Multisectoral practices supporting deaf learners' academic performance at an inclusive school in Lesotho

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Abstract — This study explores the relative importance of multisectoral practices from an inclusive school in Lesotho. This study adopted a qualitative approach through a transformative paradigm and participatory design. Thirty-four participants were purposively selected: teachers, sign language interpreters, hearing learners, deaf learners, and heads of departments at an inclusive school in the Leribe district, Lesotho. It employed focus group discussions and collages as instruments for data generation. The findings indicated that multisectoral practices such as the Ministry of Education, non-governmental organisations, neighbouring schools, health centres, and higher education institutions could be the external sources to enhance the academic performance of DLs. This study recommends separate stakeholders work together and accomplish a joint mission through communication.

Keywords: Academic performance, Deaf learners, inclusive school, Multisectoral practices

I. INTRODUCTION

IT is essential to consider Deaf Learners (DLs) as the most disadvantaged minority group in terms of educational experiences in South Africa (Kelly, McKinney, & Swift, 2020). The goal of inclusive education for deaf children is to provide them with access to inclusive education and the opportunity to become accepted and productive members of society (Jachova, Kovačević, Ristovska, & Radovanović, 2023). Deaf learners have experienced academic challenges in inclusive education globally and locally. Literature showed that related factors contributing to poor outcomes are the educational needs of deaf learners and teacher education, and the support required to meet these needs is not adequately understood (Mukuna & Maizere, 2022; Kelly et al., 2020). Others indicated that with better training and financial compensation support from external sources, DLs could improve their academic performance in inclusive education. However, this study discussed the multisectoral practices that can support the academic performance of DLs in Lesotho's inclusive schools and their significance as potential strategies to address their plight in inclusive schools.

Multisectoral practices supporting the academic performance of DLs
According to Maciver, Hunter, Adamson, Grayson, Forsyth and McLeod (2018), collaboration is the core requirement for good practice, development, and maintenance of school-wide initiatives, thus achieving inclusion. However, schools have developed a defined line of communication to share information, roles, and responsibilities to support this collaboration process. Thus, the multisectoral strategy entails working collaboratively with all partners involved. The study, therefore, sought to explore the contribution of practices from outside the school, such as higher education institutions, neighbouring schools, and health centres, and the significance of multisectoral strategies. Moreover, the reflection of transition, sharing of information, and monitoring of learners by collaborating individuals was observed and identified as the critical method of supporting learners' academic performance, particularly DLs (Maciver et al., 2018; UNICEF, 2021).

Support from Higher Institutions
The involvement of stakeholders' voices and varied experiences would encourage their collaborative participation in inclusive settings, enhancing the academic performance of DLs. In this case, multisectoral strategies entail strengthening the partnership and support of stakeholders outside the school, such as higher institutions. However, the World Health Organization (WHO) (2018) emphasised the importance of reviewing higher education programmes to respond to DLs' need to choose study disciplines. Similarly, Willis, Greene, Abramowicz, and Reley (2016) stipulated that the government strives to attain DLs' parity in enrollment for courses in higher education institutions so that DLs, and the students receive equal opportunities. Moreover, through the Ministry of Education, the government recognises the value of improving its partnership with other stakeholders in inclusive schools and higher education institutions. Consequently, the participation of higher education institutions is necessary to ensure that their positions are reflected in how the multisectoral strategies are evolving the academic performance of DLs in inclusive schools.

Support from Health centres
It is essential to note the right to health is fundamental for all. The WHO (2018) is committed to reducing inequality, promoting the health of refugees and migrants, improving the health of women and children, and engaging with communities. Therefore, by engaging health sectors that target diverse population groups in inclusive schools, the multisectoral strategies can ensure health equity, reaching the most

vulnerable and remote population groups, such as Deaf learners. Likewise, Willis et al. (2016) pointed out that the objective behind this health sector practices in inclusive schools is to strengthen and fill the gaps in the health system building blocks and amplify the impact of current initiatives and programmes thus improving the health of all learners, including DLs and ensure high-quality development in the learning environment.

