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# Challenges encountered: A Qualitative analysis of professionals' lived experiences in the field of autism

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## Abstract

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) significantly impacts American families, requiring substantial support from professionals in the field. This qualitative study explores the experiences of nine professionals in the ASD field using a phenomenological framework. Four main themes emerged from the analysis: 1) Service Delivery Constraints, 2) Knowledge Limitations, 3) Professional Adaptation, and 4) Future Directions. These findings illuminate the unique challenges professionals face in service delivery and their roles within the autism field. The study provides practical and scholarly insights based on real-life experiences, benefiting professionals, scholars, and families with children with autism.

**Keywords**: Autism Spectrum Disorder, Professionals, Services, Scholars, Families

## Introduction

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) diagnoses have been on the rise, with changes in diagnostic guidelines contributing to the increase (Neggers, 2014). Individuals with ASD commonly face challenges in social and behavioral skills (CDC, 2023). Seeking guidance from professionals is common among parents to support their children, especially due to the complexities of the diagnosis and available services.

ASD affects all communities, with higher diagnosis rates observed in Black, Hispanic, and Asian communities as well as lower-income neighborhoods (CDC, 2020). These communities often encounter additional barriers compared to white and high-income households, emphasizing the need for better resources and support.

Parents of children with ASD face significant economic burdens, including increased medical expenses, approximately $4,000 to $6,000 more on medical bills per year compared to parents without a diagnosed child, and costly specialized behavioral interventions, ranging from $40,000 to $60,000 per child per year, with inconsistent insurance coverage (CDC, 2020; Cidav, et al., 2013).

Professionals play a critical role in supporting individuals and families affected by ASD, from diagnosis to navigating the complex service system. However, there are noticeable gaps in their training, impacting the quality and effectiveness of service delivery.

This article aims to explore the lived experiences of professionals in the autism community, including medical and behavioral specialists, educators, and researchers. The goal is to investigate gaps in the literature, understand professionals' perceptions, and examine their experiences. By engaging with professionals and understanding their perspectives, this research identifies gaps in services and professional knowledge, benefiting the ASD community and enhancing professionals' confidence in their respective fields.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC, 2023), one in 36 children has autism, and this prevalence continues to rise. In this section, we will discuss the roles of professionals in providing services to individuals with autism, including those in fields such as early intervention, social work, education, disability services, occupational therapy, and speech-language pathology. While many educational programs prepare these professionals to adhere to specific standards set by their respective accreditation councils and require licensure to practice, there are no explicit requirements for comprehensive autism-related education. Professionals such as occupational therapists (OTs) acquire this knowledge through continuing education and practical experience under the mentorship of experienced OTs in the field (Abu-Dahab et al., 2022; Ashburner et al., 2014; Kadar et al., 2012; Kadar et al., 2015).

Additional examples include the initial training for speech and language therapists (SLPs), OTs, psychologists, nurses, and other allied health and medical professionals, which may consist of only one to three hours of lectures. In contrast, most qualifying courses for social workers and teachers offer no autism-specific training, placing the responsibility on professionals to seek competence through continuing education after entering the field (Dillenburger et al., 2016).

Social workers play a role in improving the services for adults and children with ASD. While many healthcare providers operate within the medical model of disability which focuses on treating symptoms, social workers utilize a social model, emphasizing the person-environment relationship (Haney & Cullen, 2018). This difference in treatment approach makes social workers equipped to respond to the diverse needs of individuals with ASD.

Social workers advocate for patient accommodations in education, work, and everyday life settings, further enhancing the support provided, for example, within education, they ensure parents and interdisciplinary partners expand their knowledge of ASD and prevent the dissemination of misinformation (Haney & Cullen, 2018).

