

# Breaking Barriers: Enhancing Sports Participation for Learners with Physical Disabilities in Vhembe District's Special Schools



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## ABSTRACT

Amongst recorded benefits, sports and recreation activities increase physical movement and mobility. They also improve fitness and flexibility, which promotes a greater range of motion and causes of movement for people with physical disabilities. This study aimed to identify the challenges faced by learners with physical disabilities while participating in sports and recreation activities at selected special schools in the Vhembe District of South Africa. A qualitative approach using a descriptive survey was employed to provide an accurate portrayal of the opinions, beliefs, and knowledge of learners who participate in sports and recreation. A focus group discussion was conducted with 44 learners (22 boys and 22 girls) with physical disabilities at selected special schools in Vhembe District, and one face-to-face interview was carried out with the sports master from the selected special school in the Vhembe District. Data analysis was conducted thematically to identify patterns in challenges faced by learners with physical disabilities when engaging in sports activities at special schools in the Vhembe District. Results indicated that learners participating in various sporting activities gain numerous benefits, but they are also exposed to social, physiological, and physical challenges. Learners view these challenges as barriers to furthering their interest in sports and recreation activities. There is a need to design and implement an awareness programme for all learners with different types of disabilities to enable them to interact with others without discrimination.

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## INTRODUCTION

Engaging in sports and recreational activities is vital for the physical, social, and emotional development of all learners, including those with physical disabilities. However, learners from special schools in the Vhembe District face unique challenges that can hinder their participation in these activities. Physical disability is a long-term impairment of part of the body's physical functions, it is a limitation on a person's physical functioning, mobility, dexterity or stamina.<sup>1</sup> People with physical disabilities are people who have orthopaedic impairments, muscular dystrophy, cerebral palsy, multiple sclerosis, acquired brain injury, spinal cord injury, spinal bifida, cystic fibrosis, epilepsy, Tourette syndrome,

<sup>1</sup> Robert Scott Santana, "Physical Activity in People with Mobility Impairments" (Arizona State University, 2022).

dwarfism and malformation.<sup>2</sup> All this causes difficulties with walking and mobility, sitting and standing, use of hands, arms, sight, hearing, speech, breathing, bladder control, muscle control, sleeping, fits and seizures or chronic tiredness.<sup>2</sup> Physical disabilities can be caused by congenital birth issues (before or during birth), accident injuries or illness.<sup>3</sup>

Children's engagement in sports and recreation participation is known to contribute to the developmental outcomes for a healthy lifestyle, where children learn physical, social and cognitive skills. Marsigliante, et.al., also acknowledge that there is a variety of benefits for children when participating in school-based sports activities, which range from physical and mental health, social well-being, and cognitive and academic performance.<sup>4</sup> The holistic development of children is directly related to positive experiences and the transfer of learning that happens during active school-based sports and recreation participation.<sup>5</sup>

Since the school is the one place where everybody should get the opportunity to play sports and take part in physical activity, it has an important role in the development of a lifelong physical activity lifestyle. To achieve that, Sport and Recreation South Africa (SRSA) has placed an emphasis on employing a school sport and recreation programme compulsory for each and every public, private and special school in South Africa.<sup>6</sup> The Department of Basic Education makes it clear that all schools should have a mandate to offer both competitive and non-competitive sporting opportunities for their pupils, to ensure that all children and young people have access to take part in sports and enjoy the benefits it brings.<sup>7</sup> However, upon further examination, it appears that the situation is not equitable within special schools located in rural regions, indicating a disparity that warrants attention and potential solutions to address the existing imbalances. Research on the potential value of sports in different settings has been provided; however, there is a persistent lack of evidence on context-specific challenges that learners with physical disabilities encounter while participating in sports and recreation activities in special schools.

Therefore, the primary objective of this study is to actively engage in addressing the challenges experienced by learners with physical disabilities while participating in sports and recreational activities at the selected special school located in the Vhembe District. This article addresses several research questions with a central question focusing on how inclusive sport and recreation participation for learners with physical disability can promote the holistic development of learners with physical disabilities in selected special schools.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The participation of learners with physical disabilities in sports is crucial for their physical, social, and emotional development. This literature review synthesizes existing research on the topic, such as inclusive sports participation in special schools, challenges in sports for learners with Disabilities, Health and safety concerns affecting participation in sports and recreation, and Teamwork and group dynamics in inclusive sports settings.

