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## Envisaged Learning Environments for Learners with Visual Impairments in Lesotho Rural Schools Using Asset-Based Approaches

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### ABSTRACT

Previous literature has highlighted the persistent global challenge of providing quality education in conducive settings for learners with visual impairments (LVIs), particularly in rural schools. This study aims to explore viable resources that can be leveraged to create an enabling learning environment for LVIs within rural primary school contexts. Employing a qualitative research approach, the study engaged 12 teachers from rural mainstream primary schools in Lesotho. Data were gathered through focus group discussions with a purposively selected sample of teachers and analyzed thematically. The findings underscored the perception among participants that rural schools possess a range of assets, both visible and concealed, that effectively cater to the special educational needs of LVIs. However, a notable limitation surfaced regarding the teachers' knowledge about utilizing these existing resources optimally. Consequently, this highlighted a crucial need for enhanced collaboration, involvement of relevant stakeholders, and augmentation of academic resources. The effective utilization of these assets emerges as a pivotal factor requiring improved management to cultivate a more conducive learning environment for LVIs in the future.

### INTRODUCTION

The paradigm shifts in delivering quality basic education have sparked significant changes in the educational landscape of countries committed to inclusive education. The inclusion of learners with visual impairments (LVIs) has become a contentious topic and a growing concern across nations, including Lesotho. Addressing the dynamics of inclusive education necessitates considering the inclusion of LVIs in conducive learning environments as a crucial and adaptable strategy to overcome their educational hurdles. However, research has highlighted that effectively integrating LVIs into enabling environments, particularly in rural contexts, has not only significantly transformed their educational standards (Shahen, 2021) but has also been an enduring global challenge. This challenge is substantiated by various authoritative documents such as the World Declaration on Education for All,

UNESCO's reports, and the Conventions of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN, 2006). These documents emphasize the vital importance of including every learner, regardless of disability, socioeconomic background, or cultural origins, as a fundamental human right essential for their success in mainstream society (ALSadoon, 2017). Therefore, ensuring the success of including LVIs necessitates the delivery of quality education in enabling environments (Haidari et al., 2020).

According to Oliveira et al., (2021), an enabling learning environment facilitates tailored interactions with learning materials, aligning with learners' specific objectives. For learners with visual impairment (LVIs), these environments cater to their unique educational needs, fostering effective learning and development. Within the educational sphere, the creation of such enabling environments for LVIs holds significance due to the availability of diverse learning materials that cater to their varied

needs, ultimately enhancing their motivation and success (Molekoa et al., 2023).

However, studies suggest that establishing enabling learning environments for LVIs in rural school settings is intricate and fluid, contingent upon their diverse educational requirements (du Plessis & Mestry, 2019; Mutlu & Yıldırım, 2019). For instance, du Plessis and Mestry (2019) argue that it's within these enabling environments that comprehensive education for all learners becomes achievable (Bullard et al., 2019; Cassum & Gul, 2016). In alignment with this perspective, Isomöttönen et al (2019) assert that enabling learning environments play a pivotal role in encouraging adaptability and fostering creativity among all learners, particularly those historically marginalized or considered vulnerable.

The study delves into the significance of establishing an enabling learning environment to address the varied educational needs of learners with visual impairments (LVIs). It specifically focuses on the identification and utilization of existing assets to achieve this goal.

The provision of quality education for learners with visual impairments (LVIs) in rural mainstream primary schools in Lesotho traces back to the government's adoption of Universal Primary Education (UPE) and Education for All (EFA) policies in 1990. The government's commitment intensified in 2000, emphasizing inclusive education for all learners, regardless of disability, to integrate them into a supportive mainstream society (Beyene et al., 2020; Mboshi, 2018). Despite these interventions, the evolution of inclusive educational policies aimed at ensuring access to education for all has faced challenges in implementation and proper teacher training, particularly in rural contexts (Tieken and Montgomery, 2021).

