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Parents' Perspectives on the Services for Children with Autism: A Basis for Improving Service Provision

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Abstract

This study explored parents' perspectives on the services provided by the Parañaque City Center for Children with Special Needs (CSN Center) for children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and identified areas for service improvement. Anchored on the SERVQUAL Model and the Family-Centered Care Framework, the study examined parental experiences regarding service accessibility, quality, responsiveness, and support. A qualitative research design utilizing thematic analysis was employed. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with six purposively selected parents of children with ASD who were receiving assessment, therapy, and parent-training services from the CSN Center. Interview transcripts were coded and analyzed to identify recurring themes and patterns. The findings revealed four major themes: Accessibility and Service Delivery, Quality of Therapy and Professionalism of Staff, Challenges in Service Provision, and Recommendations for Service Enhancement. Parents generally expressed satisfaction with the center's free multidisciplinary services, responsive communication, professional staff, and parent-training programs. They valued the support provided by therapists and reported positive developmental changes in their children. Despite these strengths, participants identified challenges related to limited personnel, therapy availability, scheduling constraints, and increasing service demand. Recommendations included expanding personnel and services, strengthening communication systems, increasing opportunities for parental involvement, and enhancing support programs for families. The study concludes that accessible, responsive, and family-centered autism services contribute positively to parental experiences and support the developmental needs of children with ASD. The findings provide insights that may assist service providers and policymakers in improving the quality and accessibility of publicly funded autism-related services. The study supports Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 3, 4, 10, and 16 by promoting accessible developmental services, inclusive support systems, and responsive public service delivery. It contributes to community, educational, institutional, and socio-economic sustainability through evidence-based improvements in autism service provision.

Keywords: Autism Spectrum Disorder; Family-Centered Care; Parent Training; Parents' Perspectives; Public Service Delivery; Service Accessibility; Service Quality; Sustainable Development Goals; Thematic Analysis

1. Introduction

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a neurodevelopmental condition characterized by difficulties in communication, social interaction, and patterns of restricted or repetitive behaviors (American Psychological Association, 2024). Early identification and intervention are critical to improving developmental outcomes; however, many families encounter barriers such as delayed diagnosis, high costs of services, limited access to specialists, insufficient public programs, and lack of information regarding available interventions. These challenges place significant emotional, social, and financial burdens on families while affecting the quality and continuity of care received by children with ASD. Given the increasing demand for autism-related services and the limited exploration of parental experiences in public service settings, this study examines parents' perspectives on the services provided by the Parañaque City Center for Children with Special Needs (CSN Center) as a basis for improving service provision.

1.1 Background of Parents' Perspectives on Services for Children with Autism

ASD requires individualized and multidisciplinary interventions to support communication, behavior, social functioning, and daily living skills. Early intervention is recommended even before formal diagnosis because delays may worsen developmental outcomes (McIntyre & Zemantic, 2017). However, families frequently face barriers including high assessment and therapy costs, long waiting periods, insufficient service availability, and delayed recognition of symptoms (Zorcec & Pop-Jordanova, 2020; Barokova et al., 2022; Quilendrino et al., 2015; Papadopoulos, 2021). The CSN Center was established to address these challenges through free assessments, multidisciplinary therapies, and parent-training programs. Services include physical therapy, occupational therapy, speech therapy, group skills training, and prevocational interventions. Evidence suggests that these interventions contribute to improvements in motor, sensory, communication,

social, and adaptive functioning among individuals with ASD (Kalra, Gupta, and Sharma, 2023). Parents play a critical role in intervention because they provide continuous support beyond clinical settings. Studies indicate that parent involvement and training enhance children's developmental outcomes, strengthen parenting competence, and improve family well-being (Vismara, Colombi, and Rogers, 2009; Barokova et al., 2022; Ijaz, Rafaq, & Haider, 2021; Im-Bolter and De La Roche, 2023; Abid, Gaddour, and Hmissa, 2024; Battanta et al., 2024).

