

**EXPLORING THE ASSESSMENT PROCESS USED IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS WHEN
ASSESSING LEARNERS WHO ARE REFERRED TO SPECIAL SCHOOLS**

by

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I declare that the above dissertation is my own work, and that all the sources that I have used or quoted from have been appropriately cited and acknowledged by means of complete references.

I further declare that I submitted the dissertation to originality checking software and that it meets the required standards for originality.

I further declare that I have not previously submitted this work, or any part of it, for examination at Unisa or any other higher education institution for another qualification.



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DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate my dissertation to my parents, Ms. Nelisiwe Millicent Mathebula and Mr. Richard Nkosiyodwa Vilakazi. I never had the chance to ask you what you wished for me, and I regret never having dedicated anything to both of you before. But I know in my heart that you always wanted the best for me.

Completing this degree was not easy. There were moments I wished you were here to hold my hand, to encourage me, to remind me to keep pushing forward.

I hope you are both proud of me. This achievement is as much yours as it is mine.

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ABSTRACT (In English)

The purpose of this study was to explore the assessment process used in public schools when assessing learners who are referred to special schools in Johannesburg Central District, South Africa. The research objectives were to determine the policy expectation regarding the assessment and referral of learners to special schools, to establish how the assessment process is guided in mainstream schools to assess and refer learners to special schools, to establish what support is available to learners with barriers to learning in mainstream schools, and to determine how trained mainstream school teachers are to assess and refer learners to special schools. This study employed a qualitative research approach, utilizing a single case study design within the interpretivist paradigm. This study was underpinned by behaviourism theory, which emphasises that learning is a change in observable behaviour resulting from the learner's interaction with the environment through reinforcement, repetition, and conditioning. Methods of gathering data included individual and focus group interviews, as well as document analysis. The study was conducted in three mainstream primary schools, with a total of 26 participants purposively sampled: nine teachers, nine parents, seven SBST members, and one DBST representative. Thematic analysis showed that the assessment and referral process is not conducted in accordance with SIAS Policy expectations, and there is a lack of collaboration between the primary stakeholders in the execution of intervention and support strategies. This suggests that several learners are not adequately assessed and supported, and as a result, they are referred to special schools. The study recommends that, to ensure a fair and accurate assessment and referral process, all relevant stakeholders must be adequately trained in implementing the SIAS policy and actively involved throughout the entire SIAS process.

Keywords: assessment policy, barriers to learning, inclusive education, learner support, referral process, SIAS Policy

ABSTRACT (Translated into Isizulu)

Inhloso yalolu cwaningo bekuwukuhlola inqubo yokuhlola esetshenziswa ezikoleni zomphakathi ezijwayelekile lapho kuhlolwa abafundi abathunyelwa ezikoleni ezikhethekile eJohannesburg Central District, eNingizimu Afrika. Izinjongo zocwaningo bekuwukunquma okulindelwe yinqubomgomo mayelana nokuhlolwa nokudluliselwa kwabafundi ezikoleni ezikhethekile, ukuthola ukuthi inqubo yokuhlola iqondiswa kanjani ezikoleni ezijwayelekile ukuze kuhlolwe futhi kudluliselwe abafundi ezikoleni ezikhethekile, ukuthola ukuthi yiluphi usizo olutholakala kubafundi abanezithiyo zokufunda ezikoleni ezijwayelekile, kanye nokunquma ukuthi othisha bezikole ezijwayelekile baqeqeshwe kangakanani bahlale futhi badlulisele abafundi ezikoleni ezikhethekile. Lolu cwaningo lusebenzise indlela yocwaningo olusezingeni eliphezulu, lusebenzisa umklamo wocwaningo lwendaba ngaphakathi kwepharadigm ye-tolika. Lolu cwaningo lwesekelwe ithiyori yokuziphatha, egcizelela ukuthi ukufunda kuwushintsho ekuziphatheni okuqaphelekayo okuvela ekusebenzelaneni komfundi nendawo ezungezile ngokuqiniswa, ukuphindaphinda, nokubeka isimo. Izindlela zokuqoqa idatha zazihlanganisa inhlolokhono yomuntu ngamunye kanye neqembu okugxilwe kulo, kanye nokuhlaziywa kwemibhalo. Ucwaningo lwenziwe ezikoleni ezintathu ezijwayelekile zamabanga aphansi, okunabahlanganyeli abangama-26 sebebonke abathathwa ngamasampula okuhlosiwe: othisha abayisishiyagalolunye, abazali abayisishiyagalolunye, amalungu ayisikhombisa e-SBST, kanye noyedwa omele-iDBST. Ukuhlaziywa kwetimu kubonise ukuthi inqubo yokuhlola neyokudlulisela ayenziwa ngokuhambisana nokulindelwe Inqubomgomo ye-SIAS, futhi kukhona ukuntuleka kokubambisana phakathi kwababambe iqhaza abayinhloko ekwenzeni amasu okungenelela nawokweseka. Lokhu kuphakamisa ukuthi abafundi abaningana abahlolwa ngokwanele futhi abasekelwa, futhi ngenxa yalokho, badluliselwa ezikoleni ezikhethekile. Ucwaningo luncoma ukuthi, ukuze kuqinisekiswa ukuhlola okulungile nokunembile kanye nenqubo yokudlulisela, bonke ababambe iqhaza abafanelekile kufanele baqeqeshwe ngokwanele ekusebenziseni inqubomgomo ye-SIAS futhi babandakanyeke ngokukhuthele kuyo yonke inqubo ye-SIAS.

Amagama angukhiye: inqubomgomo yokuhlola, izithiyo zokufunda, imfundo ebandakanyayo, ukusekelwa kwabafundi, inqubo yokudlulisela, Inqubomgomo ye-SIAS

NKATSAKANYO (in Xitsonga)

Xikongomelo xa ndzavisiso lowu a ku ri ku kambisisa phurosese ya ku kambela leyi tirhisiwaka eswikolweni swa mfumo loko ku kamberwa vadyondzi lava rhumeriwaka eswikolweni swo hlawuleka eXifundzheni xa Joni, eAfrika Dzonga. Swikongomelo swa ndzavisiso a ku ri ku kumisisa leswi languteriweke eka pholisi mayelana ni ku kambela ni ku rhumela vadyondzi eswikolweni swo hlawuleka, ku kumisisa ndlela leyi phurosese ya ku kambela yi kongomisiwaka ha yona eswikolweni swa mfumo ku kambela ni ku rhumela vadyondzi eswikolweni swo hlawuleka, ku kumisisa leswaku i nseketelo wihi lowu nga kona eka vadyondzi lava nga ni swirhalanganyi swo dyondza eswikolweni swa mfumo, ni ku kumisisa ndlela leyi vadyondzisi va le swikolweni swa mfumo va leteriweke ha yona ku kambela ni ku rhumela vadyondzi eswikolweni swo hlawuleka. Ndzavisiso lowu wu tirhisile endlelo ra ndzavisiso ro pimanisa, hi ku tirhisa endlelo ra nkambisiso wa mhaka hi ku landza endlelo ra ku pimanisa. Ndzavisiso lowu wu seketeriwile hi dyondzo ya mahanyelo, leyi tiyisisaka leswaku ku dyondza i ku cinca ka mahanyelo loku xiyekaka loku vangiwaka hi ku hlangana ka mudyondzi ni mbango hi ku tirhisa ku khutaza, ku phindha-phindha ni ku lawula. Tindlela ta ku hlengeleta data a ti katsa ku burisana ni vanhu ha un'we-un'we ni ku burisana ni mintlawa leyi kambisisaka, swin'we ni ku xopaxopa dokhumente. Nkambisiso lowu wu endliwile eswikolweni swinharhu swa mfumo swa le hansi laha ku ngheneleleke 26 wa vanhu hi nhlayo: vadyondzisi va kaye, vatswari va kaye, swirho swa nkombo swa SBST ni muyimeri un'we wa DBST. Vulavisi bya timhaka byi kombisile leswaku ku kamberwa na phurosese ya ku hundzisela emahlweni a swi endliwi hi ku landza leswi languteriwaka eka pholisi ya SIAS na leswaku ku na ku pfumaleka ka ntirhisano exikarhi ka vatlangi va nkoka eku tirhisiweni ka tindlela ta ku nghenelela na nseketelo. Leswi swi ringanyeta leswaku vadyondzi vo tala a va kamberwi hi ndlela leyi faneleke naswona a va seketeriwi, mbuyelo wa kona, va rhumeriwa eswikolweni swo hlawuleka. Ndzavisiso lowu wu bumabumela leswaku, ku tiyisisa leswaku ku na phurosese ya nkambisiso wo ringanana na ku va lowu lulameke na ku rhumeriwa, vakhumbeki hinkwavo va fanele ku leteriwa kahle eka ku tirhisiwa ka pholisi ya SIAS na ku nghenelela hi ku gingirika eka phurosese hinkwayo ya SIAS.

Marito ya nkoka: pholisi ya nkambisiso, swirhalanganyi eka dyondzo, dyondzo yo katsa hinkwavo, nseketelo wa vadyondzi, phurosese yo rhumela, pholisi ya SIAS

TABLE OF CONTENTS

DECLARATION	ii
DEDICATION	iii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iv
ABSTRACT (In English)	v
LIST OF APPENDICES.....	xvi
LIST OF FIGURES	xvii
LIST OF TABLES	xviii
LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS.....	xix
CHAPTER 1: ORIENTATION TO THE STUDY	1
1.1 INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND	1
1.2 RATIONALE FOR THE STUDY.....	2
1.3 THE PROBLEM STATEMENT.....	2
1.4 RESEARCH QUESTIONS	5
1.4.1 Main Question.....	5
1.4.2 Sub-Questions	5
1.5 THE AIM AND OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY	6
1.5.1 Aim of the Study	6
1.5.2 The objectives of the Study	6
1.6 LITERATURE REVIEW.....	6
1.6.1 Understanding the SIAS Policy	6
1.6.2 A Summary of the Stages of the SIAS Protocol.....	7
1.6.3 Stakeholder Roles in the Assessment Process.....	8
1.6.3.1 The Role of the Teacher.....	8
1.6.3.2 The Role of the Parent/Guardian.....	9
1.6.3.3 The Role of the School-Based Support Team (SBST)	9
1.6.3.4 The Role of the District-Based Support Team (DBST)	10
1.6.3.5 The role of the School Governing Body (SGB).....	9
1.6.4 Teachers' Views about Implementing the SIAS Policy	10
1.6.5 Teachers' Concerns Regarding the SIAS Policy	10
1.6.6 Teachers' Need for SIAS Policy Training for Better Implementation.....	11

1.6.7	Factors Contributing to the Increasing Number of Learners with Learning Barriers in South Africa	11
1.6.8	Negative Impact of Poor Assessment and Support on the Learner	12
1.7	THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK	12
1.8	RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND DESIGN	14
1.8.1	Research Design	14
1.8.2	Research Paradigm	14
1.8.3	Research Approach	14
1.8.4	Research Context	15
1.8.5	Population and Sampling	15
1.8.5.1	Population	15
1.8.5.2	Sampling	15
1.8.5.2.1	Sample Group 1: Parents	16
1.8.5.2.2	Sample Group 2: Teachers	17
1.8.5.2.3	Sample Group 3: SBST Members	17
1.8.5.2.4	Sample Group 4: DBST Representative	17
1.8.6	Instrumentation and Data Collection Techniques	18
1.8.6.1	<i>Interviews</i>	18
1.8.6.1.1	Individual Interviews	18
1.8.6.1.2	Focus Group Interviews.....	19
1.8.6.2	<i>Documents Analysis</i>	19
1.8.7	Data Analysis Process and Interpretation	20
1.9	RELIABILITY AND VALIDITY/CREDIBILITY AND TRUSTWORTHINESS ..	20
1.9.1	Reliability	20
1.9.2	Validity/Credibility	20
1.9.3	Transferability	21
1.9.4	Confirmability	21
1.10	RESEARCH ETHICS	21
1.11	LIMITATIONS AND DELIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY	22
1.12	DEFINITION OF KEY CONCEPTS	22
1.13	CHAPTER OUTLINE	24
1.14	CONCLUSION	25
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW		26
2.1	INTRODUCTION	26

2.2	INTERNATIONAL ASSESSMENT PROCESSES	26
2.3	A BRIEF HISTORY OF SPECIAL EDUCATION IN SOUTH AFRICA	28
2.4	THE SIAS PROCESS	30
2.4.1	Stage 1: Screening	31
2.4.2	Stage 2: Identification	32
2.4.2.1	Examples of Types of Barriers to Learning that Teachers can Identify.....	34
2.4.3	Stage 3: Assessment	35
2.4.3.1	Assessment principles in the SIAS policy.....	37
2.4.3.2	Assessment of Learners with Special Needs	38
2.4.3.3	Alternate Assessments.....	39
2.4.4	Stage 4: Support.....	39
2.4.4.1	Support Available to Learners with Barriers to Learning in Mainstream Schools	40
2.5	FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO THE INCREASING NUMBER OF LEARNERS WITH BARRIERS TO LEARNING IN SOUTH AFRICA.....	41
2.6	STAKEHOLDER ROLE IN THE ASSESSMENT PROCESS OF SIAS	42
2.6.1	The Role of the Teacher in the Assessment Process	42
2.6.1.1	Curriculum Differentiation.....	43
2.6.1.2	Modifying Assessments.....	44
2.6.1.3	Using Different Methods of Assessing.....	45
2.6.2	The Role of the Parent/Guardian in the Assessment Process	46
2.6.3	The Role of the School Governing Body (SGB) in the Assessment Process	48
2.6.4	The Role of the School-Based Support Team (SBST) in the Assessment Process	49
2.6.4.1	Support Needed from the SBST.....	49
2.6.5	The Role of the District-Based Support Team (DBST) in the Assessment Process	50
2.6.5.1	Support Needed from The DBST.....	51
2.6.6	The Role of the Full-Service School (FSS) in the Assessment Process..	52
2.6.7	The Role of Special School Resource Centres (SSRC) in the Assessment Process	52
2.7	FACTORS THAT CAN DELAY THE APPROPRIATE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE ASSESSMENT PROCESS	53

2.8	NEGATIVE IMPACT OF POOR ASSESSMENT AND SUPPORT ON THE LEARNER	54
2.9	RESPONSIBILITY OF THE REFERRING SCHOOL	55
2.10	DIFFICULTIES FACING TEACHERS IN IMPLEMENTING THE SIAS POLICY	55
2.11	TEACHERS' CONCERNS REGARDING THE SIAS POLICY	56
2.12	TEACHERS' NEED FOR SIAS POLICY TRAINING FOR BETTER IMPLEMENTATION	58
2.13	THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK	59
2.14	CONCLUSION	61
	CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY	62
3.1	INTRODUCTION	62
3.1.1	Problem Statement.....	62
3.1.2	Research Questions.....	63
3.1.2.1	Main Question.....	63
3.1.2.2	Sub-Questions	63
3.2	RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND DESIGN.....	64
3.2.1	Research Design	64
3.2.2	Research Paradigm	65
3.2.3	Research Approach.....	67
3.3	RESEARCH CONTEXT	68
3.4	POPULATION AND SAMPLING	69
3.4.1	Population	69
3.4.2	Sampling	69
3.4.2.1	Sampling Procedure.....	72
3.4.2.1.1	The Schools	72
3.4.2.1.2	Teachers	73
3.4.2.1.3	Parents	73
3.4.2.1.4	School-Based Support Team (SBST) Members	74
3.4.2.1.5	District-Based Support Team (DBST) Members.....	74
3.4.3	Information on the 26 Study Participants.....	75
3.4.3.1	The nine Teacher Participants.....	75
3.4.3.2	The Nine Parent Participants.....	76
3.4.3.3	The Seven SBST Members.....	77

3.4.3.4	The DBST Member.....	79
3.5	DATA COLLECTION TECHNIQUES AND INSTRUMENTATION.....	79
3.5.1	Interviews.....	80
3.5.1.1	Interview Procedure.....	82
3.5.1.2	Individual Face-To-Face and Telephonic Interviews	83
3.5.1.3	Focus Group Interviews.....	85
3.5.2	Document Analysis	86
3.5.2.1	Document Analysis Procedure.....	86
3.6	DATA ANALYSIS PROCESS AND INTERPRETATION.....	87
3.6.1	Thematic Analysis	88
3.7	RELIABILITY AND VALIDITY/CREDIBILITY AND TRUSTWORTHINESS ..	89
3.7.1	Credibility.....	89
3.7.2	Transferability.....	90
3.7.3	Confirmability	90
3.7.4	Dependability	91
3.8	ETHICAL CONSIDERATION	91
3.8.1	Permission to Conduct Research	92
3.8.2	Informed Consent.....	92
3.8.3	Respect for Autonomy	93
3.8.4	Non-Maleficence	93
3.8.5	Research Merits and Integrity	93
3.8.6	Protection of Data.....	94
3.9	CONCLUSION	94
	CHAPTER 4: DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS	95
4.1	INTRODUCTION	95
4.2	PROCESS OF DATA COLLECTION.....	96
4.3	DATA ANALYSIS	96
4.4	INFORMATION ON THE THREE SAMPLE SCHOOLS	98
4.5	INFORMATION ON THE PARTICIPANTS	98
4.5.1	Information on the Nine Teacher Participants	99
4.5.2	Information on the Nine Parent Participants.....	100
4.5.3	Information on the Seven SBST Members	101
4.5.4	Information on the DBST Member.....	102
4.6	MAIN THEMES AND SUB-THEMES	103

4.7	THEME 1: TEACHERS' UNDERSTANDING OF THE ASSESSMENT PROCESS	104
4.7.1	Sub-Theme 1.1: Understanding the Assessment Process	104
4.7.2	Sub-Theme 1.2: Teacher Confidence with the Assessment and Referral Process	105
4.8	THEME 2: POLICY EXPECTATIONS REGARDING THE ASSESSMENT AND REFERRAL PROCESSES	107
4.8.1	Sub-Theme 2.1: The SIAS Policy Process	107
4.8.2	Sub-Theme 2.2: Time Allocation and Resources	109
4.8.3	Sub-Theme 2.3: Inclusion of Parents	111
4.8.4	Sub-Theme 2.4: Parents' Response to the Assessment and Referral Process	116
4.9	THEME 3 - SUPPORT AVAILABILITY IN IMPLEMENTING THE SIAS POLICY	118
4.9.1	Sub-Theme 3.1: Support from the DBST	119
4.9.2	Sub-Theme 3.2: Support from the SBST	120
4.9.2.1	Teachers' Views on the Support They Receive from the SBST.....	121
4.9.2.2	Parents' Views on the Support They Receive from the SBST	122
4.9.2.3	The SBST Committee Members' Views	122
4.9.3	Sub-Theme 3.3: Document Analysis	123
4.9.3.1	The Screening, Identification, Assessment, and Support Policy (SIAS)	124
4.9.3.2	The Learner's Books	125
4.9.3.3	The Learner's Profile	125
4.10	THEME 4: LEARNER SUPPORT AVAILABILITY	126
4.10.1	Sub-Theme 4.1: Intervention Strategies	126
4.10.2	Sub-Theme 4.2 - Parental Involvement	128
4.10.3	Sub-Theme 4.3- Learner Profile	130
4.11	THEME 5: TEACHER TRAINING	131
4.11.1	Sub-Theme 5.1: Pre-Service Teacher Training	131
4.11.2	Sub-Theme 5.2: Professional Development for Teachers to Assess and Refer Learners to Special Schools	132
4.12	CONCLUSION	133
	CHAPTER 5: LIMITATIONS, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS	135
5.1	INTRODUCTION	135

5.2	THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS FOR THE STUDY.....	135
5.3	SUMMARY OF THE RESEARCH FINDINGS.....	137
5.3.1	Teachers’ Understanding of the Assessment Process	137
5.3.1.1	Understanding the Assessment Process.....	137
5.3.1.2	Teacher Confidence with the Assessment and Referral Process	137
5.3.2	Policy Expectations Regarding the Assessment and Referral Processes	138
5.3.2.1	The Sias Policy Process.....	138
5.3.2.2	Time Allocation and Resources.....	139
5.3.2.3	Inclusion of Parents.....	140
5.3.2.4	Parents' Response to the Assessment and Referral Process	140
5.3.3	Guidance and Support Availability in Implementing the SIAS Policy....	141
5.3.3.1	Support from the District-Based Support Team (DBST).....	141
5.3.3.2	Support from the School-Based Support Team (SBST).....	142
5.3.3.3	Teachers' Views on SBST Support	143
5.3.3.4	Parents' Views on SBST Support	143
5.3.3.5	SBST Committee Members' Views.....	143
5.3.3.6	Document Analysis.....	143
5.3.3.7	The SIAS Policy Document	143
5.3.3.8	The Learner’s Books	144
5.3.3.9	The Learner’s Profile	144
5.3.4	Learner Support Availability.....	144
5.3.4.1	Intervention Strategies.....	145
5.3.4.2	Parental Involvement.....	146
5.3.4.3	Learner Profile	146
5.3.5	Teacher Training.....	147
5.3.5.1	Pre-Service Teacher Training.....	147
5.3.5.2	Professional Development for Teachers to Assess and Refer Learners to Special Schools	148
5.4	CRITICAL APPRAISAL OF THE STUDY.....	148
5.4.1	Strengths of the study	148
5.4.2	Limitations of the study	149
5.5	RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE STUDY	149

5.5.1	Professional Development for Teachers to Assess and Refer Learners to Special Schools	150
5.5.2	The SIAS Policy Process	150
5.5.3	Time Allocation and Resources	150
5.5.4	Inclusion of Parents	151
5.5.5	Parents' Response to the Assessment and Referral Process	151
5.5.6	Support from the District-Based Support Team (DBST)	151
5.5.7	Support from the School-Based Support Team (SBST).....	152
5.5.8	SBST Committee Members' Views	152
5.5.9	The SIAS Policy Document.....	152
5.5.10	The Learner's Profile	153
5.6	SOME RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE STUDIES	153
5.7	CONCLUSION OF THE STUDY	154
	REFERENCES	155
	APPENDICES	175

LIST OF APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: UNISA ETHICAL CLEARANCE CERTIFICATE	175
APPENDIX B: APPROVAL LETTER FROM GDE	176
APPENDIX C: PERMISSION LETTER- GDE	177
APPENDIX D: PERMISSION LETTER – SCHOOLS.....	179
APPENDIX E: PARTICIPANTS CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY.....	181
APPENDIX F: INTERVIEW SCHEDULE- (FOCUS GROUP - SBST)	182
APPENDIX G: INTERVIEW SCHEDULE – (DBST REPRESENTATIVE)	183
APPENDIX H: INTERVIEW SCHEDULE (TEACHERS)	184
APPENDIX I: INTERVIEW SCHEDULE (PARENTS/GUARDIANS OF THE LEARNERS)	185
APPENDIX J: TURNITIN REPORT	186
APPENDIX K: LETTER FROM THE EDITOR	187
APPENDIX L: TECHNICAL EDITING CERTIFICATE	188

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 2.1: Stages of the SIAS process.....	31
Figure 2.2: Stakeholders involved in the SIAS process to support the learner	42

LIST OF TABLES

Table 3.1:	Study Population	69
Table 3.2:	Biographical Information on the Nine Teacher Participants	75
Table 3.3:	Biographical Information on the Nine Parent Participants	77
Table 3.4:	Biographical Information on the 7 SBST members.....	78
Table 3.5:	Biographical Information on the DBST representative.....	79
Table 3.6:	Data collection methods, instruments, and corresponding participants	80
Table 3.7:	Documents used for analysis	86
Table 3.8:	An example from data analysis transcription to the emergence of themes...	89
Table 4.1:	Tabulation of the research aim and objectives of the study	95
Table 4.2:	Biographical information on the nine teachers.....	99
Table 4.3:	Biographical information on the nine parents	100
Table 4.4:	Biographical information on the seven SBST members	101
Table 4.5:	Information on the DBST representative(s)	102
Table 4.6:	Themes that Emerged from the Data Analysis.	103

LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

DBST	– District-Based Support Team
DBSTs	– District-Based Support Teams
DoE	– Department of Education
EARC	– Educational Assessment and Resource Centres
EWP6	– Education White Paper 6
ISP	– Individual Support Plan
LP	– Learner Profile
MID	– Moderate Intellectual Disability
NCSNET	– National Commission on Special Needs in Education and Training
NCESS	– National Commission on Education Support Services
RSA-DBE	– Republic of South Africa Department of Basic Education
SBST	– School-Based Support Team
SBSTs	– School-Based Support Teams
SIAS Policy	– Screening, Identification, Assessment, and Support Policy
SID	– Severe Intellectual Disability
SGB	– School Governing Body
SNA	– Special Needs Assessment

CHAPTER 1: ORIENTATION TO THE STUDY

1.1 INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Since 1994, various initiatives have been developed in South Africa to enhance educational quality and ensure access to learning opportunities (Badat et al., 2014). In South Africa, several barriers hinder learners from effectively learning at the school level. Several factors contribute to these barriers. However, the Screening, Identification, Assessment, and Support (SIAS) policy is one of the policies formulated by the Department of Basic Education (DBE) to address these challenges. The Minister of Basic Education published the policy on 19 December 2014 (Department of Basic Education [DBE], 2014).

The SIAS policy aims to identify learner-experienced barriers to learning, determine the need for support to address those barriers, and create and implement support programmes that meet the learner's requirements to alleviate the impact of the barriers on the learning process (DBE, 2014). According to the SIAS policy, it aims to improve the education system by making it accessible to everyone, including the vulnerable and those with learning barriers (DBE, 2014). However, the teacher's experience with implementing the SIAS policy has been challenging. Zulu (2019) stated that teachers still have an insufficient understanding of applying the strategies developed by the DBE to support the implementation of inclusive education through the screening, identification, assessment, and support policy. Hence, it becomes imperative to consider the teacher's perspective and the challenges they encounter when assessing learners with barriers to learning, guided by the SIAS policy.

One of the most essential duties of the teacher in implementing the SIAS policy is to have a firm grasp on inclusion and the various needs of learners, including those with disabilities (DBE, 2014). Whenever the teacher finds the role mentioned above challenging, it can lead to several problems. The district officials highlighted the fact that teachers with limited or insufficient knowledge and understanding of the SIAS policy are contributing factors to incorrect referrals and placements of learners into special schools (Ntseto, 2019).

