












Navigating Learning for Learners with Special Educational Needs (LSEN) in South Africa: Barriers and Recommendations

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ABSTRACT

Approximately 3.5 million Persons With Disabilities (PWD), comprising 6.6% of the population live in South Africa. In South Africa, PWDs are confronted with challenges rooted in historical power imbalances and amplified by social and economic inequalities. Among these issues, the barriers to learning for learners with special educational needs (LSEN) are of particular concern. The purpose of the paper is to provide mitigation strategies for learning barriers encountered by LSEN in South Africa. The paper was guided by a qualitative integrative review (IR) research methodology. The findings highlighted various obstacles identified in research conducted at both global and national levels, including insufficient educator training, resource deficiencies, limited policy implementation, and challenges arising from the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, South Africa's educational framework, adapted from similar contexts, presents unique hurdles. By elucidating these findings, recommendations are made to mitigate these challenges through special educational needs, social context, and technology training, transformed curriculum and the introduction of class assistants. Moreover, specialised support from the Department of Basic Education (DBE) is advocated for and increased psychosocial and parental support is encouraged. The findings also propose the reinstatement of vocational-related school subjects for LSEN. This paper makes a meaningful contribution to the field of special education in South Africa by identifying the challenges encountered by LSEN and proposing viable solutions to address them.

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Publication History

Received: 20th November, 2023

Accepted: 13th February, 2024

Published online:

22nd March, 2024

Keywords: *Learners with Special Educational Needs (LSEN), Persons with Disabilities (PWD), Learning Barriers, Learners, COVID-19*

INTRODUCTION

There are currently 3.5 million persons with disabilities (PWD), comprising 6.6% of the population living in South Africa. This data is representative of individuals from the age of five and older.¹ Historically inherited issues of power, privilege, and supremacy are central to marginalising minority communities. Moreover, social and economic disparities prevalent in South Africa exacerbate the problem further.² Only 14% of PWDs have access to private

¹ Statistics South Africa (StatsSA), "General Household Survey 2019," 2019, <https://www.statssa.gov.za/publications/P0318/P03182019.pdf>.

² Sulochini Pather, "Confronting Inclusive Education in Africa since Salamanca," *International Journal of Inclusive Education* 23, no. 7–8 (August 3, 2019): 782–95, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2019.1623329>.

health care. Disproportionally, 68% of White people have access to private health care as compared to 7% of their Black counterparts. In Johannesburg (Gauteng), the economic hub of South Africa, only 24% of PWDs have completed secondary schooling while 20% have a qualification from a Higher Education institution.³

Ideally, learners with special educational needs (LSEN) would benefit from an inclusive and comprehensive approach. This would consist of access to equal educational opportunities, inclusive education, individualised support, trained teachers, reasonable facilities and adequate resources, customised curriculum, and continuous evaluation programmes. However, in South Africa, this is not being materialised. Various research studies document limitations in education for LSEN.⁴ However, these studies are restricted in providing pragmatic recommendations for the challenges identified in this paper.

Global research has identified barriers to learning for LSEN.⁵ These include but are not limited to inadequate training of educators, lack of resources, limited implementation of policy, and challenges brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, the legal framework governing schools in South Africa raises challenges as it is borrowed from other contexts commonly found in developing countries. Addressing these gaps in research related to LSEN can make a significant contribution to academia, as well as to the broader field of education and inclusive policy and legislative development. Moreover, training programmes for educators can be developed to assist in overcoming these barriers. Identifying resource gaps and suggesting solutions can lead to more effective resource allocation and support for LSEN. Furthermore, lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic can inform strategies for future emergencies, ensuring that LSEN are not disproportionately affected. Thus, this paper is informed by the following research question: How can the learning barriers encountered by LSEN in South Africa be effectively mitigated?

Legal Framework

South Africa's Constitution, section 29(1) guarantees the right to basic education, including adult and basic education. The South African Schools Act No. 84 of 1996 establishes uniform school operations, governance, and funding, with compulsory primary education for ages seven to 15. The 1995 Education White Paper 1 acknowledges the need for improved education and support for learners with special needs. This led to the development of Education White Paper 6 (WP6) on Special Needs Education by the National Commission of Special Needs in Education and Training (NCSNET) and the National Committee on Education Support Services (NCESS) in October 1996.⁶ Findings from the commission highlighted the limited specialised support, racial bias, learner clustering, curriculum gaps, and neglect of higher education and training.

Based on the findings and recommendations, the Ministry of Education released Consultative Paper No. 1 on Special Education: Building an Inclusive Education and Training System, in August 1999. This paper reaffirms the Ministry's dedication to creating an all-encompassing inclusive education system and reviewing education policies and laws. The paper also asserts that learning disabilities originate from the education system rather than the learners themselves. This underscores system-related learning barriers. In line with the NCSNET, NCESS recommendations, and Consultative Paper No. 1, the Department of Basic Education (DBE) enacted WP6 in 2001 with a commitment to achieve inclusive education within two decades. Criticism of WP6 highlights that despite acknowledging disparities in education access for learners with disabilities, especially disadvantaged black students, it does not fully address present systemic barriers within the education sector. Chapter 9 of the NDP 2030 emphasises that inclusive education aims to provide equal opportunities and enable all South Africans, especially those historically disadvantaged, to reach their potential. The plan also highlights that quality education for children with disabilities aids employment equity goals.

³ K. Lomahoza, "Demographic Profile of People Living with Disabilities in the City of Joburg," 2021, [https://joburg.org.za/about/Documents/Issue 27 PWD in the City of Joburg_Final.pdf](https://joburg.org.za/about/Documents/Issue%20PWD%20in%20the%20City%20of%20Joburg_Final.pdf).

⁴ Toyin Mary Adewumi and Cina Mosito, "Experiences of Teachers in Implementing Inclusion of Learners with Special Education Needs in Selected Fort Beaufort District Primary Schools, South Africa," *Cogent Education* 6, no. 1 (January 1, 2019): 1703446, <https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2019.1703446>; Dikeledi Mahlo, "Teaching Learners with Diverse Needs in the Foundation Phase in Gauteng Province, South Africa," *SAGE Open* 7, no. 1 (2017): 2158244017697162; Mabatho Sedibe and Jean Fourie, "Exploring Opportunities and Challenges in Parent-School Partnerships in Special Needs Schools in the Gauteng Province, South Africa," *Interchange* 49, no. 4 (2018): 433-44.