Consequently, the study aligns with the guiding principles of inclusive policy, striving to foster acceptance among learners with diverse educational needs (Beyene et al., 2023; Mónico et al., 2020). However, Cretu and Morandau, 2020) indicated that implementation and inadequate teacher training have hindered the fulfillment of this principle, leading to a lack of resources and a shortfall in accommodating the diverse needs of LVIs (Ned, 2022).

Despite increased enrollment of LVIs in rural primary schools in Lesotho, the paucity of resources

within their learning environment remains a significant barrier to their education (Shikalepo, 2020). Surprisingly, research focusing on Lesotho predominantly scrutinizes factors affecting the inclusion of LVIs rather than exploring and imagining viable solutions to create enabling learning environments for them (Ralejoe, 2021; Tseeke, 2021).

This study aims to address this knowledge gap by contributing to the creation of enabling learning environments for LVIs. It emphasizes the crucial role of rural mainstream schools in Lesotho as safe spaces for LVIs and underscores the pivotal contribution teachers can make in transforming these environments to better accommodate the needs of learners with visual impairments (Dunst et al., 2018).

## **METHODS**

The study adopted a qualitative research approach employing an arts-based research design. Researchers chose this method to glean rich (Collins & Stockton, 2018), experiential insights from participants regarding their endeavors to establish enabling learning environments for individuals with visual impairments (LVIs) within their natural settings (Creswell, 2016).

### **Study Site**

This research study was conducted in two specifically chosen rural primary schools situated in Lesotho's Berea district. These schools were selected purposefully due to their inclusive approach, offering mainstream education to all learners, including those with visual impairments.

### **Participants' Selection**

In this study, participants were specifically chosen based on their roles as educators and their substantial teaching experience of three or more years within rural schools that enrolled all learners, including those with visual impairments. The selection criteria aimed to gather comprehensive and detailed data (Cresswell, 2015). Six teachers from each of the selected rural primary schools in Lesotho were included, totaling twelve (12) teachers who volunteered to participate, all from schools accommodating LVIs.

### **Methods of Data Generation**

This study draws from prior research conducted in 2020, which aimed to enhance the well-being of LVIs in rural Lesotho primary

schools. It focuses on the initial phase's findings derived from focus group discussions to address the research question: How can asset-based approaches contribute to establishing enabling learning environments for LVIs in rural primary schools? The choice of focus group discussions as a data-generation method was driven by their unique capacity to facilitate idea sharing, collective discussion, and exploration of participants' feelings, thoughts, and skills concerning the creation of such environments for LVIs (Fouche & Delport, 2016).

During these discussions, participants engaged in conversations about utilizing existing assets, the extent to which these resources were utilized, and strategies to enhance these assets for creating enabling learning environments for LVIs in rural primary schools in Lesotho. Each session lasted 1 hour and 30 minutes per school. The researchers employed probing techniques to delve deeper into participants' perspectives, aiming to extract comprehensive and insightful information (Yin, 2017). This approach allowed participants to reflect on their schools' assets and how these resources could be leveraged to create an environment conducive to the learning needs of LVIs (Wilson et al., 2020).

#### **Data Analysis Procedures**

Thematic conventional analysis, following (Braun & Clarke, 2021) served as the method to analyze the data. All textual data—whether spoken, written, or discussed—generated from participants' responses were transcribed verbatim (Braun & Clarke, 2021), whereas detailed transcriptions aimed to faithfully represent the original content provided by the participants (Liebenberg et al., 2020). The researchers adhered to Braun and Clarke's (2021) procedural steps in conducting the analysis: becoming familiar with the data, identifying significant codes (employing color codes to group related codes), deriving meanings, clustering themes, developing a comprehensive description, constructing a fundamental structure, and validating this structure by cross-referencing the data (Liebenberg et al., 2020). The codes and themes derived from the focus group discussions were meticulously reviewed through iterative readings to ensure clarity and coherence, following the iterative reading approach advocated by (Ningi, 2022).