Zulu (2019, p. 13) also highlighted that “the placement of learners in special, vocational or remedial school is a long-term decision that can ruin a learner’s life if not based on valid assessment”. I agree with the above statement because once the learner is referred to a special school and placed in a class with a teacher who is not experienced in inclusive education nor dedicated to the work, the teacher would not necessarily notice that the learner is incorrectly placed, and as a result, the learner will be negatively impacted.

In education, the term '*assessment*' refers to a process of gathering information about the learner that informs decision-making about the learner's progress (Department of Basic Education [DBE], 2011). In terms of the SIAS process, assessment refers to a thorough analysis of the information gathered in stages 1 and 2, which will provide direction on the level of support to be offered to learners with learning barriers (Ntlhare, 2022). However, according to the SIAS policy, assessment refers to identifying the obstacles that hinder the learner's ability to learn, determining how the learner participates and functions, and deciding on ways to support the learner (DBE, 2014).

1.2 RATIONALE FOR THE STUDY

I am a teacher at a public special school for learners with severe intellectual disabilities. It did not take me very long to realize that some learners who are referred to the school from surrounding public mainstream schools can perform better than learners who are admitted to the school, that is, learners “clinically” diagnosed with severe intellectual disability. According to Thurm et al. (2019), intellectual disability is characterised by significant limitations in both intellectual functioning and adaptive behaviour, which include a range of everyday social, practical, and academic skills required for daily life and school-related tasks. Many of the learners referred to the school from the mainstream system do not fit this definition. This observation raises concerns about the accuracy and consistency of the assessment and referral processes used in mainstream public schools, particularly in determining whether learners meet the criteria for placement in special schools for learners with severe intellectual disabilities.

This study is important as it will highlight the assessment process used in public mainstream schools to refer learners to special schools. The study also identifies challenges with the assessment process used in public mainstream schools when assessing learners, which in

turn is causing learners to be wrongfully referred from public mainstream schools into special schools that cater to learners with severe intellectual disabilities. Although existing research has highlighted general challenges in the implementation of inclusive education and policies such as EWP6 and the SIAS, there is limited research that specifically analyses how assessment and referral processes are conducted in practice at the school level. Little is known about how decisions are made, what procedures are followed, and how accurately these processes identify learners' needs. This study, therefore, seeks to address this gap.

The primary benefit of this study was to highlight challenges in the assessment process, aiming to identify suitable and practical ways to assess and support learners who are identified as having barriers to learning. In doing so, the study contributes to the existing body of knowledge by providing context-specific insights into how assessment practices are implemented in mainstream school settings and how these practices influence decisions regarding learner placement.

It also assisted in providing suitable support to help learners achieve the set objectives as per the National Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement. It was also suggested that ways or guidelines be established to ensure that the School-Based Support Teams (SBSTs) are functional and upskilled to make informed decisions regarding the learners' educational needs. Lastly, the study sought to guide the process of correctly placing learners with barriers to learning, not necessarily by returning them to mainstream schools, but rather by placing them in Special, Remedial, or Full-Service schools that cater to their specific needs. This focus aligns specifically with improving the assessment and referral process, rather than broadly addressing all challenges within inclusive education, thereby strengthening the academic focus of the study. We do not want to be a country that has possibly more learners wrongly classified as illiterate due to policy and systematic shortcomings and loopholes. By addressing these issues, the study aims to support more accurate, fair, and evidence-based placement decisions, ultimately contributing to improved educational outcomes for learners with diverse learning needs.

1.3 THE PROBLEM STATEMENT

Learners who are referred to the special school from surrounding public mainstream schools are performing far better than learners who are admitted to the special school, that is, learners "clinically" diagnosed with severe intellectual disability (Al-Hroub et al., 2023). In other words,

there may be a challenge with the assessment and referral process, as learners referred to and admitted to the special school are not suited for the special school's programme offerings. There may be certain challenges with the assessment process used in public schools when assessing learners who are referred to special schools, and these challenges must be explored. Referral outcomes are shaped by factors such as limited resources, unclear policies, lack of parental involvement, systemic inequalities, and the accuracy of diagnostic practices. Additional concerns include the risk of misplacing learners, the effects of labelling, and gaps in teachers' assessment literacy.

The SIAS policy (DBE, 2014, p. 35) regarding the role of the teacher states that "once the teacher has exhausted all strategies, he/she will consult with the SBST." This is after identifying the learning barrier. According to Zulu (2019), teachers are finding it difficult to adjust to the new way of doing things, which includes providing support for learners experiencing learning barriers, and they are suffering due to the overload they face.

Von Solms (2020) posits that teachers sometimes consciously overlook those learners for fear of the additional administrative work it would entail. By implication, the possibility exists that many learners might not receive the necessary support they need for high-quality learning. As such, the vision for an education system is to promote education for all and foster the development of inclusive and supportive centres of learning that allow all learners to participate actively in the education system (Department of Education [DoE], 2007).

Looking at the above highlighted role of the teacher, it seems as though the implementation was challenging. I have observed that learners who are referred to specialised schools from mainstream public schools are performing better than learners enrolled at the specialised school.

Going back to my observations, the following concerns arise. Teachers may not always exhaust all support strategies before referring learners to special schools, which may contribute to inappropriate referrals. Another concern is whether parents are fully involved in the referral process. Some parents are unable to assist with their children's homework because they work late. Lack of interest, time, and knowledge are some of the factors that prevent parents from getting involved (Chophel et al., 2021).

Is it that the SBST is not functional? According to a study by Ntseto (2019), it became clear that the SBST members are not functional and the indications were the inappropriate composition of the team, not enough referrals of learners to SBST or DBST and a lack of Individual Support Plans.

Challenges related to the effectiveness of District-Based Support Teams (DBST) may also influence the assessment and referral process. According to Ntseto (2019), the DBST delays and does not test referred learners in time and by the time they respond, age would have caught up with the learners. Zulu's (2019, p. 1) analysis further states that "It appears that in many education districts these teams are not adequately supporting the schools or the teachers".

Is it the learner's psychological, mental, and emotional status destructive during the assessment and support process? As noted by Ivanova (2021), the sense of joy or happiness was mostly linked to individual achievement, or achievement, and to encouraging learners to pursue more success. When the learner is comfortable before and during the assessment process, the outcome is more likely to be positive and a true reflection and when the learner is uncomfortable, the results are most likely to be negative yet not reflect the real capabilities of the learner. There may be a problem with the assessment process in public schools regarding the referral of learners to specialised schools.

1.4 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1.4.1 Main Question

What assessment process is used in public schools when assessing learners who are referred to special schools?

1.4.2 Sub-Questions

1. What is teachers' understanding of the assessment process followed in mainstream schools?
2. What is the policy expectation regarding the assessment and referral of learners to special schools?
3. How is the assessment process guided in mainstream schools to assess and refer learners to special schools?

4. What support is available to learners with barriers to learning in mainstream schools?
5. How trained are mainstream school teachers to assess and refer learners to special schools?

1.5 THE AIM AND OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1.5.1 Aim of the Study

The aim of this study was to determine the assessment process used in public schools when assessing learners who are referred to special schools.

1.5.2 The objectives of the Study

- To determine the teachers' understanding of the assessment process followed in mainstream schools.
- To determine the policy expectation regarding the assessment and referral of learners to special schools.
- To establish how the assessment process is guided in mainstream schools to assess and refer learners to special schools.
- To establish what support is available to learners with barriers to learning in mainstream schools.
- To determine how trained mainstream school teachers are to assess and refer learners to special schools?

1.6 LITERATURE REVIEW

1.6.1 Understanding the SIAS Policy

The screening identification assessment and support (SIAS) policy's goal is to "evaluate the degree and level of support needed in schools and classrooms to maximize learners' involvement in the learning process. The SIAS policy (DBE, 2014) seeks to promote an inclusive education system by ensuring that every learner, regardless of their challenges, has equal access to education. The policy emphasises frequently screening and assessing learners to identify their individual needs, followed by intervention measures that enhance learning and participation (DBE, 2014).

Assessment, according to the SIAS policy, is used to establish a learner's learning hurdles, as well as their level of functionality and involvement, although it is unrelated to scholastic assessment (DBE, 2014). According to Von Solms (2020), the identification phase of the SIAS policy process focuses on the teacher's important role in identifying potential barriers to learning and engagement. Mazibuko (2022) stated that the effectiveness of the inclusive education programme depends on the early identification of learning barriers and needs of learners, particularly those in the foundation phase, as well as the assessment of learners with special needs.

The researcher agrees with Romero (2015) statement, that once a learner with learning barriers is not identified at the foundation phase level, which is Grade R to Grade 3, they are more likely to be frustrated in the classroom and develop low self-esteem, or they may hide their challenges by exhibiting disruptive behaviour in class, because the higher the grade, the more difficult it becomes academically. As a result, when a learner is identified early on, appropriate interventions can be undertaken before the learner's educational needs become overwhelming and unmanageable.

1.6.2 A Summary of the Stages of the SIAS Protocol

The teacher must follow the following stages of the SIAS protocol when implementing the policy (DBE, 2014, pp. 28–29).

- **Stage 1** - The learner's profile determines the initial screening process. The teacher must screen learners upon arrival, and any information acquired must be recorded in the learner's profile at the start of each phase. The learner's profile must include School Health Programme reports, progress report cards, parent letters, the learner's present teacher, and any other relevant stakeholders. When an asterisk appears in a learner's profile, it is time to start completing the SNA1 form.
- **Stage 2** - Identifying and addressing barriers to learning and development at the school level. When a learner is identified as at-risk or vulnerable during the initial screening, the teacher commences the support process. Starting at age 12, both the parent/guardian and learner must participate in SIAS policy decision-making. The teacher begins the process by completing the suggested Support Needs

Assessment (SNA) form 1. The Support Needs Assessment Form 1 (SNA 1) must be signed by both the teacher and the parent.

- The School-Based Support Team (SBST) uses the Support Needs Assessment Form 2 (SNA 2) to provide intervention and support to referred learners.
- Finally, the District-Based Support Team (DBST) uses the Support Needs Assessment Form 3 (SNA 3) to provide intervention and support when a learner is recommended to them.

1.6.3 Stakeholder Roles in the Assessment Process

1.6.3.1 *The Role of the Teacher*

The teacher's role in an inclusive setting is crucial, according to SIAS policy (DBE, 2014). Every learner must have complete access to learning programmes and materials, as well as assessment methods that are both accessible and comprehensive.

A study conducted by Westwood (2018) reported that all the teachers demonstrated evidence of employing diverse teaching techniques or adapting instruction to cater to all learners' needs; they provide numerous opportunities through repeated teaching on an individual basis as well as individual remedial courses by the class teacher; repeated teaching of the same concepts; reducing the content; and asking for help from colleagues. In addition to the above-mentioned statement, teachers can differentiate the lesson, which can also be a helpful intervention approach. Through differentiating the lesson, the teacher changes the activities to accommodate all the learners they are teaching, but not the context. Instead, the teacher makes use of the learners' strengths. For example, when teaching the concept of shapes, the teacher can differentiate the lesson as follows:

- High support learner - will draw and colour the shapes.
- Moderate support learner - will trace and colour the shapes.
- Low support learner - will cut, paste, and colour the shapes.

This was the same context that used different approaches to cater to different learning needs. According to Von Solms (2020), a uniform assessment for all learners can hinder the development of assistance methods tailored to each learner's specific requirements and circumstances. Individual Support Plans (ISP) can help with this issue. After the teacher has determined that the learner is experiencing learning difficulties, they must develop an

Individual Support Plan that guides the learner (and their parent/guardian) in meeting the learner's unique requirements.

1.6.3.2 *The Role of the Parent/Guardian*

According to SIAS (2014), the key aspect in the early identification of barriers is the SIAS policy, which recognizes the critical role of parents/caregivers in education and training. The instructor can use observations and comments from parents/caregivers to determine the direct nature of a learner's barriers. Parents/caregivers should be engaged in the identification and assessment of their children at all times and should be treated as equal partners in the process. According to the SIAS policy (DBE, 2014), both the parent/caregiver and the learner aged 12 years or older must be involved in the decision-making process regarding SIAS.

Von Solms (2020) stated that the teacher initiates frequent meetings with the learner and his or her parent throughout the assessment process. However, not every parent can be involved due to various reasons (Muller, 2018). Other parents leave work late, some work away from home and only return on weekends, and as a result, they are unable to supervise or assist with their children's work. Another teacher stated that illiteracy, a limited amount of time, and a lack of interest in the child's schoolwork are all issues that discourage parents from becoming involved. Mkhuma et al. (2014) further state that another participant indicated that the majority of parents refuse to acknowledge that their child has a learning disability and instead blame the teacher. Von Solms (2020) states that the support process is sometimes hampered by parents' failure to enforce support strategies at home, often because they believe it is the role of the school or teacher, not realising that for a learner to progress, both the learner and the parent must take responsibility.

1.6.3.3 *The Role of the School-Based Support Team (SBST)*

According to the SIAS policy (DBE, 2014), the SBST's duty is to find ways to get additional funding, acknowledge further community-based support, and foster collaboration. The SBST should always consult with the learner's parent(s)/guardian and inform them about any decisions made to help the learner. If the teacher's support measures are insufficient, according to Von Solms (2020), the teacher's concerns will be escalated and forwarded to the SBST. The SBST is then responsible for reviewing and enhancing the initiatives that have been implemented.

1.6.3.4 *The Role of the District-Based Support Team (DBST)*

Von Solms (2020) states that if further help is needed after the SBST has exhausted all its support options at the school level, the SBST must confer with the DBST. The DBST will next evaluate the teachers' intervention tactics, as well as the SBSTs, in assisting the learner with barriers to learning. The DBST will next provide a high degree of support to the learner and connect them with resource centres or place the learner in a special needs school.

Tebid (2010) notes that the district team visits their school once a term, according to many teachers. In my personal view, as noted by Tebid (2010), visiting a school once per term is insufficient; it would be better if the DBST visits twice or three times per term for follow-up purposes. Zulu (2019) found that many DBSTs appear to be failing to provide appropriate support to schools and teachers.

1.6.3.5 *The Role of the School Governing Body (SGB)*

The role of the SGB at schools, according to the DBE (2014), is to oversee learner support and inclusion, ensure the implementation of the SIAS process, and ensure that every learner's needs are met, including those of learners with disabilities.

1.6.4 *Teachers' Views About Implementing the SIAS Policy*

Hess (2020, pp. 202-203) states that the findings of her study show that “teachers find it hard to cope with the demand of implementing the different inclusive policies.”

Mkhuma et al. (2014) highlight that the needs of learners are jeopardised, and they cannot be identified or met since teachers lack the time and skills to do so. Research further indicates that teachers are struggling to adapt to the new approach, which involves providing support for learners experiencing difficulties, and as a result, they are suffering from an increased workload (Zulu, 2019). Zulu's (2019) findings further indicate that teachers receive mixed messages about curriculum and assessment standards, which makes it difficult for them to manage the diversity in their classrooms.

1.6.5 *Teachers' Concerns Regarding the SIAS Policy*

According to Mkhuma et al. (2014), teachers are concerned about their limited time and have expressed their dissatisfaction with the paperwork involved in the SIAS policy toolkit, as well

as individual support plans, which are adding to their workload. As a result, they do not fairly identify learners. Due to the increased administrative workload, some teachers avoided the process of identifying learners with learning disabilities. Robert's (2011) findings further suggest that time is often inadequate to provide learners experiencing barriers in the classroom with adequate support. The teachers emphasized that providing individualized support requires more time. Evidently, teachers then spend much time supporting individual learners while neglecting others in a classroom (Hargreaves et al., 2015).

1.6.6 Teachers' Need for SIAS Policy Training for Better Implementation

Teachers are willing to work, but they are not guided or encouraged to address their individual requirements as teachers (Mkhuma et al., 2014). Ntseto (2019) further highlighted that SIAS training is insufficient, as some of the trained teachers are unable to apply what they have learned in their training. It appears that teachers are under-equipped, and something must be done to address this issue.

1.6.7 Factors Contributing to the Increasing Number of Learners with Learning Barriers in South Africa

Nong (2020) indicated that the SBST, together with the DBST, must empower teachers on how to address learning barriers. Nong further highlights that it is believed the number of learners with learning barriers is increasing significantly, and in almost all classes, learners are experiencing learning barriers. Teachers must also be equipped with strategies and resources to support these learners, thereby eliminating factors that contribute to the increasing number of learners with learning barriers.

Khumalo et al. (2014) highlighted that teachers have overcrowded classes (with up to 50 learners or more in some schools) and find it challenging to create a learning environment that engages all learners in the class.

Von Solms (2020) maintains that the success of the SIAS policy in supporting learners with barriers to learning can be hindered by limited resources and a shortage of specialised skills. Due to this, teachers may be frustrated by the lack of resources, which can limit their ability to help these learners effectively.

1.6.8 Negative Impact of Poor Assessment and Support on the Learner

Ntseto (2019) highlighted that delaying the testing of a learner may lead to learner drop-outs, because by the time the learner is tested, their age may no longer permit placement at a special school, resulting in a negative impact on the learner.

1.7 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

A theoretical framework provides a structured lens through which a phenomenon is examined, offering a coherent set of ideas and assumptions that shape the study's interpretation of reality (Du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2014). This study is underpinned by Behaviourism Theory, one of the foundational perspectives in Educational Learning Theory. Behaviourism is associated with the work of scholars such as Pavlov, Watson, Skinner, and Thorndike, whose views dominated educational thinking in the mid-20th century and continue to influence classroom practice today (James, 2006). Although contemporary education increasingly integrates cognitive and socio-constructivist approaches, behaviourist principles remain evident in behaviour modification programmes, classroom management strategies, and assessment practices used in schools.

Behaviourism emphasises that learning is demonstrated through observable and measurable behaviours, which is a central reason for its relevance to this study. According to Ally (2004), behaviourist learning environments clearly communicate expected learning outcomes, assess learners to determine whether those outcomes have been achieved, and provide immediate feedback to reinforce desired behaviours. This focus on observable behaviour aligns strongly with the assessment expectations in the SIAS Policy, which requires teachers to identify learning barriers through concrete evidence such as academic performance, behavioural patterns, task completion, and response to instructional strategies (DBE, 2014). From a behaviourist perspective, teachers monitor learners' behaviours, such as attention, persistence, error patterns, and task engagement, to determine whether reinforcement and instructional conditioning are producing the expected learning outcomes. When the expected behavioural change does not occur despite repeated reinforcement or adapted teaching strategies, teachers are prompted to initiate the SIAS referral process, as the lack of response signals the presence of deeper learning, developmental, or environmental barriers.

A second key principle of behaviourism is the central role of assessment and feedback in shaping behaviour. Behaviourism theory holds that assessment provides essential

information about whether learners have mastered earlier steps before progressing to more complex tasks, and that learning materials must be carefully sequenced from simple to complex to promote mastery (Ally, 2004). This principle corresponds with the SIAS requirement that teachers conduct continuous, evidence-based assessments before making referrals. Formative assessment plays a crucial role in this process, as it allows teachers to observe how learners respond to instruction, reinforcement, and corrective feedback. Engeström (2015) and Ketabi et al. (2014) emphasise that formative evaluation is critical for identifying where learning breaks down and for adapting teaching accordingly. If a learner consistently fails to meet behavioural learning targets, despite reinforcement and repeated instruction, this signals the need for additional support or specialised assessment through the SBST or the DBST.

Behaviourism also supports the idea that teacher behaviour influences learner behaviour, particularly through reinforcement and the modelling of expectations. Skinner (1990) argues that perceived control and motivation affect a child's willingness to engage in learning activities, and that the social context created by teachers plays a key role in shaping these beliefs. Bandura (2012) similarly highlights that learners' academic outcomes are closely tied to how teachers structure learning environments, provide reinforcement, and communicate expectations. Within mainstream schools, this means that teachers must understand the SIAS assessment and referral procedures because their actions directly influence not only how learners behave, but also how learners perceive their own abilities and opportunities for support.

In this study, Behaviourism Theory provides a powerful framework for understanding how teachers interpret learners' observable behaviours, how they use reinforcement and assessment to guide learning, and how they make decisions about when to refer learners for additional support. By grounding the assessment process in observable evidence and behavioural indicators, as required by SIAS, behaviourism helps explain why teacher vigilance, consistent documentation, and systematic observation are essential for early identification and appropriate referral of learners experiencing barriers to learning. Teachers' behaviour, including how they monitor, assess, and respond to learner behaviour, ultimately shapes the learner's developmental trajectory and determines whether timely support is provided.

1.8 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND DESIGN

A research methodology is an approach used to conduct research studies. It encompasses the theoretical framework, procedures, and methods for collecting, analysing, and interpreting data. The main goal of research methodology and design is to ensure that the research findings are accurate and reliable (Tracy, 2024).

1.8.1 Research Design

The study employed a single case study design. A case study is a detailed description of social facts that exist, allowing for a deep exploration and understanding of the participant's experience (Du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2014). A case study was beneficial because it enabled the researcher to gain an understanding of the challenges with regard to the assessment process used in public schools when assessing learners who are referred to special schools in detail. Because of the nature of this research study, the information that was gathered from the participants was presented in a case study design to narrate all the information in detail.

1.8.2 Research Paradigm

A research paradigm is defined as a set of beliefs or assumptions about the fundamental elements of reality; it addresses beliefs such as ontology (the nature of reality), epistemology (the relationship between the knower and the known), and methodologies (the process by which knowledge is produced) (Aliyu et al., 2015).

The study employed the interpretative paradigm. The interpretative paradigm is a research approach that focuses on understanding the meaning and interpretation of social phenomena. It entails that reality is in a constant state of flux and is dependent on how individuals experience it internally; it aims to gain an understanding of numerous realities (Pervin et al., 2022). The participants' interpretations were captured as data for this study.

1.8.3 Research Approach

This study adopted a qualitative research approach. A qualitative research approach can be described as a research strategy that focuses on collecting and analysing spoken or written words (Du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2014). The researcher chose a qualitative research approach because the nature of this study requires a detailed classification of results that are not

numerical in nature. The purpose of this study was to explore the challenges associated with the assessment process used in public mainstream schools when assessing learners with barriers to learning.

According to Tracy (2024), qualitative researchers aim to understand how people interpret their experiences, construct their worlds, and assign meaning to their encounters. Therefore, this allowed me to understand the assessment process for referral purposes. This is because a qualitative approach enabled the researcher to delve deep into the experiences and challenges teachers and learners undergo during the referral assessment process.

1.8.4 Research Context

This research was conducted in three mainstream public primary schools located in Soweto, a township in the Johannesburg Central District of Gauteng Province, South Africa. The three mainstream foundation phase schools were identified and selected for this study because they conduct the SIAS process to refer learners to special schools. Furthermore, the schools were easily accessible to the researcher.

1.8.5 Population and Sampling

1.8.5.1 Population

A total of 26 participants participated in this study. The participants were drawn from three foundation phase mainstream schools (A, B, and C). They included nine teachers, nine parents, seven SBST members, and one DBST representative who represented Schools A and C.

1.8.5.2 Sampling

A sample is a subset of the population that is considered representative of the whole (Du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2014). It is all about how you decide to sample (a sample is a small proportion of the population), and the population (the population is every possible person who could be interested in my research).

The Sampling method that was used in this study is a non-probability sampling method. Vehovar et al. (2016) also suggest that a sample is a subset of a population, and we survey

the sample's units to gain more insight into the entire population. When accessing the complete population is difficult, non-probability sampling is utilized.

This study employs a purposive sampling method as its non-probability sampling approach. Purposive sampling, also known as judgment sampling, is the deliberate selection of informants based on their characteristics. It is a non-random technique that does not require any underlying ideas or a specific number of informants. Therefore, the researcher determines what information is necessary and goes out to find people who can and will offer it based on their knowledge or experience (Akkaş et al., 2024).

The study sample was selected in the Gauteng province of South Africa, in Johannesburg. Three public mainstream primary schools were sampled. These are schools that refer learners to special schools.

Four sample groups were selected for this study from each school: parents (sample group 1), teachers (sample group 2), SBST members (sample group 3), and the DBST representative (sample group 4). The parents, teachers, and SBST members were identified and selected by the school management team at each school. The DBST representative was the department official who oversees the assessment and referral process at the schools.

1.8.5.2.1 Sample Group 1: Parents

The first group of participants included parents. A total of nine parents participated in interviews. One or both parents/guardians (depending on the parenting status, e.g., single parent) of three learners from the foundation phase were sampled at each school. The parent(s)/guardians were representing their learners, as some learners may be vulnerable and some of the learners may not be able to answer certain questions. Priority was given to parents of learners who were already identified as having barriers to learning or those who had already initiated the referral process to special schools. This is because it has been noted that in most cases, learners referred to special schools and labelled as 'learners with barriers to learning' are in the foundation phase and early intermediate phase, especially during the transition from a teacher-classroom-based system to a subject-teacher-based system. Tebid (2019) also states that early identification of learning barriers should focus on learners in the foundation phase, and assessing learners in need of additional support is critical to the

success of the inclusion programme. According to the SIAS policy, at the period of admission and at the start of each phase, the teacher must screen all learners (DBE, 2014).

Learners who were not in the foundation phase or were not identified as having barriers to learning were excluded from the sample.

1.8.5.2.2 Sample Group 2: Teachers

The second group of participants included teachers. A total of nine foundation phase teachers participated in interviews. The sample included three Post Level 1 foundation phase teachers who implemented the referral process, with no more than five years of experience in each of the three schools.

Teachers who were not Post Level 1 foundation phase teachers and those who had implemented the referral process more than five years ago were excluded from the sample.

1.8.5.2.3 Sample Group 3: SBST Members

The third group of participants included the School-Based Support Team (SBST). A total of seven SBST members (who were all teachers) participated in focus group interviews. Each focus group consisted of two members from School A and B, and three members from School C. These participants outlined the steps followed in screening, identifying, and supporting learners. Although the researcher expected *each focus group to have three members, this was not possible at all schools.*

Teachers who were not members of SBST were excluded from the sample.