⁵ D. Galloway, *Schools, Pupils and Special Educational Needs*, vol. 24 (London: Routledge, 2018); S. Schwab, "Inclusive and Special Education in Europe," in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Education*, ed. George W. Noblit (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020); Paulo A S Moreira et al., "Engagement with School in Students with Special Educational Needs," *International Journal of Psychology and Psychological Therapy* 15, no. 3 (2015): 361-75.

⁶ White Paper 6, *Special Needs Education and Training Systems* (Pretoria: Department of Education, 2001), 25.

“Guidelines to Ensure Quality Education and Support in Special Schools and Special School Resource Centres to Support Inclusive Education” outlines four themes:⁷

1. Legislative and policy framework: Special schools, as public institutions, must adhere to the laws and policies of other public schools. They play a crucial role in inclusive education implementation, following relevant inclusive policies.
2. Curriculum management and implementation: Guidelines cover admitting highly supported learners, using specialised curriculum support instead of focusing on disability type, addressing diverse educational needs, and supporting mainstream schools.
3. Personnel supply and qualifications: Staff in schools for LSEN should be screened for suitability in working with highly supported children. Personnel qualifications should align with the school's curriculum, along with a positive attitude towards disabilities.
4. Infrastructure and hostel accommodation: Schools for LSEN must meet public school infrastructure standards. Infrastructure should cater to programme needs and diverse learner support, ensuring full accessibility.

The White Paper on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (WPRPD) offers policy guidelines to promote the rights, equality, and dignity of PWDs. It updates South Africa's 1997 White Paper on an Integrated National Disability Strategy (INDS), aligning with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), Continental Plan of Action for the African Decade of Persons with Disabilities, national legislation, policy frameworks, and NDP 2030. South Africa ratified the CRPD and its Protocol on November 30, 2007. The WPRPD's main goal is to establish an equitable society for all citizens with disabilities. Comprising nine Strategic Pillars, it focuses on removing access barriers, safeguarding the rights of marginalised persons, supporting integrated community life, empowering children, women, youth, and those with disabilities, reducing economic vulnerability, strengthening representation, building equitable state mechanisms, promoting international cooperation, and implementing monitoring and evaluation.⁸

Pillar 4, which is relevant to this paper, focuses on lifelong education and training. It highlights the importance of inclusive learning for learners with disabilities throughout their lives to enable them to learn alongside peers without disability barriers.⁹ Measures to ensure equal education access for learners with special needs include:

- Providing support for Braille, alternative scripts, communication modes, mobility skills, and peer assistance.
- Facilitating learning of South African Sign Language (SASL) and promoting the linguistic identity of the deaf community.
- Delivering education to blind, deaf, hearing-impaired, non-speaking autistic, and deaf-blind individuals in suitable languages and environments for academic and social development.
- Employing teachers with SASL and/or Braille qualifications and providing disability awareness training and appropriate communication methods to staff members to support disabled individuals.
- Ensuring persons with disabilities can access tertiary education, vocational training, adult education, and lifelong learning on equal terms through reasonable accommodations.¹⁰

METHODOLOGY

This article employed an integrative review (IR) as its research methodology. IR is used to assess and synthesise data from diverse sources to address research questions, generate new theories, and offer a comprehensive perspective on a topic of interest.¹¹ To ensure the article's rigour and quality, the authors adhered to Whittemore and Knaf's IR framework which consists of the following stages: (i) problem identification; (ii) literature search; (iii) data evaluation; (iv) data analysis; and (v) presentation of findings.¹²

⁷ Department of Basic Education, “Guidelines to Ensure Quality Education and Support in Special Schools and Special School Resource Centres to Support Inclusive Education.” (Pretoria: Directorate of Inclusive Education, 2014), [https://www.education.gov.za/Portals/0/Documents/Policies/Inclusive Education/GUIDELINES FOR SPECIAL SCHOOLS REVISED 2014 \(1\).pdf?ver=2014-05-12-053911-000](https://www.education.gov.za/Portals/0/Documents/Policies/Inclusive Education/GUIDELINES FOR SPECIAL SCHOOLS REVISED 2014 (1).pdf?ver=2014-05-12-053911-000).

⁸ Department of Social Development, *White Paper on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (Pretoria: Government Gazette, 2016), https://www.gov.za/sites/default/files/gcis_document/201603/39792gon230.pdf.

⁹ Department of Social Development, *White Paper on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*. 83.

¹⁰ Department of Social Development, *White Paper on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*.

¹¹ Anna M Kutcher and Virginia T LeBaron, “A Simple Guide for Completing an Integrative Review Using an Example Article,” *Journal of Professional Nursing* 40 (2022): 13–19.

¹² Robin Whittemore and Kathleen Knaf, “The Integrative Review: Updated Methodology,” *Journal of Advanced Nursing* 52, no. 5 (December 2, 2005): 546–53, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2648.2005.03621.x>.

Problem Identification

Section 29(1) of the Constitution of South Africa grants everyone the right to basic education, encompassing both adult and basic education.¹³ Regrettably, LSEN find themselves unable to fully exercise this fundamental right due to the numerous learning barriers they are confronted with. The predominant barrier hindering the educational progress of LSEN is the structure of the school curriculum.¹⁴ This challenge manifests itself through a multifaceted interplay of factors within the curriculum, including its content, the language employed for teaching and learning, the organisation of classrooms, pedagogical approaches, teaching pace, prescribed timeframes for curriculum completion, the inadequacy of teaching and learning materials, and the nature of assessments.¹⁵ Considering these compelling concerns, this article rigorously amalgamated and synthesised pertinent literature that delves into the learning barriers experienced by LSEN. The initial step in conducting an integrative review is the formulation of a conceptually robust research question.¹⁶ Thus, this integrative review is anchored in the research question: “How can the learning barriers encountered by LSEN in South Africa be effectively mitigated?”

