




Impact of learning barriers on academic performance of learners in selected secondary schools in Mtata

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ABSTRACT

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Learners have a right to education regardless of their limitations. However, there are still schools that are struggling to address learning barriers. This paper explores the impact of learning barriers on academic performance in selected secondary schools in Mtata, South Africa. The study was guided by the Ecological System and Inclusion Theories. A qualitative approach and case study design was adopted. Convenient and purposive sampling techniques were used to select 3 schools and 18 participants respectively. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews. Thematic frames and thick descriptions were used to analyze data. Findings indicate that learners with learning barriers such as disabilities faced myriad of challenges including lack of resources, inability to attend to learners with challenges due to overcrowded classes and inadequate inclusive education training. The paper concludes that learning barriers have a negative bearing on the academic performance of learners. Effective inclusive education policies, teachers' training, parental involvement and psychological support for learners are a necessity. Regardless of challenges, some teachers are scaffolding these learners. For improvement on learners' academic performance, there is need for collaboration of government, parents and teachers. The use of technology in South African rural schools should be a priority. Providing learners with digital tools and skills to facilitate learning is important as technology in the classroom will facilitate teaching methodology variation and management of overcrowded classes. Future study should focus on the impact of using digital tools on the academic performance of learners with learning barriers.

Contribution/Originality: This study addresses learning barriers of the Xhosa speaking people in rural areas, to create awareness about teaching and learning programmes. The study also contributed towards creating awareness of intervention strategies that should be developed by institutions of higher learning through teacher training programmes to focus on diverse learners' needs.

1. INTRODUCTION

The South African educational system has adopted an inclusive education policy to address the inclusion of learners with learning difficulties in basic education. Department of Education (2001) maintains that inclusive education promotes measures for redressing and addressing barriers to learning through establishing full-service schools and converting special schools into resource centers. However, there are schools registering a high failure rate because of intrinsic barriers to learning.

Past literature outlines barriers to learning in the South African context, particularly for learners from poor backgrounds, as socio-economic deprivation, poverty, overcrowded and noisy homes, lack of access to basic services, exposure to unstable, violent and toxic home backgrounds, and unsafe buildings (Eraddu & Osterman, 2017). A few studies indicate that external and internal barriers to learning negatively influence learners' academic success (Noorashidah, 2020). In Ethiopia, parental income, distance between home and school, availability of instructional materials and learner language skills influence academic performance (Birhan, 2018). Families and society contribute to a child's socio-emotional and cognitive development, therefore, learners struggle to learn effectively because of lack of parental involvement (Lara & Saracosti, 2019). Olivia (2020) concurs with Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory (microsystem level) that the teacher-child and parent-child relationships influence learner performance.

There are challenges of inadequate learning materials to support learners with learning barriers, poor remuneration, unskilled teachers, and shortages of classrooms resulting in poor academic performance in Nigeria (Abdulganiyu, 2020). Inclusive environments are conducive to learning (Mary, 2016) yet (Ngcukana, 2021) asserts that in Eastern Cape schools, there is insufficient infrastructure and further barriers including unreliable transport that affects learners' safety and ability to access education. Vulnerable and handicapped learners with neurological learning disorders struggle in their schoolwork (Ascherman & Shaftel, 2017); therefore, a lack of understanding of the learner diversity negatively affects academic achievement. Language of instruction, namely English, worsened by overcrowded classrooms and inadequate resources, is also a challenge (Ntsala, Ramabenyane, Koen, & Look, 2021). The Eastern Cape Province has a huge challenge of poor matric results. Nkanzela (2015) found that learners with physical disabilities perform poorly owing to limited resources to accommodate them. Frequent curriculum reforms and inadequate instructional materials negatively impact the pedagogic process, as reforms neglect teachers and learners from remote schools (Mashele, 2018; Sharon, 2020).

