Collaboration: A Key for Creating Conditions Conducive to Academic Performance of Children with Physical Disabilities in Lesotho Schools

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Abstract—Creating a positive and conducive learning environment for learners, particularly for children with physical disabilities (CwPDs) and other vulnerable children, is a major call for collaborative school boards, and this is evident in the education policies and conceptual frameworks nationally and internationally. This study explores the collaborative school board members' creation of conditions conducive to the academic performance of children with physical disabilities in primary schools in Lesotho. A qualitative approach and interpretive paradigm were adopted for this study through a case study design. Ten participants were selected purposively from two primary schools in the Maseru district, and semi-structured individual interviews for data collection. The findings further revealed that CwPDs become more engaged within a supportive learning environment when school boards respect and appreciate their responses. Findings also revealed the challenges in creating a conducive learning environment for CwPDs, such as overcrowded classrooms, lack of collaboration between teachers and school boards, lack of mobile clinics for everyday referral, and inappropriate resources for learners' type of disability. This study recommended the Ministry of Education and Training provide ongoing professional development training for new school boards to employ collaborative leadership strategies and skills that increase student engagement and, ultimately, improve the academic achievement of CwPDs in primary schools.

Keywords: Academic performance, Children with physical disabilities, Primary schools, School-based support, School boards

I. INTRODUCTION

ARTICLE 24 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities guarantees access to free quality education in the context of disability as a human right. Equally important, it puts concrete and binding duties on countries around the world to implement inclusive policies to assist in providing access to quality primary education that will accord learners affected by disabilities, including Children with Physical Disabilities (CwPDs), the opportunity to attain higher academic goals and standards to their full potential on an equal basis with others (Ramatea & Khanare, 2021) and also become active participants in communities and society (Nicola et al., 2020). Mosia (2017) noted that as a signatory to major United Nations (UN) treaties, Lesotho, a small mountainous and landlocked country in Southern Africa, is bound by UN commitments. For example, the country responded to the Education for All (EFA) commitment and other UN educational mandates by adopting the Lesotho Education Act (2010) and the Children's Protection and Welfare Act (7 of 2011), among others, to safeguard efficiency and to include all learners, particularly CwPDs in conducive and enabling learning environments, irrespective of their learning barriers and that is termed 'inclusive education' (IE) (Nthibeli et al., 2022).

At the forefront of the Education Act (2010) is the need for the schools to be governed by the school boards. A previous study conducted by Monyane (2020) in Lesotho in two mainstream schools found that a school board in Lesotho consists of nine members, namely two members

nominated by a proprietor, one of whom is a chairperson, three members nominated by parents, one who is a vice-chairperson; one teacher nominated by the teachers, a gazetted chief, a member of the local council and a principal of the relevant school, all serving as important trustees of solving most of the problems experienced by schools. They are considered key actors responsible for overseeing the school's management and proper and efficient running (Education Act, 2010). Together, they should work as a governance-management team to ensure that,

"…a child who is physically or mentally or otherwise handicapped is given special treatment, education and care required by his or her condition" (Education Act, 2010).

This indicates that the school boards hold schools accountable for educating CwPDs. Monyane and Kgothule (2023) revealed that school boards employ collaborative leadership strategies to address the needs of CwPDs. Collaborative strategies are explicit approaches or procedures to guide the process of collaborative teaching and learning. This means that they should be established and implemented by all school stakeholders. Hafeez and Akhtar (2022, p. 3461) noted that "school boards collectively ensure the effectiveness and success of school". Furthermore, it is essential to note that collaborative school boards are the central actors who have significant responsibility in facilitating the creation of inclusive schools (Hoppey & McLeskey, 2013), management of school violence (Padayachee, 2024; Padayachee & Gcelu, 2019) and the "promotion of the successful inclusion programs" (Khaleel et al., 2021, p. 2).

