



Exploring the importance of learning support for learners with barriers to learning in senior-phase schools within the King Cetshwayo district

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Abstract – Barriers to learning in South Africa constitute a critical factor impeding teaching processes and constraining pupils' academic achievement across all educational levels. Regrettably, unresolved debates persist among stakeholders regarding when, how, and why to provide necessary learning support to pupils with diverse learning needs. This study examines the significance of learning support for pupils with learning barriers in senior-phase schools within the King Cetshwayo district, focusing on the availability and challenges of learning support for secondary school pupils who struggle academically, as well as the potential roles of educational stakeholders in providing such support. This study employed an interpretivist paradigm to address four research questions through semi-structured interviews with 12 senior-phase teachers and 8 district officials, purposively selected from 4 secondary schools and the King Cetshwayo district in rural KwaZulu-Natal Province, South Africa. Data were analysed thematically. Findings reveal that learning support for pupils with barriers in the senior phase is essential for promoting academic success and inclusive education. However, teachers face multifaceted challenges, including limited resources, diverse pupil needs, and insufficient professional development opportunities, which hinder their ability to provide adequate support. Whilst parental and community involvement is crucial for creating supportive learning environments, various barriers limit meaningful engagement. The study recommends targeted interventions, including enhanced resource allocation, ongoing professional development for teachers, strengthened family and community involvement, and the implementation of individualised education plans (IEPs), which are vital for fostering inclusive educational environments that address diverse pupil needs. Effective collaboration amongst teachers, families, and community stakeholders is essential for developing and sustaining robust support systems that enhance both academic performance and the overall well-being of pupils facing challenges, thereby advancing equitable educational opportunities.

Keywords: Learning support, Learning barriers, Intervention programmes, Senior phase challenges

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I. INTRODUCTION

IN South Africa, various initiatives aim to enhance learning support and address educational disparities. The South African Government's education policies, delineated in the National Education Policy Act (NEPA), emphasise the importance of parental involvement and community engagement in the educational process. School governing bodies (SGBs), established by the South African Schools Act, play a crucial role in integrating parental and community input into school management and cultivating a supportive learning environment (Department of Basic Education [DBE], 2023).

Community-based programmes, such as Read to Rise and IkamvaYouth, provide direct educational support. Read to Rise focuses on improving literacy by distributing books and engaging parents and teachers in reading activities, particularly in under-resourced areas (Read to Rise, 2024). Similarly, IkamvaYouth offers academic support, mentorship, and career guidance through after-school programmes, where volunteers and mentors provide customised assistance to high school students (IkamvaYouth, 2024). These programmes are critical in creating supportive learning environments that surpass traditional classroom settings.

Parental involvement is further supported by initiatives such as

Parenting for Lifelong Health (PLH), which empowers parents with skills to enhance their children's educational development. The programme offers workshops and resources to help parents create a conducive learning environment at home (PLH, 2024). The National Education Collaboration Trust (NECT) engages parents through community fora and training, reinforcing their function in supporting their children's education (NECT, 2024). These efforts emphasise the growing acknowledgement of parents' essential role in educational support.

Corporate social responsibility initiatives also contribute to learning support in South Africa. For example, the Vodacom Foundation supports educational programmes by providing technological resources to schools and funding initiatives that enhance learning support in underserved communities (Vodacom Foundation, 2024). Similarly, the Woolworths Trust invests in education through its corporate social responsibility programmes, focusing on projects that improve student learning outcomes and cultivate school partnerships (Woolworths Trust, 2024). These corporate efforts complement governmental and community-based initiatives, collectively aiming to improve educational support nationwide.

Global action to encourage learning support

Numerous initiatives and actions have been implemented globally to encourage learning support and improve educational outcomes. These

efforts encompass a range of strategies, from governmental policies and international programmes to community-based projects and corporate initiatives. These global actions collectively aim to enhance educational quality, promote inclusivity, and support students in various learning environments (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation [UNESCO], 2023).

One prominent global effort is the UNESCO initiative to promote inclusive education through the SDGs. Particularly, SDG 4 emphasises ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all (UNESCO, 2023). UNESCO's Global Education Monitoring Report emphasises the importance of learning support systems, such as teacher training and educational resources, in achieving these goals and addressing disparities in educational access and quality (UNESCO, 2023).

International organisations, such as the World Bank, play a vital role in supporting education globally. The World Bank's education sector focuses on improving learning outcomes through investments in educational infrastructure, teacher quality, and early childhood education. Programmes, such as the "Learning for All" initiative, aim to enhance educational access and quality, particularly in low- and middle-income countries, by providing technical assistance and funding to improve educational practices and support systems (World Bank, 2024).

Community-based programmes globally also contribute significantly to learning support. For example, the "Room to Read" organisation operates in several countries, focusing on literacy and gender equality in education. *Room to Read's* programmes include providing books, building libraries, and educational programmes. These elements support students and teachers, cultivating an environment conducive to learning (Room to Read, 2024). Similarly, the "Teach for All" network collaborates with local partners to recruit and train teachers in underserved regions, aiming to improve educational quality and support systems (Teach for All, 2024).