Shah, Sagar, Somaiya, and Nagpal (2019) state that medical problems, below average intelligence, learning disability, physical disorders, emotional problems, poor socio-economic and cultural issues were drivers of poor performance. Learners with physiological impairments vary in terms of intellectual and cognitive abilities (Banks & Zuurmond, 2015; Kunneke, 2012). Inadequate training of teachers further causes teachers to struggle to adapt the curriculum to suit learners with learning difficulties. They struggle to involve parents of learners with disorders in rural schools (Ntombela, 2011; Prinsloo, 2001). Learners with weaker personality traits, inherited or shaped by external factors and low self-esteem, do not have the perseverance, support or motivation to excel thus resulting in poor performance (Creswell, 2006; Melissa, 2017; Weeks, 2003).

This paper aimed to explore the impact of learning barriers on academic performance, focusing on selected rural high schools in Mtata in the Eastern Cape, South Africa. For the purpose of achieving this objective, the research questions stated were: What is the impact of extrinsic and intrinsic barriers on the academic performance of learners? What challenges are faced by learners living with learning barriers?

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study was guided by Bronfenbrenner's Ecological System Theory (EST) complemented by Lev Vygotsky's Inclusion Theory. The EST explains the influence of the social environment on a learner's development. The social factors determine the thinking patterns, emotions and cognitive skills of the learner (Heather, 2016). The theory provides an insight into how the environment influences learners' academic performance. The EST has four systems that explain different social interactions that influence a child's development positively or negatively. Firstly, the microsystem is defined as the most proximal setting in which a learner is situated and interacts face-to-face with others (Beckman, Jason, & Von, 2016). This includes home, teachers and peers. Secondly, the mesosystem, mirrors interaction between home and school. For example, the relationship between parents and teachers has an impact on the learning of a child. Thirdly, the ecosystem relates to the interconnection and processes taking place between

two or more settings that do not ordinarily contain the developing person, but in events that influence processes within the immediate settings of the person (Beckman et al., 2016). For example, stressful situations experienced by a parent at work can impact on his/her family. If the parent loses his/her job, the unemployment will impact negatively on the family and on children's growth and development. In addition, the behavior of neighbors has an impact on the development of a child. Lastly, there is the macrosystem, which is the outermost layer of the child, reflecting cultural values, traditions and laws (Beckman et al., 2016).

UNESCO (2005) indicates that inclusion is an evolving process that addresses and responds to the diversity of needs of all learners through increasing participation in learning, cultures, and communities. Inclusion theory encompasses the process of allowing all learners to engage effectively within mainstream school systems (Department of Education, 2001). It enables learners and teachers to embrace diversity. Scott (2016) states that inclusion involves ensuring that all necessary support systems are available to learners with disabilities. Inclusion theory, as a rights-based educational approach including those subjects to exclusionary pressures, eradicates segregation of learners who have disabilities. The Department of Education (2001), through White Paper 6, outlines strategies to be used by the teacher to implement the inclusion theory in classrooms. However, there are still challenges in implementing inclusivity in schools, hence the focus on measures to address the learning barriers that negatively influence learners' academic performance.

The ecological systems theory was used to show that learners are from different backgrounds while inclusion theory indicates the necessity of implementing inclusive education to create a conducive learning environment for learners with intrinsic and extrinsic barriers. The effect of non-supportive or resource-constrained environments mentioned in ecological theory could lead to extrinsic barriers to learning. Therefore, inclusion theory was used to provide the merits of applying inclusivity in the classroom to accommodate learners from non-supportive ecological systems. Mncube (2010) indicates that parental involvement can increase learners' literacy scores significantly. Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory implies that the surrounding environment (Elliott & Davis, 2020) affects a learner. Positive teacher-parent interaction motivates and encourages a learner to improve their academic grades.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study employed a qualitative research approach. Maree (2016) indicates that the qualitative approach is concerned with understanding the processes and the social and cultural contexts underlying various behavioral patterns. Qualitative researchers interact with and observe human participants in their natural environment and focus on meanings and interpretations (Braun & Clarke, 2013). In this study, the data consists of the views of the participants on how learning barriers affect the performance of learners. The qualitative research approach was appropriate because the researchers had direct interaction with the participants. Creswell and Creswell (2021) state that the qualitative approach studies phenomena in their real-life context with the intention of gaining an insight into meanings ascribed to phenomena of interest. The study adopted a case study design to explore the impact of learning barriers on the academic performance of pupils in selected schools within their real-life context (Yin, 2009).

