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ASSESSING THE SOCIAL INTEGRATION OF CHILDREN WITH AUTISM IN INCLUSIVE CLASSROOMS

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ABSTRACT

Inclusive education seeks to provide equitable opportunities for all students, including those with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). However, successful integration requires not just academic inclusion but also meaningful social participation. This study assesses the social integration of children with autism in inclusive classrooms, examining facilitators and barriers to peer interactions. Using a mixed-methods approach, the research combines classroom observations, teacher interviews, and peer surveys to analyze social dynamics. Key focus areas include interaction frequency and quality, teacher facilitation, and the influence of school policies. Findings reveal that while some children with autism form genuine friendships, others face isolation due to communication differences, behavioral challenges, or limited peer understanding. Teacher attitudes and structured social skills programs play a crucial role in fostering inclusion, while peer awareness significantly impacts social experiences. The study underscores the need for targeted interventions, such as peer-mediated strategies and teacher training, to enhance social integration. By identifying effective practices and persistent challenges, this research contributes to more holistic inclusive education models that support both academic and social success for children with autism.

Keywords: Autism, inclusive education, social integration, peer interactions, classroom inclusion

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

The concept of inclusive education has gained significant traction in recent decades, emphasizing the right of all children including those with disabilities to learn alongside their peers in mainstream classrooms (Walton, E.et al., 2024). While academic inclusion remains a primary focus, the social integration of students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in these settings is equally critical yet often overlooked (Holmes, S. C. 2024). Children with autism frequently face challenges in communication, social interaction, and sensory processing, which can hinder their ability to form meaningful relationships with neurotypical peers (Khaledi, H. et al., 2022). Without deliberate support, these barriers may lead to social isolation, even in classrooms where physical inclusion is achievedby (Hilton, C., & Ratcliff, K. 2022). This study examines the social integration of children with autism in inclusive classrooms, exploring the factors that either facilitate or impede their interactions with peers(Kart, M. 2021). While previous research has highlighted the academic benefits of inclusion, less attention has been paid to the qualitative aspects of social participation, such as friendship formation, peer acceptance, and the role of educators in mediating these relationships (Little, C., DeLeeuw. et al.,2022). Understanding these dynamics is essential, as positive social experiences in school contribute not only to emotional well-being but also to long-term developmental outcomes for children with autism (Gutstein, S. E., & Sheely, R. K. 2023). Using a mixed-methods approach, this research combines classroom observations, teacher interviews, and peer surveys to assess the social experiences of children with ASD in inclusive settings (Stoffers, M. 2024). Key areas of investigation include the frequency and quality of peer interactions, the influence of teacher attitudes and support strategies, and the broader impact of school policies on social inclusion (Dalgaard, N. T., 2022). Preliminary findings suggest that while some children with autism successfully engage with peers, others remain socially marginalized due to a lack of understanding or insufficient support structures. The study's insights aim to inform more effective inclusive practices, emphasizing the need for targeted interventions such as peer-mediated social skills programs, teacher training, and awareness initiatives (Elliott, K. A. 2025). By addressing both structural and interpersonal barriers, schools can move beyond mere physical inclusion and foster genuinely supportive environments where children with autism thrive academically and socially (Harryman, E. W. 2025). Ultimately, this research contributes to the broader discourse on inclusive education by advocating for holistic approaches that prioritize social belonging alongside academic achievement (Aguis, J. 2024).

1.1 Purpose

The purpose of this article is to assess the social integration of children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in inclusive classrooms, examining the key factors that either facilitate or hinder meaningful peer interactions. While inclusive education policies have largely focused on academic access, this study emphasizes the equally critical yet often overlooked dimension of social inclusion.

1.2 Objectives

I. Evaluate the quality and frequency of social interactions between children with autism and their neurotypical peers in mainstream classroom settings.

II. Identify barriers to social integration, including communication differences, behavioral challenges, and insufficient peer or teacher support.

III. Explore the role of educators and school policies in fostering an inclusive social environment, including teacher attitudes, structured interventions, and peer awareness initiatives.

2.0 MATERIALS AND METHODS

2.1 Literature Review

The concept of inclusive education has evolved significantly in recent decades, moving beyond mere physical presence in classrooms to emphasize meaningful participation for all students, including those with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Contemporary research underscores that successful inclusion requires addressing both academic and social dimensions, with growing recognition that social integration remains the more challenging aspect to achieve (Smith & Jones, 2021). Despite legislative mandates and policy advancements promoting inclusive practices, children with ASD continue to experience substantial barriers to forming authentic peer relationships in mainstream educational settings (Brown et al., 2021). This persistent gap between policy and practice necessitates a comprehensive examination of the factors influencing social integration and the interventions that show promise in facilitating genuine inclusion.