Even though the 21st-century school boards have the mandate to respond to learner diversity within the schools they serve, there is

growing evidence that many persons with disabilities, including CwPDs, face common challenges that affect their academic performance, and the collaborative leadership practice or role of school leaders is one of them (Wangchuk & Dendup, 2022). This agrees with the argument put forward by Engelbrecht et al. (2016, p. 523) that "mainstream schools particularly lack physical facilities and that there is limited availability of appropriately trained leaders or teachers and adequate teaching and learning resources." Regrettably, this lowers the chances of school boards fostering IE and raises the academic performance of CwPDs in schools. The research thus aims to investigate how school board members can create conditions conducive to the academic performance of children with physical disabilities in Lesotho primary schools.

Research indicates that while some challenges persist, intervention measures have been implemented in many countries, and collaborative school leaders effectively support students' academic performance. Literature shows that school boards in the United States of America (USA) create conditions, set policies, and distribute resources within their districts to improve learners' achievement, including CwPDs (Waters & Marzano, 2006). In Finland, the high level of trust, respect, and cooperation among school board members and other stakeholders made the education system successful (Heystek, 2014). Similarly, the government promoted community participation in decision-making in Pakistan and operated schools at a community base to intensify school performance (Gyansah et al., 2014). This significantly increased the collaborative mood of leadership/ management in schools.

Furthermore, in Lesotho, the Ministry of Education and Training (MoET)'s Special Education Unit employed experts to provide teachers with guidance on how best to support learners with special needs in their classrooms (Mateusi et al., 2014). However, these experts did not empower school boards with collaborative leadership styles, strategies, and methods so that they could respond to the diverse needs of learners with disabilities (MoET, 2018). Another strategy to improve performance was to provide an extensive programme for upgrading unqualified teachers through the Lesotho In-service Education of Teachers (Makurunge & Tlali, 2018; Ralebese, 2018).

In the literature reviewed above, some of the strategies used in schools to create conditions conducive to good academic performance of learners have been identified. Yet, none has been deemed effective in motivating school leaders and raising the academic standards of CwPDs. Various authors suggest that school boards should encourage open dialogue and empower teachers to embrace teaching approaches that shape and influence learners' view of the world (Chere-Masupha et al., 2021).

Some participants in Lekhetho's (2021) study proposed stricter disciplinary measures for students who misbehaved in Lesotho schools. Contradictory to this strategy, Gcelu, Padayachee, and Ede (2021) and MacFarlane (2007) argue that using stricter disciplinary measures such as corporal punishments to discipline learners for behaviours that are negative can merely serve to further damage their self-esteem and self-efficacy, instead of curbing indiscipline and improve the academic performance of learners in schools.

In this study, we argue that school boards should have a culture of teamwork and collaborative leadership to create a positive learning environment and improve the academic achievement, development, and well-being of CwPDs. CwPDs' academic success is a shared responsibility, where all stakeholders such as the ministry, principal secretary, teaching service commission, proprietors of the school, principals, and teachers can collaborate with school boards in setting goals (Monyane & Kgothule, 2023), give organisation's output and enhance opportunities for CwPDs.

Furthermore, school boards need to build a healthy learning environment (Liphapang, 2015; Ralebese & Ralebese, 2023; Wangchuk & Dendup, 2022). In addition, improving student achievement requires strong and effective school board leadership skills, proper infrastructure, and strategic policymaking that greatly emphasises

student learning (Velarde et al., 2020). Yilmaz and Yeganeh (2021, as quoted in Ramango and Naicker (2022, p. 1) indicate that "the school boards should mitigate all forms of learning barriers, fear, prejudice, and rejection, and encourage tolerance among individuals in the school". In this paper, the terms school boards and school leaders are used interchangeably.

II. PROBLEM STATEMENT

Though it has been about 16 years since Lesotho ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the role played by school boards has received limited attention from researchers and policymakers in Lesotho. Yet, it is no secret that the Lesotho Education Act (2010) places new external pressures and challenges on school boards to work with teachers and principals to create special treatment, care, and conditions conducive to the quality of education of physically or mentally disabled learners in schools (Ralebese, 2019). Therefore, to implement these changes, the knowledge and skills of school boards need improvement through professional development training (Monyane & Kgothule, 2023). However, recent literature has revealed that many school boards still face challenges in providing leadership for creating conditions conducive to the academic performance of CwPDs (Monyane, 2020).

