

## **Communication barriers and deaf learner misbehaviour in a South African special needs school**

**Ratidzai Shoko**

University of Johannesburg, South Africa.

### **Abstract**

*Mainstream schools often encounter problems with learner behaviour which disrupt effective teaching and learning. Inclusive special schools with learners with disabilities, including learners who are deaf, are not spared such problems. This is so especially when they face the challenges of communication barriers. This paper focuses on the influence of communication barriers on misbehaviour by learners who are deaf. The research was a qualitative case study conducted in Gauteng province of South Africa at an inclusive special needs school with learners with disabilities. It aimed to establish the effectiveness of interventions for managing behaviour among the learners. The study found that effective communication plays a vital role in the positive management of the behaviour of deaf learners. It recommends that the learners who are deaf be provided access to language and specialized communication support and language resources such as oral interpreting, sign language, and hearing aids.*

**Keywords:** Barrier, Communication, Deaf, Hearing loss, Misbehaviour, South African Sign Language (SASL).

### **Introduction**

When parents send children with hearing impairment to school, they hope that their children would thereby benefit from interactions with peers and teachers within the education system. However, this may be hampered by communication difficulties between the child, on the one hand, and the educators and other learners on the other. Although some educators can communicate using South African Sign Language (SASL), it would have been most auspicious if most people in the schools were SASL capable to facilitate comprehension by the learners who are deaf. Inability to communicate effectively might lead to difficulties that may be mistaken for learner misbehaviour. Schools with learners who are deaf often experience

---

problems because most other members and stakeholders in the school system are not able to effectively communicate with learners who are deaf. Teaching and learning are expected to proceed in an environment where both educators and learners can resolve difficulties amicably. However, this may prove a daunting task if the concerned parties are not able to communicate with each other effectively because of communication barriers. The fact that most people in and outside of the school environment are not familiar with the SASL is a great impediment to effective communication with learners who are deaf.

This study focuses on the impact of communication challenges on dealing with behavioral issues displayed by learners who are deaf. It aims to respond to the question: How do communication constraints affect interventions to the behavior of learners who are deaf?

### **Hearing loss and deafness**

Ngobeni, Maimane and Rankumise (2020, p.1) define deafness as a condition in which individuals experience hearing loss which influences their development of spoken languages. Hearing loss is the inability to hear as well as someone with normal hearing would (WHO, 2021). The main causes of hearing loss are untreated ear infections, but it could also be noise-induced or caused by heredity and age-related factors (Alberti, Portelli & Galletti, 2023). Learners who are deaf vary in the degree of their hearing loss, ranging from mild to profound. The extent of hearing loss can significantly impact their communication needs and preferences. Some may primarily use sign language while others may rely on speech and lip-reading, and some may use a combination of sign language and spoken language. The World Health Organization defines people who are deaf as those who have profound hearing loss, which implies very little or no hearing (WHO, 2021). Thus, deafness can be described as a communication barrier. Rani (2016, p.74) describes a communication barrier as anything that prevents us from receiving and understanding the messages others use to convey their information, ideas, and thoughts. Sidera (2017, p. 164) states that children who are deaf who have not been exposed to a natural language since early infancy may have difficulty in various areas of development, such as language, verbal intelligence, academic achievement, or social understanding. Learners who are deaf, thus, may face other challenges besides communication.

Communication plays an important role in addressing behavioral problems among learners. Jordan (2016) observes that educator of learners who are deaf and hard of hearing spend more time in conflict resolution than in educating learners. In an inclusive set up, teaching and learning time is often interrupted, and educators must resolve disciplinary issues.

Inability to communicate well within the learning environment impacts how learners interact. Without proper communication where educators and learners can converse without any barriers, educators often face problems when they want to implement disciplinary measures or apply interventions. It is practically impossible to give guidelines on how to behave when one cannot communicate in a way that can be easily understood by the learners involved. Bigler et al. (2019) note that learners who are deaf and hard-of-hearing are more likely to experience behavioural issues. Rani (2016) supports this assertion by stating that language is associated with behavior problems because of its effects on attention. The use of either spoken language or sign language has a significant influence on how the learner behaves. The lack of a common language in which individuals and groups can converse can contribute to behavior problems as it interferes with understanding and communication of each other's needs, and with emotional and behavioral regulation.

### **Nature of diversity among learners who are deaf**

When "Deaf" is capitalized, it usually refers to Deaf culture, which is a community of deaf people with its own culture and language (Golos, Moses, Gale & Berke, 2021). A distinctive sign language like the South African Sign Language (SASL) in South Africa, as well as common beliefs, conventions, and behaviors make up a Deaf culture. When the word "deaf" is written with a lowercase "d," it usually alludes to the medical or audio logical condition of not being able to hear or having a severe hearing loss. Because it is a clinical term that does not necessarily imply any cultural or identity affinity, the lowercase "deaf" was employed in this article. Some learners participate in the Deaf culture, while others are deaf due to medical conditions. For educators and support staff to deliver successful instruction and support, they must have a thorough understanding of this diversity.

One of the means of communication employed by learners who are deaf is sign language, which calls for a customized strategy to enable efficient communication despite any gaps in learners' and educators' language proficiency. Due to the lack of vocal information, learners who are deaf may get disengaged and frustrated (Gutierrez-Sigut, Lamarche, Rowley et al., 2022). Misbehavior in the classroom might be brought on by communication obstacles.

Learners who are deaf are a diverse community with special demands (Golos, Moses, Gale & Berke, 2021). It is therefore important to understand the learning requirements that must be addressed in the inclusive classrooms. Nieman and Esther (2020) reiterates that understanding the levels of hearing loss is essential to meeting the special requirements of

students with various levels of hearing loss and ensuring they get the support and adjustments they need (Nieman & Esther, 2020). It is essential for educational support and the required technologies that may be needed to fill in knowledge and skills gap for the learners (Alshawbkeh, Woolsey & Kharbat, 2021). For these learners to succeed in inclusive settings, it is crucial to offer them specialized communication support and to make sure they have access to the right language resources such as hearing aids and cochlear implants.