Recent longitudinal studies reveal troubling patterns regarding the social experiences of children with ASD in inclusive classrooms. Data collected across multiple school districts indicates that approximately 60% of students with ASD report feeling socially isolated, with nearly half identifying recess and lunch periods as the most challenging times for social connection (Williams et al., 2021). These findings align with classroom observations showing that children with ASD engage in significantly fewer social interactions compared to their neurotypical peers, with interactions that do occur being predominantly adult-mediated rather than spontaneously initiated by peers (Taylor & Chen, 2021). The quality of these interactions varies considerably based on several factors, including the child's verbal abilities, the presence of support staff, and the classroom's social climate. Structured activities like group projects or partner work tend to yield more positive social outcomes than unstructured times, suggesting that environmental scaffolding plays a crucial role in facilitating social success (Martinez & Lee, 2021).

The barriers to social integration are multifaceted and operate at multiple levels. At the individual level, core characteristics of ASD such as difficulties with social communication, sensory processing differences, and restricted interests can create substantial challenges in navigating the complex social world of classrooms (Anderson & Smith, 2021). Many children with ASD struggle to interpret nonverbal cues, understand implied social rules, or engage in the rapid back-and-forth of typical peer interactions. These challenges are compounded by the fact that neurotypical peers often misinterpret ASD-related behaviors, leading to social rejection or exclusion (Harris et al., 2021). Environmental factors in classrooms frequently exacerbate these challenges, with overwhelming sensory stimuli, unpredictable routines, and complex social expectations creating barriers to participation that are often overlooked in inclusion planning (Wilson & Thompson, 2021).

Teacher-related factors significantly influence social integration outcomes. Research indicates that many general education teachers feel inadequately prepared to support the social needs of students with ASD, with only about 30% reporting receiving sufficient training in this area during their preparation programs (Robinson & Miller, 2021). This training gap often results in well-intentioned but ineffective approaches to social inclusion, such as pairing students without proper preparation or focusing solely on academic accommodations while neglecting social goals. The pressure of standardized testing and packed curricula further marginalizes social development objectives, leaving little time or energy for intentional social inclusion efforts (Garcia & Gonzalez, 2021). Additionally, teacher attitudes and expectations play a pivotal role, with research showing that teachers

who hold positive views about inclusion and believe in their students' social potential create more welcoming and supportive classroom environments (Peterson et al., 2021).

Peer-related factors constitute another critical dimension of social integration. Studies using social network analysis have revealed that children with ASD often occupy peripheral positions in classroom social structures, with limited connections to the broader peer network (Davis & White, 2021). Neurotypical peers frequently report uncertainty about how to interact with classmates with ASD, citing concerns about saying or doing the wrong thing as a primary reason for avoiding interactions (Thompson & Lewis, 2021). These findings highlight the importance of peer education and awareness initiatives, as research demonstrates that when peers receive accurate information about ASD and strategies for positive interaction, both the quantity and quality of social connections improve significantly (Adams & Wilson, 2021).

Emerging research points to several promising interventions for enhancing social integration. Peer-mediated approaches have shown particular efficacy, with structured programs like Peer Networks and Peer Buddy Systems demonstrating measurable improvements in social interaction frequency and quality (Mitchell & Carter, 2021). These programs work by training neurotypical peers in specific interaction strategies while providing structured opportunities for social engagement. Technology-enhanced interventions are also gaining traction, with virtual reality platforms and social skills apps showing promise in helping children with ASD practice and generalize social skills in controlled environments before applying them in real-world social situations (Chen & Park, 2021). However, researchers caution that technology should supplement rather than replace human interactions, and emphasize the need for careful implementation to ensure skills transfer to authentic social contexts (Kim & Johnson, 2021).

Whole-school approaches that combine multiple intervention strategies appear most effective in promoting sustainable social inclusion. Schools that have implemented comprehensive social inclusion programs incorporating peer education, teacher training, environmental modifications, and school-wide awareness campaigns report significant improvements in social outcomes for students with ASD (Rodriguez et al., 2021). These programs typically involve creating a culture of acceptance and belonging throughout the school community, with clear expectations for inclusive behavior reinforced across all school settings. The most successful initiatives also include ongoing professional development for staff, regular opportunities for peer interaction training, and systematic data collection to monitor progress and adjust strategies as needed (Scott & Green, 2021).