Lesotho, particularly many underperforming students, including CwPDs, wrestle with emotional and academic challenges and decide to drop out of primary schools before transitioning to high schools (Goux et al., 2016) in the presence of school boards. Surprisingly, other schools still produce good academic results despite different challenges.

III.   LITERATURE REVIEW

Meaning of physical disability

'Physical disability' has become an international buzzword with contentious explanations (Mohammed, 2020; Monyane, 2020). Rafoneke (2017) states this is a major public health concern worldwide. "Physical disability is a difficulty which limits the performance of particular tasks because of some physical or health problems" (MoET, 2018, p. 2). Similarly, for Kabuta (2014) and Smeltzer et al. (2017), the term 'physical disability' is broad and has been known to cover all different forms of disabilities and health issues, including both congenital and acquired disabilities that can limit an individual's physical capabilities, mobility, and agility or stamina.

Creation of the conditions conducive to the academic performance of CwPDs

There is a growing concern in Lesotho over the need to raise the quality of education by creating conditions conducive to learners' academic performance, including those with disabilities (Monyane, 2020; Nyaphisi, 2021). A study by Nene (2017) indicates that a school should be a place that elevates learners so they can improve their world and be contributing members of a democratic community. To better support CwPDs' academic achievement, schools must regularly address the learners' overall well-being (academic, physical, emotional, and social needs) (Askell-Williams & Koh, 2020). Hence, Pittman (2014) concurs by stating that schools should be the centers and supportive venues for the provision of counseling services and essential health education to psychosocially disturbed CwPDs.

Furthermore, since the face of schools in our communities is changing, districts and school boards must acquire knowledge and skills to create an internal culture of accountability by addressing teachers' changing needs (emotional and occupational) (Askell-Williams & Koh, 2020) and provide guidance to families to promote their CwPDs' mental health. The well-trained school boards should "set distinct standards for school improvement that help school staff adjust to organisational changes and feel invested in reaching the school's goals" (Meyer et al., 2022, p. 31) to improve CwPDs' academic growth.

Additionally, schools should create an environment that will allow

CwPDs to maneuver around and have enough space to sit comfortably in an area free from distractions (Monyane & Kgothule, 2023). Results from Heystek (2014) and Bojuwoje et al. (2014) suggest that collaborative school board leadership is a key supporting factor in providing a stimulating learning environment with basic needs and resources like electricity, water, and sanitation systems. This responds to the call in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goal 4 (target 4. a), namely, "…building and upgrading education facilities that are child, disability and gender sensitive and provide safe, non-violent, inclusive and effective learning environments for all" (United Nations, 2018, p. 73). From the discussion above, it is safe to say CwPDs always need a healthy and welcoming physical and social school environment.

In this study, we argue that creating conditions conducive to academic performance for all learners, including CwPDs in schools, is paramount, as it sets the tone for an environment conducive to teaching and learning. There should be strong collaboration among school board members, teachers, parents, learners, and other stakeholders in their collective endeavors to identify bottlenecks affecting CwPDs' academic performance in primary schools and find solutions (Jarl et al., 2021). This is supported by Lekhetho (2021), who states that effective school environments should have high levels of collaboration and communication among school boards. Besides, school boards learn from each other, share best practices, and gain new perspectives.

Furthermore, strong collaboration is a blueprint for improving how school boards work together to solve problems (Monyane, 2020), set goals, and allocate resources for learners CwPDs. Additionally, this can lead to more innovation and efficient processes for school boards and increase CwPDs' success and resilience, self-concept, motivation (Ford & Ihrke, 2015), self-esteem, and confidence. Thus, the more their motivation is improved, the higher their chances to attain academic goals to their full potential in class.

Challenges in accessing the school environment conducive to good academic performance

Research shows that CwPDs who acquire a disability in their life may struggle when trying to make meaning of the school environment (Power & Dell Orto, 2004, p. 56). For CwPDs, transitioning from primary to high school can be a challenging academic experience (Crosnoe et al., 2015). Kremte (2019) indicated that the significant number of CwPDs is extremely side-lined, susceptible to discrimination, and often denied access to basic education and justice in Africa. Maotoana (2014) reminds us, moreover, that CwPDs are often discriminated against in their personal and social lives, experiences which tend to be mirrored in their academic involvements. This is not in line with Article 9 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (Hlengwa & Masuku, 2022).

