

Reviewing Teachers' Preparedness to Adopt and Implement the Lesotho Inclusive Education Policy 2018 in Lesotho Schools

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ABSTRACT

The launch of the Lesotho Inclusive Education Policy (LIEP) in 2018 by the Ministry of Education and Training assured the participation of learners with special educational needs (LSEN) in the education system. The policy requires teachers to be the drivers of educational initiatives within the school setting to execute the implementation of the policy and assumes that teachers' use of constructivism-based practices would influence them to implement inclusive education. Informed by a critical paradigm and situated within qualitative research, this paper sought to assess teachers' preparedness to adopt and implement the LIEP and how they have revised their practices to align with the policy aspirations. Data were generated through individual, semi-structured interviews with a purposively selected group of eight primary school teachers. The data were analysed through thematic analysis. The findings reveal that teachers are unaware of the LIEP; they have not been sensitised about or trained on how the policy affects their educational practices. Additionally, teaching and learning resources to support diverse learners remain an obstacle to the full implementation of the policy. It is recommended that the Ministry of Education and Training facilitate teacher training and improve the infrastructure of schools to make them physically accessible. It is also recommended that a national study on reviewing teachers' preparedness to adopt and implement the Lesotho Inclusive Education Policy 2018 in Lesotho Schools is required to inform implementation of the Lesotho Inclusive Education Policy (LIEP) 2018 in mainstream schools.

Keywords: Inclusive education, learners with special educational needs (LSEN), policy, teachers.

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I. INTRODUCTION

This paper is premised on the assumption that a clear inclusive education policy (IEP) and practice could guide teachers on how to accommodate learner diversity in mainstream schools (Khumalo, 2018). Studies have shown that inclusive education policies and practices promote the inclusivity of all learners. Riveros and Viczko (2016), for example, contend that policy adoption and practices result in transformations and adaptations of educational practices that overcome some existing limitations. According to a UNESCO (2021) report, inclusive education policies foster inclusive and tolerant communities, which benefit both students with and without disabilities as well as society as a whole. The report further indicates that inclusive education promotes quality and equitable education for all, including learners marginalised by learning or social needs.

Although the Lesotho Constitution does not consider education human right, it calls for the development of policies that could support that right (The Lesotho Government Gazette, 1993). According to Article 28 of the Constitution, the Lesotho government must work to ensure

that education is accessible to everyone and must adopt policies to ensure that section (a) education centres on the complete development of the human personality and sense of dignity while promoting reverence for rudimentary privileges and human rights. Article 28, section (b) further states that basic education is mandatory and accessible to everyone. The Child Protection and Welfare Act of 2011 is one example of legislation carrying out this constitutional obligation. It declares basic education a human right, validating claims for inclusive education (The Lesotho Government Gazette, 2011). The Education Sector Strategic Plan (ESSP) 2016–2026 provides the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) with guidelines and targets for attaining Inclusive Education (IE) (Ministry of Education and Training, 2016).

One of the ESSP aims was achieved when the MOET unveiled the Lesotho Inclusive Education Policy in 2018. In addition to supporting the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which includes SDG 4: "Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all", and SDG 10: "Reduce inequality within and among countries," the policy is in line with Education for All. As a result, Lesotho has emerged as

one of the countries that aspire to give all children, including those with disabilities, equal access to education (Morai, 2021). However, efficient application of the 2018 Lesotho Inclusive Education Policy requires the Ministry of Education and Training to induct teachers into the policy.

A. Significance of the Paper

The Lesotho government, through the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET), launched the Lesotho Inclusive Education Policy 2018. The Ministry of Education and Training (2018) states that teachers are the ones who spearhead educational initiatives in the classroom. The effectiveness of the inclusive education programme depends on the knowledge and disposition of the teachers, which directly affect their daily teaching and learning. They should be equipped with the necessary skills to effectively carry out their mandate (MOET, 2018). The article intends to persuade the MOET to consider and evaluate the progress it has made in implementing the Lesotho Inclusive Education Policy (IEP) into practice, as outlined in the Ministry of Education and Training (2018). It could also prompt the Ministry to facilitate teacher-training programmes, as some learners with special educational needs are not fully participative in inclusive schools. In addition, teachers, as important elements in bringing about change, will reflect on their daily practices and distinguish the threats they experience in accommodating learner diversity in their classes. Thus, the study could have a significant impact on MOET's ability to successfully implement the Inclusive Education Policy and accomplish the fourth and tenth Sustainable Development Goals (SDG).