Corporate social responsibility initiatives further encourage learning support globally. Companies such as Google and Microsoft developed educational programmes and resources designed to support learners and teachers. For instance, "Google for Education" provides devices and resources to enhance teaching and learning. "Microsoft Education" offers training and digital devices to support teachers and improve learner outcomes (Google for Education, 2024; Microsoft Education, 2024). These corporate efforts help to provide innovative solutions and resources, complementing governmental and community-based educational initiatives.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Global observations on learning support

Diverse observations of learning support are discussed below.

Finland

Finland is renowned for its progressive education system, emphasising a comprehensive approach to learning support. The Finnish model prioritises individual student needs and promotes inclusivity through personalised learning plans and dedicated support systems. A crucial feature is integrating special education services within mainstream classrooms. This integration helps ensure that all students, regardless of their learning challenges, receive the support they need (Sahlberg, 2021). Teachers in Finland are highly trained and have the autonomy to adapt teaching methods and support mechanisms to meet the diverse needs of their students. This approach underscores the assumption that adequate learning support is embedded in understanding and directing individual student needs within a supportive classroom environment (Sahlberg, 2021).

Japan

In Japan, learning support is significantly influenced by cultural values that emphasise discipline, hard work, and perseverance. The Japanese education system incorporates structured support mechanisms, such as after-school programmes and remedial classes, to

assist students who are struggling academically. Japan has a strong focus on academic achievement and standardised testing. This focus can create pressure, but it also motivates the provision of targeted support to help students excel (Okano & Tsuchiya, 2023). The government and educational institutions collaborate closely to offer supplementary education and additional tutoring. This would ensure that students meet rigorous academic standards, reflecting an observation that structured, consistent support is essential for academic success (Okano & Tsuchiya, 2023).

United States

The United States adopts a multifaceted approach to learning support, compelled by federal and state-level policies. The IDEA ensures that students with disabilities receive customised support services, including IEPs and accommodations (Education, 2024). The No Child Left Behind Act, succeeded by ESSA, emphasises standardised testing and accountability. This led to the development of various support programmes to improve educational outcomes for all students, including those from disadvantaged backgrounds (Education, 2024). The emphasis on data-driven interventions and an array of support services underscores a commitment to addressing diverse educational needs through structured, legally mandated frameworks.

Brazil

In Brazil, learning support is influenced by efforts to address educational inequality and support learners across a diverse socioeconomic landscape. The Brazilian Government introduced policies to reduce educational disparities. These policies include the Bolsa Família programme, providing financial assistance to low-income families to support their children's education (Giroto & Nascimento, 2023). Brazil implemented programmes, such as the National Programme for the Improvement of Basic Education (PNAIC), focusing on improving literacy and numeracy through teacher training and pedagogical support (Giroto & Nascimento, 2023). These initiatives reflect an observation that targeted financial and educational support are essential for improving learning outcomes and reducing educational inequality nationwide.

III. OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

This study aims to explore the importance of learning support for learners with learning barriers in senior-phase schools within the King Cetshwayo District. It examines existing support mechanisms, identifies the challenges faced by teachers and district officials, and explores the roles of parents, communities, and external partners in strengthening inclusive learning support systems.

IV. METHODS

Research paradigm

This study adopted an interpretivist research paradigm. The research paradigm is knowledge and understanding of "the reality and nature of the world", also known as the "basic belief system and the theoretical framework with assumptions about ontology, epistemology, and methodology" (Rehman & Alharthi, 2016, p. 51). Social interactions among people generate diverse realities for everyone. Reality and truth are formed through interactions; they are not merely discovered. An understanding of reality is based on individual interpretations of socially constructed phenomena. This reflects how researchers perceive, understand, and study the world around them. A brief discussion on the interpretivism paradigm follows in the subsection.

Research design

This study employed a qualitative, exploratory, and descriptive research design, which was appropriate for gaining an in-depth understanding of teachers' and district officials' experiences and perceptions of learning support for learners with barriers in the senior phase. An exploratory design was used to investigate a phenomenon that is not yet well understood within the context of rural secondary schools in the King Cetshwayo District. The descriptive aspect of the

design enabled the researcher to present a detailed account of the support mechanisms, challenges, and contextual factors influencing learning support practices. This design allowed for flexibility in exploring participants' lived experiences, meanings, and interpretations, consistent with the interpretivist paradigm guiding the study. It also facilitated the use of semi-structured interviews, enabling participants to express their views freely and to provide rich, nuanced data. Overall, the design supported the development of a comprehensive understanding of how learning support is conceptualised and implemented in real school settings.