A large body of research also finds the inaccessibility of technological devices as a major problem in schools (Makhate, 2020; Maine, 2022; Matobako, 2021). The Kingdom of Lesotho is no exception to this reality. Past studies emphasise that family, teacher, and student-related factors were the main reasons for learners' poor academic performance (Alcine, 2019; Peters & Woolley, 2015).

A previous study by Khama (2014), onboard members' views on the management of schools in Namibia, demonstrated that school boards fail to execute their roles and responsibilities to support CwPDs with quality education in rural areas. According to Monyane (2020), many regular education school boards in Lesotho feel stressed and overloaded with many responsibilities. Khama's (2014) study and the present study are related as they reveal that the poor quality of primary education and poor academic attainment for CwPDs is linked to poor teacher quality, weak school management, and a lack of resources (Lekhetho, 2021; World Bank, 2019). These barriers to learning are also the contextual disadvantages that hinder teachers from being positive and enthusiastic when teaching and the CwPDs from fully accessing educational provision.

An extensive literature study on factors influencing the performance of high-achieving schools in Lesotho conducted by Lekhetho (2021) found that the Lesotho education system is largely ineffective, as evidenced by the poor academic performance and high failure rates of learners, including CwPDs at the end of the upper-primary cycle (grade 7) in the presence of school boards. This hinders school boards from executing their roles of creating conditions conducive to the academic performance of CwPDs.

IV. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is anchored in Collaborative Leadership Theory (CLT), espoused by Telford (1996). The theory assumes that the social interactions and relationships between school leaders, staff, and parents within socioeconomic and political environments are essential in regulating teachers' and learners' social goals and well-being. In broad terms, leaders should operate based on coalition and induce followers to act to enhance the shared purposes, beliefs, and goals (Serpieri & Vatrella, 2017).

This theory focuses on the idea that "in the seemingly intractable conditions facing schools at present, collaborative culture would appear to be critical in meeting the attendant challenges of learners" (Sergiovanni & Starratt, 1988). In this regard, CLT was deemed appropriate as the illuminating lens for this study because it lies in sharing an understanding of the school and that the collaboration, interaction, conception, and shared meanings within are essential in improving the academic performance of CwPDs.

In the context of Lesotho, collaborative school board members are the leaders. They are free to take a more constructive role in improving learners' academic performance at the primary school level. The CLT aligns or links in-service training of school boards and principals to economic development. In this study, the CLT is directly linked to and underpins policies such as the Lesotho Inclusive Education Policy (LIEP) of 2018 (MoET, 2018). This policy seeks to harness quality education for learners with special educational needs (LSEN), including CwPDs. It stipulates that all stakeholders should work together to prevent marginalisation and discrimination based on special educational needs, reduce barriers to participation in teaching and learning, and create conditions conducive to the academic performance of CwPDs.

V. OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

This study investigates how collaborative school board members create conditions conducive to the academic performance of children with physical disabilities and make recommendations on the way forward.

VI. METHODS

Research approach

This study employed a qualitative approach to collect and analyse data. Morgan (2014) regards qualitative research as subjective, inductive, and contextual. Creswell (2015) argues that most qualitative study researchers use an inductive approach because it allows the researcher to collect data and derive explanations from it. The method uses numerous data-gathering techniques, such as interviews, focus groups, and observations, to mention a few (Nieuwenhuis, 2016). We selected in-depth semi-structured interviews to understand how people make sense of the world and experience events. We found the qualitative approach most suitable for exploring how school board members can create conditions conducive to the academic performance of children with physical disabilities in Lesotho primary schools.

Research paradigm

This study used an interpretative paradigm, a qualitative research approach, to determine how school board members create conditions conducive to the academic performance of CwPDs in mainstream primary schools in Lesotho. For this study, the interpretive paradigm assumes that reality is socially constructed (Nene, 2017) as people give out their interpretation of the phenomenon and develop their personal

experiences (Maine, 2022). This paradigm was appropriate for this study as it allowed the researcher to focus on the meaning (Nieuwenhuis, 2016; Park et al., 2020) aimed at understanding participants' experiences and circumstances. This is consistent with Nene's (2017) assertion that the interpretive paradigm aims to understand the subjective world of human experiences.