II. REVIEW OF THE RELATED LITERATURE

A. Implementation of Lesotho's Inclusive Education Policy 2018

The Lesotho government is part of international legal obligations to ensure access to quality, relevant, and accessible inclusive education for LSEN. This is by various treaties signed by Lesotho, including the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) (United Nations General Assembly, 2006). Since the policy's inception, the government, through the Ministry of Education and Training, has struggled to meet the standards of the Lesotho Inclusive Education Policy 2018. According to Lumina and Hodgson (2023), the Ministry of Education and Training's Special Education Unit is considerably understaffed and under-resourced to accomplish the critical functions and duties of the office. The continued delay in adopting an implementation framework for the Inclusive Education Policy further frustrates the Special Education Unit's ability to implement the policy. The reality faced by principals, teachers, and learners at the school level is far removed from Lesotho's legal and policy commitments. The study further indicates that key stakeholders such as government officials, school staff, and parents are ill-informed about disability rights and inclusive education and sometimes consider children with disabilities uneducable. Children with disabilities are kept at home, bullied, or otherwise maligned by staff and other learners when they attend regular schools (Lumina & Hodgson, 2023).

Besides that, according to Comstat (2021), society regards

learners with unique needs and difficulties as incapable of being valuable and productive members of society. As a result, people with disabilities hide in their homes to avoid being discriminated against or treated differently. The MOET has not budgeted enough to ensure that the field of special education is equipped with the right resources and suitably qualified educators (Morena & Nkoane, 2021). The possibility for learners with special education needs to get a quality education is denied to them due to a shortage of teachers who specialise in special education. Again, the country's infrastructure is poor and does not make schooling easy for learners in rural places where they have to travel long distances to get to school facilities (Comstat, 2021).

B. Teacher Training for Lesotho Inclusive Education Policy (LIEP) 2018

Teacher training programs greatly influence the successful implementation and achievement of newly designed inclusive education policies in 21st century society. For instance, according to Dange and Siddaraju (2020), teacher training programs aim to develop well-equipped teachers who can promote relevant and accessible inclusive education, which aims at producing quality learners. Similarly, inclusive education teacher training equips teachers with the skills and information needed to promote fair and high-quality education (Arnaiz-Sánchez et al., 2023). Again, according to a study conducted by Triviño-Amigo et al. (2022), teachers surveyed believe that the initial training programmes were sufficient for them to deal with the diversity of their learners and that continuous induction courses could assist in improving inclusive education. However, empowerment should be emphasised in teacher education along with practical and technical skills. In addition to gaining particular skills training, instructors in inclusive schools must be professionals at fostering inclusive practice by working with school staff and a multidisciplinary team ((Nseibo et al, 2022).

In Lesotho, teacher skill training and professional development in inclusive education are still severely lacking, resulting in gaps in effective adaptation and modification of the teaching and learning environment for learners with disabilities. Teachers cannot to provide the kind of support and accommodation that children with disabilities may demand unless they receive sufficient pre-service and in-service training on inclusive education (Lumina & Hodgson, 2023). Academically, general education or special education are the two areas of specialisation for Lesotho teachers, with general education constituting the majority. As a result, administrators lacking the ability to support learners with special needs and disabilities run and lead schools. Maintaining each learner's specific educational needs remains a constraint without a good basis for what inclusive education involves and requires (Morai, 2021).

