

Barriers faced by secondary school teachers in supporting learners with learning difficulties in mainstream schools in the Erongo region, Namibia

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Abstract

This study explored the barriers faced by secondary school teachers in supporting learners with learning difficulties in mainstream schools in Erongo region, Namibia. The study adopted a qualitative approach, utilising a phenomenological design. The study adopted a qualitative approach, utilising a phenomenological design. Purposive sampling was used to collect data from nine secondary school teachers through individual interviews. The study's results indicated that teachers encountered difficulties in providing support to learners with learning difficulties in mainstream schools, even though they make up a minor proportion of the learner population. The results specifically underscored challenges related to motivation, teacher training, crowded classrooms, parental involvement, communication, and collaborative efforts. The findings of the study emphasise the urgency of revisiting existing educational practices and policies to better align them with the realities of supporting learners with learning difficulties in secondary school mainstream classrooms. The study recommends that teacher training in the area of teaching and supporting learners with learning difficulties should be strengthened to facilitate their ability to teach and support learners with learning difficulties. Furthermore, there is a need for education planners to address classroom overcrowding in secondary schools to create a more conducive teaching and learning environment for learners with learning difficulties.

Keywords: learning difficulties, learning support, barriers, inclusive education, mainstream

Introduction

Countries worldwide are making efforts to implement inclusive education in their unique contexts. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO, 2020) reported that 54% of Sub-Saharan countries are pursuing inclusion and have taken steps towards policies that support the full inclusion of children with disabilities in mainstream schools. Namibia is no exception, and adaptations were made in the education system to ensure all learners are given equal learning opportunities. The Government of Namibia has ratified several UN conventions that promote the human rights of all children, such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child of 1989, Jomtien World Declaration on Education for All of 1990, Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action (UNESCO, 1994) and the Dakar Framework for Action (UNESCO, 2000). Consequently, Namibia implemented a policy on inclusive education in 2013, paving the way for children with learning difficulties (LD) to learn and participate fully in the education system (Ministry of Education, 2013).

Inclusive education is widely regarded as the most effective way to ensure all children have an equal opportunity to attend school, learn and develop the skills necessary for success. It means previously excluded groups will have access to meaningful learning opportunities (UNICEF, 2020). Implementing the inclusive education policy means children attending school learn and participate fully in the education system in mainstream schools, regardless of their strengths, weaknesses, abilities, disabilities and differences in any area (Buli-Holmberg & Jeyaprabhan, 2016). With the implementation of the policy on inclusive education in Namibia, “at-risk learners”, i.e., gifted learners, learners with physical disabilities, learners with mild disabilities, such as low vision, hard of hearing and mild to moderate learning difficulties, as well as learners with emotional and behavioural issues and those who experience educational backlogs can be provided for in mainstream schools (Ministry of Education, 2013). However, there appears to be a challenge in implementing the policy as inclusive education in Namibia is primarily

focused on access to education, which has been limited to the education system, where children with learning barriers are mainstreamed into regular schools (Bialostocka, 2016; Hausiku, 2017).

A substantial number of learners in Namibia encounter obstacles to learning in mainstream or regular schools. In 2020, Namibia's Ministry of Education recorded 57,503 enrolments of learners with barriers to learning, with learning difficulties accounting for the highest number of learners at 20,343 (Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture, 2020). Of the total number of learners with learning difficulties, 3 164 were enrolled in secondary schools (Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture, 2020). Learners with Learning Difficulties (LLDs) are defined as children whose performance is not in line with their abilities due to a variety of reasons, leading to underachievement (Ministry of Education, 2009).

Learners with learning difficulties underachieve academically for many reasons, including factors such as sensory impairments, high absenteeism, ineffective instruction, or inadequate curricula (Dednam, 2011). Once these learners are provided with programs that incorporate suitable support, they can attain age-appropriate levels. Donald et al. (2018) assert that such learners primarily require appropriate assistance and practice to make up for what has been missed or poorly taught. Aspects in the educational environment or experiences, such as inadequate instruction or missing a time of schooling, lead many learners to struggle with basic skills, such as reading, spelling, and mathematics. With the rise in the number of learners experiencing learning difficulties, the Ministry of Education, Arts, and Culture (2018a) urged teachers to provide learning support to all learners experiencing learning difficulties.