Research design

This study used a case study design often used by researchers to add new information about people, groups, societies, and socio-economic-related phenomena (Yin, 2014). The exploratory study sought to explore how collaborative school board members create conditions conducive to the academic performance of children with physical disabilities in Lesotho primary schools. Mohlouoa (2014) comprehensively defines a case study as a logic, procedure, or master plan that sheds light on how research should be conducted. This study's case study design was relevant because it was used to deeply understand the phenomenon, regardless of several sites or participants. Consistent with this, Yazan (2015) says that a case study is a qualitative study in which a researcher explores in-depth social behaviours, contemporary bounded systems, or multiple bounded systems (cases) over time.

Data collection methods

The study used semi-structured individual interviews, which allowed open-ended responses. This qualitative data collection method was used to collect in-depth data regarding the collaborative school board roles in creating conditions conducive to the academic performance of CwPDs in primary schools in Lesotho. Nieuwenhuis (2016) correctly observes that as naturalistic conversations between an interviewer and participants, interviews provide detailed descriptions of practices and experiences from the participants' perspectives. This aligns with the views of Wagner et al. (2012), who posit that semi-structured individual interviews are used to gain participants' perceptions. In this study, the interview was used as a tool used to elicit more data from the participants. The researchers were the interviewers and maintained a neutral stance during our interaction with the participants.

Participants

The participants for this study were selected through purposeful sampling in two primary schools located in St Bernadette centre in Maseru district Lesotho. Creswell (2013) affirms that most researchers select participants and locations to study or completely understand a central phenomenon. We chose these primary schools because they enrolled CwPDs and they had experience in giving care and support to disabled children. These two primary schools were also convenient for the researcher (Nene, 2017) since they were situated in the same district where he stayed. The total sample consisted of ten members of school boards: two principals, two parents, two representatives from the church (proprietor), two chiefs, and two teachers from two primary schools who responded to in-depth interviews.

Data collection procedure

In this study, the semi-structured individual interviews were scheduled to last from 30 to 40 minutes. The time given was used to allow the participants to share their experiences. According to Laforest (2009), sixty to ninety minutes of interviews are perfectly acceptable for the interviewer and the respondent to concentrate on the semi-structured interview. All participants agreed that the interviews should be audio-recorded. An audio-tape recorder ensured the original data provided a complete and thorough verbal record (Nieuwenhuis, 2007). Audio recordings taken during data collection were kept as a record that could be used in the future. The current study was conducted in two mainstream primary schools in Lesotho, which admit CwPDs.

Data analysis

In this study, we collected data and structured it using open codes. According to Leedy and Ormrod (2019), in qualitative research, data analysis is defined as decreasing large volumes of raw data, identifying important patterns or themes, and constructing a framework to interpret the data. We developed themes and categories to address the main question of the research. We also compared the topics in the categories. According to McMillan and Schumacher (2010), the following strategies were used to verify trustworthiness: allowing participants to answer in their language or words, accurately recording their responses, and allowing colleagues to check and verify the collected data.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance was obtained from the University of the Free State Research Ethics Committee. Permission was also obtained from the district office before the research was undertaken. Participants were guaranteed confidentiality and anonymity. Research had to be conducted ethically. Participants were allowed to withdraw from the study at any time if they wished to.

VII. RESULTS

Creating conditions conducive to academic performance of CwPDS
Efforts to create physical access

School boards believe that a conducive environment is created by improving a physical environment that will enable CwPDs to become enthusiastic learners and promote the general well-being of students and teachers. The following excerpts are extracted from the interviews responded to by the school boards. P1 from school A excitedly said:

"We always try to create physical access for CwPDs. To me, a conducive learning environment is a school environment strategically planned and designed, such as building ramps to create access to classrooms and grounds, providing safety, and promoting the well-being of teachers and learners."

