

## An examination of job satisfaction among classroom teachers working with students with autism spectrum disorder

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### Abstract

Job satisfaction among teachers working with students diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) holds particular significance due to the unique demands of special education. Despite the complexity of these roles, limited research explores the interplay between job satisfaction and the specific challenges encountered by such educators. This study addresses this gap by examining the job satisfaction levels of classroom teachers in special education settings, with a focus on identifying the primary factors influencing their satisfaction. Employing a qualitative design, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with ten purposefully selected teachers experienced in working with students with moderate to severe ASD. Descriptive analysis revealed that teachers experience significant challenges, including insufficient parental collaboration, limited educational resources, and emotional strain. While many educators expressed discouragement due to unmet learning outcomes, observed positive behavioral changes in students contributed to their professional satisfaction. The findings suggest that early intervention, increased material support, and enhanced parental involvement are critical to improving job satisfaction. The study highlights the need for systemic support and targeted policies to retain and support educators in ASD-focused learning environments.

**Keywords:** Autism spectrum disorder; classroom leader; job satisfaction; teachers.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a prevalent neurodevelopmental condition marked by challenges in social communication, repetitive behaviors, and restricted interests, which typically manifest in early childhood (APA, 2013). The success of educational interventions for individuals with ASD is influenced not only by the characteristics of the students but also by various factors related to educators, including their experience, training, professionalism, job satisfaction, and motivation (Devi et al., 2024; Anchieta et al., 2025; Marelle et al., 2023). Teachers' job satisfaction plays a crucial role in determining the quality of education and the outcomes for students with ASD, as it influences teachers' commitment, effectiveness, and overall well-being. Thus, understanding the factors that contribute to or hinder job satisfaction in this context is vital for improving educational practices and support systems.

Teachers' job satisfaction is a critical determinant that directly impacts both their individual performance and the overall development of students (Zang & Feng, 2023). Given the unique challenges inherent in special education, the job satisfaction of special education teachers is particularly significant (Pang et al., 2024). Teachers working with children with ASD often face higher levels of stress due to the complexity of the disorder and the need for specialized teaching methods. These challenges can be exacerbated by factors such as limited resources, lack of training, and insufficient institutional support. Addressing these challenges is essential to enhance teacher satisfaction, which in turn can lead to better educational outcomes for students with ASD.

However, research on this topic remains limited, with existing studies predominantly focused on quantitative data, which may fail to capture the complexity and depth of teachers' experiences. A qualitative approach, in contrast, offers a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the lived experiences of these educators. By exploring teachers' perceptions, challenges, and coping strategies in a more personal and contextualized manner, qualitative research can provide insights that quantitative data may overlook. This type of research is crucial in identifying the specific needs and professional development opportunities that could enhance teachers' job satisfaction and improve their ability to effectively educate students with ASD.

Furthermore, exploring job satisfaction through a qualitative lens allows for a deeper understanding of the impact of institutional, societal, and personal factors on teachers' experiences. For example, the role of family involvement, community perceptions of special education, and school leadership may influence teachers' attitudes toward their work. A comprehensive understanding of these influences can help inform policies and interventions aimed at improving job satisfaction, professional development, and overall educational practices for special education teachers working with children on the autism spectrum. By focusing on the voices and experiences of teachers, this study can contribute valuable insights into the broader conversation about improving the quality of education for students with ASD and supporting the educators who work with them.

### 1.1. Purpose of study

The aim of this study was to determine the job satisfaction levels of class leaders working with students with ASD in special education schools or classrooms affiliated with the Konya Provincial Directorate of National Education and to explore their perspectives on the key factors influencing this satisfaction.

## 2. METHOD AND MATERIALS

### 2.1. Research design

The research method used in this study is semi-structured interviews, which are preferred to identify the job satisfaction levels of special education teachers working with ASD students and to explore the key factors influencing this satisfaction. Semi-structured interviews, a qualitative research method, are frequently preferred by researchers because they offer the opportunity for the interviewee to express themselves, provide in-depth information when needed, have flexibility, and eliminate the limitations of surveys (Büyüköztürk et al., 2015; Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2003).

## 2.2. Participants

The participant group in the study consisted of 10 class leaders working at the Meram Special Education Application School and Selçuklu Special Education Application School in Konya, both at Grade Level 3 (High School), who had students with ASD in their classrooms. The teachers selected for the study were identified using the typical case sampling model, a purposive sampling method. This model was chosen because it provided valuable data for exploring the job satisfaction levels of special education teachers working with ASD students and the key factors influencing this satisfaction, while also yielding data that could be generalized (Onwuegbuzie & Collins, 2007).