Learning support is a constructive approach to acknowledging learners' potential to grow at their own pace (Kruger et al., 2013). The Ministry of Education mandated schools to implement learning support and introduced a Learning Support Teachers' Manual to guide teachers in supporting learners (Ministry of Education, 2014). The Ministry of Education (2014) has stated in the Learning Support Teachers' Manual that "learning support involves planned methods and materials that enable LLDs and other special needs to reach essential basic competencies in the different

subjects and skills" (p.1). The Ministry of Education, Arts, and Culture (2018a) describes learning support as the physical, social, emotional and intellectual support given to learners who experience barriers to learning to enhance their learning capabilities. Furthermore, it requires adapting teaching and learning methods and materials, assisting aids, unique arrangements, examinations, and counselling (Ministry of Education, Arts, and Culture, 2018b). With the guidance of the learning support manual, teachers can support learners at different phases of the school. It stipulates that emphasis should focus on literacy and numeracy, including learning support in daily lesson preparation, of which in-class and/or afternoon lesson support takes place immediately when a learner presents learning difficulties, with a limit of 15 learners per group. The manual also aims to improve teachers' understanding in identifying learners' learning needs, the causes of their difficulties, and organising learning support for such learners (Ministry of Education, Arts, and Culture, 2016).

One significant challenge identified in Namibian schools is the lack of learning support classes (special units) available to learners in secondary schools, as these classes are currently limited to primary schools (Sichombe et al., 2011; Ministry of Education, Arts, and Culture, 2018b). This implies that LLDs are included in mainstream classrooms on a full-time basis in secondary schools, as opposed to primary grades. According to Donald et al. (2018), the assumption regarding learning support is that it is required more in the lower primary grades, less in the upper primary grades, and not at all in the secondary education grades, whose teachers often do not see LLDs as their responsibility (Donald et al., 2018). In countries like South Africa and Swaziland, secondary school teachers face many challenges in supporting LLDs (Hannah, 2015; Mavuso, 2014; Zwane & Malale, 2018). These challenges include their competencies in supporting and identifying learners with learning difficulties. Mavuso (2014) adds that one major challenge secondary school teachers face is that information about interventions in previous grades for learners was not captured. Such information includes curriculum differentiation, scaffolding, using individualised learning support and using learner profiles to establish existing difficulties and support provided (Mavuso, 2014).

Sichombe et al. (2011) show that while LLDs at primary levels receive support, little is known about secondary school learning support practices. Therefore, this paper examined the challenges faced by secondary school teachers in supporting LLDs in mainstream classrooms.

Purpose of the study

The study aimed to investigate the challenges faced by secondary school teachers in supporting learners with learning difficulties in mainstream schools in Erongo region of Namibia.

Literature Review

The practice of inclusion

According to UNESCO (2022), inclusion is a strategy that values learner diversity and sees individual differences as opportunities to deepen learning. With the concept of inclusion, regular schools are responsible for meeting the needs of all children, and teachers must believe that all children can learn, have faith in their abilities and accept responsibility for the development of all learners (UNESCO, 1994). Thus, achieving its goal is to increase the acceptance and participation of all children, including those with disabilities, in regular education (Brownell et al., 2010). The evolving implementation of inclusion can yield several advantages for learners with learning difficulties, such as learners acquiring new knowledge, connections and attitudes that learners may not fully attain in a segregated educational system. Additionally, it provides them with early exposure to the natural world beyond their home experiences (Paramanik et al., 2018). According to Izgar and İlter (2022), to successfully practice inclusion, all educational components and stakeholders must comprehend and endorse the inclusion philosophy while reorganising educational programmes and teaching practices to accommodate every learner.