### **Hearing loss and interventions**

According to the World Report on Hearing (2022), if a person's hearing abilities fall below those of someone with normal hearing, which is defined as having hearing thresholds of 20 dB or higher in both ears, they are said to have hearing loss. The effects of hearing loss include the inability to communicate with others and the delayed onset of language in children, which can cause social exclusion, loneliness, and frustration, especially in elderly persons with hearing loss. Lack of adequate hearing accommodations affects academic achievement as well as social interactions. Many people who are deaf find great value in the use of sign language and other sensory substitution techniques like speech reading. Hearing assistive technology and services like captioning and sign language interpretation can further enhance access to communication and education for those with hearing loss (World report on Hearing, 2021). The World report on Hearing (2021) shows that early action after diagnosis is crucial for positive results as most ear illnesses are curable with medical and surgical intervention, potentially correcting the resulting hearing loss. When hearing loss is irreversible, however, rehabilitation can ensure that those who are afflicted and society avoid the negative effects. In this regard, significant progress has been made over the past few decades, and there are now a variety of efficient choices available to meet the needs and preferences of those who have hearing loss.

People's ability to receive care for ear illnesses and hearing loss is frequently hampered by a lack of correct information and stigmatising attitudes about these conditions. Even among health care professionals, there is frequently a lack of awareness regarding the prevention, early detection, and management of hearing loss and ear illnesses, which makes it difficult for them to give the necessary care (World Report on Hearing Loss, 2021).

Children can acquire a language from birth, but they must do so in the language of their environment and family (CDC, 2021). However, because of hearing loss, children may struggle to develop receptive language which has a significant impact on their ability to develop expressive language. Sometimes speech and language impairments can coexist. Children with

language difficulties may act out, act helpless, or retreat out of frustration at not being able to communicate with others or comprehend them (CDC, 2021). It is necessary in schools to understand these frustrations and how they may impact on how the learners behave. Speech on the other hand is the real sound of spoken language which means this method of communication is verbal. Language is the whole of words and symbols used to convey meaning, whether orally, visually, or through body language and gestures. Learners who are deaf may therefore experience challenges in speech, but they have their own language which may not be understood by peers and educators.

It is often necessary to have views from the learners who are deaf as they may be improperly represented. Pitt (2022) argues that South Africa's Department of Basic Education lacks an adequate understanding of how deaf education and South African Sign Language interact, a situation that is harmful to the cause of educating learners with hearing loss.. Nonetheless, South Africa is one of the few countries—others are as Australia, New Zealand, and Sweden—that have a formal school curriculum for sign language. SASL is useful and more people who are proficient SASL users and understand Deaf culture are needed in South Africa. SASL has its own grammar, lexicon, and syntax and like every other language, it has the potential to communicate an endless number of thoughts.

Though SASL was initiated in schools in 2015, much work still needs to be done until educators are sufficiently proficient in it. Nonetheless, SASL has developed somewhat since it is now taught from preschool through grade 12 and in 43 schools. The first group of learners who are deaf to enroll in SASL and deaf education graduated in 2018 (Njeyiyana, 2021). Although hearing people also use sign language with children, friends, and family who are deaf, SASL is the primary language of the Deaf community. Many deaf individuals use sign language as their primary mode of communication. South African Sign Language (SASL) is the predominant sign language in South Africa.

For optimal communication with learners who are deaf and to facilitate their cognitive development, sign language proficiency is essential. At least educators and support professionals should have the rudiments of the language. In educational settings, sign language interpreters, captioning, and assistive listening devices may be necessary for learners who are deaf.

## **Status of deaf education in South Africa**

With the help of public health initiatives, school screenings, and community outreach initiatives, South Africa is pushing early intervention for hearing loss to guarantee equal rights and access to services for people with disabilities. Through a network of audiologists and speech therapists who are backed by the government and non-profit organizations, South Africa provides rehabilitation services for people with hearing loss, including the fitting of hearing aids. Cochlear implants are being used in South Africa, mainly in urban areas, to give those with severe to profound hearing loss access to sound and spoken language. However, in rural regions, there is a lack of access to healthcare services, which results in undetected or untreated hearing loss (Ehlert & Coetzer, 2020).

A National Policy Framework for Inclusive Education (2001) has been formulated in South Africa, supporting inclusive practices in classrooms, and guaranteeing accessible instruction for all students, including those with disabilities. Learners who are deaf are placed in a variety of appropriate educational environments, such as mainstream schools and deaf schools, to address their unique requirements while combining inclusion with specialized support. This placement process involves specific planning and teamwork.

Through creative methods and local government initiatives, South Africa is aggressively improving the educational experiences of learners who are deaf. Unfortunately, implementing deaf education in rural and impoverished areas of South Africa where there is little access to high-quality instruction and specialized assistance is difficult. According to Bush, Kaufman, & McNulty (2017), children with hearing loss who reside in rural areas typically receive hearing technology (like hearing aids or cochlear implants) much later in life than children who reside in urban areas. Khoza-Shangase & Kanji (2021) also stressed that unequal access to hearing technology, intervention, and support to promote auditory/oral communication remains a challenge for children with hearing loss in South Africa. This lack of access to hearing screening services for children in resource-constrained areas remains a challenge for early diagnosis of hearing loss and appropriate intervention (Kuschke, 2021).