The study population included teachers and learners of selected high schools in the rural area of Mtata in the Eastern Cape Province. A purposive convenient sampling was used to identify three high schools which facilitated personal judgment in choosing participants (Ames, 2019). Three male and three female teachers with in-depth knowledge of their learners, and six learners with extrinsic barriers, six with intrinsic barriers from grades 10 and 11 participated in the study. The total sample was 18. The study used semi-structured interviews addressing the factors explored while facilitating exploration of participants' thoughts, emotions and beliefs about learning barriers (Gill, 2008). Face-to-face interviews (25-30 minutes for teachers and 15-20 minutes for learners) were organized and COVID-19 prevention protocols were followed. The interviews were conducted in English and, where necessary, isiXhosa (the official language of South Africa) was used. Interviews were audio-recorded with the permission of the participants and the researchers took notes. The deductive approach, based on inclusion theory

and Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, was used to analyze and interpret data through identifying and coding information from the transcripts and creation of themes.

4. RESULTS

4.1. Interviews with Learners that Experience Intrinsic Barriers to Learning

To ascertain the impact of learning barriers on the academic performance of learners, participants were asked about their disorders and conditions and how these barriers affected learning. Interviews were also done with teachers to establish their experiences with learners with learning difficulties. Emerging themes were identified to interpret and display the data, and these included experiences of learners with intrinsic barriers, the influence of the barriers on their academics, and the kind of support they received from different people were the themes that emerged from the interviews, as shown in Figure 1.

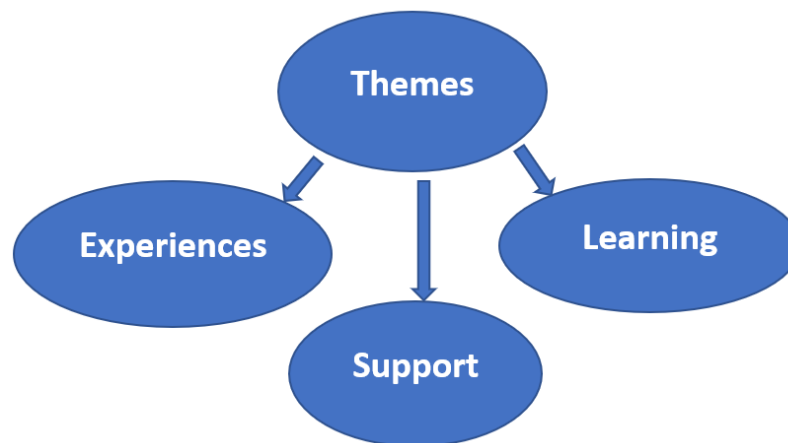


Figure 1. Major themes developed from interviews with learners with intrinsic barriers.

Sub-themes were also identified in line with each of the above themes as presented in Figure 2.