### Inclusive Sports Participation in Special Schools

Research on the disability landscape has extensively explored the social barriers that people with disabilities encounter in their communities. Few studies have focused on inclusive sports participation in special schools. Globally, governments have policies to govern sports participation in the school context, but less attention is given to special schools. A study by Sahlin and Lexell showed that Inclusive

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<sup>2</sup> Marie-Josée Harbec, Gary Goldfield, and Linda S. Pagani, "Healthy Body, Healthy Mind: Long-Term Mutual Benefits between Classroom and Sport Engagement in Children from Ages 6 to 12 Years," *Preventive Medicine Reports* 24 (2021): 101581.

<sup>3</sup> Harbec, Goldfield, and Pagani, "Healthy Body, Healthy Mind: Long-Term Mutual Benefits between Classroom and Sport Engagement in Children from Ages 6 to 12 Years."

<sup>4</sup> Santo Marsigliante, Manuel Gómez-López, and Antonella Muscella, "Effects on Children's Physical and Mental Well-Being of a Physical-Activity-Based School Intervention Program: A Randomized Study," *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 20, no. 3 (2027).

<sup>5</sup> J. Lindahl et al., "Trends and Knowledge Base in Sport and Exercise Psychology Research: A Bibliometric Review Study," *International Review of Sport and Exercise Psychology* 8, no. 1 (2015): 71–90.

<sup>6</sup> Sport and Recreation South Africa (SRSA), *National Sport and Recreation Plan* (Pretoria: Sport and Recreation South Africa, 2011).

<sup>7</sup> Sport and Recreation South Africa (SRSA), *Draft School Sport Policy* (Pretoria: Sport and Recreation South Africa, 2011).

sports can also have a positive influence towards participation engagement, hence improving physical and mental health.<sup>8</sup> Sport and recreation inclusion is so important as it is included in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child: “*The Committee ... emphasizes the obligations of States parties to ensure that children with disabilities have equal access with other children to participation in play ... Pro-active measures are needed to remove barriers and promote accessibility to and availability of inclusive opportunities for children with disabilities to participate in all these activities*”.<sup>9</sup> Although this quote implies that children with disabilities are entitled to opportunities to participate, these opportunities are not always available, especially in special schools within rural communities.

### **Challenges in Sports for Learners with Disabilities**

Access to sports facilities is a fundamental requirement for promoting sports and recreational activities for learners with disabilities. Given the current landscape, where research indicates that a considerable number of schools lack the necessary infrastructure to cater to the needs of all students, especially those with physical disabilities, the situation calls for urgent attention. McKenzie underscores this issue by revealing that few special schools have accessible sports equipment and facilities, greatly impeding opportunities for inclusive sports engagement.<sup>10</sup>

Other challenges are the prevalent architectural barriers within school settings, including aspects like stairs without ramps, narrow doorways, and inaccessible restrooms. The stipulations set forth by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) aim to ensure accessibility standards, unfortunately, are not uniformly adhered to by educational institutions. This inconsistency results in a frustrating disparity between policy mandates and practical implementation, ultimately excluding many learners from fully participating in sporting activities.

### **Health and Safety concerns affecting Participation in Sports and Recreation**

The intersection of physical disabilities and participation in sports poses distinctive challenges and considerations for learners. Learners with physical disabilities face medical issues that intricately impact their engagement in sports. A broad array of common medical conditions, including musculoskeletal disorders, neurological impairments, and chronic illnesses like asthma, can significantly hinder their sports engagement.<sup>11</sup> In addition to these medical challenges, health-related fears emerge as a substantial barrier to the active engagement of learners with physical disabilities in sports. These fears are profoundly influenced by several factors, ranging from past negative experiences such as sports-related injuries to concerns about exacerbating existing health conditions.

Research conducted in 2018 revealed that the majority of learners with physical disabilities express anxiety concerning the likelihood of sustaining injuries while participating in sports. The broader societal perceptions and stigma attached to disabilities often magnify these fears. Learners might find themselves battling feelings of nervousness about potential judgment or the inability to match the pace of their peers, ultimately leading them to shy away from sports altogether.