Inclusive education is imperative for children and youth with autism, as education is a human right and essential for future job opportunities. However, educators often lack knowledge and hold stereotypical beliefs about autism, which can hinder inclusive practices (Al Jaffal, 2022). Misconceptions about autism, such as attributing it to poor parenting, can impact the teacher-parent relationship and student-teacher interactions. Providing more structure, predictability, explicit direction in tasks, and classroom management through special education classrooms can benefit children with ASD (Al Jaffal, 2022). Supportive services can vary depending on factors such as education level, school type, size, cost, and location (Kim, 2021). Disability services offer knowledge and perceptions of students with ASD, as well as the overall attitudes and acceptance within educational institutions, which greatly impact the effectiveness and supportiveness of programs (Kim, 2021).

Occupational therapy (OT) is a service commonly accessed by individuals with autism, as it offers a holistic perspective on their strengths and needs. OTs collaborate with individuals and their families to establish specific goals, facilitating meaningful daily activities and community engagement. Additionally, OTs engage in group and population-focused advocacy to promote integration and community acceptance (AOTA, 2022; Yingling & Bell, 2020).

Individuals with autism exhibit distinct sensory responses, as recognized by the DSM-5 TR criteria. These responses can impact various aspects of daily life, including social engagement, academic performance, and community participation (APA, 2022; Jones et al., 2020). Occupational therapists are acknowledged as experts in addressing sensory processing differences (Watling & Hauer, 2015; Weaver, 2015).

Speech and language therapy is one of the most frequently accessed interventions for children with suspected or diagnosed autism for communication difficulties, through Speech language Pathologist's (SLP's) role in screening, assessment, and intervention of the referred children they may be the first to encounter individuals with autism (Philofsky, 2008; Binns et al., 2020). Through early intervention services SLP's provide imperative patient specific treatment for communication delays. Treatment is usually specific to finding the best modality to help with the expression of language or understanding social cues and rules. Research suggests that language development and social communications skills are key factors in predicting long-term outcomes for children with ASD (Sturrock et al., 2022).

In collaboration with OTs and nutritionists, SLPs often are a part of a team addressing feeding issues. Feeding difficulties often exist and are most likely to include picky eating, limited independent feeding, need for increased feeding times, and a highly restrictive food repertoire (Philofsky, 2008).

Disparities in healthcare for individuals with ASD are evident, leading to unmet healthcare needs, frequent emergency room visits, and access barriers (Nicolaidis et al., 2014). Effective physician-patient communication is crucial for improved health outcomes (Nicolaidis et al., 2014). Accommodations in healthcare settings, such as using signals for breaks, providing warnings before procedures, and allowing extra time for information processing, can enhance service delivery (Nicolaidis et al., 2014).

In the education setting, accommodating the growing number of individuals with ASD is essential. The United Nations Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities calls for systemic education reform to provide equitable learning experiences for all students (Byrne, 2022). Strategies like behavioral and writing instructional strategies, as well as computer-based programs, have shown positive effects on school performance (Leifler et al., 2021). Peer-mediated and child-assisted interventions have also improved social skills and integration in general education classrooms (Kasari et al., 2012). Additionally, because professionals can be found providing specialized services in a variety of settings, the need for comprehensive training is highlighted to equip them with the competence to accommodate individuals with ASD.

## Materials and Methods

### *Research Design*

The research employed a phenomenological approach to qualitatively analyze interview data from professionals in the field of Autism. Rooted in a social constructivist paradigm, this method utilized phenomenological techniques to explore the experiences of professionals working with individuals diagnosed with ASD. In this paradigm, it's recognized that participants' realities are constructed through the interpretation of data from their lived experiences (Creswell, 1998).

Phenomenological methods were employed to identify and describe the subjective experiences of individuals who share a common phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). This approach emphasizes understanding the entirety of the experience and uncovering its core essence. By adopting this approach, participants in the study recalled and shared their collective experiences related to working with children and families impacted by ASD.