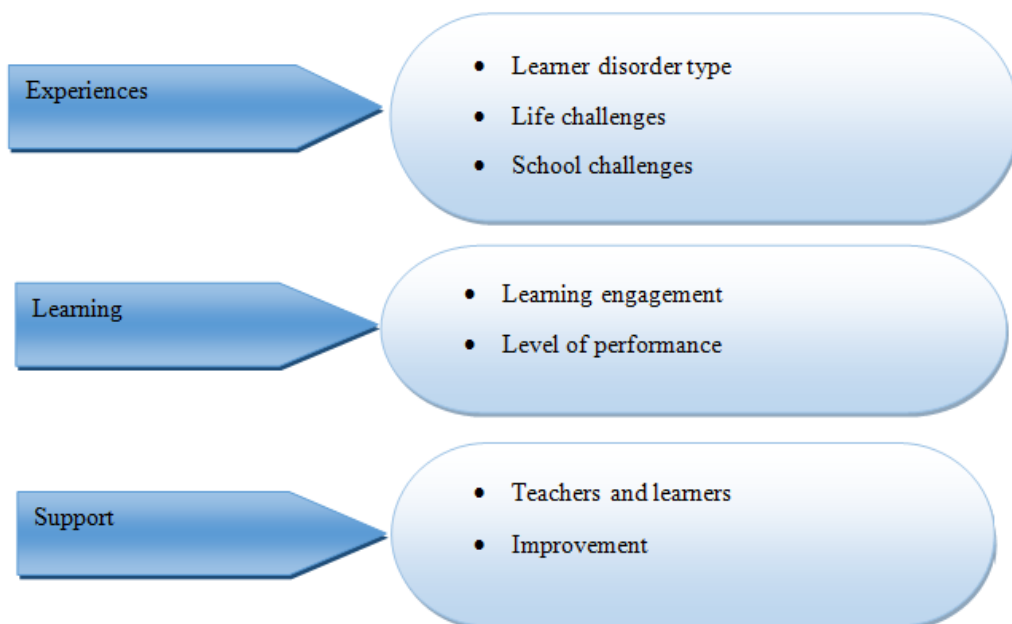


Figure 2. Sub-themes identified from interviews with learners with intrinsic barriers.

Theme 1: Challenges experienced by learners with intrinsic barriers

Question: "What challenges do you encounter in your daily life in the school?" The first Learner Participant (LP1), who was a learner with Autism, doing Grade 10, initiated, "I don't know how to talk to others....so ngenxa yalonto (because of that) others think I'm stupid." He said, "I hate noisy places because it irritates me". The learner with autism (LP1) and the learner with epilepsy learner (LP2) demonstrated having a similar struggle of being anti-social and having low self-esteem. LP2 responded to the question by saying, "I am not comfortable around people because I fear that I could fall anytime and that is so embarrassing, even here at school ndisoloko ndinekhala." (I am always anxious.).

The two other participants who experienced intrinsic learning barriers had different views. LP3 was myopic and LP4 was hyperopic, and they both had poor vision. LP3 shared that he was unable to see anything which was far from him. LP4 said, "Eish... Yoh Miss; it's difficult to have eye problems because sometimes I can't see something near me; sometimes when I'm riding my bicycle...and nditshayise into, ndilimale." (I often collide with obstacles and get injured.).

Theme 2: The effects of barriers on learning

The learner participants were asked, "How does this condition affect your learning in the classroom?" LP10's classroom engagement was affected by her disorder. She said, "It takes time for me to understand when the teacher is teaching in class", adding that it was hard for him to express his ideas in class. LP2 shared a similar experience and said, "Xa u miss esenzisa I speech, ndiye ndoyike because it is difficult for me to talk, kubhetere ukubhala. (When the teacher instructs us to do an oral presentation, I become anxious because it is difficult for me to talk; I prefer writing). The vision-impaired learners shared similar views owing to having a common condition. They indicated that they struggled copying notes (LP12) or to read small print (LP3). However, the learners were determined to overcome the impact of this disorder on their learning.

Theme 3: Support

Learner participants were asked, "Do you get support here at school? If yes, how does it help you?" They indicated that support from teachers and peers improved and boosted their confidence. LP11 replied, "Having a problem in your body reduces self-esteem. You always undermine yourself.... but mna ndincedwe zititshala zam (My teachers are helping me) for encouraging me to study.....and they always compliment me when I have passed a test". Similarly, LP3 said, "U Miss we Life Sciences uyandi encouraga oko nabazali bam (my teacher and parents are encouraging me) support me...that is why I will not stop schooling until I get a job." LP1 said she felt that teachers also struggled with proper ways of helping, whilst parents had lost hope. Responses expressed by LP1 were deep and revealing. The love, encouragement, moral support from teachers and parents are momentous elements in nurturing learners with disabilities, as proposed by the ecological systems theory used in the study. Therefore, the big question is what can be done to help learners with learning barriers?

4.2. Interviews with Learners that Experience Extrinsic Barriers to Learning

Interviews with learners that were affected by the 'outside factors' such as socio-economic status, non-supportive environment, violence, attitudes, inflexible curriculum, language and communication, inappropriate and inadequate provision of support services, lack of enabling and protective legislation and policy, lack of parental recognition and involvement were conducted. The aim was to explore the effect of these barriers on the learners' performance. Themes identified included the kind of circumstance, experiences of the learner, and impact of the situation on their learning.

Figure 3 illustrates the themes and sub-themes.