1.8.5.2.4 Sample Group 4: DBST Representative

The fourth group of participants included representatives from the District-Based Support Team (DBST) at each of the three schools, who are involved in the placement and referral process. Although the researcher expected three DBST representatives to participate in this study, a total of only one DBST representative participated, as she represented both schools A and C. She was interviewed telephonically to explain the procedures for the referral processes in schools A and C. The DBST representative for school B was not available for an interview.

1.8.6 Instrumentation and Data Collection Techniques

The data collection methods identified for this study included interviews (both individual and focus group) and document analysis.

- Individual interviews were conducted with the learner's parent(s)/guardian (nine participants), the learner's class teachers (nine participants), as well as the district-based support team (DBST) representative (1 participant).
- Focus group interviews were conducted with the school-based support team members at each school. The total number of SBST members was seven, and they were all teachers.
- Documents analysed for this study included the SIAS policy document, the learner's books, and the Learner Profile containing the Individual Support Plan, and learner Support Needs Assessment (SNA1) forms, as well as Parent invitation to school letters.

1.8.6.1 Interviews

In qualitative research, Sewell (2020) characterises interviews as attempts to comprehend the world from the subject's perspective, to unravel the significance of people's experiences, and to discover their lived reality before scientific explanations. An interview is a discussion between a researcher and a participant.

In this study, interviews were conducted with the selected participants, lasting less than one hour. A semi-structured interview schedule guided the interviews. A tape-recording device was used to record the interviews, and notes were taken in handwritten form. The tape recorder and notes are only accessible to the researcher.

1.8.6.1.1 Individual Interviews

Parent(s) or guardian of the participating learners preferred to be interviewed individually at the learners' former schools, in the classroom of the SBST coordinator, and also telephonically. The teachers were interviewed individually in their schools and also by telephone. The District-Based Support Team member was interviewed telephonically. The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews because they were informal in tone and allowed for open responses (Ruslin et al., 2022).

1.8.6.1.2 Focus Group Interviews

Focus groups are discussion groups or interviews. They may be tiny or huge. Focus groups have been employed for a wide range of purposes over the last century (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2013).

In this study, focus group interviews were conducted with members of the School-Based Support Team only, lasting approximately one hour. A tape-recording device was used to record the interview and take notes in the form of handwritten notes. The tape recorder and notes are only accessible to the researcher. The interviews were conducted at each of the three sample schools, scheduled at a common time according to the availability of all members.

1.8.6.2 Documents Analysis

Document analysis is a way of carefully reviewing and evaluating both printed and electronic resources (computer-based and Internet-based). This strategy has the advantage of allowing one to collect a large amount of data. The purpose of analysing the documents is to enable the researcher to collect data on the intervention strategies employed by the teacher, parent, and SBST in assisting the learner in overcoming the learning barriers and challenges encountered during the assessment process.

The documents that were analysed included the following:

- Screening, Identification, Assessment, and Support (SIAS) policy.
- Learner books.
- Learners' profiles, which contained the following documents:
 - Individual Support Plans
 - Learner Support Needs Assessment forms (SNA1), and
 - Parent invitation to school letters.

The researcher requested all the documents from the teachers. The researcher also requested that copies of all necessary documents be made. However, the researcher was not allowed because some documents contained personal and confidential information. Therefore, the analysis took place in a private office in the respective schools.

1.8.7 Data Analysis Process and Interpretation

This study used thematic analysis to analyse the data. According to Onwuegbuzie and Leech (2007), qualitative data analysis is one of the most crucial steps in the qualitative research process, as it enables researchers to make sense of their qualitative data. The process of qualitative data analysis is “labour-intensive and time-consuming” (Lofland et al., 2006, p. 196). This is because qualitative research produces large amounts of contextually laden, subjective, and richly elaborated data. Thematic analysis is a method of arranging data according to themes and patterns in a way that answers the research questions (Ngulube, 2015).

The researcher followed the four steps for analysing the themes as identified by Harding and Pill (2013): first, the researcher identified the themes and created categories; second, the researcher ordered the codes from different descriptors into common categories; third, the researcher created sub-categories to reflect different elements of the themes; and finally, she used the themes to explain the relationship between different parts of the data.

1.9 RELIABILITY AND VALIDITY/CREDIBILITY AND TRUSTWORTHINESS

1.9.1 Reliability

Reliability in research refers to the consistency of a study or measurement tool in producing consistent results (Mohajan, 2017). The researcher ensured reliability by carefully designing the study and using consistent methods and tools.

1.9.2 Validity/Credibility

The accuracy with which the researcher understood the information provided by the participant is referred to as credibility (Du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2014). Credibility was ensured by using more than one research method, namely interviews (individual and focus group) and document analysis. The data from the sources were analysed and triangulated for common patterns.

1.9.3 Transferability

Transferability refers to the extent to which the findings remain consistent when applied in a similar situation (Du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2014). To ensure Transferability, this study provided a detailed outline of the sampling size and selection process, allowing others to assess the relevance of the findings to their contexts.

1.9.4 Confirmability

Confirmability refers to the degree to which the collected data supports the researcher's findings and analysis (Anney, 2014). It illustrates how practical inferences are made from the data. To help individuals interested in learning more about the research design, this study provided a detailed explanation of the research techniques.

1.10 RESEARCH ETHICS

Research ethics can be defined as a set of morals or a professional code of conduct that governs one's attitude and behaviour (Du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2014). Research ethics are important because they impact all individuals who have a stake in research. The study was conducted by addressing ethical issues that affect the participants as follows:

- **Research integrity-** According to Levitt (2017), research integrity refers to the process that occurs between the data gathering method, data analysis, and the theory derived from the data as a quality of the process. This study ensured integrity by outlining a detailed data collection method, data analysis process, and the theory related to the data.
- **Informed consent-** the participants in this study were informed about the study, were aware that they were part of it, and understood the expectations and the application of the results. They signed a written consent to participate in the study. The identities of the schools and all participants are protected using pseudonyms. This information was provided in writing, and participants signed a consent form.
- **Maintaining confidentiality-** In conducting this study and collecting data from the participants, interviews were confidential, and sensitive information was protected. Follow-up questions were asked to clarify uncertain information (Petrova, 2016).

- ***Incentives***- the study made it clear that participants would not be advantaged or disadvantaged by being part of the study. Participation is voluntary, and participants can withdraw at any time if they wish. All participants received feedback on the findings (Correa, 2020).
- ***Participant well-being***- This study topic triggered emotional memories in some parents/guardians. The researcher was sensitive and offered comfort, pausing and continuing the interview once the parent/guardian was ready (Lynch, 2024). The study aimed to make a positive and valuable contribution to society while causing no harm to the participants in any way.
- ***Data storage***- the data is kept in secure storage and is only accessible to the researcher. The data will be disposed of after five years (Hart, 2016).

1.11 LIMITATIONS AND DELIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Given the shortage of educational psychiatrists in the Johannesburg Central district, only one DBST member was telephonically interviewed for less than an hour over the weekend.

Scheduling a common time for the focus group interviews at the school was a challenge, as members were not available at the same time. To counteract this, ample notification was provided to the participants, allowing them to indicate their availability and preferred date and time, and the interviews were scheduled accordingly. Some individual interviews were conducted telephonically to accommodate certain participants. Raymond (2021) stated that participants must be accommodated and not made to feel obligated to participate in studies.

1.12 DEFINITION OF KEY CONCEPTS

- ***Screening Identification Assessment and Support (SIAS) Policy*** - The SIAS policy (DBE, 2014) aims to provide a framework for standardising procedures to identify, assess, and offer programs for all learners who require additional support to enhance their participation and inclusion in school.
- ***District-based Support Teams (DBST)***- The DBST is referred to as departmental experts and is in charge of promoting inclusive education through leadership, administration, curriculum delivery, training, resource allocation, and the identification and resolution of learning impediments (DBE, 2014; Ntseto, 2015).

- **School-based Support Teams (SBSTs)**- The SBSTs are formed by schools in general and higher education as a school-level support mechanism, with the primary goal of coordinating school, learner, and teacher support services. They were previously referred to as the Institution-level Support Team (DBE, 2014; Maphumulo, 2019).
- **Barriers to learning**- Barriers to learning refer to challenges that prevent learners from taking advantage of learning and development opportunities because they arise in the educational system as a whole, the learning environment, or the learner themselves (Sikhitha, 2023).
- **Learning Challenges/difficulties**- Some learners face barriers to learning in different disciplines, such as cognitive, emotional, social, environmental, and physical challenges (DBE, 2014; Seneheweera, 2022). These learners are identified as having learning challenges/difficulties.
- **Foundation phase**- This refers to grades R–3, which include learners aged five to eight. The foundation phase involves four years, beginning with grade R, the reception year. The most significant learning programs in this phase are literacy, numeracy, and life skills (Hadebe, 2019).
- **Mainstream/ Ordinary Schools**- A mainstream school is a typical educational establishment that teaches learners from the general learner body, as opposed to special education schools or other institutions that cater to learners with particular needs (Leifler, 2021).
- **Full-Service Schools**- Full-service Primary and secondary schools are government-designated and converted mainstream schools with specialized resources and equipment to assist learners with a variety of disabilities and learning requirements (Mamogobo, 2023). According to SIAS policy (DBE, 2014), they may accept learners with "high" learning requirements, but they are more likely to accommodate learners with "moderate" or "low" learning needs.
- **Special Schools (SSs)**- Special schools, according to Education White Paper 6 [EWP6] (DoE, 2001), are referred to as schools that can provide a specialised education curriculum to learners who require full-time or part-time access to high-intensity educational and other support. Special schools are elementary and secondary schools that are equipped to provide a specialised education curriculum to learners who require a high level of educational support (DoE,

2001). Special schools must focus on the education of children with specific "severe" disabilities (DoE, 2001). Children should only be enrolled in special schools after being screened through the SIAS policy procedure in a mainstream school (DBE, 2014). Special schools should also specialise in accommodating their particular impairment. Due to the large distances between their homes and special schools, children in special schools are often required to reside in hostels during the school year (DBE, 2014).

- **Mild intellectual disability-** A person with a mild intellectual impairment may have the ability to read but have difficulty understanding what they are reading (DBE, 2014; Whitbread, 2021).
- **Moderate intellectual disability-** Individuals with moderate intellectual disability possess fundamental communication abilities, although they cannot generally engage in complex discourse. They may struggle in social situations and have difficulty interpreting social cues and making judgments. These individuals are capable of caring for themselves, although they may require more training and assistance than the average person. Some individuals can live independently, while others require the support of a group home (DBE, 2014; Martin, 2017).
- **Severe intellectual disability-** Individuals with severe intellectual disabilities are those who are only able to communicate at the most basic level (DBE, 2014). They require ongoing supervision and assistance, as they are unable to perform all self-care duties independently. Most individuals in this category will require living in a group home for support, as they are unable to live independently (DBE, 2014; Gjermestad, 2017).

1.13 CHAPTER OUTLINE

Chapter 1: Orientation to the Study

In this chapter, the researcher introduces the study by outlining its aims and background. It included the rationale for the study, statement of the problem, research questions, aim of the study, research methodology, and definition of terms.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

In the literature review, the researcher examined the existing literature on the assessment process used in public schools to evaluate and support learners referred to special schools.

Chapter 3: Research Methodology

In this chapter, the researcher outlined the research methodology used in this study. It discusses the research design, paradigm, and approach, as well as the population, sample selection, research methods, and ethical considerations.

Chapter 4: Data Analysis and Discussion of Findings

The researcher compared the research problem, research objectives, and data gathering techniques, and explained the analysis and interpretation strategies that are important.

Chapter 5: Summary, Recommendations, and Conclusions

This chapter presents a summary of the findings, along with limitations, conclusions, and recommendations derived from the study.

1.14 CONCLUSION

It is a concern that learners referred from public mainstream schools to specialised schools are performing significantly better than those intended for admission to specialised schools and those already enrolled at the school. The teachers, parents, SBST, as well as the DBST, must play their part in ensuring that they offer proper support before referrals, as a means to exhaust all options, guided by the SIAS policy.

However, the study aims to explore the assessment process used in public schools when assessing learners with barriers to learning and to suggest some guidelines or recommendations regarding the assessment process. We do not want to be a country wrongly classified as illiterate due to policy and systematic shortcomings and loopholes.

The next chapter (Chapter 2) provides the literature review for the study.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter will review the literature about the assessment process used in public mainstream schools when referring learners to special schools. A brief history of special schools in South Africa will be highlighted. This chapter will also discuss the policy on screening, identification, assessment, and support process as we compare it with other international assessment policies and strategies. The stakeholder's role in the assessment process and the negative impact of poor assessment and support on the learner is further discussed. Difficulties facing teachers in implementing SIAS, their concerns, and the need for training are also highlighted. The theoretical framework and concluding remarks bring the chapter to a close.

2.2 INTERNATIONAL ASSESSMENT PROCESSES

Over the last thirty years, the concept of inclusion, particularly inclusive education, has gained traction in many countries. Inclusion is typically characterised as a process of reconstruction and change aimed at increasing participation (Walton & Engelbrecht, 2024).

In Germany, individuals who are physically and mentally challenged or who have other obvious disabilities are diagnosed before school enrolment (Von Maurice et al., 2017). The federal states of Germany have declared that if a teacher identifies or suspects that a learner is experiencing learning barriers, or if a parent notices indications that the learner might be experiencing learning barriers, the educational authority initiates a diagnostic investigation (Von Maurice et al., 2017). Additionally, the parent must be informed about the process; however, if the learner is 18 years or older, it is not necessary to inform the parent. The special teacher conducts the assessment. The educational authority informs the parent when there is a need for special education or provides advice regarding relevant information for the learner to implement (Secretariat of the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs of the Länder in the Federal Republic of Germany, 2015).

In Sweden, diagnostic processes are conducted within the health sector, rather than in schools (Sansour & Bernhard, 2018). Teachers are not permitted to diagnose learners, but whenever they suspect that a learner is displaying learning barriers, the teacher will inform the school principal. The principal, together with the Student's Health Team (SHT), will then

develop intervention strategies. The Student's Health Team serves as an important measure in assessing the learner at the school level, as well as the team that drafts the action plan to ensure the learner is assisted (Hjörne & Säljö, 2014). The school conducts a pedagogical investigation, and when the parent agrees, modifications in the teaching and learning environment will be made to cater to the learner. Psychological assessments are conducted when pedagogical investigation reveals other issues; however, this cannot occur without the parents' consent. The learner is then referred to the school that will cater to their learning needs, although the learner has the right to decline the specific placement offered (Hjörne & Säljö, 2014).

In Sweden, four types of assessments (medical, psychological, social, and pedagogical) are now required before a learner can be placed in a special school (Skolverket, 2013). Learners who do not fulfil the minimum learning goals for mainstream or comprehensive schools are enrolled in special schools. There are two types of special schools: ordinary and special education for individuals with intellectual impairments. Individuals with an IQ below 70 are required to attend a special school for individuals with intellectual disabilities. Alternatively, they can be referred to a regular school that follows the special school curriculum (Skolverket, 2013).

While international and South African literature provides a broad understanding of inclusive education and the policy frameworks guiding it, such as Education White Paper 6 and the Screening, Identification, Assessment and Support (SIAS) policy, recent studies indicate that there are still significant gaps between policy and practice. The SIAS policy was designed to standardise procedures for identifying, assessing, and supporting learners who experience barriers to learning, with a strong emphasis on stakeholder involvement and equitable access to education (Fodo, 2023). However, research shows that the implementation of inclusive education policies in South Africa remains uneven, particularly in resource-constrained contexts where teachers often lack adequate training and support to effectively carry out assessment processes (Sepadi, 2025).

Furthermore, studies evaluating the application of the SIAS policy reveal that, although teachers are expected to follow structured processes of screening, identification, and assessment, these procedures are not always consistently or effectively implemented at the school level (Matolo & Rambuda, 2022). Additional research highlights challenges such as limited access to specialist support services, inconsistencies in referral systems, and

resource shortages, all of which negatively affect the assessment, placement and support of learners requiring specialised education (Starkie, 2024). In some cases, these challenges result in delays or barriers in referring learners to special schools, despite policy intentions to promote inclusion and appropriate support (Mavuso, 2022).

Although these studies provide valuable insights into inclusive education and policy implementation, there is still limited research that specifically focuses on how the assessment process is conducted in practice when learners are referred from public mainstream schools to special schools. Much of the existing literature addresses broader issues such as teacher preparedness, policy effectiveness, and inclusive practices, but does not sufficiently analyse the detailed procedures and decision-making processes involved in learner referral. Therefore, this study seeks to explore the assessment processes used in public mainstream schools when assessing learners who are referred to special schools, with the aim of contributing to a deeper understanding of how policy is translated into practice and identifying possible gaps and challenges within the referral process.

2.3 A BRIEF HISTORY OF SPECIAL EDUCATION IN SOUTH AFRICA

To understand or gain a clear perspective on how the assessment process came to be, it is necessary to look briefly at the history of the South African special education system, because it reviews the process and efforts to mitigate previous injustices that gave birth to the assessment and referral process for learners with learning barriers and the education system as we know it today.

The Minister of Education assigned the National Commission on Education Support Services (NCESS) as well as the National Commission on Special Needs in Education and Training (NCSNET) in October 1996 to examine and provide suggestions on every aspect of the South African Special Needs and Support Services in education and training (DoE, 1997).

In November 1997, a combined report of findings from the NCESS and the NCSNET was conferred to the minister of education, and an ultimate report that talked about the suggestions regarding special needs and support services in education and training in South Africa was released in February 1998 by the Department of Education for public input and recommendation (DoE, 1997).

In addition to the above-mentioned statement, the NCESS and the NCSNET spent a year conducting research, holding debates, workshops, and public debates, and inviting international experts to examine the quality of South African Special Needs and Support Services in education and training (DoE, 1997). This, in itself, is evidence that the Department of Education and Training truly wanted to see specialised education implemented; however, a lot still needs to be done to ensure that our society is inclusive and accessible. Over the years, researchers such as Lomofsky, Lazarus, and Engelbrecht, among others, have reached similar conclusions (Lomofsky & Lazarus, 2001).

The Department of Education [DoE] (1997) highlighted that specialised education and assistance were primarily provided for a small proportion of learners with disabilities within special education. This negatively impacted a larger proportion of learners with disabilities. In the past, during apartheid, top-quality resources were set aside for white learners, meaning specialized education and support were rendered on a racial basis (DoE, 2001). Additionally, Margolis (2017) states that learners were divided into ethnic groups and instructed in separate facilities. It was also shown that black schools had around twice as many learners per class as white schools. This questions the credibility of the findings as it shows a bias toward the other group.

The EWP6 (DoE, 2001) pointed out that most learners with disabilities have been wrongly placed in mainstream schools or fallen out of the education system. The curriculum has failed to accommodate and cater to the diverse learning needs of learners, resulting in many pushouts, dropouts, and failures among children with learning needs. In addition, Omidire et al. (2015) highlighted that poor assessments can lead to low learner achievement, which can also be attributed to a lack of interest in trying again, demotivation, and distress.

According to EWP6 (DoE, 2001), the NCSNET and NCESS proposed that the education and training system promote education for all and encourage the creation of inclusive and supportive learning environments in which every learner can fully participate in the educational process, allowing them to develop and expand their potential and participate as equal members of society. The Educational White Paper 6 [EWP6] (DoE, 2001) is a policy that outlines what an inclusive education and training system is and what it aims to achieve. It also provides guidelines, structures, and strategies for establishing an inclusive education and training system for South Africans.

An inclusive education and training system recognizes that all children and youth can learn and benefit from support, while also acknowledging that each learner is unique and individual. (DoE, 2001).

EWP6 (DoE, 2001) recommends funding initiatives to address areas and institutions in need, promote sustainability, and ensure equal access to education for all. In 2001, the Department of Education announced planned changes to be implemented over an eight-year period. To assist the development of an inclusive education and training system, policies were established in response to strategic changes. The Implementation of Education White Paper 6, Special Needs Education: Building an Inclusive Education and Training System, included the 2008 National Strategy for Screening, Identification, Assessment, and Support School Pack (DoE, 2001).

SIAS was first piloted in selected districts between 2002 and 2010, tested through small-scale projects to refine screening and support processes (Maree, 2023). From 2010 to 2013, the Department of Basic Education engaged in consultations and revisions, leading to the official launch of SIAS in 2014 (Department of Basic Education, 2014). Its rollout was phased across provinces between 2014 and 2019, with training workshops and resource allocation, though uptake varied widely. These historical and contextual factors continue to shape current challenges: apartheid-era segregation still influences perceptions of “special” versus “mainstream” education, resource shortages undermine effective implementation, and policy ambiguity fosters compliance-driven practices rather than genuine diagnostic or support-oriented practices.

The Screening Identification, Assessment, and Support (SIAS) policy (DBE, 2014) is the current policy that aims to address the needs of learners, particularly those who are vulnerable, marginalized, and excluded. The SIAS policy aims to provide access to basic education for learners who face learning difficulties, including those with physical disabilities (DBE, 2014).

2.4 THE SIAS PROCESS

The Policy on SIAS was publicised by the Minister of Basic Education, Angelina Matsie Motshekga, on the 19th of December in the year 2014 (DBE, 2014). This policy aims to provide a framework for the established procedures in South Africa. It aims to provide better access to the quality of education, enhancing participation in the educational experience or

journey of all learners, particularly those who are vulnerable, marginalised, and excluded, as well as those who experience learning barriers by screening, identifying, assessing, and supporting them in their current schools as much as possible (DBE, 2014). Figure 2.1 below shows the stages of the SIAS process.

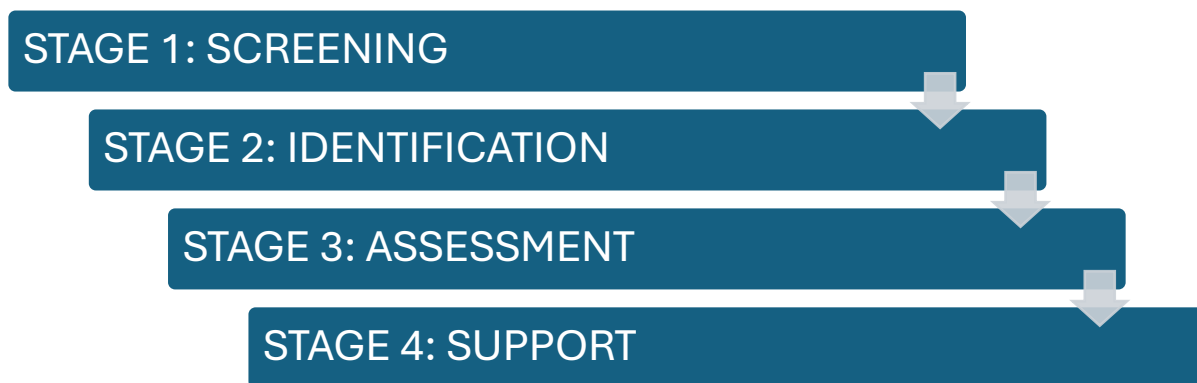


Figure 2.1: Stages of the SIAS process

2.4.1 Stage 1: Screening

In the SIAS policy, the word '**Screening**' is abbreviated to '**S**'. The first stage of the SIAS process is the initial screening, guided by the Learner Profile. In education, screening can be defined as a method or tool that a teacher uses to gather information about a learner (DBE, 2014). It can include information about the learner's personal strengths, weaknesses, learning abilities, learning challenges, social competence, behaviour, wellness, health, personal care, classroom and school experiences, community, home, and family background, etc. (DBE, 2014).

According to Deghaye (2021), to screen a learner, take note of and capture all necessary details in the learner's profile. The goal of screening is to detect if a learning barrier exists.

Screening should be done at admission as well as at the beginning of each phase by the teacher. All findings must be recorded in the learner profile (DBE, 2014).

In education, a learner profile is a legal document that contains the learner's information (DBE, 2014). The Learner Profile contains information about the learner, including their personal details, health information, reports from professionals and relevant stakeholders, skills, strengths, weaknesses, likes, dislikes, potential learning barriers, and other relevant

details. It can describe the learners' goals, plans, needs, and wants. Its purpose is to provide the learner's existing status and to take measures for the learner's future development. Learner profiles can be used to build effective relationships and create inclusive classrooms, as well as identify any necessary adaptations to support learners' success or improved performance (Inguva et al., 2019).

The Road to Health Booklet (especially for grade R and Foundation Phase levels), health program reports, reports from parents, professionals, and other relevant stakeholders, admission form, school progress reports, and current teacher(s) involved with the learners' reports; are all documents that can be used to collect the required information about the learner during the screening phase (DBE, 2014).

Deghaye (2021) highlights the fact that teachers with a poor understanding and ability to recognize the screening process are more likely to exclude learners with less obvious disabilities from being identified and receiving the necessary support to participate fully in learning.

The teacher will obtain background information on the learner through screening, and the screening results will then determine whether any learning barriers exist. Using a Learner Profile, a whole class or school is assessed to identify who among the learners is at risk of experiencing learning barriers and who requires additional support (DBE, 2014).

The next stage recommended by the SIAS protocol is to identify and address potential barriers to learning and development at the school level (DBE, 2014).

2.4.2 Stage 2: Identification

In the SIAS policy, the word '**Identification**' is abbreviated by the second letter '**I**'. The term "identify" refers to recognising a learning barrier that hampers effective learning. The identification procedure aims to ensure that learners experiencing academic, functional, behavioural, and other challenges are accurately identified and receive the relevant support (DBE, 2014).

The method of early identification and support aims to prevent developmental abnormalities in young children while also limiting the impact of the problems once they are discovered (Boh et al., 2018).

Research has demonstrated the benefits of identifying learners with learning barriers early. Health-care services are more likely to discover learning and development barriers, such as severe disabilities, during pre-formal schooling. Community-based clinics are ideal for doing first examinations. Collaborating with parents and professionals from various sectors, including education, can help design effective early intervention strategies for learners with learning barriers (DoE, 1997).

At this stage, learners are only identified if their screening stage outcomes indicate that they are experiencing obvious barriers to learning. A form known as the Special Needs Assessment 1 (SNA1) is used to identify barriers to implementing the SIAS 2014 policy. The teachers are then responsible for coordinating the intervention processes by first engaging parents and learners over twelve years old in the decision-making processes, as per the SIAS policy (DBE, 2014).