Research approach

This study used a qualitative approach. This approach focuses on research that interprets the meaning and descriptive data from the participants' own words. This approach was helpful because it provides a holistic understanding of the detailed human descriptions of the participants' feelings, opinions, and experiences related to the selected research topic. It was beneficial for understanding individuals, observing them in their natural settings, and experiencing their daily challenges in real-life situations (Brynard, 2014). This method was useful in exploring the importance of learning support for learners struggling with learning barriers in rural high schools in the senior phase.

Research sites

The study was conducted across four sites in the King Cetshwayo District. The KCD, with its administrative headquarters in Richards Bay, is in KZN, approximately 150 km north of the eThekweni central metropolitan area. The district is bordered to the north by uMkanyakude, to the northwest by Zululand, and to the south by the iLembe district. The KCD encompasses the local municipalities of Mthonjaneni, uMlalazi, Mfolozi, Umhlatuze, and Nkandla. The district is adequately served by educational institutions, featuring 452 primary and 204 secondary schools; however, information regarding the quality of these facilities and the provision of water and sanitation at the schools is lacking.

In KCD, 12.37% of the population is without formal schooling, representing 2.85% of the provincial total and a share of the national figure. Despite ongoing efforts to improve educational outcomes in KZN, significant disparities in educational attainment persist, particularly within the KCD. As of 2019, only 178,000 individuals in the district had obtained a matriculation certificate, representing 7.94% of the province's total matriculants (Statistics South Africa, 2020). Although progress has been evidenced by a decrease in the number of people without formal schooling at an average annual rate of 2.82% between 2009 and 2019, the proportion of residents with only a matric qualification remains low. Individuals in the district with both a matric and a postgraduate degree account for just 1.38% of the national population and 8.54% of the provincial population, emphasising the enduring educational inequality in the region (Statistics South Africa, 2020).

Participants

Twelve participants were conveniently selected from four high schools and eight district officials. Some teachers are currently teaching or have tutored students in the senior phase. This study assumed that these teachers, due to their experience, were better at expressing themselves and discussing the learning support provided to students with learning barriers in the senior phase compared to teachers in other educational phases. The teachers were all from mainstream schools in KCD. In this study, schools and participants were conveniently selected, focusing on those located in nearby wards that are easily accessible to the researcher.

Data analysis

The thematic analysis approach was employed for the data analysis. This technique is mainly used in qualitative research. It consists of organising and describing a dataset, widely used in qualitative data analysis to detect, analyse, and report themes within the data. It helps in extracting meanings and concepts from data, including pinpointing,

examining, and recording patterns or themes (Javadi & Zarea, 2016, p. 33). This technique is suitable for qualitative interpretative studies, as it emphasises individual experiences and perceptions of a phenomenon. (Braun & Clarke, 2016). This study analysed the transcripts verbatim, translating from IsiZulu to English, as most participants preferred IsiZulu as the medium of instruction (an IsiZulu interview schedule was available). A second party proofread the transcripts for accuracy, trustworthiness, reliability, and validity. The researcher's initial step was to read the transcripts to familiarise herself with the data and identify codes. The codes were organised into central themes, as explained through repeated reading steps to achieve consensus on the themes; the codes were then applied to the transcripts. Braun and Clarke (2016, pp. 213-227) recommended six phases, as follows:

Phase 1 consists of becoming familiar with the data (from text or transcriptions) and identifying potential items of interest. First, the interviews were transcribed with correct spelling. This step enabled understanding of the topic under discussion based on the participant's observations.

Phase 2 involves generating initial codes. However, the researcher created a pilot list of ideas related to the data. The data were organised into specific groups and assigned initial codes (Braun & Clarke, 2016). Accordingly, coding was conducted on a desktop, and the researcher made notes along the margins of the emphasised text.

Phase 3 deals with searching for themes. The researcher collected data and explored the codes to identify the meaning of broader patterns. The researcher had diverse codes; whenever the initial codes were formed, they were searched for themes. The themes developed from the codes were assigned code names and collected into concepts, patterns, and categories of related topics from the participants' perspectives.

Phase 4 consists of reviewing themes. Two basic principles regarding the characteristics of themes in phase are internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity. The data within the themes were closely related, and the themes could be meaningfully differentiated. Themes were refined, split, combined, and discarded. Potential themes applied to the dataset were determined if they told a conclusive story that answered the research question.

Phase 5 defines and names themes. However, developing a detailed analysis of each theme is necessary. The researcher defines the themes at the end of each phase and summarises them. Theme naming involved defining clear, accurate, and concise names and communicating them to the intended readership. Themes were also linked to the study's literature review.

Phase 6 produces a report. However, the final phase involved writing and reporting on the categorical themes the researcher had identified. It involves accuracy, logic, and consistency, without repeating themes, which are crucial when expressing themes. The researcher analysed data from semi-structured interviews and visual material to create units of meaning. The themes were then categorised into a narrative that best answered the research questions. Credibility, dependability, authenticity, and confirmation were used to guarantee trustworthiness in this research phase. The qualitative research description adheres to the identified criteria for ensuring the authenticity and trustworthiness of the research phase (Ryen, 2020).