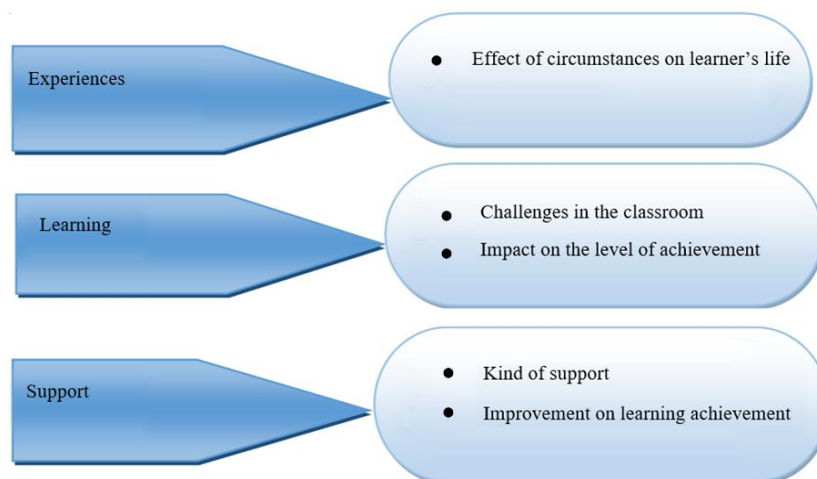


Figure 3. Themes and sub-themes from interviews with learner participants experiencing extrinsic barriers.

Theme 1: Challenges experienced by learners with extrinsic barriers

PL5 was a Grade 10 orphaned female learner parenting her 3 siblings. PL6, PL9, PL4, and PL7 were male learners doing Grade 11, and all lacked financial support because their parents were unemployed. PL8 was a female Grade 10 learner victim of domestic violence. The learners were asked, "How does this situation affect you?" PL5 replied, "It is very difficult to grow happily when you have to be the parent of siblings at this age Miss." PL7 explained his experiences of suffering from poverty with a heart-wrenching face: "It is so stressing ma'am to have i-uniform endala (old uniform) ube usazi ba abazali abaphangeli (knowing that parents are not working) and they cannot afford to buy it."

It is evident that any kind of child abuse could destroy the child's psychology. PL8 believed that her lack of confidence was caused by the corporal punishment she experienced at home. In the cases of both PL8 and L1, the significant others, like parents worsened the situation of learners. This is why the study used Bronfenbrenner's ecological system theory, as the focus was on the influence of contextual experiences on their learning.

Theme 2: Influence of barriers on learning

The researchers asked, "How does this situation impact your learning and performance in the classroom?" The results showed that non-supportive environmental issues hugely influenced learner performance. The non-supportive environments at home affected the concentration capacity of learners. LP8 believed that if her abuser could stop the violence, she could concentrate in the classroom. She said, "When I think of it eclassini ndiye ndiphazamiseke." (In the classroom, I become obstructed.) PL6 and PL7 believed that the struggle of their parents had been the motivation for them to study hard, to change the situations in their homes. PL7 said, "I make sure that I pass in all my grades because I want to change the situation at home." Therefore, if these learners had the necessary support, their academic performance would improve. The extracts above demonstrate the learners' determination to perform well, despite their circumstances. However, they had support from teachers, as indicated below.

Theme 3: Teacher support

PL5 said, "My teachers and neighbours are helping me a lot.... nge uniform nokutya." (...with uniforms and food). She explained that this encouragement made her work very hard on her schoolwork. PL6 indicated, "I have a role model that encourages me to study because naye he used to struggle at his home but now is a lawyer." These experiences show that with the support of significant others like neighbours and teachers, as suggested by the ecological system, learners could rise above impediments. For the purpose of data corroboration, a sample of teachers participated in the study.

4.2. Interviews with Teachers

Interviews were conducted to explore teachers' experiences in teaching learners with learning difficulties. Three female and three male teachers were interviewed. The views of the teachers were similar to those of the learners. They indicated the same challenges raised by the learner participants. The themes identified include Educators' experiences, challenges in the teaching process, behavior of learners, and support from stakeholders, as illustrated in Figure 4.