Ethical approval for the study was granted by the University's Institutional Review Board, and all participants provided signed informed consent. Qualitative researchers often collect data in natural settings where participants encounter the phenomenon, issue, or problem (Creswell, 2018). After confirming their consent, interviews were scheduled at mutually convenient times and locations. Recruitment for the study involved emails, flyers, and the snowball sampling method.

### *Sample*

The study employed convenience sampling and included nine professionals to facilitate a comprehensive exploration of the phenomenon. All nine professional participants were part of the study, selected from the pool of professionals in upstate New York engaged in Autism-related work. Participants were asked to disclose their educational background and socioeconomic status, with all reporting an upper-income level and holding college degrees.

In accordance with Creswell's recommendations (Creswell, 1998; Creswell & Poth, 2018) of having a minimum of three participants for adequate representation of the phenomenon, this study employed a convenience sampling method, ultimately selecting nine participants to facilitate an in-depth exploration of the subject. Recruitment occurred through community agencies and individuals with a known history of ASD-related work. The chosen sample was intentionally diverse in terms of backgrounds and experiences.

### *Data Collection*

Data collection for the study was conducted by the primary researcher, an assistant professor and a clinician experienced in phenomenological methods. Professionals agreed to at least one unstructured taped interview and a follow-up phone call to ensure credibility and verify the accuracy of identified themes. Researchers used member checks and triangulation to enhance credibility. The interview questions were designed to enable participants to recall and share their experiences and feelings about working with clients with ASD. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed upon completion of each interview. A follow-up check-in was scheduled within one week to verify the accuracy of participants' responses and gain a deeper understanding of the emerging themes.

Before the interviews, participants received a copy of the questions regarding their experiences working with clients with ASD. These questions served as triggers for the interview, ensuring that specific topics were discussed. Participants were encouraged to lead the conversation and discuss any other relevant experiences related to working with individuals with ASD.

To understand the impact of ASD on professionals, this study aimed to capture the lived experiences of professionals working in the field of autism. The analysis uncovered information related to constraints in service delivery, limited knowledge, professional adaptability, and future directions.

**Table 1**

*Interview Questions*

- Tell me about your role in providing services individuals with Autism?
- How many years in the field?
- Describe barriers in service delivery; what are the challenges in providing services to individuals with Autism?
- Tell me about the main supports needed for success for an individual impacted by Autism -parent involvement? -access to therapy?
- Describe the knowledge or training/s one needs to successfully deliver services to an individual with Autism.
- Any other needs?
- Tell me about the financial aspect of servicing individuals with Autism.
- What are the gaps in service delivery?
- How can we improve service delivery?
- What can we do to educate the public?
- Please describe the most common misconception you encounter in the field about Autism.

Note: This table lists the unstructured questions used to guide participants

### *Data Analysis*

The researcher employed a modified version of Moustakas' (1994) analytical method to analyze the phenomenological data. The process began with creating a comprehensive list of statements relevant to each participant's experience, known as "horizontalization," where all comments were treated equally. Next, non-overlapping and non-repetitive statements were identified, forming invariant horizons that captured the unique units of meaning within the participants' experiences. These invariant horizons were then organized into thematic clusters.

Subsequently, the researcher generated individual textural descriptions for each participant, which included verbatim excerpts from their interviews. Additionally, individual structural descriptions were formulated by drawing from both the individual textural descriptions and using imaginative variation to explore the phenomenon from different perspectives.

This comprehensive process resulted in the creation of a textural-structural description, encompassing the significance and essence of each participant's experience, including the invariant constituents and themes. Finally, the individual textural-structural descriptions were used to identify common themes shared by the majority of participants, leading to the development of a composite description that captured the core essence of the collective experience among all participants.

### *Trustworthiness*

To ensure trustworthiness in this research, multiple strategies were employed (Creswell & Poth, 2018). These strategies included researcher reflexivity, triangulation, member checks, prolonged engagement, and self-memoing. Each of these approaches contributed to the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the study's findings.