1.2 Themes and Insights on Autism Services, Family Experiences, and Parental Involvement

Research consistently demonstrates that families of children with ASD experience substantial emotional, psychological, social, and financial burdens. Caregivers frequently report stress, anxiety, depression, caregiving overload, and altered family dynamics (Sánchez Amate and Luque de la Rosa, 2024; Papadopoulos, 2021). Families also express strong needs for information, social support, professional guidance, financial assistance, and community-based services (Serrano Fernández, 2025). Studies involving Filipino families reveal challenges related to delayed diagnosis, treatment costs, caregiving demands, guilt, stigma, and limited access to specialized services (Roxas, 2022; Chepngetich, 2022; Capote, 2016). Despite these difficulties, family support, professional assistance, faith, and community networks contribute to resilience and coping. Literature further highlights the value of multidisciplinary interventions. Occupational therapy, physiotherapy, speech-language therapy, and vocational rehabilitation support developmental functioning and independence among individuals with ASD (Gattud & Piduca, 2020; Kalra, 2023). However, access remains uneven due to shortages of specialists, resource limitations, and service availability. Parent training and parent-implemented interventions have been shown to improve communication, social interaction, behavioral outcomes, parental confidence, and mental health (Vismara, 2009; Im-Bolter, 2023; Barokova, 2022; Abid, 2024; Ijaz et al., 2021). Effective services are characterized by responsiveness, collaboration, emotional support, and active parental participation.

1.3 Local, National, and Global Context of Autism Service Provision for Children with ASD

Globally, families continue to face challenges related to service accessibility, diagnostic delays, insufficient provider training, long waiting lists, and fragmented service systems (Scattoni, Shih, & Schendel, 2023). Similar concerns have been documented in South Africa, Syria, and other low-resource settings where service providers struggle with workforce limitations, inadequate infrastructure, and insufficient policy support (Pillay, Duncan, & de Vries, 2022; Mounzer & Stenhoff, 2021). In the Philippines, access to specialized autism services remains uneven, particularly in public settings. Families often shoulder substantial expenses for assessments, therapy, and education while navigating limited service availability (Gattud & Piduca, 2020; Chepngetich, 2022; Quilendrino et al., 2015). The establishment of the CSN Center through Ordinance No. 17-03 (Santos, 2016) represents a local government initiative to improve access to free assessments, therapy services, and parent training for children with neurodevelopmental disorders. Nationally, legislative initiatives have recognized the need to strengthen autism-related services and support systems through inclusive and accessible programs (Zubiri, 2022; Estrada, 2022; Ejercito, 2023). Republic Act No. 11650 (2022) further supports inclusive services for learners with disabilities through specialized interventions, inclusive learning resource centers, and support services designed to improve educational access and participation.

1.4 Theoretical and Conceptual Basis of Parents' Perspectives on Autism Service Quality

This study is anchored on the SERVQUAL Model developed by Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1988), which evaluates service quality through the dimensions of tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy. These dimensions provide a framework for understanding how parents assess the quality and effectiveness of services received by their children. The study is also guided by the Family-Centered Care (FCC) Framework, which emphasizes respect, collaboration, information sharing, and active family participation in service delivery. These principles are consistent with quality-improvement frameworks for disability services that emphasize family engagement, collaborative decision-making, responsiveness, and continuous service enhancement (Council for Disabled Children, 2024). FCC recognizes families as essential partners in care and highlights the importance of culturally responsive and collaborative interventions that strengthen family-provider relationships and improve outcomes for children with ASD. Together, these frameworks support the examination of parental experiences, perceptions of service quality, and opportunities for service enhancement.

1.5 Research Gaps and Rationale for Improving Autism Service Provision

Existing literature provides substantial evidence regarding caregiver burden, intervention effectiveness, parental involvement, and satisfaction with autism services. However, several gaps remain. Most studies focus on quantitative measures of satisfaction, utilization, or outcomes, with limited exploration of parents' lived experiences and perceptions of service quality. Qualitative approaches are valuable in understanding stakeholder experiences and identifying practical challenges that may not be captured through quantitative measures alone (Allam & Martin, 2021). Research specifically examining public autism services within the Philippine context remains limited. Furthermore, parent perspectives are often underutilized in service improvement planning despite their direct involvement in children's development and intervention processes. The present study addresses these gaps by exploring how parents perceive service accessibility, responsiveness, professionalism, support, and areas requiring improvement within a government-funded therapy center. The findings are expected to contribute to the development of more responsive, accessible, and family-centered autism services.

1.6 Alignment of Autism Service Provision with Relevant Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

This study aligns with:
SDG 3 – Good Health and Well-Being, by promoting improved access to developmental, therapeutic, and psychosocial services for children with ASD and their families.
SDG 4 – Quality Education, through support services, parent training, and interventions that enhance developmental readiness, communication skills, and participation in educational settings.
SDG 10 – Reduced Inequalities, by examining the effectiveness of publicly funded services that seek to reduce disparities in access to assessment, therapy, and support for children with disabilities.
SDG 16 – Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions, through the evaluation of public service delivery and the promotion of responsive, inclusive, and accountable service systems for vulnerable populations.