## **CONCEPTUALIZATION**

### **Physical Disability**

Physical disability refers to a range of conditions that result in physical limitations affecting an individual's ability to perform daily activities. This concept encompasses various impairments, which can be temporary or permanent, and arise from different causes such as accidents, illnesses, genetic factors, or congenital conditions. Understanding physical disability involves examining its definitions, types, and the models used to conceptualize it. Physical disability is defined as any degree of disability

<sup>8</sup> K.B. Sahlin and J. Lexell, “Impact of Organized Sports on Activity, Participation, and Quality of Life in People with Neurologic Disabilities,” *PM&R* 7 (2015): 1081–88.

<sup>9</sup> UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, “General Comment No. 17 on the Right of the Child to Rest, Leisure, Play, Recreational Activities, Cultural Life and the Arts (Art. 31),” *CRC/C/GC/17*, 2013.

<sup>10</sup> Judith McKenzie, “Intellectual Disability in Inclusive Education in South Africa: Curriculum Challenges,” *Journal of Policy and Practice in Intellectual Disabilities* 18, no. 1 (2021): 53–57.

<sup>11</sup> Rachael M., Rimmer et al., “Transcranial Direct Current Stimulation Effects in Late Life Depression: A Meta-Analysis of Individual Participant Data,” *Journal of Affective Disorders Reports* 10 (2022): 100407.

caused by bodily injury, illness, or birth defect. This includes conditions like paralysis, diabetes mellitus, amputation, and other impairments that affect mobility and coordination.<sup>12</sup>

Physical disability varies according to the type and intensity of loss of mobility. People with a physical disability have a loss that reduces the body's motor skills. Motor skills are based on a complex body structure, which includes the nervous system, spinal cord, muscles, nerves, and joints. The disability affects one or more of these elements (e.g., muscular, neurological, or skeletal systems) rather than a certain part of the body.<sup>13</sup>

The understanding of physical disability is shaped by the examination of two primary models: the Medical Model and the Social Model. The Medical Model views disability as a result of a health issue, disease, or injury that can hinder a person's physiological or cognitive functions. It perceives disability as a condition that a person possesses, emphasizing the importance of prevention, treatment, or cure for the disabling condition.<sup>14</sup> On the other hand, the Social Model shifts the focus towards the barriers encountered by individuals with disabilities, rather than solely on the impairments or deficits of the individual. This perspective highlights that a person's activities are constrained not by their impairment or condition but by external factors such as the environment. Barriers, under the Social Model, are seen as outcomes of societal limitations rather than innate characteristics of the person with a disability.<sup>15</sup> This distinction underscores the significance of social organization and the creation of an inclusive environment that enables individuals with disabilities to fully participate in society without unnecessary obstacles hindering their engagement. The Social Model thus promotes a society that values accessibility and inclusivity as fundamental principles, allowing for the true empowerment and integration of individuals with disabilities into all aspects of life.

For learners with physical disabilities, accessibility, inclusion and safety are primary issues that need to be addressed. School-based sports and recreation activity opportunities have been shown to help learners with physical disabilities improve their participation in daily activities and reduce social isolation. Despite the known benefits, substantial barriers and challenges inhibit accessibility to these activity opportunities.<sup>16</sup>

## Sport Participation

Sports participation can be conceptualized as the engagement in organized physical activities that adhere to specific rules and objectives, which can be undertaken individually or as part of a team. This participation is not only limited to competitive contexts but also includes recreational and community-based sports. The benefits derived from sports participation encompass various dimensions, including physical health, psychological well-being, and social outcomes.

According to the World Health Organization, regular physical activity is not only important for maintaining a healthy lifestyle but also plays a vital role in preventing a wide range of health conditions, as highlighted in WHO's report from 2020.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, the UNESCO International Charter of Physical Education and Sport emphasizes that physical education and sports are not mere activities but essential rights that every individual is entitled to for the complete development of their character and capabilities. It stresses the significance of providing opportunities, not only within the formal educational system but also in society at large, for individuals to enhance their physical, intellectual, and moral strengths through engaging in physical activities and sports.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Adi Goldiner, "Understanding 'Disability' as a Cluster of Disability Models," *The Journal of Philosophy of Disability* 2 (2022): 28–54.

<sup>13</sup> Hoo Kyung Lee and Jooyeon Jin, "The Effect of a Virtual Reality Exergame on Motor Skills and Physical Activity Levels of Children with a Developmental Disability," *Research in Developmental Disabilities* 132 (2023): 104386.