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was sought from the University of Western Cape, and a communication was drafted to request authorisation to conduct a study in the King Cetshwayo schools through the KZN DBE. Before participants engaged in the research, they were provided with informed consent forms to ensure they were fully aware of what was expected of them and understood their rights. Volunteer safety was prioritised, with the assurance that no toxic or harmful substances would be used throughout the investigation. Confidentiality was maintained to protect participants' privacy; no personal details were disclosed to anyone.

Informed consent occurs when a participant voluntarily agrees to participate in a study. This study emphasised voluntarism, ensuring that participants understood they were participating of their own free

will, without coercion, and that they had the option to withdraw at any time. Permission letters were requested and distributed to participants as part of the study.

V. RESULTS

Support mechanisms for learners with learning barriers

Effective support mechanisms for learners with learning barriers are crucial for cultivating an inclusive educational environment. Participants in this study shared their experiences regarding the existing support systems and their effectiveness in addressing the diverse needs of learners facing barriers.

In-school support systems

Participants emphasised the importance of in-school support systems, such as remedial programs, tutoring, and counseling services, in supporting learners facing academic challenges. Teacher Participant A remarked,

“Our remedial programmes have helped many learners catch up, but we need more resources to sustain them” (Teacher Participant A).

From a Vygotskian perspective, remedial programmes represent scaffolding, in which teachers provide targeted support to help learners reach higher levels of understanding. However, the resource limitations mentioned emphasise a systemic challenge in meeting the zone of proximal development (ZPD) of all learners, particularly in resource-poor settings.

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory underscores that support mechanisms must also consider the macrosystem (cultural and policy influences) that define educational practices. The lack of resources not only affects the individual learner's development but also impedes the wider educational system's capacity to address learners' needs comprehensively.

Teacher collaboration and peer support

Collaboration among teachers is crucial for developing effective strategies to support learners with learning barriers. Teacher Participant C emphasised,

“When we share strategies and resources, we can create a more supportive learning environment for our learners” (Teacher Participant C).

Vygotsky's idea of social learning plays a central role in this context. By working together and sharing strategies, teachers engage in collaborative scaffolding, benefiting from one another's expertise to address diverse learning needs.

Additionally, from Bronfenbrenner's perspective, teacher collaboration strengthens the microsystem by cultivating a supportive professional community. This collaborative environment enhances the teachers' ability to influence positive outcomes for learners, which is crucial in areas where learners face multiple barriers.

Specialised educational resources

Access to specialised educational resources, such as assistive technology and learning aids, is vital in supporting learners with barriers. Teacher Participant E remarked,

“Having access to assistive technologies has made a significant difference for many of my learners” (Teacher Participant E).

This emphasises the importance of mediated learning experiences in line with Vygotsky's theory. Assistive technology acts as a tool that facilitates students' engagement with the curriculum, expanding their ZPD and enabling them to perform at higher levels.

A district official added,

“We are working on improving access to specialised resources, but it requires ongoing investment and training for teachers” (District Official, Curriculum Advisers).

This mirrors Bronfenbrenner's emphasis on the mesosystem. Collaboration among educational institutions, families, and external stakeholders is needed to provide the resources and professional development teachers need to support learners effectively.

External partnerships and interventions

Collaboration with non-profit organisations and external agencies is critical in supporting learners with learning barriers. Teacher

Participant G observed,

“Collaborating with local NGOs has brought in additional resources and support for our learners” (Teacher Participant G).

These partnerships enhance the support network available to schools, underscoring the importance of accessing external expertise to supplement in-school efforts. According to Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, such external collaborations are part of the exosystem, which indirectly influences learners by improving the quality of the school's educational environment. These partnerships, therefore, provide critical resources and expertise that complement the school's efforts to support learners with diverse needs.

District officials also recognised the value of these partnerships. One official remarked,

“We actively seek partnerships with organisations that align with our goals to support learners with barriers” (District Official, Psychologist).

This proactive stance toward external collaboration reflects a strategic approach to addressing the systemic challenges that schools face, enabling more robust support systems for students. Integrating external partnerships into the school environment aligns with Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, which emphasises the role of social interaction and external tools in supporting development. By tapping into external resources, these partnerships serve as tools that expand the ZPD for both learners and teachers. In this context, external agencies serve as scaffolding, enabling teachers to meet learners' needs better.

Despite the value of these partnerships, participants also identified areas for improvement. From enhancing in-school support systems to cultivating deeper collaboration among teachers and leveraging the potential of external partnerships, there are multiple opportunities to strengthen the educational experience for learners. Effectively directing these gaps is crucial to ensuring all learners receive the necessary academic and social support to succeed.

