

Assessing the Right to Accessing Education to Learners with Hearing Impairment in Primary Schools in South Africa

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ABSTRACT:

The right to education is enshrined in numerous international and regional legal frameworks, including treaties such as conventions, covenants, and charters, as well as in soft law instruments like general comments, recommendations, declarations, and action frameworks. The following were the objectives of this study: To explore the importance of providing inclusive education to hearing-impaired learners, To discuss the appropriateness of practices adopted in the education of hearing-impaired learners, To identify ways in which the policies of the education system can be implemented to be more inclusive for hearing-impaired learners in South Africa and To suggest guidelines that can be developed to promote access to inclusive education for learners with hearing impairment. The data for this study was collected through interviews with school inspectors, principals, and teachers. Given the qualitative nature of the study, the data was presented using themes supported by verbatim excerpts from participants. The findings indicate that participants generally recognise inclusive education as an important right for learners with hearing impairment. Across all participant groups, there was a shared understanding that inclusive education promotes equality by ensuring that learners are not excluded from mainstream schooling due to their disabilities.

Keywords: Access, Inclusive education, Hearing impairment, Self-esteem, Right to education

1. Introduction

The introduction and adoption on inclusive education have been a milestone in the education sector. It has helped remove different forms of stigma and labels placed on learners with learning disabilities and difficulties. It has also helped address the issue of social segregation and discrimination based on the physical and mental makeup of learners. Inclusive education has answered many questions related to the welfare of learners with disabilities and was put forward

during the Jomtien Conference of 1990 and stated in the Salamanca Statement of 1994. In as much as inclusion sought to and managed to address the issue of education for all and the removal of special schools it failed to address the issue of learners with hearing impairment in totality. For a start, schools cannot provide or afford to implement the Multi-Disciplinary Approach (MDA) which requires schools to have different teachers to deal with learners with disabilities.

Problem Statement

The right to access inclusive education for learners with hearing impairment (HI) in South Africa faces various challenges which compromise the learners' opportunities to achieve their academic goals. With the emphasis being placed more on social integration than academic development, access to inclusive education for learners with HI might remain a pipe dream in South Africa. The educational system has not fully embraced inclusion as demonstrated by the sluggishness of the implementation in coming up with an integration plan. This study, therefore, seeks to assess the right to which inclusive education is being administered and implemented for learners with HI in South Africa, and whether their right to education is being met.

Main Research Objectives

Establish the right to access inclusive education for learners with hearing impairments.

1. Explore the importance of providing inclusive education to hearing-impaired learners.
2. Discuss the appropriateness of practices adopted in the education of hearing-impaired learners.
3. Identify ways in which the policies of the education system can be implemented to be more inclusive for hearing-impaired learners in South Africa.
4. Suggest guidelines that can be developed to promote access to inclusive education for learners with hearing impairment.

Research questions

1. What is the importance of providing inclusive education to hearing-impaired learners in South Africa?
2. What is the appropriateness of practices adopted in the education of hearing-impaired learners?
3. How can the policies of the education system be improved to be more for hearing-impaired learners in South Africa?
4. What guidelines can be developed to promote access to inclusive education for learners with hearing impairment?

Brief Literature Review

The study focuses on assessing the right to access inclusive education for learners with hearing impairment in primary schools in South Africa. This paper reviews the literature related to and relevant to the study. It also looks at the theoretical concept and conceptual framework of the study. This paper also seeks to answer the research questions which drive the study.

Inclusive education ensures deaf and hearing-impaired students have the same chances to learn and develop by eliminating obstacles and meeting their specific requirements. Everyone has a basic right to access education. Hayes and Bulat (2017) emphasise that the strengths of students in special education are amplified through interactions and social engagement with their peers. These strengths, which may be linked to personal interests or hobbies, contribute to a sense of belonging among the students. Furthermore, participation in life skills training programmes has a beneficial impact on the self-esteem of pupils with hearing impairments.

Hayes and Bulat (2017) identify several benefits of inclusion for students with hearing impairments. Firstly, they mention that through interaction with the hearing world, deaf students can improve their communication skills with those who can hear. This exposure prepares them for effective communication in the hearing world. Secondly, the authors highlight the importance of socializing deaf students with the hearing world, as it helps them develop crucial social skills necessary for future interactions. Additionally, inclusion provides deaf students access to a variety of academic, vocational, and extracurricular programs, contributing to their holistic development. Lastly, attending a local school enables deaf students to live close to home and receive support from their families and friends, negating the need to live away from their support system at a distant school for the deaf.

