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# Teaching learners with Autism in the inclusive classroom: the experiences of teachers in Johannesburg and how they are affected by government's policy on Inclusive Education

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# Teaching learners with Autism in the inclusive classroom: the experiences of teachers in Johannesburg and how they are affected by government's policy on Inclusive Education.

A Research Dissertation Submitted to the Faculty of Humanities, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg

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In partial fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of Master of Education by Research Dissertation

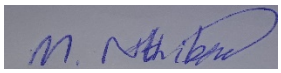
(Ethics Protocol Number: H20/07/34)

Supervisor:

Dr Dominic Griffiths

## Declaration of Original Work

This is a research report submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master's in Education (Inclusive Education) by Research Dissertation in the Faculty of Humanities, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. I declare that this research is my own, original work, and it has not been submitted before for any other degree, part of degree or examination at this or any other university.



## Abstract

Inclusive education is commonly discussed worldwide, but the actual application of its goals and precepts are not as widespread as the talking points. Due to inaction, many children still experience marginalisation despite living in countries where official policies support the enhancement of their participation in educational environments. As lack of action persists, children with disabilities, notably in developing countries, experience increasingly harsh realities of deprivation of educational opportunities. It is also concerning the fact that neurological disorders such as autism are rising sharply, yet little attention has been given to teaching affected learners in ways that will benefit them. This study looked to find out how teachers are developed in their practices as a result of the Education White Paper 6 in South Africa as an inclusive education policy. The sample included 7 teachers from 3 schools in the Johannesburg Metropolitan Area: 2 mainstream schools and one special autism school. Data was collected using phenomenological interviews, and subsequently analysed using thematic analysis, with emerging themes also singled out from the data and discussed. Concepts from the capability approach were used to evaluate the educational well-being of learners, judging on how much freedom teachers have to teach in proper response to the needs of individual learner. Unfortunately, the participating teachers scarcely relate their professional development to this policy, which shows that there has been little commitment from government and other stakeholders to making the national education system truly inclusive. Nevertheless, some of the techniques that the teachers have used as they gained field experiences bode well for the development of future policy goals. As a policy, the Education White Paper 6 (EWP6) was found to be relatively well aligned with the international goals of inclusive education, the main issue is that it does not have clear goals, and leaves teachers confused about how to apply it to their work.

Key terms: inclusive education, autism, policy on inclusion, capability approach

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# Chapter 1: Introduction:

Long after its introduction into the education fraternity, inclusive education remains a complex idea, surrounded by disputes over its meaning and means of achievement. Many different scholars have varying interpretations of how to provide education that benefits all learners, including those with disabilities, leading to intricacy in the conceptualisation of inclusive education. One of the most common descriptions of inclusion has to do with turning learners that experience marginalisation into active members of the classroom, with the classroom seen as a group in which everyone has a role that complements others. For example, Lindsay, Proulx, Scott and Thomson (2014) view inclusive education as respecting all learners and treating them as valued members of the school community and helping them participate in all school activities. Having acknowledged the need for full participation, it can be understood that there is need for practical teaching strategies that can achieve full participation. To this end, Ainscow and Miles (2008) argue that "effective teaching is effective teaching for all students" (p. 21), meaning that all learners' needs should be integrated into the planning and development of teaching and learning activities.

Moreover, in another conceptualisation of inclusion, reference is made to the philosophy that it was meant to replace in which segregation of learners according to their needs began to be seen as unfair treatment. Dixon and Verenikina (2007) hold this view, defining an inclusive education system as one that is "unified and coordinated" and "more likely to provide educational support for all students than two separate education systems" (p. 194). Prior to the founding of inclusive education, there were two education systems worldwide: the special education system for learners with disabilities and the mainstream system for learners without disabilities (Mariga, McConkey & Meyezwa, 2014). Different teachers worked in separate schools that enrolled learners who they were trained to teach; special education teachers taught learners with special needs while regular educators would only teach learners who were not regarded as requiring extra support (Engelbrecht, 2006). Inclusive education seeks to end the exclusion of learners with special-needs teachers from mainstream schools in favour of developing a single education system in which the needs of all learners are addressed (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011).

As a result of the discrimination caused by special education, in the mid-twentieth century, criticism began to increase against this education philosophy. The international community subsequently decided to abolish these bigoted criteria of admitting learners to schools, this was

first cemented through the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, 1948) which mandates that education shall be "… made accessible to all" (p. 54). This implies that the exclusion of learners with disabilities from regular schools is a denial of their right to learn in the environment they or their parents deem to be best for their education. To ensure meaningful participation for learners with disabilities when they are placed in mainstream schools, necessary accommodations such as health care and recreation opportunities became mandatory for all educational institutions (UNICEF, 1989). Officially, there has been more subsequent international legislation such as the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994), the United Nations Convention on Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 2006), and many other legislative agreements that promote the education of learners with disabilities in mainstream schools. On the national level in different countries, there has also been a positive response to pledge to develop Inclusive Education with policies being drawn up to express such a commitment. In South Africa for instance, which is the area of focus for this thesis, the Education White Paper 6 (Department of Education, 2001) is the policy that best outlines the steps for transforming the education system such that all learners can have unrestricted access to education in their local environments.

However, the concept of inclusive education is still in doubt among some international academics, as many believe that it is not pragmatic. For example, Cornish (as cited in Allan & Slee, 2008) argues that the practice of placing learners with disabilities in general education classrooms serves no purpose. Cornish argues that teachers are not trained to teach such diverse groups of learners, giving an example of learners with behavioural challenges who in her opinion, will disrupt classes. This argument seems to carry the assumption that all educators will be forced to implement inclusion without efforts to better train them, which makes it an opinion based on the magnitude of the problem being addressed rather than the potential of the proposed solution. Nevertheless, the Salamanca Statement states that a major prerequisite for inclusion is the "provision of teacher training in special needs education and the establishment of suitably staffed and equipped resource centres for schools to turn to" (UNESCO, 1994, p. 13). Like Cornish, Kauffman, Bantz and McCullough (2002) also favour special education because it started when regular educational institutions were not able to cater for learners with disabilities and it was an attempt to mitigate this challenge. However, this view is predicated on the assumption that inclusive education is only the placement of learners with disabilities in mainstream schools; the assertion above by Kauffman et al. (2002) appears to regard inclusive education as something that has been tried before with no

success. However, a proper understanding of inclusion makes known that the inability of regular schools to cater for learners with disabilities falls among the challenges which the inclusive education methodology was made to overcome.

The Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994) represents a turning point in the drive towards inclusive education according to Charema (2010), and it outlines some changes that can contribute to inclusion. It is indeed a turning point because unlike many policies before it, the Salamanca Statement does not neglect any aspects of schooling but takes a whole school approach in providing marginalised pupils opportunities to receive quality education (UNESCO, 1994). This shows that its proponents recognised that to make equal provision in the same educational space possible, the existing conditions in mainstream schools needed to be properly transformed. It follows then that there is a need to optimise the school environment rather than to send learners with disabilities off to segregated schools which have the tendency to lower the standards of achievement for the same learners (Eun, 2016). This study therefore agrees with the collective opinion of the 300 participants of the Salamanca conference (UNESCO, 1994) who believed that educating all learners in the same schools together, rather than to have separate special education institutions and mainstream schools, was the best solution. Of the 300 participants at this important event, 92 represented their respective governments, while 25 international organisations of persons with disabilities were also represented. Firstly, the presence of government officials from countries around the world symbolised that providing equal education for all persons was a priority for many countries. Secondly, the presence of organisations of persons with disabilities ensured that victims of marginalisation would actively shape their educational futures; an important way of avoiding the silencing of voices whose lives are directly impacted by the decisions made in the conference (Nind, 2014). It follows therefore, that the decision to align this study with inclusive education is in the best interests of learners with disabilities.

Inclusive education does not have a definitive way it can be practiced because of diverse interpretations of its meaning. Not only do understandings differ based on the opinions of the people who provide their views of inclusion, but also different contexts influence the conceptions. Context is not only positional, but it also relates to the forms of marginalisation and exclusion that exist in a particular educational environment (Guler, de Vries, Seris, Shabalala & Franz, 2018). In South Africa for instance, the priority in developing inclusive education after the dawn of

democracy was to reverse inequalities that had resulted from segregation and other injustices that had been committed under the apartheid regime (Du Plessis, 2013). The common rationale for the necessity of following the inclusive education tradition is seen worldwide as providing access and quality education to learners with disabilities (Allan, 2010a; Terzi, 2005). However, South Africa has predominantly focused on giving quality education to people who had been denied the chance to attain the best education due to racial discrimination (Department of Education, 2001). Nevertheless, this does not mean that people with disabilities are not prioritised in the quest to provide inclusive education, as inclusion is about leaving no need unaddressed. Racial discrimination was the most immediately problem when the first inclusive education policy in South Africa was introduced, therefore it warranted the attention that it received. Recently, it has been seen that neurological disabilities are rising in prevalence and likewise urgent attention must be turned to assisting those affected. One of the most widespread neurological disorders is autism, and the present study seeks to investigate it in the South African context, along with how the existing Inclusive Education policy (Department of Education, 2001) can respond to the challenges brought by the rise in its prevalence and the need for inclusion.

Despite the presence of this inclusive education policy in South Africa, research discussed below shows that many schools around the country remain incapable of teaching learners with disabilities alongside their typically developing peers. Dalton, McKenzie and Kahonde (2012) describe South Africa's implementation of Inclusive Education as "slow and only partial" (p. 2), because only a few of the goals in the policy (Department of Education, 2001) have been realised. Engelbrecht, Nel, Smit and Deventer (2016) attest to this, indicating that though schools that have been converted to full-service schools are enrolling learners with special needs, they still educate these learners in secluded environments such as classrooms for learners with disabilities. Full-service schools are defined as "mainstream institutions that provide quality education to all learners by supplying the full range of learning needs in an equitable manner" (Department of Education, 2010, p. 22). A school designated as such is therefore supposed to use the same educational space for all learners, because separate placement in the same school can easily be perceived as inequity by those affected. However, the practicality of inclusive education still needs to be fulfilled in South Africa in order to build on the foundation laid by the introduction of legislation, beginning with the South African Schools Act (Department of Education, 1996). This Act states that "A public school must admit learners and serve their educational requirements without unfairly

discriminating in any way" (p. 6). Until all, or a majority of schools will be able to cater for learners with disabilities, more effort is still needed from all stakeholders to make strides towards the desired fully inclusive national system of education.

As briefly mentioned earlier, a key objective for the proponents of inclusion was to undo systematic exclusion from the past. Some of these past discriminating practices were "…longstanding and historical exclusions based upon racial, economic, linguistic and other differences" (McDermott, Edgar, Scarloss & Press, 2011, p. 233), not just exclusion based on disability. In South Africa, most of the bases for exclusion in the previous sentence are certainly relatable; among these, racial exclusion in schooling was enforced and legalised during the apartheid era. During that period, the best resourced schools were attended only by white learners, with black children only attending underdeveloped schools (Lomofsky & Lazarus, 2001a). Naicker (2005) asserts that apartheid education "… focused on control absolute understanding of the world and a very authoritarian approach" (p. 1). This control was placed adversely on black people, who were seen as second-class citizens, not deserving high quality education.

The Bantu Education Act of 1953 was the legislative instrument which enforced a racial divide in South African education. Education for non-whites under the Act, was to prepare them for "a realistic place in white dominated society" (Christie & Collins, 1982, p. 60). A "realistic place" meant being on the lowest economic, social and political levels of society and doing menial labour. Henceforth, the Act was met with discontent in the black community, who saw it as a way to condemn them to inferiority (Shepherd, 1955). Racial exclusion was coupled with linguistic exclusion because Afrikaans, a language foreign to many South Africans, was the official medium of instruction even in schools attended only by black children (Naicker, 2005). Because of this particular history, inclusivity in South Africa is still discussed along racial lines to this day, notably because inequality persists in the country despite having been democratic for over a quarter of a century (Makoelle, 2014). Historic marginalisation in South Africa was supported by the laws and policies of the past, therefore the development of an inclusive society for the future requires laws and policies that reflect the values of social justice.

An area of research that has not been adequately explored is the effectiveness of inclusive education policies in enabling teachers to teach all learners, including those with disabilities. Though there are methods of teaching that have been developed as guides on how pedagogy can

include a diverse community of learners, none of these practices can be conclusively regarded as the ultimate inclusive philosophy. This conclusion is the based on the reality that inclusion is defined differently, therefore courses to pursue it can be diverse. Examples include differentiated instruction, a method built on the principle of knowing all learners in the classroom, varying teaching methods and matching the strengths and needs of all learners (Subban, 2006). Differentiation does well to embrace diversity, but it is argued that it would be unrealistic in crowded classrooms which is an unfortunate reality in South African schools (Donohue & Bornman, 2014). Another method that promotes inclusive education, known as Universal Design for Learning is a "… model for designing all aspects of the learning environment to address the wide-ranging variation of student needs that exist in an inclusive education system" (Dalton et al., 2012, p.3). The model can involve the use of assistive technologies, which are costly and put less advantaged schools at a loss for benefiting as much as more resourced schools can. Each pedagogical approach comes with advantages, as well as limitations, but when used interchangeably, the teaching and learning process becomes more fluid and therefore, more inclusive (Subban, 2006). This implies that teachers should implement teaching methods based on the characteristics of their classes, and not only on the recommendations of the method itself.

Given the contextual differences around the world, it is also essential for each country to have its own aims regarding inclusive education. Considering this, the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994a) prompts all countries to draft their own policies of inclusion because they face varying challenges. In the South African context, inclusive education is mostly seen as a way of undoing the injustices of the laws and policies of the apartheid era which permitted exclusion based on race and disability (Lomofsky & Lazarus, 2001b). Restructuring the education system began with law and policy, with the motivation to provide education to all people, regardless of race, disability, gender, or any other differences. This can be seen in education through the South African Schools Act, which states that a school can only be legally registered if "the admission policy of the school does not discriminate on the grounds of race" (Department of Education, 1996, p. 28). To cement the inclusion agenda, focusing primarily on learners with disabilities, the Education White Paper 6 on Special Needs Education: Building an Inclusive education and Training System (Department of Education, 2001) was introduced. This is the policy document that outlines the goals to transform the education system of South Africa into one that is inclusive. This study assesses its effectiveness in pursuing those goals with respect particularly to autism. Moreover, the Education

White Paper 6 (Department of Education, 2001) highlights teachers' skills as a critical component of the drive towards inclusion. Concerns have been raised however (Donohue & Bornman, 2014; Makoelle, 2014), that the abilities of South African educators to teach in diverse classrooms remains a challenge. This casts doubt on the usefulness of policies and laws that are in place, or at least the seriousness with which they have been followed. To test the usefulness of the Education White Paper 6 (EWP6), a policy analysis will be conducted in detail to determine whether it needs amending or, should be enacted the way it is.

**What is Autism?**

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a mental developmental syndrome that involves a lack of social communication skills (Bellini, Peters, Benner & Hopf, 2007)**.** It is considered a spectrum because of the range of symptoms it can manifest, and the different levels of difficulty in social interaction for autistic persons (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). The term 'autistic persons' is used to refer to people who show signs that are linked to the disorder (Ametepee & Chitiyo, 2009). Aboubakker et al. (2016) add that besides social and communicative deficiencies, children with autism commonly engage in "restrictive and repetitive behaviour" (p. 1). For instance, a learner with autism may not be comfortable with minor changes that would have them leave the restricted environment that they feel free in. In other cases, an autistic child may be seen every day with a particular object, doing the same thing he does every day such as bouncing a squeeze ball (Timmons, Breitenbach & McIsaac, 2006). It is immediately apparent that a pupil with autism will experience greater challenges in school because abrupt changes in the environment or activities of the day can come across as unsettling to such a learner.

Research shows that the by age of 3 years, children on the autism spectrum may begin to show signs of slower development of communicative skills than their typically developing peers (Kearney & Kane, 2006). This can be in the form of slow development of speech or coordinated movements in other cases. The biological basis of autism is well founded, and Bristol et al. (1996) show that genetics plays a major role in the possibility of a child having autism. This is interesting to note considering the debates in inclusive education research about whether or not disability is a social construct or a reality that should be looked at for its physical implications as well (Oliver, 1996). The Social model of disability, proposed by Oliver (1986) suggests that the difficulties that people with disabilities face do not originate from their physical ailments, but from the way that

society relates to people with disabilities. This model was developed to diminish the dominance of the medical model of disability which stigmatised people with disabilities, regarding them as deviants from the abilities of normal human beings (Dixon & Verenikina, 2007). The narrow-mindedness of the medical model also leads to ignorance regarding forms of exclusion that are not related to physical disability. According to Waitoller and Kozleski (2013), issues such as race, social class, language, and gender influence habits in schools that amount to exclusion. In addition, the biological aspect of autism has a history of contestation regarding the origins and causes of the disorder. There is an ongoing debate particularly in media circles, where there are allegations about autism being caused by vaccines. Though these claims have been conclusively refuted by medical research (Jick & Kaye, 2003), many parents still avoid having their children vaccinated, fearing that it might lead to autism. More on the relationship between autism and vaccinations will follow in the literature review section of this dissertation in greater detail.

Being mindful of the significance of the medical knowledge of autism and the social implications of it, I have placed this study within the theoretical paradigm of the capability model of disability. Terzi (2005) outlines that the capability model can promote the equality that inclusive education promotes by focusing on the capabilities of people. Capabilities in this context are regarded as measures of the level of freedom that people have to pursue goals and aspirations that they find valuable (Sen, 1993). The approach begins by evaluating functionings; which are aspirations that one may look at attaining to improve one's livelihood (Walker, 2005). Capabilities – the central theme of the capability approach - are the functionings that are actually available for a person to have within a society or an institution (Norwich, 2014). The use of this approach bodes well in particular for the advancement of inclusive education, which has a central objective of enabling learners, to achieve goals that they value rather than those set for them by authorities. The Salamanca statement (UNESCO, 1994) importantly states that "every child has a fundamental right to education" and crucially, "must be given the opportunity to achieve and maintain an acceptable level of learning" (p. 7). According to the Capability approach, one should be free to choose what levels of learning are acceptable to them (Sen, 1993). However, the issue, in the case of children, is that they may not be mature enough to make sound choices regarding most issues. This challenge is addressed critically in the next chapter where the validity of the capability approach to inclusive education is discussed.

Despite South Africa being the leading African country on autism research, (Springer, van Toorn, Laughton & Kidd, 2013), the public remains poorly informed on autism and related challenges. One of the main causes of lack of knowledge about ASD among the general South African public is the lack of studies relating to its prevalence in the country itself and the Sub-Saharan region in which it is situated (Chambers et al., 2017). This calls for more research efforts supported by government to be directed at determining the quantitative data that would reveal the rising prevalence of autism in South Africa, in comparison with world statistics. The absence of a clear indication of prevalence rates of a medical condition leads to passivity among people, as they may not realise the severity of it, or how it affects their interactions with others (Cardon & Marshall, 2020), and this is an issue that needs urgent attention in South Africa. Moreover, the country's inclusive education policy (Department of Education, 2001) expresses commitment to respond to pressing issues in South Africa. As the first post-apartheid policy document on the education of people with disabilities, the Education White Paper 6 affirmed the initiative to transform South Africa into an equal nation.

However, researchers (Donohue & Bornman, 2014; Engelbrecht, 2016; Makoelle, 2014) have questioned the applicability of the Education White Paper 6. Donohue and Bornman (2014) argue that the policy recommends teaching methods that are not suited to most South African schools. Makoelle (2014) further argues that racial discrimination continues in South African schools despite reformed laws and policies, such as the South African Schools Act (Department of Education, 1996) and the Education White Paper 6 (Department of Education, 2001) that prohibit racism. Given that these findings have led to doubt over the sufficiency of inclusive education policy in South Africa, this study will use autism as a measure to harness the views of teachers and find out from them if the Education White Paper 6 has been useful in helping them cater for learners with autism. The effectiveness of this policy is looked at specifically in terms of its role in helping teachers develop practical skills for inclusion of learners with autism in mainstream schools.

## Problem Statement:

The worldwide prevalence of autism is increasing, and as more children are affected by it, it is crucial to raise awareness and conduct more studies into it. In North America for instance, 1 in 165

children were found to be living with autism in 2014, making it the world's "most common childhood developmental disorder" (Lindsay et al., 2014, p. 101)**.** The rising prevalence of autism necessitates the intensification of research into its causes and the interventions that can assist those who are affected by it. Kaye, de Mar Melo Morentes and Jick (2001) point out that there has been an increased focus on autism in the past two decades, particularly in relation to its causes. Two decades later, there is still great attention on autism, especially in Western societies and institutions, which shows that it remains a pressing reality. Despite the increased focus in both medical and educational research, there has been very little academic inquiry into autism on the African continent. Ametepee and Chitiyo (2009) found in their review of scholarly literature that there were no publications that documented the prevalence of autism in Africa. The intensification of autism research in Africa needs to target specific stakeholders involved in the education of learners with the disorder, for example teachers and parents as the primary caregivers of children. The prevalence and epidemiology of autism are not necessarily central to this study, but what is at its core is the teaching aspect of it; precisely how teachers can be enabled to teach learners with autism in mainstream schools. These skills will certainly be in high demand as the prevalence increases and teachers become more likely to have learners with autism in their care.

## Purpose Statement:

The focus of the current study is to examine the pedagogies that are used to cater for learners with autism in selected schools in the Johannesburg Metropolitan Area. Teaching practice is subject to policies developed by government, an50d this is an integral part of this study. It is well established in research (Chan & O'Reilly, 2008; Leblanc et al., 2009; Timmons, Breitenbach & McIsaac, 2006) that the ideal environment for learners living with autism is in inclusive classrooms alongside their typically developing peers. While this depends on the severity of the ASD symptoms, it resonates with inclusive education, which aims to "remove barriers, improve outcomes and remove discrimination" (Lindsay, 2003, p. 3). There has been a worldwide response to research supporting the inclusion of learners with autism in mainstream schools, and the evidence of this is that the education policies of most countries support inclusion (Ravet, 2018). Though policies are in place, Ravet (2018) notes that only Western education systems teach the majority of their learners with autism in mainstream schools.

It remains a challenge in many African countries, including South Africa, to achieve the same placement, let alone develop teaching strategies for full inclusion. South Africa's inclusive education policy has particularly been criticised (Donohue & Bornman, 2014) for being impractical and not suitable to the realities of the local education system. This project aims to find out whether teachers have a working knowledge of the inclusive education policy of South Africa. This will be followed by an inquiry into how teachers' knowledge of policy has impacted their efforts to teach learners with autism in mainstream classrooms and informed their knowledge of autism and how to recognise it.

## Research Questions:

**Main Question:**

How has South Africa's inclusive education policy been influential in improving the abilities of teachers to teach learners with autism in two mainstream schools and one special school in Gauteng?

**Sub-questions:**

- Do teachers see teaching autistic learners alongside typically developing children as the best way to ensure meaningful learning for them?
- Is the Education White Paper 6 a sufficient guide for the realisation of inclusive education in South Africa?

## Rationale:

The rising worldwide prevalence of autism has seen an increased research focus on the disorder in recent decades. Though the amount of research involving autism has increased, very few of the related studies originate in Africa, and the result is that knowledge about autism spectrum disorder in African communities is limited. De Vries (2016) attests to the lack of knowledge about autism in the developing world, stating that "most people with ASD live in low and middle-income

countries, yet almost all we know about ASD comes from high income countries" (p. 130). Furthermore, Africa is the continent where the least number of studies seeking to understand autism spectrum disorders have been made, which makes it crucial to investigate the experiences of African people who have ASD. The limitation in knowledge among people in developing countries leads to many autistic people being undocumented, and therefore being unable to get the assistance that the condition necessitates. Looking at the African continent, South Africa is the leader in autism research, however, there is still a lack of proper statistics that reveal the state of autism, with prevalence rates in the country still unknown (Ametepee & Chitiyo, 2009b). More research therefore needs to be conducted and published to increase the knowledge about autism among South Africans and how to contribute positively to the lives of those who live with the disorder.

This study seeks to add to the much-needed knowledge about autism in South Africa, focusing specifically on the role played by teachers in helping affected learners to participate satisfactorily at school and in society. Knowledge is alarmingly lacking both in the areas of epidemiological research of autism in South Africa and the development of practical strategies for teachers to assist learners in ASD in attaining meaningful mainstream education. Additionally, teachers are perceived as possessing the know-how and pedagogical approaches, hence the study seeks their input on how they have been able to include learners with ASD in regular schools. In investigating the strategies teachers have applied to succeed in inclusion, the connection between attitudes about inclusion with the willingness to develop strategies for its fulfilment is also considered. This is driven by the understanding that a positive attitude has a bearing on the success that a teacher can achieve. Holding the view that teachers who have passion for what they do are more likely to succeed, this dissertation goes further to uncover practical strategies that have led to their success in including learners with autism in mainstream schools. The need for such a study is affirmed by the assertion that "further research is required to identify exactly what teachers who hold positive attitudes do differently in their classrooms…" for the benefit of "… other teachers who hold less positive views towards inclusion" (Monsen Ewing & Kwoka, 2014). The aim is to change the negative attitudes of other teachers in future, while letting them acquire practical pedagogical strategies to complement their newfound positive attitudes.