Significance of multisectoral practices

Contemporary research has shown that the multisectoral approach was used to promote public health and well-being challenges that the health sector could not address alone (Health Policy Project, 2014). According to Salunke and Lal (2017), collaboration with other stakeholders is an essential and vital measure for effective health service delivery. Hence, the involvement of multiple sectors encourages participation and inclusive approaches. These results suggest that promoting multisectoral strategies within other ministries is vital for effective service delivery through implementing and strengthening communication to ensure multisectoral coordination (Salunke & Lal, 2017). Moreover, the WHO (2018) analysis revealed that multisectoral action for health and well-being can provide the transformation called for by the 2030 Agenda and mobilise additional resources for health and well-being.

Moreover, its effectiveness was identified within the UNICEF (2021) developmental goal: working across various sectors for the programmes and services for children's protection. It is a multidisciplinary field that requires collaboration among actors across many different sectors, including education, health, justice, and social protection, and at multiple levels, such as government ministries, international agencies, donors, civil society organisations, religious institutions, and communities. The sectors are effectively coordinated to deliver diverse strategies, including ensuring access to and quality of formal education and reducing the rate of child marriages. Furthermore, contemporary research has shown that the multisectoral collaboration approach in education efficiently empowers the marginalised in Africa (Balisi, Moses, Madisa & Malosiwa, 2019). Balisi et al. (2019) observed that the strategy is one of the measures to achieve social inclusion and empowerment in education. Hence, through the multisectoral approach, the programme has helped nurture graduates' skills, knowledge, and abilities in providing care and support for orphans and vulnerable children. Therefore, contemporary research significantly supports the contribution of multisectoral partnerships in enhancing service delivery and highlights some strengths and areas for improvement of the approaches to multisectoral collaboration. However, there are many challenges associated with multisectoral practices, given sectoral differences in working approaches, human resource capacity, and bringing together people from different sectors with different capacities in terms of skills and knowledge and other ways of working.

II. OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

This study This study determines the external sources of support enhancing the academic performance of DLs in inclusive schools in Lesotho.

III. METHODS

Research approach

The qualitative approach is an ideal method for applying participatory design, as it allows deliberation to explore how multisectoral strategies could support the academic performance of Deaf Learners in Lesotho. Unlike the quantitative, numerically based approach, the qualitative approach is word-based data that allows participants to voice their perceptions and provide Deaf Learners and other stakeholders an opportunity to share their wide range of experiences and knowledge in their natural setting (Harling, 2012). One of the advantages of qualitative research is that several methods of data collection could be used with the participants to talk about and represent their meaning in their day-to-day settings rather than experimental ones (Mays & Pope, 2019). Thus, multisectoral strategies allow the collaboration of combined strengths and voices among stakeholders working towards a common goal (Corpuz, 2021).

Research paradigm

This study was situated within the transformative paradigm to ensure that the current situation of the DLs' academic performance is enhanced and transformed in the context of inclusiveness. This paradigm is appropriate because it enables the deliberate efforts of the researcher to support human rights and increase social justice and reciprocity (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). The transformative paradigm focuses on the strengths of DLs who experience exclusion, discrimination, and oppression based on their learning experiences and cultural values. Likewise, the transformative paradigm acknowledges the roles of privilege, power, inclusion, and culture in working with DLs to overcome the challenges in learning that they encounter (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017).

The transformative paradigm highlights the assumptions on ontology, epistemology, axiology, and methodology, often ignored when developing interventions for disability issues (Matjila & van der Merwe, 2021). This refers to assistance in understanding the reality about the academic performance of Deaf Learners through their lenses as stakeholders (ontology), acquiring knowledge of the subjects and related literature (epistemology), and addressing the issues of the ethics to be considered for the said cohort of DLs (axiology). According to Mertens (2007), the transformative paradigm provides a framework that examines assumptions that explicitly address power issues, social justice, and cultural complexity throughout the research process. Omodoh (2020) further added that the transformative paradigm exposes the participation of Deaf Learners in the research processes for transformation.