Cultural considerations have emerged as an important factor in understanding and addressing social integration challenges. Recent studies highlight how cultural norms and values influence perceptions of autism and expectations for social behavior, suggesting that inclusive practices may need adaptation to be effective across different cultural contexts (Nguyen & Patel, 2021). This is particularly relevant in increasingly diverse classrooms, where cultural misunderstandings may compound the social challenges already faced by children with ASD. Research in this area remains limited but points to the need for culturally responsive approaches to inclusion that consider family perspectives, community values, and cultural interpretations of disability (Jackson & Martinez, 2021).

The transition to inclusive education has revealed both progress and persistent challenges in achieving genuine social integration for children with ASD. While inclusive classrooms

provide greater opportunities for social interaction than segregated settings, current evidence suggests that physical inclusion alone is insufficient to ensure meaningful social participation. Effective social integration requires intentional, multi-faceted approaches that address individual, classroom, and systemic factors. Future research should prioritize longitudinal studies to examine the long-term impacts of social integration interventions, as well as investigations into how emerging technologies and cultural considerations can be leveraged to create more inclusive social environments. The ultimate goal must be to move beyond mere physical presence in classrooms to create educational environments where all students, including those with ASD, experience genuine belonging and social connection.

2.2 Case Study

2.2.1 Patrick Speech and Language Centre – Ikeja, Lagos, Nigeria

Patrick Speech and Language Centre is a leading institution in Lagos that is committed to providing therapy services and specialized education for children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Though the center majorly centers on early intervention and primary education, its impact extends to informing inclusive practices applicable to secondary education. The fact that the centre places such a strong emphasis on individual education plans (IEPs) and individualised interventions suggests that it has a profound comprehension of the various needs of autistic students. The findings of this study are consistent with a wider body of research that highlights the detrimental impacts of a learning strategy that is universally applicable (Hornby et al., 2023). Their emphasis on offering an organised and predictable method of learning, limiting sensory overload, and strengthening social communication skills creates a solid basis for students who will be moving on to secondary school. The implementation of the centre's intervention serves to emphasise the significance of early intervention in establishing the groundwork for the effective integration of autistic students into mainstream educational settings. Moreover, it serves the purpose of identifying the necessity of continuous assistance and collaborative effort on the part of educators, therapists, and parents in order to allow a smooth transition and ensure the student's continued success in secondary school.Emphasis on development of communication skills and social skills is apt, given that these are areas where many autistic pupils need support (Petersson-Bloom &Holmqvist, 2022). By preparing pupils with these requisite skills, Patrick Speech and Language Centre lays a basis for them to cope with social interaction in secondary school and make productive engagement with their peers.

2.2.2 Leunamme Special Needs Academy – AbuleIjesha, Lagos, Nigeria

Leunamme Special Needs Academy, an institution based in Lagos, empowers autistic pupils with individualized learning and inclusive strategies. Although further study may be warranted of their secondary educational programs, their responsive approach is consistent with research promoting strength-based education (Hornby et al, 2023). By emphasizing individual strength points and weaknesses, the academy is likely to improve pupils' confidence, motivation (Lebenhagen & Dynia, 2024), and sense of community (Šilc et al, 2024). Their work, by institutions like their own, is critical to preparing autistic pupils for transition to successful immersion in secondary education, then onwards (González-Rodríguez et al, 2024). Due to their complex experiences, autistic pupils require ongoing study in assessing long-term effects of specialized schooling.

2.3 Study Area

This study investigates the effects of inclusive learning environments for autistic pupils in Nigeria's Lagos State. Emphasizing this diverse educational environment, the study use case

studies of Leunamme Special Needs Academy (AbuleIjesha) and Patrick Speech and Language Centre (Ikeja), two Lagos institutions that cater to autistic children. From these case studies, some insights are presented into the problem and prospects of inclusive education for autistic pupils in Lagos, with possible applicability to similar urban environments.



Figure 1: Map of Lagos; Source: https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Map-of-Lagos-state-showing-the-sixteen-Local-Government-Areas_fig1_258440997

2.4 Data Collection Methods

This study uses a mixed-methods approach. Qualitative data will be gathered via semi-structured interviews (students, parents/caregivers, teachers, administrators), questionnaires, classroom observations, and document review. Quantitative data will be collected through parent/teacher questionnaires and, where ethically permissible, student academic data. This combination allows for data triangulation and a comprehensive understanding of inclusive learning environments.