To achieve the goal of inclusive education, it is essential to prioritise providing comprehensive training to teachers, which equips them with the necessary skills and knowledge to integrate learners with disabilities successfully into regular classrooms. Given that teachers bear the primary responsibility for all learners' education and daily learning, this emphasis on training becomes crucial in fostering an inclusive learning environment (United

Nations, as cited in Izgar & İlter, 2022). While many governments prioritise providing access to education to all learners through inclusion, Kauffman and Hornby (2020) posit that inclusion should partially revolve around physically present learners in general education classrooms, further emphasising that true inclusion centres on providing meaningful and challenging instruction should be tailored to each individual's needs. Kauffman and Hornby (2020) contend that offering appropriate instruction is the most crucial aspect of education for all learners, regardless of their abilities.

Teaching learners with learning difficulties

Scholars (Nilsen, 2020; Karunanayake et al., 2020; Coutsocostas & Alborz, 2010; Watson, 2007; Yin, 2018) have investigated the inclusion of LLDs in mainstream classrooms in different countries, such as Greece, Norway, Australia, China and Sri Lanka. The findings of these studies have raised concerns, as they highlight challenges and negative attitudes from teachers, leading to the avoidance of LLDs. Nilsen (2020), for instance, reports that many teachers in primary and lower secondary schools in Norway struggle to follow up with multiple learners, particularly impacting those with LDs, who require more assistance. Coutsocostas and Alborz's (2010) study, involving preschool, primary and secondary school teachers from Greece, found that although some teachers feel comfortable with LLDs in the classrooms, others still believe that teaching become problematic when LLDs are involved and, thus, oppose including them in their classrooms.

Karunanayake et al. (2020), in a study that sought to study teachers' ability to identify LLDs in primary schools in Sri Lanka, revealed that teachers noticed LD in learners but needed more information and knowledge about addressing them. Insufficient understanding of LLDs impedes teachers' ability to tailor instruction to address learners' individual needs. Furthermore, large class sizes negatively affect the teaching of LLDs as teachers tended to use a teacher-centred approach, which was suitable for large classes but ineffective for LLDs. Yin (2018) used the Humanistic Theory of Carl Rogers to analyse the causes of LDs from the perspective of high school teachers who taught LLDs in China and reported that it was challenging for teachers to provide high-quality teaching when they had to

manage large numbers of learners. The study concluded that implementing small class sizes within the existing education system enables teachers to pay more attention to LLDs, establish a harmonious teacher-learner relationship, identify LLDs timely, and offer appropriate support (Yin, 2018). In South Africa and Swaziland, secondary school teachers face many challenges in supporting LLDs, which affects their ability to support LLDs (Hannah, 2015; Zwane & Malale, 2018; Mavuso, 2014). These challenges include insufficient parental involvement, language barriers, inadequate resources, time constraints, misinterpretation of policies, absence of support systems, and teachers' attitudes toward LLDs (Nel & Grosser, 2016; Yin, 2018).

Lack of proper policies that outline proper procedures, an inflexible curriculum that leads to a breakdown in learning, as well as fixed teaching and evaluation methods that ignore the needs and preferences of a wide range of learners was also cited as a barrier to supporting LLDs (Nel & Grosser, 2016). Zwane and Malale (2018) noted that efforts toward mainstreaming inclusive education and supporting learners with difficulties are hindered by a curriculum not designed to be inclusive. A curriculum that is too wide, theoretical and examination-oriented affects how learners with LDs perform. Although these studies documented teachers' experiences, the context of the studies differs from the current study. There exists a knowledge gap in the experiences of Namibian teachers in teaching and supporting LLDs in mainstream secondary schools.

Research methods

Research design

This study employed a phenomenology design that is embedded in a qualitative approach. The qualitative approach is based on collecting verbal data, often presented in narrative accounts (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The qualitative research approach was deemed appropriate for this study, as it allowed the researchers to gather data directly from teachers at the selected secondary schools, focussing on their first-hand experiences of supporting LLDs through face-to-face interactions (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Phenomenology design is concerned with human experiences; as such, it was deemed appropriate for this study to investigate and

understand the challenges secondary school teachers face in supporting learners in mainstream schools (Denscombe, 2017).