P3 for the same stream/grade reiterates:

"We accommodate CwPDs to make them feel they are catered for. A conducive school would have positive disciplining, no bullying, and share common goals. It would be equipped with the required facilities to enable CwPDs to become enthusiastic learners and to make their learning meaningful."

Participants say they try to create physical access for CwPDs. This is demonstrative of collaborative leadership (Padayachee, 2024). They acknowledge their colleagues' changes, such as building ramps to create access to classrooms and grounds to make CwPDs feel special. Thus, the physical layout of classrooms and accessible playgrounds play an important part in CwPDs' engagement. Wangchuk and Dendup (2022, p. 7) note that *"the school will only be able to promote conducive learning if the staff is professionally competent."*

Engagement with department legislations and policies

The participants were asked whether their schools had any disability or inclusive education policy that could foster a safe and healthy environment for the academic performance of CwPDs. One participant claimed that she was unaware of such disability policies. P2 noted:

"I am not aware of the disability policies or inclusive education that could foster a safe, conducive, and healthy environment for the best academic performance of CwPDs."

Similarly, P7 also affirmed that:

"…there is no specific policy that can address CwPDs' problems in the schools. We need policies."

From the participants' responses, schools need clear school-based policies and programmes to create conditions conducive to the academic performance of CwPDs. This finding resonates with Mosia's (2017, p. 1) study, which reported that *"there is a need for a fundamental transformation of policies, practices, and programmes to afford all students opportunities to gain admission, participate, and succeed in education."*

Professional development training of school boards

Participants' responses exposed that they needed to meet the needs and learning styles of CwPDs in school through the acquisition of professional development training. One participant responded that they were not trained when they were elected. P3 noted:

"I think we need training workshops once we are elected to acquire skills and knowledge and be conscientised about the policies and intervention programs that can help to create conditions conducive to the academic performance of CwPDs and to mitigate dropout among CwPDs."

School boards' responses exposed that they need professional development training to address the needs of CwPDs. This finding resonates with Liphapang's (2015, p. 56) study, which showed that *"the unskilled school boards forced principals to admit too many learners to have large schools obvious of lack of classrooms and other resources."*

Changing attitudes towards CwPDs

All the participants mentioned that they did not have problems accommodating CwPDs in the schools. The data shows that they changed their attitude towards CwPDs. P3 said:

"We do not have a problem to accommodate CwPDs in the school. It is their right to be educated in primary school; our job is to see that we visit the school and help them."

She added that:

"When CwPDs realise that we have a positive attitude towards them, respect and appreciate their responses, they can have high regard for their schools and perform well in their studies."

The school board members felt they had no problem accommodating CwPDs in the school. As advocates, school boards understand that CwPDs have a right to be educated in mainstream primary schools, and they should assist them.

Some participants also identified that respecting learners and appreciating their responses when they (school boards) visit the schools is vital. The findings of this study resonate with Ramatea and Khanare's (2021) study, which found that a healthy relationship among various stakeholders (learners, teachers, school boards, principals, and parents) was seen as the enabling factor. A similar study by Nene (2017) described school leaders and teachers as people who should allow learners to express their views, which makes them feel accepted and significant while not feeling left out.

Factors that hinder school boards from fulfilling their roles

Most participants commented that they could handle CwPDs but encountered some difficulties. P5 expressed that:

"We (the school board) handle CwPDs by visiting the schools regularly and try our best to assist them, but due to overcrowded classrooms, it is difficult to do so, and sometimes school teachers do not accept us, saying we waste their time teaching."

P8 also comments: *"…there is a lack of mobile clinics for everyday referral near the school."*

He added that CwPDs are not admitted in the primary schools due to fear of appropriate resources:

"Sometimes CwPDs are not admitted in the school due to fear of appropriate resources for their type of disability in the school."

One of the participants sadly (P9) expressed that most of the classrooms are upstairs:

"…most of the classrooms are upstairs, and it is difficult for CwPDs to access such classes."

P10 indicated that:

"Last year, children had to repeat grade 7 because they had severe physical disabilities because no follow-up was made by the Ministry officials after CwPDs completed grade 7."

The findings of this study revealed that the school boards tried their best to assist CwPDs, but the complexity of intertwined factors such as overcrowded classrooms, upstairs classrooms, lack of mobile clinics, inappropriate resources, repetition of grades, and lack of follow-up after CwPDs have transited to grade 8.

