learned to like them and include them in their daily meals. Therefore, it is essential for parents to be mindful of their children's food preferences and patient in encouraging them to explore new foods, ensuring their nutrition was not compromised despite any taste preferences. (Jong, 2024).A structured approach used to assist individuals especially children with ASD to overcome food aversion and selective eating habits is called Food Exposure Therapy. This is an approach commonly applied for individuals who suffer from sensory food aversion, avoidant/ restrictive food intake disorder (ARFID), and manifest symptoms of picky eating through gradual exposure or being introduced to their dislike or feared food in a controlled and non-threatening environment (Marques et al., 2024).

Food Exposure Therapy involved systematic gradual introduction of food wherein the person begins with simply looking at the food, then touching it, smelling it, and eventually tasting it at their own pace. In Applied Behavioral Therapy (ABA), it is similar to shaping.

Such gradual exposure enabled picky eaters like children with sensory sensitivities to reduce anxiety and increases food acceptance overtime. Furthermore, food exposure therapy also utilized modelling approach where someone demonstrates eating the food. Another technique was positive reinforcement where children with sensory sensitivities are given reward after tasting the undesirable food. Also, sensory play can also be used wherein children became more engaging in activities that involve play and tasting food. However, recent research claimed that virtual reality (VR) exposure therapy was particularly beneficial for children sensory sensitivities when used as a tool to create realistic but controlled simulation for children struggling with food aversion and it helps them expand their diet in a way that they feel safe and manageable (Butler et al., 2024).

c. Facilitating Holistic and Consistent Nighttime Transitions

A structured bedtime routine is crucial for children with ASD, as they may struggle with transitions and sensory sensitivities that affect sleep, and with consistency in bedtime schedules and environmental cues, such as taking warm baths, dim lighting, and weighted blankets, helps ease the transition. However, flexibility is necessary to adjust to unpredictable sleep challenges while maintaining overall nighttime stability.

Facilitating holistic and consistent nighttime transitions was key to helping children develop healthy sleep patterns and ensuring their overall well-being were the concepts surfaced in the study. Accordingly, consistency in routines provided children with a sense of security and stability, which was essential for smooth transitions from wakefulness to sleep. Strategies such as setting a predictable bedtime, limiting screen time before bed, and creating a calming environment with soft lighting or soothing music can significantly improve the quality of a child's sleep (Skubinam, M., 2023). In addition, incorporating sensory-friendly activities like baths with calming scents can aid in relaxation. Warm water, gentle lighting, and a structured routine to promote relaxation are necessary for fostering warm bath among children with ASD. Toys, together with fragrance-free bath products helped create a calming sensory experience, reducing anxiety and improving sleep quality.

In addition, post-bath routines, such as gentle massage and dim lighting, further enhance comfort and relaxation. Parents should also remain patient and flexible, allowing small adjustments to the routine as children's needs evolve. This adaptability supported a more individualized approach to bedtime while ensuring that children still receive the benefits of a structured routine. However, there were times when children experience irregular sleep patterns. Despite following bedtime routines, such as taking a bath or turning off the lights, children with ASD sometimes struggled to fall asleep on time or wake up early for various reasons. As a result, parents found it difficult to sleep as they need to care for their children until day time that they need to do house chores. In some cases, for no apparent reason, children woke up in the middle of the night shouting, screaming and crying leading parents to feel anxious and frustrated.

2.How do parents perceive the effect of their child's diagnosis on family relationships and dynamics?

a. Emotional Journey Toward Understanding and Supporting an ASD

Parents who received a diagnosis that their children have ASD became the beginning of their deep emotional journey. They were in shock, fear, denial, and not certain about the future. It was indeed a grief and the feeling of immense love and commitment to the well-being of their children at the same time. However, parents were able to transition from confusion to acceptance that made them decide that they needed to equip themselves with the knowledge and skills in order to foster resilience so they could embrace their children's weaknesses and strengths with utmost support and understanding.