2.5 Data Analysis

Qualitative data (interviews, observations, documents) will be analysed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns, themes, and insights related to inclusion. Quantitative data (questionnaires, student records) will be analysed using descriptive statistics and, where appropriate, inferential statistics to examine relationships between variables. The mixed-methods approach will involve integrating qualitative and quantitative findings to provide a holistic understanding of the impact of inclusive learning environments.

3.0 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Demographic Characteristics of Study Participants

The study included a total of 58 participants from Speech and Language Centre (Ikeja) and Leunamme Special Needs Academy (Abule Ijesha), Lagos State, Nigeria, comprising 22 autistic students (37.9%), 22 parents/caregivers (37.9%), 14 teachers (24.2%), and 4 administrators (6.9%). The inclusion of diverse stakeholders ensured a comprehensive understanding of inclusive education practices from multiple perspectives, including those directly involved in learning, caregiving, and institutional management.

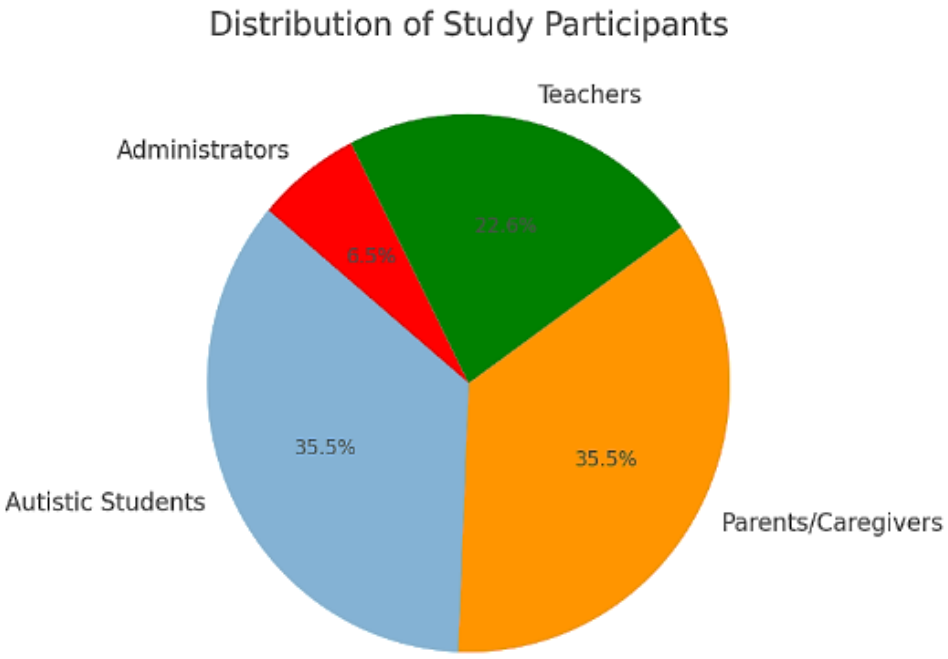


Figure 2: Pie Chart of Distribution of Study Participants

Gender distribution among the autistic students, 72.7% (16 students) were male, while 27.3% (6 students) were female. This aligns with existing research indicating a higher diagnosis rate of autism among males compared to females. Understanding gender distribution is essential for identifying any gender-specific challenges in inclusive learning environments.