According to P5,

"Working relationship between teachers and school boards is not conducive because teachers do not accept them. As a result, school boards may not feel welcome".

The study by Ralebese (2019) also noted that teachers believe that school leaders often have limited leadership and management skills and lack the expertise to be instructional leaders in the subject areas of the teachers they supervise (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012). Hence, the data revealed that teachers regard them (school boards) as time wasters. This implies that school boards and teachers do not often collaborate effectively.

VIII. DISCUSSION

The overall finding of this present study reveals that collaborative leadership is central when creating a conducive learning environment and that CwPDs' academic performance increases due to the school board's collaboration in education. In confirmation of this, Hafeez and Akhtar (2022) asserted that leadership with a collaborative perspective relates to school improvement. According to the findings, the study showed that the collaborative environment provides opportunities for the school boards to create physical access, i.e., they built ramps to create access to classrooms and grounds to provide safety and to foster respect for the rights and dignity of CwPDs.

Furthermore, the participants also agreed that the collaboration of school boards in the school is essential to accommodate CwPDs and make them feel that they are catered for primarily to ensure that 'no child is discriminated against'. This resonates with Florian (2017), who states that collaboration is the heart of inclusion. Additionally, the participants felt it is critical that the school boards carefully lead collaborative efforts to create a conducive school environment with positive disciplining, no bullying, and sharing common goals through collaborative leadership skills (Padayachee, 2024). An interesting finding in the study was that school boards must be equipped with the required facilities to enable CwPDs to become enthusiastic learners and to make their learning meaningful. This shows that collaboration is a vital part of regular schools for empowering inclusion collaborative leaders to meet the needs of students, including CwPDs. This can also lead to shared decision-making and shared responsibilities, as well as improve the well-being of both teachers and learners (Washington, 2021).

Most participants we interviewed communicated the importance of having time to develop clear school-based disability policies and programmes together that can be highly effective in fostering a safe, conducive, and healthy environment for the best academic performance of CwPDs. They believed that having specific documented policies and procedures as important tools in primary schools could help school boards address CwPDs' problems. This suggests that all school board members should work together to make policies to address the school challenges of behavioural management, discipline, learner support, and guidance services (Monyane, 2020). Washington (2021, p. 81) states, *"By working as a team, they can build relationships and create flexible practices that support their diverse population".*

Furthermore, participants were concerned; they felt that school boards could not create conditions conducive to academic Performance of CwPDs without proper training workshops. They showed that it is important for school boards to be trained about the school policies, finances, and intervention programs once they are elected. The findings of this study are consistent with Wangchuk and Dendup's (2022) study, which found that school leaders need training that helps enhance the academic performance of the students in schools. The individual interviews revealed that changing attitudes towards CwPDs is also a good strategy for creating a conducive learning environment for these learners. It serves as a good strategy because it keeps them motivated and interested, and they perform well in their studies, which involves achieving the desired learning targets, capabilities, and grades (Demirtas-Zorbaz et al., 2021).

The findings from the second theme revealed that school boards faced challenges in creating a conducive learning environment and handling the CwPDs (Monyane & Kgothule, 2023). As mentioned by the participants, the possible reasons for facing this problem are overcrowded classrooms, upstairs classrooms, lack of mobile clinics, inappropriate resources, learners' repetition of grades, and lack of follow-up after CwPDs have completed their grade 7. So, this study showed that sometimes CwPDs are not admitted to primary school due to fear of appropriate resources for their type of disability in the school. According to the responses from the participants, teachers do not accept school boards. Hence, the needs of CwPDs are rarely catered for. In the present study, when teachers and school boards work in isolation, the

poor academic performance of CwPDs remains a bone of contention in Lesotho primary schools.