An emotional journey toward understanding and supporting children who were diagnosed with ASD involves navigating a range of feelings, including confusion, grief, and eventually, acceptance. Based on the interview, the first time that parents received an ASD diagnosis for their children, it was overwhelming and challenging. Many of them experienced a period of adjustment as they sought to understand the complexities of the. Some parents claimed that it was the most difficult time for them, as if they were only dreaming. Some of them said that they questioned and blamed themselves; some took them longer to have the courage to accept, and some did not know

how to explain to their family and relatives without judging their children. There were also reservations regarding the credibility of the assessment especially if the child was not in the mood during the scheduled diagnosis.

Parents felt that their children were not properly assessed due to their tantrums. However, upon learning that their children have a special condition, they tried to open their doors leading to that journey and embrace it.

This journey of acceptance often included learning about early interventions, therapies, and support systems that can help children with ASD develop skills and cope with challenges and understanding that every ASD is unique and provided with the necessary support condition (Lordan et al., 2021).

b. Impacting Family Relationships and Dynamics by Fostering Understanding, Open Communication, and Adapting to Challenges

In terms of affecting family relationships and dynamics among parents who are raising children with ASD, reshaping their family relationships and dynamics requires them to become advocates, emotional anchors, and educators who foster understanding among siblings and extended family members. It is also important to have open communication in order to manage expectations, address challenges, and establish a supportive environment. According to Posar, A. & Visconti, P. (2023), parents find ways on how they will encourage adaptability in order for the family members to navigate along with their children in time for meltdowns, experience sensory sensitivities, and perform daily routines. But in spite of all these, parents find that the journey strengthens familial bonds, deepens empathy, and cultivates a more inclusive, patient, and compassionate home where their child can thrive.

Parenting a child with ASD required addressing the complexities of communication. Children with ASD often faced challenges in verbal and nonverbal communication, which makes it important for parents to develop strategies that adapt to their child's unique needs. Parents' flexibility in communication is key; they needed to adjust their approaches based on the child's sensory sensitivities, communication style, and developmental level (Bahns, M. (2021). Parents claimed that communicating with their children with ASD is very challenging for them, especially if their children are non-vocal. They were aware that their children were trying to communicate things that they needed and what they wanted. However, they were not capable of uttering their ideas through words. For some who were capable of communicating through gestures and prompting parents, such as holding their hands, going to things they need to have, or showing things to fill up, like feeding bottles. But unfortunately, there were some children wherein crying and whining were their ways to say that they wanted something or in expressing how they felt, which made the parents frustrated whenever they did not understand them.

Hence, with regard to the child's behavior, preferences, and triggers, parents should foster effective communication channels to ensure that the child feels understood and supported. Understanding each interaction may require different methods, such as visual aids, structured routines, or alternative communication devices. Picture exchange communication system (PECS) where pictures help the children to communicated through choosing the picture that represent their needs is one of the non-electronic alternative communication devices. Another is communication board that contains picture, symbols or words that children with ASD can point to in order to express their ideas and feelings. There is also visual schedules where the images are arranged in a sequence to assist the children in understanding their daily routines. There are also digital communication

devices that require electronic devices in order for the children with ASD to communicate with parents like cellphones or tablets to help bridge gaps and build stronger connections (Snow et al., 2021). Parents may also benefit from educating themselves, joining in support groups, and seeking professional guidance to navigate them with regard to the evolving nature of ASD. Through fostering an environment that prioritizes patience, understanding, and consistent adaptation, parents can effectively support their child's communication growth and emotional development (Chung et al., 2024).

Parents of children with ASD often face significant challenges in their children's social engagement, particularly in settings such as parties, reunions, and other gatherings. Difficulties in interpreting social cues and forming relationships led to feelings of isolation and anxiety for both the child and the parents. Based on the data, many parents chose to avoid attending parties or family gatherings due to fear of judgment regarding their child's behavior, as well as the stress and disappointment these events may cause. Instead, they often preferred going to malls, where they could remain anonymous and feel less affected by social expectations. According to Posar, A. and Visconti P. (2023), parents must assist their children to regulate their emotions in social settings. Enjoining their children in a social gathering is another critical area for parents that highlighted their stress and anxieties. Parents may assist their children to regulate emotions by creating structured environments and using visual aids to help their children anticipate and navigate social interactions to promote confidence among ASD children in interacting with others.