# Chapter 2: Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

## Literature Review

This chapter begins by detailing how knowledge about inclusivity in South Africa has evolved from before the democratic dispensation until now. There is also further emphasis on the statistical data and medical issues surrounding the epidemiology of ASD, which includes the alleged connection between the vaccination and the neurodevelopmental disorder. The chapter also highlights the different views of scholars on whether it is pragmatic to teach learners with ASD in mainstream schools, and also explores some teaching techniques that are used to successfully teach learners with autism in inclusive classroom environments. Finally, it introduces some of the main ideas of the capability approach, which is advocated for in this dissertation as a theoretical approach that can support proper implementation of inclusion of learners with autism in mainstream classroom environments.

Inclusive education in South Africa is about equalising opportunities for those who were historically denied proper educational access. The right to equal educational access for all persons (United Nations, 1948) was repeatedly violated in South Africa during apartheid. Naicker (2005) recounts that the best educational institutions under apartheid in South Africa were reserved for white people, while other races, including the black majority had to settle for lower grade schools. The South African Schools Act (Department of Education, 1996) heralded change in South African education, making it mandatory for all learners to be accepted and catered for in any school of their parents' choosing without any discriminatory criterion being applied. This meant that even the best schools could now be attended by children of African, Coloured, Indian or European descent. The Schools Act (Department of Education, 1996) represents an educational revolution because it makes no discriminatory biases, unlike its predecessor; the Bantu Education Act (Giliomee, 2009). The latter, as Christie and Collins (1982) describe it, was a "carefully planned policy of segregated socio-economic development for the black people" (p. 59). Under the Bantu Education Act, every race – Black, White, Coloured, and Indian- was to be educated by its own education department rather than one nationwide education system (Shepherd, 1955). The education of white people subsequently received much more financial support and resource

development than that of other races. Christie and Collins (1982) assert that channelling more funds towards the education of whites than blacks led to an unequal, white-dominated society.

Apart from racial discrimination, the South African education system post-apartheid faced issues related to the education of people with disabilities. Learners with disabilities had been excluded from mainstream schools and placed in special schools. This was the case in schools for whites as it was for blacks (Lomofsky & Lazarus, 2001b). As a new democracy, South Africa was readmitted into the United Nations following its suspension due to numerous human rights violations in the apartheid era (Keech, 2000). Readmission into the United Nations meant that the education system in South Africa would have to adapt to global developments and standards. With regards to the education of learners with disabilities, the international community had agreed to curb segregation that had resulted from special education in favour of inclusive education (UNESCO, 1994). The basic tenet of special education is, according to Allan (2010, p. 604), "fixation on individual deficits and remedies". In this view, the individual is the sole object of focus and must fit into an educational curriculum, without any changes made to the environment; the person is seen as the one that needs to be adapted to the environment. At its inception, special education was seen as a solution to the problem of learners with disabilities, such as the hearing impaired, the blind, and those with other physical ailments not coping with the general education system (Croft, 2013). The solution was understood according to the medical model as being possible by changing some aspect of the learner so that they cope with the system.

Though it might appear a logical measure to remove learners from an educational curriculum that they are unable to cope with, this step only transfers the problem of discrimination to a later and more permanent stage of development. While being away from other learners who might discriminate against them for being different might give some relief, learners with autism for example, will later find it difficult to have active roles in society and in professional spaces. A major advantage for inclusion is to train both learners with autism and their peers to live together in harmony. However, if this sense of community is not instilled in childhood, it becomes almost impossible to reinforce it in adults. One of the main functions of education is to get children ready to make lives for themselves in a world that is progressive and highly fluid in terms of perception and identity among people (Lotz-Sisitka, 2009). With that said, the education system should reflect the values of the society that the international community aims to promote; one that accepts and

respects all persons, no matter their differences (United Nations, 1948). For this oneness to be fulfilled and maintained, Donohue and Bornman (2015) argue that full inclusion of learners with disabilities into mainstream schools should be blended with academic and social development. Educational attainment can be maximised in any educational setting, but full social development is only possible if all society is brought on board in its pursuit.

Following global trends, South Africa's new national Department of Education formulated an inaugural policy that would initiate inclusive education. This was the Education White Paper 6– Special Needs Education, Building an Inclusive education and Training System (Department of Education, 2001). It was the product of local and international educational expertise, following for example, the framework for action of the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994)**.** In the Education White Paper 6, inclusive education is described as "acknowledging that all children and youth can learn and … need support" (Department of Education, 2001, p. 6). It goes on to add that inclusion involves respecting and celebrating differences. While difference was historically used as a rationale for deprivation and division of society, this policy marked a turning point because difference now reveals how each learner can be properly assisted. According to Engelbrecht et al., (2016), one of the first steps towards the development of inclusive education in South Africa was to shift from the medical model of disability to the social model. This shift was first declared in the White Paper 1 (Department of Education, 1995), which was the first educational policy document in the democratic Republic of South Africa. It acknowledged that inclusive education "… recognises that issues of health, social, psychological, academic and vocational development, and support services for learners with special education needs in mainstream schools, are inter-related." (p. 28).

In the social model, exclusion is understood to be caused by a range of factors other than disability (Oliver, 1996). This model considers the whole range together when eradicating marginalisation. This contrasts with the medical model of disability, which isolates learners who do not function like the 'normal learner' and places them in special schools outside of mainstream education (Terzi, 2005). Given that South Africa's history of systematic exclusion was largely influenced by race relations, it seemed sensible for educational policies post-1994 to adopt frameworks that tackle all exclusionary practices, including racism. Accordingly, Engelbrecht et al. (2016) argue that the Education White Paper 6 followed the social model view of disability, although it still

denotes medical model principles in identifying learners with special needs (Engelbrecht et al., 2016). This hints at insufficiency of both the medical model and the social model to conceptualise disability in ways that address all relevant factors.

The Education White Paper 6 identifies teachers as the "primary resource" (Department of Education, 2001, p. 18) needed to implement inclusive education. Since at the inception of the Education White Paper 6 teachers in South Africa had experience in working in either mainstream or special education institutions, (Naicker, 2005) their functioning in an inclusive education system required new training. Sharma, Forlin, Deppeler, and Guang-xue (2013) suggest that teachers can only become effective in meeting the needs of all learners with proper training. As South African teachers were not accustomed to working in classrooms that included learners with disabilities, those of different cultures and races and those from various socio-economic backgrounds, the Department of Education (2001) devised plans to render in-service and pre-service training to promote inclusive practices in teachers. The vision for inclusive education in the Education White Paper 6 (Department of Education, 2001) was later furthered with the publishing of the Guidelines for Full-service Schools (Department of Education, 2010). The strategies thereof outline how mainstream schools can cater for the full range of learners' needs, and therefore become inclusive schools. Catering for the full range of learning needs means that full-service schools must be willing and able to provide education for learners needing low, moderate or even high levels of support. This is not an easy task because most South African schools lack the necessary resources, hence there is a need for clear guidelines on how existing resources can be used. Causton-Theoharis, Theoharis, Bull, Cosier and Dempf-Aldrich (2011) emphasise this need, asserting that a key step in making a school inclusive is to devise ways to utilise available resources differently.

However, pedagogic aspects are lacking in the guidelines. Indeed Makoelle (2012) argues that teachers have received little attention because the guidelines rarely offer solutions regarding pedagogical practices in the classroom environment. As a learning disability that is rising in prevalence, autism should receive urgent attention through pedagogical approaches that can enable teachers to teach affected learners effectively. The development of such approaches needs to fit inclusive school contexts, which are seen as ideal for encouraging the academic development of autistic persons (Palko & Frawley, 2009). The matter of inclusion of these learners therefore needs

to be attended to urgently to meet the needs of learners and give them opportunities to participate fully in classroom activities.

**More on ASD**

As briefly explained above, autism spectrum disorder is a term that refers to a range of neurodevelopmental conditions that involve social and communication difficulties. The following definition by Akhter et al. (2018) specifies some of the characteristics associated with autism: "autism spectrum disorder (ASD) refers to a group of complex neurodevelopment disorders characterized by repetitive and characteristic patterns of behaviour and difficulties with social communication and interaction" (p.1). These disorders are Autistic Disorder, Asperger's Syndrome, Pervasive Disintegrative Disorder-not otherwise specified, Rett's Disorder, and Childhood Developmental Disorder (Leblanc et al., 2009). All these conditions are caused by slow mental development, hence the description of ASD as "a group of complex disorders of brain development" (Autism South Africa, 2020, p. 3). The complexity referred to is further confirmed by the fact that scientists are still trying to understand what autism really is (South, Rodgers & Hecke, 2017)**.** Hansen, Blakely, Dolata, Raulston and Machalicek (2014) add that the onset of ASD is usually during the first 3 years of childhood, while Jick and Kaye (2003) further state that diagnoses are common between ages 2 and 5, with most cases being boys. Signs of autism include social withdrawal and obsession to routine (Abubakar, Ssewanyana & Newton, 2016), leading to difficulties in coping with the dynamics of social life for those affected. What they mainly lack is the ability to understand other people's feelings, they rarely make eye contact and have little interaction skills, making them difficult for teachers to manage in the classroom environment (Boyd & Shaw, 2010). Many children with autism usually prefer to be alone, but for some that can interact verbally, there is usually a prolonged focus on a topic of interest (Timmons et al., 2006). Beyond the symptoms and age of diagnosis of ASD stands a controversial question: what are the causes of autism? Firstly, medical experts generally agree that hereditary aspects account for most ASD cases, for example, Jick and Kaye (2003) assert that "… surely a substantial proportion of autism is due to genetics" (p.1529). The role of genetics is widely agreed upon by researchers according to Ametepee and Chitiyo (2009) as the main cause of autism. It is vital therefore, for the medical history of close family to be evaluated when assessing a potentially autistic child.

Conversely, the suspicion that vaccinations may cause autism is surrounded by much controversy. In 1998, Dr Andrew Wakefield and his research team published a paper on their study conducted in the United Kingdom on 12 children living with autism, effectively concluding that the measles, mumps, and rubella (MMR) vaccine caused autism (Wakefield, 1999). This, however, was a study compromised by presumption and an overall failure to consider ethical issues and research protocol (Offit & Coffin, 2003). This was seen for instance, in the sample size that was too small to possess any repeatability across vast contexts, and failure to be objective about the findings of the research. Ultimately, the article was retracted, and its findings declared invalid, hence it is widely accepted in the academic and medical fields that there is no proven causal link between ASD and childhood vaccinations (Godlee et al., 2011). With the causal link being disproved, a few causes are accepted as being possible causes of autism, and research efforts continue to look for more compelling evidence for each of the likely causes. Autism South Africa (ASA) recognises the following as factors that specifically lead to high functioning autism, also known as Asperger's syndrome: "genetic predisposition, biochemical abnormalities, metabolic disturbances and pre-natal and post-natal conditions" (ASA, 2020, p. 5).

Another important but often overlooked subject related to autism diagnosis is that of the comorbidities associated with it. Being a multifaceted disorder, autism overlaps with other neurological disorders that are related to the symptoms that it manifests, and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is one example. ADHD is similar to autism in that they both have biological origins in complications to the central nervous system during infancy (Mayes, Calhoun, Mayes & Molitoris, 2012). In addition, language impairment, dyslexia and ASD may be closely related, as shown by Eicher and Gruen's (2015) findings which suggest that all three disorders are associated with the same genes. This increases the chances of any of the three impairments coexisting in the same person, hence the need to study autism in conjunction with other intellectual disabilities. Moreover, similar characteristics and causes also make it possible for learners with autism and related comorbidities to be assisted in similar, if not by same means, which can be a way if minimising costs**.** Furthermore, anxiety disorder is commonly found to be present in many people with autism, with up to 50 percent of children with autism having been found to experience anxiety in a study by South et al. (2017). Findings such as these are testament to the broad reaches

of autism and to the fact that it needs to be approached with an open mind to avoid putting all learners in a 'one size fits all' approach.

Assisting people with autism should be done with consideration of the societies in which they live. The disorder involves "… significant deficits in verbal and nonverbal communication as well as social interaction skills" (Ametepee & Chitiyo, 2009, p. 11); challenges that involve relations with other people. Likewise, Lindsay et al. (2014) argue that social interaction is among the biggest challenges for a person with ASD. Because of its clear implications regarding interactions between people, autism can be a useful measure with which the practicality of inclusive education can be assessed. The goal for inclusion is that society should be equal and welcoming to all persons (Du Plessis, 2013), but an extra hindrance on social interaction for autistic people is that they are treated differently in schools and communities. If communities get educated about communicative disorders such as autism, affected persons would be accepted in schools and communities that are conducive for them. Palko and Frawley (2009) report that the ideal placement for learners with autism is increasingly seen as the mainstream education system, however, social navigation for learners with disabilities in the inclusive classroom remains a challenge.

Contrarywise, supporters of special education prefer to place learners with disabilities in special schools because the environment is thought to be conducive for them. (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). This is more of a case of avoiding a problem, than solving it, because discrimination cannot be eradicated by taking marginalised people out of shared spaces but by uprooting attitudes that lead to marginalisation. What needs to change is not the child with autism, but the way society reacts to their condition needs to change if it is negative. As mentioned earlier, special education was first influenced by the expectation that learners with disabilities would struggle to adapt to the mainstream school environment (Naicker, 2005). Montessori (1912) however, saw little difference in the way that disabled and non-disabled learners learned, and proposed as early as 1912 that the same methods that had been developed for learners with impairments could be effective in teaching unimpaired children. This triggered enquiries into whether it would be helpful to place all learners in mainstream schools. Common placement for all reinforces a sense of equality and belonging for learners who might otherwise feel undervalued when placed in special schools because they are seen as different (Göransson & Nilholm, 2014).

Unfortunately, there was no will to improve schools to be conducive for learners with disabilities prior to the dawn of inclusive education because the understanding was that schools should either be oriented towards teaching learners with disabilities or those without disabilities (Lomofsky & Lazarus, 2001b). Instead, educational authorities were intent on keeping the order of the education system unchanged and channel learners into adapting to it. The reason for this resistance to change according to Mariga et al. (2014) is that "special education sees the child as the problem, not the system or the teacher" (p. 28). In alignment with inclusion however, this study maintains the view that a child who struggles to adapt to the school environment such as one with autism, should not be sent to separate schools but that the environmental and social challenges they face should be mitigated in that same environment. This says that the attitudes of teachers towards such learners, along with the skills they possess to assist autistic learners will have a lasting positive change in comparison with segregating learners with disabilities (UNESCO, 1994).

As mentioned in the rationale, most of the published literature on autism comes from the developed world, yet autism is a worldwide issue. Lack of research in developing countries has left society uninformed (Ametepee & Chitiyo, 2009a), which then leaves many children unaccounted for and their challenges not being properly dealt with. Springer, van Toorn, Laughton and Kidd (2013) attest to the need for research on autism in African countries, stating that 94% of published ASD related articles originated in Europe and North America in a recent study. Looking at the studies that have been done in Africa, there is also a pronounced dominance in that only 2 countries account for most of the studies. Nigeria and South Africa accounted for most known studies on autism in a review of literature by Amitepee and Chitiyo (2009), with the former accounting for 11.23% of the studies, while the latter had 25.51%. Though South Africa leads other African countries on research conducted, autism remains an unfamiliar issue to the local populace. For example, the prevalence of autism in South Africa is unknown and Springer et al. (2013) argue that this may be because the only data available comes from medical records; that is only cases that have been reported to medical facilities. Autism South Africa admits that there is reason to assume that the prevalence rates in South Africa are not significantly different from the overall global statistics (Autism South Africa, 2020). While more workable statistics and more awareness is needed to understand how autism affects South African society, this study focuses on teachers' teaching strategies for learners with autism, especially in mainstream classroom environments.

The inclusion of learners with autism in mainstream schools should be accompanied by appropriate changes to cater for their needs. The accommodation for learners with ASD includes appropriate teaching methods to help the whole classroom community, rather than just the learners with autism. Being autistic means that one struggles with social interaction, therefore, ideal interventions are done in a shared environment where the learner can gradually improve their communication skills. Graetz (2009) points out that many parents and teachers are becoming aware that learners with autism are "best educated in the general education classroom" (p.45). As outlined earlier, the autism spectrum includes a plethora of signs, meaning that the needs of learners falling within it also differ, hence there is no single pedagogical strategy that works for all learners. It is crucial therefore, for educators to be familiar with the common characteristics as well as the ways in which learners differ.

Some teaching methods developed to implement inclusive education can be useful in teaching learners with autism in the inclusive classroom. Differentiated instruction is one such example, Thompson (as cited in, Subban, 2006) defines it as "a philosophy of teaching that is based on the premise that students learn best when their teachers accommodate the differences in their readiness levels, interests and learning profiles" (p. 940). It entails teaching dynamically to engage all learners in the lesson, this can work well in classes that include learners with autism. Universal design for learning is another model that can benefit autistic learners in inclusive classrooms. Dalton et al. (2012) describes this as a model of transforming the entire educational space for the good of all children. Such an approach resonates with the needs of learners with autism, who as Hansen et al. (2014) argue, benefit from approaches that involve making appropriate changes to the physical environment to adapt it to the needs of all learners. Despite having been tested in the developed world only, Dalton et al. (2012) remain hopeful that Universal design can help South African educators too. Consistent as they are with the values of inclusion, these methods are generic and might cause teachers to still feel insufficiently trained to teach learners with disabilities, so more techniques are needed in the classroom situation. In South Africa particularly, many schools are overcrowded and Donohue and Bornman (2014) argue that differentiated instruction for example, would not be very helpful where the learners are so numerous that the teacher is unable to consider all the preferences, intelligence levels and aptitudes of the learners.

## Teacher Readiness for inclusion of ASD learners in mainstream schools

The attitudes of teachers can contribute greatly to the success or failure of inclusion of learners with autism in mainstream classrooms. Teachers are the main implementers of strategies to enable learners with autism to attain high levels of cognition in school. It is therefore, important that educators are knowledgeable enough about the condition and be equipped with enough skills to be able to succeed in teaching autistic learners along with non-autistic learners. Though teachers around the world generally approve the inclusion of learners with disabilities in regular schools (Forlin, 2010a)**,** many still feel unprepared and lacking in the expertise needed to teach in inclusive classroom environments (Copfer & Specht, 2014). Teachers' lack of readiness to teach learners with autism is an urgent concern because the disorder is rising so quickly in prevalence that general education teachers will inevitably have children with autism in their classrooms (Morrier et al., 2011). One of the common traits among learners with autism is challenging behaviour in the form of tantrums and rejection of initiations of social interactions (Cardon & Marshall, 2020), and many teachers do not think they have adequate skills to handle them.

## Readiness in South Africa

Similarly, in the South African context, teachers' approval of inclusion has is well documented (Donohue & Bornman, 2015; Nel et al., 2011; Swart, Engelbrecht, Eloff & Pettipher, 2002), but the bigger question is whether this has led to implementation. What remains a constraint is the confidence in their own knowledge and skills when it comes to teaching learners with disabilities alongside other learners. Negative attitudes will, in many cases result in lack of progress, whereas as Swart et al. (2002) note, teachers who have positive attitudes towards inclusion are better at accommodating learners with disabilities in mainstream classes. In order to curb negativity, Ntombela (2011) suggests that teachers should be given sufficient training before they start their careers and still more in-service training to remain cognisant of emerging challenges.

In addition, an incomplete understanding of participation is possible when teaching learners with autism in mainstream schools. One might view placement in the same environment or activity as adequate participation, but the agency given to each participant should be considered because full participation is a wholistic process. Eun (2016) argues that special schools do not work as much

towards academic achievement as they do to make learners feel good about themselves. Ultimately, one of the most concrete ways to measure the success of teaching and learning is whether learners can demonstrate knowledge of the subject matter. With that said, a learner with autism can rightly be said to have made great progress if they can communicate better with or maintain eye contact with other people if they previously had an inability to do so. However, if the same learner is not given subject-specific knowledge and skills, they remain vulnerable to being excluded in areas of specialisation as they grow older (Bessant, 2014). Lowered expectation of academic attainment for learners with disabilities is not only common in special education settings but has also been noted in mainstream schools. According to Donohue and Bornman (2015), many mainstream teachers only go as far as "caring for learners …", however, this "… can become detrimental for learners with disabilities if they are not expected to acquire academic skills in school" (p. 45). It can indeed be detrimental because social participation is one of the end goals for teaching learners with autism in mainstream schools to enable them to attain equal participation in the broader society (Graetz, 2009). Now, it can be argued that if learners can improve in social interaction, yet not have sufficient knowledge to enter the professional space, the education that they received subjected them to a form of partial exclusion. Full inclusion is inclusion into all aspects of human life, peaceful interaction with other people, recreation, physical wellbeing, academic life and the professional space. Social interaction is just one of these and many other aspects that make up human existence.

**Models (Conceptualisations of Disability):**

Theories of disability have historically informed choices of the educational provision for learners with disabilities. Hollenweger, (2008) adds that "classification systems are the results of a consensus process either at the international or national level to ensure a common conceptualisation of a specific domain of life, relative not only to individuals, but also to society" (p.11). Consequently, policies made for peculiar groups of people should also cater for society at large. Such a consideration is necessary given that the postmodern world has evolved into a community of sorts, where changes in one part of the world can impact lives worldwide (Usher, 2002). With rapid change in the world comes the need to rethink how some initially held perceptions can be maintained or modified in line with changes around the globe. Correspondingly, initial studies on the education of children with disabilities were done with the aim of enabling

disabled people to be educated enough to participate in building the national economy (Montessori, 1912). Such thinking was the result of aiming to maximise human effort for material and economic gain, therefore those who were physically unable to work and build the economy were given less attention for educational development (Heather, 1976). The medical model of disability was influenced by this view, and this is evident in that the teaching methods and forms of placement for learners with disabilities were solely based on medical (scientific) data (Terzi, 2005). This data was the basis for making decisions on whether to send a learner to a mainstream school or to keep them in special education settings where a watered-down curriculum was offered (Allan, 2010a).

With more focus on human rights after World War 2, there was a drastic change in the terminology that was used to refer to disabled people. Nineteenth century academics freely used words like 'idiot', 'lame', 'dumb' and other degrading terms to refer to people with impairments (Montessori, 1912), terms that are now highly offensive. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, 1948, p. 1) promoted an equal society, stating that "… all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights". In light of the rights discourse, the medical model of disability that was at the centre of the special education system came under scrutiny as the social model took shape. The social model followed on from the publication of the Fundamental Principles of Disability document (Anchor et al., 1984), which proposed a view of disability as a social construction rather than an internal characteristic of any person. According to Oliver (2013), the social model opposes the medical model's attempts to fit disabled people into the existing order of society. Instead, the social model holds that the environment, along with the norms and policies, must be made flexible enough to cater for the needs of all people, including those with disabilities.

As a response to societal oppression, Patterson (2011) further explains that the social model seeks to reduce the barriers faced by children at school and suggests that such restrictions stem from society. Being the source of the hindrances to the progress of people with disabilities, the model suggests that it is society itself that should change to enable the disabled learner to have a meaningful experience at school (Oliver, 2013). However, the medical model requires people to be led to adapt to the environment in which they live, while the social model requires the environment to respond to the needs of all people. The medical model entails the placement of learners with disabilities in mainstream schools with efforts made to improve some facet that renders the incompatible with the regular school system (Göransson & Nilholm, 2014a). Both

these models have fundamental shortfalls, and Terzi (2005) assesses that the medical model undermines the impact of social attitudes and norms on the lives of impaired people, while the social model pays excessive attention to the influence of society on the lives of persons with disabilities, without being realistic about the physical implications of it.

Although disability is commonly discussed through the opposing aspects of the medical and social models, this study will refrain from further comparing the two as this does not align with its objectives. Instead, it seeks a model that unifies the advantages of these models in developing knowledge on how learners with autism can best be taught. Based on a thorough review of available literature, the capability approach stands out as a suitable perspective that can model meaningful inclusion of learners with autism in mainstream schools. The capability approach takes precedence as it can harness the advantages of both the aforementioned models. It should be noted however, that the capability approach does not necessarily originate from a deliberate collection of medical and social model aspect (Norwich, 2014). What can be seen is that it has, in common with both models, some useful concepts that can be applied to educational inclusion, therefore it is a different approach with its own merits. Pioneered by Amartya Sen in developmental economics with a specific focus on wellbeing, the capability approach evaluates the quality of a person's life based on their "… ability to achieve various valuable functionings as part of living" (Sen, 1993, p. 271). Sen (1993) also locates the concept of capabilities within a social justice paradigm and chooses freedom as the main theme through which to assess wellbeing. The significance of freedom is therefore discussed at length in the following few paragraphs along with some of the key terms that the current study will frequently point to in drawing connections between the capability approach and best practice for teaching learners with autism in mainstream schools.