Population and sample

The population of interest in this study consisted of teachers from 14 secondary schools in the Erongo region of Namibia. Six secondary schools were conveniently sampled from the Erongo region, as they were easily accessible to the lead researcher. After selecting the participating schools, nine teachers with a minimum of five years of experience in teaching LLDs in mainstream secondary schools across a variety of subjects (Life Skills, History and Geography, Chemistry, Afrikaans, English, Business studies, Mathematics and Physical Science, Biology, Life Science and Agriculture) were purposively sampled.

Research instruments

A semi-structured interview guide was used to collect data. The interview guide consisted of two sections, with the first section focusing on obtaining biographical data, and the second section seeking to gather information about teachers' experiences in supporting LLDs in secondary schools.

Data collection procedure

Permission to conduct the study in the chosen secondary schools in the Erongo region was sought and granted by the Ministry of Education, Arts, and Culture, as well as the Erongo Regional Education Director. After the request was approved, the lead researcher visited the selected schools, engaged with the principals, and obtained consent to collect data. Upon informing the participants of the study's objective, the lead researcher recruited participants who were willing to participate. Subsequently, the lead researcher established dates and times for data collection. One-on-one interviews were conducted after school to mitigate disruptions to the teaching and learning process.

Data analysis

Data was analysed using Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis method, which involves identifying, analysing and reporting themes within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2022). This method of data analysis allowed the researchers to achieve a clear interpretation of the data and identify themes that were relevant

and significant in addressing the research objective (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017).

Research ethics

Ethical approval was granted from the University of Namibia's Research Ethics Committee (UREC) through the Rundu Campus Decentralized Ethics Committee, reference: RUC0009. A consent form was distributed to the participants, which included information regarding the study, protocols, confidentiality and voluntary participation. Pseudonyms were used in reporting to maintain confidentiality rather than identifying the participants or schools where the data was collected.

Findings and discussion

This section presents analysis and discussion of the study findings. It starts with the characteristics of the participants and concludes with barriers that secondary school teachers in the Erongo region experience in supporting LLDs.

Participant characteristics

Nine participants took part in the study, and they possessed diverse undergraduate and postgraduate qualifications in education. Notably, one participant had a master's degree in inclusive and special needs education, while another had an advanced diploma in special education. Three participants had Basic Education Teaching Diplomas (BETD), while the other four held Bachelor of Education (Honours) degrees. Most participants reported that they had never attended a workshop in inclusive education or special needs education, which suggests a paucity of professional training in the areas of teaching and supporting learners with special educational needs. For example, Participants 2 said that *"they do not teach us about teaching and supporting LLDs in depth in university"*, while Participant 5 mentioned that *"there should be training for teachers every year on learner support"*. Chitiyo et al. (2015) expressed concern over the lack of professional development training for teachers to teach learners with LLDs.

Barriers

Here, the researchers present and discuss the study's findings regarding the barriers that teachers encounter in their efforts to teach and support LLDs in mainstream secondary schools, as narrated by the study participants.

Motivation

Participants in this study remarked that LLDs lacked self-motivation, were sometimes uninterested in teachers' efforts to assist them and were quick to give up on themselves. Participants further added that the lack of interest from the learners was due to frustrations with mainstream classrooms. According to Weiser (2014), LLDs often become frustrated in mainstream classrooms because they see themselves as being incompetent in many areas of the school; thus, generally making them unmotivated and unexcited to read, write and complete tasks for fear of failure, embarrassment and disrespect. Below, some participants narrated their experiences of teaching learners with learning difficulties. *"LLDs get frustrated and give up trying. This is because many fail grades once, twice, and sometimes even up to three times. In most cases, they are transferred to the next grade without actually passing. By the time they reach secondary school level, they are not motivated to learn and end up underperforming"* (Participant 4). *"Some learners, once they fail to grasp something or show little or no improvement, they give up on learning and just come to school to be in school"* (Participant 5). *"These learners lack interest and would rather socialise and focus on activities unrelated to school, instead of focusing on their academics"* (Participant 6).