Tebid (2010) emphasises the importance of identifying learning barriers and assessing learners with special needs during the foundation phase to ensure successful inclusion programs. The above statement is accurate; however, the focus should not be limited to the foundation phase, as other learning barriers can develop as the learner progresses through the school system and advances to subsequent phases due to various factors, such as health issues.

Tebid (2010) further maintains that the effectiveness of the inclusive education program depends on the early identification of learning barriers and the needs of learners, particularly those in the foundation phase, as well as the assessment of learners with special needs. The researcher agrees with Tebid's (2010) statement that once the learner with learning barriers is not identified at the foundation phase, which is Grade R to Grade 3, they are more likely to be frustrated in the classroom, develop low self-esteem, or hide their challenges by exhibiting disruptive behaviour in the classroom because the higher the grade, the more challenging it becomes for them academically. Therefore, when the learner is identified earlier, proper interventions can be implemented in a timely manner before the learner's situation becomes overwhelming and unmanageable.

According to Tebid's (2010) study, teachers provide multiple opportunities through repeated individualized instruction to overcome learning barriers in their classrooms.

Gross (2015) states that some teachers lack the skill to identify learners with learning barriers due to the large number of learners in their classes. In neighbouring Lesotho, teachers have

only the "assessment form" as a formal tool to identify learners with learning barriers, and they primarily rely on their own informal assessments to identify these learners (Zulu, 2019).

A study by Von Solms (2020) suggests that the identification phase of the SIAS policy process emphasises the teacher's crucial role in identifying potential barriers to learning and engagement. In addition to the above statement, Dreyer (2015) highlighted that teachers can identify barriers to learning by reflecting on their teaching strategies and classroom practices, as well as identifying learners' support needs and possible contextual barriers. Teachers are therefore mainly responsible for designing and implementing preliminary strategies in the initial stages of the support process. The support process, as described by Tebid (2010), includes one-on-one remedial lessons with the class teachers, repeated teaching of the same concepts, reduction of content, and seeking assistance from other colleagues. These can add value to the process since they can be a collaborative effort.

2.4.2.1 *Examples of Types of Barriers to Learning that Teachers can Identify*

Teachers play a central role in the early identification of barriers to learning, as they are positioned to observe learners' daily behaviours, academic performance, and patterns of engagement in the classroom. According to the SIAS Policy (DBE, 2014), barriers to learning may arise from a range of environmental, systemic, personal, and curriculum-related factors that inhibit a learner's ability to access and benefit from education. These barriers frequently originate in the home, school, or community context and may include unsafe or inaccessible environments, inadequate support services, and limited parental involvement. Research shows that schools in under-resourced communities often struggle with insufficient teaching and learning materials, poorly maintained facilities, and limited access to assistive technologies, all of which exacerbate learning difficulties for vulnerable learners (Engelbrecht & Nel, 2016; Makoelle, 2021).

Socioeconomic challenges remain a particularly significant barrier, as poverty, food insecurity, and lack of basic services can negatively affect concentration, attendance, and overall learner well-being. Studies in South Africa highlight the strong correlation between socioeconomic adversity and learning difficulties, noting that learners from disadvantaged households often face additional stressors such as community violence, malnutrition, and limited access to healthcare (Engelbrecht & Walton, 2024; Graham, 2023). These factors may manifest in the classroom as fatigue, behavioural difficulties, inconsistent performance, or emotional withdrawal, prompting teachers to initiate the SIAS referral process.

In addition to contextual barriers, learners may experience personal or intrinsic challenges such as language and communication difficulties, behavioural or social–emotional problems, and disabilities affecting hearing, vision, or motor functioning. Teachers frequently identify issues related to cognitive development, including moderate to profound intellectual disability, learning disabilities, and difficulties with memory or processing, as these often present through observable academic struggles or slow acquisition of concepts (Buthelezi, 2023; Mazibuko, 2022). Health-related barriers, including chronic illness, neurological impairments, and mental health conditions such as ADHD, autism spectrum disorder, epilepsy, or the effects of foetal alcohol exposure, further complicate learning and require specialised interventions. The Integrated School Health Programme emphasises that untreated health conditions are closely linked to poor academic outcomes, underscoring the need for early detection and referral (Department of Health, 2012; Msane et al., 2021).

Curriculum-related barriers, such as inflexible teaching approaches, inappropriate assessment practices, and limited differentiation, also pose challenges. When teaching strategies do not accommodate diverse learning needs, learners with emerging difficulties often fall behind, reinforcing the need for adaptive instructional practices and support from SBSTs. As noted by Chisholm and Vally (1996) and more recently by Mpanza and Govender (2022), rigid curriculum delivery can marginalise learners who require modified pacing, alternative learning materials, or additional scaffolding to succeed.

The range of barriers outlined above illustrates the complexity of learner needs within mainstream classrooms and highlights why teacher vigilance and early identification are essential components of the SIAS framework. Through systematic observation and evidence-based referral, teachers contribute to a responsive and inclusive education system capable of addressing diverse learner challenges.

2.4.3 Stage 3: Assessment

Stage 3 of the SIAS process focuses on “**Assessment**”, represented by the third letter “**A**” in the SIAS acronym. In the context of the SIAS Policy (DBE, 2014), assessment refers not to traditional scholastic testing but to a structured process aimed at identifying a learner’s barriers to learning, level of functioning, and capacity to participate in learning. This form of assessment is holistic and developmental, prioritising an understanding of the learner within their educational and socio-emotional context. Rather than measuring academic achievement alone, SIAS-aligned assessment gathers evidence about the learner’s

strengths and support needs, enabling teachers and support teams to make informed decisions about appropriate interventions (Engelbrecht & Walton, 2024; Ntseto et al., 2021).

Educational researchers emphasise that assessment is a systematic process that involves collecting, interpreting, and acting on evidence to support teaching and learning (Nkomo et al., 2021; Wiliam, 2011). Teachers use a range of planned learning activities, observations, and classroom interactions to build a comprehensive profile of the learner. Preciado-Babb et al. (2018) argue that the purposes of assessment include guiding learning, providing constructive feedback, informing curriculum delivery, and ensuring that progression standards are met. Within inclusive education, assessment becomes particularly important because it helps teachers identify emerging difficulties early and tailor instruction or refer learners to the SBST when classroom-level interventions are insufficient.

However, research shows that teachers often experience uncertainty about differentiating between the assessment of learning needs and determining the level or intensity of support required. Roberts (2011) found that educators frequently confuse identifying the nature of the barrier with identifying the correct support package, which leads to inconsistent application of the SIAS procedures. This confusion underscores the need for continuous training and clearer guidelines from district officials. Moreover, assessment should motivate learners and support their learning process, as learners who receive timely, actionable feedback tend to demonstrate stronger engagement and improved outcomes (Brissenden & Slater, 2020; Rowe et al., 2013).

A critical consideration in SIAS-aligned assessment is cultural and contextual relevance. Gutuza et al. (2015) highlight that assessment tools should reflect learners' cultural backgrounds and lived realities to ensure fairness and validity. Similarly, Woolley et al. (2010) warn that overly standardised or narrow assessments may fail to capture individual learning preferences or teaching-related factors contributing to underperformance. These concerns reinforce the importance of differentiated assessment strategies, which Von Solms (2020) argues are essential for meeting diverse learner needs in inclusive classrooms. Differentiated assessment enables teachers to adjust tasks, pacing, and feedback according to each learner's readiness, interests, and learning profile, thereby increasing the accuracy and reliability of assessment outcomes.

Tomlinson (2017) further supports this approach by describing differentiated instruction as a practice that takes into account learners' readiness levels, emotional needs, and preferred

learning modalities. Within the SIAS framework, such differentiation is crucial because it ensures that learners who experience barriers to learning are not disadvantaged by rigid or uniform assessment practices. Finally, the DBE (2014) emphasises that assessment procedures must uphold the principle of respect, be transparent, and involve all relevant stakeholders, including parents, teachers, and other professionals.

These principles ensure that the assessment process is ethical, learner-centred, and aligned with the broader goals of inclusive education.

2.4.3.1 Assessment Principles in the SIAS Policy

The following assessment principles have been adopted from the SIAS policy 2014 (DBE, 2014).

- Assessment must be diverse, considering different formats and viewpoints.
- This section's assessment identifies support needs by analysing a learner's functioning, involvement, and impediments to learning, not only their academic achievement. Teachers, parents, and learners must all play an active role in the process.
- Assessments should be multidimensional and systemic, considering barriers at the individual, family, curriculum, community, school, and social levels.
- Standardised tests can be used as a strategy to inform the teaching and learning process and determine the necessary educational support for learners.
- When requesting a specialist assessment from the SBST to the DBST, the assessment question and justification must be specified (e.g., medical, social, psychological, and therapeutic-occupational therapy, speech therapy, and physiotherapy).
- The assessment purpose should be explicit and open. It must be truthful and pertinent to the conditions and environment of the people or school in question.
- Assessments must be fair, without bias, and consider race, gender, ability, and cultural background. Assessing learning barriers is necessary to improve the teaching and learning process.

- Assessment procedures should prioritise respect for all parties involved. Assessment should be a constant process. To ensure that assessment processes run smoothly, all levels of the system (such as SBSTs and DBSTs) must work closely together.

2.4.3.2 Assessment of Learners with Special Needs

According to the DBE (2014), the Republic of South Africa's National Protocol for Assessment Grades R–12, the assessment, progression, and recognition of the competence of learners who experience barriers to learning are implemented in accordance with the following guidelines.

- The National Curriculum Statement's (Grades R-12) minimum standards for passing exams may not be changed. Regardless of whether the result is a final certificate or not, all learners can be encouraged to reach their maximum potential within a flexible curriculum and learner pace.
- Inclusionary assessment techniques should be uniform across all grades. Assessment, documenting, reporting, and promotion are all required to address this.
- Learners with learning challenges in ordinary and special schools must get a certificate of competence.
- The following alternative examinations are suitable for learners with severe cognitive disabilities and others who face learning challenges and need alternative methods to demonstrate knowledge, concepts, and skills. Furthermore, it provides a means to ensure that these learners become part of a system of educational accountability.
- Regular and special schools should provide all three forms of assessments.
- Learners should be allowed to obtain the assessment standard that best matches their needs. The system should not harm any learner by lowering the bar or failing to assess them. Obtaining a school-leaving statement will be an option available to all.

2.4.3.3 Alternate Assessments

Alternate assessments refer to methods that can be used to ensure learners with learning barriers are fully included during lessons, their learning needs are catered to, and they obtain equal and quality lessons like other learners. According to the Department of Education [DoE] (1997), there are *three types* of alternate assessments. Namely:

(1) Alternate Assessments Based on Alternate Attainment of Knowledge (content, concepts, and skills)

These assessments are primarily intended for learners with a substantial cognitive disability. These assessments are based on the same grade-level material as the general test, but with less difficulty. These assessments reflect learning achievements. Learners with intellectual disabilities who are currently enrolled in both regular and special schools may be designated target learners.

(2) Alternate Assessment Based on Modified Attainment of Knowledge (content, concepts, and skills)

These assessments focus on grade-level themes included in the general evaluation of learners with disabilities. Individuals with disabilities may require additional time to fully comprehend the information. These examinations assess a learner's grade-level proficiency. Target learners may have mild intellectual challenges, be deaf, or take part in skill development programs.

(3) Alternate Assessments Based on Grade-level Attainment of Knowledge (content, concepts, and skills)

These types of assessments are primarily designed for learners who require testing formats or procedures that provide them with an equal opportunity to demonstrate mastery of content at the same grade level as the general exam. This covers learners with particular needs or learning difficulties. Target learners include those with dyslexia, blindness, or hearing impairments.

2.4.4 Stage 4: Support

In the acronym SIAS, the word "**Support**" is abbreviated by the fourth letter, **S**, which represents the fourth stage of the SIAS process. The term support means to offer help or assistance. When teachers become aware of learners who are experiencing learning barriers

in their classes, they should provide those learners with the support they need to learn effectively in those settings (Naude & Meier, 2019). According to the SIAS policy, relevant and proper support is given to learners after the Screening, Identification, and Assessment process (DBE, 2014).

It is essential for teachers to recognise learners who are experiencing difficulty learning and to support them by differentiating their instruction, thereby addressing learning barriers in the classroom. Teachers must have a good understanding of barriers to learning in order to support learners who may be facing them and to prevent frustrating them with their performance in the classroom or at work (Matolo & Rambuda, 2022).

Support is therefore offered after the assessment process; it is the responsibility of the teacher, parent, SBST, DBST, as well as other stakeholders, to offer support to the learner. However, there is no specific duration for assessment in the policy. The policy only specifies that assessments should be continuous. Support is a very crucial stage because the learner experiencing barriers to learning might progress when proper and relevant support is offered to the learner. As a result, there will be no need to refer the learner to a more specialized environment or a full-service school.

2.4.4.1 Support Available to Learners with Barriers to Learning in Mainstream Schools

Education White Paper 6 [EWP6] (DoE, 2001) emphasises the government's commitment to provide opportunities for learners facing challenges to learn and develop. Learners who require moderate support can receive it in full-service schools, while those who need severe care should be assigned to special schools.

The SIAS policy defines the roles of Foundation Phase teachers, parents, managers, and support staff in a new framework for the support organisation. It provides directions and information on how to support learners who have learning challenges (Mahlo, 2017).

The SIAS policy outlines the identified learners' support needs and how they should be supported throughout the education system (DBE, 2014). Hay (2007) defines inclusive learning support (ILS) as an ecosystem in which support is provided not only to an individual learner but also to all systems in the learner's immediate environment.

Ntseto (2019) stated that when choosing a site where learners will receive additional support, decision-makers must consider the learners' educational, social, and emotional needs. Recognizing that learners come from a variety of socioeconomic, linguistic, cultural, ethnic, and racial backgrounds, which must be considered throughout teaching and learning to accommodate all learners (DBE, 2013). For instance, a school in Finland offers remedial instruction to all of its learners who require extra help (Niemi et al., 2012). In Zimbabwe, inclusion is facilitated by providing specialized professionals to support learners with special needs in regular classrooms (Von, 2020).

To enhance the remedial departments of full-service schools, Daghanye (2021) suggests that the national DBE provide financial resources to the provincial education departments, thereby increasing the number of remedial teachers at each school. This is because, even after being transformed into full-service schools, mainstream schools often lack the resources and facilities required to accommodate a wide range of special needs services.

Mahlo (2017) suggests that schools must be committed to giving parents the impression that they are valued participants in their children's education. As a result, learners' self-confidence and academic performance will be enhanced, as they will understand that even their parents and other primary caregivers are concerned about their well-being.

2.5 FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO THE INCREASING NUMBER OF LEARNERS WITH BARRIERS TO LEARNING IN SOUTH AFRICA

Nong (2020) indicated that the school-based support team, in collaboration with the district-based support team, must empower teachers to address learning barriers. Nong (2020) further highlights that the number of learners with learning barriers is on the rise. According to Mantai and Huber (2021), almost every class has learners who are experiencing learning barriers, apart from those classes that conduct entry tests or assessments before accepting or admitting learners.

Marais (2016) highlighted that teachers have overcrowded classes (with up to 50 or more learners in some schools) and struggle to create a learning environment that engages all learners.

Von Solms (2020) states that inadequate resources and a lack of specialized skills would consequently disturb the SIAS policy's purpose of providing enough assistance to learners

who encounter learning difficulties. Sufficient and relevant resources will contribute positively to the implementation of the SIAS policy.

2.6 STAKEHOLDER ROLE IN THE ASSESSMENT PROCESS OF SIAS

The teacher does not bear sole responsibility for the successful implementation of SIAS. Many stakeholders must collaborate and provide support to ensure that the SIAS process is effectively implemented, that learners with specific needs are appropriately recognized, and that suitable assistance is provided to fulfil those needs. The school's governing body (SGB), teachers, parents, school-based support team (SBST), district-based support team (DBST), full-service schools (FSS), and special school resource centres (SSRC) all play important roles in the school support system (Hess, 2020). Figure 2.2 below shows the stakeholders involved in the SIAS process to support the learner.

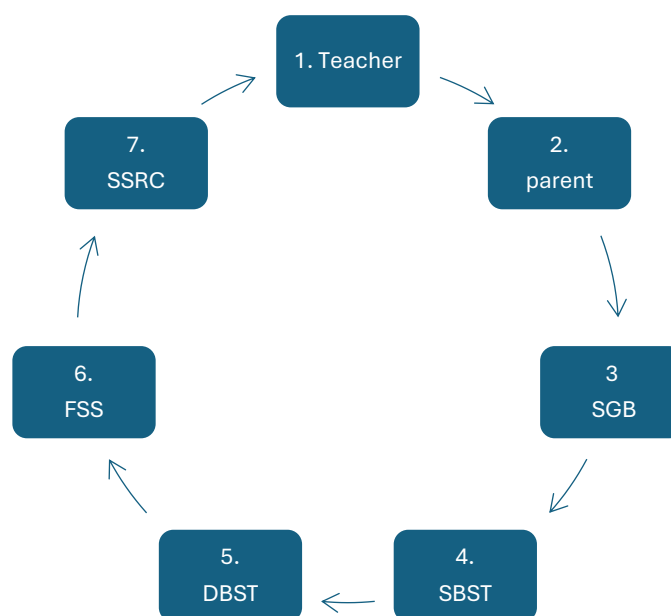


Figure 2.2: Stakeholders involved in the SIAS process to support the learner

2.6.1 The Role of the Teacher in the Assessment Process

When a learner is recognised as vulnerable or at risk during the initial screening, it is the teacher's job to act as a case manager and supervise the intervention process (as mentioned in the learner profile).

The learner and the parent/caregiver must participate continuously in the SIAS decision-making process (starting at the age of 12 and above). The SIAS Form 1, also known as the Support Needs Assessment One (SNA1), is part of the process for evaluating whether a learner requires additional support. It also serves as a guide for teachers in completing the first step of supporting the learner (DBE, 2014).

Teachers' intervention and support for learners can take place through Curriculum differentiation, which includes adjustments and accommodations in assessments, modifying assessments, and/or using different methods of assessment.

2.6.1.1 Curriculum Differentiation

Curriculum differentiation is one of the SIAS policy's organising concepts, as well as the primary technique for meeting the diverse learning needs of learners with varying learning styles and requirements. It involves adapting, altering, extending, changing, and varying teaching methodologies, assessment strategies, curriculum content, and teaching methods, taking into consideration the learners' levels of functionality, backgrounds, and interests. (DBE, 2014).

Curriculum and assessment adjustments aim to enable learners at multiple levels of functionality to access curriculum and assessment tasks that cater to their needs. Tomlinson (2017) defined a differentiated curriculum as one that is informed by the view that learners learn best when their teachers allow for variation in their levels of preparedness, well-being, and learning styles. In addition, a differentiated curriculum also includes teachers' efforts to respond to variations among learners in the classroom.

One of the biggest obstacles can be found in the curriculum, mostly due to its inflexibility, which cannot accommodate the diverse learning needs of learners (Tomlinson, 2017). Learning breakdown may develop when the learners are unable to access the curriculum.

Since the curriculum may cause most learning barriers, including the methods of teaching and learning, the subjects covered, how the classroom is run, and the supplies and instructional aids employed, inclusion is primarily a curriculum issue. Sometimes, due to insufficient training, teachers employ teaching methods that may not meet the varied demands of learners (Marais, 2016).

2.6.1.2 Modifying Assessments

Assessment modification refers to purposeful adjustments made to assessment tasks to ensure that all learners can access them equitably, regardless of disability, learning difficulty, or contextual barrier. According to the State of New Jersey Department of Education (2022), modification involves simplifying or adapting assessment conditions or materials without altering the construct being measured. This ensures that the assessment remains fair, valid, and inclusive while accommodating the diverse needs present in mainstream classrooms. For example, a learner who is short-sighted may require worksheets with enlarged print, while a learner with hearing difficulties may need instructions to be delivered orally or supported through sign language.

Within the South African context, assessment modification aligns strongly with the principles of the SIAS Policy, which emphasises adapting the learning and assessment environment to remove barriers to participation (DBE, 2014). Von Solms (2020) argues that a rigid, one-size-fits-all approach to assessment disadvantages learners with additional support needs, as uniform assessment tasks fail to account for variations in readiness, processing abilities, sensory impairments, or disability-related challenges. Differentiation is therefore a critical component of assessment modification. Tomlinson (2017) identifies four key areas in which teachers can differentiate instruction and assessment content, process, product, and learning environment, allowing learners multiple ways of demonstrating their understanding.

In practice, assessment modification may include adapting furniture or physical positioning for learners with mobility challenges, extending time allocations for learners who process information slowly, or allowing frequent breaks for those who experience fatigue, anxiety, or attention difficulties. Other forms of modification include providing large-print or Braille versions of tests, reading instructions aloud, or using cued-speech and sign-language interpreters to support learners with hearing impairments. Learners with visual or motor challenges may benefit from using manipulatives such as number lines, counting chips, or abacuses during mathematics assessments, while others may rely on assistive devices such as eyeglasses, hearing aids, augmentative communication devices, FM systems, or word processors. Ensuring that these devices are functioning properly is important so that technical difficulties do not hinder assessment performance (State of New Jersey, 2022).

Environmental adjustments also form part of assessment modification. Adequate lighting, appropriate seating arrangements, and clear sight lines to the teacher or examiner are

essential for supporting learners with sensory or attention-related barriers. For deaf or hard-of-hearing learners who communicate orally, maintaining visual access to the examiner is crucial when receiving instructions. Medication use must also be monitored to ensure that its timing and effects do not interfere with cognitive or behavioural functioning during assessment activities.

Collectively, these modifications reflect the underlying principle that equitable assessment is not identical to assessment. Instead, it recognises learner diversity and intentionally adapts assessment conditions to ensure that all learners can demonstrate their true capabilities. In doing so, assessment modification contributes to the broader goals of inclusive education and supports the SIAS mandate to remove barriers to learning and participation.

2.6.1.3 Using Different Methods of Assessing

Gutuza et al. (2015) recommend culturally appropriate assessment procedures for individuals with special needs. The assessment instruments for dyslexic learners should align with the social and cultural development of the target countries. Additionally, these instruments should be straightforward to use. The following are various types of assessment approaches that teachers can utilize (Yambi & Yambi, 2018).

- Informal - Formal Assessment
- Formative - Summative Assessment
- Process - Product Assessment
- Continuous - Final Assessment
- Divergent - Convergent Assessment

Continuous assessment is most appropriate in the SIAS process, and when the learners' information on progress or achievement is required to determine the progression or sequence of activities. Continuous assessment provides teachers and learners with valuable information for improving teaching and learning. Continuous assessment involves increased workload for both teachers and learners (Preciado-Babb et al., 2018). A significant aspect of the teaching and learning process is continuous assessment. The primary goal should be to enhance learners' access to a diverse curriculum (DoE, 1997).

2.6.2 The Role of the Parent/Guardian in the Assessment Process

For many years in South Africa, parents' voices remained silent, and parental involvement was limited (Mathibela, 2017). With the emergence of a new democratic South Africa in 1994, the role of parents in educating children with learning barriers has undergone significant changes. Parents are now regarded as essential partners in the development of a more inclusive system, in which decision-making and accountability for outcomes are shared (Miller et al., 2019). The South African Schools Act (1996) and Education White Paper 6 (Department of National Education, 2001) recognise the significance of this emerging role.

The assessment of learners must be open and honest, and it must be acknowledged that learners and their parents have the right to participate in all assessment procedures. It is also essential to ensure that they are aware of all assessments and have access to all assessment feedback and related reports.

It is the responsibility of those conducting the assessments to ensure that parents are informed of the contents of reports and any implications of the assessment findings. When appropriate, this should also include teaching the learner directly. It is unacceptable to deny parents access to reports solely because they are intended for other experts (DoE, 1997).

According to the SIAS Policy (DBE, 2014), parents and caregivers play a central and compulsory role in the identification and support process for learners experiencing barriers to learning. The policy emphasises that parents are responsible for creating an inclusive home environment that supports their child's developmental, emotional, and learning needs. This aligns with research showing that the home environment significantly influences learner readiness, engagement, and long-term academic outcomes (Boonk et al., 2022; Perry-Jenkins, 2022). To support this responsibility, parents must be equipped with relevant knowledge and tools that enable them to maximise their child's potential, including understanding the child's specific support needs and how to collaborate effectively with teachers and support teams (Engelbrecht & Green, 2018).

Parents and caregivers are also required to be informed of their rights when seeking educational support, as parental advocacy and awareness contribute to equitable access to interventions and reduce the risk of delayed or inappropriate placement decisions (Rossetti et al., 2021). In line with early childhood development principles, the SIAS policy stipulates

that parents must take reasonable steps to ensure their child is enrolled in an appropriate early intervention programme as early as possible. If parents believe their child requires additional support and have not accessed early intervention services before the age of three, they are expected to report to a local school no later than age five to initiate the support and assessment process (DBE, 2014). Early identification is widely supported in the literature as a key factor in preventing long-term learning difficulties and improving learner outcomes (Boh & Johnson, 2018).

In addition to initiating contact with the school, parents must complete all relevant components of the learner's support needs assessment and provide supporting documents such as early intervention reports, medical or social records, and health assessments. These documents help schools form a holistic understanding of the learner, consistent with the SIAS emphasis on multi-source, evidence-based assessment (Ntseto et al., 2021). Following consultation with parents, the school is required to finalise the necessary forms and ensure that all information is captured accurately.

To ensure the successful implementation of the Individual Support Plan (ISP), parents and caregivers must build a collaborative relationship with the teacher. Research highlights that strong family-school partnerships are essential for sustained learner progress, especially for learners with additional support needs (Hornby & Lafaele, 2023; Miller et al., 2019). The SIAS policy, therefore, makes it clear that parental involvement is not optional; rather, it is a mandatory component of the support process. Without consistent parental participation, the implementation of assessment, intervention, and ongoing support becomes fragmented, reducing the effectiveness of inclusive education practices (Mpanza & Govender, 2022).

Parents should support teachers in the classroom, especially when they are addressing issues with learners who are experiencing barriers to learning. When parents take responsibility for their children, teachers in the classroom are motivated to help the learner because they are aware of the parents' support.

Schools have a special obligation to involve the community and parents in enhancing their learners' academic performance (Masha, 2017). Throughout the assessment process, the teacher initiates recurrent consultations with the learner and his/her parent(s) (Von Solms, 2020).