Literature Search

An exhaustive review of both local and international literature about the topic under study was undertaken. The comprehensive literature search encompassed various reputable sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles, government reports, research reports, books, and post-graduate dissertations and theses. To ensure the rigour of the methodology, a series of steps were meticulously followed. These steps encompassed the formulation of the research question, the precise definition of the target population (i.e., LSEN), and a systematic and thorough search across esteemed scientific databases such as Academia, SAGE Journals, PubMed, ResearchGate, Google Scholar, SABINET, Education Resources Information Centre (ERIC), and OAJI. Furthermore, the researchers supplemented their search by consulting the University of South Africa (UNISA) library catalogue. This rigorous approach ensured that the study was based on a solid foundation of the most relevant and up-to-date literature available.

The search terms employed in searching the databases centred on the barriers or challenges encountered by learners with disabilities or special educational needs. To discern the studies to incorporate or omit, the research question served as the guiding criterion for sifting through the literature, specifically targeting studies addressing the barriers faced by these learners. During the literature search, a notable scarcity of scientific research that offered a comprehensive overview of these challenges became evident. Consequently, any relevant study from local, continental, or international sources that delved into this phenomenon was considered, regardless of its publication date. South African literature was prioritised, given the contextual focus of the study. This meticulous approach was taken to ensure that the research was founded on a robust basis of knowledge, encompassing both historical and contemporary perspectives on the subject matter.

Data Analysis and Presenting Results

The researchers employed the interpretative qualitative research data analysis method known as thematic analysis (TA) to analyse the data. Furthermore, they adopted an inductive approach, allowing the themes to emerge from the literature rather than imposing pre-conceived themes onto it. The following thematic analysis steps were adapted and used to analyse the data:¹⁷

- **Data organisation:** Initially, the data was organised to facilitate manual computer-based analysis. Given that the data under scrutiny were derived from literature, which already existed in text format, there was no need for transcription.
- **Data familiarisation:** In this phase, the researchers engaged in a comprehensive review of the texts, taking preliminary notes to become acquainted with the data.
- **Coding:** Subsequently, the coding process commenced, wherein sections of texts with similar meanings from various studies were identified and highlighted using consistent colours. Labels or codes were assigned to these sections to describe their content.
- **Theme development:** During this step, the researchers focused on identifying patterns and interpreting the relationships between the individual codes to develop overarching themes.

¹³ Republic of South Africa, *Constitution of the Republic of South Africa Act 108 of 1996* (Pretoria: Government Printer, 1996), <https://www.gov.za/sites/default/files/images/a108-96.pdf>.

¹⁴ Department of Education, *National Curriculum Statement (Grade R–12): Guidelines for Responding to Learner Diversity in the Classroom* (Pretoria: Government Printers, 2016).

¹⁵ Department of Education, *National Curriculum Statement (Grade R–12): Guidelines for Responding to Learner Diversity in the Classroom*.

¹⁶ Marcela Tavares De Souza, Michelly Dias da Silva, and Rachel de Carvalho, “Integrative Review: What Is It? How to Do It?,” *Einstein (São Paulo)* 8 (2010): 102–6.

¹⁷ Victoria Clarke and Virginia Braun, “Successful Qualitative Research: A Practical Guide for Beginners,” *Successful Qualitative Research*, 2013, 1–400.

- Data interpretation: Defining themes and categories: In this phase, the initial themes underwent a re-evaluation, leading to the creation and precise definition of the final themes.
- Presentation of results: The final stage of the process involved presenting the research findings within this research article.

Throughout these analytical steps, the researchers adhered to the principles of thematic analysis to ensure a rigorous and systematic examination of the literature data.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Family and Socio-economic Background

A substantial portion of the global disabled population resides in the economically underdeveloped regions of the world, predominantly within low and middle-income countries.¹⁸ Additionally, a significant number of these individuals live in rural areas and often grapple with conditions marked by severe poverty.¹⁹ Persons with disabilities in these settings face varying societal, cultural, and environmental stereotypical perceptions.²⁰ Moreover, developing countries, such as South Africa, are identified as particularly vulnerable environments for individuals with disabilities.

Children with disabilities often come from households with lower incomes.²¹ These households are frequently headed by single parents, particularly mothers or grandparents, and are often characterised by economic hardships. In South Africa, children with disabilities often bear the brunt of extreme poverty and face discrimination within their communities, leading to the marginalisation of their education.²² The prevalence of single-parent households mirrors the broader societal context. In 2020, 42% of children in South Africa lived with their mothers alone, 32.7% lived with both parents, 21.3% lived without either parent, and 4% were in households led solely by their fathers.²³ Social grants remain a crucial source of income for 28.8% of South African households, particularly in rural areas.²⁴ These statistics underscore the socioeconomic challenges faced by families, especially those with children with disabilities.

For some families of LSEN, their financial stability hinges on the disability grants they receive, amounting to R1,890 (approximately \$104) per month. Poverty and the dependence on these disability grants to cover school fees are among the challenges contributing to the inadequate provision of education and support in schools for LSEN.²⁵ Given that some families rely on these grants, they fall within the category of households falling below the upper-bound poverty line of R1,268.²⁶ The socioeconomic circumstances of caregivers of children with disabilities often lead to them abandoning their children at government care centres and schools.²⁷ A research study conducted in the Mzimba District of Malawi revealed instances where learners conveyed that their caregivers never returned for them after they were initially placed in school. This paints a compelling picture of the socioeconomic pressures these families face, which can ultimately affect the educational and caregiving decisions they make.

¹⁸ S. Grech, *Disability and Poverty in Rural Guatemala: Conceptual, Cultural and Social Intersections*. (London: CBM, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, 2016); Siyabulela Mkabile et al., "African Families' and Caregivers' Experiences of Raising a Child with Intellectual Disability: A Narrative Synthesis of Qualitative Studies," *African Journal of Disability* 10 (April 30, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.4102/ajod.v10i0.827>.

¹⁹ Grech, *Disability and Poverty in Rural Guatemala*, 3.