Research design

This study employed the participatory design. It places more value on a collaborative effort engaging between the researcher and multiple stakeholders in finding solutions to a problem (Van der Velden & Mörtberg, 2015). It is concerned with using multiple methodologies organised in terms of the levels of participation (Hall, Gaved & Sargent, 2021). Participatory research design continues to gain popularity in qualitative research for its ability to encourage openness and equity in sharing knowledge and experiences and to nurture close collaboration in all things challenging within the current context (Hall et al., 2021). This study adopted a participatory design because the participants worked closely with the researcher to enhance the academic performance of DLs in Lesotho's inclusive schools.

Participants

The research is within qualitative approach hence participants are selected because they are considered to provide detailed description and rich information and usually interact with Deaf Learners to enhance their academic performance (Bertram & Christiansen, 2014). There are different sampling methods used to select research participants and context. For this study, the purposive sampling was considered convenience method employed to select the research context, settings, and participants. The purposive sampling enables participants provide in-depth understanding of the study (Crossman, 2018).

Data was generated from February to March 2023 in an inclusive schools located in the Leribe district of Lesotho which was the researcher's study site. In this case thirty-four participants were purposefully selected for this study. The twelve Deaf Learners aged 15–20 years, and twelve hearing learners of the same age were recruited. The sample included five teachers, three Sign Language interpreters, and two Heads of Departments (HODs). The idea was these experts are knowledgeable and experienced about the effects of the current academic performance of DLs in Lesotho. Participants had to show their availability and willingness to participate, and the ability to communicate experiences and opinions clearly.

Focus group discussions (FGDs) were used in this study to explore how multisectoral strategies support the academic performance of DLs. This objective was achieved considering the answers from the first research question that says 'What are the multisectoral strategies that can support the academic performance of Deaf Learners in Lesotho's inclusive schools?' The researcher had three groups of FGDs where the first group comprised of 12 participants: 7 DLs and 5 hearing learners. The division of groups or the selection of the members was the choice of group members. The members of the group were 7 boys and five girls. While the second FGDs comprised 6 participating DLs and 6 hearing learners. The members were 7 boys and 5 girls from the various classes. The third FGDs incorporated teachers. They encompassed 4 male teachers and 6 female teachers.

Data collection tools
Focus group discussion (FGD)

This study used a focus group discussion as one of the data collection tools. A focus group discussion is the data collection method that focuses on discussing and exchanging opinions and experiences with the participants (Muijeen, Kongvattananon & Somprasert, 2020). Moreover, in this technique, the researcher assembles a group of individuals to discuss a topic or issue in depth. Its aim draws from the participants' complex personal experiences, beliefs, perceptions, and attitudes, facilitated by a professional, external moderator (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011; Eeuwijk & Angehrn, 2017). Furthermore, Nyumba, Wilson, Derrick and Mukherjee (2018) indicated that the most compelling reason for using a focus group discussion is to generate discussion or debate about a research topic that requires a collection of views and the meaning behind those views. Therefore, the focus group discussion enabled the participants to discuss what they perceive to be the multisectoral practices to support the academic performance of DLs in inclusive schools in Lesotho.

Collages

The second data generation method adopted in this study is collage. The collages have become increasingly popular in art-based research (Gerstenblatt, 2013). Collages are the multiplicity of images, which can generate new constellations of possibilities (Hanawalt, 2019). Collages are a form of visual art in which virtual elements are combined to create a new image that conveys a message or idea (Culshaw, 2019). Collages are virtual artwork created by selecting magazine images, textured papers, or ephemera, cutting, altering, arranging, and attaching them to support such paper or cardboard (Chilton & Scotti, 2014). Collage brings together disparate visual elements that reflect a commitment to a relationship, making the ordinary something special and bringing diversity into unity (Chilton & Scotti, 2014). However, the paper will only concentrate on the FGDs.

Research site

The study was conducted at an inclusive school located in the northern part of Lesotho in the Leribe District. The school had a perseverance rate of 34% among DLs in 2022. The statistical overall population of Learners with Special Educational Needs (LSEN) enrolled in high schools was 7395 in 2016 (Lesotho Inclusive Education Policy, 2018). What is valuable in this study is that many LSEN were DLs in Leribe District. This high school is the only one in the country that admits DLs and is responsible for their education. Thus, the district in which the research is contextualised is a critical space to explore the multisectoral strategies that enhance the academic performance of DLs.