<sup>14</sup> Zosia Zaks, "Changing the Medical Model of Disability to the Normalization Model of Disability: Clarifying the Past to Create a New Future Direction," *Disability & Society* 39, no. 12 (2024): 3233–60.

<sup>15</sup> Teodor Mladenov, "The Social Model of Disability, the Independent Living, and the Idea of 'Care,'" *Критика и Хуманизъм* 3, no. 55 (2021): 9–24.

<sup>16</sup> Jordan D Herbison et al., "Strategies to Improve Access to Physical Activity Opportunities for People with Physical Disabilities," *Translational Behavioral Medicine* 13, no. 7 (July 1, 2023): 486–500, <https://doi.org/10.1093/tbm/ibac119>.

<sup>17</sup> Fiona C Bull et al., "World Health Organization 2020 Guidelines on Physical Activity and Sedentary Behaviour," *British Journal of Sports Medicine* 54, no. 24 (2020): 1451–62.

<sup>18</sup> UNESCO, "UNESCO International Charter of Physical Education and Sport," November 21, 1978.

The UNESCO Charter further underlines the necessity of tailoring physical education and sports programs to accommodate diverse needs, including those of young children, adolescents, elderly individuals, and those with disabilities. This highlights the inclusive approach advocated by UNESCO to ensure that everyone, regardless of age or ability, can benefit from the enriching experiences and developmental opportunities that physical education and sports offer. By ensuring access to such programs, individuals are empowered to cultivate their personal growth and well-being through active participation in physical activities, thereby contributing to a healthier and more fulfilled society overall, as outlined in the foundational principles set forth by UNESCO back in 1978.<sup>19</sup>

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

This study was guided by Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, which provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how various systems interact to influence an individual's development and experiences. In the context of this research, researchers thoroughly examine and acknowledge the diverse factors that can impact learners with physical disabilities. It was deemed imperative to assess various layers of influence, such as societal attitudes, accessibility barriers, educational support systems, and personal experiences, to gain a comprehensive understanding of the challenges these learners may face. The Ecological Systems Theory was also unpacked to look at its three components, namely Microsystem, Mesosystem, and Exosystem.

### **Microsystem**

The microsystem, which represents the innermost layer of an individual's ecological system, encompasses the immediate environments that exert direct influences on the person's life trajectory. Within this layer, learners with physical disabilities face unique challenges and opportunities that can significantly impact their overall well-being.<sup>20</sup> For instance, the influence of family members is pivotal, as their support and attitudes can profoundly shape a child's self-esteem and motivation to engage in sports activities. Equally important is the school environment, where teachers, peers, and the availability of supportive facilities play crucial roles in fostering positive experiences related to sports participation for students with physical disabilities. The broader community context must be considered, encompassing local organizations and clubs that provide sports programs. These community resources can either facilitate or hinder access to sports activities for individuals with physical disabilities, thereby directly affecting their opportunities for social interaction, physical fitness, and overall inclusion in recreational pursuits.<sup>21</sup>

### **Mesosystem**

The mesosystem, a critical aspect of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, signifies the dynamic interactions and interrelations that occur between different microsystems in an individual's life. This concept sheds light on how the relationships and connections among various environments can significantly impact and shape a person's growth and development.<sup>22</sup> For instance, when we examine the interplay between the home and school environments, we observe how this interaction can profoundly influence a child's perceptions and attitudes towards activities like sports. Positive and supportive communication channels that are established between parents and teachers play a crucial role in nurturing a child's interest and motivation to engage in sports activities. Furthermore, fostering collaboration and partnerships between schools and community-based sports organizations can lead to the creation of more inclusive and accessible opportunities for learners with physical disabilities, ensuring that they too can actively participate and benefit from sports programs.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> UNESCO, "UNESCO International Charter of Physical Education and Sport."

<sup>20</sup> S.G. Burakgazi, "The Ecological Model of Human Development," in *Exploring Adult Education Through Learning Theory* (IGI Global, 2025), 325–42.

<sup>21</sup> Burakgazi, "The Ecological Model of Human Development."

<sup>22</sup> Esmita Charani et al., "In Transition: Current Health Challenges and Priorities in Sudan," *BMJ Global Health* 4, no. 4 (August 21, 2019): e001723, <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjgh-2019-001723>.