The findings show that LLDs sometimes lacked motivation resulting in limited effort towards their learning. Gkora and Karabatzaki (2023) also noted the critical significance of motivation in learning, stating that LLDs are less persistent in their academic pursuits, which suggests a lack of motivation. They added that motivation is closely linked to the learning process and the achievement of a learner.

Time and workload

The participants indicated that their efforts to ensure that LLDs succeed in mainstream classes are further made difficult by limited time and high teaching workloads. They suggested that the time they had to dedicate to extra learning support that LLDs required to be on par with other students was limited due to administrative tasks, such as lesson planning, preparing and grading assessment activities for the high number of learners. *"One of the barriers to supporting LLDs is time. Time is not always with us, since we are overloaded"*

with teaching throughout the day, and one gets exhausted" (Participant 2). "We know what to do; it's just that we are overwhelmed with a lot of administration work" (Participant 5). "If we can have less workload as teachers, then maybe we can do more teaching and supporting learners, especially those lagging behind" (Participant 7).

Brau and Clarke (2022) posits that teachers must allocate significant time to interacting with learners and preparing lessons, which might result in challenges in effectively managing their time. For LLDs to succeed in mainstream classes, they need effort, individual attention, and teacher support. The time-intensive nature of teaching learners with learning difficulties has long been a source of concern for teachers. Serry et al. (2022) concur with these sentiments that the importance of interventions for LLDs, along with adequate time and material resources for teachers, is crucial.

Overcrowded classrooms

Participants in this study reported that the number of learners in the classrooms frequently exceeded the designated number of learners per class. "We currently teach learners above the norm, which is 1:35, but we teach up to 45-50 learners in one classroom, including LLDs" (Participant 3). "One of the problems at our school is that we have overcrowded classrooms, so this learner support can really [Silence]... The classroom, the numbers are too big. We cannot control these learners" (Participant 1). The findings of the study show that teachers find it challenging to effectively manage the entire classroom while attending to and supporting LLDs due to the large class sizes. Having smaller class sizes would allow teachers to dedicate more attention to LLDs, fostering harmonious relationships with learners, promptly identifying learning challenges and providing appropriate support. Karunanayake et al. (2020) report related findings indicating that large class sizes hinder teachers' ability to offer individualised attention to learners in need of help.

Learner discipline

The participants reported that LLDs were often made fun of by their classmates, leading them to become either demoralised to participate in class, aggressive towards their peers or withdrawn from lessons as illustrated by some

teachers who said that "learners facing learning difficulties often resort to masking their challenges through disruptive behaviour – and due to their older age, they might display aggression towards their peers and engage in negative communication. As teachers, our efforts are directed towards safeguarding all learners, including those with learning problems, as well as addressing issues related to bullying and teasing of learners with learning difficulties" (Participant 2). "Sometimes, struggling learners avoid reading out loud in class – and when they try, other learners make fun of them" (Participant 4).

The results of this study are consistent with an earlier research study conducted by Ofiesh and Mather (2023), which also demonstrated that LLDs were frequently the targets of ridicule from their peers. Consequently, some of them chose to abstain from participating in activities to prevent humiliation. Similarly, a study by Rose et al. (2011) observed that LLDs exhibited aggressive behaviour towards their peers as a response to bullying. Additionally, participants reported that they allocated an increased amount of time to addressing learners' misbehaviour, which diverts their attention from teaching and providing support. "By the time they get here (high school), their learning difficulties hide behind their problems, where they have to bunk classes, stay away from school or not do activities. So, once they come here, we are dealing more with behavioural problems – discipline problems that are a direct result of their learning problems, I would say" (Participant 2). "Some LLDs are ill-disciplined. They can come to class and ruin the whole lesson because you will be dealing with one learner, instead of everyone in the class – always talking" (Participant 4). "I am tired; I am exhausted; I am a human being before I am a teacher... There is only so much that one can do" (Participant 1).