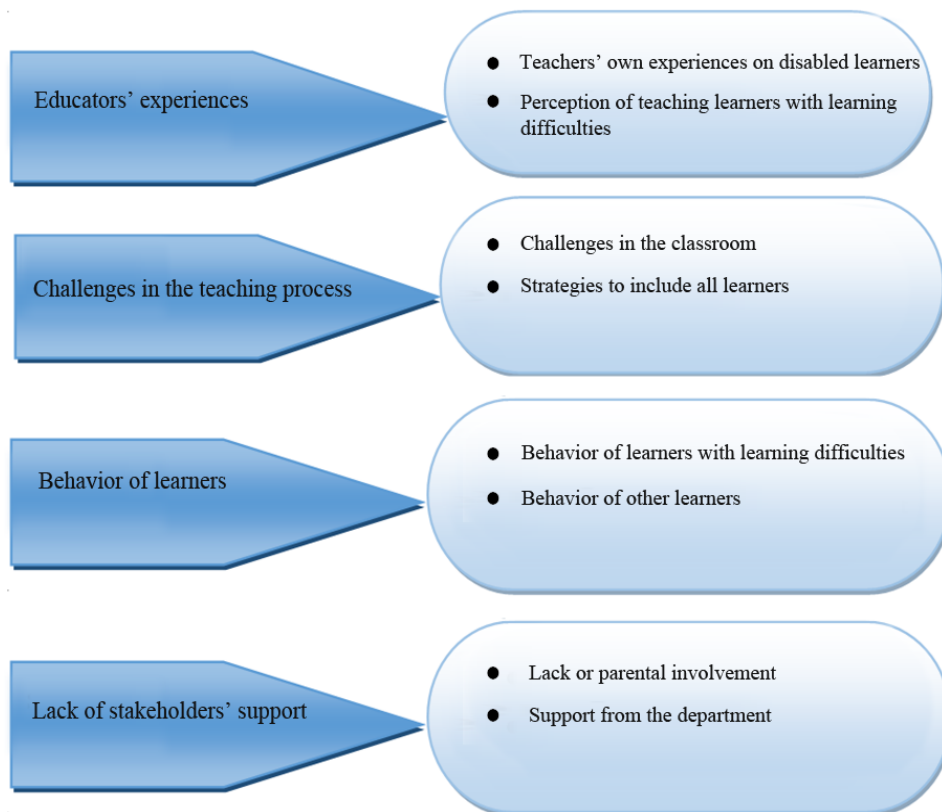


Figure 4. Themes and sub-themes from interviews with teachers.

Theme 1: Educators' experiences

Participant teachers (PT) were asked, "What are the challenges of teaching learners with different learning barriers, whether intrinsic and or extrinsic?" PT1 said;

It was very confusing and difficult to accommodate these learners at first because I wasn't trained to teach them at varsity.... but as I attend workshops that equip us to include all kinds of learners in our schools now, I am able to handle the situation and understand them more but am still skeptical. Attending a workshop when you are not trained is not enough hence my skepticism.

The above excerpt represents ideas expressed by most teacher participants. The majority of teachers dealing with learners with learning difficulties lacked the necessary formal training. This implies a skills gap; hence the teachers are struggling to help learners living with disability. Concurring with PT1's views above, PT6 indicated that she was struggling to manage a learner with epilepsy. She said, *"Eey I don't wanna lie; it is traumatizing and very difficult for me when the learner is attacked by the seizure in class, but you know as a teacher you need to control the situation."* Thus, learning barriers obstruct the teaching process. It is hard to develop a learner holistically if they have challenges that affect mental ability. PT4 concurred with the above statements thus,

It is not easy to teach effectively when you have more learners with learning difficulties in the classroom.... it's really exhausting. I have learners from broken or abandoned families, abused learners, poverty-stricken families, etc. They often pose a challenge in class because they are always lagging behind. But I try my best.

The views of the teachers agreed with those of the learner participants. There was a consensus among the teachers that encouraging and motivating learners to achieve, regardless of their learning barriers, is a call for everyone in school and in society.