## **Challenges faced by learners with hearing loss**

Njeyiyana (2021) quoted by Pitt (2022) observed that even when the classroom teachers use SASL, they could not sign to learners like children who are deaf would sign to one another. Furthermore, she indicated that the home language of the learners influences how they communicate as some use fewer signs. Consequently, learners with hearing loss may be treated

as though they have learning disabilities when the issue is that a linguistic foundation has not been laid. Unfortunately, the necessary communication support is not provided to the learners who are deaf by the Department of Basic Education because of its ignorance of the relationship between SASL and deaf education (Ngobeni, Maimane & Rankhumise, 2020).

Children who have hearing loss experience significant communication, social, and academic development issues. Children who are deaf or hard of hearing face a higher risk of unfavorable social and emotional development than their hearing classmates, which could result in disruptive behavioural issues. Children who are deaf or hard of hearing are noted to display behavioural issues twice as frequently as children with normal hearing (Zaidman-Zait & Most, 2020). Young children's hearing loss requires sophisticated rehabilitation and care, and the addition of disruptive behaviour could further impede language and social development.

Njeyiyana (2021) argues that deaf education cannot assist the community to improve if it is not directed by the people who are deaf as the public is not conversant with SASL as well as Deaf culture. She claims that skewed perceptions of the deaf community persist because people who are deaf are not involved in directing deaf education.

Parents place their children at institutions for inclusion hoping that they will acquire language from adults and other people whom they meet there (Ngobeni, et al., 2020). However, this is not always the case as the learners also meet people who are not able to converse in the South African Sign Language (SASL). It is therefore necessary to develop approaches which can address such challenges. Gregg (2017) suggests that educators, families, and service providers can work together to assess the purpose of the child's behaviour to create more functional ways for the child to communicate as the child's spoken language continues to improve. Although emerging research suggests that both learners and teachers benefit from an approach to student conduct that is more purposeful than traditional behavior modification models, further research is necessary to clarify how such an effective purposeful program would work (Jordan, 2016).

Furthermore, Jordan (2016) elaborates that because of these additional disabilities, this population often demonstrates a need for educators with strong behavior management techniques. Educators need to be aware of other challenges the learners face and they must have strategies they can possibly use to manage the attendant behaviour issues. Gregg (2017) highlights that learners with communication challenges may express frustrations through challenging behaviour such as aggression and social withdrawal. This challenging behaviour

may lead to difficulties with building social competencies including emotional regulation and peer engagement (Gregg, 2017). Children with communication challenges need practical strategies to provide support for social communication to increase quality classroom interactions.

Walton (2018) asserts that Department of Education policies have placed priority on the field of inclusive education, which calls for educators to be informed about its principles and practices and be capable of instructing various student populations (Walton, 2018). White Paper #6 recognises that educators are the key to accomplishing the objective of inclusive education and it pledges to help them advance their knowledge and abilities to help in the development of new talents (DoE, 2001). It further places a strong emphasis on providing children with disabilities with high-quality, pertinent education. It requires ongoing training in inclusive practices, cultural diversity, and communication techniques for educators (Manga & Masuku, 2020). Such ongoing training would keep educators informed about current developments both locally and globally.

If problem behavior may compromise the development of young children with language difficulties, it is important to understand the factors associated with its onset and persistence so that intervention can be successful (Jansen, Maljaars, Verhappen, Zink, Steyaert & Noens, 2020). This study focuses on the importance of communication in controlling behaviour of deaf learners. According to research by Kelly, McKinney, and Swift (2020), deaf students find it extremely difficult to communicate with their teachers. Communication, linguistic, and informational breakdowns put them at risk (Freitas et al. (2022). Understanding how communication barriers impact on behaviour management helps in addressing learner behaviour problems. Improved communication between the learners who are deaf and the people who interact with them regularly improves the way they respond to interventions.

This study attempts to answer the following research questions:

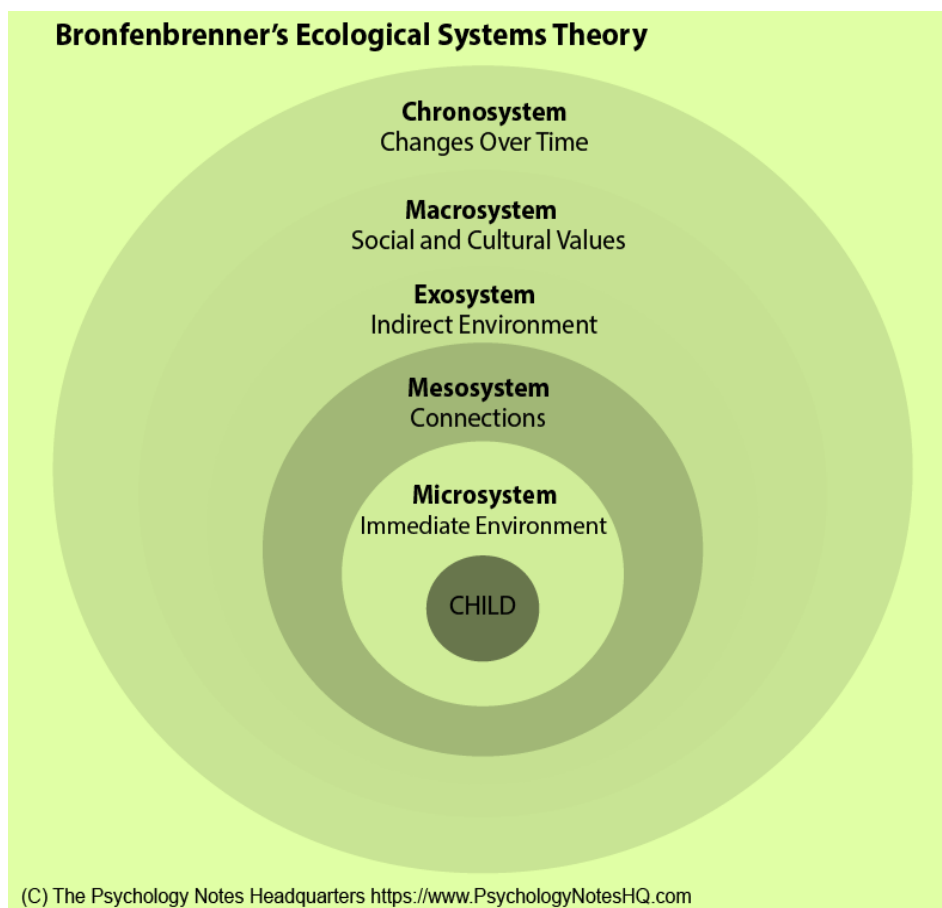
1. How do communication barriers influence the behaviour of learners who are deaf and their schooling experiences?
2. What are the causes of the communication barriers between learners and educators?
3. How do educators deal with communication and related challenges associated with learners with hearing impairment?

## THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

This study utilized Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory which is considered excellent for explaining childhood behaviour difficulties. Hayes, O'Toole and Halpenny (2017) consider it to be a holistic approach which is inclusive of all the ecosystems children and their family are involved in, accurately reflecting the dynamic nature of actual family relationships. Etekal and Mahoney (2017, p.2) note that in the theory, "ecological levels" range from smaller, proximal settings in which the individuals directly interact to larger distinct settings that indirectly influence development". Each of these levels influences the child. These levels are the microsystem, the mesosystem, the exosystem, the macro system and the chronosystem. Bronfenbrenner explains how each of these systems interacts with and affects the child's behaviour and how the systems interact with each other.

Figure 1 shows an illustration of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory.

Figure 1. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory.



The microsystem is closest to the child and has direct contact with it. This includes the family and the school. The microsystem, that is the local environment, has an impact on the

development of learners and educators through the activities, social roles, and interpersonal interactions they engage in (Tickly, 2015). The interactions in this environment involve those who can influence a person's development, such as parents, educators, potential life partners, and friends (Bronfenbrenner, 1995). According to Nel, Nel, Engelbrecht, and Tlale (2016), these microsystem actors have a significant influence on the willingness of support structures to implement school interventions. Learners, educators, and the school are considered microsystems in the study.

The mesosystem provides the link between the child's microsystems. An example is the relationship between the educators and the parents. The relationships between the microsystems, such as between the family and the school, the family and the peer group, and the school and the peer group, are represented by the mesosystem (Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000). The implementation of school-based interventions requires effective interaction between these microsystems (Leask, 2019).

The exosystem is the larger social system with which the child does not normally interact directly. An example is the parents' workplace which has an indirect impact on the child. This is an example of a broader social system that has an impact on a person's development. Although the developing individual is not actively involved in this system, it can still have an impact on their growth (Swart & Pettipher, 2016). The macro system consists of cultural values, customs, and laws and it impacts on all other levels. The relationships between all other levels are influenced by the macro system, which includes other systems. The macro system usually has a unilateral influence on the other components of the model, which can change the nature of a particular society (Leask, 2019).

The chronosystem deals with the dimension of time in relation to a child's environment. This includes physiological changes that may occur to the child. This highlights the importance of time to schooling as it affects how teaching staff and learners change over time.

Bronfenbrenner (1979) described the environment in which the child grows up as a series of nested structure. These structures, the school, the family, or the peer group have an influence on the child's behaviour. The theory helps in analysing the influence of deaf learners' ecological systems on learners' behaviour and communication challenges among the various stakeholders in learners' lives. According to Nel, Nel, Engelbrecht, and Tlale (2016), the

structures of the ecosystem are critical to the school's ability to function effectively as this affects how interventions are put into practice.

As the family is a crucial component of the child's microsystem, it is important to raise awareness of the difficulties faced by students with hearing loss in society. In this way, prejudices and preconceived ideas about learners who are deaf can be dispelled. This will contribute to a greater understanding of the contribution that learners with hearing loss can make to society, rather than focusing solely on their negative behaviour. Early socialisation in the home promotes language development. Through their behaviour patterns, their perceptions of deafness, their emotional reactions to deafness, and their interactions with the deaf child, the family has a significant influence on the child. Similarly, informal networks consisting of friends and extended family can have a significant impact on how the family develops, which in turn affects the development of the individual deaf child.

The bioecological perspective helps to proactively address the necessary support for learners who are deaf and hard-of-hearing so that they gain the ability to overcome the challenges they face, assert themselves, and refute preconceived notions about their abilities (Viljoen, 2021). The interactions that take place both within and between levels, including the formation, labelling, and reification of symptoms, are recognised by the bio-ecological view. This study adopted the bio-ecological model because it recognises the complexity of interactions between learners and educators during behaviour therapy that are influenced by the micro, meso, and macro levels. This model recognises the interdependence of the microsystems within the school setting. The bio-ecological model describes how a person's growth is both directly and indirectly influenced by the context, which is composed of five systems (Swart & Pettipher, 2016).