In-school support systems

In-school support systems are crucial to the academic success of learners who face barriers. The effectiveness of these systems is strongly linked to the availability of resources and the implementation of well-designed programmes. Participants repeatedly emphasized the importance of remedial programmes, tutoring, and counselling services in improving learner outcomes. Teacher Participant A remarked,

“Our school offers a range of remedial programmes, but they often lack the necessary resources and trained staff to be effective” (Teacher Participant A).

This highlights the resource scarcity that many schools face, which limits the potential effectiveness of these support systems. Bronfenbrenner's theory suggests that inadequate resources in the microsystem (the immediate school environment) significantly affect the quality of learners' educational experiences and can limit the system's ability to meet their needs.

District officials echoed this sentiment, with one official noting, *“We recognise the importance of in-school support systems, but they need to be adequately funded to ensure they can cater to all learners”* (District Official, 2024).

This acknowledgement at the mesosystem level underscores the broader systemic challenges affecting schools and emphasises a commitment to improving support mechanisms.

This perspective aligns with Vygotsky's idea of scaffolding, in which learning and development are maximised when learners receive appropriate support tailored to their needs. Remedial programmes, tutoring, and counselling services are crucial scaffolds, but only when sufficiently resourced. Without such resources, these services may fall short in addressing the diverse needs of learners.

The responses from district officials further emphasise the importance of mental health resources as part of a comprehensive support network. This indicates a proactive approach to meeting learners' academic and emotional needs. While in-school support systems are critical, participants emphasised the need to increase resources, staffing, and collaboration among support personnel. Strengthening these areas will not only improve the quality of support

provided but also foster better educational outcomes for all learners.

Availability and influence of remedial programmes, tutoring, and counselling services

The availability and effectiveness of remedial programmes, tutoring, and counselling services are critical support mechanisms for learners encountering barriers in the senior phase. Participants in this study shared their experiences regarding the availability and impact of these services, emphasising both their potential and limitations.

Several participants recognised the importance of remedial programmes in assisting struggling learners. Teacher Participant E remarked,

"The remedial programmes we offer have made a noticeable difference for some learners, but they often lack the structure needed to be fully effective" (Teacher Participant E).

This statement highlights that, although the intention behind these programmes is positive, their implementation may fall short in providing the necessary support for learners. This emphasises the need for more structured and focused tutoring, particularly to address specific learning gaps.

However, the availability of these support services is often hindered by various limitations, such as time constraints and resource shortages. This limitation calls for more flexible scheduling and strategic planning to ensure a broader range of learners can participate. Additionally, counselling services emerged as another vital support mechanism for learners facing emotional or behavioural challenges. These services are crucial for helping students overcome personal and psychological challenges that may affect their academic performance.

Despite their importance, using counselling services can be hindered by societal perceptions surrounding mental health. District officials acknowledged these concerns, with one official stating,

"We are aware of the gaps in service utilisation and are working on strategies to raise awareness and reduce stigma related to counselling" (District Official, social worker).

This reflects a commitment not only to improving the availability and quality of services but also to cultivating a supportive environment in which students feel comfortable accessing these resources. This aligns with Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, in which external support, such as counselling and remedial programmes, serves as scaffolding, facilitating learners' development. Similarly, Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory suggests that both in-school support systems and external influences (such as family attitudes and societal stigma) shape students' learning experiences, emphasising the importance of a holistic, integrated support system.

While remedial programmes, tutoring, and counselling services are essential for supporting learners with barriers, the challenges of availability, implementation, and societal stigma must be addressed. Directing these challenges is crucial for maximising the effectiveness of these support mechanisms and improving educational outcomes for all learners.

Teacher collaboration and peer support

Teacher collaboration and peer support are vital elements in creating effective learning environments, particularly for learners who face barriers in the senior phase. Participants in this study shared their perspectives on teachers' collaborative efforts and the influence of peer support in addressing learners' diverse needs.

Many participants emphasised the importance of teacher teamwork in cultivating a supportive educational atmosphere. Teacher Participant J stated,

"Working together as a team allows us to share resources and strategies that benefit our learners, especially those facing challenges" (Teacher Participant J).

This sentiment highlights the importance of collaboration, where pooling resources and strategies can enhance teaching effectiveness. This aligns with Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, which emphasises the importance of social interaction and shared experiences in learning and professional development.

Peer support not only enhances teachers' effectiveness but also facilitates professional development, particularly for less experienced teachers; however, time constraints were a consistent barrier, as teachers often struggle to engage in meaningful collaboration and planning due to their heavy workloads. This reflects a need for more structured opportunities for collaboration and mentorship.

District officials recognised the necessity of cultivating collaboration among teachers, with one official noting,

"We are working to create more structured opportunities for teachers to collaborate, as we know it can significantly enhance their ability to support learners" (District Official, learner support adviser).

This acknowledgement emphasises the importance of creating an environment where collaboration is prioritised, and teachers are provided with the infrastructure and support to engage in effective teamwork.