Theme 2: Challenges in the teaching process

Teacher participants were asked to explain the challenges encountered in the classroom with learners that had problems from home or those that were living with a disability. PT5 said, *“There are so many challenges in the classroom..., sometimes you will find a learner sleeping during class... ..and when you ask her you will find that there is a valid reason behind that.”* PT2 said, *“As a Mathematics teacher I expect every learner to have a scientific calculator but you will find very few that own calculators because of lack of finances at home.”* The participant believed that teachers must not have large classes as they had a duty to create time for different learning intelligence of their pupils. PT3 and PT2 shared similar views on this issue. PT3 said, *“The challenge that we have here is overcrowded classes and we end up not giving all learners the attention they need in order for them to learn effectively in class.”* PT3 believed that using technology in these overcrowded classes with learners with challenges could be an effective solution for improving teaching and learning. However, the school did not have digital resources for teaching and learning. All the teacher participants indicated that it was impossible for them to modify the curriculum to accommodate diverse learner abilities, as suggested by Inclusion Theory adopted by the current study.

Theme 3: Behavior of learners

PT1 believed that in an inclusive class, awareness of the disorders, disabilities and other learning barriers had to be raised so that learners understand learning barriers. PT1 said, *“The behavior of learners in the classroom is not acceptable...you will find a learner mocking or underestimating the information from the slow learner...that is totally wrong.”* PT2 said, *“You know Miss, the confidence of learners with this problem is destroyed.... it’s hard for them to express ideas in the class.”* In addition, PT5 stated, *“My learners with different learning barriers are intimidated in class and they found it very difficult to participate in class.”* The extracts above show that in some situations, learners with learning difficulties are not comfortable participating in class because of fear of being ridiculed by others. It is the teacher's responsibility to educate learners in class about disability and other learning barriers for them to embrace diversity. Awareness campaigns can be done by teachers at school level and in the communities with the aim of educating people to change their attitudes and behaviors towards children living with disability and other learning barriers.

Theme 4: Lack of stakeholders’ support

There was an indication by the teacher participants that there was a lack of support from other stakeholders and parents. Teachers expected especially parents to offer support by engaging in the learning activities of their children. For instance, if parents are called for a meeting at school or by the teacher, the expectation is for them to honor the invitation, but teachers decried that parents were reluctant to cooperate in that regard. PT6 said,

Miss, teaching in rural areas is a struggle because parents are not participating in their children’s education...you will recognize a problem emtaneni (with the child) and when you want to meet her/his parents so that nizo- discussa (to discuss) the problem...trust me you, the parent will never show up.

The teacher said that a few parents participated in the education of their children, and there was a huge improvement in those learners. The teachers decried lack of training for teachers in rural schools to equip them with skills to accommodate all learners. They indicated that the government lacked supporting schools to assist learners living with learning barriers. The teachers expected the government to either provide proper training to teachers for them to be able to deal with such learners and to reduce the sizes of the classes to offer individual attention to learners by employing more teachers.

5. DISCUSSION

The study found that teaching learners with learning difficulties was not easy. Participants mentioned different challenges, and these had a negative impact on the academic performance of such learners. It was revealed that teaching learners with learning barriers in an inclusive class was still a new experience for some teachers. The teachers interviewed articulated that they were not well equipped to embrace learners' diversity. Equally, learner participants indicated that some teachers struggled to manage them. This concurs with the findings by Gelderbloem (2021) that teachers were not well-informed about learners' impairments and about how to teach such learners. Therefore, if teachers are not equipped to manage learners with learning barriers, they find it difficult to accommodate them in their classes. This falls short of what the Inclusion Theory by Lev Vygotsky advocates and was discussed in the theoretical framework adopted for this study.

Vygotsky's Inclusion Theory allows all learners, despite their learning barriers, to learn and engage effectively within mainstream school systems. Inclusion Theory has principles that enable both learners and teachers to feel comfortable with diversity, creating a conducive atmosphere that promotes the good academic performance of all learners. The theory believes that if teachers were to be trained or be staff-developed on inclusivity, getting the necessary support as proposed by the Inclusion Theory, then such challenges could be addressed or reduced. This has some financial implications; the Department of Education should be prepared to invest in the training and retraining of all teachers. Furthermore, material resources such as ICT infrastructure, physical infrastructure, etc., should be addressed to accommodate learners living with disability and other learning barriers. Nonetheless, it was heart soothing to learn that teachers were trying their best to assist such learners.