²⁰ Sphiwe Wezzie, Moses Fayiah, and Simeon Gwayi, "Challenges Faced by Learners with Hearing Impairments in a Special School Environment: A Case Study of Embangweni Primary School for the Deaf, Mzimba District, Malawi," *World 2*, no. 1 (2020): 21–36.

²¹ N Deghaye, *Disability Support and Accessibility in Mainstream Schools in South Africa: Research on Socio-Economic Policy* (Stellenbosch: Stellenbosch University, 2021), https://resep.sun.ac.za/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Disability-support_Resep_May2021_final.pdf.

²² J. McKenzie et al., "The Education of Children with Disabilities Risks Falling by the Wayside," University of Cape Town, 2020, <https://www.news.uct.ac.za/article/-2020-05-28-the-education-of-children-with-disabilities-risks-falling-by-the-wayside>.

²³ Statistics South Africa (StatsSA), "Poverty in Perspective," 2020,

https://www.parliament.gov.za/storage/app/media/1_Stock/Events_Institutional/2020/womens_charter_2020/docs/05-03-2021/StatsSa_presentation.pdf.

²⁴ StatsSA, *Poverty in perspective*, 18.

²⁵ Department of Basic Education, "Guidelines to Ensure Quality Education and Support in Special Schools and Special School Resource Centres to Support Inclusive Education."

²⁶ StatsSA, *Poverty in perspective*, 19.

²⁷ Wezzie, Fayiah, and Gwayi, "Challenges Faced by Learners with Hearing Impairments in a Special School Environment: A Case Study of Embangweni Primary School for the Deaf, Mzimba District, Malawi," 31.

Learning Barriers

Lack of Adequately Trained Teaching Staff

“Teacher professional learning (TPL) is the most effective leadership practice in strengthening student outcomes.”²⁸ Consequently, when TPL falls short, there is a considerable risk of detrimental effects on learners' experiences and outcomes as a shortage of adequately trained special education educators and professional staff can impede the effective teaching of LSEN.²⁹ One of the most controversial problems experienced by teachers who teach LSEN is that they turn to training programmes to compensate for the special education knowledge they lack and to acquire special education teaching techniques.³⁰

Adequately trained educators are pivotal to the success of educating LSEN. However, this crucial element continues to pose a substantial barrier to the effective provision of education to this group, and this constitutes a significant impediment to their learning progress. Research indicates that educators in schools catering to LSEN often lack the essential training necessary to deliver comprehensive teaching and support.³¹ Many educators lack a fundamental understanding of disabilities and the requisite knowledge to effectively instruct children with disabilities.³² This deficit in training extends beyond specialised schools to encompass teachers in mainstream schools who often lack the necessary qualifications or basic training needed to proficiently educate LSEN. Furthermore, a staggering 90% of South African educators responsible for teaching deaf learners lack basic proficiency in SASL.³³ This deficiency in communication skills can lead to significant underperformance among learners due to communication breakdowns. These findings collectively underpin the pressing need for enhanced training and qualifications among educators to adequately support LSEN.

Moreover, recognising that learning takes place not only within the confines of the classroom but also within social interactions,³⁴ effective communication with deaf learners becomes essential for facilitating their learning effectively. Residential schools for deaf learners frequently underestimate their responsibilities beyond the classroom.³⁵ There is a pressing need for the development of appropriate programmes to enrich the overall learning experience of deaf learners.³⁶ This imperative extends to equipping boarding staff with enhanced communication skills to effectively engage with learners.³⁷ Furthermore, residential schools for deaf learners should appoint suitable deaf adults as "cultural and language role models" to foster enhanced learning experiences outside the classroom through meaningful social interactions.³⁸ This recommendation aligns with the argument that the existing gap in the training and skills of educators is exacerbated in boarding schools, particularly those catering to deaf-blind learners, often burdened by inadequate staffing levels and extended working hours.³⁹ These interconnected factors emphasise the significance of effective communication and support systems to maximise the educational outcomes for deaf learners, especially in residential school settings.

During their visits to schools for the deaf in the Western Cape Province of South Africa, DeafSA found a pervasive lack of proficiency in SASL among both classroom and hostel staff across all the schools they inspected.⁴⁰ Through the communication breakdown, stemming from staff members' inability to communicate through signing, instances of neglect and the use of corporal punishment on the learners were identified.⁴¹ In South Africa, corporal

²⁸ Helen Timperley and Adrienne Alton-Lee, “Reframing Teacher Professional Learning: An Alternative Policy Approach to Strengthening Valued Outcomes for Diverse Learners,” *Review of Research in Education* 32, no. 1 (2008): 328–69.

²⁹ Edwards J Kochung, “Role of Higher Education in Promoting Inclusive Education: Kenyan Perspective,” *Journal of Emerging Trends in Educational Research and Policy Studies* 2, no. 3 (2011): 144–49.

³⁰ Orly Crispel and Ronen Kasperski, “The Impact of Teacher Training in Special Education on the Implementation of Inclusion in Mainstream Classrooms,” *International Journal of Inclusive Education* 25, no. 9 (2021): 1079–90.

³¹ Human Rights Watch, “Complicit in Exclusion: South Africa’s Failure to Guarantee an Inclusive Education for Children with Disabilities,” Right to Education, 2015, <https://www.right-to-education.org/resource/complicit-exclusion-south-africa-s-failure-guarantee-inclusive-education-children>; Winnie Poelane Ngobeni, Joseph Ramathibela Maimane, and Mmushetji Petrus Rankhumise, “The Effect of Limited Sign Language as Barrier to Teaching and Learning among Deaf Learners in South Africa,” *South African Journal of Education* 40, no. 2 (2020): 1–7; Tejal Manga and Khetsiwe P. Masuku, “Challenges of Teaching the Deaf-Blind Learner in an Education Setting in Johannesburg: Experiences of Educators and Assistant Educators,” *South African Journal of Communication Disorders* 67, no. 1 (June 11, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.4102/sajcd.v67i1.649>.

³² Human Rights Watch, *Complicit in exclusion*, 59.

³³ Human Rights Watch, *Complicit in exclusion*, 59; Ngobeni et al., “The effect of limited sign language,” 2.