A good place to start exploring the capability approach is to look at how it describes the state of being that people are in before it proposes ways to improve their wellbeing. In conceptualising the current state of being and therefore diagnosing the problems constraining the abilities of individuals to attain a satisfactory life, the term "functionings" is the first to emerge. Functionings are described as basic abilities and factors that constitute the natural state of being (Terzi, 2005), what this means according to Norwich (2014) is that functionings are simply related to human wellbeing in its basic sense. As they are elementary abilities of an individual, functionings are the starting points in evaluating the wellbeing of a person. Unterhalter (2003) states that "functionings

are what one actually manages to achieve" (p. 666). Another way to phrase this is that functionings are what society and one's environment enable them to do and be. In the school context, this would be a question of what avenues a learner is able to follow as they learn. In the case of a learner that is diagnosed with an impairment such as autism, the school environment is likely to be more constraining than enabling. The biggest constraint is arguably the fact that the school system at large is structured in a way that caters for the majority and leaves learners who are different on the peripheries. Capabilities on the other hand, are described by Norwich (2014) as "functionings that someone can choose and therefore are positive opportunities to flourish" (p.17), and the freedom to make such choices is the focus of change in the capability approach. Therefore, a capability is an issue of realising potential, the freedom to pursue one's goals with intent and interest, rather than settling for what is merely available.

Having given basic descriptions of functionings and capabilities, a further contrast must be drawn between the two terms as such a distinction is crucial for applying the capability approach. The most profound point of difference is outlined in the following manner: "The difference between a capability and functioning is one between an opportunity to achieve and the actual achievement, between potential and outcome" (Walker & Unterhalter, 2007, p 4). A functioning is an outcome of the processes and conditions that exist in an environment, while capability is that which controls the outcomes that can be achieved. Wellbeing is significantly influenced by the power relations that exist in society because opportunities to reach any desirable end are either constrained or made available by the approval of authorities. In a similar manner, Nussbaum (1998) asserts that personal preferences and decisions are constructed and deconstructed by the society in conjunction with governing policies. The way policy shapes achieved functionings is of particular importance in this study; that is whether the Education White Paper 6 grants opportunities for achievements that are valuable to learners with autism and their teachers.

**Capability approach and disability**

The capability approach can also be applied in making meaning of disability and to dispel some of the negative attitudes that people with impairments face. The capability approach describes disability as "a specific variable of human diversity" (Terzi, 2005, p. 203), which concurs, to some extent with the medical model recognising that there is an organic basis for being disabled. In conceptualising disability as "…a specific variable of human diversity", the capability approach

avoids a narrow view of disability as only caused by social dynamics (Burchardt, 2004). However, the capability approach goes a step further than the existence of difference in an individual by considering the social influences on the experience of a disabled person, an aspect that the medical model lacks (Van Rooyen & Le Grange, 2003). To place the disability entirely upon the affected individual results in limited action and assistive measures that lack efficiency. In the educational space particularly, assistive measures based on the medical model are also implemented in a separate place from the normal learning environment (Naicker, 2005). Because of this practice, Hay and Beyers (2011) argue that learners with disabilities become subjected to discrimination by way of being removed from regular schools. This is discriminative because special education placement is commonly made simply because a learner is seen as different rather than from the experience that efforts to teach them in mainstream schools were unsuccessful.

With the ushering in of the Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, 1948) in the mid twentieth century, a rights discourse underlay an emerging view of disability as primarily the result of societal factors (Burchardt, 2004). Oliver (1996) was instrumental in pioneering this view, particularly by presenting the view that people with disabilities experience difficulties that stem from living in societies that fail to see and treat them equally with others. Impairment is just a matter of difference, but disability as Oliver (1996) posits, is the compounded burden imposed by society on an impaired person. For instance, most autistic persons have impaired intellectual function and experience anxiety, among other symptoms, but these challenges become burdensome if others bully them, or treat them differently. In essence, according to the social model, whether an impairment can escalate to a disability is a function of societal attitudes. The capability approach builds on this by arguing that there is actually "nothing inherently unequal about difference… but differences can become inequalities" (Walker & Unterhalter, 2007a, p. 10). What makes differences become inequalities is when the provision of goods and services is made to be a function of the difference itself.

Though the idea of the social contribution to making the lives of people with impairments complex is worth considering, such a consideration becomes incomplete without acknowledging and addressing the medical science of impairment. Norwich (2014) argues that the capability approach considers social and medical aspects of disability in conjunction with each other. The functionings of any person for example, are being adequately nourished, being physically healthy or having

good mental health, issues that are related to the daily lives of individuals (Sen, 1993). For a person with an impairment, there is ordinarily less functionings within their reach, as opposed to one who is not impaired in any way. This can be seen in the case of a person with autism whose difficulty is communicating and understanding the dynamics of social interaction (Boyd & Shaw, 2010). If, for example, a community has the privilege of having a radio station with which to stay up to date on the latest developments, that community can generally be said to have secured the functioning of being informed. Nevertheless, most autistic persons understand visual information better and find it hard to comprehend the spoken word (Lindsay et al., 2014), hence they can be said to lack the basic functioning of being well informed if they only have access to a radio and no television or newspapers. Moreover, the assurance of being in the know may be compromised by political influence on what is reported on media outlets, which further proves that possession of resources and utilities alone does not constitute complete well-being (Frediani, 2010). Media outlets tend to report news that is aligned with their owners' principles, not necessarily what consumers value as important information. What constitutes wellbeing is having determined for oneself what needs to be provided and having the freedom to decide how the provided resource or service can be consumed.

Significantly, Sen (1993) rejected the utilitarian approach to solving problems of lack in society, which held that it is socially just to render the same kinds and amounts of resources to all people understood to be facing the same challenge. This is a particularly objective position because what applies to one is applied to all, but Sen (1999) opposes this by suggesting that objectivity "… does not rule out the possibility of interpersonal variations in well-being rankings" (p. 23). Seeing the limitation of choice in many societies, Sen (1993) introduced freedom of choice into the debate surrounding what constitutes social justice and wellbeing. Essentially, the utilitarian conception of objectivity is making identical, provisions in the pursuit of happiness; utilitarianism holds that "questions of social policy are to be answered by calculating the consequences of alternatives of the total happiness of individuals" (Hausman, 2003, p. 26). This implies that quantity defines happiness, whereas the capability perspective uses freedom for all to choose what they need to attain well-being as the basis of well-being.

Moreover, the sensitivity of the capability approach to difference attracts some scrutiny on how resource allocation is appropriated to people of specific characteristics. By making identical

provision for all the sole object of social justice, the utilitarian approach is seen by some as exemplifying social justice and equality. Utilitarianism narrows its focus to a quantitative aspect of wellbeing (Renouard, 2011), and is criticised for being ignorant of differences in people and in their contexts, which renders them needing different forms of provision. Pogge (1995) defends utilitarianism, arguing that by rendering resources and services based on observed difference, learners are made vulnerable to stigmatisation. Likewise, Messiou (2012) argues that labelling can polarise society because, while the initial impulse is to identify disadvantaged people to supply their needs, they may be looked down upon in the process of being set apart. Pogge (1995) also argues that "labelling of persons is not random… but rather a result of how these persons have lived under the present economic scheme" (p. 337). The validity of Pogge's argument that the labels attached to people highlights how they have suffered alienation from financial sustenance is understandable, but that the assumption that the solution is equalising income distribution is questionable. Though two students may be disadvantaged in the same way, the measures to bring them to an equal level of freedom are not necessarily of the same cost, as utilitarian philosophers would like to believe. This is what the capability approach directly opposes in that it recognises that there needs to be more resource and financial input towards those whose challenges exceed those of the average citizen. Labelling, therefore, can be justified by the capabilities approach if it is accompanied by rendering support according to specific personal needs. In this regard, Sen (2014) affirms that the capability approach's evaluation of the success of a society is done "primarily by the substantive freedoms that the members of that society enjoy" (p. 527). By seeing impairment as "a specific variable of human diversity (Terzi, 2005, p. 203), the capability approach, applied to education, leads to a sensitivity to diversity that is predicated by an objective to provide resources and services specific to the individual. In this regard, there is a positive aspect to "labelling" which Pogge (1995) appears to overlook.

**Capabilities in teaching and learning activities**

It can also be argued that utilitarianism is not sufficient for enabling teachers to foster the inclusion of children with autism in mainstream schools. Firstly, the marked differences in how symptoms of autism manifest, along with the levels of intensity in social comprehension from child to child, is worth considering. The needs of each child in helping them communicate better and understand social cues more easily are as wide as the autism spectrum itself. To contextualise the complexity

of these needs, Wilhite, Tripp, Smith Canter and Floyd (2009) assert that "children identified as ASD exhibit a full array of cognitive functioning levels ranging from high intellectual abilities to severe intellectual deficits." (p. 77). Thus, providing teachers with the same kind of resource for assisting ASD learners would not, on its own, have positive results across the population. The provisions needed depend on the learning style of each individual and the specific areas and levels with which they experience impairment or difficulty. In terms of the capability approach, each teacher desires the capability of being able to choose the resources based on the needs of the child (Sen, 2014), and the acquisition of some common resource by all teachers may not lead them all to attaining the desired capability in the learners they teach.

Educationally speaking, it follows that achieving inclusion is not only about giving agency to learners, but a prerequisite of this is to give teachers the freedoms they need to facilitate the acquisition of capabilities for learners. Cognisant with this view is the community view of inclusion where if one member of the group is not fully included, the inclusive nature of the classroom is compromised. Unlike the community perspective (Göransson & Nilholm, 2014), inclusion as merely placement in mainstream schools is not suitable for educational improvement that encourages learner agency. Inclusion, understood as placement, is the attempt to place learners with disabilities in regular schools and fit them into the system, while not adjusting the system to cater for their special needs. A thorough analysis of inclusion as placement leads one to conclude that it is not, so much, an ideological shift as it is a locational change because seclusion is then practiced in a different setting. Technically, that does not constitute inclusion but is better termed 'integration', which can involve "admission to a special section of an ordinary school with an independent entrance and little mixing of the students" (Thomazet, 2009, p. 554). What is required by the community perspective of inclusion is that *all* members of the school environment must participate in all teaching and learning activities in the same spaces and on equal proportions (UNESCO, 1994a). Efforts made after placement are, therefore, the determinants of successful inclusion as Walker (2005) rightly warns that "we cannot assume that education promotes valued doings and beings automatically" (p. 50). At the core of educational achievement is the choice of appropriate pedagogies that all learners can benefit from, which serve the needs of learners ahead of those of teachers and other figures of educational authority (Althusser, 2006). With this understanding, this study does not merely seek to investigate the issue of whether learners with autism are placed in mainstream schools, but mainly the kinds of teaching approaches that are

implemented to give them the best education possible. The concern is not only how resourced the schools are, though it is an important consideration, but whether available resources, including human resources, are being trained and utilised to the benefit of autistic learners.

Indeed, by considering freedom, the approach seeks to give meaningful participation to people with disabilities. This is reflected in Sen's (1993) description of capability as alternative functionings that one can attain, for example, by giving learners with autism autonomy to determine what they need to have a valuable educational experience. A problem arises when the affected people are children because they are not necessarily mature enough to make justifiable choices. In response, Sen (2004) argues that freedom on its own may be subject to misappropriation and should always be combined with rationality to ensure that there is sound reasoning in rendering freedoms. Rationality is here defined as "subjecting one's choices to reasoned scrutiny" (Sen, 2004, p. 4), so the capability approach does not give endless possibilities without any kind of scrutiny. What the aim is in prioritising agency is to let the process of service and resource provision be directed by the recipient of the provision. Learners with autism can be a good example of the application of rationality in education because of their noted propensity for obsession (Timmons et al., 2006). If for instance a child's interest is model rockets, their science teacher may want to build on this interest. If the child is in Grade 3, drawing a rocket and labelling its parts is more rational than being allowed to build one and attempting to launch it. In a Grade 10 class however, learners are more mature and can exercise caution, hence it makes sense to allow an attempt at launching a model rocket. By so doing, the teacher will have applied both principles of capability and rationality. By piquing their interest, the capability to learn knowledge that the learner finds valuable is realised (Walker, 2005), while rationality is applied in considering safety procedures for allocating the appropriate activity for the level of development and cognition. Another advantage of rationality is that it can be used to avoid extravagant use of resources, which is especially important in the context of a society or institution with limited resources as most South African schools are.

A further application of the capability approach to education involves clarification on what functionings we should strive for in educational activities. Firstly, Sen (1993) declines to provide any rigid list of functionings that everyone should attain, preferring instead to leave it up to individuals to determine what is meaningful for them to achieve. This contrasts with Nussbaum

(1998) who argues that a list of basic capabilities on which to assess wellbeing is needed, and Nussbaum proposes a list containing life, bodily health, bodily integrity and practical reason among other things. Sen (2014) contends that the fact that the list itself is provided, not by those whose wellbeing is at risk, but by a theorist is already a denial of freedom. Following the ideas of Friere, Sen (1999) argues that people in need must be the ones to determine what will satisfy their needs. Unfortunately, the current worldwide educational climate is the opposite of these recommendations of learner agency; it is largely decided for learners what kind of education they need and the solutions and strategies for its realisation are imposed on them.

According to Freire and Ramos (2009, p. 168), "… education as the exercise of domination stimulates the credulity of students, with the ideological intent of indoctrinating them to adapt to the world of oppression". One of the results of oppression is being having choice for oneself made by someone else, even if it leads to some advantage, whether that advantage is wanted needs to be a consideration. Nussbaum's (1998) list is a group of outcomes determined to be essential for all, though being presented as a path to capabilities, it lacks the key aspect the capability approach, which is agency. Sen (1993) advocates for freedom, and with a list of "basic capabilities" (p. 272) being prescribed by Nussbaum, agency is already denied to those for whom such a list is already established. In policy development, Walker (2005), similarly to Sen, puts the marginalised at the centre, stating that "those affected by any policy or practice should be the ones to decide on what will count as valuable" (p. 28). Like Freire (1996), Sen (2014) recommends that the goals for education should largely be constructs of students. By mapping out areas of focus, Sen (1993) also attests to the contribution of context, stating that "… the identification of the objects of value specifies what may be called an evaluative space" (p. 272). The evaluative space is the area of focus of an evaluation; the domain of aspects that can be changed to provide the needed freedoms to achieve desired capabilities. The evaluative space contains a range of capabilities that are open for individuals to choose from and are in some way related to one another (Sen, 2009). Considering inclusion of learners with autism in mainstream schools, the evaluative space can be identified as encompassing opportunities for academic achievement and belonging. For instance, the choice by learners of what extra-mural activities to participate in at school falls within the evaluative space of seeking to achieve valued functionings (Sen, 1993) because such activities sharpen the mind, hence contributing to academic achievement. Conversely, whether an autistic child prefers a private dentist or one in a government hospital does not necessarily address the issue of capabilities

in education despite affecting their physical well-being (Walker, 2005). From this, it can be inferred that capabilities associated with learners with disabilities, such as autism, can be assessed and provided within the space comprising objects which, when dealt with, would lead to attainment of educational capabilities. What the objects are, according to the capability approach, is largely to be left to individual learners to decide for themselves (Sen, 1993), and teachers serve to develop strategies towards individual learners' needs.

**Defining Inclusion**

Considering the levels of inequality that persist in South African society, inclusion in the country should contribute to the restoration of equal access to educational opportunities. Education is a social aspect of life, and it is identified as a human right to which all people are entitled (United Nations, 1948), therefore the denial of education for any person is socially unjust. As education is a human right and inherently a social issue, principles of social justice play a large part in its development, hence there is a need to define what constitutes social justice and social injustice in educational circles. One form of social injustice is to provide education that does not serve the interests of the receiver, but only serves the interests of the provider of education. Rawls (in Rahman, n.d) interprets social justice as fairness, and this he does in opposition to a utilitarian framework of social justice. Utilitarian thought proposes social justice as the possession of an equal number or amount of commodities or financial value by all members of a social group (Saito, 2003a). In the context of inclusive education, such a theoretical view implies that all children that attend the same school and have access to the same kind of resources and facilities are equally advantaged in their learning. Rawls (1971) argues that an institution that supports social justice allows its members to not only have access to the same kinds of opportunities, but also enables them to determine for themselves what the aims of their education are. In strengthening his argument, Rawls supports an approach to education that allows every learner the privilege of choice rather than creating a way that all should follow. He argues that "… each person must decide by rational reflection what constitutes his good" (Rawls 1971, p. 7), and having met this condition, the principles that govern the school as a community can be set out. Sen (1993) meets this need through asserting that social justice should focus on the realisation of capability, which is wellbeing that is chosen, rather than prescribed. In the same line of thinking, this study views socially just education as the kind that takes note of and integrates the will and interest of learners

with autism, thereby drawing a connection between choice and justice. The capability approach is seen as the best framework for this connection to be drawn and its principles will be used in suggesting ways in which the inclusion of learners with autism in mainstream schools can be properly facilitated.

In the face of diverse views of what inclusive education is, the perspective that I believe is best suited for the South African context as described above, specifically regarding learners with autism is that inclusion seeks to make the general society inclusive (Artiles & Kozleski, 2007). An inclusive society, if understood solely in positional terms, portrays an incomplete view of equality because it neglects the aspect of participation, which is vital in the origination of inclusive education (UNESCO, 1994a). If learners with impairments have less opportunities to participate in activities, despite being in a mainstream school, they are still experiencing marginalisation (Messiou, 2012a). The above-mentioned concept of inclusion as the creation of an inclusive society resonates well with Göransson and Nilholm's (2014) assertion that apart from placement, inclusive education is the "creation of communities" (p. 270). The word 'community' holds significance because it describes a group of people that share a space and go through everyday life together, denoting shared responsibilities and different ways of participating in the life of the group (DuFour, 2004). With that said, learners with autism can only be regarded to be included in regular schools if they have equal opportunities to prosper, and the school becomes a community to them in which they actively participate.

Moreover, the community perspective of inclusive education promotes the spread of respect for people with impairments and support for their equal participation in society. In this regard, McCowan and Unterhalter (2013) state that when schools become inclusive, the whole society can benefit because schools contribute significantly to conditions that exist in communities. By becoming an inclusive community, the school fosters tolerant, respectful, and caring young children who can go on to pass positive attitudes to the general public in their adult lives. However, little has been done in research to conceptualise and support the community view of inclusion. Artiles and Kozleski (2007) therefore call on researchers to pay more attention to evaluating the idea of the community perspective of inclusive education. This study contributes to filling the void and adding more understanding, specifically how learners with autism can be made active participants within the mainstream classroom community. In the community definition, Göransson

and Nilholm's (2014) also add that the community they envisage holds specific characteristics, and one of these characteristics goes back to the capability approach. In making this link, Reindal (2016) argues that "… these characteristics are the development of capabilities for every child" (p.10). The classroom community therefore must strive as much as possible to give learners the freedom to pursue educational goals that are valuable to them.

Furthermore, a well-functioning classroom community is responsive to the needs of learners who struggle to learn. This calls for teaching approaches that are flexible enough to respond to the emergent needs of learners instead of having limited and rigid approaches. According to DuFour (2004), a well-organised classroom community requires teachers that are "aware of the incongruity between their commitment to ensure learning for all students and their lack of a coordinated strategy to respond when some students do not learn" (p. 2). Being aware of the gaps between the goal of universal learning and the pedagogical approaches that have been applied enables teachers to then work on strategies to assist learners that fall behind. DuFour (2004) further recommends that a learning community should apply swift interventions, rather than wait for the problem to persist; meaning that a classroom community should react to challenges as they arise. Such versatility is especially important when educating learners with autism because they experience ever-changing levels of cognitive difficulty on a regular basis (Autism South Africa, 2020).

There is a strong relation between the socio-economic conditions of a person in their adult life and the type and level of education that they received in childhood. Society is made up of people who have been groomed by the school system into various workplaces. In recognition of this, Marx (1895) spoke of the school environment as resembling the conditions that exist in workplaces. It therefore becomes apparent that the values that are taught in schools and the general running of schools regarding people with disabilities are connected to the ways that disabled people are treated in society. Moreover, the efforts that are made in improving the education of learners with autism and other impairments not only assists them academically, but also aids their full incorporation into society. With that said, an understanding of a classroom as a community leads to efforts to ensure that all members participate meaningfully, which can extend into participation in the broader community of the school and ultimately in the broader society. In essence, school practices have a lasting effect on the experiences of people who are marginalised, and if all needs are

properly addressed in schools, a more inclusive society can follow on, with inclusive educational institutions as their route.

**Known Approaches for assisting learners with ASD in developing communication skills in inclusive settings**

As highlighted earlier, educating learners with disabilities requires various modifications of typical teaching approaches. Learners with autism are no exception and specific techniques have been developed and applied to aid their learning in inclusive school environments. An inclusive educational setting in relation to learners with autism is defined by Hansen et al. (2014) as "… having access to peers in the target child's least restrictive environment" (p. 195). In other words, it is a learning environment that is accessible to all children; those with developmental delays and those that do not have developmental delays. Within inclusive classrooms, specific teaching approaches are employed primarily to facilitate the integration of learners with autism so that they become active participants in activities in class and across the school setting. Autistic persons mainly experience impeded interpersonal communication and struggle with initiating and responding to social interactions (Watkins et al., 2015). As such, academic assistance in the inclusive classroom should be coupled with training in social development for learners with autism to familiarise them with their classmates and teachers. Some intervention techniques include enhancing the communicative skills of learners with autism in inclusive environments and focusing on the individual child. Others simultaneously target the social skills of children with autism and optimise their social and physical environment. The physical environment is the infrastructure of the school, and one of the key alterations that can be done to it, in support of autistic learners, is the introduction of visual stimuli. This is done by teachers in consideration of the relative inability of most learners with autism to comprehend verbal instruction, which makes most of them visual learners, hence their preference of visual aids (Tissot & Evans, 2003a). The social environment includes the teachers, fellow learners and others who are part of the school population and are likely to interact with the autistic learners (Garrote & Dessemontet, 2015). Robertson, Chamberlain and Kasari (2003) highlight the importance of this consideration, asserting that successful inclusion of any student in a shared school environment is the result of their collective relations between them and their teachers and peers. The social environment, therefore, is properly understood if it is perceived as being formed by all parties frequently present in the school.

Individualistic methods work solely on modifying the behaviour of autistic children and teaching them social interaction skills. These are said to be individualistic because the training mainly happens outside the classroom environment, in "non-naturalistic settings, such as clinical settings, resource rooms, or other pull-out settings" (Garrote & Dessemontet, 2015p. 377) and focus on the individual learner. This commonly involves an expert in behavioural disorders or a special needs teacher, who will take time with the child and train them to use appropriate social responses in particular situations. Individual interactions are generally found to have modest effectiveness (Hansen et al., 2014), mainly because they are conducted outside the classroom environment in which the taught skills are to be actualised. Learners with autism are sensitive to slight changes in their surroundings (Hansen et al., 2014), and may not be able to show the same improved social skills they did with a professional when they come into a class that has many different faces. Ideally therefore, learners should be assisted within inclusive learning spaces to preserve uniformity in their routine. In this regard, Causton-Theoharis, Theoharis, Bull, Cosier and Dempf-Aldrich (2011) argue that children should not have to leave normal learning environments and learn alone. In addition, individualistic methods involve direct interaction and require teachers who are especially trained for conducting interventions with individual children. The utilisation of the services of general education teachers for typically developing children and special education teachers for learners with autism is a costly process. According to Plavnick and Hume (2014), low budget schools simply cannot afford to assign a teacher to teach every learner in need of support one-on-one. For these reasons therefore, the inefficiency of individualistic interventions necessitates the development of more practical and effective learner strategies, and what are called antecedent strategies can cater to that need.

Antecedent strategies are interventions that "… involve manipulating some aspect of the environment to evoke a desired response or make an undesirable behaviour less likely to occur" (Crosland & Dunlap, 2012 p. 254). Hansen et al. (2014) add that the routine and the environment of learning should be optimised in anticipation of the possible occurrence of challenging behaviours. By encouraging proper social interactions and reducing the occurrence of undesirable actions, antecedent interventions enable the autistic learners to improve their social skills. A school environment that includes learners of diverse characteristics and abilities should not be so polarised as to create a divide between learners with and without disabilities; everyone should be treated equally (Göransson & Nilholm, 2014a). Equal treatment in educational institutions can be seen in

the level of participation that learners can attain, thus learners with autism cannot be regarded to be properly included in mainstream schools if their participation is limited. As communication and social relations are the main areas where autistic learners struggle, teachers should assist them in this area as part of helping them towards academic success. Supporting this, Bellini (2008) argues that meaningful participation for learners with autism in regular schools is more likely when all members of the classroom are encouraged towards appropriate levels of interaction with no one being isolated.

Furthermore, antecedent strategies are ideal for adapting the school environment for learners with ASD because they take into consideration all possible factors that may affect their educational development. This is supported by Causton-Theoharis et al.'s (2011) view that inclusive teaching and learning requires "a whole school approach" (p. 102) and using available human and material resources for the benefit of all learners. Teachers, as human resources for effective learning, need to be assisted in adapting their instructional practices so that they can meet the needs of learners with disabilities that are placed in mainstream schools (UNESCO, 1994a). This is one consideration that seems to have been underexplored in the restructuring of the South African education fraternity as shown by the lack of skills among teachers to teach in diverse classrooms. Naicker (2007) points to this oversight, stating that "policy change in South Africa ignored epistemological issues in the training of educationists" (p. 2). Epistemology is the philosophical study of knowledge (Fuller, 2002), and when applied to teaching and learning, can be used to shape understandings among teachers on how to develop the knowledge of learners with challenges such as those with ASD.