Researcher reflexivity played a pivotal role in this study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). It enabled the researcher to recognize and account for their perspectives, biases, and experiences. By acknowledging these factors, the researcher approached the study with an open mind, free from preconceived notions, and was better equipped to explore the participants' experiences without undue influence.

Triangulation is another essential method, aimed to enhance credibility (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This approach involved comparing data from multiple sources and perspectives. By cross-verifying the data obtained from participants with aggregate themes and comparing it with data collected by the researcher for qualitative analysis, the study sought to ensure consistency and reliability. It also encompassed comparing emerging themes with existing literature to identify areas of convergence and divergence.

Member checks were conducted to involve participants in the validation of themes and findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This step allowed participants to review and confirm the accuracy of the data interpretation. Member checks played a crucial role in ensuring that participants' voices and perspectives were faithfully represented in the study's findings, strengthening its credibility.

Prolonged engagement with participants was a strategy to establish trustworthiness (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Building rapport and trust with participants before conducting interviews allowed for the collection of in-depth and rich data. It fostered an environment in which participants felt comfortable sharing their experiences and emotions related to working with individuals with ASD.

Self-memoing, the practice of keeping reflective notes throughout the research process, contributed to transparency and accountability (Creswell & Poth, 2018). These memos documented the researcher's thoughts, feelings, and insights, providing an audit trail of decisions made during data analysis. They served as a valuable resource for maintaining reflexivity and tracking the evolution of themes and interpretations.

These trustworthiness strategies, encompassing reflexivity, triangulation, member checks, prolonged engagement, and self-memoing, collectively ensure the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the research findings. These rigorous approaches were implemented to accurately and comprehensively represent the experiences of professionals working with individuals with ASD.

## Results and Discussion

Four major themes emerged from the analysis of participant interview statements: Constraints on Service Delivery, Limited Knowledge, Professional Adaptability, and Future Directions.

### **Theme 1**: Constraints on Service Delivery

Professionals consistently highlighted the significant challenges and constraints associated with service delivery to individuals with autism. One prominent issue identified was the extensive waitlists for autism diagnoses and early intervention services. The professionals described the waitlists as excessively long, resulting in delays in accessing necessary support. A behavior specialist expressed frustration with the limited availability of professionals conducting autism diagnoses, resulting in extensive waitlists:

> I can tell you there aren't a lot of people that are willing to do that sort of autism diagnosis..., the waitlist is ridiculous. I made a referral to a local place and they are currently on an 8-month waiting list. But accessing services and then you throw in a waitlist... That's certainly a good enough reason for people to be like, Nope, I'm good.

The scarcity of providers and the impact of long waitlists were emphasized by professionals working directly with families and individuals on the autism spectrum. Unfortunately, both ends of the age spectrum encounter waitlists. Professionals in developmental pediatric practices highlighted the lengthy waitlists for early intervention services, which negatively affected access to crucial therapies such as speech.

"Early intervention services, families are waiting months, six months to get services so that a child may qualify for speech, but there are no speech pathologists to provide the services."

Also, participants expressed concerns about adults struggling to receive an autism diagnosis due to challenges and costs involved, potentially hindering their self-understanding and access to appropriate support.

> The waitlists are extreme. So having providers is hard. Getting an autism diagnosis as an adult is challenging and expensive, so many people have to decide. Is it worth it? What will the benefit be? And it's sad that many people could go their whole life without knowing a big part of who they are.

The shortage of providers and resources was a recurring theme in the interviews, with professionals noting the scarcity of teachers, professionals, and support staff. This shortage was not exclusive to the autism community but was observed on a national scale:

*"Right now, the main gaps are just staffing, honestly. Across the country, there aren't enough teachers, TAs, professionals, there aren't enough of everything."*

COVID-19 was identified as a contributing factor exacerbating the constraints on service delivery. The pandemic's impact on labor shortages and the restrictive regulations imposed on program development further limited options and creativity in providing services.

