

## INCLUSION OF LEARNERS WITH BARRIERS TO LEARNING IN MAINSTREAM SCHOOLS: A PSYCHO-SOCIAL SUPPORT INTERVENTION

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### Abstract

The South African education white Paper 6 (EWP6) emphasises the importance of access, equity, and inclusion of all learners in the education system as a social justice agenda. The inclusion of learners with barriers to learning in mainstream schools becomes a serious challenge and such learners with emotional, behavioural, or cognitive challenges often face difficulties in mainstream settings. This presentation examines the role of psycho-social support interventions in enhancing these learners' social integration, emotional well-being, and academic engagement. This study generated qualitative data through interviews with 15 Grade 9 teachers from mainstream schools in Gauteng Province, South Africa. Thematic data analysis was employed to analyse the data. The findings of this study highlight effective strategies, including counselling, peer support, and teacher training to foster a supportive inclusive environment. The study concludes that psycho-social support interventions are an enablement of effective inclusion of learners experiencing barriers to learning in mainstream schools. This study recommends continuous training of in-service teachers in inclusive policies that aim to support the well-being of learners and the exposure of learners to counselling services that are offered in schools. This research provides practical insights for educators, school administrators, and policymakers on implementing psycho-social frameworks that facilitate successful inclusion, thereby promoting a more accessible and equitable education system.

**Keywords:** *Barriers to learning, inclusion, intervention, mainstream schools. psycho-social support.*

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### 1. Introduction and background of the study

According to the Department of Education (DoE, 2001) White Paper 6: Building and inclusive Education and Training System access, equity and inclusion are the core principles with which the South African education system aligns itself (DoE, 2001). The main directive of this policy document is to advocate for the inclusion of all learners in mainstream schooling. According to Serero (2021), all learners should be the recipients of quality education regardless of any underlying disability or challenges. However, even with progressive policies such as the EWP6 outlining practical methods of implementing inclusive education, often practice tends to be a step behind theory when coming to the implementation (Walton & Engelbrecht, 2024). According to Cele (2023) lack of resources, skills and support within mainstream schools remains to be major obstacle standing in the way of the implementation of inclusive education. Moreover, challenges around the practical implementation of the inclusion of learners with diverse learning needs, tend to perpetuate the exclusionary values experienced within their social settings (Mhlolo & Ntoatsabone, 2023). Both global and local studies have demonstrated how learners with cognitive and behavioural emotional difficulties often struggle with being accommodated in mainstream educational settings (Hind, Larkin & Dunn, 2019; Serero, 2021).

On the other hand, teachers are unable to meet the needs of learners with barriers to learning due to not having been adequately trained to handle such specific educational tasks (Mahmood, Huang & Rehman, 2024). With no availability of resources and non-functional to absent psycho-social support structures in place, teachers have always reported performing their duties with great difficulties (Ludago, 2020). Such challenges often result in the deterioration of learners' overall emotional, educational and social well-being which at times accounts for higher school dropouts (Deli, Kaur & Hashim, 2021).

## 2. Inclusion of learners with barriers to learning in mainstream schools

Inclusion is one of the principles and values of an inclusive education system. The inclusive education approach is based on the premise that all learners who are diverse in terms of gender, sexual orientation, ability, age, religion, language race, socioeconomic background, and all other aspects that make them different should be accommodated in mainstream schooling. According to UNESCO (2005), the inclusive education approach prescribes that learners of all kinds of needs and barriers should receive education in the same schools for their social, psychological, and educational growth. Mainstream schooling is beneficial because learners with various barriers to learning learn in the same classroom. Florian (2015) opined that mainstream class teaching for learners with learning barriers may have benefits such as increased participation by all learners in the learning process and decreased exclusion in the curricula.

Teachers are paramount to ensure that learners with barriers to learning are included and accommodated in mainstream schools. However, the study findings by Adewumi and Mosito (2019) reported that some teachers mentioned that they were trained in inclusive education approach but were not trained to implement inclusion for learners with barriers to learning. This is because supporting learners with barriers to learning requires the appropriate skills such as observations and counselling. Nevertheless, another piece of the literature revealed that Life Orientation teachers provide psychosocial support to all learners in schools (Mahwai & Ross, 2023) even though they are not adequately trained through the in-service and pre-service teacher education programmes.