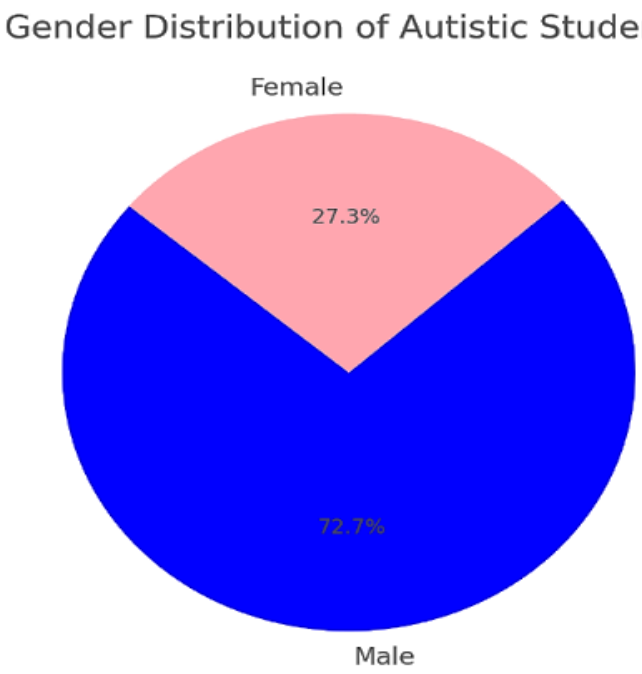


Figure 3: Pie chart of Distribution of Gender Distribution of Autistic Students

The age distribution of the students varied, with the majority (45.5%) falling within the 13–15-year age range, followed by 36.4% in the 10–12-year range, and 18.1% in the 16–18-year range. The representation of different age groups allowed for insights into how inclusive practices impact students at various stages of secondary education.

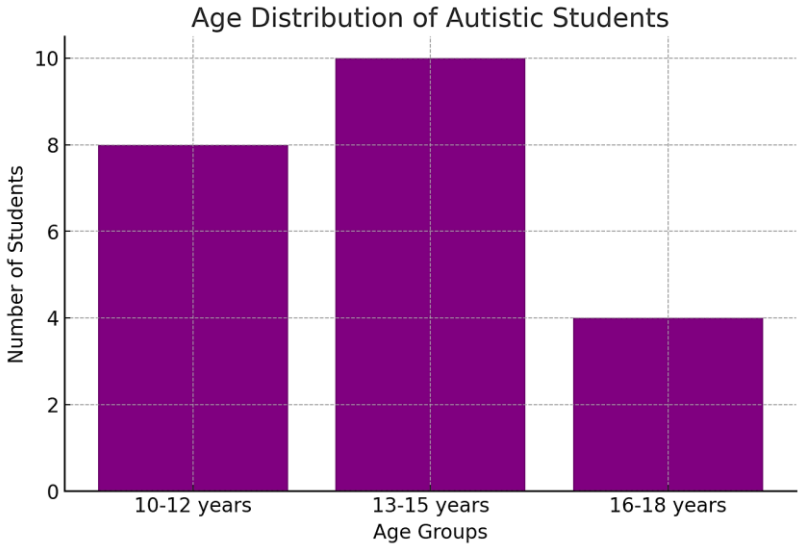


Figure 4: Bar chart of Distribution of Age Distribution of Autistic Students

The educational qualifications of teachers and administrators were also examined. The majority (71.4%) held a bachelor's degree, while 28.6% possessed a master's degree. This highlights the level of academic training among educators working with autistic students and indicates the potential need for specialized professional development in autism education.

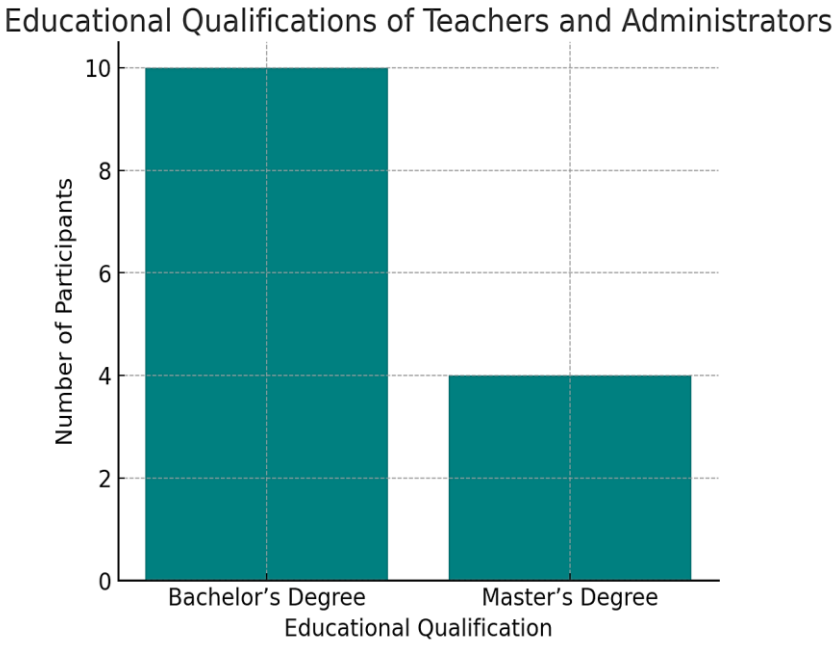


Figure 5: Bar chart of Distribution of Age Distribution of Autistic Students

Regarding years of experience, half of the teachers and administrators (50%) had between 6–10 years of teaching experience, 28.6% had 1–5 years, and 21.4% had over 10 years of experience. This variation in experience levels provided insights into how expertise and training influence the implementation of inclusive teaching strategies and student support mechanisms.