³⁴ Wezzie, Fayiah, and Gwayi, “Challenges Faced by Learners with Hearing Impairments in a Special School Environment: A Case Study of Embangweni Primary School for the Deaf, Mzimba District, Malawi,” 29.

³⁵ DeafSA, “Deaf Education,” 2018, https://static.pmg.org.za/180912Deaf_Education.pdf.

³⁶ DeafSA, “Deaf Education,” 26.

³⁷ DeafSA, “Deaf Education,” 26.

³⁸ DeafSA, “Deaf Education,” 27.

³⁹ Manga and Masuku, “Challenges of Teaching the Deaf-Blind Learner in an Education Setting in Johannesburg: Experiences of Educators and Assistant Educators,” 2.

⁴⁰ DeafSA, “Deaf Education,” 27.

⁴¹ DeafSA, “Deaf Education,” 27.

punishment is explicitly prohibited by section 10 of the South African Schools Act.⁴² These harmful disciplinary practices have been linked to a multitude of adverse consequences for learners, with a disproportionate impact on LSEN.⁴³ This accentuates the urgency of addressing the communication barriers faced by deaf learners specifically and the need to ensure a safe and inclusive learning environment for LSEN in general.

Lack of Resources

Resources encompass not only teaching materials but also time, educators' knowledge, and skills acquired through education and experience.⁴⁴ Additionally, resource shortages can take various forms, including physical, technological, systemic, and financial aspects, often stemming from government infrastructure deficits.⁴⁵ Lack of resources is a significant issue, particularly for teachers and LSEN who require specialised equipment.⁴⁶ Inadequate support, both financially and in terms of necessary devices and infrastructure, hinders effective teaching and learning.⁴⁷ Furthermore, insufficient learning materials, such as textbooks and Braille resources, pose significant barriers for visually impaired learners who often must share Braille machines, affecting their ability to complete classwork and homework.

As deaf learners predominantly learn through visual means, the implementation of visual aids is imperative.⁴⁸ However, a significant absence of these aids in the classrooms was discovered.⁴⁹ This deficiency in essential resources imposes a severe hindrance on both educators and learners. DeafSA has also highlighted the scarcity of learning and teaching support materials (LTSM) in deaf schools, which are indispensable for the integration of SASL into the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statements (CAPS) curriculum.⁵⁰ This deficiency further emphasises the critical need to provide educators and learners with the necessary tools to facilitate effective learning and teaching for deaf learners.

The Implications of COVID-19 on teaching and learning

On 15 March 2020, the South African Government led by President Cyril Ramaphosa, declared a state of national emergency due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Subsequently, following the President's announcement of COVID-19 as a national disaster, the DBE issued a directive to close schools from March 18 to April 14, 2020.⁵¹ Furthermore, the country initiated a stringent lockdown (level 5) on March 22, 2020, that allowed only essential services and select businesses to operate legally. In April 2020, the DBE introduced a "Covid-19 response programme" for learners.⁵² Consequently, learners throughout the country were required to continue their education at home under the supervision of parents or guardians.⁵³ This lockdown period had a profound impact on learners of all grade levels. The emergency plan devised by the DBE to ensure the continuity of learning during the COVID-19 lockdown encompassed several key components. Lessons were broadcast through television (TV) and radio stations, making them widely accessible to learners. However, these were not accessible to blind learners and deaf learners due to the absence of sign language translators on the television, or the lessons being presented on the radio. This put blind and deaf learners at a great disadvantage. Taking the above into consideration, these measures did not accommodate learners with disabilities and LSEN were, therefore, excluded from the South African education system during the pandemic.⁵⁴ Nonetheless, online provision of lessons was facilitated, with learners gaining access to essential textbooks and teaching guides via digital platforms. Furthermore, study materials were uploaded to the DBE

⁴² Republic of South Africa (RSA), *Constitution of the Republic of South Africa No. 108 of 1996* (Pretoria: Government Printer, 1996), <https://www.gov.za/sites/default/files/images/a108-96.pdf>.

⁴³ Ashley S MacSuga-Gage et al., "Disproportionate Corporal Punishment of Students with Disabilities and Black and Hispanic Students," *Journal of Disability Policy Studies* 32, no. 3 (2021): 212–23.

⁴⁴ I.S. Owoko, "The Role of Advocacy in Enhancing Equalization of Opportunities for Disabled People.," 2009.

⁴⁵ Rufus Olanrewaju Adebisi et al., "Barriers to Special Needs Education in Nigeria," *International Journal of Education and Research* 2, no. 11 (2014): 451–62.

⁴⁶ Boitumelo Mangope, Magdeline C Mannathoko, and Ahmed Bawa Kuyini, "Pre-Service Physical Education Teachers and Inclusive Education: Attitudes, Concerns and Perceived Skill Needs.," *International Journal of Special Education* 28, no. 3 (2013): 82–92.

⁴⁷ M C Morena and M M Nkoane, "Challenges of Learners with Special Educational Needs in Lesotho Mainstream Classrooms," *International Journal of Multidisciplinary and Current Educational Research* 3, no. 2 (2021): 1–9.

⁴⁸ Ngobeni, Maimane, and Rankhumise, "The Effect of Limited Sign Language as Barrier to Teaching and Learning among Deaf Learners in South Africa," 4

⁴⁹ Ngobeni, Maimane, and Rankhumise, "The Effect of Limited Sign Language as Barrier to Teaching and Learning among Deaf Learners in South Africa," 4

⁵⁰ DeafSA, "Deaf Education," 22.

⁵¹ Crain Soudien, Vijay Reddy, and Jaqueline Harvey, "The Impact of COVID-19 on a Fragile Education System: The Case of South Africa," *Primary and Secondary Education during COVID-19: Disruptions to Educational Opportunity during a Pandemic*, 2022, 303–25.

⁵² Soudien, Reddy, and Harvey, "The Impact of COVID-19 on a Fragile Education System: The Case of South Africa."

⁵³ Soudien, Reddy, and Harvey, "The Impact of COVID-19 on a Fragile Education System: The Case of South Africa."