According to the SIAS policy (DBE, 2014), the key aspect in the early identification of barriers is the critical role of parents/caregivers in education and training. The teacher can use observations and comments from parents/caregivers to determine the direct nature of a learner's barriers. Parents/caregivers should be actively involved in the identification and assessment of their children at all times and should be treated as equal partners in the process.

Von Solms (2020) stated that the teacher initiates frequent meetings with the learner and their parent throughout the assessment process. However, not every parent can be involved due to various reasons (Tebid, 2010). Other parents leave work late, some work away from home and only return on weekends, and as a result, they are unable to supervise or assist with their children's school work. Another teacher stated that illiteracy, a lack of time, and a lack of interest in the child's schoolwork are all issues that discourage parents from becoming involved (Tebid, 2010). Mkhuma et al. (2014) further state that another participant indicated that the majority of parents refuse to acknowledge that their child has a learning disability(s) and instead blame the teacher. Von Solms (2020) notes that the support process is sometimes hindered by parents' failure to enforce support strategies at home, often because they believe it is the school's or teacher's role, not realising that for a learner to progress, all stakeholders must take responsibility.

Furthermore, findings by Abongdia et al. (2015) highlight that there is solid evidence that parents would wish to avoid stigmatising their children as much as possible, which could indirectly prevent teachers from detecting the learner's learning barrier.

2.6.3 The Role of the School Governing Body (SGB) in the Assessment Process

The school governing body is composed of parent representatives, teachers, and the principal. The role of the SGBs, according to the Republic of South Africa's Department of Basic Education (DBE, 2014), is to oversee learner support and inclusion, ensure the implementation of the SIAS process, and ensure that every learner's needs are met, including those of learners with disabilities.

The EWP6 (DoE, 2001) states that it is the duty of the school's governing body to allocate resources towards quality education; however, if those resources are inadequate, they must be supplemented by the state.

2.6.4 The Role of the School-Based Support Team (SBST) in the Assessment Process

According to the SIAS policy, the acronym SBST stands for School/Site-Based Support Team. It is the principal's duty to establish this team and ensure that it is functional and supported (DBE, 2014).

Le Roux (2013) states that SBSTs are teams created by schools as a school-level support system, with their primary duty being to implement coordinated support for schools, learners, and teachers. The principal of the school serves as the SBST's leader to make sure that it develops into an inclusive centre of learning, care, and support.

2.6.4.1 Support Needed from the SBST

According to the SIAS policy (DBE, 2014), the SBST's duty is to find ways to get additional funding, acknowledge further community-based support, and foster collaboration. The SBST should always consult with the learner's parent(s)/ guardian(s) and inform them about any decisions made to help the learner. If the teacher's support measures are insufficient, according to Von Solms (2020), the teacher's concerns will be escalated and forwarded to the SBST. The SBST is then responsible for reviewing and enhancing the initiatives that have been implemented by the teacher.

The support needed from the SBST in response to teachers' requests for assistance is to create support plans for learners experiencing barriers to learning, as well as to complete the Support Needs Assessment form (SNA2). The SNA2 form is the assessment intervention by the SBST. The SNA2 form guides the SBST when a learner is referred to them by the teacher after their interventions have been unsuccessful.

The SBST reviews the information provided by the teacher, which includes supporting documents, verbal reports, and comments on the identification of learners' learning barriers/needs/challenges. After doing so, the SBST offers alternative support to the teacher (and parent) in assisting the learner (DBE, 2014). Whenever the SBST's alternative support is unsuccessful, the SBST will compile a summary of the barriers to learning identified by the team, as well as a summary of the support provided (DBE, 2014).

The teacher and SBST fill in the Individual Support Plan (ISP) together. The ISP provides support for learning, family, behavior, communication, social competence, wellness, personal care, classroom, home, health, community, and teacher development and training (DBE, 2014).

In addition to the above statement, *Form 120* is completed and submitted by the SBST to the District-Based Support Team (DBST) when requesting further support for the learner, after exhausting all available support measures at the school level (DBE, 2014). However, this can only be done if the parent has been informed and given permission for further support from the DBST; without the parent's permission, the process will not proceed.

After the parent has permitted the process to continue, the school principal is then responsible for authorizing the DBST intervention, having seen the SBST's unsuccessful intervention. The teacher or the SBST cannot directly request intervention by the DBST without authorisation from the school principal (DBE, 2014).

2.6.5 The Role of the District-Based Support Team (DBST) in the Assessment Process

The SIAS policy defines the DBST as a management structure at the district level that coordinates and promotes inclusive education by identifying, assessing, and addressing barriers to learning, as well as developing infrastructure and distributing resources. The DBST is responsible for managing and leading schools in their district to create inclusive learning environments (DBE, 2014).

Makhalemele and Nel (2014) define the DBST as a unit comprising professionals from the Department of Education, Non-Governmental Organisations, and regional community-based organisations, including curriculum specialists, management specialists, psychologists, counsellors, and therapists. This refers to a variety of terms used in different countries when referring to DBST/DBE officials, such as superintendents of education, school advisors, school managers, and school inspectors (Zulu, 2019).

Researchers like Engelbrecht and Swart (2007) suggest that the composition of DBSTs presents a multidisciplinary approach to aiding teaching and learning, as cited in Roberts (2011).

2.6.5.1 Support Needed from the DBST

The assistance offered by districts is considered a crucial component of the country's overall improvement of educational support services (DoE, 2001). The DBST's responsibility is to review the intervention strategies developed by teachers in collaboration with the SBST, as well as ensure that necessary resources and support are made available to schools (Von Solms, 2020).

Deghaye's (2021) findings indicate that teachers are having trouble comprehending screening, and most of them believe they are unable to identify learners who may have barriers to learning. Collaboration between the district-based, school-based, and Integrated School Health Programme support teams will be necessary to support teachers to overcome this obstacle.

To ensure that educational policies developed at the national and provincial levels are implemented at the school level, DBSTs are needed (Zulu, 2019). The primary focus of the DBST is to develop and support SBSTs by providing indirect support to learners through empowering and supporting teachers, as well as school management, in curriculum and institutional development. The next focus is to provide direct support to learners when the SBST is also unsuccessful in responding to learning needs (Engelbrecht et al., 2016).

District offices play an important role in connecting education departments and schools. Schools rely heavily on them for assistance and intervention, as well as information gathering and diagnosis (Zulu, 2019). To guarantee accountability at all levels, extra support measures can be implemented through school and class visits, mentorship and consultation, or by requesting written reports on support-line expenditures (DBE, 2014).

The DBST reviews the information and supporting documents that comprise the Support Needs Assessment (SNA1) and Support Needs Assessment 2 (SNA2) forms, along with the SBST. The DBST should evaluate the degree of support to be given to the learner or the school during the implementation stage and include this in the DBST plan of action (DBE, 2014). The DBST assesses whether it agrees with the diagnoses of the SBST identification by reviewing the SBST intervention and subsequently provides guidelines for supporting the learner. The learners must be supported in current schools or schools close to their homes. Efforts should be made to support the learner. The DBST will then complete the plan of action

form, known as **Form DBST 122**. The DBST may consider implementing Outreach Programmes in collaboration with Full-Service Schools (FSS) and Special School Resource Centres (SSRC). This process involves completing Form DBE 124, which is an application submitted by the SBST or DBST to request an accommodation, exemption, or endorsed NSC aimed at alleviating the learner's specific learning barriers. The application must include a list of the accommodations being requested, such as the use of Braille, a reader, or a scribe. Importantly, placing a learner in an alternative educational setting to access specialised support programmes should be regarded as a last resort after all other support measures have been exhausted.

2.6.6 The Role of the Full-Service School (FSS) in the Assessment Process

Full-service Primary and secondary schools are government-designated and regenerated mainstream schools with specialized resources and equipment to support learners with diverse disabilities and learning needs. In other words, they provide holistic support to curriculum delivery and learning. According to the SIAS policy (DBE, 2014), full-service schools may accept learners with "high" learning requirements, but they are more likely to accommodate learners with "moderate" or "low" learning needs. Full-service schools in the assessment process are expected to provide expertise and professional support in curriculum, physical, material, and human resources to accommodate a full range of learning needs (DoE, 2001).

2.6.7 The Role of Special School Resource Centres (SSRC) in the Assessment Process

Resource centres are expected to provide expertise and support. Resource centres are designed to serve as a referral base for both the SBST and the DBST, ensuring that schools with learners experiencing barriers to learning in the vicinity of the centres are assessed and assisted in accessing specialised curriculum interventions and, in most cases, therapeutic interventions. This is because these resource centres have centre-based therapists who can provide intervention and assistance on a range of physical, psychological, developmental, and social-related barriers that impede the learner's ability to learn or perform at their optimum potential (Maguvhe, 2013).

2.7 FACTORS THAT CAN DELAY THE APPROPRIATE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE ASSESSMENT PROCESS

Several interrelated factors continue to delay the effective implementation of the assessment process within the SIAS framework, particularly in under-resourced South African schools. Ntseto et al. (2021) highlight that socioeconomic challenges, such as high unemployment, persistent poverty, and limited access to essential public services, have a direct impact on learners' readiness for assessment and their ability to engage meaningfully with support interventions. Learners from economically disadvantaged households often experience hunger, trauma, and instability, which affect concentration, attendance, and overall performance, ultimately complicating teachers' efforts to identify barriers accurately (Graham, 2023; Walton & Engelbrecht, 2024).

A lack of parental involvement further delays assessment, as parents play a key role in providing background information, granting consent, and participating in intervention planning. Research indicates that many parents struggle to engage due to work commitments, low literacy levels, or limited understanding of the SIAS process, which hampers effective collaboration between home and school (Buthelezi, 2023; Mpanza & Govender, 2022). Financial constraints at both household and school levels also restrict the availability of specialised services, assessment tools, and assistive devices necessary for accurate identification of learning barriers.

In addition, inadequate resources, including limited teaching materials, outdated assessment tools, and shortages of support personnel such as educational psychologists and therapists, create further obstacles. These resource limitations are compounded by overcrowded classrooms, where teachers struggle to provide individualised attention or systematically monitor learners' progress. Overcrowding has been shown to undermine classroom management, reduce instructional quality, and delay early identification of learning difficulties (Graham, 2023; Marais, 2016).

Curriculum-related challenges also contribute to assessment delays. An inflexible or content-heavy curriculum makes it difficult for teachers to differentiate instruction or adjust assessment strategies to accommodate diverse learning needs. When curriculum demands take precedence over learner support, teachers may overlook subtle indicators of difficulty or delay completing the necessary SIAS documentation (Matolo & Rambuda, 2022).

Collectively, these systemic, contextual, and pedagogical factors hinder the timely implementation of assessments within the SIAS process and limit schools' ability to respond effectively to learners experiencing barriers to learning.

2.8 NEGATIVE IMPACT OF POOR ASSESSMENT AND SUPPORT ON THE LEARNER

The assessment results are taken into consideration when deciding whether the learner is eligible for special education services and when writing reports.

Zulu (2019) suggests that assessment practitioners who speak vernacular languages are needed to further the field of cognitive assessment. Writing assessments that take into account the native culture and languages in South Africa is one way to do this. Early intervention and the identification of learners who need special education are the results of the emphasis on special needs education. When it comes to advancing education, cognitive assessment is crucial. The cognitive evaluations are one of the measures used to determine which special school to place the learner (Zulu, 2019).

Main worries include the possibility that psychiatric patients may receive incorrect diagnoses, learners may be disproportionately placed in special education programs or classes, and applicants may be wrongfully denied employment or admission to colleges due to alleged bias in standardized tests. Accurate measurement is required to establish an accurate diagnosis. Due to linguistic and cultural bias, most cognitive assessment methods may not accurately reflect learners' intellectual abilities, which is a difficulty for psychologists and psychometricians (Goh, 2013; Van de Vijver & Leung, 2011; Van de Vijver & Tanzer, 1997).

Inaccurate assessments can lead to a learner being placed in a special, vocational, or remedial school, thus ruining their life. Due to a lack of screening information, numerous learners with subtle problems may go unnoticed in school. Many learners with impairments or who encounter barriers to learning may not receive the necessary support to fully participate in learning (Deghaye, 2021).

Ntseto (2019) highlighted that the delay in testing the learner may lead to learner dropouts, because by the time the learner is tested, their age no longer allows for placement at a special school.

2.9 RESPONSIBILITY OF THE REFERRING SCHOOL

The referring school is the institution where the learner is being placed or referred. The new school's responsibility is to accommodate and cater to the learner's learning needs. However, some forms are completed by the parent and the DBST during the referral process, namely Forms DBE 123a and b. The parent fills out Form DBE 123a to request placement/transfer to a special school, while the DBST fills out Form DBE 123b to ask for placement in a special school to access a high-level support program (DBE, 2014).

Parents play a crucial role in selecting the learning site, as most learners are educated in mainstream schools (Hess, 2020). Hence, in South Africa, parents choose where to enrol their children. In most cases, they take into account the proximity, affordability, curriculum, and language of instruction when making this decision.

However, in Kenya, the Educational Assessment and Resource Centres (EARC) are responsible for placing the learners. The EARCs' function is to identify, assess, and refer learners with learning barriers. The role of parents in placements remains unclear (Kenya, 2015).

The Basic Education Laws Amendment Act (BELA Act 32 of 2024) reinforces inclusive education by making Grade R compulsory and tightening accountability in admissions and placements. This early entry point allows schools to identify learning needs sooner, which supports SIAS's focus on early intervention (Department of Basic Education, 2014; Republic of South Africa, 2024). The Act also strengthens governance by giving provincial Heads of Department more authority over admissions, ensuring that placement decisions follow transparent processes rather than mere compliance. In this way, BELA advances SIAS's goal of fair referrals based on accurate assessment. By affirming learner rights and accountability, the Act situates SIAS within the latest legal framework, aligning screening and support practices with constitutional and international obligations for inclusive education (Mahlaule, 2024).

2.10 DIFFICULTIES FACING TEACHERS IN IMPLEMENTING THE SIAS POLICY

Recent studies by local academics have shown that the difficulties faced by teachers in implementing inclusive practices in their classrooms, particularly in developing individuals who encounter learning barriers, are common. Two of these studies were conducted in white

schools in Gauteng, one in an independent school (Gumede, 2008) and the other in a public school (Paudel, 2009). Two other studies were conducted in rural and semi-rural African schools: one in Mpumalanga (Mpya, 2005) and one in KwaZulu-Natal (Gwala, 2006). Although the situations were different, the content led to a similar conclusion: that South African teachers face difficulties when implementing inclusion policies. Teachers from different ethnic groups and provinces face these challenges (Abongdia et al., 2015).

Hess (2020, pp. 202-203) states that the findings of her study "...show that teachers find it hard to cope with the demand of implementing the different inclusive policies". Mkhuma et al. (2014) state that the needs of learners are jeopardized because they cannot be identified or met, as teachers lack the time and skills to do so. Zulu's (2019) study suggests that teachers are having to adjust to the new way of doing things, which involves offering support to learners who are experiencing hurdles to learning and are suffering because of their workload. Further, it states that teachers get mixed messages about curriculum and assessment standards, which makes it difficult for them to handle the diversity in their classrooms.

2.11 TEACHERS' CONCERNS REGARDING THE SIAS POLICY

According to Mkhuma et al. (2014), teachers are concerned about their limited time and have expressed their dissatisfaction with the paperwork involved in the SIAS policy toolkit, as well as individual support plans, which are adding to their workload. As a result, they do not identify learners reasonably (Mkhuma et al., 2014). Due to the increased administrative workload, some teachers avoid the process of identifying students with learning disabilities.

In addition, Abongdia et al. (2015) highlight that in South Africa, the SIAS policy focuses on creating a support system to remove barriers (DoE, 2008, p. 9). However, because the policy contains too much paperwork and omits practical advice in several places, this document does not make teachers' work any more straightforward.

Robert's (2011, p. 61) findings indicate further that "time is often insufficient to support learners experiencing barriers in the classroom adequately". The teachers emphasized that providing individualized support requires more time and effort. Evidently, teachers then spend a considerable amount of time supporting individual learners while neglecting others in the classroom (Engelbrecht et al., 1999).

The DoE stated that teachers will have their knowledge enhanced and new skills acquired to achieve the objectives of establishing inclusive education and training. However, in our experience, evidence of such abilities and expertise remains challenging to obtain. Additional difficulties for the teachers include an overload of paperwork, a lack of time, knowledge of a wide range of learner requirements, overcrowded classrooms, and inadequate assistance from the DBSTs (Abongdia et al., 2015).

2.12 TEACHERS' NEED FOR SIAS POLICY TRAINING FOR BETTER IMPLEMENTATION

Teachers are willing to work, but they are not guided or encouraged to address their individual requirements as teachers (Mkhuma et al., 2014). Moreover, Ntseto (2019) further highlighted that the SIAS training is insufficient, as some of the trained teachers are unable to apply what they have learned in training. It appears that teachers are under-equipped, and something must be done to address this issue.

According to the Department of Basic Education (2014), the implementation of the Screening, Identification, Assessment and Support (SIAS) policy is supported by structured training and capacity-building initiatives led by the Department of Basic Education. The rollout of SIAS included orientation and training programmes targeting district officials, School-Based Support Teams (SBSTs), and teachers. These programmes were designed to build teachers' competencies in screening learners, completing SIAS documentation, and implementing appropriate support interventions.

The DBE training model primarily follows a cascade approach, whereby national trainers capacitate provincial officials, who in turn train district-based support teams and school-level personnel (Walton et al., 2022). Training content typically includes the use of SIAS forms, procedures for identifying barriers to learning, referral processes, and strategies for curriculum differentiation and support provision (Hess, 2020). Malema (2022) highlighted that the DBE SIAS policy training modes included workshops, cluster meetings, and on-site support visits, although the duration and intensity of training vary across provinces. Despite these formal provisions, several studies highlight persistent gaps in the depth, consistency, and effectiveness of SIAS training. Maree et al. (2023) found that many teachers experience SIAS training as inadequate, often limited to brief workshops that do not sufficiently develop practical skills for implementation. Similarly, Walton et al. (2022) note that the cascade model

can dilute the quality of training as it moves through different levels, resulting in uneven knowledge transfer and limited classroom application.

Furthermore, Fodo (2023) research findings indicate that training programmes often lack follow-up support, mentoring, and evaluation mechanisms, which are essential for sustained capacity-building. Donohue et al. (2014) argue that without continuous professional development and monitoring, teachers struggle to translate policy knowledge into effective practice. More recent studies confirm that teachers remain uncertain about SIAS procedures, particularly in relation to assessment, referral, and documentation processes (Maree et al., 2023).

Therefore, while the Department of Basic Education has established a structured framework for SIAS training, the literature suggests that its implementation is uneven and often insufficiently sustained, which contributes to the challenges experienced by teachers in practice.

In their daily teaching, all teachers are equally expected to play a crucial part in screening, identifying, and assessing barriers to learning. They must then offer assistance to any learner who may be encountering barriers to learning. It is necessary to expand the scope of current teacher training programs to include topics such as curriculum differentiation and how to set assessments for learners who experience barriers to learning (Deghaye, 2021).

The absence of high-quality training and the demands the Department places on teachers, such as having to fill out documents without clear directives, seems to be frustrating them. The child facing learning barriers would be the victim of this situation because of the strong urge to present falsified reports about the identification processes (Abongdia et al., 2015).

Teachers' competence within the SIAS framework goes beyond simply completing forms or following prescribed steps; it is about their ability to identify learning needs accurately, interpret assessment data, and apply inclusive teaching strategies. Competent teachers can recognise barriers to learning, adapt curriculum delivery to diverse learners, and design support plans that are practical rather than just procedural. This requires strong assessment literacy (knowing how to use tools and interpret results), reflective practice (evaluating their own teaching methods), and inclusive pedagogy (ensuring all learners are engaged and supported). Without these skills, SIAS risks becoming a compliance exercise where

paperwork is completed but learners' real needs are overlooked. Building teacher competence, therefore, means investing in professional development that strengthens teachers' diagnostic judgement, classroom adaptation, and ongoing reflection, so that SIAS becomes a tool for meaningful support rather than just documentation.

2.13 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

A theoretical framework provides a structured lens through which a phenomenon is examined, offering a coherent set of ideas and assumptions that shape the study's interpretation of reality (Du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2014). This study is underpinned by Behaviourism Theory, one of the foundational perspectives in Educational Learning Theory. Behaviourism is associated with the work of scholars such as Pavlov, Watson, Skinner, and Thorndike, whose views dominated educational thinking in the mid-20th century and continue to influence classroom practice today (James, 2006). Although contemporary education increasingly integrates cognitive and socio-constructivist approaches, behaviourist principles remain evident in behaviour modification programmes, classroom management strategies, and assessment practices used in schools.

Behaviourism emphasises that learning is demonstrated through observable and measurable behaviours, which is a central reason for its relevance to this study. According to Ally (2004), behaviourist learning environments clearly communicate expected learning outcomes, assess learners to determine whether those outcomes have been achieved, and provide immediate feedback to reinforce desired behaviours. This focus on observable behaviour aligns strongly with the assessment expectations in the Screening, Identification, Assessment and Support (SIAS) Policy, which requires teachers to identify learning barriers through concrete evidence such as academic performance, behavioural patterns, task completion, and response to instructional strategies (DBE, 2014). From a behaviourist perspective, teachers monitor learners' behaviours, such as attention, persistence, error patterns, and task engagement, to determine whether reinforcement and instructional conditioning are producing the expected learning outcomes. When the expected behavioural change does not occur despite repeated reinforcement or adapted teaching strategies, teachers are prompted to initiate the SIAS referral process, as the lack of response signals the presence of deeper learning, developmental, or environmental barriers.

A second key principle of behaviourism is the central role of assessment and feedback in shaping behaviour. Behaviourist theory holds that assessment provides essential information

about whether learners have mastered earlier steps before progressing to more complex tasks, and that learning materials must be carefully sequenced from simple to complex to promote mastery (Ally, 2004). This principle corresponds with the SIAS requirement that teachers conduct continuous, evidence-based assessments before making referrals. Formative assessment plays a crucial role in this process, as it allows teachers to observe how learners respond to instruction, reinforcement, and corrective feedback. Engeström (2015) and Ketabi et al. (2014) emphasise that formative evaluation is critical for identifying where learning breaks down and for adapting teaching accordingly. If a learner consistently fails to meet behavioural learning targets, despite reinforcement and repeated instruction, this signals the need for additional support or specialised assessment through the SBST or the DBST.

Behaviourism also supports the idea that teacher behaviour influences learner behaviour, particularly through reinforcement and the modelling of expectations. Skinner (1990) argues that perceived control and motivation affect a child's willingness to engage in learning activities, and that the social context created by teachers plays a key role in shaping these beliefs. Bandura (2012) similarly highlights that learners' academic outcomes are closely tied to how teachers structure learning environments, provide reinforcement, and communicate expectations. Within mainstream schools, this means that teachers must understand the SIAS assessment and referral procedures because their actions directly influence not only how learners behave, but also how learners perceive their own abilities and opportunities for support.

In this study, Behaviourism Theory provides a powerful framework for understanding how teachers interpret learners' observable behaviours, how they use reinforcement and assessment to guide learning, and how they make decisions about when to refer learners for additional support. By grounding the assessment process in observable evidence and behavioural indicators, as required by SIAS, behaviourism helps explain why teacher vigilance, consistent documentation, and systematic observation are essential for early identification and appropriate referral of learners experiencing barriers to learning. Teachers' behaviour, including how they monitor, assess, and respond to learner behaviour, ultimately shapes the learner's developmental trajectory and determines whether timely support is provided.

2.14 CONCLUSION

This chapter highlighted the literature relating to the assessment process used in public schools when referring learners to special schools. A brief history of special schools in South Africa. This chapter also discusses the SIAS policy process and compares it with other international assessment policies and strategies. It also highlighted the stakeholders' role in the assessment process and the negative impact of poor assessment and support on the learner.

The next chapter, Chapter 3, will discuss the research methodology employed in this study. It also describes the research design and instruments, as well as the data collection and analysis techniques. It will also discuss the reliability and validity of the data that was collected.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 INTRODUCTION

Research involves generating answers to questions that remain unanswered, as outlined in the research objectives. As the researcher searches for information on a topic, research becomes the journey to discovery. To select an effective methodology for this study, it was essential for the researcher to understand the overall aim of the study, which is to explore the assessment process used in public mainstream primary schools when referring learners to special schools in the Johannesburg central district, South Africa.

In the previous chapter, the researcher discussed the literature related to the study that the researcher sampled, providing a broad understanding of the phenomenon being studied. This chapter focuses on the methodology employed in this study, explaining the research design used and describing the research instruments, as well as the processes of data collection and analysis. This chapter also explains the reliability and validity of the data that has been collected. Below is a reminder of the problem statement and research questions that guided the study.

3.1.1 Problem Statement

Learners referred from public schools to special schools often perform better than those clinically diagnosed with severe intellectual disabilities who are admitted directly (Al-Hroub et al., 2023). This discrepancy suggests potential shortcomings in the assessment and referral processes, indicating that some learners placed in special schools may not be appropriately matched to the programmes offered. A closer examination of the assessment tools and procedures used in public schools is therefore warranted.

The Screening, Identification, Assessment, and Support (SIAS) policy (DBE, 2014) mandates that teachers exhaust classroom-based support strategies before involving the school-based support team (SBST). However, Pacaol (2021) highlights that teachers face challenges in implementing this shift due to heavy workloads. Ntseto et al. (2021) further assert that some educators may avoid identifying learners who require support to circumvent added administrative duties, ultimately hindering the provision of necessary interventions. Such

practices undermine the principles of inclusive education, which aim to foster supportive learning environments for all learners (DoE, 2007).

Observational data suggests that learners referred from mainstream schools demonstrate stronger academic performance than those already enrolled in special schools. This raises critical questions: Are educators neglecting to exhaust support strategies? Is parental involvement insufficient? Some parents struggle to engage with the educational process due to work-related pressures, lack of interest, limited time, or inadequate knowledge (Cole et al., 2021).

Further complicating the referral system is the functionality of the SBST. Mpanza and Govender (2022) reported that many SBSTs operate ineffectively due to poor team composition, a lack of learner referrals, and the absence of individual support plans. Additionally, DBSTs are often slow to conduct assessments, resulting in learners aging out of appropriate placement windows (McEvoy, 2024).