Likoche High School (a pseudonym) is a management structure comprised of the secretariat office, the provincial council, the school board, the principal, the deputy principal, heads of departments, teachers, sign language interpreters, learners, and non-teaching staff. It is a well-known inclusive school in Leribe District that admits and accommodates only DLs, who are learning together with their hearing counterparts countrywide. As for the teaching and learning of DLs the medium of instruction changed from lip reading instructions to sign language, hence the presence of sign language interpreters. Therefore, Likoche High School admission rates increased, and the number of DLs

increased. However, the academic performance of DLs remained low, which the researcher believes to be associated with the lack of cooperation among stakeholders, and hence the exploration of multisectoral strategies that enhance the academic performance of DLs.

Data Analysis

In this section, the researcher discusses the data analysis processes in the study. It is defined as cleaning, transforming, and processing raw data to discover useful information and help make informed decisions (Kelly et al., 2020). Therefore, the data for this study was analysed qualitatively through thematic analysis, as a process of identifying the themes (Eloff & Swart, 2018). Thematic analysis is the process of identifying patterns or themes within qualitative data. Braun and Clarke (2006) indicate that this method provides core skills for conducting many other analyses. In this study, the researcher used thematic analysis for its advantage of being a method rather than a methodology. Therefore, unlike many qualitative methodologies, it is not tied to a particular epistemological or theoretical perspective (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Clarke & Braun, 2013). This makes it a very flexible method, a considerable advantage given the diversity of work in learning and teaching (Kelly et al., 2020).

The analysed data are generated from the focus group discussion collected from the learners, their teachers, Sign Language interpreters, and HODs, as the participants. The data, therefore, was analysed and reported on this inclusive school in Lesotho, exploring the multisectoral strategies to support the academic performance of DLs. As for McMillan and Schumacher (2014), this process involves the familiarisation, and coding identified from the participants' transcripts after the researcher has immersed in the data and generated themes, naming the themes, defining the themes, and writing them up (Cohen et al., 2011).

Ethical considerations

According to Arifin (2018), considering ethical issues is crucial throughout all the stages of a qualitative study to protect human subjects by applying appropriate ethical principles and keeping between the risks and the benefits of the research. Similarly, Ziyani, King and Ehlers (2004) elucidated that in consideration of ethics, the research participants must grant permission voluntarily. In addition, permission must be obtained from any pertinent authorities and institutions. Therefore, the researchers ensured as much as possible that the research protocols were considered and that the relevant authorities were contacted to obtain the required permission and to understand the nature of the context. The Ethics Committee of the University of Free State, Lesotho Ministry of Education, school principals, and the parents granted permission to do this research since some of the learners were between the ages of 14 and 15 years. Hence, they had to sign parental informed consent forms and permit their children to participate in the study. For the FGDs, permission was obtained from the following parties: hearing learners, DLs, teachers, Sign Language interpreters, and HODs. The researchers also obtained permission to create the collage from the DLs and the hearing learners only.

IV. RESULTS

External sources of support

The participants have imitated that exterior support is motivated mainly by the sense of sympathy and vulnerability of Deaf Learners in Lesotho's inclusive schools.

From the Ministry of Education

The results revealed that support from the national government through the Ministry of Education could be an external source enhancing the academic performance of DLs. Participants mentioned that governmental support involves entities that support DLs financially and academically. They appreciated the support as one of the active stockholders in the school. The following responses illustrate these.

"The Ministry of Education and Training has made several initiatives to support the education of deaf learners, including paying their school fees. Thus, their education is guaranteed since DLs are never dismissed from classes for

not paying fees" (Teacher 1, FGD 3).

"The Ministry has its system of governance that stops the sponsorship of DLs. Once the learner fails, s/he is left un-sponsored. We face many conditions that influence our failure, and I think we do not deserve that punishment" (Learner 6, FGD 2).

"The ministry also looks for donations of technology-based devices that help ease the teaching and learning of deaf learners" (Teacher 3, FGD3).

"Ummm! The use of technology-based devices within the school is attractive and improves the attention span of all learners" (Teacher 7, FGD 3).

"The technology devices are also deaf-friendly" (Teacher 2, FGD 3).