*"You know there's not enough people working with anyone nowadays. You know just the labor shortage in general because of COVID."*

*"Covid certainly you could add that to the barrier list too. Especially because some of our programs here are state regulated and with those regulations you can't really get creative and think out of the box, especially among programs."*

Moreover, the financial aspects of service delivery posed additional barriers. Professionals noted that high service expenses, coupled with inadequate insurance coverage, limited access to mental health resources, coping skills training, and therapies:

> I also think that resources as far as mental health and therapists can teach people coping skills and acceptance and how to really tap into and utilize your abilities and how to work on your deficit. I don't think that we have a lot of that available, and I think that insurance doesn't cover a lot of it, so you know cost is such a big barrier.

The issue of low professional pay was also raised, highlighting the impact on service delivery and the retention of qualified professionals. Professionals expressed concerns about the undervaluation of individuals with autism and the professionals working with them, emphasizing the need for fair compensation:

> We're struggling to find and retain good quality support for programs here. But I think that goes to the bigger part of the conversation of what society values. Our friends with autism or intellectual disabilities and the people who work with them aren't even being paid a livable wage. It's really a crime against humanity.

Overall, the theme of Constraints on Service Delivery highlighted the challenges posed by extensive waitlists, shortage of providers, resource limitations, restrictive regulations, high service costs, and low professional pay. These factors significantly impeded access to timely and comprehensive support for individuals with autism and their families. Addressing these constraints is crucial to improving service delivery and ensuring that individuals with autism receive the care and assistance they need.

**Theme 2**: Limited Knowledge

Professionals consistently emphasized a critical need for more comprehensive knowledge, both for themselves and their peers in various disciplines who engage with individuals diagnosed with autism. Specifically, many professionals underscored a prevailing issue: the absence of adequate training programs that comprehensively cover the diverse presentations and requirements within the autism community.

At the core of the professional experience in the autism community was a palpable hunger for increased education. This sentiment cuts across diverse practice settings and disciplines. Regardless of their specific roles, professionals shared a common belief in the imperative necessity of a broader and more accessible knowledge base concerning this population. They expressed a profound sense of unease in their capacity to effectively support individuals with autism, often fueled by the frustration stemming from a broader lack of public awareness.

Many openly admitted that they often had to acquire knowledge through trial and error, underscoring their perception that existing training and available resources inadequately addressed the diverse array of individuals they encountered, each with their distinct needs. This collective acknowledgment among professionals underscored the urgent call for improved accessibility to knowledge about autism across various professional domains. One social worker noted the ways trainings specifically in the school setting fail to prepare providers to deliver optimal service to this community:

> The special education… trainings and certifications, they don't do a great job encompassing the bigger picture. We have a lot of really fantastic teachers who come into this role, knowing really nothing on how to modify curriculum or expectations for kids with autism. If I'm honest up here, we are in a desert as far as people that really know a lot about autism. We have a couple of really great people but everybody else is just sort of learning trial by fire.

One professional, however, expressed the value in a greater emphasis on learning as you go as opposed to relying heavily on trainings:

> I think some professional training is definitely needed, but I also know that just having worked my way up through various different roles in working with autistic people is that sometimes you don't really learn about it in a classroom setting in training. Sometimes it's better to learn hands-on in that way.

Professionals also addressed the ways in which trainings that are provided lack an ability to address diversity among those with an autism diagnosis:

> I think a lot of the training that are out there currently are basic. It's kind of based on, you know, white males and what autism presents like in white males. So, we need to definitely have more diverse examples of autistic people in those kinds of baseline trainings.

Knowledge gaps specific to communication were cited by multiple professionals as a limitation to effective practice within this population.

> I would say the number one challenge that anyone entering this field is going to encounter is the deductive skills, the skills to understand communication from the individuals that we're servicing and I see so many times that a new hire comes in and they just don't know what communication approaches work with people. So, I often find that people are engaging inappropriately, just not developmentally appropriate for the individual.