The study also found that learners with poor psychological well-being struggled at school. Furthermore, teachers grappled to assist them. We found that learners from poor rural households did not have therapists that would assist change their mind-sets as they had problems that affected them physically and psychologically. This contradicts findings by Mary (2016) that learners' performance and behavior had improved after the Department of Education recruited Learner Support Agents in schools. The teacher participants blamed education department officials for not providing proper and effective policies to assist teachers in implementing inclusivity successfully. The implication is that for learners with learning barriers to be given attention in classes, the teacher workload policy and other policies should be revised. In addition, there should be monitoring to ensure the effective implementation of inclusive education.

Furthermore, it emerged from the findings that teaching learners with learning barriers was characterized by a myriad of challenges such as lack of resources for handicapped learners, inability to attend to every challenged learner due to overcrowded classes, and lack of formal training on teaching learners with disabilities. All participants indicated that the challenges were many and that these negatively affected learning. Similarly, Mtonjeni (2020) found that there was no provision of resources in rural schools, which obstructed the teaching process. Mtonjeni's findings indicate that there were no digital tools to assist during teaching and learning, which is confirmed by the findings of the current study. The teachers believed that if they could be provided with technological teaching tools, the burden of teaching crowded inclusive classrooms could be eased. Mzizi (2014) indicates that curriculum advisors and subject advisors were not granting teachers opportunities to modify the content and assessment strategies in diverse classrooms.

We also found that the behavior of challenged and non-challenged learners needed urgent attention to bring equilibrium between learners with and those without learning problems. The study participants identified behavior as a huge problem for the self-esteem and confidence of learners with learning barriers. Findings indicate that some learners had resorted to not participating in class owing to fear of being ridiculed by others. The challenges made the teaching process in a diverse classroom a struggle, falling short of the principles proposed by the Ecological System and Inclusion Theories. These theories advocate for encouragement of those who have learning impairments to be embraced by those surrounding them. Our findings are similar to those of Vlok (2016) who

established that learners with learning barriers were bullied, whilst teachers were considered the most influential aspects in determining successful support and motivation of challenged learners.

Lastly, we found that teachers were not getting support from the government and parents. Limited involvement of parents impacted negatively on learner motivation. Some learners felt that their parents had lost hope that something good would come out of their children. The Ecological System Theory emphasizes the vital role that parents should play as first teachers of these learners. Furthermore, the findings indicated that education officials were not offering the necessary support to teachers teaching inclusive classes; hence, teachers were ill-equipped for these classes. Engelbrecht, Oswald, and Forlin (2006) had similar findings that teachers were not provided with resources or new skills. The implication is that the status quo of learners with learning barriers will remain the same if not all relevant stakeholders pay urgent attention to their situation.

6. CONCLUSION

The study concludes that extrinsic and intrinsic barriers affect teaching and learning. Participant responses revealed that the performance of learners was affected by several barriers. Consequently, learners with learning impairments register poor performance in their academics. However, the determination of some learners with learning challenges made them conquer the learning barriers and strive for success regardless of these challenges. Inclusivity, resilience and a positive attitude by teachers and learners will improve education in South Africa. It is time for society to accept people as they are and to believe that human beings are not defined by their mental or physiological disabilities. It is evident that teachers are experiencing many challenges dealing with learners with learning challenges. Regardless of challenges, some teachers are scaffolding these learners and trying hard to transform the situations of the vulnerable learners. For improvement on learners' academic performance, there is a need for collaboration of government, parents and teachers. The use of technology in South African rural schools should be a priority. Providing digital tools and skills will help learners learn according to their abilities, and teachers to teach using different strategies. Future study should focus on the impact of using digital tools on the academic performance of learners with learning barriers.

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Transparency: The authors state that the manuscript is honest, truthful, and transparent, that no key aspects of the investigation have been omitted, and that any differences from the study as planned have been clarified. This study followed all writing ethics.

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Authors' Contributions: Conceptualization, literature review, methodology, analysis, discussion and writing of the first draft, B.B.; methodology, analysis and discussion, compilation of final draft, proofreading, M.N. Both authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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