## 3. Psycho-social support interventions

Regional Psychosocial Support Initiative (REPSI) defines psychosocial support as “a continuum of love, care, and protection that enhances the cognitive, emotional and spiritual well-being of a person and strengthens their social and cultural connectedness” (2013). According to the Department of Basic Education (DBE, 2017), Care and Support for Teaching and Learning (CSTL) programme, the lack and insufficient provision of psychosocial support is a barrier to learning that has a ripple impact on learning outcomes (DBE, 2017). Psycho-social support interventions can serve as an engine that enables the inclusion of learners with barriers to learning in mainstream schools (Sharma, Ashokan & Kurian, 2024). This may consist of several strategies that may focus on fostering continued teacher training on how to adequately respond to learners’ specific educational learning needs (Madiba, 2021).

DBE’s (2020) guide for Learner Support Agents and Schools on Providing Psychosocial Support to Learners indicates that psychosocial support includes counselling, changing the environment of the school, and the policies and practices that are not conducive to teaching and learning. In addition, the guide further stipulated that psychosocial support in basic education aims to provide a suitable environment for children to learn and develop, support optimum learning, retention, and achievement in school, enhance resilience, and promote early identification of vulnerable children and provision of support. Psychosocial support interventions in the classrooms should be evidenced by learners feeling welcome, happy, safe, actively participating in the learning process, and having opportunities to develop meaningful relationships, which in turn allow them to reach their full potential (Noble & McGrath, 2015).

## 4. Purpose of the study and research question

This study aimed to examine the significance of psycho-social support interventions in enhancing the inclusion of learners with barriers to learning in mainstream schools. The main research question that assisted in generating the findings is: *How can psycho-social support interventions enhance the inclusion of learners with barriers to learning in mainstream schools?*

## 5. Theoretical framework

This study grounds itself within the biopsychosocial model proposed by Engel (1977). This theory holds a central postulation that biological, psychological, and social factors need to be considered for understanding the individual’s functioning. Furthermore, all the factors should be understood to function interdependently. In 2021, Hay and Joubert (2021) proposed the education of educational factors to this model. In applying this model in this study, teachers should ensure that they have a better understanding of the biological, psychological, social, and educational factors for them to adhere to inclusive practices. According to Taukeni and Mollaoğlu (2025), the biopsychosocial model serves as a guiding framework for achieving quality education and cultivating a more equitable educational space. Therefore, if teachers can embrace the significance of the interplay of biological, psychological, social factors, and educational factors, they may be in a better position to propose psychosocial interventions that can enhance inclusion at mainstream secondary schools.

## 6. Methodology

This study is qualitative. The interpretive qualitative paradigm was used in this study to get a deeper understanding of how psycho-social support interventions enhance the inclusion of learners with barriers to learning in mainstream schools. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2003), an interpretive qualitative paradigm involves studying things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of or to interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them. A substantial amount of time was spent in the field having conversations with the teachers interacting with learners experiencing barriers to learning, how they were managing their interventions, and how they collaborated with other teachers within an inclusive school environment. Purposive sampling, which is mainly utilised in qualitative research (Ames, Glenton & Lewin, 2019), was used for the selection of information-rich participants who are working at mainstream secondary schools.

Semi-structured interviews were used to generate data. Maree (2013) explains that the semi-structured interview is widely used in research to validate data emerging from other data sources. To gain sufficient data, a series of semi-structured interviews were held with the 15 Grade 9 teachers from mainstream schools in Gauteng Province, South Africa. These interviews were conducted in the school staffrooms. Thematic analysis was used to focus on identifying and describing implicit and explicit ideas within the data through themes. All the data was transcribed, coded, categorised, and sorted into themes. Ethics clearance was obtained at an institutional level as well as from all relevant authorities and participants before the commencement of the research. This included obtaining informed consent from teachers and principals. The consent forms were clear about the focus of the study and what the procedures of the study were. Confidentiality and anonymity of the participants were maintained. Participation in this study was completely voluntary, and the participants had the right to withdraw from the study at any stage.

## 7. Findings and discussions

The findings of this study are reported in this section. Only three themes are reported in this paper, namely; the provision of counselling, peer support strategies, and Specific teacher training. The findings are reported using codes to protect the identity of the participants.

### 7.1. Provision of counselling services

Teachers mentioned that counseling services should be provided in mainstream schools to promote the inclusion of learners. See below-sampled experts by teachers.