C. Importance of Supportive Resources in Inclusive Schools

In general, supportive materials are important in the teaching and learning process. Khumalo and Khanare (2021) claim that by using braille pedagogies as auxiliary materials, visually impaired students could be able to access the integrated curriculum and advance their knowledge and abilities. National Braille Week (2020) confirms that learning

braille enables visually impaired students to use the same letters, numbers, and punctuation as blind or low-vision students. The learning materials should also equip students with the knowledge, skills, and capacities they need to succeed and support institutions, as well as the capacity to think critically and solve problems (Saad & Sankaran, 2020). According to Saad and Sankaran (2020), a school's essential objectives, namely, teaching and learning to attain good performance, could be seriously hampered without proper teaching and learning resources, regardless of how well-staffed the institution is.

As they improve child-centred teaching and learning practices through learner involvement, teaching, and learning materials, according to Machaba (2013), could be crucial for the self-discovery of both instructors and learners. Once again, using instructional materials encourages students to succeed academically. According to Ashiono et al. (2018), using ICT to deliver lessons increases learner engagement and boosts academic retention. Lyimo et al. (2017) further claim that instructional resources enhance lesson plans, assist teachers in better addressing the needs of different learners, and improve teaching, all of which positively impact students' and schools' performance. Pohjolainen et al. (2018) concluded in their study on using computers in the classroom that both ICT tools and braille in the classroom have good effects on learning. In addition to assisting students with their homework and schoolwork, computers and laptops could impact on how well students comprehend and study important subjects like mathematics (Hegedus & Moreno-Armella, 2020).

Consequently, studies have shown that inadequate and supportive resources remain challenging in Lesotho. For instance, Lumina and Hodgson (2023) highlight that limited learning materials are provided to schools and that the current curriculum has not been fully adapted to ensure accessibility for learners with disabilities. These learners tend to repeat grades more than those without disabilities do. Infrastructure at special and inclusive schools is often inadequate, dilapidated and unsafe to use.

III. METHODOLOGY

The study has adopted social constructionist theory as a lens to interpret the data. The framework helps the researcher understand teachers' perceptions of a phenomenon within their institution. Additionally, teachers help students find their learning by facilitating, providing vital information, and organising activities (Liu & Guo, 2010). Hulin and Drake (2011, p. 395) assert, "Inclusive education necessitates a constructivist approach to teaching and learning." This fundamental shift demands an open critique of positivist concepts, practices, and frameworks. This argument contends that the mind actively develops information. The human mind is not passive but creates knowledge and ideas (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). In other words, humans do not develop their interpretations in a vacuum but rather in relation to the environment in which they are actively engaged. Constructivists believe that individuals seek comprehension of their surroundings by inventing subjective interpretations for their experiences directed at specific objects or things (Creswell, 2003). Teachers assist students by planning

activities, providing pertinent information, and facilitating.

Constructivists employ participant perspectives on the event being studied to construct the meaning of the situation, which is frequently forged via debates or interactions with others. According to Hattie (2008), cooperative learning and peer tutoring comprise some of the most valuable practices for learners in a constructivist, inclusive education environment. Peer tutoring and cooperative learning empower learners to participate in social interaction while actively studying in a real-world setting. Consequently, the researchers used a social constructivist approach to evaluate teachers' readiness to accept and execute the Ministry of Education and Training Inclusive Education Policy 2018 in their inclusive settings in the Berea district.

Furthermore, the researchers used a qualitative research approach and a phenomenological case study design. This case study highlighted one elementary school in Lesotho, located among low-income foothill settlements (Yin, 2017). Eight educators were interviewed through semi-structured interviews for information on the Inclusive Education Policy 2018. The method proved suitable for the study since it concentrated on how teachers felt about their readiness to embrace and put into practice the 2018 Inclusive Education Policy of the Ministry of Education and Training in Lesotho schools.

A. Participants

Eight primary school teachers were purposively and conveniently selected in Berea district, which was the site of the study. According to Palinkas *et al.* (2015), purposive sampling is a technique for identifying and choosing examples that would efficiently use limited research. The method selects respondents that are most likely to yield appropriate and useful information" (Kelly, 2010, p. 317). Therefore, the participants were prepared and opened to participating in the research (Creswell, 2012).