"The examination council of Lesotho also created a moderation platform for deaf learners during the final examination. This is a sign of recognition of deaf learners' plight and commitment to develop their academic performance even though the understanding still lacks" (Teacher 7, FGD 3).

Although participants appreciated the Ministry's support, they expressed concern about strict sponsorship regulations that cannot be negotiated. The participants shared the following;

"The Ministry is helping us with numerous things, including school fees, feeding, stationery, and transport. However, the Ministry does not communicate with the schools they assist to obtain relevant feedback" (Teacher 2, FGD 3).

"The ministry would just bring the bus to transport us home when their schedule allows them, and in most cases, it comes outside the school calendar" (Learner 4, FGD 1).

"...you cannot believe it! Due to lack of communication between the school and the Ministry, we left the school without sitting for examinations delivered home" (Learner 5, FGD 1).

Thus, open discussions and suggestions from all stakeholders, including DLs, the Ministry, and the inclusive school, are necessary. Thus, the support provided by the government, as one of the active stockholders in the school, is appreciated.

From non-governmental organisations

The results showed that support from non-governmental organisations could be an external source enhancing the academic performance of DLs. The participants declared that non-governmental organisations involve entities outside government boundaries that interact and show interest in supporting the academic performance of DLs. They provided additional training skills to teachers and DLs and their teachers.

"We are also lucky that non-governmental organisations visit our school. Some of them equip our learners with computer skills. The learners are trained for a certain period and then awarded certificates" (Teacher 8, FGD 3).

"Some non-governmental organisations used to support our vulnerable DLs with toiletry and take them to different training sessions" (Learner 7, FGD 2).

The results suggested that providing additional skills could be an essential practice from the non-governmental organisation, which enhance the academic performance of DLs in inclusive schools in Lesotho.

From neighbouring schools

The results indicated that the support from the neighbouring schools could be an external source that enhances the academic performance of DLs. They said that neighbouring schools involve the standard fundraising practices among schools in the sub-zonal region to contribute to buying technology devices for DLs. The extracts from participants declare these.

"We normally celebrate the Sign Language Day per annum with our neighbouring schools, though it is not regular. This is done by raising funds to buy technology devices to help ease DL teaching and learning" (Teacher 4, FGD 3).

"…Hey! That is called a silent day, and we all speak in sign language. If you talk, you are made to pay R5. Teaching and learning are even done through sign language. The day appears too long for us, but very accommodating and informative" (Learner 2, FGD 1).

"(Rising and emphasising) The day made me proud of my native language" (Learner 4, FGD 1).

From higher education institutions

The results found that support from higher education institutions could be an external source that enhances the academic performance of DLs. Participants mentioned that this support involves recognising learners with disabilities, DLs as special cases, in their admission criterion to accommodate them. The higher education institutions accommodated them and used the inclusive schools from which they learned as their reference, particularly when they encountered challenges concerning DLs' teaching and learning. The abstract from participants shared these.

"DLs are recognised in our local institutions of higher learning. They hire sign language interpreters. Therefore, in our follow-up after DLs complete their high school level, we obtained great support from these institutions" (Teacher 8, FGD 3).

"Some even revisit us to obtain experience on how to work with DLs." (Teacher 6, FGD 3).

From Health centres

The results demonstrated that support from the health centres could be an external source to enhance the academic performance of DLs at schools. Participants highlighted that health centres involve the specific attention they get from health services. They reported that the health support increases their awareness of chronic diseases. The extracts from participants said these.

"The nurses are normally sent to our school for us to get vaccinations for infectious diseases, and lately, they have collaborated with the National Association of the Deaf and distributed Universal Serial Bus (USBs) with awareness videos" (Learners 5, FGD 2).

"Yeah! Our nearby hospital recognises our school as well. They always update us about vaccinations and raise awareness of infectious diseases. However, our learners experience a lack of privacy due to the absence of sign language in health services" (Teacher 9, FGD 3).

Therefore, even though the practices are still more solitary, this department critically enhances the academic performance of DLs and promotes healthy well-being and effective engagement in their studies.