## 2.3. Data collection tools

The data were collected through a semi-structured interview form developed by the researchers. Semi-structured interviews are often preferred by researchers because, due to their level of standardization and flexibility, they eliminate the limitations of surveys or tests (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2003).

## 2.4. Data analysis

The data were analyzed using descriptive analysis. In this approach, data are classified, described, and interpreted based on predetermined themes and presented to the reader according to their dimensions, considering the interview questions (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2008).

## 3. RESULTS

In response to the question, “How do you generally feel about working with ASD students?” the following sub questions were asked:

1. What were your expectations when you started working with ASD students? How much do your experiences so far align with your expectations?
2. What is the greatest source of satisfaction for you in working in special education?
3. What are your views on job satisfaction when working with autistic students?
4. What difficulties have you encountered in carrying out your profession? How do these difficulties affect your job satisfaction?
5. What would you like to see changed or improved to increase your job satisfaction?
6. Do you plan to stay in this profession in the long term? Why?

### 3.1. Teachers' views on working with ASD students

The majority of the interviewed teachers (6/10) stated that working with ASD students is difficult due to the insufficient knowledge of families on this subject, the problem behaviors of ASD children, and the scarcity of materials in this field. A small number of teachers (2/10) expressed that working with these students was fulfilling and made them happy.

*“The process is generally difficult. The facilities in our school are very limited. The parents' knowledge level is quite weak. This affects the whole process. Since our school is of moderate to severe level, the problem behaviors of our students are quite frequent. Sometimes we feel helpless.” (T4)*

*“Working with ASD students is difficult, but I think there is a side that brings satisfaction in different ways. It makes me feel peaceful.” (T7)*

### 3.2. Teachers' expectations

The vast majority of teachers (8/10) stated that when they started their careers, they thought they would achieve better results in the education of ASD students, but their current experiences showed otherwise. They

noted that even in teaching basic life skills, they were facing difficulties. A small portion of teachers (2/10) stated that their expectations and experiences aligned, and they achieved good results with their students.

*"When trying to teach academic skills, we are even facing difficulties with basic life skills, and there are mismatches between teaching and practice." (T3)*

*"I was expecting to do more academic work, but since the level of the students' disabilities is very high, I don't expect to do much beyond very basic tasks." (T10)*

*"When I started working with ASD students, my expectation was to teach them some behaviors. So far, my experiences mostly align with my expectations." (T2)*

### **3.3. Teachers' professional satisfaction**

All of the teachers (10/10) stated that observing positive changes in the behaviors of ASD individuals and helping them reintegrate into society increased their professional satisfaction.

*"Knowing that I helped ASD students integrate into social life gives me professional satisfaction." (T9)*

*"The biggest source of satisfaction for me is the reduction or elimination of problem behaviors and the impact this has on the family." (T6)*

### **3.4. Impact of working with ASD students on job satisfaction**

The majority of the interviewed teachers (9/10) stated that their job satisfaction is very low because they are working with students with moderate to severe ASD, and they do not receive feedback from the education they provide, or it is received too late.

*"In general, not receiving much feedback from the students negatively affects my job satisfaction." (T5)*

*"Since I work in a moderate-to-severe school and do not receive the results of the education I provide to students, my job satisfaction is very low." (T3)*

### **3.5. Teachers' challenges**

Half of the teachers (5/10) stated that the greatest challenges they face in their profession are material shortages and the problem behaviors of students, which make their job more difficult and negatively affect their job satisfaction.

*"When a student exhibits problem behavior, we need more toys and materials to calm them down and assist them. When there are insufficient materials and toys, it negatively affects my job satisfaction." (T2)*

### **3.6. Suggestions for increasing job satisfaction**

The vast majority of teachers (8/10) stated that in order to increase their job satisfaction, early education for ASD individuals should be started, materials for these individuals should be increased, and families should be involved in the process.

*"Education should begin at a young age, in preschool, for these children. The family should be involved in the process. The schools where I work should have better facilities in terms of materials and educational environments. Also, teacher salaries should be increased. Teachers struggling financially cannot be productive in their classrooms." (T4)*

### **3.7. Views on continuing the profession**

Half of the interviewed teachers (5/10) stated that they plan to stay in the profession until retirement due to the lack of alternative job opportunities, while the other half (5/10) indicated that they planned to resign after securing another source of income.