B. Data Analysis

The data on reviewing teachers' readiness to accept and execute the Lesotho Inclusive Education Policy 2018 in Lesotho schools were evaluated using a qualitative content analysis tool (Newcomer *et al.*, 2015). Tools for qualitative content analysis were used to analyse the material acquired. According to Zhang and Wildemuth (2009), analytical units are the central texts that serve as the descriptions for the themes that were found. To guarantee validity and procedural consistency, every text was coded. Four themes were created by organising and categorising the coded data. The researchers checked the transcripts to the interview tapes and submitted them to participants for member-check and further comments or clarifications, and they provided feedback (Merriam & Tidsell, 2016).

C. Ethical Considerations

The researchers approached the Ministry of Education and Training office at Teyateyaneng in Berea to request permission to undertake the study. After that, it was pledged to teachers and principals - the main participants - that their experiences and viewpoints would be handled confidently during interviews. Throughout the actual interview, the researchers used the opportunity to clarify outstanding issues concerning the study's purpose and related research matters

such as the research procedure, potential risks associated with the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and participants' right to withdraw from the study at any time if they felt uncomfortable (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Sotuku & Duku, 2015). It was also highlighted that using anonymous identities protect participants' confidentiality (Hays & Singh, 2012). All participants verbally and in writing consented to participate in the study and be audio-recorded.

IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The study reviews teachers' preparedness to adopt and implement the Lesotho Inclusive Education Policy 2018 in Lesotho schools. Generally, the data collected from the participants led to the conclusion that they were unaware of this policy and, as a result, were not ready to implement the LIEP. Besides that, school buildings remain inaccessible. In addition, teaching and learning resources to support diverse learners remain an obstacle to the full implementation of the policy. Lastly, learners with disabilities are assessed without proper adaptive approaches. Teachers' responses were individually analysed as they were interviewed individually. Therefore, the results have yielded four themes, which are discussed below. The demographic characteristics of the participants are presented in Table I.

TABLE I: DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF THE PARTICIPANTS

ID	Gender	Age	Highest qual.	Teaching subject	Teaching experience (in years)
P1	Male	29	B.ED	Science and technology	2
P2	Female	32	Diploma	Mathematics	7
P3	Female	28	B.ED HONS	English	5
P4	Female	27	B.ED	Sesotho	3
P5	Male	35	B.ED	Social sciences	6
P6	Male	46	M.ED	Life skills	12
P7	Female	50	M.ED	Mathematics	15
P8	Male	40	Diploma	English	10

Note. B.ED – Bachelor of Education.

A. Teacher Training for Lesotho Inclusive Education Policy (LIEP) 2018

The LIEP strives to educate teachers on effective teaching methods that could meet the varied requirements of learners in welcoming environments. However, according to the findings, one of the eight teachers interviewed on the nature of training given on LIEP 2018 highlighted that:

"... I did not receive any orientation on the policy except after seeing it being launched by the Minister of Education and Training on Lesotho Television (Ltv) in 2019." (Interviewee P1)

The response given clearly indicates that there were no teacher induction programmes provided by the Ministry of Education and Training. Another respondent emphasised:

"The inability of teachers to effectively handle a wide range of learners' needs is a barrier to the policy's adaptation and implementation." (Interviewee P2)

This statement implies that the teachers were not equipped to implement the policy. Hence, it was not easy to address a wide range of diverse learners' needs.

Furthermore, in-service programmes could provide administrators with skills and knowledge to facilitate the implementation of the LIEP. P3 highlights the benefits that could be derived by being trained for LIEP 2018:

"If the MOET can train us as principals on how to implement the current policy, it would be easy for us to support teachers and learners. This would help us embrace learner diversity in our schools and create a conducive or learner-friendly environment. We need in-service training." (Interviewee P3)

P3 further argued:

"I'm already in the field of teaching, and teachers would be assisted if they met some challenges." (Interviewee P3)