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Teachers' Understanding of the Use of Asset-Based Approaches**

During the focus group discussions, participants shared insights regarding the use of assets in creating an enabling learning environment for LVIs. Their collective understanding highlighted assets as encompassing “everything within rural schools that facilitates teaching and learning”. The responses indicated a shared perception among participants that assets encompassed all resources available within the school environment, seen as instrumental in facilitating teaching and learning processes, particularly for LVIs. Their statements conveyed a clear association between the utilization of assets and positive outcomes in fostering an enabling learning environment for LVIs. For instance, Teacher C from School B expressed, “Assets are everything that aids teaching within our school”, emphasizing their role in supporting effective teaching.

Similarly, Teacher M from School A defined assets as “school belongings”, while Teacher S expanded the scope to include resources both within and outside the school premises, illustrating a broader understanding of assets. Another teacher, Teacher K from School B, described assets as resources that streamline teaching and learning processes, citing classroom materials as examples.

The participants' collective understanding highlighted the critical role of assets or resources in enabling teaching and learning processes. Their perspective emphasized the significance of these resources in overcoming potential barriers that could impede the creation of a safe learning environment for LVIs (Archibald et al, 2024; Laranga et al., 2020).

Viewed from an asset-based perspective, the participants' comprehension of rural school assets emerged as pivotal in enhancing their teaching and learning practices while acknowledging their influence in creating an enabling learning environment for their students (Mónico et al., 2020; Ritterbusch et al., 2020). These findings align with Landsberg's (2019) emphasis on the pivotal role of effectively utilizing assets within the teaching and learning environment.

### **The Application of Asset-Based Approaches in Enabling the Learning Environments for LVIs**

The participants' responses underscore the utilization of asset-based approaches to augment their knowledge and teaching competencies in establishing an enabling learning environment for LVIs. Their responses are delineated as sub-themes below:

#### **Improved Collaboration**

The discussion here reflects the participants' astute recognition of collaboration as a pivotal element in enhancing their teaching prowess. Teacher L from School A aptly articulated, "Definitely! Working together is crucial for improving our teachings". Echoing this sentiment, Teacher M, also from School A, emphasized the significance of collective effort, stating, "We need each other; everyone is important in every aspect of life". Similarly, Teacher S from School B highlighted the importance of teamwork among teachers, suggesting, "We need to work as a team, leveraging each other's specialized knowledge to better support these learners".

Many participants perceive collaboration as pivotal to their development, especially in providing support to LVIs within rural schools. These insights align with (Bornman et al., (2021) emphasizing the adaptability of LVIs to academic life due to the collaborative support received within their school environments. For the participants, collaborative assistance emerges as a crucial factor in aiding LVIs to surmount challenges (Laranga et al., 2020; Manwedi-Thulo et al., 2023). (Le et al., 2018) further support this notion, emphasizing the ease of adjustment and adaptation for LVIs owing to the collaborative support within their academic settings.

#### **Involving Existing Agents**

Most participating teachers reached a consensus regarding the importance of engaging existing agents to support LVIs and fortify their learning environments. Teacher T from school B emphasized the necessity for their school to strengthen relationships with existing agencies, particularly special education teachers, highlighting the potential for holistic support for all learners through enhanced collaboration among school members. The unanimous agreement among all participants underscored the crucial role of special education teachers within their cohort. These specialists were deemed capable of effectively

accommodating the diverse educational needs of LVIs within daily school activities. Teacher M from School A reiterated this sentiment, highlighting the invaluable contribution of trained specialist teachers in catering to LVIs' educational needs.