This theme underscores the critical imperative to dispel misconceptions and enhance professional knowledge and training within the field of autism. It emphasizes the urgent need for comprehensive education, not only for professionals themselves but also for their peers across various disciplines who interact with individuals diagnosed with autism. The theme reveals a pervasive issue: the absence of adequate training programs that effectively encompass the diverse presentations and requirements within the autism community. Professionals from various practice settings and disciplines unanimously express a profound desire for a broader and more accessible knowledge base regarding this population. This shared sentiment stems from their collective unease about their capacity to support individuals with autism and their frustration arising from the broader lack of public awareness. Furthermore, professionals candidly acknowledge their reliance on trial-and-error learning due to the inadequacies of existing training programs and available resources, reinforcing the urgent call for improved accessibility to autism-related knowledge across various professional domains. This research also highlights the limitations of current training programs, emphasizing the need for more inclusive representations of individuals with autism in foundational training and addressing knowledge gaps, particularly in communication skills tailored to the diverse needs of this population.

**Theme 3**: Professional Adaptability

Within the theme of providing support and services to individuals within the autism community, professionals often find themselves navigating a dynamic landscape that requires a high degree of adaptability. This theme explores the crucial concept of professional adaptability as articulated by various professionals working in this field. Their insights shed light on the multifaceted nature of flexibility, emphasizing its importance when engaging with individuals on the autism spectrum. These professionals recognize the need for creative and non-traditional approaches, highlighting the value of being open-minded and innovative in-service delivery. Additionally, they underscore the significance of accessibility and accommodation in accommodating the unique needs of this population.

When working with individuals in the autism community, numerous professionals expressed the importance of being flexible.

> I really feel like we need to access different modalities of services that might benefit kids more. It's one of the reasons why I'm working on my play therapy certification. But then there's also animal assistant therapy. There's sand. I mean there's so so many things that aren't traditional back-and-forth verbal therapy.

This sentiment of flexibility is echoed by another professional when they said:

> You have to determine who can change easier in the situation and if it's you then do what needs to be done so that everybody wins and one of Ross Green's big points is that too often, we pick unreasonable things. We get super inflexible and so parents and schools make rules that people on the spectrum don't understand what the rules are about, but it frustrates them.

Several professionals placed emphasis on what this flexibility could look like when working with younger populations on the spectrum:

> Go into whatever situation that you're going in to help provide support with an open mind. I have some of my preschool kids. I don't expect that you have to sit at a desk when you're doing the work. If you want to sit on the floor please sit on the floor. If you want to sit on the beanbag, please sit on the beanbag. Really, making sure that we're comfortable in the 1st place is going to set you up for success in service delivery.
>
> More out of the box thinking. I think a lot of the programs that are existing right now for people with autism are somewhat antiquated and really glorified babysitting.

Professionals shared some additional ways to be flexible when working with this community. Specifically, one professional highlighted the importance of increasing accessibility and accommodation:

> Accommodation is a really big thing so you know the location. Location can be flexible. Some individuals might be more comfortable virtually if you can make the flexibility to be virtual or if they are more comfortable in person. One of the big things that comes to mind is scheduling appointments for things is something that's very difficult because it feels like a very big daunting task. So accessibility in you know you have to either schedule Online or call or you know you can email. You can choose where your appointment is going to be, that kind of thing instead of just being. You know you have to call the office or whatever service provider you're calling.

This theme delves into the concept of professional adaptability, as articulated by professionals working with individuals on the autism spectrum. It emphasizes the necessity of flexibility and innovative thinking when delivering services to this community. Professionals stress the importance of creating comfortable and accommodating environments, whether in-person or virtually, and moving beyond traditional methods to foster creative and effective support systems. This theme underscores the evolving nature of service delivery within the autism community and the need for professionals to remain open-minded and adaptable in their approach.