Similarly, it appears that the empowerment of teachers is a key role player in determining the proper implementation of any new education policy, which is once again neglected. In addition, it is difficult to interpret the policy and its legal framework that aims to support the accommodation of learners with disabilities. P5 further explained:

"Training could assist us in explaining the policy and the legal framework that supports the education of students with disabilities." (Interviewee P5)

In contrast, P5 felt that a lack of training could be a major obstacle to the implementation of the policy and provided a clarification:

"It will not be easy to facilitate the implementation of the policy, as we are not equipped with attitudes towards learner diversity." (Interviewee P5)

Despite the efforts by MOET to remove all forms of discrimination against learners with disabilities, learners still face the challenge of not participating fully like normal learners. P6 stated:

"We are unable to handle learners with disabilities due to a lack of knowledge and their special demands. We advise parents to send them to special schools or keep them at home, but training can help us work with them well. There are those learners who need special attention, but we don't know how to handle them." (Interviewee P6)

It was clear that learners with severe disabilities could not access education like normal learners do. Since teachers are not trained, children with disabilities still face challenges in mainstream schools. P6 further emphasised:

"Even if we have good, well-established policies, they are useless if MOET does not provide teachers with the knowledge, strategies and approaches to enable them to implement the policies." (Interviewee P6)

It was evident that the Ministry of Education and Training was also contributing to preventing schools from enrolling

students with disabilities.

Although P8 commended MOET for adopting the LIEP, which offers a framework for safeguarding the educational rights of diverse learners, it was apparent that MOET has more work to do in terms of facilitating and implementing inclusive education. P8 stated:

“In spite of the fact that the Ministry of Education and Training enacted the inclusive education policy 2018, which offers a framework for safeguarding the rights of children with disabilities to education, MOET has not gone far enough to ensure that the policy is put into practice in schools. For instance, educators continue to struggle with how to instruct students who have autism. I still need training on a few concepts before I can embrace and use the policy.” (Interviewee P8)

From what is indicated above, it appears that the Ministry of Education and Training is not in a position to promote and practise the Lesotho Inclusive Education Policy (LIEP) 2018 in mainstream schools. Subsequently, MOET fails to train teachers to adopt and implement the policy in mainstream schools, and teachers are unable to address the needs of students with disabilities.

B. Accessible School Buildings for Students with Disabilities

One teacher indicated that her school buildings were inaccessible to accommodate diverse LSEN. P7 revealed:

“Our classes here are inaccessible because there are no ramps for learners who use wheelchairs.” (Interviewee P7)

P5 suggested:

“Since MOET has introduced Free Primary Education where parents are not paying anything, I suggest that MOET should pave the school premises for learners who use wheelchairs.” (Interviewee P5)

On the same issue, P4 continued:

“MOET has not assisted schools in constructing ramps for students who use canes, and we always encourage parents to bring children to schools where they can receive assistance. Here in Lesotho, there are such organisations that cater for people with impairments.” (Interviewee P4)

P6 highlighted:

“Learners who have physical disabilities frequently struggle with mobility issues, such as getting into buildings and specific locations where there aren't any special accommodations for them.” (Interviewee P6)

P3 postulated:

“The school structures still need to be altered to accommodate learners who use crutches, and they may require assistive devices and specifically constructed buildings to enable them to move around smoothly.” (Interviewee P3)

According to the remarks above, learners in wheelchairs, as well as those with canes and other mobility constraints, are disadvantaged in accessing education and amenities afforded to other children. They are denied the opportunity to participate, socialise and interact with other learners.