Moreover, the importance of having a strong theoretical guide for teachers of learners with autism in democratic South Africa is made necessary by its educational history, which itself was theoretically influenced. Education under apartheid rule was functionalist because it perpetuated domination of the black majority and elevated whites to high levels of society and had the hallmarks of an authoritarian system of education (Naicker, 2005). A functionalist education system creates a society divided into classes of differing status by teaching certain groups of people for service while training others for higher occupations (Althusser, 2006). Such an education system perpetuates social control over social freedom, which is the founding principle of positivism, and Naicker (2007) argues that post-apartheid South African policies such as

Curriculum 2005 (Chisholm, 2003), and the Education White Paper 6 (Department of Education, 2001a) departed from this approach and its oppressive tendencies to favour constructivism. Constructivism holds that learners are active agents in their learning and that teachers guide them through learning, but the knowledge is shaped by the learner rather than imparted by the teacher (Jamero, 2019). This orientation in teaching and learning can be demonstrated in the use of learner centred teaching methods where teachers and learners work together rather than approaches where teachers only impart knowledge on learners. An educational system where a teacher dominates the students is repressive to learners and sets them up for a future of acceptance of oppression (Freire, 1996). Freire (1996) argues that meaning making must be a shared activity between student and teacher, and that this can contribute significantly to making education a tool of emancipation rather than one of bondage for the masses. Vygotskyan thought would suggest similar sentiments in that it argues that "the principal function of instruction is to facilitate conscious awareness and mastery over one's own intellectual functions" (Miller, 2014, p. 40). Teachers should therefore make it a central focus to give more autonomy to learners with autism in training them to better control their cognitive processes.

Furthermore, most strategies meant for assisting learners with autism in inclusive settings have a strong visual component. Research shows that most learners with autism are visual learners (Palko & Frawley, 2009), hence the widespread application of visual aids in supporting them. A visual learner is one whose retention of instructional content and information is better if it is delivered to them through the use of observable tools, such as printed media that they can see (Tissot & Evans, 2003b). Educators can therefore supplement auditory instruction with visual representations by using both auditory and visual cues. Crucially, visual aids do not only benefit learners with intellectual disorders such as ASD but can be advantageous to typically developing children too. An estimated 80% of the information processed by the average human being (with or without learning disabilities) is received through the sense of sight (Landsberg, Kruger & Nel, 2005), which means anyone can be impacted positively by visual representations of information. Another advantage of visual strategies is that they eliminate the possibility of having non-ASD pupils being impacted negatively by the inclusion of learners with autism. A common critique for the inclusion of learners with behavioural and intellectual disabilities such as autism is that these learners need extra attention, and that this will interfere with the education of non-disabled children (Florian,

2012). However, as the argument above claims, visual learning will not disadvantage non-autistic learners, but can be used to enhance their learning.

With research supporting the use of visual aids for learners with disabilities and those not identified as such, inclusive classrooms can be made progressive for all through visual teaching strategies. Moreover, visuals can be used by learners with autism and their peers in collaboration, such as in the joint activity schedule which is a tool used by a disabled child and a typically developing peer. Betz, Higbee and Reagon (2008) describe an activity schedule as a "sequence of pictorial cues for children with disabilities to compete complex chains of behaviour independently" (p.237). The benefit here is that the autistic child improves their social skills while learners without the disorder are sensitised to issues relating to autism and how to relate better with those affected by the disorder. Such interventions that involve peers enable the whole school environment to function as one system because they "focus on training and prompting peers to interact with target children" (Jung, Sainato & Davis, 2008, p. 164). This collaboration between learners with disabilities and their peers promotes a truly inclusive environment by keeping the entire class engaged in issues pertaining to disability and learning challenges (Ainscow & Miles, 2008). As the knowledge of teachers and typically developing peers of autistic learners rises, misconceptions and discriminative attitudes can be eradicated, and everyone in the classroom environment can be treated with equal respect.

Furthermore, educators' extensive knowledge about processing disorders such as ASD is vital for inclusion in mainstream schools. An autism diagnosis does not automatically translate into low levels of intelligence, actually, ASD learners are seen to fit at least one of three main categories. The first is low-functioning autism, which involves very low levels of social coercion as shown by the children in this category having an IQ of less than 55. The second group is known as moderate functioning autism, and it includes children whose communication and intelligence levels are almost the same as typically developing children. High functioning autism, however, is characterised by a high IQ (greater than 85), as such, a child in this category is not necessarily a slow learner but will likely struggle with communication and social awkwardness. Mild to high functioning autism is described as 'Asperger's syndrome'. This does not mean that it is a disorder different from autism, but rather, is a description of the degree to which affected learners experience developmental delay (Mayes et al., 2012). It is a useful consideration therefore, to

determine the levels of functioning of learners diagnosed with autism to implement interventions that target the specific challenges that individual learners have, rather than assuming that all autistic learners require the same type and level of assistance. In this regard, differentiated instruction, such as visual aids, coupled with other strategies that present varying forms of learning and levels of complexity, can help teachers to address diverse needs in the same classroom environment.

A crucial aspect of the inclusion of learners with autism in inclusive settings is to bring all stakeholders on board. Though inclusion is aimed at giving learners with autism equal opportunities as all other children, it is a legitimate concern whether autistic learners welcome the inclusion. Greenway et al. (2013) postulate that learners with impairment may be frustrated by continued efforts to place them in environments that they are not comfortable in. In this regard, it should be properly communicated to learners what positive changes they stand to experience by being part of a mainstream school. This will enhance the child's willingness to accept other learners as peers and partners in the learning process and motivate their parents to assist in the child's development in inclusive environments.

Apart from visual strategies, teachers can turn to collaboration with parents as a mechanism for supporting learners with autism. The success of the inclusion of learners with disabilities such as autism is dependent on the input of various stakeholders, and parents are among the most crucial. The Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994a) states that "a positive attitude on the part of parents favours school and social integration" (p. 33). This is a principle that relates squarely to children with autism because their main constraint is integration into school and society at large that is caused by underdeveloped communication skills (Cardon & Marshall, 2020). In the interim, the crucial role that parents can play in the school context is to be open and transparent to the teachers and letting them know of communicative difficulties, social withdrawal, lack of language skills or any other sign (however little) that may suggest that a child is developing below the expected levels. Early identification allows teachers and other school staff to make provisions for children and all other assistive measures are likely to improve the social skills of children more effectively if they are implemented from the earliest age possible. Moreover, the ways that a parent interacts with their children from an early age have lasting effects on the communicative abilities of the child (Kashinath, Woods & Goldstein, 2006). A parent with sufficient knowledge about autism is

likely to be more positive in teaching their child how to communicate and understand social cues, while one who has little knowledge about behavioural disorders may be less patient with the child and maintain a negative view on their struggles.

## Theoretical Framework:

This section outlines the general view of knowledge development that is adopted in this study, along with the theoretical perspective within studies of inclusive education that is well aligned to the improvement of the education of learners with ASD in the South African context.

The main theoretical perspective that informs this study is that adequate educational provision for persons with disabilities can be realised in an inclusive education system, as outlined in the Salamanca Statement. It states that it is vital and urgent to provide "education for children, youth and adults with special educational needs within the regular education system…" (UNESCO, 1994. p. viii). For learners with autism, mainstream provision, rather than separate special education is more favourable as a mainstream school environment fosters improved social skills. The capability approach (Sen, 1993) has been adopted in theorising disability and inclusion. It is a thought-provoking approach, given how it simultaneously addresses the need for a nuanced understanding of the impact of the medical (physical) aspect of disability and the social experiences of people with disabilities.

This study falls broadly within the epistemological paradigm of interpretivism, which is rooted in human interaction. According to Scott and Morrison (2006), the most important principle of interpretivism is that "individuals make interpretations about the world" (p. 124). Thus, every person has a subjective view which is dependent on the environment and experiences that they have had. Now, this experience is not completed on the individual scale, actually, most meaning making in the interpretivist view, originates from interactions between people within particular cultural contexts. Weber (2004) reiterates this, arguing that reality for the interpretivist is both subjective and intersubjective; the former means that one interprets the world based on what knowledge one has and the experiences that are shaped by their cultural contexts. Intersubjectivity means that people's meaning making occurs in an interactive manner, such that people's perceptions help shape those of others in the same society. Merriam and Tisdell (2015) add that

interpretivism has a constructivist view of knowledge, which points to people being active in forming their own meanings. Constructivism is basically the worldview that human beings develop their own knowledge through their experiences; that knowledge is not discovered but made through interaction with the environment (Steffe & Gale, 1995). The branch of constructivism directly aligned with the current study is 'social constructivism', a view that "… the process of knowing is affected by other people and is mediated by community and culture" (Ravet, 2018, p. 10). Social construction of knowledge is relevant to the study because the noted difficulty in interaction for learners with autism can be addressed by the development of pedagogies that encourage social interaction, as social constructivism recommends.

Furthermore, the applicability of the interpretivist view of knowledge to this study on the education of children with autism is well warranted. In general, interpretivism and autism are associated with human interaction. The former is a theory of knowledge that seeks understanding of people's interactions and to improve human life based on that knowledge, and autism is a disorder that mainly involves difficulties in interacting with other people. The limitation in communication associated with autism is not only due to the inability of those diagnosed with it to socialise, but can also be because of the attitudes of their typically developing peers and teachers. Gage (1989) posits that the norms and attitudes of a particular community or cultural environment are best understood by involving key members of that environment. Teachers are such key members, especially because this study aims first and foremost to harness their knowledge and skills in teaching learners with autism. Leblanc et al. (2009) add that teachers can be decisive in helping learners overcome the challenges associated with autism, "… within the inclusive educational settings" (p. 169). It is therefore important to involve the opinions and experiences of teachers in seeking to find ways in which the education of learners with autism can be improved. Moreover, as knowledge building is intersubjective, interventions for learners with autism must go beyond the individual level so that all in the school environment can participate in positive changes. Garrote and Dessemontet (2015) support this view, stating that efforts to increase the social participation of learners with autism should pay attention to "individuals at risk but must also involve their peers" (p. 381).

# Chapter 3: Research Design and Methodology

This part of the study explains the sampling of research data and the methods used for its subsequent analysis. It specifies and validates the sampling method used as well as the specific technique for the analysis of data from interviews and policy analysis.

The dissertation employs a qualitative, interpretivist approach to collecting and assessing data. The chief aim is to evaluate the effectiveness of teachers' practice when teaching learners with autism mostly in regular school environments and the contribution thereof of government's inclusive educational policies. The specific policy targeted was the Education White Paper 6 (Department of Education, 2001a), which is South Africa's main policy document for the fulfilment of inclusive education in the country. The data collection component involved interviewing a total of 7 teachers from 3 different schools, both in public schools and in private schools in Johannesburg. In choosing the schools, an effort was made to balance the representation of both public and private schools, but the final sample depended on the availability of teachers and the permissions that were eventually granted by schools in each sector. Moreover, one public special school that caters specifically for learners with autism was included for the teachers concerned to provide insight into strategies that are more geared towards learners who experience high levels of difficulty and are therefore placed in special schools. The main criterion on choosing participants was that they should have experience in teaching learners with autism, preferably in mainstream school environments. The justification for this is that these teachers would have experienced inclusion (at least in terms of learner placement), and therefore better placed to give insight of pedagogies that promote inclusion of learners with autism in mainstream schools. Interviewing is an ideal technique for such a task as it allows studying an issue from the perspectives of those who experience it directly. Siedman (1998) explains that interviewing is useful for "understanding the lived experience of other people; and understanding the meaning they make of that experience" (p. 9). Another objective was to understand the concerns that teachers have because of their experience, hence the interviews needed to be open to issues being raised by the teachers rather than to only limit them to a set of pre-set themes.

More specifically, the domain of interviews followed was phenomenological interviews, whose primary theme is to provide the platform for participants to detail their experiences regarding a

particular issue (Moustakas, 1994). Phenomenological interviews make use of open-ended questions, which not only discuss key themes, but also allow new points of concern to be raised by participants (MacDonald & Headlam, 2008). The main points of inquiry in the questions would be: what experiences have teachers had in teaching learners with autism, what are their main strategies and what do they think would be efficient approaches to improving the education of learners with autism? The choice of this particular interview method was also inspired by Nind's (2014) assertion that "educational research needs to employ methodologies that invite the contributions of all educational agents" (p. 532). Among educational agents, teachers are undoubtedly the most important because all that is proposed can only be judged to be effective if they make it work. Nevertheless, if teachers do not take part in the development of policies, their role will be less significant than it should be. If teachers are given active roles in the devising of the approaches that are eventually mandated by government policies, they will be more responsible for the level of achievement their students can attain (Nind, 2014). Other studies have shown that teachers specifically point to unsuitable policies and lack of training as the reasons why they struggle to teach learners with disabilities (Florian, 2012; Leblanc et al., 2009).

Additionally, purposive sampling was applied; this method involves collecting data from sources that are most likely to possess relevant knowledge (Scott & Morrison, 2006). Merriam and Tisdell (2015) add that qualitative researchers seek "… to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned" (p. 96), and as such, use a purposive sample. Teachers from schools that have at least one learner who has been diagnosed with autism were chosen, attention was also paid to the ages of the learners that they teach; the target group was learners in the foundation phase and intermediate phase. The foundation phase was chosen for evaluating the development of recently diagnosed children, while the intermediate phase is a more advanced stage of development and can shed light on learners' progress a few years after their initial diagnosis. The sample size across the 3 schools was 7 teachers, whereas initially the intention was to interview a total of at least 10 teachers. Difficulty with securing permissions for the desired sample size was caused by the strict lockdown restrictions during the first half of the year 2020, and the reluctance of many school principals to give permission for research to be conducted with their teachers, despite being presented with the option of conducting virtual interviews. Though the desired sample size was not secured, the objectives of this study were not affected to a major degree as it is a qualitative study whose concern is opinions and

elaborate engagement with issues of inclusion, and not based on quantitative patterns. Accordingly, Meiring, Seabi, Amod, Vorster, and Kern (2016) assert that "... the sampling strategy for qualitative research is less concerned with the size of the sample but more with the relevance of the sample" (p. 2). Relevance is determined by whether the interview structure allows for in-depth statements from the respondents, providing comprehensive feedback that sheds light on their teaching experiences, along with their recommendations for policy development. Collected data was analysed using thematic analysis, which is "… the process of analysing data according to commonalities, relationships and differences across a data set" (Gibson & Brown, 2009, p. 127). As a result of using open-ended questions, some of the themes that were analysed were brought about by the responses of the teachers, making the findings of the study relevant to the participants. Siedman (1998) shares this view and indicates that open-ended questions address key themes and develop the themes and issues as they arise.

Further on the analysis, as part of grouping data collected from interviews into themes, the information was classified into codes. Coding is defined as creating a category that is used to describe a general feature of data, with such a category comprising of several cases or instances where similar views were raised (Gibson & Brown, 2009). As already stated, themes mainly arose from commonalities in responses. In data analysis, these themes were then grouped into codes, which are categories that describe a characteristic that is picked up in the data sets. There are two types of codes: apriori codes and empirical codes (Scott & Morrison, 2006). The former are categories that are set leading up to data collection to outline the expectations of the kind of data that the research seeks to explore. The advantage of apriori codes is that they keep a firm focus on the research questions and objectives of the study. Empirical codes on the other hand, are common data points that emerge as the research process unfolds, the purpose of using this open-ended approach is to allow these points to emerge. Apriori codes are particularly important because they help research participants to direct researchers to some vital truths that may not be immediately apparent or envisaged in developing a research project. An additional benefit to the expanding of the reaches of the study as a result of emergent codes is that a degree of power is given to the participants themselves to make the findings relevant to themselves. This is particularly important in this study as it hinges on aspects of inclusive education, which as Messiou (2012) notes, can sometimes lead researchers to exclude the very parties that they sought to include in the first place. For this reason, data collection and analysis in this study is made in keeping in mind that "we

include and exclude as we write" (Van Rooyen & Le Grange, 2003, p. 153), the desired aim only being the former. Allowing important themes to be given by participants also aligns well with the capability approach, which according to Sen (1993) purposefully refrains from imposing a set of capabilities on individuals so that all people may have the chance to make known what they see as valuable goals for themselves. The gathered data was reliable because it was stored through recordings so that it could be replayed and transcribed carefully and accurately, the recording was authorized by the ethics committee of the University of the Witwatersrand and participants were given a consent form to sign to indicate their approval of their interviews being recorded.

# Chapter 4: Statement and analysis of results

In this section of the dissertation, the Education White Paper 6 is first analysed as a policy in terms of whether it properly represents the values of inclusive education. This analysis involves an examination of the policy itself and proceeds to evaluate the progress so far in achieving the objectives that were set out when the policy was introduced in 2001. The White paper was given a 20-year timeline which culminates in 2021 for the actualisation of its goals. Thus, this study is well positioned to assess the success or failure of the policy and the inclusive education transformation that it represents, in that it reaches completion in the same year on which the Education White Paper 6 timeline ends. As stated in earlier chapters, inclusive education has a variety of definitions coming from different scholars in diverse contexts. Amidst the variety of conceptualisations of inclusion that exist, the one relevant to this study and especially the education of learners with autism in mainstream schools is the community definition. In this view, all members of the classroom form one community in which the contribution of every member is valued, and the aim is to ensure that all learners participate fully in every activity. Full participation fulfils the goal of directing education towards the creation of communities (Göransson & Nilholm, 2014). McCowan and Unterhalter (2013) add that the long-term effect of developing schools into inclusive communities is that the society outside schools can likewise be transformed when children reflect the tolerant attitudes taught at school. Therefore, the main motivation of overcoming the communication and interaction difficulties experienced by learners with autism is to enable them to achieve full participation in the learning space.

Apart from the community definition, the principles of social justice, as articulated by the capability approach take on a key role in the analysis of responses relating to teachers' strategies for accommodating learners with autism. This involves indicating points in the participants' responses themselves where similar sentiments to those of the capability approach are held. In addition, the capability approach is also used as a framework on which teachers can build strategies that can benefit learners with autism.

## Policy Analysis:

This section reports on a thorough evaluation of the Education White Paper 6 as a guide on which the inclusive education objectives of South Africa rest. This analysis is chiefly meant to compare the policy with what is required on the international inclusive education scale and assess whether it reflects the values that motivated the founding of the inclusive education movement. This is followed by a close analysis of the context of the South African education system to assess whether the Education White Paper 6 matches it. Moreover, the subsequent policy documents that the Department of Education released to track the progress of the goals of the Education White Paper 6 are assessed to establish whether some of the deficiencies seen in it have been noted and followed up with appropriate changes. A central theme in the analysis is to draw out the education of learners with autism in order to see whether the role of teachers in including these learners, and others with disabilities, in mainstream schools is given adequate attention.

The primary function of an educational policy is to serve as a guide to an objective or a set of objectives, and it is also a governing tool for various stakeholders in an education system. Besides governance, the development of policy is usually a response to a need or problem that requires an official, coordinated response from the government. Different parts of the world experience unique challenges, hence the characteristics of the country in which a policy is developed must form an integral part of the stage of synthesis of the policy (Naicker, 2005). This suggests that when reading the inclusive education policy of any country, one should get a sense of what the situation is in that part of the world, and it should be clear how the policy responds to the challenges experienced. Lasswell (1951) proposed a technique that is relatively thorough in its steps to analysing the viability of a policy as well as the extent to which its application can be judged to have been effective. The model begins with finding out the main problems that prompted the introduction of an educational policy, be it existing problems or those that might arise in the near future. The sequence of this analysis is depicted below:

Problem → Research → Solution → Implementation

This is a useful method for doing a thorough inquiry into all parts of a written policy document because not only does it look at the finished product, but it considers the process of its synthesis as a policy. It further traces the policy beyond its completion by including an analysis into its

implementation, which reveals in clearer terms whether the policy is effective in solving the problems that it was originally drawn up to attempt to solve. However, this four-stage approach is not sufficient on its own in policy analysis, most notably due to its lack of emphasis on the values that motivate the development of a policy. Weaver-Hightower (2008) affirms this position and argues that Lasswell's (1951) model of policy analysis assumes that policy building is a value-free process. On the contrary, knowledge building itself is a value-laden process, a position that is central to the interpretivist view of knowledge, which is adopted in the theoretical framework of the present study. Gage (1989) for example, posits that the values of a community are essential to any attempt to understand the behaviours of its members and establish patterns of interaction. In addition, Moustakas (1994) argues that educational activity is a particularly intentional process, further necessitating a reflection on the values that motivate the production of a policy to govern the very provision of education. Weaver-Hightower (2008) therefore argues that policies are value laden and that they are politically driven, which means people of high political standing may pass a policy off as reflecting national values whereas, in fact, it upholds their own values and principles. Political influence can be positive in some cases, and South Africa is a practical example of this; all educational policies in South Africa value human rights as a means to move on from its history of rights violations, it is also this value that guides most policy statements and legislation in South Africa. Liasidou (2008) adds that a policy is an instrument of social change, therefore it affirms the values and norms of the society that it targets.

To tap deeper into the influences that drove the drafting of the Education White Paper 6 and the impact of these on its implementation, language analysis is carried out on the policy. Some discourses are singled out that may go against inclusion. A discourse is any way in which language is used, the language used in a text is "grounded in a set of beliefs" (Case, 2005, p. 148). The text in this case being the Education White Paper 6, is analysed for its adherence to inclusivity. Janks (1997) asserts that evaluating discourses can reveal how language shows traces of power relations, which makes it particularly relevant in policy analysis because government policies begin at a high position of power and are applied to the lower levels of society. What the power relations in discourse will reveal is whether the Education White Paper 6 imposes the interests of those in power over the teacher and their learners. Having identified the problem areas, the discursive trends in describing the challenges are put under evaluation, focusing on whether there may still be room made for exclusion in the articulations of the inclusion objectives. Messiou (2012)

recognise this possibility, in stating that sometimes marginalised people in society may be alienated by the very efforts that are intended to empower them.

Liasidou (2008) comments that many policies that were introduced to advance inclusive education actually promote exclusion, especially in the language that they use. It is therefore especially vital to critically analyse inclusive education policies to bring to light any traces of exclusionary language. One major factor that contributes to the complexity of inclusive education is the context in which the policy is to be applied. In light of this, it is vital in this discourse analysis to deduce whether the Education White Paper 6 is a policy that suits the education of learners with autism in mainstream schools in South Africa. This is to say that an educational policy should respond to the needs of the people within its range first, rather than just matching the international standard (UNESCO, 1994a). As such, one key area of focus in the Education White Paper 6 (Department of Education, 2001) is the context in which it was formulated, and the problems that prompted the formulation of an inclusive education policy. It starts by describing the divide between the special education system and the mainstream system as bearing the marks of the apartheid system that is now in South Africa's past.

With race having been the main factor on which segregation developed, black learners with disabilities were doubly disadvantaged (Du Plessis, 2013). Only learners with physical disability in the form of "organic and medical disabilities" were regarded as requiring extra support (Department of Education, 2001, p. 9) which left children who did not fall within this category without the support that they actually needed. Among these were learners who had challenges such as broken homes, malnutrition and others not related to physical disability. This was rectified in laying out the strategies of how an inclusive education system would be realised in South Africa. The policy made mention of the impact of the HIV/AIDS pandemic on the education of children in South Africa, giving the inclusion agenda a broader reach (Department of Education, 2001). This is in accordance with the international standards of inclusive education, such as those set out in the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994a). The Statement holds that the planning and implementing inclusion should be done in consideration of the needs of children with disabilities, those from poor backgrounds and any other groups that are "disadvantaged or marginalised" (UNESCO, 1994, p. 6). With regards to having a broad perspective on who inclusion should serve, the Education White Paper 6 (Department of Education, 2001) responded well to a major need. In

dismantling the racial bias and the limit to only provide support for learners with physical disability, the Education White Paper 6 took the shape of a policy for the good of all South Africans.

**Stereotyping**

Nonetheless, while the Education White Paper 6 has a broad reach in acknowledging different forms of marginalisation, it does not address specific impairments sufficiently. As this study has autism at its centre, the analysis of the policy entails looking for ways in which it can be relevant in guiding the practice of teachers who work with autistic learners in inclusive classroom environments. In going through the policy, not much could be found which could be of significance in teaching learners with neurological disorders including autism spectrum disorder. In 1996 when the process of the synthesis of the Education White Paper 6 (Department of Education, 2001) began, autism spectrum disorder was not as widespread as it is today, at least not in South Africa. However, there was already a growing concern over the rising prevalence in other countries, such as the United States, where 1 in 2500 children were likely to be diagnosed with autism (Lindsay, 2003). In the early 2000s, as diagnostic tools and criteria were improved, it was found that many more children around the world were living with autism than was previously thought (Dyer, 2010). However, South Africa did not have any established statistics of how widespread ASD was in the country, a problem that still continues in the country (Guler, de Vries, Seris, Shabalala & Franz, 2018). This might explain why there is no specific mention of ASD in the entire Education White Paper 6 (Department of Education, 2001). However, the growing incidence of autism in South Africa over the past 2 decades warrants more attention from government and all stakeholders in the educational sector. One urgent need is the development of operational instructions for schools on how learners with autism can be accommodated and allowed to fully participate in school activities. With inclusion as the goal, some schools have been changed into full-service schools, and as this an unfamiliar orientation, concise plans on the transition are highly important.