Theoretical framework

Theoretical literature is related to the study of theory, as opposed to its use to generate existing theory, and is tested as a gap in existing research, resulting in the generation of new hypotheses that require further research. When this guidance and support come from others by 'scaffolding', new knowledge is built in the mind (Mallory & New, 1994). Social-constructionist theory in sociology emphasizes how society and culture shape individuals' identities and experiences, suggesting that knowledge and reality are influenced by social interactions and language.

2. Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations in research are a set of principles that guide a researcher's research designs and practices (Bhandari, 2021). The emphasis is placed on the integrity, human rights, and dignity of participants, as well as the collaboration between scientific inquiry and societal engagement. These foundational principles guarantee that involvement in research studies is voluntary, informed, and conducted in a manner that prioritises the safety of research participants. They include confidentiality, voluntary participation and anonymity.

Informed Consent

Informed consent signifies that individuals involved in the research are completely cognisant of its nature and voluntarily decide to participate (Creswell, 2018). This concept emphasizes the autonomy and freedom of choice of participants regarding the actions undertaken, as well as their entitlement to be informed about any explicit or implicit processes involved (Deppeler, 2012).

Confidentiality and Anonymity

Confidentiality and anonymity pertain to a situation where the researcher is aware of the identity of a research participant but implements measures to safeguard that identity from being revealed to others. This concept imposes a responsibility on the researcher to guarantee that any utilization of information acquired from participants does not compromise the interests of those individuals (Aspin, 2007). Confidentiality and anonymity will be ensured through the non-

publication of participants' names and personal data in the research document and interview scripts.

Ethical Clearance from Unisa

The researcher received ethical clearance from the Ethical Committee at Unisa to conduct the research.

Limitations and delimitations of the study

Limitations of the Study

The limitations of the study are those features of design or methodology that influence the interpretation of the findings from the research (Elfil & Negida, 2017). These features are beyond the control of the researcher. The limitations, circumstances, or external factors that are beyond the researcher's control impose constraints on both the methodology and the conclusions drawn (Elfil & Negida, 2017). The extensiveness and effectiveness of the study will be affected by time issues and limited financial resources for travelling to the different schools which be used for research. The other restricting factor will be that of time, since I am not a full-time student, I will need to divide my time between my work, and the research.

Delimitations of the Study

Delimitations are choices that were be made by the researcher describing the boundaries set by the researcher which are, the population of the study, variables, statistical analysis and the focus of the research (Elfil & Negida, 2017). The research only focused on 2 Special Education Inspectors, 4 school principals, 8 teachers teaching in inclusive classrooms. The research is not illustrative of what may be happening in other clusters around the region and country. It was not possible to pick every subject available because tabulating of collected data would be difficult and laborious.

3. Methodology

Research Site

The research is on how the right to access inclusive education for learners with hearing impairments in South Africa, Gauteng Province.

Gauteng Province is an ideal research site due to its central location and diverse resources. Gauteng East District is responsible for the implementation and management of inclusive education.

Research Approach

For this study, a qualitative research approach was employed, as the researcher aims to collect non-numerical data by capturing a variety of responses (Williamson & Johanson, 2018). This approach enables the researcher to gain a more profound insight into the experiences and behaviours of participants, as it allows them the freedom to articulate their feelings during the interview process (Creswell, 2018).

Research Design

The researcher employed a case study design for the entirety of the study. This design establishes the framework that outlines the type of data to be gathered, the sources of that data, and the methods of collection. According to Deppeler (2012), a case study design examines a unit of human activity situated in the real world, existing in the present moment to address research inquiries. It aims to collect various forms of evidence that are present within the case context, which must be extracted and compiled to provide the most comprehensive answers to the research questions.

A case study is seen as being appropriate for this study because it provides a one-on-one experience between the researcher and participants which allows for the gaining of concrete, contextual, in-depth knowledge on how the right to access inclusive education be enhanced for learners with hearing impairments in South Africa.

Research Paradigm

The research utilized an interpretivist framework, a qualitative approach employed to examine data concerning human behavior within the field of sociology. This method involves analyzing events or actions through the lens of the beliefs, norms, and values inherent in the culture of the society where they occur (Bhandiri, 2021). Within this framework, knowledge and findings are

developed progressively as the investigation unfolds. Specifically, insights are derived through discussions that involve reconciling differing interpretations among community members, which is why this approach has been selected for the current study.

Philosophical Paradigms

In this research, an epistemological framework was utilized. Epistemology is concerned with the acquisition, validation, and interpretation of knowledge (Matta, 2022). Integrating an epistemological viewpoint into the research design enables a critical examination of the sources of knowledge on hearing impairment in schools. This facilitates an understanding of the many ways in which knowledge is created within the field of special education and informs the approach to gathering and analysing data.