## **RESEARCH METHODS AND DESIGN**

A qualitative case study was conducted in the province of Gauteng of South Africa on interventions to control violence in an inclusive special needs school. Because the special needs school in focus has learners with various disabilities, the main form of communication there is speech. However, the learners who are deaf use sign language and lip reading. The qualitative approach is suitable in this research because it allows researchers to gain an in-depth understanding of the experiences and perspectives of individuals (Tomaszewski et al., 2020). It allows for the exploration of specific contexts in which communication problems arise for learners who are deaf. Consequently, the current study investigated how communication affects

the behaviour of learners who are deaf in a special needs school. Semi-structured interviews and qualitative questionnaires were conducted with 15 participants; 10 of them were learners with disabilities, 5 were educators and 1 was a principal. The participants were kept anonymous in this study by the use of numbers to replace their names. The criterion for selecting participants was that they were learners or educators at a special needs school. The age and the gender of the learners were not taken into account, although there was an equal number of boys and girls. These participants were purposively selected as the intended sample were learners and educators at a special needs school. Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2018) supports the use of purposive sampling because it allows the researcher to handpick the participants to be included in the sample based on their judgment of their eligibility, resulting in a sample that meets the needs of the research. The school was selected because it specialises in teaching and supporting learners with special needs (LSEN). It has a range of learners with disabilities, including the visually impaired, learners who are deaf, and learners with physical disabilities. The school has resources tailored to the different special needs. Its specialist human resources include a School Based Support Team (SBST) and a school counsellor who works as an on-site nurse. However, it does not have a school psychologist and relies on the District Based Support Team (DBST).

Semi-structured individual interviews were conducted to collect data. The data collected was subjected to a thematic analysis and was categorised to find recurring themes. As noted by Ary et al. (2014), thematic data analysis involves trying to understand the data and make connections clear. There were categories, themes, patterns, and relationships that emerged in the data. The emerging themes were then discussed.

### **Trustworthiness**

To ensure the dependability of the report, the researcher took several measures. The researcher used purposive sampling to ensure that the study participants met the inclusion criteria and were a representative sample of the general population. An interview protocol was used to avoid bias and credibility was ensured through peer debriefing, member checking, and continued participation. The researcher also utilised triangulation of individuals and data sources and kept an audit trail throughout the study to keep track of the entire research.

### **Ethical considerations**

Before starting the research process, the researcher obtained ethical approval from the university and permission from the Department of Basic Education to conduct the research in

schools. Before data collection began, participants were informed of the purpose of the study. They were also informed that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any time without consequences. They were also told that their names and/or data would only be utilized for this study and would be kept confidential and anonymous. They all signed a consent form assenting to their being interviewed and videotaped. To protect their privacy and ensure anonymity, participants were assigned numbers throughout data analysis.

## **RESULTS/FINDINGS**

Results from data analysis revealed the following themes: 1. Communication challenges 2. Learners who are deaf discriminated against. 3. Unavailability of skilled manpower. 4. Learners who are deaf are violent. The data was analysed thematically.

### **How do communication barriers influence the behaviour of learners who are deaf and their schooling experiences?**

#### *Communication challenges*

Poor communication between learners and educators was cited as an issue that often led to disciplinary problems. A participant noted,

*. . . It's a bit of a problem with the deaf because not all the people are fluent in sign language. When the deaf come to complain, or report something then it's a problem if they don't have the interpreter but it's just this thing that happens in our school (Participant 6- educator).*

The implication in this statement is that while some individuals can use sign language, the majority cannot. This makes for a challenging situation because it is often difficult to provide effective interventions for learners who are deaf when there are communication problems.

*Yes, the application of discipline is difficult with deaf learners because if anyone complains about a deaf learner, the case ends up being cancelled because of a communication barrier. They [educators] don't know how to speak with them (Participant 10 - educator).*

Due to their incapacity to interact with learners who are deaf, some educators are unable to implement intervention strategies which otherwise would be possible if an interpreter were present.

The same participant explained how communication barrier impacts on maintaining the required confidentiality around certain issues that might arise. For instance, if it is necessary to

intervene, the learner is made aware that they may receive help only if a third party is involved. Unfortunately, not all learners could be comfortable with this approach.

*Because the person that must help is . . . not able to communicate with him [i.e., the deaf learner]. We must help that person [learner] and that's where it becomes a problem because if something is too confidential for him then he won't say anything. And if the person who is going to interpret is the perpetrator, then it becomes a problem to the child [learner] (participant 10- educator).*

The results show that communication barriers affect learners when they want to complain or report to educators who do not understand SASL. Educators also face challenges when it comes to disciplining learners, as they need interpreters to do so. When issues that require confidentiality cannot be addressed without a third person, it raises considerable difficulty as learners may not want to confide in a third person.

#### *Learners who are deaf are discriminated against*

Some participants felt that deaf learners are discriminated against by other learners. Some learners who are not deaf often mock at the disability of the deaf learner, calling them names as reported by participant 3 (learner):

*. . . because they [learners who are deaf] act crazy(sic) . . . the talking learners swear at them because they can't hear when they are being sworeed, (sic) [at,] so I think they [learners who are deaf] are the ones being discriminated [against].*

However, the form of discrimination that participant 3 alludes to is more in line with the difficulties arising from inadequate communication between the learners who are deaf and hearing students. Both parties take aggressive action against each other because of their mutual inability to understand each other. Similarly participant 9 acknowledged that discrimination occurs among the learners with disabilities.

*Indeed, there is discrimination among learners who are deaf, blind, and with physical disabilities. For example, when the deaf see people using wheelchairs or crutches, they [act in ways that say they] are superior to the people using wheelchairs.*

Thus participant 9's observations show that the learners with disabilities in this school hold stereotyped ideas about one another, as each group gave labels to the other groups. Research has shown that communication difficulties are the source of what was here called discrimination. This is how the learners with other disabilities target the learners who are deaf.

## **What factors contribute to the communication barriers between learners and educators?**

### *Unavailability of skilled manpower*

Lack of skilled manpower contributes to communication barriers between educators and learners. Participants observed that the unavailability of skilled interpreters often delayed the implementation of discipline. Participant 6 (educator) noted that:

*. . . If a thing [quarrel] happens at night and . . . [a] teacher is not on duty, they must wait for[until] the next day. We have people who can do that [i.e., interpret], but sometimes they are not available when they are needed.*

*Sometimes an interpreter has to accompany a learner to court to interpret for the learner and if they can't [refuse to go with them] then at the end [day] the learner will go alone there [to the court] and there won't be a case and they end up coming back. So, the shortage of interpreters will make them [deaf learners to be] take[n] advantage [of]. This problem is not only a school problem, but a national problem. (Participant 10- educator)*

The shortage of skilled manpower affect not only schools but also other government departments, including courts. If ever a learner who is deaf has a case to be resolved through the courts, the challenge of getting interpreters comes up.