The results indicated that teachers had to address behavioural issues related to LLDs, such as absenteeism, incomplete tasks and disruptions in class, rather than solely focusing on academic challenges. This observation is consistent with findings by Anderman and Hicks (2013) and Collier (2015), who highlight that low motivation and enthusiasm in the learning process among LLDs can lead to negative behaviour, including disruptions in the classroom and skipping classes. The results of Ingabire et al. (2023)'s study indicates that

the most common misbehaviours among LLDs were exhibiting aggressive and disruptive behaviour and being rude to the teachers. Teachers in this study further reported feeling discouraged and despondent when confronted with LLDs' misbehaviour. Nevertheless, teachers must exercise caution and refrain from labelling learners as disruptive and failing to provide them with the required support. Often, teachers implement measures, including suspending LLDs from school, rather than providing the necessary support. Regrettably, this strategy often resulted in LLDs dropping out of school.

Parental involvement

The education of children is significantly influenced by their parents' participation, and this is particularly true for those with learning challenges. Participants in this study emphasized the importance of parents in the academic lives of LLDs and believed that parents neglected LLDs and failed to support their children actively. Consistent with the results of this study, several researchers (De Jager, 2016; Hausiku, 2017; Ndinisa, 2016; Westwood, 2004) identified a lack of parental involvement in their children's schoolwork. The participants in this study emphasised the importance of parental support for their children, which include assisting them with homework, ensuring the completion of assigned tasks, and being present at school when required. In line with this perspective, Durisic and Bunijevac (2017) mentioned that teachers commonly assign homework to encourage learning at home and keep parents informed about classroom activities, enabling them to assist their children in understanding and completing the tasks effectively. In their efforts to engage parents, the participants mentioned adopting strategies, such as inviting parents to the school or organising parent evenings. Mantey (2020) also reported in their study that teachers engaged parents through Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) meetings, but attendance by some parents was lacking. Participants expressed concerns about the lack of interest shown by some parents regarding their children's educational matters: *"There are times when I invite parents so that we can discuss the problems their children are facing. Some of them refuse and do not show up. Yes. Then it is a challenge to have a learner who wants to commit suicide but whose parents do not want to hear about it"* (Participant 1).

"Some parents will not want to be called in to be told about the learner's learning difficulties by the teacher or the Life Skills teacher" (Participant 9).

Parental involvement in education is important and has been shown to improve academic performance among learners, especially when parents hold high expectations (Boonk et al., 2018). When parents actively participated in the learning process of LLDs the participants reported observing positive improvements in the learners' performance. The participants in the study pointed out another obstacle, the resistance of both parents and learners to acknowledge the presence of learning difficulties. According to their accounts, parents were unwilling to accept that their children had learning difficulties, disregarding the issue altogether. Instead, they attributed their children's learning problems to teachers. The following quotes from participants exemplify this sentiment: *"Most parents do not accept the learning challenges their children have. This makes them blame the school for not doing their work"* (Participant 4). *"Some parents fail to understand that their kids have learning difficulties, so parental involvement becomes a problem because then a child must get support from both the parent and the school"* (Participant 3).

This finding is in accordance with Sahu et al. (2018)'s report, which indicated that parents were inclined to resist when they were informed about their children's challenges, exhibiting over-protective behaviours and attributing the challenges to the school system, teachers, and the curriculum. Ndinisa (2016) advises that when communicating with parents about learners' learning challenges, teachers must recognise that parents react differently to the news of their children having learning difficulties. The negative reactions to the news of their children having learning difficulties may be due to a lack of knowledge among parents regarding learning difficulties (Taderera & Hall, 2017; Sahu et al., 2018). A participant in this study noted that assisting a learner becomes challenging when parents were unaware of the learner's struggles. *"For parents, it feels like the child with learning difficulties is not serious with school. In the African culture, alone, people fail to understand that learning can be difficult for some learners. Since they don't understand, they don't know how to help the learners"* (Participant 2). It is challenging for parents to

support their children and participate in their education when they lacked a comprehension of learning difficulties. There is thus a need to educate parents about learning challenges. The increased awareness of LD might encourage greater parental engagement as parents become more aware of the support and assistance their children require.