Sampling Design

For purposes of this research purposive sampling, a non-probability sampling method, was used. Purposive sampling entails the researcher using their judgement to select a sample that is most useful to research (Elfil & Negida, 2017). The use of purposive sampling in this study allows for targeted selection of participants with relevant expertise and experiences, ensuring the research captures valuable insights and perspectives from key stakeholders in the education sector.

Research population

The study population comprised of twenty special education inspectors at the Ministry of Education and Training District Office and the four regions, school principals and teachers in schools surrounding the CBD. This central business district offers a hub for collaboration and data collection with key stakeholders involved in managing hearing impairment in educational settings, providing accessibility and convenience for engaging with the identified research participants across various levels of the education system.

Research Sample

As stated by (Elfil & Negida, 2017), a research sample consists of a subset of subjects or individuals chosen from a larger population relevant to the study, all of whom possess similar characteristics. The target population of this study will be 5 Special Education Inspectors, 10 school principals (5 primary schools and 5 high schools), 5 teachers teaching in inclusive classrooms. This is a good number as the researcher will not have enough time and resources to visit a larger number of schools in South Africa. This number is also suitable for the study as the participants can yield data that is of sufficient quality.

Data collection methods:

- **Research Instruments**

Creswell (2018) characterises research instruments as tools employed for data collection. In contrast, Rau (2010) describes a research instrument as any tool used to gather, measure, or analyse data pertinent to a research topic. In this study, unstructured interviews were utilized as the method for data collection.

- **Unstructured Interview**

An unstructured interview is a data collection method characterized by an informal conversational style without a predetermined set of questions. This approach allows respondents to engage in a natural dialogue, where their

answers may generate follow-up questions, fostering a more in-depth exploration of the topic (Williamson & Johanson, 2018). This approach provides the opportunity to investigate topics in considerable detail and depth in a flexible manner. Additionally, this format enables interviewers to assess advanced skills, including conceptual reasoning.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used as the qualitative data analysis method. Thematic analysis is a structured method for examining qualitative data, focusing on identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns or themes within that data, which are then interpreted according to their intrinsic meaning (Bingham, 2023).

4. Results

The data for this study were collected through interviews with school inspectors, principals, and teachers. Given the qualitative nature of the study, the data is presented using themes supported by verbatim excerpts from participants. The findings indicate that participants recognise inclusive education as an important right for learners with hearing impairment. Across all participant groups, there was a shared understanding that inclusive education promotes equality by ensuring that learners are not excluded from mainstream schooling due to their disabilities.

Table 1: Alignment of Themes with Sub-Research Questions for Data Presentation

Research Question	Research Objective	Thematic Areas	Key Focus Areas
1. What is the importance of providing inclusive education to hearing-impaired learners in Eswatini?	To explore the significance and value of inclusive education for learners with hearing impairment	• Inclusive Education: Rights Versus Practice • The Conditional Nature of Inclusion Benefits	- Inclusive education as a fundamental human right - Equality and equitable access to education - Social integration and reduction of stigma - Benefits of inclusion in academic, social, and emotional development - Conditions under which inclusion becomes meaningful or ineffective
2. What is the appropriateness of	To assess whether current teaching	• Pedagogical Misalignment	- Teacher-centered versus inclusive pedagogies - Lack of

Research Question	Research Objective	Thematic Areas	Key Focus Areas
practices adopted in the education of hearing-impaired learners under South Africa's law and policy?	practices and systems align with inclusive education policy and legal frameworks	Resource Constraints as Structural Barriers Policy–Practice Gap	differentiated instruction - Weak classroom adaptation for hearing-impaired learners - Limited assistive technologies and learning materials - Shortages of interpreters and specialized resources - Disconnect between policy commitments and practical implementation
3. How can the policies of the education system be improved to be more inclusive for hearing-impaired learners in South Africa?	Identify policy gaps and propose improvements for strengthening inclusive education	Policy–Practice Gap Curriculum and Assessment Constraints	- Weak implementation structures - Limited policy monitoring and evaluation - Funding and enforcement deficiencies - Curriculum rigidity and exclusionary assessment systems - Need for curriculum reform and inclusive assessment approaches - Strengthening institutional accountability
4. What guidelines can be developed to promote access to inclusive education for learners with hearing impairment?	To develop practical strategies and guidelines for improving access and participation	Teacher Capacity as a Key Constraint Communication Barriers as Functional Exclusion Resource Constraints as Structural Barriers	- Teacher training deficits, including sign language proficiency - Need for continuous professional development - Communication barriers in classroom participation - Lack of specialist staff and support systems - School accessibility improvements - Practical strategies for strengthening inclusive learning environments

The table above presents a synthesis of qualitative findings organised according to the research questions. The analysis demonstrates that while inclusive education is widely supported in principle, its practical implementation is constrained by systemic, institutional, and resource-related challenges. The emerging themes highlight a consistent policy-practice gap, particularly in relation to teacher preparedness, resource allocation, and monitoring of inclusive education practices.