1.7 Importance of Improving Autism Services to Multidisciplinary Sustainability

The study contributes to socio-economic sustainability by identifying ways to improve publicly funded autism services and reduce burdens experienced by families. It supports community sustainability through stronger family-provider partnerships and more inclusive support systems for children with ASD. The study also contributes to educational sustainability by highlighting the importance of interventions and parent-training programs that support lifelong learning and developmental growth. In addition, it promotes institutional and policy sustainability by providing evidence that may guide local government units, service providers, and policymakers in strengthening autism-related programs and resource allocation. By incorporating parents' experiences into service evaluation and planning, the study supports the development of accessible, equitable, family-centered, and sustainable autism services within the Philippine context.

2. Material and methods

2.1 Research Design

The study employed a qualitative research design using thematic analysis. Qualitative research is appropriate for examining participants' experiences, perceptions, and behaviors in relation to real-world issues and for answering questions that focus on how and why certain experiences occur (Tenny, 2022). Thematic analysis was utilized to systematically organize and analyze complex qualitative data by identifying recurring patterns and themes. Open-ended interviews were conducted to explore both shared and unique experiences among participants. Thematic analysis enabled an in-depth examination of how parents perceived the services provided by the CSN Center and what improvements they considered necessary. A rigorous thematic analysis approach can produce insightful and trustworthy findings (Dawadi, 2020).

2.2 Locale of the Study

The study was conducted at the Parañaque City Center for Children with Special Needs (CSN Center), a public therapy center that provides free assessments, therapeutic interventions, and parent-training programs for children with neurodevelopmental disorders, including ASD. The center serves children and families within Parañaque City and functions as a government-supported institution focused on accessible and multidisciplinary developmental services.

2.3 Respondents of the Study

The respondents were six parents of children diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder who were receiving services from the CSN Center. Although participation was open to both mothers and fathers, all participants were mothers. Their children ranged from 5 to 8 years old and had been diagnosed with ASD at different severity levels. All participants had children who had received assessment services, therapy services, and parent-training programs from the center. The respondents had direct and sustained experience with the services provided, enabling them to offer detailed perspectives regarding service delivery, staff responsiveness, professionalism, challenges, and areas for improvement.

2.4 Sample and Sampling Procedure

Purposive sampling was used to select participants based on their relevance to the study objectives (Makwana, 2023). The sample size of six participants was patterned after qualitative studies that similarly explored experiences related to autism, including Malone (2025) and Milan (2023). Participants were selected from the client population of the CSN Center based on predefined inclusion criteria. Eligible participants were parents of children aged 5 to 24 years diagnosed with ASD and currently receiving services at the center. The children must have received at least one assessment service, at least one therapy service, and parent-training services. The study focused exclusively on parental perspectives and did not include siblings, other family members, or children outside the specified age range.

2.5 Research Instrument

A researcher-developed screening instrument was used to identify participants who met the study criteria. Data were collected through a semi-structured interview guide consisting of open-ended questions designed to explore parental experiences, perceptions, challenges, and recommendations regarding autism-related services. The interview guide

underwent content validation by five experts in psychology, special education, and research to ensure relevance, clarity, and appropriateness.

2.6 Data Gathering Procedure

Prior to data collection, approval was obtained from the CSN Center and the ethics committee of San Beda College Alabang. Participants were recruited through the partner institution and were provided with informed consent forms explaining the purpose of the study, confidentiality measures, voluntary participation, audio recording procedures, potential risks and benefits, and their right to withdraw at any time. Individual face-to-face interviews were conducted with each participant. Initial interviews lasted approximately 20 minutes to one hour and were audio-recorded with participant consent to facilitate accurate transcription. Follow-up interviews were conducted when necessary to obtain clarification and richer descriptions of experiences. Interview recordings were transcribed verbatim and reviewed before coding and analysis. Data collection continued until saturation was achieved, meaning that no new information or themes emerged from subsequent interviews. Saturation served as the criterion for ending data collection and analysis (Saunders, 2017).