## **How do teachers deal with communication and related challenges associated with learners with hearing impairment?**

### *Learners who are deaf are violent*

Some participants were of the view that it was difficult to manage violent behaviour from learners who are deaf as they are violent, and people could not control them because they are afraid of being hurt. Since educators are afraid to be hurt, they intervene only when they judge that it is safe to do so.

Participant 3 (learner) observed that:

*. . . Others do [i.e., some teachers intervene] but others don't because the deaf learners are too strong, when they are fighting some of the teachers stand back. If a teacher is willing, they can stop the fight but others are afraid to get hurt, because the deaf use weapons when they are fighting.*

Participant 3's assertions indicate that other learners felt that learners who are deaf get away with committing violent acts and they viewed it as a sign that educators find it difficult to assist these learners to change their behaviour. However, the biggest challenge remains that of difficulty in communication and the concomitant difficulty in addressing whatever triggered the event by means of SASL.

## **DISCUSSION**

### **How do communication barriers influence the behaviour of learners who are deaf and their schooling experiences?**

One of the findings of this research was that learners who are deaf exhibit behavioural problems and that educators had difficulty addressing them. It is clear from the findings that communication is a crucial aspect of behaviour, as some behaviour problems manifest in the context of people communicating with others.

The negative impact of hearing loss on language and cognitive development as well as psychosocial behaviour is widely known in contrast to the proven benefits of early intervention (Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA), 2018). It is difficult communicating with people where there is a language barrier without ending in frustration and conflict. Such situations could lead people to avoid each other (which does not necessarily imply discrimination). Reducing social isolation among deaf learners and promoting collaboration between all students can be achieved by promoting inclusion and teaching the whole class about deaf culture and communication techniques. Flexibility, comprehension, and inclusivity are necessary for effective communication with deaf students (Hamdy, 2022). Regardless of their hearing abilities, educators can create a supportive learning environment for all children. When children behave poorly it might be due to communication breakdown. Their actions might be a way to get attention. Hence, people who regularly deal with learners who are deaf need to have basic sign language skills for helping with conflict resolution before the police get involved. Since learners who are deaf are not able to communicate in spoken language or access instruction, educators should instead receive support for these learners and educate other learners who are not deaf to understand the challenges faced by learners who are deaf. If educators and learners have a common understanding, it would be easier to manage behavioural issues.

Some of the behavioural problems of learners who are deaf result from their inability to express themselves in a language that is understood by the people around them. Learners

who are deaf need to be treated fairly and without discrimination or favouritism. People should understand the situation these learners are in. If the frustration that learners who are deaf feel due to communication barriers is reduced, it would be easier to manage their behaviour. This calls for addressing issues of emotional development of learners who are deaf and hard of hearing.

It is pointless for a teacher to shout across the classroom at a learner who is deaf in a bid to correct them. They cannot be expected to receive the verbal "correction" that hearing students receive. However, deafness should not be used as an excuse for bad behaviour and educators should establish effective communication with students to avoid this and prevent damage to the relationship between students who are deaf and other students. For the other students to perceive fair treatment, it is crucial to treat the learners the same as everyone else.

Because the educators and some learners in our subject school could not use SASL, it was impossible to address disciplinary issues with urgency as an interpreter was always needed. This also meant that a disciplinary hearing also requires that a qualified interpreter should be called in. The persistent delays in holding the disciplinary hearings meant that the school had to sit on unresolved cases for long periods of time. Disciplinary matters need to be addressed immediately following an offence so that learners do not repeat the same offence.

### **What are the causes of communication barriers between learners and educators?**

Poor communication problems with deaf learners are attributed to South Africa's failure to adopt global best practices such as newborn screening, early intervention, language accessibility and parental support. Early identification of hearing difficulty would minimise the instances of learners with hearing loss who are usually older been placed in classes with younger learners. Ngobeni et al. (2020) observed that most learners who are deaf in South Africa start school at the age of ten or older. This age advantage could be the reason why they are considered to be "strong," more "powerful," or violent.

The failure of other systems within society (e.g., health, legal, education, police) to provide adequate services for the people who are deaf cannot be transposed into a learner problem nor as the motivating factor for their poor behaviour. Indeed, research by Ngobeni et al. (2020) validates the assertion that the problem is not unique to the school under investigation but is rather nationwide. If interpreters are available at all levels, the cause of learner misbehaviour can be more easily identified. Although school contexts have some influence on learner behaviour, the ecological levels and contexts which are closer to the individual have

more intense and direct effects on them. It is problematic and unfair to conclude that learners who are deaf act violent because they know there would be no repercussions as participant 10 implies.

### **How do educators deal with communication and related challenges associated with learners with hearing impairment?**

Instead of other learners and the educators feeling that the learners who are deaf got away with their misbehaviour, an empathetic understanding of their situation would have helped. Instead of being hostile towards learners who are deaf, it would help to contribute to improve their school experience and thereby help to control their behaviour. If everyone involved is aware of the challenges faced by learners who are deaf, there would be a better understanding of each other's behaviour. For instance, some bad behaviours are caused by frustration, and it is not unique to learners who are deaf to resort to use of available dangerous weapons in quarrels to fight back when they are misunderstood and feel threatened. Unfortunately, learners may express their behaviour in different ways including, sometimes, in physical confrontations. Nonetheless, behaviour can be better managed if all the stakeholders, organisations, service providers and parents act as a unit without fear or discrimination. Guy-Evans (2020) suggests that educators and parents should maintain good communication with each other and work together for the good of the child. He claims that this approach strengthens development within ecological systems that the child inhabits and that these positive relationships shape the child's development in a positive way.