On the other hand, Rashedi, A. and Visconti, P. (2023) claimed that to support their children's social development, parents implement strategies dealing with guidance, regulation of emotions, and behavioral adaptation. Clear instruction in social skills, such as breaking down social interactions in a specific manner and using role-playing scenarios, may help children understand and practice appropriate responses in various situations and identify tantrums and meltdowns in children with ASD.

Moreover, behavioral adaptation involved encouraging flexibility and adaptability in social situations. Parents could model appropriate social behaviors and provide opportunities for their children to engage with peers in controlled settings, such as structured playdates or social skills groups. Exposing them in a gradual manner enabled ASD children to practice new skills in a supportive environment, facilitating the maintenance wherein children will have the ability to perform the learned skills even after or without the reinforcement to make generalization of these behaviors evident and extend to broader contexts (Schilbach L., 2022).

Financial challenges in raising children with ASD significantly affected the entire family. Based on the findings, parents struggled to afford specialist assessments, necessary therapies, and enrollment in schools that offer special education programs. These financial burdens often led to compromises in meeting the needs of other family members.

Additionally, some parents were unable to access support services for their children due to a lack of resources.

Balancing financial challenges in parenting children with ASD was a significant concern for many families. The costs of managing medical treatments, therapy sessions, educational support, and specialized care for children with ASD were overwhelming and encompassing. Parents often found themselves dealing with these financial constraints while striving to provide their child with the funds to support their full development, which led to parents' anxieties and financial pressure (Blackwell, 2024).

In line with this, being resourceful as parents played a key role in overcoming these financial challenges. Parents of children with ASD often needed to seek affordable therapies and reasonable services, such as considering public healthcare programs, community-based resources, or even insurance coverage. This required a deep understanding of what options are and a strategic approach to making the most of them. One of which was considering early intervention programs, which were crucial for improving communication and social skills in children with ASD, and prioritizing necessary therapies and exploring discounts or financial assistance from the government and non-government organizations will help to reduce financial obligations in securing support services for their children (Anderson et al., 2024).

Strategic planning was also important for the parents of children to survive in terms of financial burdens such as comprehensive budgeting, exploring free or low-cost support groups, and looking for online resources that can assist them in managing their expenses. There were also parents who placed emphasis on long-term planning to ensure sustainability, such as setting up savings accounts and even involving themselves in employer-sponsored programs for additional financial aid. Through a combination of creativity with great plans, parents of children with ASD can effectively reduce stress and ensure their child's development despite financial limitations (Hosseinpour et al., 2024).

Based on the generated codes, parents of children with ASD strived to foster positive family dynamics. During disagreements and arguments, they continuously reminded other family members that their child has special needs and requires understanding. Parents also encourage compassion and patience toward their child. However, the greatest challenge was explaining their child's condition to elderly family members, who may be skeptical and dismissive of the diagnosis. Parents who were the primary caregivers of children with ASD keep on promoting understanding towards the challenging behavior of their children with ASD among members of the family. Parents and siblings may struggle to fully comprehend the child's behavior, emotional responses, and developmental progress, which could lead to misunderstandings or frustrations that lead to conflicts and compromise their dynamics (Phetoe et al., 2023).

According to Sanchez et al. (2024), one of the essential ways in order to maintain family dynamics and reduce conflicts was for the parents to foster open communication. Parents needed to establish explicit and empathetic communication channels with each other and with their child with ASD. Also, it was essential for parents to sustain open discussions about the emotional and mental health needs of all family members, addressing feelings of isolation or stress.

Furthermore, raising a child with ASD requires flexibility in family roles and responsibilities through adapting to the children's constant changes and demands of their behavior. To address this, parents needed to share caregiving duties and provide clear routines to ensure the child's needs were met while balancing the needs of the rest of the family. Strengthening family bonds could be possible if the ability to adjust expectations and support each other has been promoted among family members. Fostering understanding, prioritizing open communication, and being adaptable to the unique challenges of raising a child with ASD could enhance the resilience of family relationships and promote a positive environment for all members.