Ultimately, the emotional and psychological state of the learner can significantly impact the accuracy of assessments. When learners feel comfortable and supported during assessment, results tend to be more representative of their actual abilities. Conversely, stress or discomfort may lead to poor performance and misdiagnosis (McKown, 2025). These factors collectively highlight the need to critically evaluate the referral and support mechanisms to ensure the effective and equitable placement of learners with diverse needs.

3.1.2 Research Questions

The following research questions framed the study.

3.1.2.1 Main Question

What are the challenges with the assessment process used in public schools when assessing learners who are referred to special schools?

3.1.2.2 Sub-Questions

1. What is teachers' understanding of the assessment process followed in mainstream schools?
2. What is the policy expectation regarding the assessment and referral of learners to special schools?

3. How is the assessment process guided in mainstream schools to assess and refer learners to special schools?
4. What support is available to learners with barriers to learning in mainstream schools?
5. How trained are mainstream school teachers to assess and refer learners to special schools?

3.2 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND DESIGN

Research methodology, according to Igwenagu (2020), is a design process for conducting research or developing a procedure; it is not, by itself, a tool, technique, or system for carrying out tasks. According to Mulisa (2022), research methodology may be divided into two main categories: qualitative and quantitative. Qualitative research focuses on exploring phenomena through non-numerical data, while quantitative research relies on numerical data to test hypotheses and measure variables (England, 2022). Mixed methods are another research approach combining qualitative and quantitative methods within a single study (Schoonenboom, 2023). The first instance, research methodology, relates to the systematic procedure that the researcher employs when describing and predicting their study (Hancock et al., 2021).

3.2.1 Research Design

The research design used in this study is a single case study. The research design is a form of inquiry that provides specific direction for a procedure within a qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-method approach, as per Mulisa (2022).

A case study is a detailed description of social facts that exist, which allows deep exploration and understanding of the participant experience (Hancock et al., 2021). This study employed a descriptive research design, as it involved an in-depth examination of the phenomenon within its natural context.

The researcher employed a single case study approach to gain a thorough understanding of the assessment process in South African public schools for learners referred to special schools.

The detailed information gathered from participants will be presented in a case study format to provide a comprehensive narrative. In other words, the case study method was chosen to facilitate an in-depth exploration and detailed presentation of the assessment process (Wohlin & Rainer, 2022).

3.2.2 Research Paradigm

The interpretivism paradigm framed this study. According to Kivunja and Kuyini (2017), a paradigm is a set of beliefs or assumptions that directs the researcher's reevaluation process. Sefotho (2015) describes a paradigm as a collection of logically connected concepts, assumptions, or propositions that shape research and thinking. Makombe (2017) states that the research paradigm influences how research questions are formulated and addressed. In addition, Babbie (2015) posits that paradigms are essential frames of reference that we employ to organize our findings and thoughts. They influence how we see and comprehend reality. Therefore, it can be concluded that a research paradigm influences how knowledge is viewed and interpreted, and that it lays down the motivation and intent for a study, guiding the selection of methods, tools, and participants.

The research paradigm is also described by Kivunja and Kuyini (2017) as a set of assumptions or beliefs about the core elements of reality that are to be discovered or studied and constructed through human interaction and meaningful action. According to Hiller (2016), these assumptions include the following characteristics of interpretivism: ontology, epistemology, and methodology.

Ontology refers to the nature of reality. It involves:

- Human interactions and meaningful acts that can be used to construct and investigate reality.
- Learning about how people make sense of their social environments in the natural setting through everyday routines, discussions, and writing while engaging with others.
- Various realities.

Epistemology refers to *the nature of knowledge. It involves:*

- Procedures that are understood through mental processes of interpretation, which are impacted by interaction with social surroundings.
- The researcher and the participants engaging in a collaborative process of talking and listening, reading and writing.
- Data collection using an interactive approach.
- The social construction of knowledge by participants through encountering real-life or natural environments.

Methodology refers to *the method by which knowledge is produced. It involves:*

- Data collected through focus group discussions and interviews; and
- The influence of the researcher's values on the research process.

The interpretative paradigm refers to how researchers go about uncovering what they believe can be known. Bailey and Bailey (2021) state that in order to interpret events in the way that people assign them significance, this methodology employs an interpretive naturalistic approach in which things are to be explored in their natural environment.

The key principle of research, according to Chivanga and Monyai (2021), is that research can never be studied from the outside; rather, it should be observed through the experiences of the participants. The interpretive paradigm looks to understand rather than to explain. In this study, the interpretative paradigm enabled the researcher to look into participants' opinions, viewpoints, and subjective realities (Pervin & Mokhtar, 2022).

The interpretations of the participants were captured as data for this study. Hiller (2016) states that to understand the social world, interpretivist researchers interact and hold dialogues with study participants, enabling them to formulate their understanding through experiences and subjective meanings that participants attach to the social world. Shufutinsky (2020) adds that the meaning of the social world can be hidden, and it needs to be brought to the surface through reflection, which can be achieved by the interaction (dialogue) between the researcher and participants, which is exactly how this study unfolded.

The interpretative paradigm was chosen for this study because it enabled the exploration of experiences from the participants' perspective and ensured a deeper understanding of the

study's questions (Gcabashe, 2024). As applied in this study, the interpretative paradigm is social in nature, as it requires a unique and trusting relationship between the participants who are the ones to share with the researcher their experiences and challenges related to the assessment process.

3.2.3 Research Approach

A qualitative research approach was selected because the nature of this study requires a detailed classification of results that are not numerical.

As pointed out by Merriam (2015) and Nayak and Singh (2021), as a qualitative researcher, the researcher aimed to understand how the participants interpret their experiences, how they build their worlds, and what meaning they assign to their encounters. Therefore, the qualitative approach enabled the researcher to understand the process of assessment followed for referral purposes. The qualitative research approach enabled the researcher to delve deep into the experiences and challenges teachers, parents, and learners undergo during the assessment and referral process. The qualitative research approach allowed the researcher to examine the assessment process used in public schools when assessing learners who are referred to special schools and to interrogate whether all the Support Needs Assessment stages are followed correctly.

A qualitative study can be described as a research strategy that focuses on collecting and analysing spoken or written words (Tracy, 2024). The quantitative approach is more open, unstructured, and flexible in terms of the inquiry process (Dehalwar & Sharma, 2024). What is typically studied using the qualitative approach is the narration and description of feelings, experiences, and perceptions, rather than their measurement. When findings of a qualitative nature are presented, they are typically presented descriptively, rather than analytically, as in quantitative studies. Less emphasis is also put on the generalisation of these findings or conclusions. This approach is used to study the nature of the problem and to assess its extent. As the aim of this study is to explore challenges with the assessment process used in public mainstream schools when assessing learners with barriers to learning, the qualitative approach enabled the researcher to gain insight into the process of assessment for referral purposes.

Mulisa (2022) agrees that the qualitative method is explorative and helps answer questions about experience and perspectives from the participant's standpoint. Furthermore, Lofland et al. (2022) explain that qualitative research can acquire a comprehensive understanding of a particular subject through data analysis from direct observations, such as interviews and others.

The qualitative research method was chosen for this study because, firstly, it is the ideal methodology to explore and understand the participants' perspectives (teachers and learners) and reveal different thoughts and opinions (Ramdani et al., 2022). Secondly, the participants' perceptions assisted in judging how effective or ineffective the assessments are and led to recommendations and improvements that could be made. Lastly, because the nature of this study requires a detailed classification of results that are not numerical. These results are based on the participants' experiences and perspectives of the assessment process, as outlined in the SIAS policy, and are therefore narrative and subjective in nature.

3.3 RESEARCH CONTEXT

Schools A, B, and C are public mainstream schools that are located in the southwest of Soweto, under Johannesburg Central District Ward 15 in Gauteng. The three schools are foundation phase schools, ranging from Grade R to Grade 4, catering for learners aged 5 to 11 years. These schools fall under Section 21 schools, meaning that the Department of Education allocates funds to them. The schools are responsible for ordering stationery and textbooks, paying for water and electricity, and undertaking and managing their own maintenance. They are classified as quintile 3 no-fee paying schools. The chosen mainstream schools are located in a low socioeconomic township where many learners live in informal settlements, backyards, hostels, and Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) houses, which are government-subsidized homes provided to low-income South African citizens to promote equitable access to housing, basic services, and improved living conditions. Most learners live with their grandparents or extended family members. Unemployment is at a high rate. The employed earn a minimum wage, and most of the families rely on social grants. School A has 12 teachers and 468 learners, School B has 17 teachers and 635 learners, and School C has 24 teachers and 923 learners. These schools cater to boys and girls. The home language they offer at these schools is IsiZulu. These schools were purposefully chosen because they refer learners to the special school.

3.4 POPULATION AND SAMPLING

3.4.1 Population

A research population can be explained as the total number of people with certain traits that the researcher aims to collect information from (Ghanad, 2023). The total population for this study was 26 participants. They were drawn from 3 mainstream primary schools (referred to as Schools A, B, and C in this study) located in South Africa, Gauteng province, in Johannesburg central district. They comprised 9 foundation phase teachers, 9 parents, 7 SBST members, and 1 DBST representative who represented Schools A and C. The representative for School B was unavailable for an interview. Table 3.1 below presents the study population.

Table 3.1: Study Population

School	Grade 3 Foundation Phase teachers	Parents	SBST members	DBST members	Total population
A	3	3	2	1	9
B	3	3	2	0	8
C	3	3	3	Same as School A	9
TOTAL	9	9	7	1	26

Key:

SBST = School-based support team

DBST = District-based support team

3.4.2 Sampling

According to Lohr (2021), sampling refers to the process of selecting a subset from a larger population. A sample is a subset of the population that is considered representative of the whole (Iliyasu & Etikan, 2021). It is about how one chooses to sample (a small proportion of the population) from the population (every possible person who could be interested in my research).

The sampling method used in this study is non-probability sampling. According to Iliyasu and Etikan (2021), researchers survey sample units to gain more insights into and learn about the broader population. In this context, non-probability sampling refers to methods where participants are selected based on their relevance to the research topic and their potential to provide accurate and meaningful information (Mweshi & Sakyi, 2020).

Accordingly, purposive sampling, a type of non-probability sampling, was employed in this study. Purposive sampling, also referred to as judgement sampling, involves the intentional selection of participants based on specific characteristics or knowledge relevant to the study (Etikan et al., 2016). According to Creswell and Poth (2018), three key considerations in purposive sampling should be taken into account: (1) determining suitable participants, (2) the site that will be utilized for the study, and (3) the sample size that will be studied (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

This study used a total of 26 participants from three mainstream primary schools. The participants included nine foundation phase teachers, nine parents, 7 SBST members, and 1 DBST representative who represented Schools A and C. The representative for School B was not available to participate in the study. The parents, teachers, and SBST members were identified and selected by the school management team at each school. The DBST representative was the department official responsible for overseeing the assessment and referral process at the schools.

Participants were selected from the three sample schools as follows:

- ***Teachers***

A total of nine Foundation Phase teachers were selected—three from each school. All participating teachers had at least five years of teaching experience and had been involved in the SIAS process.

- ***School-Based Support Teams (SBSTs)***

One SBST group was selected from each school, with a target of two to six members per group. However, due to availability, Schools A and B each provided two members, while School C provided three members, resulting in a total of seven SBST members. The members of the SBST provide support to referring teachers in each school regarding the steps followed when screening, identifying, and supporting learners. They also make contact with the DBST for intervention after they have exhausted all their intervention strategies.

- ***District-Based Support Team (DBST) representatives***

Only one DBST member participated in the study, although the intention was to interview one DBST representative per school. This participant was responsible for both Schools A and C. The DBST member for School B was unavailable. The DBST representative is responsible for the placement and referral process of learners to special schools.

- ***Parents***

A total of nine parents were selected—three from each school. These parents either had children currently undergoing the referral process or had children who had already been referred to special schools. Selection was based on the parents' active involvement in their child's referral process. One or both parents/guardians (depending on the parenting status, e.g., single parent) of three learners were sampled at each school. The parent(s)/ guardians were representing their learners since the learners may be vulnerable, and some of the learners will not be able to answer some of the questions. Priority was given to parents of learners who are already identified as having barriers to learning or those who have already begun the process of referral to special schools. This is because it has been noted that in most cases, learners referred to special schools and labelled as 'learners with barriers to learning' are in the foundation phase and early intermediate phase, especially during the transition from a teacher-classroom-based system to a subject-teacher-based system. Mazibuko (2022) also states that the early identification of learning barriers should focus on learners in the foundation phase, and the assessment of learners in need of additional support is critical to the success of the inclusion program. According to the SIAS policy, at the period of admission and the start of each phase, the teacher must screen all learners (DBE, 2014).

The participants and sites were purposively selected based on the study's objectives, given their knowledge of the SIAS process and experience with referral procedures. This alignment ensured that the data collected would directly contribute to understanding the research problem. The aim was to align the study's overall objectives with its methodology, considering its ontological, epistemological, and methodological underpinnings.

Purposive sampling is a non-random strategy that does not depend on predetermined sample sizes or rigid selection criteria. The researcher determines what information is needed and sets out to identify individuals who can and will supply it based on their knowledge or experience (Hatch, 2023).

3.4.2.1 Sampling Procedure

The sample for this study was drawn from Soweto Township, located in the Johannesburg Central District of Gauteng Province, South Africa. Participants were sampled from 3 schools. The participants in this study were all adults.

Ethical clearance (see Appendix A) to conduct the study was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee (REC) at the University of South Africa (Unisa). Once the schools were identified, the researcher contacted the school principals and requested written permission (see Appendix D) to conduct the study at the respective schools. The principals agreed, and in the three schools, the researcher was introduced to and handed over to the SBST coordinators, who then assisted in identifying teachers, SBST members, DBST representatives, and parents of learners relevant to the study and could provide the researcher with detailed information. These participants were chosen for their willingness and availability to participate in the study, and their experience was beneficial for the study

3.4.2.1.1 The Schools

Identification Procedure:

- The three public mainstream primary schools were sampled as these schools refer learners to special schools. The researcher identified the schools as she works in a special school, and its neighboring schools are mainstream primary schools and schools that serve as referring schools.

Inclusion Criteria:

- The research required mainstream primary schools that are referring schools and that have a functional SBST committee.

Exclusion Criteria:

- Other neighboring schools were excluded because they are high schools, and only primary schools were relevant for this study.

3.4.2.1.2 Teachers

Identification Procedure:

- The researcher requested that the SBST coordinators recommend teachers who have referred learners for additional support or placement in special schools and who have experience applying the SIAS policy.

Inclusion Criteria:

- Currently teaching at a selected mainstream school.
- Have referred at least one learner for SBST support or special school placement.
- At least one year of teaching experience in the current school.
- Willing to participate and provide informed consent.

Exclusion Criteria:

- Teachers who have never been involved in learner referrals.
- Temporary/substitute teachers or interns.
- Teachers with less than one year at the current school.

3.4.2.1.3 Parents

Identification Procedure:

- With the assistance of the SBST coordinator, the researcher was able to identify parents of learners who have been assessed and/or referred to a special school and who were willing and emotionally able to discuss the experience.

Inclusion Criteria:

- Biological or legal guardians of learners who have undergone the referral process.
- Informed of and involved in the SBST/DBST referral process.
- Able to give informed consent and communicate effectively in the preferred language (or with translator support).

Exclusion Criteria:

- Parents of learners not referred or supported through SBST/DBST.
- Unwilling or unable to give informed consent.

3.4.2.1.4 School-Based Support Team (SBST) Members

Identification Procedure:

- Request school principals to identify active SBST members, especially those who handle learner case files, referrals, assessments, and who work directly with DBST representatives and parents.

Inclusion Criteria:

- Officially appointed SBST members (e.g., learning support educator, principal, or designated staff).
- Involved in referrals to special schools and learner assessments in the past year.
- Able to explain the use of SIAS policy and support structures.

Exclusion Criteria:

- Staff who are nominal members but inactive in SBST processes.
- Staff unaware or uninvolved in the assessment process.

3.4.2.1.5 District-Based Support Team (DBST) Members

Identification Procedure:

- Liaise with the Gauteng Department of Education (Johannesburg District Office) to identify educational psychologists, inclusive education specialists, and learning support facilitators.

Inclusion Criteria:

- Official DBST personnel working in the relevant Johannesburg education district.
- Actively involved in evaluating, reviewing, or approving learner referrals to special schools.

- At least one year of experience with mainstream–special school transitions.
- Willing and authorized to participate.

Exclusion Criteria:

- DBST members are not directly involved in learner assessment or referral decisions.

Table 3.1 above presents the total number of schools (A, B, and C) and the number of participants (26) who participated in this study.

3.4.3 Information on the 26 Study Participants

A total of 26 participants were involved in the study. They participated in interviews.

3.4.3.1 The Nine Teacher Participants

Three teachers from each sample school participated in the study, resulting in a total of nine Foundation Phase teachers, aged between 31 and 58 years. Among the participants, one was male and eight were female. Although based on a small sample, this finding aligns with national trends, which show that Foundation Phase teachers are predominantly female rather than male. Data was collected through individual interviews, conducted either face-to-face or via telephone. Table 3.2 below indicates the biographical information on the nine teacher participants.

Table 3.2: Biographical Information on the Nine Teacher Participants

School	Teacher participants	Participants' pseudonym	Gender	Age	Grade	Years of teaching experience
A	1	A-T-1	Female	39	3	8
	2	A-T-2	Female	53	2	22
	3	A-T-3	Female	46	2	16
B	1	B-T-1	Female	34	3	6
	2	B-T-2	Female	31	2	5
	3	B-T-3	Female	51	3	20
C	1	C-T-1	Male	39	3	7
	2	C-T-2	Female	56	2	18
	3	C-T-3	Female	58	2	24

Key:

A-T-1 to A-T-3 = School A Teacher 1 to Teacher 3

B-T-1 to B-T-3 = School B Teacher 1 to Teacher 3

C-T-1 to C-T-3 = School C Teacher 1 to Teacher 3

3.4.3.2 The Nine Parent Participants

Three parents or guardians of learners who had completed the assessment process were selected from each of the sampled schools. All participants were female and between the ages of 35 and 45 years. Data were collected through individual interviews, conducted either face-to-face or via telephone.

Table 3.3: Biographical Information on the Nine Parent Participants

School	Parent participants	Participants' pseudonym	Gender	Age	Employment status
A	1	A-P-1	Female	37	Unemployed
	2	A-P-2	Female	41	Unemployed
	3	A-P-3	Female	45	Employed
B	1	B-P-1	Female	40	Part time
	2	B-P-2	Female	35	Unemployed
	3	B-P-3	Female	37	Employed
C	1	C-P-1	Female	37	Unemployed
	2	C-P-2	Female	41	Employed
	3	C-P-3	Female	45	Employed

Key:

A-P-1 to A-P-3 = School A Parent 1 to Parent 3

B-P-1 to B-P-3 = School B Parent 1 to Parent 3

C-P-1 to C-P-3 = School C Parent 1 to Parent 3

Among the nine parent or guardian participants, employment status varied across the sample. Four were unemployed at the time of the study, representing households potentially reliant on external support structures. One participant reported being employed part-time, indicating a flexible but limited income source. The remaining four participants held full-time employment, suggesting more stable economic conditions.

These variations in employment status may have implications for parental involvement, availability, and capacity to support their children's educational needs, factors explored further in the study's findings and discussion.

3.4.3.3 The Seven SBST Members

A total of seven School-Based Support Team (SBST) members participated in the study: two each from Schools A and B, and three from School C. All participants were teachers, ranging in age from 34 to 58 years. Among them, one was male and six were female. Data was collected through focus group interviews, providing insight into team dynamics and shared experiences across school sites.

Table 3.4: Biographical Information on the Seven SBST members.

School	Participants	Participants' pseudonym	Gender	Age	Grade	Years of teaching experience	Designation
A	1	A-FGP-1	Female	39	3	8	PL1
	2	A-FGP-2	Female	46	2	16	PL2
B	1	B-FGP-1	Female	34	3	6	PL1
	2	B-FGP-2	Female	51	3	20	PL2
C	1	C-FGP-1	Male	39	3	7	PL1
	2	C-FGP-2	Female	56	2	18	PL1
	3	C-FGP-3	Female	58	2	24	PL2

Key:

A-FGP-1 and A-FGP-2 = School A Focus Group Participants

B-FGP-1 and B-FGP-2 = School B Focus Group Participants

C-FGP-1 to C-FGP-3 = School C Focus Group Participants

A total of seven School-Based Support Team (SBST) members participated in the study across the three sampled schools, although a larger number had originally been anticipated. All participants were primary school teachers with more than five years of teaching experience. Within the focus groups, four teachers held post-level one positions, while three occupied post-level two roles.

In South Africa's public education system, post levels are used to classify teaching positions based on responsibility, experience, and salary scale. Post-Level 1 refers to entry-level teachers. These teachers are primarily responsible for classroom teaching, lesson planning, learner assessment, and curriculum delivery. They may also participate in extracurricular activities and parent-teacher meetings, but their primary focus is direct instruction. While post-level two is typically referred to as Departmental Head (DH), these teachers have additional responsibilities such as managing subject teams, overseeing curriculum implementation, mentoring junior teachers, and handling departmental administration. It is a promotional post that requires experience and leadership capacity (Department of Basic Education [DBE], 2012).

3.4.3.4 The DBST Member

Only one DBST representative participated in the study, as she served both Schools A and C. Although the researcher initially intended to interview two representatives, only one was ultimately available for the interview. The DBST member assigned to School B was unavailable during the data collection period. Data were obtained through a telephone interview, as the participating DBST member was unable to meet in person.

Table 3.5: Biographical Information on the DBST Representative

School	Participants	Participants' pseudonym	Gender	Age	Years of experience as DBST
A and C	1	A/C-DBST- R	Female	54	8

Key:

A/C - DBST - R = School A and C District-Based Support Team- Representative

The DBST representative is the departmental official responsible for overseeing the assessment and referral process at the schools.

3.5 DATA COLLECTION TECHNIQUES AND INSTRUMENTATION

The study approach involves generating questions and developing strategies for data collection that are contextually relevant to the participants (Jack et al., 2023). Subsequently, data analysis is conducted to identify and highlight interconnected themes.

The researcher then identifies and interprets potential insights that can be drawn from the initial data (Christou, 2022).

Ganesha and Aithal (2022) define data collection as the process of acquiring information to address research questions. Depending on the research paradigm or methodology employed, various data collection methods may be utilized. Specific approaches are more appropriate for qualitative research, others for quantitative research, and some are designed explicitly for mixed-methods studies.

This study followed a qualitative research approach. Primary and secondary data are examples of qualitative data. Mazhar et al. (2021) define primary data as data obtained for

the first time, fresh, and original, whereas secondary data have already been collected. Secondary data sources, including academic journals and books, were employed in this study.

Tracy (2024) identifies five primary approaches for collecting and analysing data in qualitative research: observation, interviews, questionnaires, document analysis, and the use of visual resources.

The data collection methods used in this study included individual interviews (conducted face-to-face or via telephone), focus group interviews, and document analysis. Table 3.6 below presents the data collection methods, instruments, and corresponding participants.

Table 3.6: Data Collection Methods, Instruments, and Corresponding Participants

Data collection methods	Instrument	Corresponding participants	Total participants
Face-to-face Individual interviews	Semi-structured interview schedule	6 parents	11
		5 teachers	
Face-to-face focus group interviews	Semi-structured interview schedule	Group 1: 2 SBST members	7
		Group 2: 2 SBST members	
		Group 3: 3 SBST members	
Individual telephonic interviews	Semi-structured interview schedule	3 Parents	8
		4 Teachers	
		1 DBST Representative	
TOTAL PARTICIPANTS			26
Document analysis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ SIAS policy ▪ Learners' books ▪ Learners' profiles 	N/A secondary data	N/A

3.5.1 Interviews

In qualitative research, Sewell (2024) characterises interviews as efforts to understand the world from the participant's perspective, to uncover the meaning behind their experiences, and to explore their lived reality before applying scientific interpretations. As cited by Elhami

and Khoshnevisan (2022), an interview is a structured conversation between a researcher and a participant, designed to elicit rich, contextual insights.

The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews because they were informal in tone and allowed for open responses (Karatsareas, 2022). A semi-structured interview schedule guided the interviews. Semi-structured interviews consist of open-ended questions, although the purpose is clear and they have a set of questions that have been prepared, focusing on answering the research question (Creswell, 2007; 2014; Maree, 2011; McMillan & Schumacher, 2014).

Interviews are a widely used method in qualitative research, allowing researchers to explore participants' lived experiences, perceptions, and contextual realities. Tracy (2024) emphasizes that interviews provide a flexible yet structured means of collecting rich, descriptive data, particularly when investigating complex social or educational phenomena. Sewell (2009), as cited in Elhami and Khoshnevisan (2022), describes interviews as a way to understand the world from the participant's perspective, uncovering the meaning behind their experiences before applying scientific interpretation. This method is especially valuable in educational settings, where personal narratives offer insight into institutional practices and challenges.

In this study, interviews were conducted with Foundation Phase teachers, members of the SBST, and a representative from the DBST. Both individual and focus group interviews were used. This also depended on participant availability and was guided by a semi-structured interview schedule aligned with the study's research questions and ethical considerations (Castillo-Montoya, 2021). This approach enabled open-ended responses and follow-up probing, thereby enhancing the depth and relevance of the collected data. The use of interviews contributed significantly to the study by capturing refinement perspectives on the SIAS process insight that would have been difficult to obtain through other data collection methods (Mazhar et al., 2021).

The study employed a combination of face-to-face and telephonic interviews using a semi-structured interview schedule to gather qualitative data from a diverse group of participants. Face-to-face individual interviews were conducted with 11 participants, comprising six parents and five teachers. Additionally, three focus group interviews were conducted with SBST members, divided into groups of two, two, and three, respectively, comprising a total

of seven participants. Telephonic interviews were conducted individually with three parents, four teachers, and one DBST representative, adding eight more participants. In total, 26 individuals contributed to the data collection process. These participants had been involved in implementing the learner referral process for no more than five years at their respective schools.