Inclusive Education: Rights versus Practice

While participants strongly endorsed inclusive education as a fundamental right, the data indicates that this understanding remains largely

conceptual rather than fully operationalized within school systems. This suggests a clear gap between the ideological acceptance of inclusion and the material realities of implementation.

Conditional nature of Inclusion benefits

Although participants widely acknowledged the academic, social, and emotional benefits of inclusive education, these benefits were not viewed as automatic outcomes of mainstream placement. Rather, respondents consistently emphasized that successful inclusion is conditional upon the availability of adequate support systems.

These findings suggest that inclusion alone does not guarantee meaningful educational outcomes. Positive learner experiences depend heavily on effective support mechanisms, including specialized resources, communication systems, and trained personnel.

Pedagogical misalignment

The findings indicate that current teaching practices remain largely teacher-centered, examination-driven, and insufficiently adapted to the needs of hearing-impaired learners. Across schools, teachers reported that mainstream classrooms continue to prioritize syllabus completion and examination performance over differentiated instruction and learner-centered inclusion.

Teacher 5 noted that “teaching styles are not varied because teachers were not capacitated... they focus more on exam teaching,” while Teacher 7 explained that “there is too much testing than learning.” Principal 2 similarly criticized the curriculum as “exam oriented,” emphasizing that it does not adequately support learners with hearing impairment.

This pedagogical misalignment limits meaningful participation for hearing-impaired learners by maintaining rigid instructional methods that prioritize uniformity over adaptation. The data suggests that without substantial curriculum and instructional reform, inclusive education remains constrained by traditional educational structures.

Resource constraints as structural barriers

Resource shortages emerged as one of the most significant structural barriers to effective inclusive education implementation. Participants consistently identified inadequate access to assistive technologies, teaching materials, infrastructure, and specialist services.

Principal 5 stated that schools “make do with the limited resources we have,” while Teacher 4 emphasized that “there are no interventions to assist learners with HI. There are no resources to assist these learners.” Inspector 1 similarly reported shortages in hearing aids, teaching materials, and relevant support devices.

These constraints are not isolated challenges but systemic barriers that significantly undermine schools’ ability to deliver inclusive education effectively. The widespread nature of resource limitations suggests that inclusive education implementation in Eswatini remains materially under-supported.

Teacher capacity as a key constraint

Preparedness emerged as a critical factor influencing the success of inclusive education. Most participants reported that teachers lack sufficient professional training in sign language, inclusive pedagogy, and hearing impairment support.

Inspector 1 stated that “teachers broadly do not know sign language and there are no interpreters in schools.” Principal 4 similarly admitted that “our teachers, including me as the principal are not trained to handle learners with HI.” Teacher 4 reinforced this by acknowledging, “We as teachers are not trained to handle learners with hearing impairment.”

This widespread lack of preparedness significantly restricts teachers’ ability to provide meaningful educational support. Respondents consistently recommended mandatory sign language training, practical inclusive education modules, continuous professional development, and leadership training. These findings position teacher capacity as one of the most decisive determinants of inclusive education quality.

Communication barriers as functional exclusion

Communication challenges emerged as one of the most direct barriers to inclusion, often transforming physical placement into functional exclusion.

Inspector 1 noted that “profound deaf learners do not succeed in mainstream inclusive classrooms because there are no interpreters and teachers do not know sign language.” Principal 5 identified communication as a major challenge, particularly regarding sign language use. Teacher 7 similarly explained that “the learning process is still difficult” because of communication limitations.

Without effective communication systems, hearing-impaired learners often struggle to access instruction, participate in discussions, and develop socially within mainstream classrooms. This suggests that communication barriers represent a core exclusionary mechanism within otherwise inclusive settings.

Policy–Practice Gap

Although South Africa has developed multiple inclusive education policies and legal frameworks, participants consistently described weak implementation, poor dissemination, and limited enforcement.

Principal 1 admitted unfamiliarity with inclusive education policies, while Teacher 1 remarked that “policies exist in the District Office offices gathering dust there.” Teacher 3 described inclusive education policy as “a white elephant.” Inspector 1 further acknowledged implementation challenges due to limited institutional support.