<sup>23</sup> Diane W Braza et al., "Promoting Physical Activity by Creating Awareness of Adaptive Sports and Recreation Opportunities: An Academic–Community Partnership Perspective," *Progress in Community Health Partnerships: Research, Education, and Action* 12, no. 2 (2018): 165–72.

## Exosystem

The literature stated that the exosystem plays a significant role in shaping an individual's development, It consists of broader social systems that exert indirect influences.<sup>24</sup> For instance, a parent's workplace environment, including policies on parental leave and flexible work hours, can significantly determine the amount of time parents are able to dedicate to their children's sports engagements. Moreover, local government policies focusing on accessibility regulations for public spaces can also have a profound impact on the availability of sports facilities for students with disabilities. Therefore, it becomes evident that these external social systems play a crucial role in moulding and facilitating an individual's overall development by creating various environments that either limit or enhance opportunities for participation in sports activities.

## METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative research approach, utilizing a descriptive survey design to explore the perspectives of learners with physical disabilities regarding their participation in sports and recreation activities at a selected special school in the Vhembe District of Limpopo Province. The qualitative approach was chosen for its ability to provide rich, detailed insights into the lived experiences of the participants, aligning with Maher and Dertadian's view that qualitative research seeks to understand the meaning and complexity of human experience.<sup>25</sup> The research site was a boarding school that caters to approximately 340 learners with various disabilities, including physical, visual, and hearing impairments. The school not only provides education but also serves as a safe haven for learners who are often marginalized within their communities.

Purposive sampling was employed to select 44 learners (22 boys and 22 girls) with physical disabilities who actively participate in different sports and recreational programs offered by the school. In addition, the sports master, who has extensive knowledge of the learners' engagement in these activities, was also purposively sampled to provide further depth to the data. This approach allowed for the selection of information-rich participants who could contribute to a deeper understanding of the research problem.

Prior to data collection, ethical clearance was obtained from the Limpopo Department of Education, and school-level permission was granted by the principal. Parental consent was secured through information letters and consent forms sent home, while learners signed assent forms before participating in the study. The sports master also voluntarily consented after being informed of the study's objectives. To ensure ethical compliance, participants were informed about their right to withdraw at any point without any consequences, and confidentiality was maintained throughout the research process by anonymizing all personal identifiers in the transcripts and reports.

Data was gathered through six focus group discussions, each involving seven participants—except for the final group, which included eight. These discussions were conducted during learners' spare time to minimize academic disruption and took place in a quiet classroom setting, lasting approximately 40 minutes each. An individual interview with the sports master was also conducted to gain additional insight into the contextual and organizational aspects of sports activities. All discussions and the interviews were audio-recorded with the participant's permission. To enhance the credibility of the data, recordings were played back to participants to verify the accuracy of their contributions.

Data analysis was conducted thematically to identify patterns in challenges faced by learners with physical disabilities while engaging in sports activities with special schools in the Vhembe District. Thematic analysis is well-suited for identifying recurring themes and patterns within qualitative data, allowing the researcher to draw meaningful conclusions about the challenges that learners with physical disabilities face while participating in sports in selected special schools in Vhembe District. The process involved coding the data from both focus group discussions and interviews, organizing it into key themes, and analysing the relationships between these themes to uncover the underlying challenges faced by learners with physical disabilities in sports and recreation participation.

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<sup>24</sup> Urie Bronfenbrenner and Pamela A Morris, "The Bioecological Model of Human Development," *Handbook of Child Psychology* 1 (2007).

<sup>25</sup> Lisa Maher and George Dertadian, "Qualitative Research," *Addiction* 112, no. 1 (2018): 167–72.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the study, the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability were applied, as recommended by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Credibility was enhanced through member checking, where participants reviewed the transcriptions for accuracy. Transferability was addressed by providing a detailed description of the research context, participants, and procedures, enabling others to determine the applicability of the findings to similar contexts. Dependability was ensured by keeping a detailed audit trail of all research activities, including data collection and analysis procedures. Confirmability was promoted by using verbatim quotes from participants to support interpretations, thereby minimizing researcher bias. These strategies collectively strengthened the rigor and integrity of the study.