3.5.1.1 Interview Procedure

Face-to-face and telephonic Interviews were conducted with all participants for less than one hour. Before each session, the researcher explained the purpose of the study and obtained signed informed consent forms from all participants. Each individual willingly participated in the interviews, which were guided by a semi-structured interview schedule designed to ensure consistency while allowing for open-ended responses.

A tape-recording device was used to capture the interviews, and handwritten notes were taken to supplement the recordings. These materials remain accessible only to the researcher, ensuring confidentiality and data protection. Interviews were conducted with class teachers, the parents or guardians of learners who underwent the assessment process, as well as SBST members and the DBST representative.

According to Karatsareas (2022), the semi-structured individual interview method guides the course of inquiry while allowing participants to articulate their views, opinions, values, and knowledge on topics relevant to the investigation. This approach to data collection enables researchers to obtain rich, descriptive information that supports a deeper understanding of the research context and facilitates the answering of research questions.

Individual interviews were conducted with learners' parents or guardians who were involved in, or are currently participating in, the assessment and referral process. These interviews aimed to identify the challenges associated with the assessment procedures used in public mainstream schools when assessing learners referred to special schools.

The researcher opted not to include learners in the study, but instead focused on their parents, as interviews with children differ significantly from those conducted with adults. Children often lack life experience and cognitive maturity to fully understand the purpose of an interview or what is expected of them during the process. Their knowledge may be implicit, meaning they are unaware of what they know; hence, indirect methods are better

(Karatsareas, 2022). Additionally, children possess clear imaginations, and researchers must be able to distinguish between responses rooted in lived experience and those shaped by imaginative thinking. Moreover, the referred learners were already facing challenges and inviting them to be interviewed could have added unnecessary stress. As noted by Botha and Makhanya (2023), this distinction should be made without diminishing the value of the child's voice or contributions.

3.5.1.2 Individual Face-To-Face and Telephonic Interviews

A total of 19 individual interviews were conducted. Individual interviews, conducted either face-to-face or via telephone, served as the initial data collection method in this study. This approach allowed participants to share detailed, context-rich insights in a confidential and flexible setting, contributing significantly to the depth and credibility of the research findings. 11 individual face-to-face interviews were conducted (six parents and five teachers), and eight individual telephone interviews were conducted (three parents, four teachers, and one DBST).

- **Parents**

A total of nine interviews were conducted with parents. All parents made themselves available as per the scheduled time. Six parents or guardians of the participating learners were individually interviewed, face to face, at the researcher's workplace (the school where the researcher teaches). This location was selected based on the participants' preference, as they did not want to be interviewed at their children's schools.

The remaining three parents or guardians were interviewed telephonically. Telephonic interviews were selected primarily due to the availability and convenience for participants. This method provided a flexible approach that accommodated their varied schedules, ensuring their voluntary participation without imposing additional logistical constraints. Before conducting the interviews, the researcher confirmed the personal details of the participants to ensure she was interviewing the correct participants. Each interview lasted less than one hour and was conducted in the participant's home language, which was isiZulu, and the researcher was fluent in the language. This linguistic accommodation enabled participants to express themselves freely and provide detailed explanations, thereby enhancing the richness and authenticity of the data collected. No challenges were experienced during the interviews, apart from the limited availability of participants due to their busy schedules. To mitigate this,

interviews were scheduled at times most convenient for each participant, respecting their commitments and promoting ethical engagement.

The researcher conducted interviews with parents or guardians to gain insight into their role during the learner assessment and referral process, as well as to uncover the learners' experiences, notably since the learners themselves were not interviewed. Parents play a critical role in shaping inclusive education practices, offering unique perspectives on the challenges and effectiveness of assessment procedures. Their input provides valuable context regarding how learners navigate the referral process and how institutional decisions impact their educational journey. As noted by Moyo and Sibanda (2022), parental involvement enhances the credibility of qualitative research by capturing lived experiences that may otherwise remain unspoken.

Furthermore, parents are recognized as equal partners in the development of inclusive education systems, where decision-making and accountability for outcomes are shared collaboratively (Naidoo & Miller, 2023). Their participation not only strengthens the ethical foundation of the study but also contributes to a more holistic understanding of the learner's experience within the broader educational framework. All interviews with the parents (or guardians) took place without incident.

- ***Teachers***

A total of nine teachers participated in individual interviews, conducted through both face-to-face and telephonic formats. Four teachers were interviewed in their respective classrooms at their schools after contact time, as preferred by the participants. The remaining five were interviewed telephonically to accommodate scheduling and location constraints. Each interview lasted less than one hour, allowing sufficient time for meaningful responses while respecting participants' availability and professional responsibilities.

Although the interviews were conducted in English, participants were encouraged to respond in their preferred language. In practice, teachers chose to express themselves in both IsiZulu and English, which enriched the depth, authenticity, and cultural relevance of the data collected. IsiZulu is a language with which the researcher is also familiar. All teachers availed themselves as agreed. The interviews were conducted without incident.

The purpose of interviewing teachers was to gain insight into their experiences and perspectives regarding the assessment procedures used in mainstream schools when referring learners to special schools. Their contributions provided valuable context on the practical implementation of referral processes and illuminated challenges and considerations encountered in everyday teaching practice.

- ***The District-Based Support Team Member***

The DBST member was interviewed telephonically in the afternoon due to her unavailability and the convenience of the call. The interview lasted less than one hour and was conducted in English; however, the participant was not restricted to using English alone. IsiZulu was also used alongside English to emphasise specific points, allowing for clearer expression and cultural relevance.

Telephone interviews involve collecting information by contacting respondents via telephone, offering flexibility and accessibility in qualitative research settings (Rahman, 2023).

3.5.1.3 Focus Group Interviews

Focus groups are collective conversations or group interviews that vary in size and structure, ranging from small to large, and can be directed or non-directed. They have been widely used for diverse research purposes over the past century (Tadajewski, as cited in Moyo & Sibanda, 2022).

In this study, three focus group interviews were conducted exclusively with members of the SBST at three sample schools. The SBST members arrived promptly, and the interview commenced without delay. Each session lasted approximately one hour. At Schools A and B, the interviews took place in the classroom of the SBST coordinator. At School C, the session was held in the staffroom. A tape-recording device was used to capture discussions, supplemented by handwritten notes. These recordings and notes were accessible only to the researcher, ensuring confidentiality and data protection.

The interviews were scheduled at a time convenient for all members (during school hours) and conducted in English. However, participants were encouraged to respond in their preferred language. In practice, both IsiZulu and English were used, particularly to emphasise key points, which enriched the cultural and linguistic depth of the data. Before each session,

the researcher re-briefed the participants on the study's purpose and ensured that they were comfortable with the interview setting and procedures. All interviews concluded successfully and without incident.

3.5.2 Document Analysis

Document analysis is a systematic method used to assess and evaluate both printed and electronic materials, including computer-based and internet-based sources. This strategy offers the advantage of enabling researchers to collect large volumes of data efficiently and unobtrusively (Maree, 2023).

In this study, document analysis was employed to gather information on the interventions implemented by teachers, parents, SBST, and the DBST to assist learners in overcoming learning barriers and challenges encountered during the assessment process. The analysis provided insight into nature, timing, and effectiveness of support strategies documented throughout the referral and assessment procedures. Table 3.7 below presents a list of documents along with the purpose of their analysis.

Table 3.7: Documents used for analysis

Document	Purpose
SIAS Policy	To view the policy expectations, aims, and process, as well as the roles and responsibilities of all stakeholders involved in the assessment and referral process.
Learners' workbooks	To assess the learners' challenges and evidence of support provided to them by the teacher, parent, and SBST.
Learner Profiles	Check evidence of support given to the learner by the teacher, parent, and SBST (and other relevant stakeholders).

3.5.2.1 Document Analysis Procedure

The documents analysed in this study included: SIAS policy documents, learner workbooks, and learner profiles (which included: Individual Support Plans, Support Needs Assessment (SNA1 and SNA2) forms, parent invitation letters, and school policies on learner support strategies.

The above documents were essential for understanding the interventions implemented by teachers, parents, and the SBST to assist learners in overcoming learning barriers during the assessment and referral process.

Access to these documents was granted by the school principal and limited to teachers currently involved in referring learners. Additionally, assessment and referral documents of learners who had already been placed in special schools were reviewed at the receiving institutions, as learners transfer with their Learner Profiles.

Document analysis was conducted in a private setting to ensure confidentiality and maintain the integrity of the research. Although the researcher requested permission to make copies of relevant documents, this was not granted due to the presence of personal and sensitive information. This approach aligns with ethical research practices and the protection of participant privacy (Maree, 2023).

Document analysis of policy documents and learner profiles was conducted in a private setting to ensure confidentiality and data protection. Although the researcher requested permission to make copies of the relevant documents, this was not granted due to the presence of personal and confidential information. This restriction aligns with ethical research practices that safeguard participant privacy and uphold institutional data protocols (Maree, 2023).

3.6 DATA ANALYSIS PROCESS AND INTERPRETATION

Data analysis is defined as the process of drawing sound inferences and conclusions from raw data. It involves arranging the information, conducting an initial read-through of the data set, and segmenting the data into smaller components through coding. Only relevant data are retained, after which themes are developed and the data are interpreted and represented (Creswell & Poth, 2023; Marmmerberg & Kirkman, 2021).

The purpose of data analysis is to transform raw information into meaningful insights that address the research questions. In qualitative research, this process is particularly critical, as it enables researchers to make sense of complex, context-rich data (Nassaji, 2022). Qualitative data analysis is widely acknowledged as labour-intensive and time-consuming due to the volume and depth of subjective, detailed information it generates (Byrne, 2025; Lofland et al., 2025).

3.6.1 Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data for this study. It is a method of organising data according to recurring themes and patterns in a way that addresses the research questions (Ngulube, 2023). Qualitative data analysis is considered one of the most essential steps in the research process, as it enables researchers to make sense of complex, context-rich data (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2022). The process is widely recognised as labour-intensive and time-consuming due to the volume of subjective and richly detailed information it generates (Byrne, 2025; Lofland et al., 2025).

The researcher followed the four steps outlined by Harding and Pill (2021), which included: (1) identifying themes and creating categories, (2) ordering codes from different descriptors into categories, (3) creating sub-categories to reflect different elements of the themes, and (4) using the themes to explain connections between different parts of the data (as cited in Ngulube, 2023). This process began with careful listening to interview recordings, followed by transcription into an African language and subsequent translation into English. The researcher made sure that words were not just translated directly, but that the same meaning was carried across. To check accuracy, translations were compared with the original wording. This way, the voices of participants were preserved and their ideas were accurately understood in both languages. Participant folders were labelled and organised, and all interview data were securely stored in my laptop, memory stick, and in a pocket file in a lockable storage.

The researcher continued with extensive reading, note-taking, and cross-referencing with existing literature and document analysis to ensure that key information was captured. Following this, the data were highlighted using colour coding and labelled to indicate emerging ideas and potential themes. Common patterns were noted across participants' responses.

Coding was then applied to reduce large volumes of data into manageable segments. This involved assigning labels to meaningful units of data, which facilitated interpretation and thematic development (Merriam, 2021). The researcher categorised the coded data and developed a table of code headings based on frequently occurring concepts in the transcripts. These themes are presented in the next chapter.

Table 3.8: An example from data analysis transcription to the emergence of themes.

Teachers Interview Question	Transcript	Code	Category	Final Theme
What training did you receive to assess and refer learners to special schools?	<i>No, we never had training specifically for assessing and referring learners to special schools. However, we did attend workshops on SIAS policy. But because we also did psychology as part of our teaching modules at college. And by making own research and asking from my fellow colleagues.</i>	Training, workshop, and college.	Training of teachers.	Teacher training

3.7 RELIABILITY AND VALIDITY/CREDIBILITY AND TRUSTWORTHINESS

According to Shufutinsky (2021), credibility in qualitative research is grounded in the truthfulness of the data, the participants’ perspectives, and the accurate interpretation and representation of their views. In this study, the concept of data credibility and overall trustworthiness was evaluated using four key components: credibility, transferability, confirmability, and dependability (Amin et al., 2023). These criteria provided a framework for assessing the integrity and reliability of the research findings.

3.7.1 Credibility

Credibility refers to the accuracy with which the researcher understands and represents the information provided by participants (du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2023). It centres on the issue of truth-value and is widely regarded as the most essential criterion in establishing trustworthiness (Statistics Solutions, 2025). Trustworthiness, in turn, is how researchers demonstrate that their findings are worthy of consideration and accurately reflect participants’

experiences. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985, as cited in Nowell et al., 2022), trustworthiness encompasses a set of criteria, including credibility, that ensures the integrity and reliability of qualitative research.

3.7.2 Transferability

Transferability refers to the extent to which research findings remain consistent when applied to similar contexts or situations (du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2023). To enable readers to assess whether the findings are transferable and applicable to their own settings, researchers must provide a thick description of the participants, context, and study procedures (Nowell et al., 2022; Peters et al., 2022). In this study, Transferability was supported through a clearly defined sampling strategy and a detailed participant selection process.

Integrity, as defined by Whyte (2021), refers to the coherence between the data collection methods, data analysis procedures, and the theoretical insights derived from the data. This study ensured integrity by outlining a comprehensive data collection approach, a systematic analysis process, and a clear link between the findings and the theoretical framework.

3.7.3 Confirmability

Confirmability refers to the extent to which research findings can be supported and verified by others (Patton, 2021). It focuses on demonstrating how the researcher's interpretations and conclusions are grounded in the data collected (Amin et al., 2023). The concept emphasises the importance of transparency in the analytical process, demonstrating how well the evidence supports the conclusions.

Aspers and Corte (2022) emphasise the need for findings to be verifiable across studies, reinforcing the importance of methodological clarity and consistency. By explicitly describing how interpretations and conclusions are reached, researchers enhance the confirmability of their work.

In this study, confirmability was achieved through meticulous record-keeping and detailed documentation of research procedures. These practices support transparency and allow others to understand and potentially replicate the research design, thereby strengthening the study's trustworthiness

3.7.4 Dependability

Dependability refers to the extent to which research findings remain consistent when applied to similar participants in comparable contexts (Amin et al., 2023). It emphasises the importance of a transparent and logical research process that can be traced and evaluated by others. Fellows and Liu (2022) highlight that dependability requires researchers to ensure that their procedures are clearly documented, methodologically sound, and free from misinterpretation.

In this study, dependability was achieved by maintaining a reliable and consistent research process. The researcher ensured that all procedures were systematically followed and that participants' views were accurately represented, thereby reinforcing the integrity and trustworthiness of the findings.

3.8 ETHICAL CONSIDERATION

Research ethics refer to a set of moral principles or professional codes of conduct that guide researchers' attitudes and behaviours throughout the research process (du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2023). Ethical considerations are essential because they impact all individuals involved in or affected by the research. In this study, ethical issues were addressed with particular attention to the rights, dignity, and well-being of participants.

Gupta (2022) emphasises that researchers must consistently prioritise ethical concerns and remain mindful of participants throughout the research process. Ethical clearance for this study was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee of the University of South Africa (UNISA), under reference number: 2022/04/13/50111930/22/AM. A formal research proposal was submitted to UNISA, and approval was granted in accordance with the university's Research Ethics Clearance Policy, which outlines the principles and conditions that all researchers must adhere to before and during the study.

Marshall and Roseman (2021) advocate for the implementation of ethical practices both before and following the completion of research, reinforcing the importance of sustained ethical accountability

3.8.1 Permission to Conduct Research

Before conducting the research, the researcher obtained formal approval from the Gauteng Department of Education (GDE) to carry out the study at the three selected schools. In addition, permission was granted by the principals of all three schools to facilitate data collection on their premises.

Several ethical considerations were addressed to ensure the protection and dignity of participants. These included maintaining participant anonymity, safeguarding privacy and confidentiality, securing informed consent, and ensuring voluntary participation with the option to withdraw at any stage (Creswell & Creswell, 2023; Creswell & Poth, 2023). These measures align with best practices in educational research and uphold the ethical standards required for responsible inquiry.

3.8.2 Informed Consent

Participants in this study were fully informed about the nature and purpose of the research. They were made aware of their involvement, clearly understood what would be required of them during participation, and were informed of how the results would be used. Consent letters were distributed to all participants, including SBST members, DBST representatives, teachers, and parents/guardians, to obtain formal consent for participation.

All interviews were conducted confidentially, and sensitive information was protected throughout the data collection process. Follow-up questions were asked when necessary to clarify uncertain responses. In qualitative research, it is often necessary to revisit the field or participants to collect additional data or verify findings, which enhances the validity of the conclusions (Seidel, 1998, as cited in Maree, 2023).

Regarding incentives, the study clearly stated that participants would neither be advantaged nor disadvantaged by their involvement. Participation was entirely voluntary, and individuals retained the right to withdraw at any time without consequence. All participants were assured that they would receive feedback on the study's findings

3.8.3 Respect for Autonomy

This study respected the autonomy of all participants by ensuring they were fully informed about the research purpose, procedures, and their role in the study. In conducting the research and collecting data, interviews were treated as confidential, and sensitive information was protected by replacing identifying details with pseudonyms. Personal information was not directly linked to the data, thereby safeguarding participant privacy. Follow-up questions were asked when necessary to clarify ambiguous responses and ensure accurate representation of participants' views (Maree, 2023).

3.8.4 Non-Maleficence

Before obtaining consent, participants were informed that their involvement in the study was entirely voluntary. The term voluntary participation refers to the principle that individuals cannot be coerced or obligated to take part in research (Birch, 2021). Participants were also made aware that no reimbursement or incentives would be provided, and that they retained the constitutional right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence.

During data collection, one parent experienced emotional distress triggered by the study topic. The researcher responded with sensitivity, offering comfort and pausing the interview until the participant felt ready to continue. This approach reflects the study's commitment to ethical research practices and its aim to make a positive and meaningful contribution to society without causing harm to participants. Throughout the research process, participants were treated with dignity and respect (Allan, 2023).

3.8.5 Research Merits and Integrity

This study aims to explore the assessment procedures and referral processes used in public mainstream primary schools when identifying learners for placement in special schools. It seeks to contribute to the existing body of knowledge in the fields of Inclusive Education and Learner Support. The research has the potential to highlight both the advantages and limitations of current assessment practices and to offer evidence-based recommendations for improving referral systems and support strategies.

3.8.6 Protection of Data

The identity of the schools and all participants was protected through the use of pseudonyms. Data collection was guided strictly by the ethical code prescribed by the University of South Africa's Ethics Committee. All data were treated with the highest level of confidentiality, ensuring that schools, learners, and parents remain unidentifiable in any written reports or publications.

Audio recordings are securely stored in a locked, private safe at the researcher's residence, accessible only to the researcher. These recordings will be retained for five years, after which they will be permanently deleted from the recording device. Any handwritten notes taken during the interviews will be incinerated to ensure complete data disposal and participant privacy.

3.9 CONCLUSION

This chapter provided a comprehensive overview of the research methodology and the single case study design employed in the study. It detailed the data collection techniques and instruments used, including individual and focus group interviews, interview procedures, document analysis, and the protocols followed during document review.

The chapter also outlined the data analysis and interpretation process, which was guided by thematic analysis. Key considerations related to credibility, trustworthiness, and ethical compliance were thoroughly addressed to ensure the integrity of the research process. The next chapter, Chapter 4, presents the data analysis and discussion of findings.

CHAPTER 4: DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

4.1 INTRODUCTION

The previous chapter explained the research design used and described the research instruments and the collection and data analysis processes. It also explained the reliability and validity of the data that has been collected. This chapter (Chapter 4) presents the data analysis and discussion of the findings. The research aimed to explore the assessment process used in public schools when assessing learners who are referred to special schools in Johannesburg Central District, South Africa. The research design used in this study is a case study, as it allows deep exploration and understanding of the participant experience (Hancock, 2021).

This chapter will present, interpret, and discuss the findings that emerged from the case study concerning the research questions, literature, and the theoretical framework underpinning the study.

Table 4.1: Tabulation of the Research Aim and Objectives of the Study

RESEARCH AIM
The aim of the study was to determine the challenges with the assessment process used in public schools when assessing learners who are referred to special schools in Johannesburg Central District, South Africa.
RESEARCH OBJECTIVES
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• To determine the teachers' understanding of the assessment process followed in mainstream schools.• To determine the policy expectation regarding the assessment and referral of learners to special schools.• To establish how the assessment process is guided in mainstream schools to assess and refer learners to special schools.• To establish what support is available to learners with barriers to learning in mainstream schools.• To determine how trained mainstream school teachers are to assess and refer learners to special schools.

4.2 PROCESS OF DATA COLLECTION

This study was conducted in three primary schools in the Johannesburg central district of Gauteng province. The methods of data collection for this study included in-depth semi-structured individual face-to-face and telephone interviews, focus group interviews, and document analysis. These methods of data collection enabled the researcher to acquire rich and descriptive data as well as to answer the research questions, that is, what are the challenges with the assessment process used in public schools when assessing learners who are referred to special schools?

Interviews were conducted with the teachers, parents, or guardians of learners who went through the assessment process and the DBST. The interviews lasted for less than an hour.

Focus group interviews were conducted with the SBST members for about one hour. In Schools A and B, the interviews were conducted in the classroom of the SBST coordinator. In School C, the interviews were conducted in the school staffroom.

All the interviews were conducted in English, but the participants were not restricted to responding in English, and the use of isiZulu and English was used to emphasise some of the points. Documents that were analysed in this study included:

- The SIAS policy document,
- The learner's books, and
- The Learner Profile containing the Individual Support Plan, and learner Support Needs Assessment (SNA1) forms.

These documents were requested from the teacher who was currently in the process of referring the learner.

4.3 DATA ANALYSIS

Christou (2022) explains that data analysis is performed for linked themes to emerge, and for the researcher to establish connections to potential understandings that could be extracted from the initial information. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the qualitative data collected for this study. Thematic analysis involves arranging data according to themes and patterns in a way that will answer the research questions (Jnanathapaswi, 2021). Qualitative data for this study were collected through individual face-to-face interviews, telephonic

interviews, focus group interviews and document analysis. The different qualitative methods used to collect data for the study were triangulated to ensure the trustworthiness and reliability of the study. Semi-structured individual interviews and focus group discussions are ideal for researchers using an interpretive paradigm (Ajani & Govender, 2021).

To address the research objectives, the researcher needed to gather relevant information on the SIAS policy expectations regarding the assessment and referral process, the guide available in mainstream schools to assess and refer learners to special schools, and the support available for learners with learning barriers. The researcher also needed to find out how trained teachers are with the assessment and referral process. As a result, the researcher conducted telephonic interviews with three parents, face-to-face interviews with six parents, telephonic interviews with six teachers, face-to-face interviews with four teachers, three face-to-face focus group interviews with three SBSTs, and telephonic interviews with one DBST representative. The interviews and focus group discussions were held over four weeks.

In analysing the qualitative data, the researcher followed the four-step thematic analysis process proposed by Harding and Pill (2013). This approach began with the identification of themes emerging from the raw data, allowing the researcher to generate initial categories that reflected recurring ideas and patterns across participant responses. Once these broad categories were established, the researcher proceeded to organise codes from different descriptors into the relevant categories, thereby grouping similar pieces of information together in a meaningful way. The third stage involved creating subcategories to capture the nuanced elements of each theme and to differentiate between the varied dimensions embedded within participants' experiences. Finally, the researcher drew on these themes and subthemes to explain the connections between different parts of the dataset, enabling a deeper interpretation of how the participants' perspectives related to the broader research questions and literature (Harding & Pill, 2013).

To carry out this analytical process effectively, the researcher engaged in several systematic steps. This included listening attentively to the audio-recorded interviews, transcribing the recordings verbatim, and immersing themselves in the data to develop a comprehensive understanding of participants' responses. The integration of interview transcripts with documents analysed during the study strengthened the depth and credibility of the findings. Consistent with the guidance of Cohen et al. (2011), common ideas and repeated patterns

were coded and categorised to allow the researcher to make sense of data collected from multiple sources. This iterative and rigorous process ensured that the themes generated were firmly grounded in the data and reflective of the participants' lived experiences.

4.4 INFORMATION ON THE THREE SAMPLE SCHOOLS

A total of three mainstream primary schools from Johannesburg Central District in South Africa participated in this study. Thus, the non-probability sampling method used in this study was the purposive sampling method, also known as judgment sampling (Ahmad et al., 2025). Participants and the schools were purposely selected for the study since they had knowledge about the SIAS process and the experience of the referral process, which helped unfold the research problem of the study. Pseudonyms were assigned to the schools to protect their identities. The researcher will refer to them as School A, School B, and School C, respectively.

Schools A, B, and C are public mainstream schools that are in Soweto under Johannesburg Central District. The three schools are foundation phase schools, ranging from Grade R to Grade 4. These schools fall under Section 21 schools, meaning that the Department of Education allocates finances to them. The schools are responsible for ordering stationery and textbooks, paying for water and electricity, and undertaking and managing their own maintenance. They are classified as quintile 3 no-fee schools.

School A was built in 1899. The school has 12 teachers and 468 learners. School B was built in 1899. The school has 17 teachers and 635 learners. The school caters to boys and girls. It is not a boarding school. The school is situated near a community library and hall. School C was built in 1895. The school has 24 teachers and 923 learners. The home language they offer at the school is IsiZulu.

4.5 INFORMATION ON THE PARTICIPANTS

A total of 26 participants participated in this study. The participants were drawn from three schools (A, B, C). They included nine teachers, nine parents, seven SBST members, and one DBST representative who represented Schools A and C.

In School A, the researcher interviewed three teachers, three parents, two SBST members, and one DBST representative.

In School B, the researcher interviewed three teachers, three parents, and two SBST members. The DBST representative for School B was not available to participate in this study.

In School C, the researcher interviewed three teachers, three parents, three SBST members, and one DBST representative, who was the same DBST member that represented School A.