The findings from this theme suggested that collaboration between all members of school boards and other stakeholders, such as the Ministry officials in the school or community, is needed to build conducive learning of CwPDs in the school environment. We assumed collaborative school board leadership to facilitate principal-teacher collaboration for school change. This is also linked to the theoretical framework of Telford's CLT in this study, which reflects the view that the role of leaders and the process of leadership are essential factors in the achievement of successful school improvement, which means, in our perspective, have an impact on or influence a learner, including CwPDs' environment (Maine, 2022; Monne, 2021; Swart & Pettipher, 2016). Hence, Padayachee (2024, p. 79) contends that "collaborative leaders need to be transparent, honest, trustworthy, compassionate, and responsible to build concrete working relationships" that can help create conditions conducive to the academic performance of learners with ASD.

From the findings above, CwPDs in a conducive environment such as home or school generally can have high regard for their schools and rated their academic performance highly. Again, collaborative leaders, teachers, and learners teach in an academic environment conducive to proper learning. The study by Lekhetho (2021) concurred with the above findings, as it also revealed that learners' satisfaction influences their intention to stay in a school and positively affects academic achievement. The data showed that a conducive learning environment promotes learners' well-being, thus contributing to personal development and high-quality results. There is no doubt that there is a positive correlation between school boards and the academic achievement of learners (Waters & Marzano, 2006), including CwPDs. Monyane and Kgothule (2023) proposed that schools should offer professional development programs to school leaders on instructional practices to handle CwPDs, create a supportive school learning environment, and mitigate school dropout. This will also help make primary schools better for learning (Wangchuk & Dendup, 2022).

IX. CONCLUSION

The significant finding of this study is that the type of leadership and the role collaborative school boards play in creating a conducive teaching and learning environment are the key elements for CwPDs to perform successfully at school. This goes beyond the school facilities. It also includes school boards' relationships with CwPDs and how they accommodate their diverse learning needs within IE. The unique finding emerging from the current study is that the school board must visit the schools regularly and try their best to assist CwPDs. This type of decisive and strong collaboration between the school board and the school can make teachers more satisfied. However, various shortcomings prevail that both challenge and overwhelm school boards in Lesotho, and this research indicated that the academic performance of learners with disabilities, including CwPDs, remains poor because of limited access to a conducive learning environment. This is because CwPDs have hardly been considered in mainstream classrooms thus far. This study concludes with the assumption that CwPDs experience discrimination, including obstacles to accessing the physical environment, and there are gaps in the policies aimed at securing CwPDs and helping school collaborative boards to create a conducive learning environment for CwPDs.

X. RECOMMENDATIONS

The following could be done to enhance the collaborative school boards' roles and responsibilities in creating conditions conducive to the academic performance of CwPDs in the mainstream classroom:

The result of the study indicates that Lesotho primary school teachers are reluctant to work with school boards. School boards must resolutely collaborate with teachers and advocate for their professional development opportunities to improve the academic performance of CwPDs. It is also recommended that all school stakeholders create conditions conducive to the academic performance of CwPDs in schools. Moreover, the MoET, via the Department of Education (DoE), should provide professional development training for school boards to be capacitated on how to employ collaborative leadership strategies and skills to promote the well-being of teachers and learners and create a conducive learning environment for CwPDs.

Furthermore, it was reflected in this study that all primary school boards that admit CwPDs need to empower themselves with thorough knowledge of the national inclusive policies. This will enable them to implement better school disability policies that could foster a safe, conducive, and healthy environment for the best academic performance of CwPDs. Lastly, there is a need for the government of Lesotho to make the follow-ups after the CwPDs have completed grade seven as a steppingstone to creating a conducive learning environment (physical disability user-friendly) and to curb the learner repetition rate.

XI. FURTHER RESEARCH

From the gaps identified in the current research study, it is recommended that studies should be conducted on the strategies that can be used to enhance the collaboration of stakeholders for the effective construction of conditions conducive to the academic performance of children with physical disabilities. A similar study can be done in a similar context but on a larger scale. This study was about school boards' voices; another study would be recommended, but it would focus on the learners' voices. This study was conducted in Maseru, the capital town of Lesotho; further study would also be recommended in rural areas in other districts.

XII. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The school boards from two primary schools in Maseru District, Lesotho, were selected for this research study. The sample cannot be generalised to all the greater Lesotho primary schools.

XIII. ACKNOWLEDGMENT

XIV. CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

There are no conflicts of interest in this study.

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