⁵⁴ Serges Djoyou Kamga, "COVID-19 and the Inclusion of Learners with Disabilities in Basic Education in South Africa: A Critical Analysis," *African Human Rights Law Journal* 20, no. 2 (2020): 558–83.

website, enabling easy access for learners. To cater to the diverse needs of learners, multimedia resources compatible with mobile devices were made available on the DBE website. Lastly, the plan extended its support to educators and school management, ensuring they received clear communication and guidelines on effectively addressing the learning barriers experienced by learners during this extraordinary period.

The initiatives mentioned above represent just a portion of the comprehensive efforts undertaken to ensure uninterrupted learning during the pandemic. A multifaceted approach was adopted, albeit with a heavy reliance on technology and internet access.⁵⁵ Consequently, during the stringent lockdown period in 2020, when physical schools were temporarily closed, learning pivoted to an online mode, with learners engaging in self-directed learning with the assistance of parents or other family members.⁵⁶

The restrictions and protocols introduced by the pandemic brought unique challenges for LSEN. Learners often did not want to make use of personal protective equipment, such as masks, and neglected social distancing protocols.⁵⁷ A study was conducted across three countries, namely, Ethiopia, Nepal and Qatar that highlighted that a school is central and plays a significant role in the wider socio-emotional well-being of all children, more especially for children with disabilities.⁵⁸ The participants (parents) were interviewed, and they expressed that, during the hard lockdown, their children experienced the loss of daily structure, experienced feelings of loneliness due to the lack of contact with friends and missed out on opportunities due to the closure of schools.⁵⁹ A study in Turkey during the COVID-19 pandemic among LSEN revealed that, despite educational efforts, they struggled to regularly attend TV lessons and online classes, and receive teacher feedback.⁶⁰ Amidst the stringent lockdown measures, only 37% of South African households maintained uninterrupted internet connectivity via cell phones and other devices. Delving into the regional breakdown, the scale of the challenge was evident. North-West and Limpopo Provinces exhibited a lack of home internet access, registering at a mere 3.6% and 1.6%, respectively.⁶¹ As a result, these difficulties were significantly intensified for LSEN.

This paper makes a significant contribution because it illuminates the multi-faceted nature of the barriers faced by LSEN in their pursuit of education. It underscores that these challenges are not isolated but rather interrelated, encompassing socio-economic factors, resource limitations, and the added complexities brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. Recognising the range of barriers emphasises the need for comprehensive and holistic solutions to address the educational disparities experienced by LSEN.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The discussion has shown that to successfully address barriers to learning among LSEN in South Africa, the themes below need to be strategically realised.

Special Educational needs training

Adequate training and support, experience and competence are key substantial factors that inspire confidence in teaching.⁶² In this way, teachers can apply innovative skills in their teaching, while strengthening their learners' enthusiasm to learn. The following notable recommendations are necessary to address these challenges:

- It is recommended that special education needs and basic training, such as sign language, braille and how to assist learners with physical disabilities, be made mandatory for LSEN schools. Furthermore, it would be an added advantage if every staff member working with LSEN has technological skills, can operate assistive devices, and can apply these skills to the teaching environment. This is essential as insufficient skills in assistive technology are a primary obstacle to effective learning and achieving a meaningful education for LSEN.⁶³
- It is recommended that staff development programmes be synthesised at LSEN schools to improve staff performance, skills, and knowledge. Staff development will ensure cooperative learning, curriculum

⁵⁵ Soudien, Reddy, and Harvey, "The Impact of COVID-19 on a Fragile Education System: The Case of South Africa," 310.

⁵⁶ Soudien, Reddy, and Harvey, "The Impact of COVID-19 on a Fragile Education System: The Case of South Africa," 312.

⁵⁷ Johan Beckmann and Mariëtte Reyneke, "COVID-19 Challenges to Access to Education for Learners Living with Severe Disabilities: An Education Law Perspective," *Perspectives in Education* 39, no. 1 (2021): 125.

⁵⁸ N., S. Singal et al., *Revisiting Equity: Covid-19 and the Education of Children with Disabilities.*, University of Cambridge: Cambridge Network for Disability and Education Research (Cambridge: University of Cambridge: Network for Disability and Education Research, 2021).

⁵⁹ Singal et al., *Revisiting Equity: Covid-19 and the Education of Children with Disabilities*, 9.

⁶⁰ Gulcihan Yazcayir and Hasan Gurgur, "Students with Special Needs in Digital Classrooms during the COVID-19 Pandemic in Turkey," *Pedagogical Research* 6, no. 1 (January 3, 2021): em0088, <https://doi.org/10.29333/pr/9356>.

⁶¹ P. Hanekom, "Covid-19 Exposes South Africa's Digital Literacy Divide," Mail&Guardian, 2020, <https://mg.co.za/thought-leader/opinion/2020-09-08-covid-19-exposes-south-africas-digital-literacy-divide/>.

⁶² Australian Human Rights, "Access to Education for Children with Barriers and Difficulties," 2021, <https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/projects/access-education-students-disability>.

⁶³ Toni Van Laarhoven et al., "Integrating Assistive Technology into Teacher Education Programs: Trials, Tribulations, and Lessons Learned," *Assistive Technology Outcomes and Benefits* 8, no. 1 (2012): 32.

enhancement, and continuous and adequate provision of learners' needs. For example, training programmes, such as social context, technology, and Microsoft Teams training, are necessary to improve skills for both teachers and LSEN.