C. Supportive Instructional Materials and Resources for Inclusive Education

Generally, despite the initiative taken by the MOET to prevent marginalisation based on special educational needs and reduce barriers to participation in learning, one of the key issues highlighted by these findings is that LSEN still faces a lack of supportive instructional materials and resources in all grades. P1 asserted:

“There are no facilities to cater for learners with autism spectrum disorders (ASD). So many children are marginalised in mainstream schools because MOET has not prepared devices for them.” (Interviewee P1)

Additionally, there are no adaptive technologies, such as braille, for visually impaired learners. P2 explained:

“MOET, though the SEU (Special Education Unit) fails to provide appropriate adaptive technology such as braille to visually impaired learners, we have to refer such learners to special schools.” (Interviewee P2)

P3 said:

“The teaching and learning process has become time-consuming and difficult for learners with visual impairments due to the lack of braille-based educational resources and technological solutions.” (Interviewee P3)

Learners with hearing impairments face challenges such as a lack of technological devices to aid hearing. P5 opined:

“MOET should provide schools with hearing devices and train teachers with hearing aids, assertive listening skills devices, captioning, or transcription.” (Interviewee P5)

The participants believe that MOET's insufficient financing prevented mainstream schools from successfully implementing inclusive education. P6 declared:

“The supply of resources, equipment, and other types of support to address the distinct and different requirements of learners is dependent on the availability of funds from MOET.” (Interviewee P6)

P7 added:

“Inadequate textbooks, practice books, large classes, and learners with impairments all slow down the teaching and learning process, and at the end of the day, schools do not finish the curriculum.” (Interviewee P7)

P8 also posited:

“The school must use the knowledge and expertise of a wide range of specialists and external agencies to identify special educational needs, plan strategically, implement a thoughtful response, and use instructional materials and resources appropriately to remove barriers to learning.”

(Interviewee P8)

The results show that not having enough money to buy teaching and learning resources is one of the most prevalent problems classroom teachers face while assisting children with special educational needs. There is once again a vacuum in the application of laws and practices like the Lesotho Inclusive Education Policy 2018 since students with disabilities are few in mainstream schools for a variety of reasons, including a lack of supportive resources.

D. Learners with Special Educational Needs (LSEN) Assessment

The participants were requested to give their views on the assessment of learners with educational special needs in inclusive schools and state their daily practices. The teachers gave several views as follows:

“...Tests or examinations are standardised and generally administered traditionally by the Examination Council of Lesotho (ECOL), with the use of pencil and paper. There is a lack of appropriate evaluation tools to measure learners' performance and teacher readiness.” (Interviewee P1)

P2 emphasised:

“...The current assessment does not cater for learners with visual impairments.” (Interviewee P2)

P1 suggested:

“Curricula and evaluations may be devised and implemented to improve all learners' learning, and modifications can be made to remove learning barriers for learners. In our case, things are still treated as if they were normal.” (Interviewee P1)

Still, on the issue of assessment, P3 added:

“There is no proper assessment for learners with disabilities. They are assessed like other normal learners because we do not have tools or facilities that can help us apply adaptive methods depending on the learners' special needs.” (Interviewee P3)

It could also depend on the teacher's creativity to design and provide large printed question papers for learners with visual impairments. P8 further highlighted:

“There are eight domains of accommodations for assessment that teachers need to adopt and implement when assessing learners with special needs. For example, with the use of equipment or adaptive technology, especially for learners with visual impairments, they can be able to read and write well using braille. Nevertheless, such resources are not available in our schools. Therefore, it is difficult for us to assess learners with educational special needs if the tools are not there.” (Interviewee P8)

Some teachers showed a willingness to support diverse learners in assessment. However, they needed support from professionals. P4 explained:

“If we could receive training on how to apply adaptive learning models for children with learning disabilities, we would be willing to develop lessons for a variety of learners... Professionals such as special education instructors, skilled school principals, and school supervisors are needed to support adaptive learning methods. In terms of support, there is a divide between schools and Special Education Units.” (Interviewee P4)

P5 added:

“The office does not have enough facilities to assist us. Yes, they can advise on how we can handle learners with special needs. Honestly, the office does not do enough for these children.” (Interviewee P5)

P6 received training in Special Education from South Africa; however, due to a lack of facilities for LSEN, she had to improvise. P6 further indicated:

“I attended school in South Africa. My special area is special education. I know that special education assessment (SED) can be applied to meet diverse learners' needs. I am applying some of the techniques, skills, knowledge and attitudes I acquired when I was in school, but my challenge is the lack of school facilities to assess learners. This makes our work difficult.” (Interviewee P6)