*Counselling services should be offered in mainstream schools just like in inclusive schools. (T1)*

*Most learners in mainstream schools experience emotional and behavioural challenges therefore they can benefit from counselling services. Schools should have in-house Social workers or Psychologists who can assist learners in mainstream schools. (T7)*

These findings show a great need for counselling services to be offered in mainstream schools due to the prevalence of emotional and behavioural challenges learners display. This therefore presses upon the DBE to ensure that there is functionality of psycho-social support services in schools. According to Teschers (2020), inclusive education practices in principle should advocate for holistic well-being as an overall practice that guides every learning process. From the findings, it is understood that there is a need for mainstream schools to have designated social work and psychological services instead of commonly used referral-based methods. Thus, based on Alexander (2010) stationed counselling services in schools can support the learning of learners with learning barriers by fostering resilience in them. Counselling services can help to break barriers standing in the way of learners' learning process and socio-emotional well-being.

### 7.2. Peer support strategies

Teachers mentioned that learner-centred learning strategies such as peer support can be beneficial to learners with barriers to learning. See below the excerpt from the teachers:

*Learners should be encouraged to support others. For instance neh...learners master concepts differently, therefore, instead of encouraging them to compete with each other, learners can support each other during learning. (T9)*

*As teachers, we should always encourage mixed-ability grouping and assign a buddy to learners with barriers to learning. (T2)*

*As teachers, we should also support each other. Some of us have no idea on what to do to support learners with cognitive challenges. We always believe they should be sent to special schools but some teachers are trained to deal with these learning difficulties hence we can collaborate. (T13)*

Peer support was mentioned by the majority of teachers as a critical aspect necessary in fostering inclusive education, and where learner participation in the process of learning may be enhanced. The participants viewed the use of peer support among learners as an effective strategy leading to collaborative and collective learning instead of individualised or self-focused learning. Furthermore, participants acknowledged the method of assigning buddies to learners who are struggling as an effective support strategy which further enhanced inclusivity within mainstream schools. In addition to peer support as an effective strategy for learners, peer and collaborative support were further emphasised by teachers. These teachers mentioned that sometimes other teachers lack the competencies and confidence to cater to the learning needs of learners with barriers to learning. The findings further demonstrated that often when teachers are left to function in isolation, it becomes difficult to adequately support learners who are cognitively challenged. These findings are in harmony with that of Sheikahmadi and Khoshnavis (2016) who in their study discovered that teachers functioning in isolation tend to be limited in their ability to support learners as they should. Further advocating for collaboration.

### **7.3. Specific teacher training**

Teachers mentioned that they do not have the required skills to support learners with emotional, behavioural, and cognitive barriers. See below-sampled excerpts:

*Learners with emotional, behavioural, and cognitive barriers should be supported in mainstream classrooms. But as teachers, we do not have the skills and knowledge to support them. (T5)*

*We try our best as teachers, but we have huge workloads to attend to learners with barriers. (T8)  
As teachers, we should be capacitated to support all learners including learners with barriers to learning. (T14)*

The above findings display a significant disconnect between teachers knowing what is being expected of them in terms of supporting learners with barriers to learning, and not being capacitated to effectively do so. Excessive workload and other related hindrances such as lack of resources are mentioned as barriers preventing teachers from providing support to learners with learning barriers. The findings reveal that teachers view professional development and continued teacher training as critical aspects that can position them to adequately support learners with learning barriers. However, should there be no systematic modification focusing on lessening teachers' challenges e.g., overcrowded classrooms and work overload; then teacher professional training alone would not be sufficient to develop teachers if their working conditions are not improved. Similar to the sentiments posed by the participants, Ludago (2020) underscores the importance of improving the working environment of teachers by availing the necessary resources and teacher professional training in mainstream schools.

## **8. Recommendations and conclusion**

This study recommends continuous specific training of in-service teachers in inclusive policies and skills that aim to support the well-being and inclusion of learners. The specific training should have a clear focus on how to support learners with barriers to learning at mainstream schools. DBE should retrain teachers on how to incorporate psycho-social support services in mainstream schools, where psychological and emotional support are offered to learners with learning barriers. Furthermore, DBE can explore the possibility of institutionalising counsellors, psychologists, and social workers at mainstream schools.

The study concludes that psycho-social support interventions are an enablement of effective inclusion of learners experiencing barriers to learning in mainstream schools. This research provides practical insights for educators, school administrators, and policymakers on implementing psycho-social frameworks that facilitate successful inclusion, thereby promoting a more accessible and equitable education system. This study has shown the important role of psycho-social intervention support in successfully including learners with barriers to learning in mainstream schools. The study further demonstrated how continued teacher training support programs and counselling services may add significant value in promoting positive inclusive education practices. Despite this, the lack of specific teacher training, peer support and collaboration among learners and stakeholders still pose as a challenge to the implementation of inclusion.

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