## **PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Focus group discussions related to challenges faced by learners with physical disability while participating in sports and recreation activities at a selected special school in the Vhembe District**

During the focus group discussions, learners expressed different views about challenges they face while participating in sport and recreation activities at a selected special school in Vhembe District, therefore, three themes emerged and were named: social challenges and physical challenges. These themes were supported by direct quotations from the focus group discussions.

#### **Social Challenges**

Learners expressed their concern about the way other learners with different forms of disability treat them during sports and recreation time. The majority of learners with physical disability reported that they get discriminated against, even by other learners with different forms of disability. One of the research participants explained:

*“Other learners who do not have the same disability as us group themselves separately and start to play without us, and when we try to reach out to them, they refuse to join their team.”*

Learners with physical disability were of the view that discrimination based on the type of disability starts amongst learners themselves. They described this form of challenge as a disturbing one that they even felt like not going out and participating in sports and recreation activities. Learners also reported that they are called names by other students with different types of disability.

Learners also reported that the school, parents and community, in general, do not support them to participate in sports and recreation activities. One student also commented that:

*“My parents told me not to participate in any form of sports or recreation activity, they are afraid that I may get injured.”*

This sentiment was also supported by the majority of participants in the focus group discussion. Learners furthermore reported that they only participate in sports and recreation activities without concern for their families, as most parents still believe that sports and recreation are not meant for people living with a disability.

#### **Physical Challenges**

Learners felt that the unaccommodating physical environment in the sports grounds and courts was a huge challenge to them. In their views, it is a form of neglect and a lack of respect for their rights. Learners with a physical disability further explained that circumstances force them to play sports in the wrong facility just because that is the only facility they can be able to access. One of the participants said that:

*“The problem is that these facilities in our school are designed to cater for a specific group of learners with different disabilities from ours. For us to access a facility like a swimming pool, soccer ground and event hall, it’s always a struggle that you need help from others.”*

### **Findings from interviews with Sports Master**

The study also employed the use of interviews, where the sports master from the selected special school in the Vhembe District was interviewed to add in-depth knowledge of challenges faced by learners with physical disabilities while participating in sports and recreation activities. The Sports master, who is also a teacher from the selected Special School, reflected on different challenges related to the provision, governance and implementation of sports and recreation activities for learners living with physical disabilities at the school. The researcher found it to be important to include the sports master as he is the one who organizes, runs and implements sports and recreation activities within the school.

### **Findings related to challenges faced by learners with physical disabilities while participating in sports and recreation activities at selected special schools in the Vhembe District**

After a comprehensive analysis of the interview transcripts, the following themes were developed: lack of teamwork, health challenges, social challenges and physical challenges.

#### ***Lack of Teamwork***

The Sport master reported that learners with physical disability are very good when it comes to individual games rather than in team sports. This was shown by the achievements of learners with physical disabilities..

#### ***Health Challenges***

The Sport master reported that most learners with physical disabilities always consult doctors after participating in sports and recreation activities. This led them not to continue with participation in sports and recreation activities.

#### ***Social Challenges***

Learners who have different kinds of disability seem not to understand other types of disabilities. This sentiment was reported by the school sports master, who further explained that learners who have physical disabilities feel discriminated against when others who have different types of disability do not participate in the same activities with those who have physical disabilities.

*“Although the classification of activities is based on the nature of the disability, these learners feel like they are discriminated against not being allowed to participate in other activities due to their nature of disability. However, the law is there to save and protect them.”*

The sports master also explained that at times these students are called names based on their disabilities instead of being called by their real names.

### **DISCUSSION**

Learners with physical disabilities attending the Selected Special School in Vhembe District are confronted with a myriad of social, psychological, and physical challenges when it comes to engaging in sports and recreational activities. They perceive these school-based pursuits as essential for their growth and development, offering unique benefits that cannot be easily replicated by other means. Despite the invaluable opportunities presented by sports and recreation within the school setting, learners with physical disabilities still encounter a diverse range of challenges that hinder their full participation. The findings of the study inherently validate this reality, with a substantial number of learners highlighting the difficulties they face while trying to actively engage in sports and recreation at the selected special school in the Vhembe District. It is recognised that sports play a pivotal role in equipping school children, including those with disabilities, with essential life skills that are unparalleled by any other form of activity.<sup>26</sup> Nonetheless, the societal barriers surrounding the involvement of learners with various disabilities in sports pose significant hurdles, making it a challenging endeavor for

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<sup>26</sup> Michael B. Edwards et al., “Participation in Interscholastic and Intramural Sport Programs in Middle Schools: An Exploratory Investigation of Race and Gender,” *Recreational Sports Journal* 35, no. 2 (2011): 157–73.

these children to partake in sports and recreational activities without encountering obstacles along the way. Hence, it is imperative to address and overcome these barriers to ensure inclusive and enriching experiences for all students, regardless of their physical abilities.