Some participants felt that their approach when assessing learners was not proper due to a lack of skills. P7 opined:

“I do assess students with special needs, but I do not think it is properly administered because I am not trained on how I can assess learners with special needs. For instance, a student with a disability who has delayed or hindered language development would not be appropriate for a typical written test.” (Interviewee P7)

Based on the facts shown above, it is possible to conclude that learners with special educational needs are unable to access certain educational programmes such as customised classroom teaching, curriculum, tests and examinations. The assessment of learners with special learning needs has deep-seated issues resulting from unclear and unimplemented policies, as well as the development of trained and empowered teachers.

This qualitative study generally leads to the conclusion that teachers in inclusive primary schools in Lesotho are not prepared to adopt and implement the Inclusive Education Policy 2018 of the Ministry of Education and Training. The lack of teachers' professional development is a challenge for them, as revealed by the findings. The Ministry of Education and Training has neither disseminated the policy nor workshopped teachers on the new LIEP 2018, and consequently, they fail to meet the needs of learners with special educational needs. These results are not a surprise given the numerous studies in the literature that suggest that, in general, teachers' induction programmes for the Inclusive Education Policy (IEP) are non-existent, and as a result, in their classrooms, they do not feel equipped to work with learners that have special educational needs (Byrd & Alexander, 2020; Page & Davis, 2016). For educators to be

able to meet the different requirements of these children in an inclusive classroom, it is critical for general education teachers to have specialised knowledge and pedagogy, as prior research has demonstrated (Byrd & Alexander, 2020). This could be improved by better teacher collaboration, such as general education and special education instructors participating in collaboration modules (McKenzie, 2015). As the implementation of IE is a very complicated and varied process, Mitchell (2015) and Schuelka and Engsig (2020) contend that teachers' knowledge and abilities are crucial in implementing inclusive classroom practices. In order to address these complicated issues, teachers' training for school teams comprising various professionals, such as teachers, support experts, and school administrators, could be helpful.

The findings further revealed that most of the buildings in schools were barren and not disability-friendly. The school environment and classroom buildings are not accessible to learners with disabilities. For instance, the buildings are not equipped with ramps for wheelchair users and students who use crutches and canes. The findings further indicated that teachers are forced to release learners with disabilities from mainstream schools to special education schools due to a lack of a learner-friendly environment. The findings concurred with those of a study by Scott (2019) and Tudzi *et al.* (2020), which found that these challenges are not new. They still call for oversight and vigilance in order to ensure ongoing school monitoring, enforcement and facility improvement in order to accommodate students with disabilities in mainstream schools as required by the LIEP 2018 (MOET, 2018).

In addition, the findings showed that despite teachers' best efforts to implement the Lesotho Inclusive Education Policy 2018 and impart knowledge, skills and values to learners with special needs - such as visual impairment using adequate and appropriate facilities, the lack of resources continues to be a challenge. According to Asamoah *et al.* (2018), teachers should have access to enough resources to enable them to improve their ability to instruct learners with visual impairments and regulate the speed of academic study. For instance, to help the visually impaired keep up with their academic work, teachers can teach them how to use the braille machine. Additionally, this study corroborates Khumalo and Khanare (2021) finding that braille pedagogies could be provided as supportive resources to enable learners with visual impairments to acquire knowledge and skills and access the comprehensive school curriculum. Another issue limiting their learning is the shortage of instructional materials. A learner with any kind of impairment who cannot run quickly to obtain a chair finds things even more difficult because many schools throughout the world do not have enough chairs and tables for the pupils. Additionally, there are no books available for students who are blind (Mpu & Adu, 2021).

Moreover, the findings also indicated that schools do not receive funding from the government. As a result, teachers and the school administration failed to adopt and implement the current LIEP 2018. According to Donohue and Bornman (2014), teachers fail to implement policies due to a lack of funding. Policies such as inclusive education are symbolic since they are developed to adhere to international standards rather than as a direct result of changes driven locally. Such policies lack local content, which is indicated by the absence

of funding that comes with them. There is definitely a pattern regarding the number of publications that criticise similar policies and seek to highlight the role played by the international development community in supporting inclusive education as the only progressive strategy for the education of students with disabilities. In this way, funders have a significant impact on the promotion of practices in low-income countries that are based on different socio-economic settings (Kalyanpur, 2011; Le Fanu, 2014).