**Theme 4:** Future Directions

Professionals voiced a need for change to improve service delivery and increase access for those who are members of the autism community. Overarching ideas that were present across multiple professionals included needs for increased public education, increased representation in the media that encapsulates the vast ways in which autism can present, a need for services across the lifespan, and more support for families that often have to navigate complex service and insurance systems and barriers. Most predominantly, the majority of professionals emphasized the need for efforts to be put toward increasing both public and professional education.

> I just feel like we can do more. I also feel like research. It's out there. I feel like I don't know enough about it that people, therapists in general, the public, you know parents know more about what it looks like.

Multiple professionals also expressed a need for future efforts to focus on creating services and resources that expand beyond early intervention and school.

> Transition services are definitely something that there needs to be more of ...what happens when the bus stops coming for our kids and when you graduate high school and whatever program that you're in when you're school age, there really isn't all that much for that school age it's kind of just like, well, you're an adult now there's not much for you, so you know resources of how can we help you to create a life is a good way to explain it. Like to build all of those building blocks and put them together to be a successful adult in our society.

Several professionals shared about the impact media has on public perception of autism as well as the need for future more representative depictions of autism in media as a means to aid in public knowledge.

> I think that the media does a real disservice to autism. I think that we either see The Sheldon Coopers or we see or hear about the kids that are completely nonverbal and maybe self-interest. But ... it's a spectrum and so really showcasing what the spectrum is and how it can look, and that each person is so individual and somebody that may have lots of language doesn't mean that they don't have deficits in other areas; ... so much support out there and so much good that can come from an autism diagnosis, and so really just trying to highlight all the good and the all of the ability not just the disability.

Professionals also shared the sentiment that future efforts should emphasize support for families as they are largely absent despite the many challenges they come up against. One professional who is also a parent to a child with autism expressed this need when saying:

> I can imagine a less persistent person or a less knowledgeable person would have simply just given up, because that was ridiculous. I mean you shouldn't have to fight with 18 people to get your kids something that will allow them to talk.

## Discussion

Limited funding has adverse effects on staffing levels in ASD programs, resulting in a shortage of trained professionals. This impacts the recruitment and retention of qualified staff, including teachers, therapists, and support personnel. Inadequate funding makes it challenging to offer competitive salaries, hindering the attraction and retention of skilled professionals. This shortage compromises the Additionally, financial constraints restrict the availability of training programs for both families and professionals. quality of services provided to individuals with ASD.

The desire for more comprehensive and accessible training initiatives to address diverse ASD needs remains unmet due to funding limitations (Abu-Dahab et al., 2022; Ashburner et al., 2014; Kadar et al., 2012; Kadar et al., 2015; Haney & Cullen, 2018; Kim, 2021). This lack of training affects professionals' ability to deliver optimal care and leaves family members feeling ill-equipped to support their loved ones.

Insufficient funding also extends the waiting period between diagnosis and access to essential resources (Nicolaidis et al., 2014). Families encounter extended waitlists for autism diagnosis and early intervention services, further delaying crucial support. The financial strain on families becomes evident as they struggle to afford necessary resources and interventions not covered by insurance or publicly funded programs. Inadequate financial assistance emerges as a recurring theme throughout the study, underscoring the far-reaching impact of funding constraints.

In summary, funding constraints pose significant challenges in developing and implementing effective programs and services for individuals with ASD. This study highlights the urgent need for increased financial support to address staffing shortages, enhance training opportunities, and remove barriers to accessing essential resources. Policymakers, organizations, and stakeholders must prioritize allocating sufficient funding to support the well-being and development of individuals with ASD, enabling them to reach their full potential and lead fulfilling lives.

## Limitations

This phenomenological research study provides valuable insights into the experiences of individual participants, shedding light on the challenges faced by professionals working with individuals diagnosed with ASD. However, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of this qualitative approach. The findings cannot be generalized to all professionals in the field, given the small sample size and the unique perspectives of the participants.