2.7 Data Analysis Techniques

The study utilized thematic analysis to examine the qualitative data. Interview transcripts were repeatedly reviewed to achieve familiarity with the data before generating initial codes. Related codes were grouped into categories, patterns, and themes that reflected participants' experiences and perspectives. The analysis focused on identifying recurring insights regarding service accessibility, staff responsiveness, professionalism, challenges encountered, and recommendations for service improvement. Themes were compared across participants to identify common and unique experiences that addressed the research questions.

2.8 Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to ethical principles to protect participant welfare and maintain research integrity. Informed consent was obtained from all participants before data collection. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were informed of their right to decline participation, refuse to answer any question, or withdraw at any stage without penalty. Participant confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained through the use of codes and pseudonyms. No identifying information was included in the final report. Data were stored securely on password-protected devices accessible only to the researcher and were used solely for academic purposes. All collected data will be permanently deleted after completion of the study. Although the study posed minimal risk, participants experiencing discomfort were offered appropriate support and referrals. Ethical approval was secured from the appropriate research ethics committee prior to the conduct of the study.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Accessibility and Service Delivery

3.1.1 Accessibility of Free Assessment and Therapy Services

Parents reported that the CSN Center provided accessible and free assessment and therapy services that would otherwise be financially difficult to obtain. Participants appreciated the availability of multidisciplinary services, including assessments, therapy sessions, and developmental interventions that supported their children's needs. They also viewed the center as a valuable community resource that reduced the financial burden associated with autism-related care. These findings support existing literature indicating that families of children with ASD often experience financial challenges and limited access to specialized services (Chepngetich, 2022; Gattud & Piduca, 2020). The availability of free services addresses barriers identified by previous studies and demonstrates the importance of accessible community-based interventions for children with ASD and their families.

3.1.2 Responsiveness and Communication of Staff

Parents described the staff as responsive to concerns and needs. They highlighted effective communication, timely responses, and supportive interactions that helped them understand their children's progress and available services. Participants reported feeling informed, respected, and included throughout the service process. The findings reflect the importance of responsive and family-centered service delivery. Effective communication strengthens parent-provider partnerships and promotes parental involvement in intervention programs. These results support findings that parents prefer person-centered and responsive services that actively involve families in treatment planning and implementation (Im-Bolter and de la Roche, 2023; Ong, 2019).

3.2 Quality of Therapy and Professionalism of Staff

3.2.1 Professional Competence of Therapists

Parents consistently described therapists and staff as knowledgeable, skilled, and professional. They reported observing improvements in their children's communication, behavior, social interaction, and developmental skills through participation in therapy programs. Confidence in the therapists' competence contributed to overall satisfaction with the

services received. These findings demonstrate the importance of professional expertise in autism intervention. The positive perceptions of therapist competence support studies emphasizing the effectiveness of multidisciplinary interventions in promoting developmental outcomes among children with ASD (Kalra, 2023). Professional knowledge and service quality also contribute to parental trust and confidence in service providers.

3.2.2 Compassion, Care, and Family Support

Participants emphasized the caring attitude, patience, and dedication of therapists and staff. Parents appreciated the personalized attention provided to their children and valued the supportive environment created by the center. Many described the staff as approachable, understanding, and genuinely concerned for their children's welfare. These experiences highlight the importance of empathy and respect in service delivery. Similar studies found that parents value emotional support, collaboration, and family-centered approaches when accessing autism-related services (Barokova et al., 2022; Vismara et al., 2009). Positive staff-family relationships contribute to satisfaction and strengthen engagement in intervention programs.

3.2.3 Parent Training and Capacity Building

Parents reported learning strategies that enabled them to support their children at home. Training sessions increased their knowledge of ASD, improved their ability to manage challenging behaviors, and strengthened their confidence as caregivers. Participants also valued the emotional support received through parent-oriented programs. The findings align with studies showing that parent training improves parental competence, communication skills, and child outcomes (Vismara et al., 2009; Ijaz et al., 2021; Abid et al., 2024). Parent involvement extends intervention beyond therapy sessions and reinforces developmental gains within the child's natural environment. Parent training also provides social and emotional support, which is essential for families coping with ASD-related challenges (Quilendrino, 2015).

3.3 Challenges in Service Provision

3.3.1 Limited Personnel and Therapy Availability

Despite positive experiences, parents identified limitations related to staffing, therapy schedules, and service availability. Participants reported difficulties securing therapy slots due to increasing numbers of clients and limited personnel. Some also expressed concerns regarding short therapy sessions and inconsistent service availability. These concerns reflect challenges commonly reported in autism service systems. Limited resources, shortages of trained professionals, and insufficient service capacity have been documented in both local and international studies (McIntyre & Zemantic, 2017; Pillay, Duncan, & de Vries, 2022). Such limitations may affect continuity of care and reduce opportunities for intensive intervention.