Social Context Training

The term "social context" typically refers to the environments encompassing the social groups individuals interact with and the cultural aspects of life in which individuals are involved. Diverse customs, attitudes, traditions, and behaviours of individuals collectively shape their social context.⁶⁴ Within the classroom environment, the spirit and atmosphere of the classroom serve as the social context. For learners, this social context is intricately shaped by their daily interactions with educators and other staff members, as well as the robustness of the curriculum and teaching programmes. These elements exert a profound influence on various aspects of learners' activities, spanning from active participation in formal school endeavours to engagement in extracurricular pursuits. These interactions among learners, educators, and other staff members should facilitate and foster emotional and social growth among the learners. Teaching a class comprising children with diverse needs can pose significant challenges for educators, often stemming from insufficient training and support, limited knowledge about various disabilities, and managing their own emotions when working with LSEN. Therefore, teachers should not only receive theoretical training but also practical experience to understand the spectrum of needs within their real-world teaching contexts.⁶⁵

A negative attitude toward learning can have a detrimental impact on the overall teaching environment, just as a negative attitude towards teaching can affect the learning environment. As such, educators must proactively create an inclusive and supportive atmosphere where learners believe their needs are being addressed and their potential is acknowledged. Additionally, qualities, such as attentive listening, empathy, fostering positive attitudes towards disabilities, and addressing both behavioural and academic performance can collectively contribute to breaking down barriers to learning.⁶⁶ In addition, LSEN tend to suffer feelings of low self-esteem, self-criticism and neglect.⁶⁷ Furthermore, a curriculum perceived by learners to be "irrelevant" or "not interesting" may lead to truancy (the act of skipping or bunking classes) and delinquent behaviour (such as substance abuse).⁶⁸ Hence, teachers should ensure that the curriculum is customised to the needs of the learners. This will create a positive environment that gives learners hope for a better future.

Curriculum

Many teachers find themselves lacking in pedagogical content knowledge when it comes to effectively educating LSEN, mainly because the curriculum is primarily tailored for mainstream schools. The curriculum often acts as a significant hurdle for LSEN, limiting their ability to leverage their strengths to their full potential.⁶⁹ While teachers may be subject matter experts, understanding how to teach LSEN is equally crucial in creating a meaningful and enjoyable learning experience for them.⁷⁰ Notably, inadequate curriculum adjustments contribute to underperformance among LSEN.⁷¹ Some schools still receive standard textbooks and learning materials that are not converted into Braille for blind learners, necessitating the manual conversion of these materials by teachers. In cases involving textbooks with visual content, educators take it upon themselves to photocopy relevant pages and convert them into Braille formats to accommodate blind learners. This highlights the pressing need for curriculum adaptations and additional support to cater to the diverse needs of the learners.

The Guidelines for Special Schools⁷² accentuates the following curriculum responsibilities of principals in schools for LSEN: a) strict adherence to established policies and procedures; b) ensuring that the school's educational programmes are fully aligned with the National Curriculum Statement (NCS); c) guaranteeing the presence of a sufficient number of qualified and professional educators capable of delivering the curriculum

⁶⁴ J Fernando Sánchez-Rada and Carlos A Iglesias, "Social Context in Sentiment Analysis: Formal Definition, Overview of Current Trends and Framework for Comparison," *Information Fusion* 52 (2019): 344–56.

⁶⁵ Adewumi and Mosito, "Experiences of Teachers in Implementing Inclusion of Learners with Special Education Needs in Selected Fort Beaufort District Primary Schools, South Africa"; Susanne Schwab et al., "Social Participation in the Context of Inclusive Education: Primary School Students' Friendship Networks from Students' and Teachers' Perspectives," *European Journal of Special Needs Education* 37, no. 5 (September 3, 2022): 834–49, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08856257.2021.1961194>.

⁶⁶ S. Naidu and D.R. Bedgood, "Learning in Social Context," in *Encyclopedia of the Sciences of Learning*, ed. N.M. Seel (Freiburg: Springer, 2012), 1705.

⁶⁷ David Lund, "Craft, Design and Technology for Children Having 'Special Educational Needs'," *Studies in Design Education Craft & Technology* 17, no. 1 (2009).

⁶⁸ Lund, "Craft, Design and Technology for Children Having 'Special Educational Needs'," 14.

⁶⁹ Morena and Nkoane, "Challenges of Learners with Special Educational Needs in Lesotho Mainstream Classrooms," 2.

⁷⁰ Mangope, Mannathoko, and Kuyini, "Pre-Service Physical Education Teachers and Inclusive Education: Attitudes, Concerns and Perceived Skill Needs," 90.

⁷¹ Morena and Nkoane, "Challenges of Learners with Special Educational Needs in Lesotho Mainstream Classrooms," 2.

⁷² Department of Basic Education, *Guidelines to ensure quality education and support in special schools*, 8.

effectively; d) the provision of appropriate learning materials tailored to the specific needs of learners, with an emphasis on the relevance of the format; and e) creating simplified versions, special editions, or materials corresponding to lower grade levels of texts to cater to individual learning needs.

Technology Training

Staff members need to be trained on technology and software for LSEN. This will ensure that teachers are familiar with and can operate computers, smart devices, and assistive devices. Qualified trainers should therefore be responsible for training teachers on technology for special education. Technical programmes, such as text-to-speech programmes, dictating programmes, and adaptive apps, paired with Tablets are meant to assist learners depending on their special needs.⁷³ Text-to-speech is mostly helpful to blind learners or those with low vision. This programme can also assist learners in having their lessons read aloud or as a communication tool for non-verbal learners. Dictation programmes transcribe speech. This will assist learners in completing their tasks as well as taking notes.

Class Assistants

Special schools serving LSEN need substantial support in the form of class assistants. These assistants collaborate closely with teachers to ensure the effectiveness of teaching and learning. Class assistants in schools for LSEN have a multifaceted role. They oversee class activities when teachers are engaged with individual learners or small groups, contributing to improved learning outcomes for these individuals or groups, while the assistant attends to the rest of the class. In the absence of the teacher, they step in, providing valuable feedback on learner progress based on teacher instructions. Class assistants also assist in maintaining learner hygiene and discipline within the classroom, especially as the class moves between activities. Additionally, they aid teachers in designing, preparing, distributing, collecting, and storing teaching and learning materials. Language support, including translation, can also be offered by class assistants to learners not proficient in the classroom language during class activities. Beyond the classroom, class assistants actively engage in extracurricular activities and help learners complete assigned tasks. Their role is integral to the comprehensive support provided to LSEN.⁷⁴

Specialised Support from the DBE

It is recommended that the DBE offer continuous specialised training and development of educators working with LSEN. Moreover, classroom support should be provided to improve collaboration between the school and the district.⁷⁵ To support special schools effectively, the DBE should provide tailored and specialised assistance. This should be accompanied by the allocation of necessary resources and funding to facilitate a conducive learning environment. Such resources should encompass a wide array of materials, including books, as well as the availability of therapy staff and assistive devices to cater to the unique needs of the learners. Furthermore, it is crucial to organise regular awareness and training workshops for both teachers and parents, aimed at improving their ability to care for and educate LSEN. The consistency of these workshops serves the dual purpose of ongoing monitoring and resource support for schools.⁷⁶ Moreover, these workshops play a vital role in raising awareness among parents and communities, providing them with a platform to voice their challenges in raising children with special needs.