This need was met when the Department of Education published the guidelines for full-service schools (Department of Education, 2010), through which chosen mainstream schools would develop into inclusive full-service schools. Operationally speaking, this is the document that best outlines how plans for inclusion held in the EWP6 can be actualised, along with giving solutions for challenges in the education system that would arise later. Despite the worldwide surge in

neurological and developmental disorders like autism (Gjevik, Eldevik, Fjaeran-Granum & Sponheim, 2011), there was still indifference on the part of policy makers for adapting the education system to assist learners with autism in giving guidelines to inclusive schools (Department of Education, 2010). For a teacher seeking to improve their engagement with learners with autism in an inclusive school, the guidelines on full-service schools do not offer much assistance. On a positive note, the most recent publication pertaining to the implementation of Education White Paper 6 provided more insight on autism in South African schools. This is the Report on the Implementation of Education White Paper 6 on Inclusive Education - An Overview of the Period: 2013-2015 (Department of Education, 2016). Unlike the EWP6, it does make specific mention of autism and raises awareness about it rising prevalence. It also shows that more than half of children with autism that are attending school in South Africa are in special schools (Department of Education, 2016). It is worth clarifying that in the South African context specifically, a special school is one that caters for learners with "severe disabilities" (Department of Education, 2001, p. 3). Having majority of the known autistic learners in South Africa in special schools may indicate that they are taken to special schools based on having autism, rather than applying the EWP6 severity criterion mentioned above. This indicates that the inclusion of this group of learners is still far from being achieved, but at least shows that the need to understand how autism affects the local educational landscape has been realised. What is still lacking is the development of locally applicable teaching strategies for teaching learners with autism in mainstream schools, leaving teachers to rely on international research for insights on how to teach.

**Neglect of Intellectual Impairment**

Moreover, in the Education White Paper 6 (Department of Education, 2001) itself, intellectual impairments are made out to be less of a priority than bodily ailments. This is seen in a statement in the policy that suggests that educating learners with intellectual impairments only needs "curriculum adaptation" and not "major structural adjustments or sophisticated equipment" (Department of Education, 2001, p. 25). As has been outlined extensively so far, autism is a disorder that involves intellectual impairment and therefore the statement above applies to it as well. Nonetheless, research on autism contradicts the statement that educating learners diagnosed with it only requires a little structural adjustment: an area of research that affirms this point is that of early identification. Boyd and Shaw (2010) argue that children tend to produce better academic

outcomes when they receive an autism diagnosis early, as opposed to later in their childhood as this allows for timely intervention to be provided. It has also been observed from the early 2000s that the number of children identified as living with ASD has increased significantly, and this surge has been attributed in part to the introduction of more effective screening tools and equipment (Travis & Geiger, 2010). Early identification clearly allows teachers to have a head start in developing the interaction and intellectual abilities of children, therefore it contributes significantly to the support processes that follow.

On the same issue of the importance of structural adjustments, countries that have made extensive use of early identification resources have noticed a substantial improvement in their capacity to diagnose children early and subsequently place them in a fitting educational environment (Boyd & Shaw, 2010). South Africa still lacks the capacity for early identification (Springer, van Toorn, et al., 2013), and the acquisition of sophisticated modern diagnosing equipment can go a long way in addressing the identification problem. Contextually speaking therefore, a revised Education White Paper 6 should acknowledge the urgent need for sophisticated equipment, or at least the official documents subsequent to it, such as the 'Guidelines for full-service schools' (Department of Education, 2010) and the 'Report on the Implementation of the Education White Paper 6 should have done so. To further demonstrate this need, an estimated 400 000 children were out of school in the period 2012-2013 (Department of Education, 2016). This number includes children with disabilities, which the government report admits is mainly because children with impairments "… are not identified early enough and also do not have access to support services that will ensure that they are admitted to school and supported in school once they are admitted." (Department of Education, 2016, p. 52). Based on the above indicators and the success that has been yielded by early screening abroad, a restatement in the policy is essential, which should indicate that sophisticated and structural adjustments are in fact imperative in both diagnosing and including learners with autism and other intellectual impairments in mainstream schools.

The above two paragraphs confirm some of the claims that researches have made about the inclusive education project in South Africa. One of the most common criticism levelled against the Education White Paper 6 is that it lacks clear vision, and this can be seen in how it seems to not subject all educational stakeholders to its mandates. Though it has been stated internationally (UNESCO, 1994a) that policies that support inclusion should be flexible enough to prioritise the

needs of marginalised groups of people in the contexts where they are developed, a national policy should be binding in its country of origin. Unless all within the South African education system are given mandatory instructions for how they can contribute to the actualisation of the inclusion agenda, none will feel obliged to make such a contribution. In reference to the passivity of the policy, Van Rooyen and Le Grange (2003) comment that the Education White Paper 6 advocates for "conditional acceptance of inclusion" (p. 154). This can be seen in one assertion in the policy, where it states that special schools will provide "a high-quality service for learners with severe and multiple disabilities" (Department of Education, 2001, p. 24). The provision of education for learners with severe impairments is indeed an international requirement (UNESCO, 1994a), but clarity is still needed for what is understood as 'severe'. If this distinction is made, school governing bodies can be at liberty to place learners in special schools when they might have been well suited for mainstream education. Throughout the policy, there is no explanation of what level of impairment is "severe", leaving it open for school principals to decide for themselves whether the impairment that a child experiences is too severe for them to cater for. Seeing that there is difficulty in deciding on a criterion on severity, the right step may be to work towards teaching all learners in mainstream schools because no justification would hold for sending them to special schools without an official basis.

Additionally, the policy covers the aspect of defining what inclusive education is, stating that it is "enabling education structures, systems and learning methodologies to meet the needs of all learners" (Department of Education, 2001, p. 6). The Education White Paper 6 also outlines why inclusive education needs to be adopted by the South African education system. Internationally, it is recognised that an education system should cater for the needs of people who experience any form of marginalisation (UNICEF, 1989). However, learners with disabilities take priority in that they experience greater challenges and more exclusion because of being placed in separate special schools. This results in a dominant focus on disability as the main factor in the development of inclusive education, as seen in international and national policy documents, including that of South Africa. The Education White Paper 6 (Department of Education, 2001) states, to this effect, that inclusive schools "will have a bias towards particular disabilities, depending on need and support" (p. 10). Though this may be advantageous to learners with physical disabilities in that they will receive more attention and support, the language is reminiscent of special education thinking. A school that is "full service" is thus named because of its ability to cater to every arising need

(Department of Education, 2010), not one that has a particular focus. The bias issue therefore appears to describe a special school that admits some learners without special needs, rather than one that takes in a diverse learner population as its name suggests. A proper conception of an inclusive school is one that caters for any impairment, therefore on that area, the Education White Paper 6 promotes special education rather than inclusive education. Full-service schools are inclusive of some learners with disabilities, rather than all learners, so even if the live up to their policy expectations (Department of Education, 2001a, 2010), they would only achieve partial inclusion.

One positive aspect of the Education White Paper 6 is that its founding process includes the contribution of persons with disabilities. The two international conventions in which inclusive education was promoted; the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994a), and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 2007) emphasise the need for people with impairments to play a central role in the planning and execution of strategies to improve their education and general livelihoods. The Salamanca Statement calls upon governments to "encourage and facilitate the participation of communities and organisations of persons with disabilities in the planning and decision-making processes concerning provision for special needs education" (UNESCO, 1994, p. 4). Likewise, in the development process of the Education White Paper 6, the views of organisations of disabled people were incorporated (Department of Education, 1997). The fact that these views were given deserving consideration is evident in the decision to keep special schools in operation for learners experiencing severe impairments, a recommendation that was largely influenced by organisations of disabled persons in South Africa (Lomofsky & Lazarus, 2001b).

**The Capability approach and the EWP6**

A few tenets of the capability approach can be considered in further analysing the Education White Paper 6. One of these is the significance that the approach ascribes to the distribution of material and monetary resources. When South Africa became a democratic country, the funding of schools was largely influenced by racial prejudice and the schools that were only attended by white learners received adequate funding, while others received little financial support from government

(Lomofsky & Lazarus, 2001b). Such an unbalanced distribution translates into social injustice (United Nations, 1948). As such, the funding strategy that would emerge had to be done with a keen sense of preventing social injustice. Evidently, the introduction of the model for inclusive education in South Africa entailed a revised funding strategy, which is found in chapter 3 of the EWP6, along with a proclamation that it was made to be "socially just" (Department of Education, 2001, p. 35). This strategy is, to some extent, agreeable to the capability approach's conceptualisation of social justice as being incomplete if it is only viewed in terms of all people receiving equal financial support (Sen, 1993). The funding strategy details that the allocation of funds will be guided by the needs of individual learners in schools, rather than just on the basis of falling within the same category of disability (Department of Education, 2001). In like manner, the capability approach calls for a closer analysis of individual needs even with a relatively homogenous population (Sen, 1993). As such, a mainstream school may need more visual resources for learners with autism as most of them are visual learners (Tissot & Evans, 2003a), but it is a reality that some schools are far less equipped than others.

Below is a detailed analysis of the funding strategy contained in the Education White Paper 6 (Department of Education, 2001) relative to the capability approach's ideas on financial resources distribution. Sen's (1993) understanding of social justice is that the socio-economic situations of individuals should be considered when determining the level of support they need. In terms of the approach itself, the achieved functionings should guide the efforts to attain the realisation of desired capabilities (Sen, 2014a). Similarly, the Department of Education's distribution of funds to schools took into consideration the fact that schools were not starting on the same level due to having been disadvantaged differently before democracy took precedence in South Africa (Lomofsky & Lazarus, 2001b). What might have been perceived as a basic functioning for a learner in a model C school could be perceived as a desired capability by one in a township school because during apartheid, the two learners were afforded widely different levels of freedom to choose functionings that they valued. For example, a learner in a more resourced school becomes accustomed to attending science classes in a laboratory and conducting experiments on a regular basis, whereas a rural school learner only sees scientific equipment once in a term because their school does not have an adequate laboratory, or the funds needed to construct one.

To eradicate this unequal resource distribution, the capability approach suggests that the provision of financial resources where they are needed the most is a crucial step but does not, in itself count as equalisation of opportunities. For instance, Sen (2009) argues that "a person with severe disability cannot be more advantaged merely because she has a larger income or wealth than her able-bodied neighbour" (p. 253). This means that the provision of financial resources according to needs is a foundation on which to build inclusion, but not the end of it. After funds are provided, Sen (2009) calls for an evaluation to find and remove the restrictions that may still exist that disable learners from getting meaningful improvement on their educational experiences from the resources provided. In the example provided above, the construction of a state-of-the-art laboratory may fail to enable the child in a disadvantaged school to improve their studies of science, such as if they only access the laboratory 1 hour a week to perform experiments that are ordered by their teacher. What will maximise the benefit of a resource is whether the learners are free to use it for their own purposes besides those that are prescribed by the curriculum; Sen (2014) argues that the best factor to show whether resource allocation to a community is done effectively is to assess "… the substantive freedoms that the members of that society enjoy" (p. 527). It would therefore be an incomplete evaluation of the Education White Paper 6 funding strategy if the proportions of resources that it brought about were to be the only metric on which to decide if it led to inclusion of learners with disabilities such as autism. It therefore needs to be clear if more freedom was given to learners to learn towards their valued goals as part of the reform process of how government funds towards education were allocated prior to the introduction of the policy.

There was a clear imbalance of fund distribution in South Africa that had to be changed as part of the conversion of the country into a democratic state. Fiske and Ladd (2004) relate that there was clear favouritism for schools for white learners before 1994, which resulted in black learners receiving substandard education. As a response to the gap in resource provision and funding, the Education White Paper 6 (Department of Education, 2001) funding plan recommended the provision of more financial assistance to rural and township schools than schools that were formerly advantaged. This reaffirmed the earlier-developed system of funding whose aim was to bring equality into the education system. Known as the National Norms and Standards for School Funding (NNSSF), this policy outlined strategies for ensuring that enough funding is provided for financially disadvantaged schools to overcome persisting challenges (Department of Education, 1998). The Education White Paper 6 (Department of Education, 2001) states that "The National

Norms and Standards for School Funding will apply to the new Inclusive Education and Training System and its application will be customised to ensure equity and redress" (p. 28). The NNSSF takes a similar approach to wellbeing improvement as the capability approach in that differential provision based on varying needs. However, it does not give details as to how the resources will be used once provided, and neither does the Education White Paper 6 (Department of Education, 2001a), and lack of detail, as already mentioned, is a common criticism of the latter mentioned policy.

As highlighted in the literature review, the capability approach rejects equal distribution of funds in favour of providing funds and resources based on individual needs (Sen, 1993). Through the "quintile" system (Education, 1998, p. 8), schools are categorised into different levels of disadvantage, and this determines the amount of money to be allocated to the school annually. This "school allocation" is arrived at "… on the basis of how many learners are there in a school, but also on the basis of how poor school communities are" (Education, 1998, p. 3). It is worth noting however, that this allocation is for government regular schools, and does not apply to special schools or inclusive schools. Nevertheless, the criterion of considering the state of poverty in the communities that surround the school shows that the aim is to provide more assistance where it is needed most. If the community alone could form the poverty criterion, individual learners' needs would be neglected as their individuality would not be considered. However, the quintile system holds that "it is the level of poverty of the school that determines how poor each learner is" (Education, 1998, p. 12). This shows that the collective condition is a function of the singular condition, hence the need to consider both levels together. Likewise, the capability approach goes beyond the community scale into individual focus, so that assistance can be provided for specific individual needs (Walker, 2005).

Despite the similarity of regard for diverse needs in the NNSSF and the capability approach, a significant difference is observed in individual considerations. The NNSSF (Department of Education, 1998) does not at any point suggest that disadvantaged children will make recommendations of what it is that is needed to improve their school life and general well-being. Conversely, in the capability approach, "the individual is seen to be an active participant in change, as citizens whose voices count" (Walker, 2005, p. 12). By adopting the NNSSF, the Education White Paper 6 (Department of Education, 2001) followed suit in caring for learners based on

observation, instead of giving them agency in their own learning. In essence, the main problem is that the Education White Paper 6 funding strategy was created for disadvantaged learners and schools, but not with their contribution; it was imposed on them. The capability approach suggests that social justice is not achieved if individuals are not involved in decision making; Sen (2009) argues that the outcome of the advancement of opportunities is to be accepted as just based on what the means to the end were. It specifically investigates whether the goal is reached through the input of the beneficiary or "through the dictates of others" (p. 230). The NNSS and the Education White Paper 6 funding strategy are examples of policies made, probably with good intentions, but lacking the crucial element of learner agency. The problem here is that it is assumed that learners are incapable of deciding for themselves what they need, with policy developers making the decisions on their behalf. Despite being in a democratic atmosphere, the lack of learner agency still largely resembles the paternalistic apartheid regime.

**A realistic time frame**

Furthermore, the progress towards inclusive education in South Africa warrants an analysis in connection with the estimated time frame for its realisation. The Ministry of Education in 2001 gave what it called "a realistic time frame" (Department of Education, 2001, p. 38) after which significant strides would be made to implement inclusion of learners with impairments across the country. The period 2001-2021 was thought to genuinely be enough time for the transformation of the unequal South African education system into an inclusive system. Seeing as the current year marks the end of this time frame, it is an interesting opportunity to assess whether the goal was indeed 'realistic'. Looking at the enrolment of learners with autism in regular schools, evidence from as recently as 2015 shows that the education system of South Africa is still far from reaching inclusivity. This assertion is supported by the concerning fact that of the 2753 learners with autism registered in schools in 2015, only 1209 are in mainstream schools (Department of Education, 2016). This translates to only 43.9% of enrolled learners with autism, showing that the education system – at least as it relates to learners with autism – is still not adapted to inclusion. As this was already towards the end of the time frame for inclusion, it is evident that either the time estimate was too ambitious or there was not enough effort placed in its fulfilment. Whichever one of these assumptions is true, the pressing reality is that the inclusive orientation that is spelled out in the policy has not been realised on the ground in schools and fresh solutions are needed.

**Teacher training**:

Another scarcely attained objective of the Education White Paper 6 (Department of Education, 2001a) is the continuous development of teaching skills. This is the plan to keep improving teachers' abilities so that they can adjust their classroom practices to match the current educational climate while being flexible to emerging needs as diverse learners are placed in the same learning environments. The Education White Paper 6 details plans for the establishment of institutional and district level support teams; the former to provide required on-site support for learners and teachers (Department of Education, 2001). The Department of Education has divided each province into areas consisting of a few schools that are in the close proximity; the Gauteng province is divided into 15 districts (Case & Deaton, 1999). District support teams, therefore, were established to facilitate teaching and learning activities throughout the district they belong to (Mfuthwana, 2016a). One of the mandates of the district support teams is to serve as a medium for teachers from different schools to share resources and more importantly to share teaching approaches with less experienced colleagues, thereby improving teaching skills within each district. In recognition of this responsibility, the Education White Paper 6 (Department of Education, 2001) describes the main obligation of district support teams as the provision of systemic assistance that teachers might need to enable them to teach in increasingly diverse classrooms. An example given is that "… the district support team could run a training workshop in their district for other educators on how to provide additional support in the classroom to visually-impaired learners" (Department of Education, 2001, p. 21). The information sharing would cover all learning challenges and disabilities as inclusion in South Africa is meant to address all learning challenges (Du Plessis, 2013). In terms of establishing these teams, the goal has been achieved, but the intended information sharing, as shown in subsequent sections, still needs a firmer application.

The policy further states that administrative personnel, such as curriculum developers and special support educators form part of the district's academic role players. Mfuthwana (2016) further explains that the teams also consist of a variety of professionals such as "learning support advisors, therapists, psychologists and special needs specialists" (p. 20). The presence of paraprofessionals, such as psychologists, should benefit anyone in need of support, including teachers and learners because teachers can barely succeed if their well-being is neglected, as this influences their attitudes (Monsen et al., 2014b). Unfortunately, the well-being of teachers does not seem to be a

priority for district support teams, for instance, psychologists and other support professionals are rarely deployed to take care of teachers and only focus on learners (Monsen et al., 2014b). Makhalemele and Payne-van Staden (2018) confirmed in their study that, though these teams have done what they can to offer some support to learners with disabilities, they have neglected the challenges faced by teachers. This shows that teachers are not being treated as the "primary resource" that the Department of Education described them to be in the policy (Department of Education, 2001, p. 18). Neglect of teacher wellbeing can be linked to negative attitudes towards inclusion, particularly of children with autism, most of whom have behavioural difficulties; a possible cause of stress for teachers (Mfuthwana, 2016). Though teachers generally support the inclusion of learners with disabilities in mainstream schools, objections are common when it comes to learners with autism, and other developmental disorders that involve challenging behaviour (Ravet, 2018). The capability to teach is reduced by the government neglecting the teachers' voices and deciding to provide support to learners only. What is needed to improve the teachers' efforts should be sought from them, as Sen (1993) recommends, that those affected directly by changes in policies should play a central role in the decision-making process. That way they will become active agents of their professional development, rather than just being subjects of policies enforced on them by authorities.

The EWP6 is also criticised for being ambiguous. For a teacher of children on the autism spectrum, the White Paper provides little if any guidance relevant to their specific area of work. It lacks targeted strategies for the various teaching staff that shoulder the responsibility of exemplifying inclusivity. Understandably, the policy itself is just an expression of objectives so it did not of itself have to give teaching strategies, but it needed to be followed up with more practical guideline documents supporting its vision, and virtually none have been developed to date. Though these sentiments are based on a thorough analysis of the policy itself, an empirical exercise is still necessary to get the word of those who are on the ground implementing policy imperatives. In this study, this was done through interviewing teachers so that they themselves could affirm or refute the suggested need for a more refined and applicable policy on inclusive education.

## Thematic Analysis of Interview Data:

This section organises the gathered interview data into themes based on the commonalities that were observed among the responses of the various participants. Two domains of themes are presented, the first being themes that were already identified as key areas prior to the interviews, while the other category covers emergent themes that the participants themselves drew attention to during the interviews. In making the final analysis of the interview data, a key emphasis was placed on how the gathered data provided insight into the experiences and strategies of teachers which had to do with knowledge of the EWP6 and the application of its precepts by the teachers concerned. In judging the applicability of the policy to the daily practice of educators, the teacher would be understood to have had their teaching practice impacted by the policy if the following conditions were met. Firstly, it is necessary to obtain a sense of the teachers' understanding and familiarity with the policy under study, before getting into how it has been applied in their practice. Secondly, whether they agree with its stipulations influences their relation to the policy understanding and supporting a policy increases the chances that a teacher can apply it (Naicker, 2007). Thirdly, whether the teacher could point to a specific principle that they obtained from the EWP6. If the teachers can give an account of practical strategies that they use that are guided by the policy and have resulted in improvement of their skills in teaching learners with autism in the inclusive education, this would be an indicator of the policy being influential. Nevertheless, this study does not only look for the influence of the EWP6 on teaching strategies but looks for those that teachers already have that might be useful in developing future policies on inclusion.

Before exploring the gathered data, the setting for the collection of data should be given to enable the reader to associate the schools where each teacher comes from with the community and therefore, the backgrounds of the learners they generally cater for. This connection is important because the main function of a school is to provide education for the betterment of the community in which it is situated (UNESCO, 1994a). Additionally, a discourse analysis of the information given on the schools' websites was conducted, and its deductions compared with what was observed when visiting the school, and this provides insight into how well the school has held to the principles it declares to uphold. Due to Covid19 lockdown restrictions classroom observations had to be removed from the study, and this analysis of a school's description of itself and the observations of it was used to at least preserve any possible metric on which to assess whether the

school is living up to its vision. The first school included in the study was a private mainstream school in a Johannesburg, which follows the national mainstream Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (Education, 2011). Though following the national curriculum, this school is fairly adapted to cater for learners with various physical and behavioural challenges, hence its curriculum is described as "a supported mainstream curriculum". The state of classrooms is indeed ideal for learners with disabilities to receive adequate attention as the classes are relatively small. With a maximum of 15 children per class, the school has stuck to its promise small class sizes in which inclusive practice is favourable. Additionally, being in a suburban area, the school mainly houses students from middle to upper income backgrounds, with a largely mixed racial profile.

The second school is a government special education school for learners with autism spectrum disorder only and is in the same suburb as the school described above. The school has a relatively low learner population with an average of about 3 learners in each class and a learner age range of around 6 years to the upper teenage years. The low number of learners in a class attests to the complexity of teaching learners with autism and may be a way to help teachers to watch all the children more closely, but this was not investigated further as it was not within the objectives of the study. The school commits to a skills-based curriculum that equips learners with "life skills required to help them function as independently as possible in activities of daily living, communication…as well as social interaction". This statement gives the impression that content may be less prioritised than interaction skills in the school, especially because the rest of the information page of the school does not make any assertion about the latter. This opens an interesting consideration into whether it is the case that subject content is neglected in the institution and whether teachers think there should be more emphasis on it. The bias towards skills is also shown in the fact that the exit phase of the school is termed 'the vocational phase', which suggests that learners are expected to leave the school predominantly armed with vocational skills. Vocational education is education that prepares one for a particular occupation and its skills (Billett, 2011), hence the child's career choices are narrowed down to those that are related to the occupation being focused on.

According to the capability approach, education should widen the options for children as to how they can make a living for themselves, instead of freedom that is restricted in some way as is the case in a vocational curriculum (Saito, 2003; Sen, 2009). Offering a vocational curriculum has its

merits in that it makes provision for learners who may be interested in taking that route, but the problem in the South African context is that most learners are placed in this kind of setting based on their physical condition. What is missing is choice, which if it were there, learners would do a vocational or content-based curriculum out of interest. By studying a range of subjects, learners in mainstream schools are allowed this freedom of choice as they can choose any career upon finishing secondary education. The interview questions directed the teachers to air their views in whether they support the choice of the school to work towards a skills-based curriculum and focus less on subject specialisation, and to confirm if it is the case that the school does not have an academic mandate. This is a relevant inquest to pursue because it may be limiting the child to centre their education on a vocational path as it limits their choices of what they can be growing up. It is understandable that physical and mental constraints can lead to inability to excel at some professions, but the curriculum should not add an extra constraint to learners' career prospects.

The third and last school included is a public full-service school which was part of the government's "national schools district development programme" (Department of Education, 2001, p. 30). This programme was a pioneering step in the infancy of inclusive education where one school in each district in South Africa was selected as the pilot project to test the effectiveness of inclusion in the country. As far as inclusive teaching in South Africa is concerned, pilot schools such as this can be expected to have some of the best trained teachers, as the best efforts of the Department of Education have been directed towards transforming them into full-service schools, having the capacity to cater for all learners' needs (Department of Education, 2010). Furthermore, this full-service school is in one of the biggest and poorest townships in Johannesburg, and therefore has a learner population predominantly from the working class. The surrounding neighbourhood faces many social and economic challenges such as a high crime rate, unemployment, drug addiction, poverty, and many other issues, which lead to high dropout rates among youth of school-going age. Being situated in an environment with many challenges, the school is involved in various initiatives to improve the communities proximate to it, an example of this is its feeding scheme for disadvantaged children.