Social challenges, particularly related to discrimination, were highlighted as one of the predominant obstacles faced by the majority of learners with physical disabilities when engaging in sports and recreational activities. It was noted that learners with other types of disabilities within the Selected special school in the Vhembe District sometimes exhibit discriminatory behavior by excluding those with physical disabilities from participating in such activities. These findings align with previous research by Matshovhana and Mulibana, which emphasized the prevalence of discrimination experienced by learners with disabilities in sports and recreation settings.<sup>27</sup> Such discrimination may stem from a lack of awareness and understanding regarding the diverse nature and types of disabilities present within these environments. Bullying in the form of calling names instead of the given name was also reported as a challenge negatively affecting sports and recreation participation among learners with physical disabilities. These findings are similar to studies where it was reported that when children with disabilities attempt to participate in sports, they are more likely to be bullied by their peers.<sup>28</sup>

This study not only revealed that learners with physical disabilities are still not granted the right to participate in sports and recreational activities, but also highlighted that parental attitudes play a significant role in limiting their involvement. Parents often prevent their children with physical disabilities from engaging in sports out of fear of injury or discrimination.<sup>29</sup> As a result, these learners are deprived of valuable opportunities for socialization and physical well-being. Additionally, the research emphasized the urgent need for special schools to prioritize the development, design, and construction of inclusive sports and recreation facilities that cater to the diverse needs of all students with disabilities. It is evident that there is still considerable progress to be made in fostering a more inclusive and supportive environment that encourages all learners to actively participate in sports and recreation regardless of their physical abilities.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study, this research advocates for the establishment of inclusive sports programmes that effectively accommodate the diverse needs of students with physical disabilities. This could include modifying existing sports formats or introducing new adapted sports that can be enjoyed by all students, regardless of their physical capabilities. The study also recommends that the Department of Basic Education raise awareness and change attitudes. The research identified prevailing negative attitudes as significant barriers to inclusion. Consequently, schools should implement extensive awareness campaigns aimed at educating the entire school community, including students, staff, and parents, about the importance of disability inclusion and the benefits of sports participation for everyone involved. These campaigns can take the form of workshops, informative presentations, and initiatives featuring role models with disabilities who can share their personal experiences. Furthermore, this study advocates for policy revisions that support inclusive sports initiatives. Advocacy efforts should be directed towards district and provincial policymakers to endorse the establishment of inclusive sports programmes that receive adequate funding for essential adapted equipment and training resources. This could involve collaboration with government officials, disability advocacy groups, and diverse stakeholders to effectively influence policy decisions, ultimately fostering an educational environment that prioritises inclusiveness and equity in sports participation.

## CONCLUSION

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<sup>27</sup> K. Matshovhana and P. K. Mulibana, "Challenges Faced by Learners with Albinism in Active Recreation Activities at Tshilidzini Special School, Thohoyandou, South Africa," *African Journal for Physical Health Education, Recreation and Dance* 20, no. 1 (2014): 1–9.

<sup>28</sup> Edwards et al., "Participation in Interscholastic and Intramural Sport Programs in Middle Schools: An Exploratory Investigation of Race and Gender."

<sup>29</sup> Jochen Mayer, Stephanie Burgess, and Ansgar Thiel, "Return-to-Play Decision Making in Team Sports Athletes. A Quasi-Naturalistic Scenario Study.," *Frontiers in Psychology* 11 (2020): 1010.

This study aimed to address the barriers that learners with physical disabilities in Vhembe District's special schools face in accessing and participating in sports. The study's findings underscore the urgent need for interventions to foster inclusive sporting environments. These interventions must address infrastructural limitations, such as the lack of accessible facilities and appropriate equipment, as well as attitudinal barriers, which include negative perceptions and a lack of awareness among educators, peers, and the wider community. Additionally, the study emphasizes the crucial role of specialized training for educators, enabling them to develop the skills and knowledge necessary to effectively support learners with physical disabilities in sports activities.

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