Additionally, it is recommended to establish access to a flexible curriculum that places priority on special schools. This includes the adaptation of the curriculum, to alleviate the burden on teachers who currently must modify exam papers during assessment. This adaptation should extend to teaching methods, learning materials, and assessment tools. The significance of curriculum adaptation is underscored by the Education White Paper 6, as it enhances the learning experience and support for LSEN.⁷⁷ Lastly, it is imperative to make continuous professional development opportunities available to teachers to equip them with the necessary skills for pedagogical adaptations.⁷⁸ This ongoing training ensures that educators can effectively meet the diverse needs of their learners.

Psychosocial Support

Both LSEN and educators learn and teach under very difficult circumstances. As a result, their mental well-being needs to be prioritised by offering regular psychosocial support through debriefing and counselling sessions.

⁷³ Teach Thought, "Technology in Special Education Classrooms," 2021, <https://www.teachthought.com/technology/special-education/>.

⁷⁴ Thuthukani Special School and Resource Centre, "Class Assistants," 2020, <https://www.thuthukani.org.za/class-assistants/>.

⁷⁵ Adewumi and Mosito, "Experiences of Teachers in Implementing Inclusion of Learners with Special Education Needs in Selected Fort Beaufort District Primary Schools, South Africa," 7.

⁷⁶ S. Matebese, "Educating Learners with Special Educational Needs in Special Schools: An Interpretative Phenomenological Study of Teachers' Experiences." (Rhodes University, 2021), 98.

⁷⁷ South Africa. Department of Education, *Education White Paper 6: Special Needs Education: Building an Inclusive Education and Training System* (Department of Education Pretoria, 2001).

⁷⁸ Singal et al., "Revisiting Equity: Covid-19 and the Education of Children with Disabilities," 10.

Therefore, associated health professionals, such as social workers, psychologists, and occupational and speech therapists, should be made available for both the learners and teachers at the school. Heavy workloads are challenges for adequate teaching and learning.⁷⁹ Teachers in schools for LSEN work under stressful and tense circumstances, which might lead to mental exhaustion. More teachers and learner support assistants should therefore be employed to reduce the heavy workloads. If possible, learner support assistants could also be made available at the hostels to assist learners with homework or with other tasks they may want to perform outside school hours.

Parental Support

Parents and caregivers are children's principal teachers and thus need to be invested in their children's development.⁸⁰ Parents, as well as communities, need to be educated regarding the nature of various disabilities so that their children are accepted by both parents and society. Cultural and societal beliefs that stigmatise LSEN as victims of bewitchment, divine punishment, or as a source of shame to the family, must undergo a profound transformation within communities.⁸¹

Parental involvement in the learners' school activities should also be encouraged to enhance learning and development. Empowering parents with the knowledge that their children can learn and develop will strengthen their involvement and support. An educational programme can only work if parents are actively engaged.⁸² Moreover, LSEN schools should transition from being learner-centred to family-centred as including the family enhances sustainable development for the learners.⁸³

Reinstatement of Vocational-related School Subjects

In the past, the DBE offered vocational-related subjects to primary and secondary learners. However, these subjects were discontinued even though they offered vocational opportunities to learners who may not be able to pursue higher education post-secondary school. These subjects, such as sewing, carpentry, and bricklaying, can empower learners with lower academic performance to showcase their unique skills and talents, ultimately fostering independence. Artistic instruction not only enables learners to acquire new skills but also encourages collaboration with peers, allowing them to realise their potential and capabilities.⁸⁴ Furthermore, it leads to the development of artisan entrepreneurship skills among LSEN.⁸⁵ By nurturing their artisan talents creatively, these learners can aspire to become self-sufficient business owners. This approach not only equips LSEN with entrepreneurial skills but also positions them to make meaningful contributions to both the economy and their communities.

CONCLUSION

This paper has shed light on the multifaceted barriers faced by LSEN in South Africa's education system. However, amidst these challenges, the paper presented recommendations aimed at improving the educational landscape for LSEN. These recommendations encompass a broad spectrum of interventions, from enhancing LSEN teacher training and incorporating social context awareness into the curriculum to the provision of class assistants and specialised support from the DBE. Additionally, the importance of psychosocial and parental support as well as the reinstatement of vocational-related subjects to ensure a holistic and empowering educational experience for LSEN have been highlighted. Consequently, a concerted effort is required from various stakeholders – educational institutions, policymakers, teachers, families, and communities – to create an inclusive and equitable education system where every LSEN can thrive. The path forward encourages collaboration, flexibility, and a steadfast commitment to overcoming learning barriers for LSEN.

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⁸⁰ Sedibe and Fourie, "Exploring Opportunities and Challenges in Parent–School Partnerships in Special Needs Schools in the Gauteng Province, South Africa," 434.

⁸¹ Pather, "Confronting Inclusive Education in Africa since Salamanca," 786.

⁸² Sedibe and Fourie, "Exploring Opportunities and Challenges in Parent–School Partnerships in Special Needs Schools in the Gauteng Province, South Africa," 434.

⁸³ Timperley and Alton-Lee, "Reframing Teacher Professional Learning: An Alternative Policy Approach to Strengthening Valued Outcomes for Diverse Learners," 328–69.

⁸⁴ Lund, "Craft, Design and Technology for Children Having 'Special Educational Needs'," 10.

⁸⁵ Tobias Pret and Aviel Cogan, "Artisan Entrepreneurship: A Systematic Literature Review and Research Agenda," *International Journal of Entrepreneurial Behavior & Research* 25, no. 4 (2019): 610.

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