On the academic front, as one of the chief educational values of the full-service school, and one esteemed highly by its long-serving principal, the school advocates for the teaching of children with disabilities in mainstream schools. This is a factor to consider in the interviews because

despite working in schools whose leaders support inclusion, some teachers were found by Monsen et al. (2014a) to prefer special schools for teaching learners with disabilities. Where such a conflict of preference exists between teachers and school management, the success of the teaching and learning activities in the school can be impacted negatively. This comes from the understanding that the success of a social activity such as inclusive education, is reinforced when those who participate in it find it valuable for them to practice (Forlin, 2010b). Additionally, the capability to teach in ways that teachers agree with and understand is vital to enabling schools to liberate learners from the oppression that comes with limited choices. Sen (2009) places the same emphasis on institutional transformation by arguing that institutions like schools can lead to important changes in society by implementing policies and practices "… in accordance with what they have reason to value" (p. 7). If positive attitudes are held in the school from the managerial level, teachers become free to implement pedagogical strategies that will uphold their beliefs of inclusion and by extension, the learners can get more agency in choosing to learn about what they value, in the ways that they value. This further reinforces the point already discussed earlier that a school can be fully inclusive if all its members share the common goal of developing a community which works for the collective good of all its members.

To maintain anonymity in stating and analysing the results of the interview process, the following designations will be used to refer to the teachers as being in a special school or a mainstream school. The initials in the designation denote the kind of school and the number separates the teachers being referred to from others in the same school as indicated below:

Mainstream Private school teacher – MT1 and MT2

Government Full-Service School Teacher – FST1, FST2 and FST3

Government Special School Educator – SE1 and SE2

**Pre-set Themes:**

**Teachers' Knowledge of the Policy**

As this study probes the usefulness of the Education White Paper 6 in developing teaching practices for inclusion, teachers' knowledge of the policy itself was also investigated in the interviews. The interviews first established whether the teachers had extensive knowledge of the EWP6, followed by questions relating to how this policy had an impact on the experiences and strategies of the teachers. This inquiry was justified by the realisation that teachers are commonly expected to develop their practice from policy statements, more so in South Africa, where attempts have been made to retrain educators from a separatist education system to one that is unified (Makoelle, 2014b). This top-down approach to professional development is problematic in that it does not allow teachers the agency with which to shape their own teaching skills, the result of this is that the initiators of guidelines for teaching are officials who may have not taught at all. Evidently, the model of implementation of inclusion has been unsuccessful in South Africa because the society is still largely polarised, and prejudice persists against people with disabilities (Ntombela, 2011). In relation to teachers, the broader strategy was to develop ground-breaking policies, with the Education White Paper 6 (Department of Education, 2001) being the one to give rise to inclusive teaching and learning.

If the policy fails to produce desired inclusive teaching practices, a different approach is needed to reach the same desired end. Griffiths and Prozesky (2020) propose that change should be instituted in the opposite direction to the top-down approach; practices, they argue, should give rise to policy amendments, rather than having teaching approaches develop from official policy documents. Following the same line of thought, this study seeks the input of teachers so that their strategies that they used to successfully include learners with autism can be made known, complementing hopefully, similar studies that will develop on this issue. The objective is that ultimately, policy developers will look to the recommendations of teachers, along with the evident pedagogies that made their efforts successful, and amendments to existing policies will then arise from there. Sen's (2014) key proposition is that freedom should be given to those who are

disadvantaged so that they can be assisted in ways that they see as most important for their well-being. Teachers fit this need as they have been oppressed by policies, or the lack of their application, which has prevented them from providing meaningful education to learners with autism, most notably in mainstream schools. Walker and Unterhalter (2007) express their support of the capability approach in agreeing that "those affected by any policy or practice should be the ones to decide on what will count as valuable" (p. 12). Based on this understanding, teaching strategies gathered from this, and similar studies can be used to develop new policy statements or to pursue existing policy objectives more practically and directly than has been done so far.

It is also notable that international policy development takes the approach of birthing practices from policies exists. The Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994) is an example of this in that it states that "educational policies at all levels, from the national to the local, should stipulate that a child with a disability should attend the neighbourhood school, that is the school that would be attended if the child did not have a disability" (p. 17). This has created an unfounded reliance on policy development as the only, or at least the main factor on which inclusive practices can be instituted in mainstream schools. There is no shortage of good policy documents, and most countries have their own piece of legislation that shows satisfactory commitment to inclusion, but exclusion and lack of practical implementation remains largely unsolved. What this suggests is that the hindrance to inclusive education is that these policies, however well written, are not being implemented. The Education White Paper 6 (Department of Education, 2001) is one such policy that is the product of extensive research. Nonetheless, the problem of exclusion will need practicality to solve, rather than the impressive use of words on a policy. A similar view is expressed by Roberts and Simpson (2016) that though there is "a general philosophical commitment to the inclusion of students with autism in mainstream schools in line with a rights-based approach to education of children with disabilities, there are significant barriers in practice which are not being adequately addressed" (p. 1093). Application is the most significantly lacking element in seeking inclusion, therefore the real need is not to conduct research showing how policy documents can be re-written to better express strategies though it does have its advantages such as being specific about objectives. The pressing requirement is the practical application of existing ideas that have come from research initiatives, policies, and importantly, practices. Thus, considering the experiences of teachers who teach learners with autism in mainstream schools can show how far policy application has gone.

Considering the assertions above, it was important to note in the interviews, the opinions of the teachers on the South African inclusive education policy, and particularly whether they prefer to be involved in the development of future policies. To maintain the focus on ASD, the questions were structured such that it could become clear how the respondents linked their teaching experiences concerning learners with autism with their knowledge of the Education White Paper 6 (Department of Education, 2001). Additionally, there was also greater focus on the strategies used by teachers in the mainstream environment as they are more in line with what the study seeks to uncover, which is the experiences of teachers of learners with ASD in inclusive school environments. In interviewing teachers in special schools, the motive was to find out whether the Education White Paper 6 contributed, in any way, to their practice, because it states that severely impaired learners are to be provided for in special schools (Department of Education, 2001). It was vital as well to enquire about whether learners are admitted into the special school based on the severity of their autism diagnosis as prescribed by the policy (Department of Education, 2001), and lastly whether some of the special educators support inclusion of learners with autism in mainstream schools.

Majority of the teachers that were interviewed were familiar with the Education White Paper 6, almost all responded in the affirmative to the question 'are your familiar with the White Paper?' One teacher from the special school made an interesting response to this question, which clearly captured the separation of their day-to-day practice from the policy:

"*I did that when I was in university, so I wouldn't remember."* (SE1)

Similarly, another teacher from the private school (MT2) responded thus to the same question:

*"No! I am not familiar at all, but I do teach learners who have a few different needs."*

This already shows that the two teachers referenced above cannot relate any of their achievements to the application of the policy as they do not have knowledge of it, let alone its recommendations. Nevertheless, this does not eradicate the possibility of these teachers practicing inclusive education, specifically the mainstream teacher who, throughout the interview, still made many points that align with the principles of inclusion.

The rest of the participants did not show signs of the policy being too far in distant memory, but none gave any indication that it was a part of their teaching activities. This came as no surprise because the problem commonly highlighted in South African literature is not that South African teachers have not been introduced to inclusive education policy, but that it has not made notable changes to the education system, specifically in terms of the practicalities of teaching and learning (Donohue & Bornman, 2014; Engelbrecht et al., 2016). Attention was therefore directed to the issue of how well teachers understand the policy, and the analysis of this is made below, in relation to the analysis above of the policy itself. This was inspired by the understanding that to understand a policy as a teacher is to successfully implement it, not just knowing what it says. The implementation efforts can, in turn, be analysed to determine whether they result in inclusion or perpetuate exclusion. To establish the policy-practice connection, one question was phrased to combine the two concepts by asking teachers if they knew the policy and continuing to ask them to explain how it has been instrumental in their success of teaching learners with autism, particularly in mainstream schools.

As highlighted above, as far as knowing about the Education White Paper 6 and that it is the official document for inclusive education in South Africa, all teachers proved to be familiar with the policy. Despite this familiarity, the participants could not attribute any foundation or improvement of their skills in working with learners with autism to the Education White Paper 6. It was evident from the responses that the teachers saw this as a policy that looks good but has not brought any gain to teachers' knowledge:

> "*I feel like there is a lot of lip service"* one mainstream teacher commented *"but not enough training."*

The policy describes in some detail, what an inclusive teacher is, yet there has been little, to no resources expended to mould the desired calibre of teachers. Lack of training of teachers to be inclusive effectively means that schools are unable to become fully inclusive environments because teacher competency is arguably the most important aspect through which inclusion can be instilled (Causton-Theoharis et al., 2011). What the focus of government has been, according to one of the participants, is striving for racial inclusion as an attempt to reverse the injustices of apartheid:

> "*… they are trying to balance out the races in schools, so I feel personally, it's more a question of racial inclusion that receives emphasis rather than the inclusion of special education needs within the mainstream."*

The equalisation of opportunities to attend the best schools in the country cannot be undermined, especially if black learners who were previously marginalised are prioritised. Nevertheless, it is worth pointing out that educational reform is a holistic process, meaning that all causes of exclusion should be given sufficient attention. It is therefore fitting to recall that South Africa's inclusive education model was built on addressing all issues that lead to exclusion in the past (Department of Education, 2001). Among these issues, the South African Schools Act (Department of Education, 1996) drew early attention towards the vision of dismantling racial and other barriers to academic opportunities by stating that public schools must register learners "… without unfairly discriminating in any way" (p. 6). The Education White Paper 6 (Department of Education, 2001) similarly expresses the need to curb all forms of marginalisation, but the education system has undergone no substantial transformation on any factor other than race, leaving many children marginalised in a variety of ways, including disability. Recent statistics such as those stated above show that there are more learners with autism in special schools that in mainstream schools (Department of Education, 2016). This implies lack of commitment to change because it resembles the apartheid era during which learners with disabilities were catered for in special schools, further proving that the South African education fraternity is still far from reaching inclusivity. The main reason why mainstream schools still reject learners with impairments such as autism is that they have little resources to cater for their needs (Engelbrecht et al., 2016). Being unable to access the same schools as everyone else means that learners with autism are, according to the policy requirements (Department of Education, 1996, 2001), experiencing discrimination.

By failing to transform schools and equip them with enough capacity to be able to cater for learners with autism, the education system of South Africa has continued to marginalise this group of learners beyond the end of the apartheid period. This highlights the centre of the problem of exclusion in South African schools, which is largely caused by educational mismanagement; importantly, government acknowledges that "… barriers to learning are not only intrinsic to learners but can also be cultural and systemic" (Department of Education, 2010, p. 9). Inclusion

is, therefore, hindered by lack of implementation; there is little wrong in the policy, but its implementation has been poor.

Crucially, policy changes spoken of above should not be copied from other parts of the world, unless they are directly connected to the local context. Though inclusion is a universalised philosophy, its development is still subject to prevailing conditions in the local environment in which it is applied. Ravet (2018) acknowledges this dependence on context as necessitated by the fact that "… notions of inclusion, disability and special education differ from country to country" (p. 716). With this being the case, it is the responsibility of individual countries through their governments to develop educational policies that address local problems instead of adopting practices that worked in countries whose contexts are markedly different from the local one. Interestingly, the Education White Paper 6 has been subjected to criticism since its inception who argue that its recommendations and the strategies it contains are adopted from Western countries and largely irrelevant to the local context. Among such critics are Soudien and Baxen (2006) who argue that "… 'experts' of some kind or another … exert influence…" in inclusive education formulations in South Africa, yet still "South Africa's policy with respect to disability and education needs further investigation" (p. 153). Indeed, further policy reform is needed if changes are lacking despite 'expert' input, and one can argue that such a transformation should be locally influenced and involve central role players more than has been done. Importantly, in policy development, contextual relevance is vital because "… if local implementers are not given the freedom to adapt the program to local conditions, it is likely to fail" (Matland, 1995, p. 149). All governments were privileged with this freedom, as stated in the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994), the "framework … must, accordingly be adapted to fit local requirements and circumstances" (p. 14).

Furthermore, the disparity between inclusive education policy and inclusion practices in South Africa was noted by Donohue and Bornman (2014) as an obstacle to the fulfilment of the goals of implementing inclusive education. The Education White Paper 6 has proved to be too generic and not effective in addressing direct issues. This is evident in this study concerning teaching learners with autism. The existence of a policy is justified by the results of its application, otherwise its development was in vain. The relevance of the Education White Paper 6 remains to be proven;

teacher training is a specific area where it has not made any notable changes, so much that Jansen (2001) commented that educational practices in South Africa "…remained intact during and after apartheid" (p. 243). Jansen (2001) explains that teachers prior to 1994 were controlled by a state-enforced, rigid curriculum, and unable to be creative and thorough in their approaches. A democratic education system as the current South African system presumably is, should look predominantly different from the oppressive system that preceded it, but South Africa still bears the hallmarks of authoritarianism in its education fraternity. Griffiths and Prozesky (2020) add that "pedagogies forged under the apartheid regime have not been fundamentally transformed" (p. 5). This is evident in the continued pressure placed on teachers to adhere to an inflexible curriculum and prioritise completing the syllabus above all else that they may need to do, as part of their professional responsibilities. This is also the case in the full-service school environment, and one of the participants from there reiterated these sentiments, stating that:

*"District officials also put pressure on poor teachers by time frame."*

Failure to implement inclusion in full-service schools is the ultimate indicator that progress is still lacking because these are these that are supposed to be known for valuing and respecting all learners (Department of Education, 2010). One of the clearest ways of giving learners equal value and respect is to give them equal opportunities to obtain meaningful education. However, as noted in Sen's (1993) capability approach, equality does not necessarily constitute giving the exact same opportunity or resource to all people. Being equal according to Sen (2014) is having the same freedom to choose the ways in which a valued functioning can be obtained. When pressed by time limits teachers are rarely able to allow learners to gain knowledge in ways that they prefer to learn, and more so, agency is denied learners to choose the knowledge that provides the capabilities that they value. In essence, strict adherence to curriculum coverage in a specified time periods deprives teachers of the capability to choose pedagogical approaches that work for them, and by extension it limits learners to learning in ways that they may not find effective. Freire (1970) points out that teachers are forced to use the "banking education" (p. 71) technique where learners act as depositories of information, as this method allows a lot of content coverage in a short time.

To reiterate the focus of freedom in the capability approach to education, freedom to choose to learn in ways that learners prefer should be allowed by policy so that they can gain education that they deem valuable (Walker, 2005). Learners are not directly governed by policy statements, but

by teachers; teachers are the immediate enablers and restrictors of the educational development of learners with autism. However, when the flexibility of teachers to use various approaches to address different learners' needs, learners bear the bulk of the disadvantage. According to Watermeyer, Swartz, Lorenzo, Presitley and Schneider (2006), South Africa needs inclusive education policies that promote independence for people with disabilities. Independence in this context is defined by Watermeyer et al. (2006) as "a person's ability to make choices about when and how they undertake activities" (p. 14). This is a valid point, as evidenced by the continued imposition of curriculum coverage as a measure of teacher performance; most teaching methods that can address the needs of all learners require more time than common approaches. The Education White Paper 6 has existed long enough for its impact to have been noted, but it has not met its need to enable learners to choose their learning preferences. Whether the policy is does not promote freedom of instruction or that its recommendations have not been applied is debatable, nonetheless, the issue to pick out from this paragraph is that liberation is still yet to be realised in the education of learners with disabilities.

Interestingly, one teacher who was particularly optimistic about the inclusion of learners with autism in mainstream schools testified to being successful in giving ASD learners a fulfilling educational experience for many years. When asked if the Education White Paper 6 had contributed to his success, MT1 answered in this manner:

> *"It hasn't really done much for me."*

MT1 went on to describe the Education White Paper 6 as

> *"anaemic in terms of support for teachers."*

In contrast to those in the two schools discussed so far, teachers in the full-service school were less critical of the Education White Paper 6. One of the teachers suggested that the policy has many merits in its recommendations, and that learners with autism are not side-lined from its benefits:

> *"The Education White Paper 6 on special needs education caters specifically for autistic children's needs… although autistic children could only benefit in specialised schools."*

This response summarises the situation in South African education in which inclusive education is approved by teachers, but its applicability has not been proven in their practice. It is evident in the quote above that the teacher just perceives inclusion as a good idea but does not see it as being

possible in their own working environment. This is most concerning because the teacher is in a full-service school, which is the kind of school that is seen to be best resourced and structured for the successful inclusion of all learners (Department of Education, 2001b, 2010). According to Engelbrecht et al. (2014), full-service schools are not fulfilling their mandate of leading the development of inclusive education in South Africa (Department of Education, 2001a). One indicator of this lack of progress is the lack of confidence of teachers to teach diverse groups of learners despite being in full-service schools. Hay et al. (2001) postulated during the first steps of introducing inclusion that fostering positive teacher attitudes towards inclusive education would be a crucial component of ensuring that South African schools become inclusive. Another teacher from the full-service school was slightly more acquainted to policies and mentioned that they did impact her teaching abilities:

> *"national policies contributed positively on inclusion to my abilities because workshops were organised to implement development to my teaching skills."*

Realistically, merely expressing positivity verbally does not lead to significant change, but what teachers can do in the classroom is what counts the most, and in the quote above there is at least a link between policies and teaching skills; a more practical example of a positive attitude. Another positive here is that workshops provide much needed in-service training for teachers. Moreover, what can be gathered here is that some teachers believe in inclusion, yet they do not see themselves as being capable of taking up the responsibility to make it a reality in their respective schools. Positive changes of attitude should therefore be encouraged at a personal level, such that teachers can not only believe that inclusion of learners with autism in mainstream schools is a possibility, but also that they can make it possible in their areas of work (Watermeyer et al., 2006). Walton and Lloyd (2011) argue that teachers are detached from the responsibility of implementing inclusive education because of how their role is expressed in policy. This is in reference to the statement that "classroom educators will be our primary resource for achieving our goal of an inclusive education and training system" (Department of Education, 2001, p. 18). According to Walton and Lloyd (2011), this statement and view of the role of the teacher suggests that "teachers do not own the goal, it belongs to the Ministry" (p. 12). This creates a dependency mindset among teachers where they wait for the custodians of the goal of inclusion, namely the Department of Education for guidelines for tasks that they can easily do well if they take the initiative on their

own and among themselves as teachers. Discursively, changes can be made in the policy to identify teachers as partners with all other stakeholders, including government officials, rather than just resources under their control.

Like many other issues concerning inclusion, the question then follows: how can this personal confidence and sense of responsibility be instilled in teachers? One of the participants from the mainstream private school suggested that regular training programmes are an effective way to not only help teachers gain the confidence to teach diverse classes of learners, but to equip them with practical strategies for teaching learners with disabilities as well. Autism is a particularly complex disorder in that there are many variations in how it manifests in children (Ravet, 2018), hence it presents teachers with ongoing challenges. In addition, ASD research is still in progress and workshops are effective platforms whereon teachers can be informed about the latest findings that might contribute to their knowledge about the disorder. In essence, the change of attitude that has been achieved in teachers is not enough for them to be inclusive practitioners, so it needs to be taken further to where they can demonstrate their support of inclusive education policies by their actions.

This resonates with Makhalemele and Payne-van Staden‘s (2018) earlier comments that the role of teachers in making inclusive education a reality is not entirely appreciated by government**.** The teachers in Makhalemele and Payne-van Staden's (2018) study iterated that they could testify to the efforts of the support teams in assisting individual children to cope with the mainstream curriculum and the challenges that come with being in a regular school, but they could not say the same for themselves as teachers. The Department of Education has not demonstrated commitment to its statement that teachers would be its “primary resource” (Department of Education, 2001, p. 18) in the drive towards inclusion, as they have not been treated as valuable assets or their input sought. Makoelle (2014) argues that there is very little that the government has done to enable teachers to practice inclusivity, and Engelbrecht et al., (2016) found that even in full-service schools, the practicality of inclusive education has not been realised. Engelbrecht et al. (2016) add that the Education White Paper 6 is too idealistic for the South African context, while Donohue and Bornman (2015) describe the policy as a “rapid political and policy change” (p. 43). The latter assertion suggests that the process of developing the policy needed more time and a more detailed planning phase to avoid ambiguity, because it neglected key factors, such as providing adequate

policy training for teachers. The effect of this oversight is evident in the continued reports that teachers do not find useful guidelines in the various policy documents in South Africa, including the Education White Paper 6. Teachers still lack operational guidance even in full-service schools where the best government efforts have been made to exemplify inclusion. It seems the average teacher in South Africa needs to look to international research to find practical strategies.

Given that most mainstream schools in South Africa are not well equipped for receiving learners with autism, a closer look is needed into how some teachers manage to teach inclusively (Engelbrecht et al., 2014). It is evident from the sentiments above that tertiary education and policy knowledge have not contributed substantially to improving the skills and self-efficacy of teachers in teaching learners with autism. More teacher confidence and ability is needed in the mainstream environment as teachers face the challenge of catering for the autistic learner, as well as to facilitate their interaction with typically developing children in this environment (Ravet, 2018). All participants were asked if they felt they had done well in teaching learners with autism in regular schools, and what it was that they could attribute their success to.

> *"I am confident, though it is very difficult to come up with positive results…"* (FST1)
>
> *"Yes. I have worked here for eleven years… I've got the experience; the experience helps a lot. It's an ongoing thing, you learn all the time."* (SE2)
>
> *"Yes, I am… I have taught in a range of schools, I started teaching in apartheid times."* (MT2)
>
> *"The answer should be yes, but I think the minute we become too dependent on what we think we know, we make mistakes… Where my education lies and my expertise lies as a teacher who has been doing work with young people with behaviour and emotional-social difficulty is, we're looking at fifteen years of experience."* (MT1)

Experience stands out in the responses above as the source of confidence in teachers' abilities to assist learners with autism. It is not so much about knowing the policy, but applying it and the experience of seasoned professionals, if shared, can benefit new teachers to implement policy goals more successfully. As far as knowledge of the EWP6 is concerned, familiarity with the policy appears to depend on what the teacher studied at university and the kind of school they taught. All the full-service school educators know the EWP6, probably because being a government school,

they more regularly attend workshops focusing on official policies. Additionally, their school was restructured specifically to implement this policy. It was also discovered that teachers from the other two schools who knew the EWP6 extensively were those that completed postgraduate degrees specifically in inclusive education in a South African university. The exception to this was MT1, who, despite having studied overseas, has conducted vast research which includes inclusive education policy in South Africa. This shows a major shortfall in that the Education White Paper 6 (Department of Education, 2001) is meant to transform the whole education system of South Africa, yet it is only well known in selected areas within the education system, full-service schools and university courses on inclusion. The reality to face here is that the education system will not become inclusive because many stakeholders are not even aware of the plans to make it so, neither the guidelines which they are to follow on that pursuit. To achieve an inclusive society, all society must be informed and be part of the efforts towards this goal, hence the EWP6 and subsequent policies and guidelines should be taught at all levels of the education system and society at large.

**Knowledge about Autism Spectrum Disorder:**

Looking at the responses to interview questions, it was evident that most of the teachers interviewed had at least a basic understanding of autism, while others had extensive knowledge. In asking the teachers what they understood autism to be, the intention was to find out if they were aware of three key aspects: the neurological aspect of ASD, difficulty in communicating and navigating the social world, and finally the broadness of the autism spectrum. All participants gave an elaborate description of the characteristics that are common in learners with autism as well as some that are not ordinarily obvious. Some examples below:

> *"A disorder with problems communicating, structural problems in the brain that doesn't allow the child to understand figurative language, sarcasm and things like that, and quite often an inability to look someone in the eye."* (MT1)

> *"signs may include lack or difficulty in interacting with others, preferring to play alone, little awareness of others, impaired speech development."* (FST3)

> *"They don't necessarily make friends easily, but I also think that they don't necessarily care or mind."* (MT2)

> *"If you will not talk to them, they will not talk to you… what happens when the child goes down the stairs, he is scared, locomotion, the whole system; it's sensory disorder."* (SE1)

Though teachers know the dynamics of autism and the symptoms involved, they still need the input of other professionals for further understanding. Medical practitioners are directly responsible for determining the severity of autism in a child, and schools use this information to decide on the appropriate placement for the learner. Likewise, the special school involved in this study makes use of teams made up mainly of medical professionals for diagnosis, as SE1 explained:

> *"We have a whole team that assesses; there's a speech therapist, occupational therapist, social workers, and the principal herself… they can diagnose the child."*

While the collaborative effort of differently trained professionals is a core principle of inclusive education (Forlin, 2010b), such a collaboration should result in coming up with ways to assist learners according to their needs in the same classroom environment (Forlin, 2010a). On the contrary, the collaboration of experts in South African schools is for the purpose of finding out whether they are fit for mainstream education, and if the verdict is that they are not, they are sent to special schools. This is in alignment with policy imperatives because as pointed out above, the Education White Paper 6 (Department of Education, 2001) only clearly legitimises the placement of moderately disabled learners in mainstream schools. The question is whether schools are right to use diagnostic tests to admit or reject learners, and a true understanding of inclusion disagrees with this form of decision-making. Inclusive education is aimed at making the classroom a community characterised by equal participation (Göransson & Nilholm, 2014b). The inability of a member of the community to participate should be remedied with strategies to help them participate, not to exclude them from the common educational environment. In the capability perspective, having a disability means that the child does not have as much freedom as others to achieve the capability to learn fruitfully (Sen, 1993). The response should therefore be targeted at removing the barriers through provision of resources and letting the child work with teachers to decide on what assistance they need.