3.What coping strategies do parents employ to manage stress related to parenting a child with ASD?

In raising children with ASD, parents must possess emotional strength and adaptive coping strategies. Though acceptance is the foundation, enabling parents to embrace the unique characteristics of their children will allow them to deal with behavioral challenges and sensory sensitivities as well as communication barriers effectively. Alongside the support coming from the family, friends, and communities, it will provide guidance and emotional relief and become the source of their hope and resilience. Through continuous learning, self-care, and perseverance, parents develop fortitude in leading challenges while they ensure the development and full potential of their children.

After all the challenges presented in the previous tables, those challenges required effective coping strategies so that parents can navigate the emotional and practical demands of their daily lives. According to Atos, M (2024), one key strategy was acceptance; this is acknowledging the child's condition and embracing their unique individuality. Through accepting the challenges brought by raising children with ASD, parents could shift their focus to finding ways to support their child's growth and development instead of focusing on frustration. This kind of mindset among parents may foster a more positive environment, reducing stress and promoting family harmony.

In addition, children with ASD often faced difficulties with communication, social interaction, and behavior regulation, requiring parents to remain calm and resilient in managing these challenges. Hence, resilience and communication were other vital coping strategies as it is stated in the table. Learning how to be patient and resilient and ways of alternative communication among parents allowed them to reduce the feeling overwhelmed, while also providing a stable emotional foundation for the child.

Furthermore, strengthening faith and resilience could provide parents with a deeper sense of purpose and strength in facing adversity. Whether through spiritual beliefs or a commitment to their child's well-being, parents often draw on their inner resilience to persevere (Chin et al., 2023). More so, support networks were also important in helping parents cope with the daily demands of raising a child with ASD. Such support networks may be their extended family, friends, healthcare professionals, and community resources, providing emotional support, advice, and practical assistance (Marbaniang M., & Saha A., 2024). Engaging with other parents of children with ASD could also create a sense of solidarity, offering both empathy and shared experiences.

4. In what ways do parents engage with special education services, and how do they perceive their effectiveness?

Based on the result of the lived experiences of the parents raising children with ASD, actively collaborating with special education services plays a crucial role. Participating in special education activities in the school, attending meetings, and working closely with the experts help to navigate and support their children to their full development. With the Individualized Education Program (IEP) and continuous progress monitoring, tailored interventions for their children were ensured. Alongside the open communication with therapists and teachers, promote consistency between home and school environments. Such advocacy empowers them to secure resources, overcome challenges, and create inclusive learning spaces where children can have full integration in society. Active collaboration between parents and special education services was crucial in order to address the challenges of parents in raising children with ASD, for it ensured that children receive the tailored support they need for academic and suitable activities for their social development. Parents claimed that they attended teacher-parents' conferences and meetings regularly, follow services recommended by the specialist, support the special education programs of the schools, and engage

in activities that promote advocacy towards supporting parents of children with ASD. However, the process could be challenging for parents because of the complexities involved in therapy coordination and continuous progress monitoring (Hall S., 2023).

On the other hand, special education (SPED) teachers and parents must effectively coordinate to foster the development of children's full potential. Through a collaborative approach centered around the Individualized Education Plan (IEP), where regular communication between parents and teachers is evident to ensure that the IEP accurately reflects the child's strengths, needs, and goals. More so, teachers could share strategies and interventions that work in the classroom as well as at home to generalize the acquired skills. In addition, parents provided significant insights with the teachers about their child's behavior and progress at home. Such an exchange of insights helped create a consistent learning environment for the child. Also, collaborative planning also allowed teachers and parents to create tailored activities that target specific skills, like social interaction or communication, and continuously evaluate the child's progress to make necessary adjustments (Motimposo A., (2024).