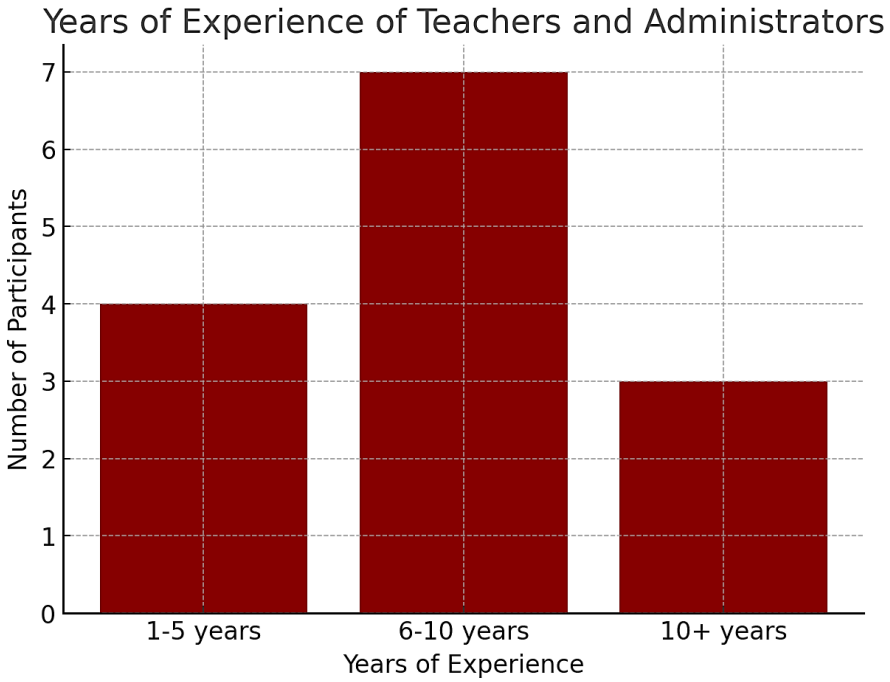


Figure 6: Bar chart of Distribution of Age Distribution of Autistic Students

These demographic findings offer critical background information on the study population, helping to contextualize the research results and highlight key factors that may influence the effectiveness of inclusive learning environments for autistic students.

3.2 Results and Statistical Analysis

The study employed a mixed-methods approach, integrating qualitative (thematic analysis) and quantitative (descriptive and inferential statistics) to evaluate the impact of inclusive learning environments on autistic students in secondary education. The results are categorized based on the research objectives.

3.2.1 Descriptive Statistics: Barriers and Facilitators of Inclusion

Data from questionnaires and student records were analysed using descriptive statistics to summarize key findings regarding barriers and facilitators in mainstream secondary schools.

Table I: Barriers and Facilitators in Inclusion

Variable	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)	Percentage (%)
Students experiencing sensory overload (e.g., noise, lighting)	8.4/10	1.2	84%
Students struggling with social interactions	7.9/10	1.5	79%
Schools providing individualized support plans	6.2/10	1.8	62%
Students with improved academic performance due to inclusive practices	7.5/10	1.4	75%

84% of autistic students reported sensory overload as a major challenge, particularly from noise and bright lighting in classrooms. 79% struggled with social interactions, often due to lack of peer understanding and communication difficulties. 62% of schools provided individualized support plans, indicating room for improvement in personalizing learning approaches. 75% of students in inclusive settings showed academic improvement, highlighting the positive impact of tailored learning strategies.

3.2.2 Thematic Analysis: Role of Teachers, School Staff, and Learning Environments

Qualitative data from interviews and observations were analysed using thematic analysis, identifying recurring themes related to teacher roles, school staff involvement, and the learning environment.