Support from the regional office

The participants held different views concerning the support provided by the regional office. Some of them believed that the regional office should enhance its responsiveness to the needs of teachers and schools, mainly by prioritising the creation of a conducive environment, which involves addressing infrastructure, staffing, and classroom overcrowding issues to better support teachers and learners. Participant 5 stated that *“there is no support from the educational official to help teachers improve their skills when it comes to identifying and giving support to learners”*. The Sector Policy for Inclusive Education and the National Promotion Policy Guide for Junior and Secondary Phase in Namibia emphasise the need for regional offices to support teachers in addressing LLDs (Ministry of Education, 2013; Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture, 2018a). This support was expected to encompass the training and deployment of inclusive education specialists in regional offices and schools alongside advisory education teachers. Haitembu (2014) affirms that regional offices currently offer insufficient support to schools and teachers in this regard. The regional office needs to provide equitable support to all schools for teachers to provide adequate learning support.

Language barrier

In social constructivism, language plays a crucial role in enabling teachers to transmit information to learners and as a means for learners to express their ideas and ask questions (Negi, 2020). Some participants cited the English language as an obstacle to providing adequate support to learners, asserting that it hinders their comprehension. *“One difficulty that I experienced is some learners experience a language barrier and have difficulty reading, so they struggle”* (Participant 3). Participant 5 explained that he pairs learners intending to have them translate for each other due to the language barrier

experienced in the class. Here is what Participant 5 said, *“I actively seek out other learners who can offer assistance – and sometimes, they might even translate into their native language. This approach helps me avoid the inconvenience of language barriers.”*

English is used as a second language in Namibia, which is a multilingual society. It is also the language of instruction in schools starting in Grade 4. Despite this, many learners struggle with English comprehension as most speak a different language at home. This creates a communication barrier that adds to the problem when learners are trying to learn new concepts, knowledge and skills through the medium of instruction used in schools. De Jager (2016) argues that LLDs refrain from engaging actively in class activities and do not constantly interact with their peers due to their inability to communicate well in English. Teachers might not possess fluency in the LLD's first language, which leads to poor interaction and understanding of culturally and linguistically different learners (Westwood, 2004; Nel & Grosser, 2016). The findings of this study suggest that some teachers lacked proficiency in the native languages of LLDs and employing English as the primary medium of instruction does not effectively cater learners. As a last resort, teachers often relied on learners who shared a common language to help translate and communicate the content to their peers, especially those with LD.

Conclusion and recommendations

The study explored the experiences of teachers in teaching and supporting LLDs in mainstream secondary schools in the Erongo region of Namibia. It identified barriers facing secondary school teachers in supporting LLDs in mainstream schools. The study's findings underscore the intricate barriers that teachers encounter as they attempt to teach and support LLDs in mainstream classrooms with limited time and resources. It highlighted the pivotal role of teachers in guiding and supporting LLDs, emphasising the influence of social interaction and language on both the teacher and the learner. The study found that when parents actively participated in the learning process of LLDs, the participants reported observing positive improvements in the learners' performance. The results specifically underscored challenges related to motivation, teacher training, overcrowded classes, lack of parental involvement, communication

language, and collaborative efforts. The findings of the study emphasise the urgency of revisiting existing educational practices and policies to better align them with the realities of supporting LLDs in secondary school mainstream classrooms. The study recommends that teacher training in the area of teaching and supporting LLDs should be strengthened to facilitate their ability to teach and support LLDs. Furthermore, there is a need for education planners to address classroom overcrowding in secondary schools to create a more conducive teaching and learning environment for LLDs.

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