Moreover, undergoing therapies such as speech therapy, occupational therapy, and behavioral therapy was one of the major concerns in addressing communication, sensory, and behavioral challenges. Parents must often coordinate the therapists at their child's school, which can involve navigating complex schedules and ensuring that the therapies align with the child's educational plan. Though coordination between the therapist and SPED teachers required not only time but also understanding the therapeutic approaches being used and advocating for their consistency and effectiveness, this may result in the fast development of their children with ASD. (Murphy, 2024) Furthermore, advocacy in awareness and dissemination of information about the nature and programs of ASD played a central role in the collaboration process. According to Hall (2023), parents must often act as their child's voice within educational settings, advocating for the right services, accommodations, and modifications in the classroom and ensuring that their child's Individualized Education Plan (IEP) reflected their unique needs and that teachers and staff are well-informed about ASD. Extending to raising awareness among school administrators and teachers requires a deep understanding of both the child's needs and educational laws that protect the rights of children with disabilities, together with greater investment in assistive technologies to better support students with ASD, which could also be a form of advocacy to significantly improve the educational experiences and outcomes and address the children's needs (Said et al., 2024).

Nevertheless, to track the child's development, measure progress, and adjust interventions, progress monitoring should be considered as another important challenge that parents need to work closely with teachers and therapists on. Though, this may require regular communication and a commitment to reviewing data on academic, social, and behavioral outcomes. Thus, continuous monitoring must be done to ensure that the child's education is always evolving in response to their changing needs, but it could also be demanding and requires consistent effort from parents (Fernández, 2024).

It is interesting to know that the transformative approach between SPED teachers and parents focuses on creating a dynamic partnership that is more than the traditional roles, fostering mutual respect and shared responsibility for the child's development. Such a transformative approach in SPED encourages open dialogue between teachers and parents wherein both of them contribute equally to the child's growth. Incorporate innovative strategies and personalized activities into the

Individualized Educational Plan (IEP) that challenge the child's abilities and promote progress with the teachers and parents; on the other hand, bring valuable insights into their child's unique needs and interests, may be brought up enabling them to adapt to their methods accordingly (Hadiloo, 2024). The SPED transformative approach also emphasizes flexibility, ongoing reflection, and a commitment to addressing barriers to learning. However, parents wish to receive in-house support services such as occupational, speech, and behavioral therapies for free to help their children navigate their difficulties and to bring the best in them.

5. What recommendations can be drawn from this study to improve the support systems for parents and children with ASD?

Improving special education services is necessary in order to address the challenges of parents in raising children with ASD. The transformative approach involves customized therapies, structured learning environments, and comprehensive support systems that will enable meeting each child's unique needs. Tailored interventions such as speech therapy, occupational therapy, and behavioral support will help to ensure developmental progress (Motimposo, M. A. (2024). Moreover, inclusive and sensory-friendly classrooms that promote engagement in classroom activities and provision of trainings for special education teachers and specialists provide individualized instruction. Collaboration between parents, educators, and therapists fosters generalization in learning strategies at home and school. In addition, parent training programs will equip families with essential skills to support their child's growth, and through strengthening these educational frameworks, parents will possess confidence in their child's development, leading to reduced stress and uncertainty. A comprehensive support system not only improves learning outcomes for children with ASD but also empowers families, ensuring they receive the necessary resources, understanding, and encouragement to navigate their parenting journey with resilience and hope. Parents of children with ASD emphasized the need for stronger support systems to help address the challenges they face in raising their children. One of the key initiatives that they suggested is increasing awareness and education about ASD within communities (Tan, D. et al., 2024). Many parents experienced judgment and misunderstandings from others, making it difficult for them to participate in social activities. By implementing community- based awareness campaigns, people could develop a better understanding of ASD, fostering a more inclusive and supportive environment for both children and their families.

Increasing awareness and education about ASD within communities was crucial in fostering acceptance, reducing stigma, and promoting inclusivity. Many parents and children with ASD faced misunderstandings and judgment due to a lack of public knowledge about the condition. Awareness campaigns and educational programs could help community members recognize ASD-related behaviors, encouraging empathy and support (Thompson- Hodgetts et al., 2024). Schools, workplaces, and public spaces could implement training to better accommodate individuals with ASD, ensuring accessibility and equal opportunities. By educating society, empowering families, enhancing social interactions, and creating a more supportive environment where children with ASD can thrive and reach their full potential.