Ravet (2018) also warns that assuming that moderately impaired learners, such as those with Asperger's Syndrome, are always easier to teach than other autistic learners may cause teachers to "overlook their needs and fail to recognise the challenges they face" (p. 715). Ideally, therefore, children should be considered individually, instead of according to the label which they are given. With that said, it is vital to note that teachers' learning does not reach a stopping point, and teachers should always be learning more about the individual children they teach. MT1 is aware of this need, and attributes part of his success to willingness to learn more about the challenges experienced by children he teaches:

> *"... in my own case, I keep on educating myself. I read a lot of research ... on the topic of special needs."*

Apart from learning from literature, teachers can learn about autism from the children who they teach; that is as the symptoms and different behaviours are manifested in the classroom.

**Teachers' views on the inclusion of learners with autism**

Many studies have shown that there is generally a positive stance among teachers with regards to inclusive education, with many endorsing the placement of learners with disabilities into mainstream schools. However, these studies of teachers' opinions on inclusion have mostly been general, without any specific impairment being highlighted, notably those conducted in South Africa (Dalton et al., 2012; Donohue & Bornman, 2014; Engelbrecht et al., 2014b; Nel et al., 2016; Ntombela, 2011; Swart et al., 2002). However, it is necessary to find out from teachers what placement they prefer for learners with specific challenges in the inclusive classroom to establish their levels of readiness to assist such learners. The specific disability, which is the focus of this study being autism, the question to be answered was whether teachers support the inclusion of learners with autism in mainstream schools. Before investigating the ways in which teachers have been able to teach learners with autism in inclusive classrooms, it seemed fitting to find out first whether they support the placement of those learners in mainstream schools in the first place. Nel et al. (2011) write that the attitude of a professional contributes significantly to their ability to produce desired results and adds that attitudes are also "based upon previous experiences" (p. 77), which means that finding out the experiences of teachers in their respective working environments helps to understand the sources of their attitudes. The correlation will thus be established between

the success or lack thereof of teachers, including learners with autism, in mainstream classrooms and whether they believe it to be the right educational approach. As indicated in the methodology section, the teachers interviewed were primarily from a mainstream background, with two being from a special education school for learners with autism. Below is an account of the sentiments of the special educators from the special school of whether they are for or against teaching learners with autism in mainstream schools.

**Special schoolteachers' views on inclusion of ASD learners**

The following responses to interview questions come from teachers in a special school for learners with autism that is found in the Johannesburg metropolitan area. Two main points were considered for input by these teachers; the first being their opinion on whether learners with autism should be placed in mainstream schools or remain in special schools, and the second being the expertise of special educators that regular teachers can learn from. The question: 'what advantages do you think learners with autism can gain from being placed in a mainstream environment?' sought to establish how being in a special school impacts the possibility of a teacher to support inclusion of learners with autism in mainstream schools. In response, SE1 indicated that decisions on placement should be guided by the level of functioning of the child, which shows how much support they need. The response was:

> *"High support - low functioning don't have the ability, you know, to be in mainstream… Asperger's yes! I would say Asperger's could benefit".*

As has been highlighted, learners on the part of the autism spectrum known as Asperger's syndrome are mildly impaired and they only face challenges of social interaction and slight behavioural irregularities. Social challenges include making sense of other people's actions and comprehending the mentalities of others, but Aspergers learners have just about the same grasp of content as a typically developing child (Samson, Huber & Gross, 2012). It is also worth noting that children with this condition are in many cases, able to function above the level of their typically developing peers, which puts them in a good place to cope with a mainstream curriculum with little support necessary. The teacher's response therefore demonstrates sufficient knowledge about the dynamics of autism and that merely being on the autism spectrum does not imply that a

child should be in an autism-specific school. Adding on the importance of individual learners' levels of impairment, MT1 also indicated that knowing learners helps to:

> *"... play to their strengths because you will find that quite often they have strengths that other learners do not have, and in a group work situation, they become quite valuable"*

On the contrary, the second special educator (SE2) in commenting on including learners with autism in mainstream schools, argued:

> *"it doesn't benefit anything because "autistic learners are mocked by other learners and the teachers can't do anything".*

This response shows that the lack of skills and experience with inclusion may have led to a negative perception of the possibilities of inclusion. The teacher judged inclusion to be impossible, not because of the failure to implement it, but because of the existing problems to which it serves as a response. For a teacher who has spent more than a few years in special schools, it is conceivable that inclusion can be seen as an impossible feat because the teacher's environment shapes their conception of what is realistic (Ravet, 2018). Moreover, the special school does not work towards making learners ready to be in a mainstream school environment as SE1 stated regarding children that sometimes leave for mainstream schools that:

> "*it was not the school who sent them away, it was their parents… it depended on the parents."*

Likewise, SE2 indicated that the special school does not have an objective of mainstream preparation, while adding a strong personal disapproval of that practice:

> "*For me, I don't recommend learners with autism to be in mainstream. What I recommend is for those in mainstream who are diagnosed to go to schools for autism… The transition should be from special schools to the world of work."*

The last remark seems contradictory and begs the question: does teaching a learner for their whole school years in a special school prepare a child for a future in a largely diversified mainstream work environment? It has been extensively explained in previous chapters that a special school is a relatively isolated space where interaction with non-autistic persons is minimised (Mariga et al.,

2014). Lack of exposure to the diversity of the outside environment may cause children to internalise the perception of society as constituting the existing conditions of the school for learners with autism. To transition from this secluded environment that is not a reflection of the larger society into diversified workplaces may be overwhelming for the child when they reach the employment age. Meiring et al. (2016) argue that schooling should sensitise learners to the world of work, and only mainstream education can prepare people with autism for mainstream work and functioning well in regular society. Considering this, MT2 provided contrasting remarks from those of the teacher in the quote above:

> *"We expect everyone to greet you, we expect certain behaviours and I think these can be learned, and I think these can make the child more social… Not that you're forcing the person, but to fit in from a society perspective, from a perspective that maybe they want to get a job one day, and I think the more you isolate them, the harder it can be."*

Importantly, this teacher looks further than the school years to show how an exclusionary education is also tied to a life of marginalisation in other areas of life. Nel et al. (2011) further emphasise that "attitudes are closely related to one's opinions and are based upon previous experiences" (p. 77). One would add that it is unlikely that a special educator would support mainstream education without having been exposed to the mainstream environment and the teaching approaches that foster inclusive teaching and learning. This is the recommended starting point for training teachers for inclusion; the eradication of negative attitudes (UNESCO, 1994a), and the causes of negative attitudes must also be identified. The Education White Paper 6 (Department of Education 2001) developers were not ignorant of this need in drafting the policy; it states that inclusive education is "about changing attitudes… to meet the needs of all learners" (p. 55). When the policy was first introduced in 2001, Hay et al., (2001) found during on an early analysis, that indeed, South African teachers needed a change of attitude because most of them were not familiar with the concept of inclusion and lacked operational knowledge of how to play a part in it. A paradigm shift was needed as a result but evidence from later studies (Engelbrecht et al., 2016; Makoelle, 2014) shows that there has been no significant change in teacher attitudes towards inclusive education. Nel, Engelbrecht, Nel and Tlale (2014) made a similar deduction in 2014 that South African teachers still maintain low levels of confidence in inclusive education. This highlights that efforts to

eradicate negativity towards inclusion among teachers have been unsuccessful, and more decisive action is imperative.

**Mainstream teachers' views on inclusion of learners with ASD**

Regarding the issue of supporting inclusion, there was a clear contrast between the attitudes of teachers from the mainstream private school and those from the special school. The first mainstream teacher (MT1) expressed full support for the inclusion of ASD learners in mainstream schools. His reasoning was the opposite of the special educator who argued that learning with autism being in mainstream schools:

> *"… doesn't benefit anything."*

Below is an account of MT1's response:

> *"I am a full supporter of full inclusive education… it is about full participation of the individual. So, alongside the fact that the young person then can fully participate in all the activities, it also helps them to socially integrate, even though they sometimes find it very difficult …"*

The response above demonstrates knowledge that including learners in mainstream schools has more to do than just welcoming them into the regular school system but in society as a whole as indicated by the indication that full participation at school encourages social integration. Spencer and Simpson (2009) share this viewpoint on education, indicating that if children are to become "…contributing members of our society, then they must be provided with the same opportunities to learn" (p. 2). Having acknowledge that there is difficulty, the educator proceeded to explain that bullying is one challenge that comes with the task of inclusion but did not see it as a definitive reason to render it ineffective to teach ASD learners in regular schools. Instead, he argued that educators can, in fact, be the solution to the bullying problem on condition that they are:

> *"…very much aware of what autism spectrum disorder is"* in which case they can *"help navigate that young person, help them develop friendships, help them settle in a group situation, they (ASD learners) become quite valuable".*

Likewise, MT2 acknowledged that there are challenges to be faced when teaching learners with autism in a mainstream school but was adamant that there are merits to including learners with autism in regular schools. MT2:

> *"I definitely think that there are advantages. However, there needs to be a sort of protected environment."*

This speaks to the adaptation of the social environment by changing the attitudes of other learners and teachers, thus removing prejudices about learners with disabilities (UNESCO, 1994a). Despite being in a mainstream school and having successfully taught learners with autism in that environment, MT2 went on to express a personal preference that is not necessarily supportive of inclusion:

> *"I think you'd have greater success in putting an autistic child in a special school"*.

The teacher supported these remarks by pointing to the practical implications of placement in most South African mainstream schools, which shows that the preference of special education is not a reflection on inclusion being unrealistic, but that the South African context makes it so:

> *"I think the reason for that is, I think when you go to really big mainstream schools, you're looking at 1500* (number of learners in a school)*, you're looking at 40-45 or more in a class. I think there is no teacher, amazing as they may be who's going to help that child."*

In reality, the situation of overpopulation is dire in many schools in South Africa, and most notably in the most densely populated province of Gauteng. It may be conceivable that many learners with autism who are in school are not necessarily placed in special schools because their parents do not prefer mainstream education, but that the state of many mainstream schools in the South African context is not conducive for the education of their children. The issue of overcrowding was also pointed out by one of the full-service school educators as a constraint on learning for children with autism:

> *"it is very difficult to come up with the positive results because of overcrowding…"*

The situation of large class sizes presents a challenge because it makes it difficult to assist learners individually according to their needs. Despite the challenge of overcrowding, FST1 still insisted that the full-service school is the ideal environment for learners with autism to learn in:

> *"I think it is best to teach autistic learners together with mainstream learners because multi-learning will prevail for autistic learners. Groupwork strategies also produce acceptance, excellency and understanding amongst learners at large."*

Not only does this response show positivity towards inclusion, but it also shows concern for typically developing learners. Inclusive teaching is based primarily on this principle of conducting lessons in ways that benefit all learners, thereby avoiding the problem of excluding in the process of trying to include (Messiou, 2006, 2012b).

One of the most widely recommended methods of teaching diverse learner populations is differentiation, which involves varying pedagogical approaches and resource use, so that learners can learn at different ways and in ways that they prefer (Subban, 2006). In large classes, it is virtually impossible to address every need and challenge because of the pressure to deliver curriculum coverage. Differentiated instruction is seen by teachers as an effective and practical strategy for inclusive teaching, however, it is discouraged by the pressure teachers have to cover the required curriculum content in a short space of time. The full-service context as articulated in policy (Department of Education, 2001a, 2010), is more ideal for inclusive approaches such as differentiation than other school contexts, but even there the pressure of curriculum coverage remains a challenge. To highlight the difficulty, FST1 commented:

> *"Differentiation system helps a lot … district officials also put pressure on poor teachers by time frame curriculum."*

As a response to the persisting negative attitudes about the inclusion of learners with autism and other disorders, a particular strategy in the Education White Paper 6 (Department of Education, 2001) needs to be implemented. This is the facilitation of information sharing and collaboration between teachers in mainstream schools with those in special schools in the same district. The data collected shows that the teachers from the special education environment and those from mainstream schools have valuable insights that can be complementary, if combined. The main

point of strength for teachers from the special school was that they showed a depth of knowledge in supporting individual children into the mastery of communicative skills.

Mainstream teachers proved to be more experienced and knowledgeable about facilitating healthy interaction between learners with autism and typically developing learners. Moreover, the delivery of content is a priority in the mainstream setting, and teachers in this sector can provide insight on how they are able to ensure academic attainment without neglecting the equally important aspect of training learners on social integration.

Further, the curriculum that is used in a school is an indication of the objectives of the school and the calibre of learners it strives to produce. The mainstream curriculum is predominantly academic, that is to say its main principle is the delivery of subject-specific content (Department of Basic Education, 2011). Autism specific schools on the other hand, take a more personal approach to nurture children and improve their social skills, with a lesser focus on subject-specific content. Evidently, the curriculum in their schools had a profound impact on the stances that the respective teachers in the study took on whether mainstream or special education was right for learners on the autism spectrum. In the special school, the two teachers interviewed saw the mainstream curriculum as a barrier, and claimed that it gives excessive attention to academic achievement; SE1 commented:

> *"They* (autistic learners) *can't even do ABCD, they don't know because mainstream is mostly academic, and those kids would rather prepare for a skills background"*

Likewise, SE2 advocated for a skills-based curriculum, giving the reason that transferring learners with autism from special to mainstream education will be challenging because:

> *"there is a different mainstream curriculum; it's a challenge to transfer them."*

It is commonly wrongly assumed that being in either a mainstream school or a special school means that learners are either taught with a regular curriculum or a special curriculum based on improvement of skills for ASD learners. Some of the findings contradict this claim, particularly the private school involved is a good example in that it uses a mainstream curriculum with a strong

emphasis on individual social skills improvement. This can be described as a mixed curriculum which cover both content and communication skills.

The Education White Paper 6 directs inclusive schools to use a flexible curriculum, not a rigid mainstream curriculum. Giving learners a good skills background helps them to overcome the difficulty of interaction, while the acquisition of academic expertise increases the chances of the learner participating in a professional environment (Watermeyer et al., 2006). It should therefore not be a choice between a skills-based curriculum for learners with autism or academic expertise, but curriculum that combines skills and academic emphasis. The mission statement of the autism school included in this study is "to provide learners with ASD the opportunity to develop essential life skills required to help them function as independently as possible in activities of daily living, communication… as well as to interact socially". The absence of academic aspirations in this statement resonates with the above noted sentiments by the teachers in the same school arguing that there is no need for a content-based curriculum for learners with autism.

**Impact on typically developing learners**

The participants were also asked to provide their views on what the impact of including learners with autism in mainstream schools is on typically developing learners. Florian (2012) found that some researchers and researchers believe that being taught alongside learners with disabilities negatively affects learners without special needs. According to Avramidis, Chan, Gendreau, L'ecuyer and Pisacane (2010), many teachers particularly see learners with disorders that involve behavioural difficulties as more challenging than those with other impairments. This suggests that there may be less motivation in including learners with autism in mainstream schools because of behavioural challenges (Graetz, 2009). To obtain the views of the interviewed teachers on this matter, they were asked to provide accounts of how they have worked around assisting learners with autism, while simultaneously keeping 'regular' learners engaged. This enquiry mostly focused on the inclusive classroom environment where learners with autism attend the same classes as their typically developing peers. As indicated earlier in the literature review, amidst the varying perceptions of what true inclusion is, the one that holds the most merit was taken to be the one in which all members of the class are seen as a community that functions together. Some

sentiments that came from one teacher in the mainstream private school (MT1) showed quite a nuanced understanding of this concept of inclusion as the building of communities (Göransson & Nilholm, 2014a).

MT1 detailed one of his strategies for ensuring that the participation of everyone else is not affected by efforts to provide special support for a learner with autism. The educator shared that while being careful not to disclose the condition of one autistic boy to his whole class, he alerts the other learners of the idiosyncrasies that will inevitably appear to be different to others.

> *"I have a single hand gesture to indicate to the young person that he or she must have a breath now and let others talk, and let the others answer as well"***.**

This is in light of one of the characteristics of autistic people which is to want to talk continuously once their interest is piqued and become oblivious to the need to allow others to contribute to the conversation (Callahan, Henson & Cowan, 2008). FST1 also described this trait in autistic persons accurately when defining ASD:

> *"... someone who doesn't get fascinated so easily about other people's point of view."*

This behaviour, if not managed well, can easily cause disruptions during a lesson, in which case other learners might be negatively impacted by the behaviour of the autistic learner. The onus is therefore on the teacher to come up with a way to allow all learners to participate equally, and the hand gesture used by MT1 is an effective, albeit simple strategy. By being transparent about what the gestures mean, the other learners are made aware that some hand signals that the teacher will occasionally use are meant to communicate messages to the autistic learner. This then avoids swaying the attention of everyone else while sending direct signals to the learner with autism, whose way of receiving communication is different from others. Another advantage is that by cutting the amount of time that the learner with autism speaks, other 'regular' learners also get time to speak, therefore their participation is not affected negatively. This is a way of ensuring special support to an autistic learner does not interfere with the progress of other learners, and the teacher attested to the same advantage:

> *"I also find that using most of these strategies ... with all these kids in the classroom actually benefits all of the kids so it is not a strategy just for one kid, but for everybody."*

In slight contrast to this, at the full-service school FST1 indicated that the teaching strategies that he uses for supporting learner with autism are:

> *"... based on supporting autistic learners' education problems only. Their capacity and character is not the same day by day with the character of his or her classmates."*

On the contrary, the fact that an autistic learner is different from others does not mean that the strategies meant for their assistance should be used 'only' for them as suggested by FST1. If planning a section of a lesson is centred on one learner, the question is what will the rest of the class be doing to stay focused on learning? In a sense, FST1 understands the importance of using different approaches in the same lesson as seen in the remark that:

> *"... you cannot dwell on one pedagogical strategy, it depends on the topic of a day, differentiation systems helps a lot."*

Differentiation is indeed an effective strategy to cater to the learning styles and cognitive abilities in a diverse environment such as a full-service school, but caution is needed regarding its use. According to Algozzine and Anderson (2007), the priority "… to the teacher who differentiates is providing a learning environment and opportunities that exclude no child" (p. 50). As the teacher presents the content in varying levels of complexity to reach learners of specific cognitive abilities (Subban, 2006), learners of different abilities should also be kept busy with a task that is at their level. For example, a learner with high functioning autism may excel in Mathematics, but this does not mean that the teacher should prepare tasks for that child alone, but less challenging tasks should be given to others who may not be that good at Mathematics at the same time. This way, all learners are kept engaged in the way that suits their abilities. Certainly, as Sen (1993) recommends, learners should be allowed to choose the appropriate tasks for themselves. In this sense, the capability of learning can be granted to all learners with freedom of choice being given, which is consistent with inclusive education and the capability approach. Thus, inclusive education is practiced by teaching to the benefit of all learners (Stubbs, 2008) and can be achieved by differentiated instruction, while the capability approach advocates for learners to be free to choose their learning style within the differentiated learning process.

In relation to ensuring that all learners remain engaged in classroom activities, it is important to remember that autistic learners are sensitive to slight changes. As has been covered so far,

differentiating teaching methods and activities to address the range of learners' needs is a useful strategy in the context of an inclusive environment. However, moving from one activity to another may be uncomfortable for autistic persons, such as in the case of doing presentations straight after a drawing exercise. It was found in all three schools that teachers regularly encountered this challenge, and they have had to devise ways to prevent learner anxiety. It takes relatively more time for a teacher to convince a learner with autism to participate in an activity, and to explain the steps than it does with other children. Likewise, two of the Full-service school teacher indicated that learners with autism:

> *"need more time…* and *… clear limited choices."* (FST2)

> *"their capacity and character is not the same day by day"* (FST1)

The latter comment also highlights that it is always likely for autistic persons to change their behaviour unexpectedly. This is because of the underdeveloped language and communication skills that these learners have (Timmons et al., 2006) and are easily overwhelmed by many instructions given in a short time. If teachers do this explaining during the lesson, other children might be disengaged while the learner with autism is being assisted individually. Some of the participants have practical strategies to ensure that all their learners keep participating, and these are detailed below.

FST2 further indicated that when giving instructions, she uses:

> *"simple concrete language."*

Other participants from the other schools provided their own views and strategies:

> *"The first thing is you need to scaffold the learning because of the inattention… they also want to know exactly what's going to happen in this lesson… you need to explain the reason why this specific task and this specific lesson is important."* (MT1)

> *"I also teach LOE, which is like PE… the autistic kids are not necessarily team players, and if you were to force them to be there, it would be a challenge. They would tend to shy away and, you would be like that's fine, do these exercises because you do need to get some exercise, but if you don't want to play soccer, that's fine"* (MT2)

Getting exercise is the desired outcome, but seeing that learners have different personalities, the teacher allows the learners to choose their way towards that end. This resonates well with Sen's (1993) idea that there should be a variety of options for achieving well-being, and the choice of the best one should be on the person whose needs are being addressed.

Most learners with autism best understand visually represented instructions and therefore benefit from the use of observable prompts, it should also be noted that a substantial amount of all learners are visual learners (Murphy, Gray, Straja & Bogert, 2004). This implies that using visual aids in a diverse class does not only benefit learners with autism, but also provides an alternative means of acquiring knowledge to others as well. More than half of the teachers shared the opinion that whether learners can be negatively impacted by being in a class with individuals with behavioural challenges depends largely on the conduct of teachers. In the case of those with autism, the discussions centre on the best ways to use visual prompts and other means to encourage the learners to participate in learning activities while keeping the whole class engaged. A key practice one of the mainstream teachers indicated, is to communicate with the entire class that some learners understand better when hand signals are used. The teachers also make it a point to explain the meaning of each visual prompt clearly to the entire class because:

> *"it is not a strategy that's just used on one kid… it's a strategy that's used for everybody, and that sense of consistency makes that young person feel included."* (MT1)

Another strategy that MT1 uses is to tell other learners about the communication differences and preferences of learners with autism:

> *"I find that if the other learners in the school do not necessarily know the diagnosis, but know of the curiosities of the individual, then it is quite often that you find a little bit of bullying takes place… in terms of saying this kid is this or this kid is diagnosed with that, I refrain from that, but I do speak openly about the young person's mannerisms."*

This is important because all learners come to know each other and respect differences, which reduces chances of bullying based on not understanding that the other person is not rude, but just different.

**Emerging themes from interviews**

As stated in the methodology section, there was a generative element in the study, allowing themes of interest and concern to be added by the teachers onto those that were already pre-determined. These were issues that the participants felt should have been of importance to the current study and that affected their experiences in teaching learners with autism in regular settings, especially those participants that were already in the mainstream environment. Below is an account of each of the emergent codes:

**Parental involvement**

One issue that was raised by almost all the respondents had to do with the lack of knowledge about ASD among parents, and the challenges it leads to. FST3 suggested that this study would be more helpful if it focused on

> *"parental involvement"* for parents *"who have ASD learners, how do we support them to assist their children at home?"*

Parental involvement benefits the child significantly because the sharing of information between parents and teachers can lead to more coordinated approaches to supporting an autistic child. In this regard, Pivik, McComas and Laflamme (2002) assert that a key consideration in assessing whether a school is inclusive is learning the experiences of parents of children with impairments, who attend the school under study. Though the parents themselves were not interviewed, the participating teachers detailed the results of their interactions with parents of the children with autism in their respective schools. What came out prominently among the teachers' experiences in both the mainstream and special school sectors was noticing a tendency by parents to deny the diagnosis of autism in their children. Additionally, some parents who know and have accepted medical diagnoses of autism simply chose not to disclose to teachers that their children are living with ASD. For instance, MT1 indicated that:

> *"we often find denial …, and we often find a situation where parents, I would say, even feel embarrassed."*

A few reasons for this lack of transparency were discussed by the participants, confirming some existing hypotheses found in research. In most indigenous African communities, there are negative stereotypes about disability, and this leads parents to either try to hide from their communities that their children live with autism or completely refuse to accept that their child is different (Gona et al., 2016). Though public stigma is a serious problem, teacher involvement should be understood and communicated to parents as in the best interests of the child, therefore transparency is advisable. Simple logic dictates that a problem not admitted is a problem allowed to become worse, and MT2 expressed frustration over the lack of transparency from parents, saying:

> *"if I know then I can help. It can still be confidential because, as a teacher, we can be confidential, but it's just slight things that can set somebody off."*

Likewise, FST1 mentioned that one of the problems that make it difficult to teach learners with autism is:

> *"... lack of support from parents"*

Another reason for parents to collaborate with teachers highlights the need to keep track of the home environment so that the school environment does not deviate too far from it as to cause disruptions in the routine of ASD learners. In order to bridge the separation between people with autism and their communities, members of the community should be educated about the disorder along so that attitudes of intolerance and abuse can be eradicated. Cardon and Marshall (2020) echoed similar sentiments upon discovering that many of the negative stereotypes about autism compound the already difficult task of raising a child who behaves significantly different from their peers. Suffice to say, teachers come from the same communities that stigmatise people with disabilities like autism, so it is crucial to ensure that their negative attitudes are changed so that they do not give different treatment to different learners. As highlighted above, teachers need to share ideas with parents about raising and teaching children with autism, and without adequate knowledge and training, teachers remain incapable of meeting this obligation (Ravet, 2018). It is thus, recommended by government that all role players directly involved in teaching and learning be given vital information relating to any form of disability that a child may have to enable them "… to work effectively with learners." (Department of Education, 2010, p. 31). Teachers need information about the areas of difficulty where children struggle to plan their lessons and utilise strategies that address the needs that they are aware of. Without such knowledge, classroom

activities may be excluding some learners because vital information was withheld by parents, leaving teachers unaware of their needs. In essence, transparency between teachers and parents of learners with autism leads to better chances of effective educational provision geared towards the needs of individual children. With that said, school leadership should facilitate the creation of an atmosphere of collaboration and safe platforms in which parents are free to share their challenges with the teachers of their children.