Besides that, the study revealed that teachers implementing the 2012 curriculum in inclusive primary schools use poor assessment techniques. Teachers still assess diverse learners as if everyone in the classroom is normal. Teachers continue to assess dissimilar learners as if they are all average learners where standard assessment practices can be implemented across the board. Teachers are hesitant to accommodate special needs children within their general education curricula because they are worried that doing so could divert attention from the academic requirements for learners without special needs. This is consistent with the findings of Angeloska-Galevska and Ilić-Pešić (2018), who discovered that teachers in the educational process, particularly those working in inclusive classrooms, have challenges when assessing impaired students' knowledge. They indicate that many teachers implement informal individual assessments, thus inferring the lack of specialised policies and recommendations in this area.

V. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The research explored teachers' preparedness to adopt and implement the Lesotho Inclusive Education Policy 2018 in Lesotho schools. This Policy appears to remain in the domain of theory and is far from being put into reality, according to the research findings, as Lesotho teachers continue to struggle with issues related to policy adoption and implementation. Before the Policy can be institutionalised, more intensive resource mobilisation and information sharing are also necessary due to the complexity and diversity of the nation. Since the majority of school employees lack the necessary preparation for inclusive practices, policies on inclusive education appear to be difficult to implement (Alden, 2016). Besides that, the environment in schools is not conducive to welcoming learners with special educational needs (LSEN). For this reason, the practice of inclusive education seems impossible unless urgent action is taken to alter the facilities in primary schools. Again, the Special Education Unit, which is intended to assist teachers at schools, seems to be understaffed and lacks resources to facilitate the full implementation of the LIEP (Lumina & Hodgson, 2023). This suggests that an important unit which was supposed to provide vital support to teachers and schools cannot operate as intended, hence further making the plight of learners with special educational needs difficult.

The study makes the following recommendations, which warrant all relevant stakeholders to view the needs of schools, teachers and learners with special educational needs as a priority with the aim to equalise the learning environment:

The Ministry of Education and Training should facilitate the Lesotho Inclusive Education Policy (LIEP) 2018 training and professional development of teachers. For effective

teaching and learning, the Ministry should also foster a supportive environment and provide educational tools like braille, tablets, computers, Wi-Fi, and internet connections to schools. These are necessary resources for teachers in the twenty-first century.

The government should relieve the burden on caregivers of children with disabilities and facilitate access to schools by allocating sufficient resources, including financial, human, technological, and other resources. Among the issues raised by the participants, it was recommended that the authorities provide adequate resources to ensure that schools become truly inclusive.

Teachers should be adequately trained on the diverse application of adaptive assessment methods that could help teachers meet the diverse needs of learners with special educational needs through the integration of braille, digital devices like tablets and laptops, and the provision of internet facilities. Such pieces of training should be conducted before teachers begin teaching and should continue throughout their tenure as teachers, preferably on-site at schools. These trainings should be conducted in cooperation with all stakeholders, such as partners in civil society and development agencies.

It is necessary to reform the education system, especially the Special Education Unit, and also complete the transition of the Special Education Unit from the Ministry to the Inclusive Education Department and ensure that the Inclusive Education Department is fully and appropriately equipped to implement the Lesotho Inclusive Education Policy (LIEP) 2018. Again, there should be appropriate staffing and resourcing for the MOET's Special Education Unit to allow it to implement and monitor the implementation of the Policy. Such appropriate staffing requires, at a minimum, experts in screening and identification of disabilities as well as staff for the unit located in every education office in all the districts of the country.

Lastly, further research on the LIEP 2018 is necessary to ensure continued interaction with the Policy. A larger sample of participants could help provide more insight into the Policy.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they do not have any conflict of interest.

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