### **CONCLUSION**

The findings from the literature and interviews in this study confirmed the impact of communication barriers on the behaviour of learners who are deaf. They show that communication barriers have a significant impact on how interventions can be applied to learners. Poor communication poses serious challenges to learners and educators and creates barriers for learners in their classes. Removing communication barriers between learners who are deaf, and their educators is the foundation for effective behaviour management in schools. Without the right strategies to improve communication, managing the behaviour of the learners who are deaf will remain a challenge. Such contextual factors as shortage of skilled manpower need to be addressed for effective communication within the school. Collaborative efforts of all stakeholders in the learner's ecosystem can improve communication.

It is therefore recommended that learners who are deaf in South Africa's educational institutions must have access to language and communication facilities such as oral interpretation, sign language, and hearing aids, etc. This is what can guarantee a solid linguistic foundation for children who have hearing disabilities. According to the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, a person has a disability if they have a long-term sensory impairment which in combination with other factors makes it difficult for them to participate fully and effectively in society on an equal basis with others. Due to the difficulties they face in communicating with other learners and educators in the classroom, learners who are deaf can end up feeling the effects of their disability.

South Africa must do more to ensure early identification of hearing loss. There is a need to improve access to qualified professional service providers for early hearing identification and intervention for young and hard of hearing children aged 0 to 5 years. The socio-cultural issues that affect children's social development should also be addressed so that these children do not miss out on age-appropriate social skills.

## REFERENCES

- Alberti, G., Portelli, D., & Galletti, C. (2023). Healthcare Professionals and Noise-Generating Tools: Challenging Assumptions about Hearing Loss Risk. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 20(15), 6520. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph20156520>
- Al-Shammakhi, F., & Al-Humaidi, S. (2015). Challenges facing EFL teachers in mixed ability classes used to overcome them. *World Journal of English Language* 5(30), 33-45. <https://doi.org/10.5430/wjel.v5n3p33>.
- Alshawabkeh, A. A., Woolsey, M. L., & Kharbat, F. F. (2021). Using online information technology for deaf students during COVID-19: A closer look from experience. *Heliyon*, 7(5). <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2021.e06915>
- Bigler, D., Burke, K., Laureano, N., Alfonso, K., Jacobs, J., & Bush, M.L (2019). Assessment and treatment of behavioural disorders in children with hearing loss: A systematic review. *Otolaryngology Head Neck Surgery*, 160(1), 36–48. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0194599818797598>
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The Ecology of Human Development: Experiments by nature and design*. London: Harvard University Press.

- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1995). *Developmental ecology through space and time: a future perspective*. In P. Moen, G.H. Elder & K. Lüscher (Eds). *Examining lives in context: Perspectives on ecology of human development* (1<sup>st</sup> ed., pp. 619–649). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association. <https://doi.org/10.37/10176-018>
- Bronfenbrenner, U., & Evans, G.W (2000). *Developmental Science in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Emerging questions, Theoretical models, Research designs and Empirical findings*. *Social Development* 9(1).
- Bush, M. L., Kaufman, M. R., & McNulty, B. N. (2017). Disparities in access to pediatric hearing health care. *Current Opinion in Otolaryngology & Head & Neck Surgery*, 25(5), 359–364. doi:10.1097/moo.0000000000000388
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2022). *Language and Speech Disorders in Children*. National Center for Birth Defects and Developmental Disabilities.
- Chabangu, L. (2014). *Factors related to the prevalence of violence in rural secondary schools in the Ximhungwe circuit in Bohlabela district, Mpumalanga Province*. Master of Education dissertation. UNISA
- Cohen, L., Manion, L., & Morrison, K. (2018). *Research Methods in Education* (8th ed.). London: Routledge.
- Department of Education (DoE) (2001). *Education White Paper 6, on special needs education*. Pretoria: Department of Education.
- Ehlert, K., & Coetzer, C. (2020). Maternal knowledge and views regarding early hearing detection and intervention in children aged 0-5 years at a semi-urban primary care clinic in South Africa. *South African Journal of Communication Disorders*, 67(1), 1-8. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/sajcd.v67i1.681>
- Ettekal, A., & Mahoney, J.L. (2017). Ecological Systems Theory. *The Sage Encyclopedia of Out-of-school learning*. 239-241. SAGE.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781483385198.n94>
- Freitas, E., Simões, C., Santos, A. C., & Mineiro, A. (2022). Resilience in deaf children: A comprehensive literature review and applications for school staff. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 50(2), 1198-1223.