In line with Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, teacher collaboration is a critical factor in the mesosystem, where interactions among various school structures (e.g., teachers, administrators) influence learners' educational experiences. Collaboration strengthens the educational environment by fostering a shared responsibility for students' success and enhancing morale and engagement.

Teacher collaboration and peer support are fundamental in addressing the needs of learners with barriers. While the benefits of collaboration were widely acknowledged, the challenges of time constraints and structural barriers must be addressed. Strategies such as structured meetings and mentorship programmes can enhance collaboration, ultimately improving teaching practices and student outcomes.

Role of teamwork among teachers in sharing strategies for learner support

Teamwork among teachers is crucial in enhancing learner support, particularly for those facing barriers in the senior phase. Participants in this study emphasised that collaborative efforts among teachers can significantly enhance teachers' ability to meet learners' diverse needs. Teacher Participant B emphasised the value of teamwork, stating,

"When we work together, we can brainstorm innovative strategies to support our learners, and that collective wisdom makes a huge difference" (Teacher Participant B).

This sentiment highlights the significance of shared ideas and experiences in fostering creativity and resourcefulness. By working together, teachers can refine their strategies and create solutions tailored to the specific needs of learners who may require additional support. Furthermore, collaboration enables teachers to evaluate and improve their practices collectively, ultimately benefiting learners. District officials also recognised the role of teamwork in supporting learners, with one official commenting,

"We encourage schools to create collaborative environments where teachers can share effective strategies and support one another" (District Official, curriculum adviser).

This statement reflects awareness within educational administration of the critical need to foster a culture of collaboration among teachers; however, some barriers remain. Teachers' hesitation to openly share strategies can hinder communication, limiting the effectiveness of collaborative efforts. Overcoming this hesitation is essential for cultivating an open and supportive dialogue. Cultivating a culture of teamwork is vital to improving educational outcomes for learners with barriers.

While participants acknowledged both the advantages and challenges of collaboration, the overarching theme emphasises the necessity of creating a collaborative environment in schools. By addressing communication barriers and providing structured opportunities for collaboration, schools can leverage teachers' collective expertise to improve support for learners.

Specialised educational resources

The availability and accessibility of specialised educational resources are integral to effectively supporting learners with barriers, particularly in the senior phase. Participants in this study reported varying

experiences with the availability of such resources, which significantly affected their ability to provide adequate support. Teacher Participant A emphasised the importance of specialised resources, stating,

"Having access to assistive technology and learning aids can change the game for many of our learners. It allows them to engage with the material in ways that suit their needs" (Teacher Participant A).

This emphasises the need for schools to equip classrooms with assistive technologies and learning aids that cater to diverse learning styles and needs. These resources can bridge the gap for learners with specific challenges, enabling them to engage more easily with educational content. The frustration teachers feel when they are committed to their learners' success but face systemic constraints further underscores the importance of adequate resource allocation.

District officials also acknowledged the significance of specialised resources, with one official commenting,

"We are working on improving resource allocation to ensure that schools have the necessary materials to support learners with barriers" (District Official, curriculum adviser).

This acknowledgement reflects an understanding of the systemic challenges related to resource availability and the ongoing efforts needed to support schools; however, while the intent to address these issues exists, challenges related to access and training remain prevalent.

To ensure specialised resources are used effectively, schools must not only have access to the necessary materials but also provide adequate training and professional development for teachers. Addressing these gaps will enhance the overall effectiveness of educational strategies designed to support diverse learners.

Accessibility of assistive technology, learning aids, and adaptive materials

The accessibility of assistive technology, learning aids, and adaptive materials is critical for supporting learners with barriers in the senior phase. Participants emphasised the positive impact of these resources, as well as the significant challenges they face in accessing them. Teacher Participant A affirmed,

"Assistive technology can make a huge difference for my learners. When they have access to tools that cater to their specific needs, their engagement levels increase dramatically" (Teacher Participant A).

This statement reflects the transformative potential of technology in creating an inclusive learning environment where all learners can participate meaningfully; however, it also underscores the inequities in resource distribution that perpetuate educational disparities among learners. While assistive technology offers significant potential to enhance engagement, limited access remains a prominent barrier.

District officials also acknowledged these challenges, with one official remarking,

"We are aware of the gaps in accessibility to assistive technology, and we are working on initiatives to bridge those gaps" (District Official, curriculum adviser).

This response indicates a commitment to improving access to these critical resources, which can provide emotional and psychological benefits for learners and cultivate a more inclusive educational environment. Despite the promise these resources offer, barriers to access and the need for practical training and implementation must be addressed. Ensuring that all teachers have the devices and training required to use assistive technologies effectively is essential for maximising their potential in supporting diverse learners.

External partnerships and interventions

External partnerships and interventions are vital for enhancing the support mechanisms available to learners with barriers. Participants discussed the importance of collaborating with non-profit organisations, community agencies, and educational institutions to provide additional resources and targeted support. Teacher Participant A emphasised,

"Collaborating with local NGOs has been beneficial for my learners. They bring in specialised programmes that we would not otherwise have access to" (Teacher Participant A).