In African communities particularly, incorrect stories about witchcraft being the cause of disability, and blame being assigned to the parents for not taking proper care for their children also contribute to parents being secretive about their child's diagnosis (Guler et al., 2018). There is a dearth of information and research about identification of children with autism and also in documenting the experiences of South African parents in raising ASD children as shown by Cardon and Marshall's (2020) literature review. If the community is not taught about autism, little change will be seen in the lives of individuals living with the disorder. This calls for research to be directed at informing people across South Africa of the true origins of autism that are informed by sound scientific research, rather than baseless assumptions. Moreover, research involving parents can also be helpful in encouraging other parents by sharing experiences and ideas of how to be there for their children living with ASD.

**Comparison of skills-based and content-based curricular**

An important consideration for the inclusion of learners with autism is whether the aim is to prioritise their social development, or to focus on academic outcomes. Some teachers and researchers prefer special autism schools because they focus more on communication and practical skills, rather than an academic curriculum. The reasoning for this is that an academic curriculum adds the burden to an already challenging task which is social interaction. One of the special educators (SE2) made a similar comment about the use of a mainstream curriculum for learners with autism, indicating that it is too academic and therefore does not cater to their need for better social interaction. For instance, SE1 argued that:

> *"They* (ASD learners) *can't even do A B C D, they don't know because mainstream is mostly academic, and these kids you would rather prepare them for a skills background."*

School is ultimately a preparation for adulthood, and the need for employment is important and inevitable, but to limit a child to a 'skills curriculum' because they are autistic is a denial of their right to choose their own career. Careers are pathways to well-being, and well-being is authentic if it goes with freedom of choice, rather than being imposed with limited options (Saito, 2003). Sen (2014) asserts that "greater freedom enhances the ability of people to help themselves and also to influence the world, and these issues are central to the process of development" (p. 528). It is imperative then, to always evaluate the curricula made available in terms of whether they encourage freedom of choice or limit the choices of learners. Allan (2010) argues that learners who are sent to special schools are relegated to a watered-down curriculum under the assumption that they are unable to cope with the mainstream curriculum. The data gathered does show that the mainstream curriculum is believed to be the reason why learners with autism should not be placed in mainstream schools, SE2 (a special educator) and FST2 (from the full-service school) expressed similar views on this issue:

> SE2: *"there is a different mainstream curriculum. It's a challenge to transfer them… I don't recommend learners with autism to be in mainstream."*

FST2's response goes on to clarify how the mainstream curriculum is not ideal for learners with autism:

> *"… learners with autism stick to routine and repetitive activities, whereas mainstream activities and education are speedier and have a huge scope."*

These two statements highlight a notable cause of exclusion, which the curriculum used in mainstream schools. True as it might be that some students with autism are unable to cope with a curriculum based on rapid content coverage and limited time, the decision to transfer them to special schools goes against the aims of inclusivity and the upholding of education as a human right and the capability approach. What inclusive education proposes is that educational systems must be restructured to respond to the needs of learners, which directly contrasts the model of special education, in which learners who could not fit into a rigid curriculum were sent to special schools (Stubbs, 2008). Simply put, if the learner's personal characteristics do not fit the school curriculum, the curriculum must be modified to respond to the needs of all learners. In essence, inclusion of learners with autism in mainstream schools requires a flexible curriculum, and this requirement is also applicable to any needs that may arise as schools become more diverse

(UNESCO, 1994) and fits within the definition of inclusion this study is adapting. Unfortunately, in South Africa, schools do not respond to this need, as was observed even in the full-service school which still works with a rigid curriculum. One of the participants in this school indicated that:

> *"Learners with autism in a mainstream school will definitely not benefit… learners with autism stick to routine, and repetitive activities, whereas mainstream activities and education are speedier and have a huge scope"* (FST3)

On the contrary, one participant from the private school (MT1) saw being taught with a content-based mainstream curriculum as advantageous, the reason being that:

> *"It is about full participation alongside the fact that the young person then can fully participate in all the activities, it also helps them to socially integrate."*

This response describes social integration as a component of the mainstream curriculum, which differs from the comments above in which other teachers suggest that curriculum development for a mainstream (or full-service) school equates to prioritising content over social inclusion. MT1 demonstrates knowledge of inclusive education as a process of all-round reform in which all aspects of exclusion are addressed, and had a few examples of good results produced by this holistic approach:

> *"We had a young person that came here at an advanced age already, and we had to physically get him from the dark corners of the buildings every now and then... It took a year and a half for him to start talking, and then we couldn't have him quiet, and then by the end of matric year he stood up and made a little speech in front of the whole school."*

In this example, the learner made significant improvements in communication; a social skill which other teachers in this study believe is unlikely to develop in a mainstream school. One thing to pick out in the narrative above is that the teacher does not attribute the success to personal effort, but to the work of the collective staff, as indicated by the repeated use of the word 'we'. This is how inclusive education can be exemplified, it begins with the belief that any child can learn despite being impaired in some way. The Salamanca Statement and the efforts of inclusion that stemmed from it are anchored on this premise that "... every child has unique characteristics, interests and abilities and learning needs" (UNESCO, 1994, p. 6), and that they have a right to

education that caters to their unique needs. This kind of education cannot be achieved without the collaborative action of all stakeholders; indeed, it requires such a team effort as was demonstrated in the above example. When all teachers in a school work together along with other non-teaching staff, children with autism that would otherwise be seen as incapable of participating meaningfully can achieve satisfactory results (Causton-Theoharis et al., 2011a). With regards to whether learners with autism should be taught with a subject specific curriculum or a skills-based curriculum, the answer that stands true for promoting inclusive education is that a flexible curriculum that covers both bases is needed. The need for a flexible curriculum to aid in the placement of learners with disabilities in mainstream schools was already proposed in 1994 as part of the United Nations Standard Rules for the equalisation of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities (United Nations Disabled Persons Unit, 1994). If implemented across the country, this principle will set a different course for educators in mainstream schools; shifting them from the medical model mindset of finding a curriculum that learners with autism can fit into, to changing existing curriculum practices to complement the learner's personality and needs.

Education prepares youngsters for adulthood, and Althusser (2006) argues that the arrangement of schools is reproduced in society so that it can be controlled by those in power. Dismantling this order in society can, therefore, be started in school, which is a crucial platform on which a tolerant society can be established. The values that are taught in school can stay with children as they grow up, leading to a transformed society. Additionally, the assertion that autistic learners should be channeled towards a skills background makes an erroneous assumption that there are enough professional opportunities for them to gain. If this were the case, most people with autism would easily find employment. The reality, on the global scale, is that "underemployment of individuals with ASD is an international phenomenon" (Taylor & Seltzer, 2011, p. 566). The exact proportions of young adults with autism in South Africa however, remains unknown due to the lack of research covering this issue in the local context. Meiring et al., (2016) do provide insight into the difficulty of South African adolescents with ASD transitioning into general society and the work environment through their study involving parents of adolescents living with ASD. The findings of that study show that the transition from school to the working environment and broader society is a difficult one, and involves anxiety on the side of parents, as well as their children.

The argument holds true that the reason for this difficulty is that the environments that these young people with autism move into during adolescence are overwhelmingly different from what they are accustomed to. Inclusive education seeks to eradicate discrimination in society using schools as the platform to develop positive attitudes starting with children at an early age. An effective way to deal with this difficulty for people with autism moving between school and work can be solved by aligning the goals of both institutions with one another and upholding the same values across the nation. Griffiths and Prozesky (2020) rightly recommend that South Africa needs to clearly describe the society that it envisages and work through all the country's institutions towards its realization.

**Continuous development of teachers**

Challenges in the learning environment change regularly, which and teachers should be trained continuously to respond appropriately. Though education helps teachers to know the theoretical aspect of teaching, most of their practical skills are developed through classroom practice as this is where the true nature of the education system is experienced. Guler et al. (2018) share this view, and state that the environmental factors that exist in schools guide teachers into effective approaches. This view was expressed by many of the participants who credited their teaching abilities to lessons gained in the field, over those they attained while pursuing their respective teaching qualifications. Below are quotations of how one teacher from each of the schools visited highlighted the development of skills that comes with classroom experience of teaching learners with autism:

MT2: *"I taught in private schools, and I taught in public schools, and I taught in public schools in in very poor socio-economic environments… I think that has made me realise there is so many differences in each child in each class."*

SE1: *"I learned more here than I learned at university… I have worked here for eleven years if I don't count this year. I did inclusive education in honours but also, I was a high school teacher at grade 8 to matric, but then I went to a special school. I've got the experience; the experience helps a lot… It's an ongoing thing, you learn all the time."*

FST1: *"Teaching is a labour of love and tolerance, as a teacher I must build a good relationship with all my learners. National policies contributed positively on inclusion to*

*my abilities because workshops were organised to implement development to my teaching skills."*

Out of all 7 participants, only FST1 reported to have been directly equipped by national policies, directly singling out the EWP6 as a positive influence:

*"National policies contributed positively on inclusion to my abilities because workshops were organised to implement development to my teaching skills."*

This shows that the teachers are not influenced to a great degree by the inclusive education policy in the country, which may be taken to confirm that the Education White Paper 6 is not tailored for the context in which they teach (Donohue & Bornman, 2014). With regards to the question of how the EWP6 has contributed to teachers' abilities to cater for learners with autism, the obvious deduction from this study is that there has been virtually no notable influence that this policy is making to teaching and learning in schools. Experience in schools has made teachers aware of the realities that exist in the education system. As has been discussed, the teachers count experience as the foremost source of improvement of their knowledge and teaching practices concerning learners with autism. The significance of classroom experience is well established, but a policy is still a vital component transforming an education system recovering from a history of systematic exclusion, hence the need to align the inclusive education policies to local problems and objectives.

Though it is true that experience develops teaching expertise, teachers should not have to wait until they get into the working environment to know for themselves how to teach. This is where the guidance of experienced teachers becomes vital for the development of upcoming educators. Government can partner up with universities to facilitate information sharing and workshops where vastly experienced teachers can train education students in preparation for working in schools of varying contexts and levels of diversity. Florian (2012) observed that the attitudes of new teachers can be significantly impacted by receiving guidance from seasoned professionals early in their career, and a change in attitude makes way for a host of positive changes in teaching approaches (Swart et al., 2002). Information sharing can also be done among experienced teachers to improve on strategies they already have, thereby avoiding the stagnation of personal improvement caused by thinking that any amount of experience makes it unnecessary to learn more.

Besides teaching strategies that teachers use in their respective lessons, another interesting point raised by two of the participants had to do with collaboration between the teachers themselves. This cooperation seeks to unify the whole school environment as one community with the same awareness of autism and which works together to assist ASD learners in their school life. Ironically, both teachers who mentioned the need for this awareness and assistance to be shared with colleagues suggested it as a way to make mainstream schools more welcoming to learners with autism, despite one of them being in a special school. The special educator explained that upon joining a mainstream school, the onus would be upon him to provide knowledge to colleagues in any mainstream setting he found himself working in about the educational characteristics and needs of learners with autism.

> ***"****I have to teach those other* (typically developing) *learners about autism, so that they understand the nature of these learners* (with autism) *... to avoid discrimination. The other teachers, I will also develop them because at the end they won't be in my class only... the whole school will understand."*

Though this comes from someone within a special education setting, it is a statement that properly reflects inclusive education, which is also known as a "whole school approach" (Lipsky & Gartner, 2012, p. 14). In such an approach, all who share the school environment work hand in hand to make vital information about impairments available and teach others how to assist rather than harm learners with disabilities. To exemplify this, the other educator who works in a mainstream school stated that he and his colleagues were already using the whole school approach to train one another as teaching staff to respond positively to the needs and challenges of their ASD learners. The educator explains that they as the school staff meet frequently to identify learners with disabilities and that they share experiences on how particular learners behave in the classroom and can be approached:

> *"This is something that we try to do as staff consistently, and it's to have a single hand gesture to indicate to the young person that he or she must have a breath now and let the others answer as well."*

The staff here take a schoolwide approach to including learners with autism in mainstream schools, which should also be done in assistance to any learners that need support. Uniformity of interaction is a specific variable that, if handled well, can have a bearing on whether learners can be

successfully included. As noted throughout this thesis, people with autism are sensitive to change, as such, visual prompts and aids that are used for them by different teachers must be similar, and the response above demonstrates this understanding. If the same message is communicated in different ways as the child moves between teachers, they are highly likely to become overwhelmed, which might result in loss of concentration and anxiety. If one teacher implements a technique for accommodation of learners with autism and others are not aware of it, the impact on the child will be confusion, and this highlights the importance of having all members of the school environment working together for the same objective of full participation for all learners. One thing to note here is that there is no use of sophisticated technology or any kind of resource to make accommodations for the child, but only teachers collaborating. Causton-Theoharis et al. (2011) argue that true commitment to inclusion does not need sufficient resources to start but can begin with the little resources that the school has. As resources are lacking in South African schools, coordinated improvisation remains the key to efforts to include learners with disabilities.

Autism research in general is alarmingly lacking in South Africa, but even more alarming is the shortage of educational research that is aligned to the local context. This further proves that the government has been slack in working towards its goals for inclusion. Furthermore, funds that are allocated by government come with specific mandates and are mainly dedicated to studies in the natural sciences, with human science research seen as less important (Nind, 2014). More early identification studies on autism have been conducted in recent years in South Africa, but there is still a slower development in the area of developing teaching strategies for learners with autism (de Vries, 2016). Research funds should be directed towards the development of teaching approaches to complement the identification efforts because the end goal for inclusive education is not only to make figures known but to provide high quality education to all people.

# Chapter 5: Conclusion and Recommendations for further research

This section of the dissertation reflects on the discussion and gathers findings from it that provides answers to the research questions. Since the study also had emergent themes based on the responses and recommendations of the respondents, discussions about these are added to the primary findings and collectively used to make recommendations for dealing with the highlighted problems relating to the education of learners with autism, and the broader discussion of inclusive education in South Africa. The three questions of the thesis are rephrased into headings under which related findings are stated and elaborated on, with the first question being addressed first.

## Main Research Question

How has South Africa's inclusive education policy been influential in improving the abilities of teachers to teach learners with autism in two mainstream schools and one special school in Gauteng?

Knowledge of the policy was noted across the sample of interviewees, as all but one of the teachers indicated that they knew that the EWP6 is the main South African policy for the education of learners with disabilities. However, most of the teachers indicated that their knowledge of the policy was vague and distant, rather than informing their present work. It became increasingly clear that most the teachers last came across the EWP6 during their tertiary education. This showed that the precepts of this policy were not being implemented at the classroom level, thereby confirming that the EWP6 remains, in significant ways, an untested policy. The findings of the study suggest that there are few possibilities for evaluating the effectiveness of the EWP6, because teachers have not been properly assisted with its implementation. Thus, the answer to the main question of how the EWP6 has impacted the teachers' abilities to teach inclusively suggests that such an impact is almost non-existent. The main contributing factor was found to be experience related to teaching learners with autism; it appears that teachers gain a great deal of knowledge and expertise from interacting with different learners over the years. Additionally, collaboration with one another and learning from more experienced colleagues helps teachers to gain new ways of ensuring that all their learners participate fully in the classroom.

The significant effects of collaboration between teachers in a school helps to develop their school into an inclusive community of shared practices. This can be expanded beyond the local school level, into the district, and ultimately the national level, thereby reaching the ultimate goal of transforming the whole education system. This can be done through implementing plans that are already drawn up in the EWP6 (Department of Education, 2001) of facilitating the exchange of skills between teachers in special and mainstream schools within the same district. If workshops involving team teaching can be conducted within individual districts where teachers unify their skills, it can be possible to come up with a flexible national curriculum which would support learners with autism develop social skills and improve academic performance, along with non-autistic learners. The stagnation of the impact of inclusive education policy observed in this study is that the development of South African special education schools and mainstream schools are treated as isolated objectives. Common goals that cover all schools can be the solution in that all schools would be reproducing the same desired inclusive society.

### Sub-question 1

Do teachers see teaching autistic learners alongside typically developing children as the best way to ensure meaningful learning for them?

Teacher attitudes towards the inclusion of learners with autism was found to be influenced by their school environments. The data showed that teachers in the special autism school were more opposed to the inclusion of learners with autism than their counterparts in the two mainstream schools. The mainstream teachers, to a large extent, saw the mainstream school environment as the right place for learners with autism to attain the best educational outcomes, but most of them still feel unfit to teach those learners alongside typically developing children. There is, therefore, a need to boost the confidence levels of these teachers, and skills development is an effective way in which positive attitudes can be fostered. Government, through district support teams, can consult teachers with positive experience on teaching learners with autism and perhaps take them around the district to train teachers who are relatively new to the field. Besides in-service training, tertiary institutions should be given a mandate of teaching education students about inclusive education and the national policies concerned. The reason why teachers graduate knowing little about inclusive instruction may be that they have little exposure to it in their undergraduate degree. However, more research would be needed to determine this. More information about teaching

diverse learner populations can be integrated into the various specialisations, so that all teachers feel the responsibility towards impaired learners and are equipped to teach learners of any character, background, and ability.

### Sub-question 2

Is the Education White Paper 6 a sufficient guide for the realisation of inclusive education in South Africa?

While there is evidently a lack of implementation of the EWP6, there is still a basis on which to assess the potential of the policy to produce an inclusive education system if implemented. The policy analysis done in this dissertation gives insight into the authenticity of the policy's description of how inclusive education is to be developed in South Africa. Using the capability approach and educational research mainly developed locally, with some international legislation and studies, the EWP6 was scrutinised extensively. The main finding of the policy analysis had to do with how the role of classroom teachers is represented in the EWP6. The articulation of the teachers' role throughout the policy appears to commodify them and make them instruments with which inclusive education can be achieved. The crux of this articulation was most notably seen in the following quotation from the policy: "classroom educators will be our primary resource for achieving our goal of an inclusive education and training system" (Department of Education, 2001, p. 18). Teachers are referred to here in a subordinate tense as a resource for the actualisation of a goal that is not theirs, as the statement affirms through the phrase 'our goal' that inclusion belongs to the developers of the policy. This has potentially fostered an attitude of excessive dependence of teachers on government as they are treated as resources of the government, instead of being respected partners with all stakeholders in the education system. The recommendation is that teachers should be given more agency and allowed to develop their own teaching strategies with guidance from the policy.

Furthermore, teachers interviewed did not provide many clear strategies that they use to assist learners with autism, but those that they did provide can be useful in guiding other teachers and for guiding policy reform efforts. Policies govern the progress of educational activities, but they should not necessarily give detailed and limiting ways of teaching which teachers must follow.

Thus, the expectation that teachers should find out how to teach learners with autism in the Education White Paper 6 goes against true inclusion because the policy becomes a limitation. From the conceptions of the capability approach that were outlined throughout this thesis, freedom remains the key idea of well-being achievement, and if the policy told teachers exactly how to teach, there would be no room for them to develop their own strategies. What the policy serves to do is to be clear on what the goals are, and how teachers will know that they are on the right path towards inclusion, but the strategies that they use can be developed independently, depending on the needs and interests of their learners.

## Limitations

This study was subject to a few limitations, the first of which was time allocation; being in fulfilment of a Master's degree, the time limit was just over a year for the project to be completed. This confines the research to making findings that are current, without reflecting on changes as time goes, hence it might be seen that the conditions in the field in a few years might change so dramatically as to render the study outdated. However, the findings here can be used as a good foundation on which other scholars can expand their knowledge. Also, the lockdown conditions and the threat of the Covid-19 pandemic over the past year made it very difficult to obtain permission to conduct interviews in a few other schools in the Gauteng province. While this is a qualitative study and the sample size small having perhaps more schools in different areas of the province would have increased the data range.

Another limitation was that in the full-service school, it took a long time even with permission to conduct interviews. Due to having to recover lost time from the hard lockdown, the principal insisted that there was no time for teachers to be interviewed as they were busy with planning and teaching. Seeing that there would be a loss of time while waiting for an appointment to be set, the teachers in this school were given the printed interview questions to fill out in their spare time and return after a few days. Consequently, the responses from this school were less elaborate than those in the other two schools. To compensate, the option was left open to go back to the teachers and ask for more clarity in case any of the responses they gave was to some extent unclear. This was not necessary. Lastly, teachers' teaching strategies were central to the dissertation, yet it was not

possible to receive permission to sit in the classroom and observe them teach due to the Coronavirus regulations. Ultimately, the teachers' word of mouth is all that could be relied upon in terms of how they teach, leaving little room for the researcher's observational assessment to be applied.

## Recommendations for Future Research

In future, similar questions about teaching learners with autism in the inclusive classroom and its relationship with policy can be done on a larger scale. This could be done in comparing different districts in the same province to see how teachers are assisted and trained differently, and ultimately to compare teacher expertise in the wealthy provinces of the country such as Gauteng and the Western Cape with less advantaged provinces. With this information government can then facilitate the advancement of teacher training and resource provision to disadvantaged communities. Moreover, information pertaining to accurate statistics of the prevalence of autism in South Africa is needed to get a clearer picture of the incidence of the disorder in the country. Importantly, such studies should be made available to the public to also raise awareness. It would also help if the studies involved health professionals and other stakeholders, so that all fields can work in closer collaboration towards improving the education of learners with disabilities.

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# Appendix

## Appendix A

Interview Questions (ASD school)

1. How would you define autism spectrum disorder? In your description, please identify some of the signs that may indicate that a child may be autistic.

   _____

   _____

   _____

2. What advantages, if any, can an autistic learner gain from being taught in a mainstream school alongside other learners with and without disabilities?

   _____

   _____

   _____

3. Are you familiar with the EWP6 on special needs education? How has it informed or directed your efforts to teach learners with autism?

   _____

   _____

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4. In your opinion, did your tertiary education give enough attention to inclusive education policies such as the Education White Paper 6 and the education of learners with disabilities such as autism in mainstream schools?

   _____

   _____

   .

5. Are you confident in your abilities to attend to the needs of learners with autism? How do you think your confidence and ability levels would be affected if you taught them (ASD learners) in a mainstream school?

   _____

   _____.

6. Does your school send learners with autism to mainstream schools once they have significantly improved their social and communication skills or do they remain in special education for the full extent of their basic education? In your opinion, should this transition be made?

   _____

   _____.

7. What diagnostic tools does the school apply in identifying leaners to be autistic? Is the diagnosis made by medical practitioners or does the school conduct its own analysis?

   _____

   _____.

8. Do you think it is best to teach learners with autism in mainstream schools or special schools? Please explain your choice.

   _____

   _____.

9. What challenges have you encountered in teaching learners with autism?

   _____

   _____.

10. Do you have any issues that you feel this interview did not cover that should be part of the study?

    _____

    _____.

## Appendx B

**Interview Questions for Mainstream teachers**

1. How would you define Autism Spectrum Disorder? In your description, please identify some of the signs that a child may be autistic.

   _____

   _____

   _____

   _____

2. What advantages can an autistic learner gain from being taught in a mainstream school alongside other learners with and without disabilities?

_____
_____
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3. Are you familiar with the Education White Paper 6 on Special Needs Education? How has it informed or directed your efforts to teach learners with autism in a mainstream school?

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4. In your opinion, did your tertiary education give enough attention to inclusive education policies such as the Education White Paper 6 and the education of learners with disabilities such as autism in mainstream schools?

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5. Do you have any learners with autism in any of your classes? How many are they and what are their genders?

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6. Are you confident in your abilities to attend to the needs of all learners in light of various differences that exist in classroom environments? (Differences include race, cultural background, and socio-economic challenges). What is your greatest source of motivation for successful inclusion of learners with ASD?

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7. Are autistic learners in your school taught in the same classrooms as learners who are not autistic? If any separate instruction is made, what does this entail?

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8. What pedagogical strategies do you use to ensure meaningful participation of learners with autism in the inclusive classroom?

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9. Do the strategies you employ in supporting learners with ASD involve the affected children only or do they coincide with efforts to sensitize non-ASD children to issues relating to the disorder?

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10. Do you think it is best to teach learners with autism in mainstream schools or special schools? Please explain your choice.

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11. What challenges have you encountered in teaching learners with autism?

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12. How have national policies on inclusion contributed to your ability to teach learners with autism? If yes, how? If no. what would you say needs to be implemented in policy and practice?

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