The study did not consider specific demographic or professional factors that may have influenced the participants' experiences. Variables such as education, years of experience, age, gender, and socioeconomic status were not examined. Future research should aim for a more diverse sample that encompasses various backgrounds and characteristics to gain a comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by professionals.

Furthermore, the study primarily focused on professionals' experiences, without directly capturing the views of individuals with ASD and their families. Including their perspectives could provide a more holistic understanding of the challenges and support needs in the community.

To build on these findings, further research should explore the implications and effectiveness of potential interventions and supports. Investigating specific strategies or programs to address identified challenges, such as improving training accessibility and service delivery flexibility, can inform evidence-based practices and policies in the field of ASD. Future research endeavors should strive for a more comprehensive and inclusive approach to drive meaningful improvements in the lives of individuals with ASD and the professionals who support them.

## Implications

The findings of this phenomenological research study have several implications for practice and future research. Firstly, the identified constraints on service access underline the urgent need for increased funding and resources to enhance the availability and affordability of services for individuals with ASD (Nicolaidis et al., 2014). Policymakers, educators, and service providers should advocate for adequate funding to ensure timely access to essential resources, early intervention programs, and ongoing support services.

Secondly, the theme of limited knowledge among professionals emphasizes the importance of continuous education and training (Abu-Dahab et al., 2022; Ashburner et al., 2014; Kadar et al., 2012; Kadar et al., 2015; Haney & Cullen, 2018; Kim, 2021). Efforts should focus on developing comprehensive training programs that encompass a broader understanding of the diverse presentations and needs of individuals on the autism spectrum. Additionally, there is a need to create culturally sensitive and inclusive training materials that represent the diversity within the autism community.

Thirdly, the theme of professional adaptability highlights the need for flexibility in service delivery approaches (Haney & Cullen, 2018; Kim, 2021). Professionals should be encouraged to explore alternative modalities, such as play therapy, animal-assisted therapy, and creative interventions, to better address the unique needs and preferences of individuals. This may require a shift away from traditional, one-size-fits-all approaches towards a more individualized and person-centered approach to care.

Lastly, the theme of future direction calls for increased public education, accurate representation of autism in the media, and expanded services across the lifespan (Al Jaffal, 2022). Efforts should be directed at raising awareness and understanding of autism within the general public, challenging stereotypes, and promoting a more inclusive society. Furthermore, it is essential to develop transition services and resources to support individuals with ASD as they transition into adulthood.

The findings of this study underscore the need for targeted interventions, improved access to services, ongoing professional development, and a comprehensive approach to support individuals with ASD and their families. These implications should inform the development of policies, practices, and future research efforts in the field of autism support and intervention.

## Conclusion

Individuals with ASD and their families often seek support and interventions from professionals. This phenomenological research contributes to the field's knowledge by delving into the experiences of professionals working with individuals diagnosed with ASD, including early intervention providers, social workers, educators, and healthcare providers. The study identifies gaps and opportunities for enhancing services. Insufficient funding for ASD programs exacerbates staffing shortages, limits training opportunities, and leaves individuals with ASD without adequate support services. The findings suggest the need for increased funding and resources to improve service availability and affordability.

Continuous education and training for professionals and families are crucial to developing a broader understanding of the diverse needs of individuals with ASD. This includes culturally sensitive and inclusive training, shifting from traditional approaches to a more individualized and person-centered approach.

The future of autism care calls for increased public education, accurate media representation, expanded services across the lifespan, awareness promotion, stereotype challenge, inclusivity, and the development of transition services. It is important to note that these findings are specific to the sample and may not be generalized to all professionals due to the study's small sample size. To gain a comprehensive understanding of challenges and support needs, future research should incorporate the perspectives of individuals with ASD and their families. Additional research is needed to evaluate the effectiveness of interventions and supports, taking a comprehensive and inclusive approach to enhance the lives of individuals with ASD and the professionals supporting them.

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No conflicts exist.

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