This illustrates how external partnerships can supplement school

resources and provide interventions that address learners' needs. Such collaborations not only enhance the support network but also offer professional development opportunities for teachers, equipping them with innovative teaching approaches. District officials also recognised the importance of these partnerships, with one official commenting,

"We actively seek partnerships with organisations that can provide resources and training for teachers. It is a critical component of our strategy to improve educational outcomes" (District Official, learner support adviser).

These partnerships emphasise a proactive approach to addressing limitations within schools by leveraging external expertise and resources. While collaborations can provide valuable support, challenges such as funding instability and the need for customised approaches must be addressed. Effective partnerships, aligned with the community's specific needs, can create a more responsive educational environment, enhancing learner success.

Engagement with non-profit organisations and external agencies for additional support

Engaging with non-profit organisations and external agencies is a critical strategy for providing additional support for learners in the senior phase. Participants emphasised how these collaborations help address barriers to learning and expand educational opportunities. Teacher Participant F remarked,

"We often partner with non-profits that focus on literacy and numeracy programmes. Their expertise and resources have significantly improved our learners' skills" (Teacher Participant F).

This demonstrates the positive influence that specialised organisations can have on directing academic deficits and contributing to overall learner development. Additionally, it emphasises the exchange of knowledge and skills between external organisations and teachers, cultivating professional development that leads to more effective teaching strategies. District officials also acknowledged the role of these engagements, with one district official affirming,

"Our partnerships with non-profit organisations have enabled us to offer resources and support that we simply do not have the capacity for as a school district" (District Official, psychologist).

These partnerships can fill critical resource and support-service gaps, ensuring comprehensive assistance for learners; however, cultivating effective collaborations is not without its challenges, including the potential instability of relying on external organisations. This underscores the importance of establishing long-term relationships to sustain the positive impact of these collaborations. Engaging with non-profit organisations and external agencies offers substantial benefits. However, the sustainability and effectiveness of such partnerships require careful planning, alignment with community needs, and active involvement from all stakeholders. By cultivating strong connections with external organisations, teachers can build a more robust support network that enhances learner outcomes.

VI. DISCUSSION

The findings indicate several support mechanisms that could enhance the educational experience for learners with barriers. These mechanisms include in-school support systems, teacher collaboration, specialised educational resources, and external partnerships.

The availability and influence of remedial programmes, tutoring, and counselling services were critical for supporting learners in the senior phase. The findings indicated that schools offering structured in-school support systems, such as remedial classes and one-on-one tutoring, were better equipped to direct the diverse needs of learners with barriers. Taylor (2021) suggests that adequate in-school support significantly improves academic outcomes for learners encountering challenges.

This finding aligns with Vygotsky's concept of the ZPD, which posits that learners require appropriate scaffolding to reach their full potential. Remedial programmes and tutoring serve as scaffolding, providing support just beyond a learner's current ability, thereby facilitating cognitive development.

Counselling services are also pivotal in supporting learners. Research indicates that mental health support within schools can alleviate emotional and behavioural issues that often accompany learning difficulties (Smith et al., 2022). These services are crucial for supporting learners' psychosocial development, a key aspect of Bronfenbrenner's microsystem, where emotional well-being directly influences academic engagement and outcomes.

Collaboration among teachers further enhances the effectiveness of in-school support systems. According to Huang and Liu (2023), teacher teamwork, such as co-teaching or sharing resources and strategies, creates a more supportive environment for learners. This cooperative dynamic reflects Vygotsky's emphasis on social interaction as essential to cognitive growth, with teachers acting as facilitators and peers contributing to a collaborative learning culture.

The findings emphasise the role of teacher teamwork and the significance of collaborative practices in enhancing educational support for learners with barriers. Research indicates that when teachers collaborate, they create an environment that fosters the sharing of best practices and resources, ultimately benefiting their students (Kumar, 2022).

Vygotsky's theory again provides a relevant lens here; teacher collaboration reflects learning as a socially mediated process. Through communities of practice such as PLCs and mentorship programmes, teachers enhance their instructional strategies by learning from one another, benefiting learners in their ZPDs.

According to Hargreaves and O'Connor (2018), effective collaboration among teachers leads to a deeper understanding of individual learners' challenges, facilitating the development of customised instructional strategies. This is vital for addressing learning barriers, as teachers can draw on each other's experiences and expertise to develop innovative solutions that meet the unique needs of their students.

Moreover, Bronfenbrenner's mesosystem is reflected in how teacher collaboration integrates elements within the school environment to support the learner. When teachers share responsibility and engage in reflective practice, it ensures learners receive consistent, multidimensional support across classrooms.

The accessibility of assistive technology and learning aids was vital for supporting learners with barriers. These specialised resources facilitate individualised learning experiences, allowing teachers to effectively address each learner's unique needs (White & Thompson, 2023).