3.3.2 Scheduling and Accessibility Constraints

Parents reported long waiting periods, scheduling conflicts, transportation difficulties, and delays that occasionally affected participation in therapy programs. These challenges became more apparent as the client population of the center continued to increase. The findings support previous research indicating that accessibility barriers continue to affect autism service utilization despite the availability of interventions (Battanta, 2024; Chepngetich, 2022). Addressing scheduling and accessibility concerns may improve service efficiency and increase family participation.

3.4 Recommendations for Service Enhancement

3.4.1 Expansion of Services and Personnel

Parents recommended increasing the number of therapists and staff to accommodate growing demand and improve service availability. Participants also suggested expanding intervention programs and increasing therapy opportunities to better address developmental needs. These recommendations are consistent with literature emphasizing the importance of adequate staffing, service expansion, and early intervention opportunities for children with ASD (Vismara, 2009; Pillay, Duncan, & de Vries, 2022). Enhanced capacity may improve accessibility and reduce waiting times.

3.4.2 Strengthening Parent Support and Communication Systems

Participants recommended additional parent-training programs, more opportunities for parental involvement, improved communication channels, and simplified registration procedures through electronic systems. Parents also suggested creating additional activities and support programs that would strengthen family engagement. These recommendations align with findings that parents value practical guidance, emotional support, and collaborative relationships with service providers (Barokova et al., 2022; Im-Bolter and de la Roche, 2023). Strengthening communication systems and family-centered services may improve satisfaction and service effectiveness.

3.5 Overall Interpretation of Findings

Parents generally expressed satisfaction with the services provided by the CSN Center. They valued the accessibility of free services, professionalism of staff, quality of therapy interventions, parent-training programs, and supportive

relationships developed with service providers. At the same time, they identified challenges related to staffing, scheduling, and service availability that may affect long-term service delivery.

The findings indicate that effective autism services require a combination of professional competence, family-centered care, accessibility, and continuous program improvement. Consistent with the SERVQUAL Model and Family-Centered Care Framework, parents emphasized the importance of responsiveness, reliability, empathy, communication, and active family participation in achieving positive outcomes for children with ASD and their families.

4. Conclusion & Recommendations

The study found that parents generally viewed the services of the Parañaque City Center for Children with Special Needs (CSN Center) positively, particularly regarding accessibility, responsiveness, communication, parent training, and the professionalism of therapists and staff. Four major themes emerged: Accessibility and Service Delivery, Quality of Therapy and Professionalism of Staff, Challenges in Service Provision, and Recommendations for Service Enhancement. Parents valued the center's free multidisciplinary services, supportive relationships with staff, and opportunities for parent involvement. However, concerns regarding limited personnel, scheduling constraints, and the increasing number of clients highlighted areas requiring improvement. Overall, the findings demonstrate that parental feedback is essential in evaluating and enhancing autism-related services and in developing more responsive, accessible, and family-centered programs for children with autism spectrum disorder and their families.

The CSN Center may consider expanding its services by increasing personnel and therapy availability to accommodate the growing number of clients. Strengthening communication systems, enhancing parent-training opportunities, increasing parental involvement, and developing additional programs for children with autism spectrum disorder and their families may further improve service delivery. Policymakers and service providers may utilize the findings to support the development of more accessible, responsive, and family-centered autism services, while future studies may continue exploring parental perspectives and service experiences in other public and community-based settings.

The study was limited to six parents of children with autism spectrum disorder who were receiving services from the Parañaque City Center for Children with Special Needs. It focused solely on parental perspectives and did not assess therapy outcomes or include the views of children, siblings, therapists, or other family members. The findings were confined to the services offered by the CSN Center and may not be generalized to private therapy centers or other service settings. In addition, the qualitative nature of the study emphasized participants lived experiences and perceptions rather than statistical measurement of service effectiveness.

Compliance with ethical standards

This study was conducted in accordance with established ethical principles to ensure the protection, rights, welfare, privacy, and confidentiality of all participants. Participation was voluntary, and appropriate measures were implemented to safeguard participant information, maintain anonymity, and ensure the responsible handling and storage of research data throughout the study. Ethical approval and institutional permission were obtained prior to data collection, and informed consent was secured from all participants before their involvement in the research.

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