- Golos, D., Moses, A., Gale, E., & Berke, M. (2021). Building Allies and Sharing Best Practices: Cultural Perspectives of Deaf People and ASL Can Benefit All. *LEARNIng Landscapes*, 14(1), 97-110.
- Graif, P. (2018). *Being and hearing: Making intelligible worlds in deaf Kathmandu*. University of Chicago Press.
- Gregg, K. (2017). Communication disorders and challenging behaviours: Supporting children's functional communication goals in the classroom. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 45, 445-452. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-016-0789-7>
- Guy-Evans, O (2020). *Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory*. Simply Psychology. [www.simplypsychology.org/Bronfenbrenner.html](http://www.simplypsychology.org/Bronfenbrenner.html)
- Gutierrez-Sigut, E., Lamarche, V. M., Rowley, K., Lago, E. F., Pardo-Guijarro, M. J., Saenz, I., ... & Goldberg, L. (2022). How do face masks impact communication amongst deaf/HoH people? *Cognitive Research: Principles and Implications*, 7(1), 81.
- Hamdy, A. (2022). Methods and foundations of teaching for people with hearing disabilities. *International Journal of Education and Learning Research*, 5(2), 114-130. <https://doi.org/10.21608/ijelr.2023.214966.1004>
- Hayes, N., O'Toole, L., & Halpenny, A.M. (2017). *Introducing Bronfenbrenner: A guide for practitioners and students in early years education*. Taylor & Francis
- Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA), (2018). *Early Hearing Detection and intervention (EHDI) guidelines*. Professional Board for speech, language, and hearing professions.
- Jansen, R., Maljaars, J., Verhappen, A., Zink, I., Steyaert, J & Noens, I (2020). Problem behavior in young children referred with language difficulties: Relations to language and intentional communication. *Autism & Developmental Language Impairments*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2396941519900076>
- Jordan, H. (2016). *A purposeful approach to student conduct with Deaf and Hard of hearing learners*. Walden University ProQuest Dissertations Publishing.
- Kamga, S. D. (2020). COVID-19 and the inclusion of learners with disabilities in basic education in South Africa: A critical analysis. *African Human Rights Law Journal*, 20(2), 558-583. <http://dx.doi.org/10.17159/1996-2096/2020/v20n2a9>

- Kelly, J.F., McKinney, E.L. & Swift, O (2022). Strengthening teacher education to support deaf learners. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 26(13), 1289-1307.
- Khoza-Shangase, K., & Kanji, A. (2021). Best and next practice in South Africa for early hearing detection and intervention. In K. Khoza-Shangase & A. Kanji (Eds.), *Early detection and intervention in Audiology: An African perspective*. Johannesburg: Wits University Press.
- Kuschke, S. (2021). Childhood hearing loss profile, decentralised screening and outcomes in the Western Cape public healthcare system, South Africa (Doctoral dissertation, University of Pretoria).
- Leask, M.C. (2019). *Implementation enablers and constraints of a school-based intervention in a rural context*. University of Pretoria Doctoral dissertation
- Lynner-Cleophas, M. M., Saunderson, C. P., & Apollis, L. J. (2023). Universal Design for Learning as Support for the Inclusion of Deaf Student Teachers in Training. *Building Inclusive Education in K-12 Classrooms and Higher Education: Theories and Principles*, 80-97. <https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-6684-7370-2.ch005>
- Manga, T., & Masuku, K.P. (2020). Challenges of teaching the deaf-blind learner in an education setting in Johannesburg: Experiences of educators. *South African Journal of Communication Disorders*, 67(1). <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/sajcd.v67i1.649>
- Nel, M., Nel, N., Engelbrecht, P., & Tlale, L.D.N. (2016). Teachers' perceptions of education support structures in the implementation of inclusive education in South Africa. *Koers: Bulletin for Christian scholarship=Koers: Bulletin vir Christelike Wetenskap*, 81(3), 1–4. <http://dx.doi.org/10.19108/koers.81.3.2249>
- Ngobeni, W.P., Maimane, J.R., & Rankhumise, M.P. (2020). The effect of limited sign language as barrier to teaching and learning among deaf learners in South Africa. *South African Journal of Education*, 40(2). <https://doi.org/10.15700/saje.v40n2a1735>
- Nieman, C. L., & Oh, E. S. (2020). Hearing loss. *Annals of Internal Medicine*, 173(11), ITC81-ITC96. <https://doi.org/10.7326/AIT202012010>
- Nseibo, K., Vergunst, R., McKenzie, J., Kelly, J., Karisa, A., & Watermeyer, B. (2022, October). Learning together: The dynamics of training teachers for disability inclusion in South Africa. *Frontiers in Education*, 7. <https://doi.org/10.3389/educ.2022.9991814>

- Pitt, R. (2022). *Much needed change in deaf education must be 'led by the deaf.'* [www.dailymaverick.co.za](http://www.dailymaverick.co.za) (11/05/2022)
- Rani, K.U. (2016). Communication barriers. *Journal of English Language and Literature*, 3(2). <http://www.joell.in>
- Sidera, F., Amadó, A., & Martínez, L. (2017). Influences on Facial Emotion Recognition in Deaf Children. *Journal of Deaf Studies and Deaf Education*, 164–177. <https://doi.org/10.1093/deafed/enw072>
- Snoddon, K. (2020). The social and epistemological violence of inclusive education for deaf learners. *Canadian Journal of Disability studies*. <https://doi.org/10.15353/cjds.v9i5.695>
- Swart, E., & Pettipher, R. (2016). *A framework for understanding inclusion*. In E. Landsberg, D. Krüger, & E. Swart (Eds). *Addressing barriers to learning: a South African perspective* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed., pp. 3-27). Pretoria: van Schaik
- Tickly, L. (2015). What works, for whom, and in what circumstances? Towards a critical realist understanding of learning in international and comparative education. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 40, 237– 249. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2014.11.008>
- Tomaszewski, L.E., Zarestky, J., & Gonzalez, E. (2020). Planning qualitative research: Design and decision making for new researchers. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 19. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406920967174>
- Viljoen, T. (2021). *Social-emotional competency –enhancing the achievement abilities of deaf and hard of hearing persons*. UNISA Masters dissertation
- Walton, E (2018). Decolonising through inclusive education. *Educational Research for Social Change*, 7, 31–45. <https://doi.org/10.17159/2221-4070/2018/v7i0a3>
- WHO (2021). *Deafness and hearing loss*. WHO
- WHO (2022). *World Report on Hearing Loss*. WHO
- Zaidman-Zait, A & Most, T (2020). Pragmatics and peer relationships among deaf, hard of hearing, and hearing adolescents. *Pediatrics*, 146(3), S298-S303.
- .