This corresponds with Vygotsky's belief in using cultural tools (such as technology and language) to mediate learning. Assistive technologies serve as mediational tools that enhance learners' capabilities, particularly those facing cognitive, linguistic, or physical challenges. The provision of such resources also aligns with the microsystem and exosystem in Bronfenbrenner's model, as both school-level decisions and broader district policies affect whether these resources are made available. Inequitable access can result in systemic disadvantages that disproportionately affect learners with barriers. Engagement with non-profit organisations and external agencies provided additional support, benefiting both teachers and learners. These partnerships provide resources and expertise that may not be available within the school system alone (Green et al., 2020).

This theme aligns with Bronfenbrenner's exosystem and macrosystem, where institutions and societal structures beyond the learner's immediate setting significantly influence educational access and quality. Community-based programmes, tutoring, and external mental health services address structural inequalities that manifest as learning barriers. Vygotsky's sociocultural perspective underscores the importance of broad social interactions and culturally informed support. When schools partner with culturally relevant organisations, they offer learners additional pathways to development through socially meaningful engagement.

VII. CONCLUSION

The proposed learning support programme focuses on a structured, tiered approach to directing learners' varying learning needs. This approach categorises learners based on the severity of their learning barriers, mild, moderate, and severe, and tailors interventions accordingly. A key feature of this programme is the integration of regular counselling and psychological sessions to support learners' emotional well-being and mental health, which is essential for their overall success. The programme also includes specific concessions for each group to ensure equitable access to education.

For mild learners, the programme recommends 30 minutes of daily reading and writing practice, emphasising repetition both in school and at home. This can be supplemented with parents' homework supervision to ensure learners remain on track. Additionally, parents are encouraged to allocate two hours each evening for literacy repetition, reinforcing classroom learning. These learners can benefit from simpler interventions, but regular check-ins with counsellors and access to psychological support are essential to maintaining their motivation and emotional resilience.

For moderate learners, the programme calls for more intensive support, such as one hour of reading and writing daily. An Individualised Education Programme (IEP) will be developed to ensure that targeted interventions are tailored to their specific needs. To enhance their learning experience, these learners can use assistive technologies, such as smartphones, computers, and literacy apps, and engage in peer or tutor-assisted learning. The programme also incorporates literacy-based activities, such as games and educational media, which can make learning more engaging and interactive. In addition, moderate learners will benefit from regular psychological sessions, which provide strategies to cope with emotional or behavioural challenges that may arise from their learning barriers. Concessions, such as extended time for assessments and alternative exam formats, will be offered to ensure fairness and equitable access.

For learners with severe learning challenges, the programme recommends referring them to special schools equipped to manage their specific needs. In these settings, an IEP will be implemented to outline the necessary accommodations, and regular psychological counselling will be provided. Severe learners will also receive ongoing counselling sessions to support their mental health, as they may experience higher levels of stress and frustration. At home, parents will be encouraged to dedicate 3 hours to reinforcing literacy skills, ensuring a consistent, dedicated support system both in and out of school.

At all levels, the programme emphasises the importance of repetition as a foundational strategy for improving literacy skills. This repetition should occur in both the school and home environments, reinforcing and sustaining learning. Concessions are included in all plans to accommodate learners' unique needs, providing the necessary adjustments in timing, format, or support to ensure fair access to education.

This structured, tiered approach not only accommodates learners' varying needs but also integrates consistent efforts at school and home to cultivate effective academic development. The inclusion of counselling and psychological sessions for all learners, coupled with regular feedback and progress monitoring, ensures that emotional and educational support are balanced and contribute to the programme's overall success.

Based on the findings, several recommendations are proposed to improve learning support for learners with barriers, as summarised in the subsections.

While schools play a crucial role in implementing learning support, it is ultimately the responsibility of educational authorities to ensure that adequate resources are allocated to address the diverse needs of learners with barriers. This study, therefore, highlights the need for increased funding and resource allocation, urging both local and national government structures to prioritise inclusive education in their planning and budgeting processes. Adequate funding is essential to

acquire learning materials, assistive technologies, and additional support staff, all of which are critical to improving the educational experiences of learners facing challenges in the senior phase. At the same time, schools can be encouraged to adopt creative approaches to securing supplementary support by forming strategic partnerships with businesses, non-profit organisations, and community stakeholders. These partnerships can provide additional resources and services, but they should not replace the state's core responsibility to ensure equitable access to quality education for all learners.

Research indicates that schools with sufficient resources are better equipped to implement effective support systems, thereby improving educational outcomes (Johnson et al., 2020). Schools should conduct regular assessments of their resource needs to ensure that they can adapt to the evolving challenges encountered by their learners. A proactive approach to resource management can cultivate an inclusive environment where each learner has access to the devices they need to succeed.

VIII. CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

There are no conflicts of interest in this study.

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