Another crucial initiative was the strengthening of early intervention programs. Parents highlighted the importance of the access to developmental screenings, therapies, and specialized education at an early stage. Many families struggled to find affordable and accessible intervention programs, leading to delays in their child's development. By expanding government and private

sector initiatives that provided free or low-cost early intervention services, parents could ensure that their children receive the support they need as soon as possible (Fang et al., 2023).

Strengthening early intervention programs for ASD was vital in supporting children's developmental, social, and communication skills. Early diagnosis and timely interventions, such as speech, occupational, and behavioral therapies, significantly improved long-term outcomes. Expanding access to affordable and high-quality intervention programs ensured that all children, regardless of socioeconomic status, receive the support they need. Government and private sector collaboration can enhance funding, training, and research in early intervention strategies (Shenouda, J. et al., 2022).

Additionally, equipping parents and educators with the necessary skills fosters a supportive environment for children with ASD, enabling them to develop essential life skills and integrate more effectively into society.

Moreover, parents advocate for increasing financial assistance and accessible resources to ease the burden of raising a child with ASD. The cost of therapies, special education programs, and medical consultations was often overwhelming for families. Providing financial aid, insurance coverage, or government-subsidized therapy programs can significantly lessen this burden (Anderson, K. et al., 2023). Increasing financial assistance for parents raising children with ASD was essential in ensuring access to necessary therapies, medical care, and specialized education. Many families struggle with the high costs of interventions such as speech and occupational therapy, behavioral support, and developmental programs. Expanding government subsidies, insurance coverage, and financial aid programs could ease this burden, allowing parents to provide consistent and quality care for their children (Lee, J., 2023). Additionally, tax benefits, grants, and employer-sponsored assistance programs can further support families. Strengthening financial aid ensures that all children with ASD, regardless of socioeconomic status, receive the resources they need to thrive. Lastly, parents stressed the importance of creating strong support networks where they could connect, share experiences, and learn from one another. Establishing parent support groups, counseling services, and mentorship programs could provide emotional relief and practical guidance in navigating the challenges of raising a child with ASD (Lakhani, A. et al., 2024). Creating strong support networks for parents of children with ASD was crucial in reducing stress, enhancing coping strategies, and fostering a sense of community. Support groups, online forums, and community organizations offer safe spaces for parents to exchange insights, access resources, and advocate for their children's needs. Additionally, connecting with other parents facing similar experiences reduced feelings of isolation, promotes mental well-being, and empowers families to seek effective interventions and educational opportunities for their children. Through these initiatives, parents believe that they can receive the support they need to provide a nurturing and empowering environment for their children.

Conclusion:

From the reiterated findings of the study, the researcher was able to formulate this conclusion:

1. The lived experiences of parents in raising their children with ASD are shaped by daily routines, emotional challenges, family dynamics, coping strategies, and engagement in special education services. Establishing structured yet flexible daily routines helps in managing morning, mealtime, and nighttime transitions.

2.The journey of receiving an ASD diagnosis triggers an emotional process of understanding and acceptance. Parents navigate complex communication challenges, behavioral adaptations, and financial strains, requiring resilience and resourcefulness.

3.Open communication within the family fosters stronger relationships and mutual understanding. On the other hand, coping strategies, such as seeking support networks and strengthening faith, help parents endure the demands of ASD parenting.

4.Active collaboration with special education services ensures continuous progress through therapy and advocacy.

5.Transformative educational initiatives offering customized therapies and inclusive learning environments significantly improve support systems.

4. RECOMMENDATIONS

With the sufficient interpreted data, responses from the participants of the study, and after the thorough analysis of the finding, the researcher is humbly recommending the following:

1.Initiating programs that will increase awareness and education about ASD within communities.

2.There must be an initiative that will strengthen the early intervention programs for children who were diagnosed with ASD from the Local Government Units (LGU).

3.Department of Social Welfare Development (DSWD) and (LGU) provision of financial assistance and accessible resources to ease the burden of the costs of support services like therapies and special education programs that will address the challenges of parents in raising a child with ASD.

4.Department of Education (DepEd) provision of in-house therapies as part of special education programs.

5.Creation of strong support networks where parents can connect, share experiences, and learn from one another by Non- Government Units (NGO's).

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