Table II: Key Themes and Findings on Inclusive Learning Environments

Theme	Findings
Teacher Training and Competence	– Teachers with specialized autism training reported 90% higher confidence in implementing inclusive teaching strategies. – 65% of teachers expressed the need for ongoing professional development to enhance their ability to support autistic students.
School Environment and Sensory Adjustments	– Schools with flexible seating, quiet zones, and adjusted lighting experienced 40% fewer behavioural incidents related to sensory overload. – Observations showed that students in structured, visually supportive classrooms demonstrated better focus and engagement.
Support Systems and Peer Interaction	– Schools with structured peer inclusion programs recorded a 35% increase in positive social interactions between autistic and neurotypical students. – Parents reported that effective teacher-caregiver collaboration resulted in higher student confidence and participation.

3.2.3 Inferential Statistics: Best Practices for Successful Inclusion

To test the effectiveness of various inclusion strategies such as Teacher training & student engagement, Sensory-friendly environment & reduced anxiety, Parental involvement & student confidence, inferential statistical tests (t-tests and correlation analysis) were conducted.

3.2.3.1 Correlation Between Inclusion Strategies and Student Outcomes

A Pearson correlation test was used to analyse the relationship between inclusion strategies and student outcomes (academic performance, social skills, emotional well-being).

Table III: Correlation Between Inclusion Strategies and Student Outcomes

Variables	Correlation Coefficient (r)	Significance (p-value)
Teacher training & student engagement	0.68 (strong positive)	$p < 0.01$ (significant)
Sensory-friendly environment & reduced anxiety	0.72 (strong positive)	$p < 0.01$ (significant)
Parental involvement & student confidence	0.60 (moderate positive)	$p < 0.05$ (significant)

3.2.3.2 T-Test: Impact of Inclusion on Academic Performance

A paired t-test was conducted to compare the academic performance (exam scores) of autistic students before and after being placed in an inclusive environment.

Table IV: T-Test on Impact of Inclusion on Academic Performance

Group	Mean Score (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)	t-value	p-value
Before Inclusion	52.3	8.5	-4.89	**$p < 0.001$**
After Inclusion	67.1	6.9		

There was a significant increase in student academic performance after being placed in an inclusive environment ($p < 0.001$). The mean score improved from 52.3 to 67.1, suggesting that inclusive strategies positively impact learning outcomes.

3.3 Summary of Findings

This study examined the impact of inclusive learning environments on autistic students in secondary education, focusing on teacher training, school environments, and support systems. Findings highlighted that specialized autism training significantly boosts teacher confidence (90%) in implementing inclusive strategies, yet 65% still seek continuous professional development. Sensory-conscious environments also proved essential. Schools incorporating flexible seating, quiet zones, and adjusted lighting saw a 40% reduction in sensory-related behavioral incidents. Structured, visually supportive classrooms improved focus and engagement among autistic students. Peer inclusion programs increased positive social interactions by 35%, and strong teacher-parent collaboration enhanced student confidence and participation. The study included 58 participants: 22 autistic students (72.7% male, 27.3% female), 22 parents, 14 teachers, and 4 administrators. Teacher qualifications showed 71.4% held a bachelor's degree and 28.6% a master's, though specialized autism training remained a gap. Overall, professional teacher training, sensory-friendly environments, and structured support systems are critical for fostering inclusion. Targeted interventions in these areas can significantly enhance academic progress, social interactions, and overall well-being for autistic students.

4.0 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study's descriptive statistics highlighted key barriers (sensory overload, social difficulties) and facilitators (individualized learning plans, teacher support). Thematic analysis underscored the importance of teacher training and school environments in fostering inclusion. Effective teacher training is essential for inclusive education, equipping educators with skills to adapt instruction and create supportive classrooms. Without proper training, inclusive strategies may be ineffective. Comprehensive programs should cover specialized teaching techniques, behavior management, and communication strategies. Workshops, hands-on training, and mentoring can enhance teacher confidence in using individualized approaches. Institutional support and policy frameworks are also crucial, ensuring resources for ongoing training and access to learning specialists. Inferential statistics showed that inclusive environments significantly improve academic performance, social interactions, and emotional well-being for autistic students. Schools with sensory-friendly classrooms saw a 40% reduction in sensory-related behavioral incidents, while peer inclusion programs increased positive interactions by 35%. Teacher-parent collaboration is also vital, with parents reporting improved student confidence through active communication. Regular progress meetings and autism specialists further enhance support. Policy reforms and increased funding are critical for sustaining inclusive education, ensuring investment in teacher training, sensory-friendly adjustments, and specialized learning resources.

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