V. DISCUSSION

The findings have revealed that the Ministry of Education and Training's support, non-governmental support, support for neighbouring schools, support for the health department, and support for higher learning institutions could be critical and external sources that enhance the academic performance of DLs. The Ministry of Education and Training is the most active external support that enhances DLs' academic performance. This entity supports DLs financially and academically in schools with Science and Technical skills, and the participants appreciated these technologically based initiatives in Lesotho. Similarly, assistive technology is vital to enhance opportunities for the deaf and hard of hearing to access language and expand their communication opportunities (Leigh & Marschark, 2016). An open sponsorship to deaf learners helped assistive devices and encouraged them to participate actively in their learning (Leigh & Marschark, 2016).

The findings have also revealed the importance of non-governmental organisations as another external source of support in multisectoral strategies that enhance DLs' academic performance. This source involves providing DLs with additional skills not offered in their schools, such as computer training courses, which are essential in supporting their academic performance. Similarly, UNICEF (2021) reiterated that multisectoral strategies require collaboration among donors and international agencies to ensure access to and quality of formal education, including DLs.

The study also emphasised the need for open communication among stakeholders within the school and the non-governmental bodies. The non-governmental bodies offer appropriate support, such as computer training skills, and award the learners certificates after completing the course. Thus, non-governmental organisations enable multisectoral strategies to enhance the academic performance of DLs by providing computer training skills.

The findings have also revealed the importance of neighbouring schools in supporting the academic performance of DLs. The study has shown that neighbouring schools take initiatives to celebrate Sign Language Day with their DLs, for which they generously provide donations. According to the deaf community, sign language is a preferred communication mode internationally recognised and celebrated globally (Australian Catholic Bishop Conference, 2021). The findings have revealed that neighbouring neighboring schools form a networking support team that is seen as a rational asset and bring forward means of interaction among individuals, groups, and other environments that contribute to achieving positive change in the academic performance of DLs (McKnight & Russel, 2018).

The findings have also revealed that the Sign Language Day celebration and the donations from neighbouring schools are highly appreciated and considered the best practice of multisectoral strategies that enhance DLs' academic performance. The study revealed that the fundraising support offered by neighbouring schools benefits the school teaching system overall. Moreover, the celebration also shows a sense of networking, interaction, and a better understanding of the deaf culture. It thus helps DLs develop a sense of belonging and acceptance within the community. The findings have further revealed the contributions of institutions of higher learning as exterior support that enhances the academic performance of DLs. This study has intimated that institutions of higher education support involve recognising learners with disabilities, including DLs as exceptional cases, in their admission criterion just to accommodate them. Participants have intimated that the higher education institutions accommodate them and use the inclusive schools from which they learned as their reference, particularly when they encounter challenges concerning DLs' teaching and learning. These findings concur with other scholars' reports that health centres and higher education institutions have strong group ties with the school community to promote partnership and develop a strong relationship that enhances the academic performance of DLs (Lee & Mathews, 2017). The findings have also revealed that health support, shown by nearby health centres, is crucial in enhancing DLs' academic performance. However, the participants criticised the absence of interpreters in the health services, which poses the challenge of language as a barrier. Chininthorn, Glaser, Tucker and Diehl (2016) concurred with these findings that no professional Sign Language interpreters are readily available at any health facility.

In addition, the findings resonate with the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006), which supports the necessity of providing understandable health information to Deaf people. Therefore, the success of health support to improve the academic performance of DLs in inclusive schools is in line with the view of the current study. The study underscores the importance of coordination and teamwork among multiple stakeholders, including the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Education and Training, and the DLs' voice, in supporting the academic performance of DLs in Lesotho's inclusive schools.

VI.   CONCLUSION

This paper discussed the practices outside the school that support the academic performance of DLs, such as the participation of higher education institutions, neighbouring school support, Non-Governmental support, and participation of Health centres as multisectoral practices support the academic performance of DLs. This study highlighted external support from the school as crucial to the academic performance of DLs. Providing health services to diverse learners enhances healthy well-being among learners, thus encouraging determination in their studies. Moreover, being recognized in a high institution motivates DLs to improve their performance and create more chances to be admitted; hence, external support is a multisectoral strategy for inclusive schools. Thus, there are worries about poor communication between the Ministry and other stakeholders within the inclusive school. This study recommends separate stakeholders work together and accomplish a joint mission through communication.

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