The participants' responses underscore the importance of recognizing and harnessing strengths within their community, echoing the findings of Volmer and Thompson (2023) which identified these resources as often overlooked or undervalued. Additionally, the participants recognized teachers as catalysts for change (Dalkilic & Vadeboncoeur, 2016), and instrumental in shaping an enabling learning environment for LVIs. Furthermore, raising awareness about visual disabilities among local communities emerged as another avenue to foster an enabling learning environment for affected learners. Participants emphasized the significance of disseminating information, considering it a means of fostering new knowledge and sharing ideas beneficial for meeting the needs of LVIs within rural school environments. Teacher M from School B stressed the importance of awareness from top leadership to local community members, advocating for acknowledgment and consideration of visual impairments. Similarly, Teacher K from School A highlighted the necessity of including discussions about visual impairments in various gatherings, ranging from parent meetings to political events. Teacher L from school B even suggested the possibility of scheduling programs on national television to educate the wider public about visual disabilities.

The responses underscored the pivotal role of raising awareness about visual impairments in fostering an inclusive and accepting learning environment for LVIs. This awareness was seen as instrumental in diverse academic development, facilitating the sharing of information, ideas, and fostering the creation of new knowledge within rural school contexts.

This notion aligns with (Meyers & Pitikoe, 2021) advocating for the necessity of educating teachers and school authorities to effectively support LVIs. The participants' responses vividly depict the multifaceted involvement of existing agents, emphasizing the importance of fostering strong relationships with these agents and promoting awareness about visual impairments. The subsequent section delves into the strategies aimed

at enhancing academic resources for LVIs, seeking to address and improve their specific learning needs.

### **Enhancement of Academic Resources**

The participants' discussions centered on discerning the significance of academic resources. Their collective insights emphasized the pivotal role of these resources in shaping the teaching and learning experiences of LVIs, establishing a foundational basis for an enabling learning environment. However, they expressed apprehension regarding the inadequate management of these resources, noting fragmented utilization practices. This led the participants to highlight the urgent need for improvement in resource management practices. Specifically, the participants pointed out that their school classrooms were inaccessible, stressing the necessity for enhancing their accessibility to better accommodate LVIs.

According to teacher M from school A: Most of our school classrooms lack accessibility, particularly in terms of oversized windows. These windows allow excessive light, creating obstacles for learners with visual impairments, hindering their ability to see clearly and disrupting their learning. To address this issue, our school needs to consider purchasing curtains to minimize the incoming light and create a more conducive environment for these learners.

*Teachers C from School B added:*

Yes, or we may even use cardboard to blind these big windows. The study revealed that participants emphasized the urgent need to enhance school classroom facilities as essential resources to create accessibility and enablement for LVIs. A study conducted by Ishimwe et al. (2020) in Rwanda highlighted the lack of facilities for visually impaired students in schools, while Rasheed et al. (2020) reported poor infrastructural support in rural South African school settings. These scholars argue that rural schools face numerous challenges that hinder the achievement of quality education.

This aligns with the current study's findings, indicating that the inaccessibility of school classrooms, particularly within Lesotho's rural school context, poses constraints on the learning experiences of LVIs in these institutions. Consequently, the participants advocated for the full implementation of existing and available resources

to transform the learning environment, facilitating easy access to education for all learners.

In addition to teaching resources and classroom space, the participants discussed crucial academic activities essential for enabling the utilization of existing assets within rural schools. They emphasized the significance of learner debates and engagement in visual disability campaigns. According to the study's findings, these activities are instrumental in enriching teaching and learning experiences, fostering an environment where LVIs can express their ideas and engage in collaborative learning opportunities.

*Teacher K from school A explained:*

Having school debates and participation in a visual disability campaign, I think this arrangement will impact positively and promote more knowledge on visual impairment in our community. The other participant Teacher L from school A has this to say: Yes, having a debate will assist learners to learn and interact with others, as well as encourage them to learn from one another.