These findings reveal a substantial disconnect between policy design and school-level practice. While policies may align with international standards, their practical influence remains limited, reflecting broader institutional implementation weaknesses.

Curriculum and Assessment constraints

Rigid, examination-oriented curricula were widely identified as barriers to inclusive education. Participants consistently criticized the curriculum for prioritizing standardized performance over differentiated learning.

Principal 2 noted that “the syllabus is not learning oriented but exam oriented,” while Teacher 5 emphasized that exam-focused teaching makes learning difficult for hearing-impaired learners. Teacher 6 also highlighted rigid testing structures that fail to accommodate diverse learning needs.

This inflexibility restricts the adaptation of teaching methods and assessments necessary for equitable participation. These findings suggest that meaningful inclusion requires curriculum reform that prioritizes accessibility, flexibility, and learner diversity.

Systemic Nature of Barriers

The challenges identified throughout the data are deeply interconnected. Resource shortages, inadequate teacher training, communication difficulties, rigid curricula, weak monitoring, and policy implementation failures reinforce one another, creating systemic barriers to inclusive education.

For example, insufficient teacher training exacerbates communication barriers; resource shortages undermine curriculum adaptation; weak monitoring allows policy-practice gaps to persist. These overlapping constraints indicate that barriers to inclusion cannot be addressed in isolation.

Rather, the findings suggest that inclusive education in South Africa is constrained by a broader systemic environment in which structural weaknesses reinforce educational inequities. Addressing one challenge without broader systemic reform may yield limited progress.

Overall, the data reveals that while there is strong conceptual support for inclusive education, practical realization remains hindered by complex, interconnected institutional barriers. Effective reform will therefore require comprehensive, multi-level interventions that address policy implementation, educator capacity, resource allocation, curriculum reform, and accountability systems simultaneously.

5. Discussion

Drawing on the Education Sector Analysis Report (2021), these deficits reflect broader issues of funding prioritization and policy implementation capacity. Importantly, the absence of sign language interpreters and specialized support highlights a mismatch between **policy ambition and infrastructural readiness**. This reinforces UNESCO’s (2015; 2000) position that inclusive education requires sustained investment and system-wide support. Without this, inclusion remains symbolic rather than substantive. This supports Bingham (2023), who argue that standardized systems inherently constrain inclusive pedagogies. The data suggests

that teachers' limited adaptation is not solely due to lack of willingness or awareness, but rather **structural constraint**, where competing demands (e.g., syllabus completion) override inclusive intentions. One of the key insights emerging from this research is the persistent mismatch between policy discourse and policy action within South Africa's inclusive education system.

One of the key insights emerging from this research is the persistent mismatch between policy discourse and policy action within Eswatini's inclusive education system. Although the state has made notable progress in developing a comprehensive policy framework aligned with international instruments such as the UNCRPD (2006) and SDG 4, the empirical findings suggest that these commitments are not adequately translated into everyday school practices. This gap is particularly striking given the existence of key national instruments, the Persons with Disabilities Bill, and the National Disability Plan of Action, all of which collectively articulate a strong commitment to inclusive education and equal participation of learners with disabilities.

The Special Education Policy Statement, for instance, provides a clear framework for inclusion by emphasising curriculum adaptation, specialised teacher training, and the establishment of resource centres as mechanisms to support access and participation in mainstream schools. Similarly, broader legislative and strategic frameworks reinforce South Africa's alignment with international standards, while also reflecting national priorities articulated in the National Development Strategy (1997–

2022) and Vision 2022, which foreground equity, human rights, and the inclusion of vulnerable populations in national development.

6. Conclusion

This paper began with the introduction to the study, and it was followed by a brief literature review and theoretical framework. The research methodology was outlined. This paper presented and analyzed the findings of the study on the right to access inclusive education for learners with hearing impairment in primary schools in South Africa. This paper also outlined key themes emerging from the data, including resource constraints, communication barriers, pedagogical practices, and policy–practice gaps. These themes highlighted the multifaceted challenges affecting both access and participation in inclusive educational settings.

The paper further advanced a discussion and interpretation of these findings, linking them to the study's research questions and existing literature. A rights-based analysis was employed to examine how these themes impact the realization of inclusive education, drawing on the principles of availability, accessibility, acceptability, and adaptability. The analysis demonstrated that while policy frameworks supporting inclusion exist, their implementation remains inconsistent and constrained by systemic, institutional, and pedagogical factors. The findings indicate that the right to access inclusive education for learners with hearing impairment is only partially realized, as barriers to meaningful participation persist despite formal inclusion efforts.

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