*"I would like to leave as early as possible. As soon as I gain financial freedom, I want to resign from the Ministry of National Education and continue freely. The profession will continue until I die, of course, but hopefully not in these schools." (T1)*

*"Yes, there are no other job opportunities, so I will continue." (T8)*

#### 4. DISCUSSION

This study examined the professional satisfaction and job satisfaction experiences of teachers working with ASD students. The findings indicate that teachers face challenges such as the problem behaviors of ASD individuals and the lack of materials in the field, but the reintegration of these individuals into society increases their professional satisfaction. This supports the widely acknowledged dual nature of the special education profession (Billingsley & Cross, 1992). In this context, identifying the factors that contribute to teachers' motivations and helping them overcome the challenges they face is important for improving their professional development and the educational processes of ASD individuals.

According to the results of the study, most teachers described working with students with ASD as highly challenging. The challenges faced by these educators were multifaceted, including issues such as families' limited knowledge about ASD, students' problem behaviors, and the insufficiency of educational materials and resources. These factors often created a stressful and demanding work environment, contributing to burnout and low job satisfaction among teachers. The literature also supports these findings, as it has long been recognized that working with students with ASD can lead to teacher fatigue, emotional exhaustion, and a decrease in professional enthusiasm (Brunsting et al., 2014). The lack of adequate support, both from families and institutions, further exacerbates these challenges, leading to a sense of frustration and helplessness among educators.

However, despite these widespread challenges, a small number of teachers expressed a sense of professional satisfaction. These teachers were able to find fulfillment in their work, highlighting the role of individual differences and personal sources of motivation. For these educators, the intrinsic rewards of teaching students with ASD, such as witnessing incremental progress in student development and contributing to their social reintegration, played a significant role in sustaining their professional commitment. This finding suggests that personal resilience, a strong sense of purpose, and a positive mindset can buffer the negative impacts of external challenges. These teachers were able to maintain their motivation and job satisfaction, indicating that with the right personal and professional qualities, educators can navigate the complexities of special education and find meaning in their work. This underscores the importance of fostering individual strengths and intrinsic motivation as part of a broader strategy to enhance job satisfaction and retention in the field of special education.

A notable gap was observed between teachers' expectations and experiences. Most teachers expected to achieve more concrete results in the education of ASD students, but their experiences did not meet these expectations. This finding aligns with the literature indicating that teachers' idealistic approaches often shift when confronted with the practical realities of teaching students with ASD (Boardman et al., 2005). However, a few teachers whose expectations aligned with their experiences suggested that some educators are able to adopt a more flexible and realistic approach, which may contribute to more effective educational outcomes. These teachers seemed better able to navigate the complexities of working with ASD students, allowing them to find a balance between idealism and practical application.

Regarding professional satisfaction, all teachers stated that the positive changes in the behaviors of ASD students and their reintegration into society were key sources of motivation. This highlights that teachers' sense of achievement and professional fulfillment is closely tied to their students' progress. The individual development of students and the tangible impact of their education were noted as central to increasing teachers' professional satisfaction. This underscores the importance of recognizing and celebrating small victories in the educational journey of ASD students as a means of sustaining teacher motivation and commitment.

#### 5. CONCLUSION

In this study, teachers' job satisfaction was found to be low, primarily due to factors such as students' challenging behaviors, insufficient support from families, and a lack of necessary materials. These challenges were reported as significant sources of stress and frustration, which negatively impacted teachers' overall

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satisfaction and effectiveness in supporting students with ASD. Addressing these issues is crucial to improving the working conditions and well-being of special education teachers.

To enhance job satisfaction, several recommendations were proposed. First, prioritizing early education programs for students with ASD was seen as essential. Early intervention can help mitigate the difficulties these students face and provide teachers with a more manageable and supportive environment. Additionally, increasing family involvement in the educational process was deemed critical. Greater collaboration between teachers and families could improve communication and create a more cohesive support system for students.

Furthermore, expanding materials and resources for ASD students was recommended to ensure that teachers have the necessary tools to effectively teach and support their students. It was also suggested that improving teachers' salaries and benefits could alleviate financial stress, which is often a contributing factor to dissatisfaction in the profession. Finally, enhancing teachers' professional development programs would provide them with better training and support in addressing the unique challenges associated with teaching students with ASD.

**Conflict of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

**Ethical Approval:** The study adheres to the ethical guidelines for conducting research.

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