*Teacher S from school B also added:*

Yeah, the debate where learners will have a chance to discuss visual impairment, will also develop their knowledge and skills. The participants highlighted the potential positive impact of organizing school debates and participating in a visual disability campaign, foreseeing these initiatives as beneficial for knowledge dissemination within their community. They emphasized the benefits of debates, noting that they enable learners to interact, fostering an environment where mutual learning occurs among peers. Teacher S from school B echoed these sentiments, affirming that debates centered on discussing visual impairment would not only enhance learners' knowledge but also contribute to their skill development.

Several participants highlighted the positive learning experience they anticipate from engaging in a visual disability campaign. They emphasized that such participation would offer them exposure to interact with individuals directly impacted by visual disabilities, providing a valuable real-world encounter.

*Teacher K from school A indicated:*

Enabling learners to engage in issues related to visual impairment, such as participating in visual disability campaigns, provides them with an

opportunity to interact not only with fellow impaired learners from different schools but also with individuals well-versed in the field of visual disabilities.

The study underscores the essential role of academic activities in enabling the utilization of existing resources to create an inclusive learning environment for LVIs. These activities, as identified by the participants, serve as platforms for idea-sharing among all learners, including those with visual impairments, fostering interaction and mutual support. Furthermore, these findings reflect the sentiments of some teachers regarding the inaccessibility of learning spaces for LVIs. However, the identification of areas for improvement in academic activities has empowered them to address these challenges, rendering the learning environment more encouraging.

Aligned with the participants' sentiments, these findings highlight the participants' ability to recognize the necessity of a broad spectrum of teaching and learning resources, acknowledging their crucial roles in addressing fragmented resource utilization. This aligns with Archibald's et al, (2024) study which emphasizes individuals' unique skills, capacities, and contributions within the community. In the context of this study, these resources encompass academic activities, empowering LVIs to actively engage in interactions, idea-sharing, and participation in campaigns and debates related to visual disabilities. This engagement, in turn, nurtures their social interaction, skill development, and knowledge acquisition, and meets their specific educational needs (Omede, 2015; Mboshi, 2018).

The findings align with studies (Murray-Orr & Mitton, 2023) suggesting that individuals possess inherent, albeit concealed, positive resources crucial for their growth and success. This idea resonates with Kretzmann & Mcknight, (1993) perspective (in Dunst et al., 2018), emphasizing individuals' natural inclination and capacity to proactively devise solutions to their challenges.

## **CONCLUSION**

The researchers emphasize that enabling learning environments prioritize the equitable and accessible education of all learners, including those with visual impairments, ensuring the availability of necessary resources crucial for their learning and

development. This study underscores the indispensability of resourceful assets in the successful provision of education to LVIs, highlighting the essentiality of effectively utilizing these assets to promote their learning. However, the study identifies constraints in asset utilization, emphasizing the need for rural schools and communities to take diverse measures to foster an enabling learning environment for LVIs.

The inclusion of LVIs in rural primary schools in Lesotho underscores the importance of harnessing and mobilizing local assets to create conducive learning environments for these learners. Drawing from the study's findings, it's apparent that participants possess an understanding of how to create an enabling learning environment for LVIs, despite facing limitations in asset utilization. The study emphasizes the significance of comprehending rural school assets as pivotal for enhancing the learning environment for LVIs. This involves identifying a comprehensive inventory of resources, skills, talents, capacities, and strengths within their school community.

From these findings, several recommendations emerge to envisage and facilitate the effective use of assets within Lesotho's rural learning ecosystem, fostering the creation of conducive learning environments for LVIs:

1. Recognition and understanding of the unique needs of individuals, wherein teachers and LVIs are perceived as active agents rather than passive recipients, necessitating their inclusion in decisions that concern them.
2. Encouragement of increased academic activities by advocating regular gatherings for LVIs to interact with other learners, emphasizing the importance of this approach to all education stakeholders. This can be achieved through visual impairment campaigns, fostering enhanced communication among learners, and supporting each other socially, emotionally, physically, and academically.
3. Promotion of visual disability campaigns within rural schools and communities to encourage inclusivity, fostering a sense of belonging and acceptance among all individuals

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