4.5.1 Information on the Nine Teacher Participants

Table 4.2: Biographical Information on the Nine Teachers

School	Teacher participant	Participants' pseudonym	Gender	Age	Grade	Years of teaching experience
A	1	A-T-1	Female	39	3	8
	2	A-T-2	Female	53	2	22
	3	A-T-3	Female	46	2	16
B	1	B-T-1	Female	34	3	6
	2	B-T-2	Female	31	2	5
	3	B-T-3	Female	51	3	20
C	1	C-T-1	Male	39	3	7
	2	C-T-2	Female	56	2	18
	3	C-T-3	Female	58	2	24

Key:

A-T-1 to A-T-3 = School A Teacher 1 to Teacher 3

B-T-1 to B-T-3 = School B Teacher 1 to Teacher 3

C-T-1 to C-T-3 = School C Teacher 1 to Teacher 3

Nine teachers participated in this study (three teachers from each sample school: A, B, C). The teachers were interviewed based on their experiences with the assessment and referral process. Although individual face-to-face semi-structured interviews were initially planned to take place with the nine teachers, only five were conducted in person, as four teachers had to be interviewed by telephone. The face-to-face individual interviews were conducted with three teachers from School A, one teacher from School B, and one teacher from School C.

The telephonic interviews were conducted with two teachers from School B and two teachers from School C. The reason for conducting telephone interviews was that some teachers had very tight schedules and the only way the researcher could reach them was through a phone call, often after several attempts with no answer. All the teachers are foundation phase teachers who have at least five years of teaching experience and have experience in implementing the SIAS process. Each interview lasted for less than an hour.

To protect the identity of the schools and participants (Teachers), the researcher refers to them as follows:

- School-A teacher participants: A-T-1, A-T-2, A-T-3.
- School-B teacher participants: B-T-1, B-T-2, B-T-3; and
- School-C teacher participants: C-T-1, C-T-2, C-T-3.

4.5.2 Information on the Nine Parent Participants

Table 4.3: Biographical Information on the Nine Parents

School	Parent participants	Participants' pseudonym	Gender	Age
A	1	A-P-1	Female	37
	2	A-P-2	Female	41
	3	A-P-3	Female	45
B	1	B-P-1	Female	40
	2	B-P-2	Female	35
	3	B-P-3	Female	37
C	1	C-P-1	Female	37
	2	C-P-2	Female	41
	3	C-P-3	Female	45

Key:

A-P-1 to A-P-3 = School A Parent 1 to Parent 3

B-P-1 to B-P-3 = School B Parent 1 to Parent 3

C-P-1 to C-P-3 = School C Parent 1 to Parent 3

Nine parents participated in this study. They were all female and parents of learners who had already been referred to special schools. Face-to-face individual interviews were conducted

with six parents from Schools A and C, while telephone interviews were conducted with three parents from School B. The reason for conducting telephone interviews was that the researcher had difficulty reaching the participants from School B. Each interview lasted less than an hour, with an audio recorder used to capture the conversations in all the interview sessions. The researcher also recorded notes in a journal to capture participants' reactions and to serve as a guide during transcription (Eaton et al., 2019).

Parents interviewed were those involved in the assessment and referral process of their children. Of the nine parents, eight were directly involved in the assessment and referral of their children. One parent, however, was not fully involved due to work commitments; her younger sister attended some meetings at the school on her behalf.

To protect the identity of the schools and participants (parents), the researcher refers to them as follows:

- School A participants A-P-1, A-P-2, A-P-3.
- School B Participants as B-P-1, B-P-2, B-P-3; and
- School C participants as C-P-1, C-P-2, C-P-3.

4.5.3 Information on the Seven SBST Members

Table 4.4: Biographical Information on the Seven SBST Members

School	Participants	Participants' pseudonym	Gender	Age	Grade	Years of teaching experience
A	1	A-FGP-1	Female	39	3	8
	2	A-FGP-2	Female	46	2	16
B	1	B-FGP-1	Female	34	3	6
	2	B-FGP-2	Female	51	3	20
C	1	C-FGP-1	Male	39	3	7
	2	C-FGP-2	Female	56	2	18
	3	C-FGP-3	Female	58	2	24

Key:

A-FGP-1 and A-FGP-2 = School A Focus Group Participants

B-FGP-1 and B-FGP-2 = School B Focus Group Participants

C-FGP-1 to C-FGP-3 = School C Focus Group Participants

Seven SBST members participated in this study by answering the interview questions based on their experiences. For the Focus Group interviews, a total of three groups comprising School-Based Support Teams participated. School A had two participants; School B had two participants and School C had three participants. However, it was expected that a school's SBST should have at least a total of six members at its maximum and a total of two members at its minimum. Due to unforeseen circumstances, other SBST members could not join the group discussions.

To protect the identity of the schools and focus group participants, the researcher refers to them as follows:

- School A focus group participants: A-FGP-1 and A-FGP-2.
- School B focus group participants: B-FGP-1, B-FGP-2; and
- School C focus participants: C-FGP-1, C-FGP-2, C-FGP-3.

4.5.4 Information on the DBST Member

Table 4.5: Information on the DBST member

School	Participant	Participant's pseudonym	Gender	Age	Years of experience as a DBST member
A & C	1	A-DBSTR-1	Female	54	8 years
B	0	The DBST member for School B was not available to participate in this study.			

Only one DBST representative participated in the study. Although a total of three DBST representatives were expected to participate in the study, only one DBST member participated, as she was the assigned representative for both School A and School C. She answered the interview questions based on her experience interacting with the schools. The DBST member for School B was not available due to her tight schedule.

To protect the identity of the schools and participants, the researcher refers to the participant as A-DBSTR-1.

4.6 MAIN THEMES AND SUB-THEMES

The collected and analysed findings are presented and discussed within the defined themes and sub-themes. Table 4.6 below serves as a preliminary organiser, showing the themes that emerged from the data collected through interviews and focus group discussions. The participants from the actual interview transcripts support the findings reported in the sections below.

Table 4.6: Themes that Emerged from the Data Analysis

No.	Themes	Sub-themes
1	Teachers' understanding of the assessment process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Understanding the assessment process. ▪ Teacher confidence with the assessment and referral process
2	Policy expectations regarding the assessment and referral processes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The SIAS Policy Process ▪ Time allocation and Resources ▪ Inclusion of parents ▪ Parents' response to the assessment and referral process
3	Support availability in implementing the SIAS Policy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Support from the DBST ▪ Support from the SBST ▪ Document analysis
4	Availability of learner support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Intervention strategies ▪ Parental involvement ▪ Learner profile
5	Teacher training	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Pre-service teacher training ▪ Professional development for teachers to assess and refer learners to special schools

4.7 THEME 1: TEACHERS' UNDERSTANDING OF THE ASSESSMENT PROCESS

The first theme derived from the data was teachers' understanding of the assessment process. This also included the teachers' confidence in the assessment and referral process.

4.7.1 Sub-Theme 1.1: Understanding the Assessment Process

It is essential that teachers understand the assessment process so they can create a more effective and supportive learning environment for their learners. As highlighted in the previous theme, 99% of teachers are aware that the SIAS policy is in existence, and they also understand its expectations and protocol that need to be followed when implementing it. However, understanding and implementing are two different things; hence, the researcher sought to understand the teachers' understanding of the assessment process.

According to the findings of this study, teachers are not accurately assessing learners because most parents stated that they were only contacted to fill in forms and that nothing was given to them. Parents had no idea how often, when, or where their child was assessed. Other parents were not even given the opportunity to assist their children or select a school of their choice during the placement of their child. This suggests that neither the learner nor the parent was prepared for what may occur at the end of the assessment process.

The following statements are some summaries that were given by teachers when they were asked, *"What are teachers' understanding of the assessment process followed in mainstream schools?"*

A – T – 2 *"We use the SIAS POLICY process by referring to the learners' profile fill the SNA forms SNA1 filled by the class teacher, SNA2 filled by the SBST and SNA3 filled by the DBST"*

B – T – 1 *"The assessment and referral process is to first identify the problem then intervene with reducing the standard of the assessment maybe by making use of pictures so that the learner remembers. Compile evidence of the learner's work and your interventions. Call the parent and inform them about the learner's challenges and the next step, which is referring the learner to the SBST. The SBST will intervene and if they do not succeed they call the parent and inform him or her about the learner's challenges and what they have done in trying to*

help the learner, then fill in the SNA forms and inform the parent that the case is being escalated to DBST. The DBST will then come to school conduct their assessments fill the SNA forms and place the learner in the school that will cater for the needs of the learner since their needs are not the same.”

C – T – 2 *“The process includes baseline assessment, planning, Teaching, accommodating all learners. Then assess all learners according to their level by reducing the workload, or a lower grade work. Use your observation book to note everything down. After identifying that the learner is experiencing learning barriers, we complete a SNA form, but we only fill in the SNA form together with the parent after exhausting all intervention strategies because we understand that this is a lifetime decision that can destroy the learner’s life. Then the learner is referred to the SBST for further intervention and assessment. If the SBST does not succeed the case is then referred to DBST for further assessment and intervention that’s when the learner is referred to a special school however that does not immediately happen it takes time until a correct school that will cater for the needs of the learner is available”.*

The findings suggest that some teachers lack a comprehensive understanding of the assessment process, which limits their ability to adapt assessment instruments to meet the diverse needs of learners. This misalignment can result in the ineffective use of educational resources and hinder the delivery of constructive feedback. Without timely and targeted feedback, learners may struggle to identify areas for improvement, thereby hindering their academic progress. Furthermore, this gap in assessment practice may decrease the confidence of both learners and parents in the teacher’s professional competence. These concerns are highlighted by Chazi-Nacimba et al. (2024), who emphasise that meaningful formative assessment and feedback are essential for improving learner performance and fostering quality education.

4.7.2 Sub-Theme 1.2: Teacher Confidence with the Assessment and Referral Process

It was important in this study to find out how confident teachers are with the assessment and referral process because this process is very important, as it can improve or negatively affect

the learners' future when accurate processes are not followed during the assessment process.

According to the interview findings, most of the teachers indicated that they were somewhat confident but not 100% confident with the assessment and referral process.

Below are some of the teachers' responses when they were asked how confident they were to assess and refer learners to a special school.

A-T-2 *"I am confident, and I've been helping other colleagues."*

B-T-3 *"I am not 100 percent confident, because I still feel that I still need a proper training with learner assessment and referral process."*

C-T-1 *"Am confident. However, if there is training available I will attend it."*

C-T-2 *"I am 100 percent confident about assessment and referral process, because I observe, do my research and consult other colleagues. And I've been teaching foundation phase for more than 7 years now."*

The majority of the teachers' responses suggest that they are confident with the assessment and referral process because they have more than five years of teaching experience and they have been doing this process more than once.

It is commendable that some teachers were researching to enhance their understanding of the assessment and referral process. Other teachers were also confident enough to assist their peers with the process.

However, some teachers are not fully confident with the process. When teachers are not 100% confident with the assessment and referral process, several implications can arise such as unfair evaluations, the learners and parents may become confused about what is expected of them which can be demotivating, and vague feedback which will not help the learners to understand their strengths or areas of improvement as a result lack of confidence can create a ripple effect that compromises the assessment and referral process (Jones et al., 2022).

Nevertheless, all teachers were open to training and stated that they required proper training with the assessment and referral process. Deghaye's (2021) findings indicate that teachers are having trouble with comprehending screening, and a majority of them believe they are unable to identify learners who may have barriers to learning.

Hess (2020, pp. 202-203) states that the findings of the study show that “teachers find it hard to cope with the demand of implementing the different inclusive policies.”

The findings from the document analysis showed that teachers hardly use the learners’ profiles as a point of reference. This was evident because the learner profiles were not updated and had very limited information. This could also allude to the fact that the SIAS process stages have a possibility of being breached, and this signals a compromise in the process; moreover, it leads one to question the authenticity of the assessment process and the final decision on the learner’s support or referral. The SIAS policy strongly recommends that the learner profile must be maintained and regularly updated (DBE, 2014). Updated learner profiles can assist the next teacher with regard to knowing information about the learner’s strengths and areas of improvement.

4.8 THEME 2: POLICY EXPECTATIONS REGARDING THE ASSESSMENT AND REFERRAL PROCESSES

The second theme that derived from the data was policy expectations regarding the assessment and referral process. This included the SIAS policy process, time allocation and resources, inclusion of parents, and parents’ response to the assessment and referral process.

4.8.1 Sub-Theme 2.1: The SIAS Policy Process

The SIAS policy has four stages: Screening, Identification, Assessment, and Support provisioning and monitoring (DBE, 2014). Through a set of official forms, this policy outlines the protocol that needs to be followed when responding to the needs of the learner, particularly those who are vulnerable. The protocol outlines the role at the school and district level.

The main focus of SIAS policy is to manage teaching and learning as well as provide guidelines on early identification and support and the role of teachers in implementing inclusive education (DBE, 2014).

According to the research findings, 99% of the teachers are aware that the SIAS policy is in existence, and they understand its expectations as well as the correct protocol that needs to be followed when implementing it.

The following statements are some summaries that were given by teachers when they were asked: *“What are the policy expectations regarding the assessment and referral process?”*

A-T-3: *“The policy expectation is that we exhaust all our intervention strategies before referring the learner for a placement in a special school. These interventions must include a learner, teacher, parent SBST and a DBST”.*

B-T-1: *“The expectation of the policy during the assessment and referral process is to first identify the problem, then intervene with reducing the standard of the assessment, maybe by making use of pictures, so that the learner remembers. Compile evidence of the learner's work and your interventions, call the parent inform him or her about the learner's challenges and the next step that is referring the learner to the SBST. The SBST will intervene and if they do not succeed they call the parent and inform him or her about the learner's challenges and what they have done in trying to help the learner, then fill in the SNA forms and inform the parent that the case is being escalated to DBST. The DBST will then come to school conduct their assessments fill the SNA forms and place the learner in the school that will cater for the needs of the learner since their needs are not the same”.*

C-T-2: *“The policy expects teachers to have an observation book that he or she will note everything he or she see on the learners' both strengths and weaknesses in writing, speaking, participating as well as how the learner interacts with other learners. Then plan your lessons and task to accommodating all learners those who are doing well and those who are struggling. We also do baseline assessment to diagnose the learners' level of functionality”.*

Teachers' responses highlighted that not all teachers, but the majority, know the expectations regarding assessment and referral processes. The findings imply that the implementation and monitoring of the SIAS process were not effective in the schools if teachers did not know the expectations of the SIAS process. This also places a huge implication on whether the SIAS process is implemented correctly in the schools. The findings suggest that SIAS policy expectation workshops are necessary to capacitate teachers since not all teachers know what the policy expectations regarding the Assessment and referral process are.

It still concerns the researcher whether teachers exhaust all their intervention strategies. It is important for teachers to know how to recognise learners who are having difficulties in learning and how to support them by differentiating their instruction in order to support learners who have learning barriers in the classroom. Teachers must have a good understanding of barriers to learning in order to support learners who may be facing them and to prevent frustrating them with their performance in the classroom (Matolo & Rambuda, 2022).

Hess (2020, pp. 202-203) states that the findings of her study "...show that teachers find it hard to cope with the demand of implementing the different inclusive policies". In addition to the above statement, Graham (2023) in their study highlighted that teachers have overcrowded classes (up to 40 or more learners in some schools) and find it hard to facilitate a learning environment that involves all learners in the class.

A learner's life can be affected negatively if the decision to place them in special, vocational, or remedial school is not based on an accurate assessment. The poor ability to screen learners means many learners with less obvious disabilities are unlikely to be identified in schools. As a result, many learners with disabilities/experiencing barriers to learning are unlikely to receive the support they need to participate fully in learning (Deghaye, 2021).

4.8.2 Sub-Theme 2.2: Time Allocation and Resources

It is important that teachers are provided with sufficient and relevant teaching and learning resources and allocated adequate time to conduct all their SIAS policy administration. The availability of resources influences the school's ability to promote inclusion. Daghanye (2021) suggests that the national DBE provides financial resources to the provincial education departments. However, White Paper 6 (DBE, 2001) states that it is the responsibility of the School's Governing Body to allocate resources towards quality education, but if those resources are not adequate, they must be supplemented by the state.

During the interviews, the majority of the teachers highlighted time allocation and lack of resources as one of the biggest challenges that they encountered during the assessment and referral process. Robert's (2011, p. 61) findings indicate further that "time is often insufficient to adequately support learners experiencing barriers in the classroom". The teachers emphasised that the provision of individualized support demands more time. Evidently,

teachers then spend a lot of time supporting individual learners while neglecting others in the classroom (Kahveci, 2023).

The following excerpts support the above findings:

C-FGP-1: *“They need to shorten the forms and clear the repetitive sections. Currently, there is a lot of paperwork that ends up demotivating schools and teachers in implementing the policy. We do not have class assistants; each teacher does their own intervention because we are classroom based. The only assistants we have are the ones that were introduced during COVID-19 by the Department of Education”.*

A-FGP-1: *“According to my experience and observation, the SIAS policy has been revised and compressed. The problem is with the increased number of learners experiencing barriers to learning. I personally think that the loophole was when the Department of Education said the learner cannot repeat the grade more than once. There are some learners who would benefit from repeating Foundation Phase even if it is 4 years, rather than progressing them with knowledge deficiencies”.*

The study's findings revealed that teachers have overcrowded classrooms. They must ensure that they cater to all learners in their classrooms, as they do not have class assistants, and learning and teaching resources are insufficient for all learners. They struggle to identify and support learners as expected due to the large number of learners in their classrooms. These findings suggest that teaching and learning are hindered due to overcrowded classrooms. Overcrowded classrooms are negatively affecting learners with learning barriers, as they require extra attention and support. Therefore, when a class is overcrowded, it becomes difficult for the teacher to identify and support learners with learning barriers promptly. Von Solms (2020, p.100) states that “inadequate resources and a lack of specialized skills would thus defeat the goal of the SIAS policy, which is to give enough help to learners who face learning barriers”.

Due to time constraints, teachers end up not following all the SIAS stages and protocols as expected. Other teachers promote the learners to the next grade even though they may not be ready for it, just because they want to avoid completing the SNA Forms.

Von Solms's (2020) findings similarly highlighted that, because the forms are so long, some teachers say they are not going to fill them. Then it becomes another teacher's problem.

The researcher is concerned about the time allocated to teachers for supporting learners with barriers to learning and whether this time is sufficient to adequately support these learners. According to the SIAS policy, there is no stipulated or allocated time for supporting learners to overcome their learning barriers (DBE, 2014). However, the SIAS policy (DBE, 2014) highlights that support is continuous; the learner is supported until he or she overcomes those learning barriers; therefore, the support plan is captured and put into action. It must have a review date on which progress (or lack of progress) will be discussed. On the review date, the plan is adjusted and the SBST may decide that a higher level of support is needed, in which case the DBST is asked to assist. Such plans should be reviewed at least once a term (DBE, 2014).

According to SIAS (DBE, 2014), schools must allocate time for teachers and support staff to collaboratively plan and review strategies for supporting learners with barriers. Time should be set aside to address the specific needs of each learner with barriers. This might include additional time for assessments, individualised instruction, or special interventions. Schools should implement flexible scheduling to accommodate the needs of learners, which may entail adjusting the timetables or providing additional support staff.

The data from the interviews revealed that teachers are willing to help learners with learning barriers, but they cannot fully support them due to the limited time they have to support these learners. In Zimbabwe, inclusion is made easier by providing specialized professionals to assist students with special needs in regular classrooms (Von, 2020). In South Africa, we do have specialised professionals to assist learners with special needs; however, they are insufficient for all schools, and as a result, teachers are negatively affected and frustrated.

4.8.3 Sub-Theme 2.3: Inclusion of Parents

Parents/caregivers should always be actively involved in the identification and assessment of their children and should be treated as equal partners in the SIAS process (Buthelezi, 2020). According to the Republic of South Africa's Department of Basic Education (2014), the parent or caregiver and the learner who is 12 years or older must be involved throughout

the decision-making process as per the Screening, Identification, Assessment and Support (SIAS) policy (DBE, 2014).

Parents have a stronger and more direct influence on their children than teachers, friends and media (Hammer et al., 2021). According to the research findings, some of the parents knew after giving birth to their children that they might have learning barriers. Some parents who were concerned about their children having learning barriers visited the school for clarity. Other parents discovered this by themselves at home when assisting their children with their homework. These parent-initiated actions emphasise the importance of parental involvement as part of a teaching and learning collaborative process. Furthermore, it demonstrates how parents can act as primary agents in the phase of learning barrier identification, which begins the support journey.

The following excerpts support the above findings:

- A-P-1:** *“My child is 6 months premature, she was discharged at hospital at 7 months. As I have been taking her to the hospital, the doctor said she was fine. Because I was concerned during the year, I asked the teacher how she was coping, the teacher said she is not coping. I then requested the teacher to take videos of the child in the classroom during teaching and learning because at home she is very clever with a strong memory”.*
- A-P-3:** *“The child had a speech problem. However, I personally discovered that the child is experiencing learning barriers when doing homework with him and I compared his work with younger children than him and kids of the same age.”*
- C-P-2:** *“I saw after birth that my child has a problem. After he turned one year old, I took him to the doctor. The doctor referred me to the Hospital for further assessment. Then my child was diagnosed with ADHD. He was given medication for his condition. They advised me to take him to a mainstream school so that they can see whether he will cope or not. He was not coping, and he repeated grade 1 twice.”*

C-P-3: *“After giving birth to my child she was not okay because she was always admitted at hospital. Even going to creche, she started very late; she was 4 years old.”*

Findings suggest that most parents never knew that their children had learning barriers until after being invited by the school to discuss their children’s academic performances. At this point, if the parents are forthcoming and concerned, they can provide background information that can assist in examining the extent of the barrier. Findings further suggest that it is also difficult for parents to accept that their child has a learning barrier without any proof or evidence. This indicates that parents need to understand their child’s learning needs and be shown evidence of the challenges their child is experiencing that warrant assistance. Even when medication is given to learners, parents need to know for what reason and how the medication will benefit the learner.

Parents need to be change agents, but if they are not capacitated or informed, they will not be able to maximally support their children. As mentioned above, parents are vital stakeholders in the education of their children. It can be concluded that after they become aware of the learning barriers their children have, they will be in a better position to be actively involved in the support plan.

The following excerpts also support the above findings:

B-P-1: *“I was told when he was in Grade 1, during the first term. I did not see anything because I was not staying with the child at that moment. He was staying with my mother, his grandmother, and my mother did not see anything as well.”*

B-P-3: *“It was the Grade R teacher from the school who made me aware that my child is struggling academically. “*

C-P-1: *“I was called at the school, and they informed me about the child learning barriers.*

Learning barriers can be influenced by various factors, including cognitive, environmental, instructional, personal, emotional and social factors (UNESCO, 2019). However, it is

important for parents to interact with or build a relationship with their children's class teacher or at least visit the school once per term to check their child's academic progress.

Most of the parents (60%) indicated they have been invited once or twice to school regarding their children's academic performance and help come up with strategies that can assist the child in overcoming the learning barriers. However, other parents (40%) were not invited to school to discuss their child's academic performance; they were just called to the school to fill in the SNA forms only.

The following excerpts support the above findings:

B-P-1: *"No, I did not have any knowledge about special schools, I only knew that special schools were for physically challenged learners and not slow learners. And I also knew that special schools focus on skills."*

B-P-3: *"They told us that they would refer her to a school that would cater for her needs since she is struggling. They gave us forms that we filled and returned them to school. I did not have any knowledge, and no one explained to me what a special school is."*

C-P-1: *"No, they never explained anything to me, but I did fill in some forms."*

C-P-2: *"The school never called me for any meeting. I went to the hospital for further intervention. The hospital did the assessments."*

C-P-3: *"Yes, I had an idea because I used to attend hospital support groups."*

The statements by the participants imply that during the assessment and referral process, parents are not given a full picture or a hint of what a special school is, in case the learner is referred to it. Most parents did not know what a special school is. This shows that teachers overlook some of the stages in the assessment and referral process.

These findings show that there is a loophole in the assessment and referral process by the teacher. This is also contrary to the SIAS policy (DBE, 2014) and Von Solms (2020, p. 64), which indicates that "Throughout the assessment process, the teacher initiates frequent consultations with the learner and his/her parent(s)".

During the assessment processes, most of the learners are not aware of what is happening, and even parents cannot answer where, when, or by whom their child was assessed.

The following are some of the responses that were given by parents when asked: *How was the setting? Who assessed your child? Was the child aware of what was happening? Were you in the room with your child during the assessment? How was the mood of the learner during the assessment?*

A-P-1: *“Am not sure because I was not informed when and where the child will be assessed.”*

A-P-2: *“The assessment was done at the school in a plain, normal class. The child was assessed by the teacher and the psychologist from the district. The child was not aware of what was happening. I was not in the school during assessment. I was told that he was scared and crying.”*

A-P-3: *“I cannot answer any of these questions because I was not there and I was not told when will the learner be assessed.”*

A-P-1: *“I was not there when he was assessed but I was told that the assessment will be done at the school hall since he was not the only learner who was to be assessed. However, I asked the child how was the assessment and did the person from the district come. He was okay, not showing any frustrations.”*

The level of parental support towards learners is a concern. However, the researcher does not shift the blame to parents but is rather concerned whether parents understand what is expected of them and whether they are even capacitated to assist their children. Parents should support teachers in the classroom, especially when they are addressing issues with learners who are experiencing barriers to learning.

Lefakane's (2023) study highlights that teachers and school communities define parental involvement as being involved in the educational processes, such as assisting your child with school activities and homework, as well as attending parent meetings to promote academic achievement. In contrast, many parents perceive parental involvement as being more involved in their children's daily lives, such as providing decent care in the home and involving their children in community or church activities. Subsequently, parents seem to act in ways

that reflect lessons learned from their own experiences, culture, education level, and economic status. When parents take responsibility for their children, teachers in the classroom are motivated to help the learner because they are aware of the parents' support (Lefakane, 2023).

4.8.4 Sub-Theme 2.4: Parents' Response to the Assessment and Referral Process

The referral process takes place after the SIAS process. According to the data collected in this study, teachers are somewhat aware of the referral process. However, it seems that not all teachers fully explained to parents the further steps that will be taken to support their children. All the parent participants from School A and School B indicated that *the teachers did explain to them the referral process and gave them forms to fill*. However, one participant, C-P-1, from school C, indicated that *“they never explained anything to me, but I did fill in some forms”*.

To find out whether there is a collaboration between the teacher and parent during the assessment process, the teachers were asked to explain *‘how do parents respond to the assessment and referral process’*. Below are some of the teachers' responses:

A-T-1: *“Most parents shift the blame to the teacher. Parents are in denial; they are not involved.”*

A-T-2: *“Most parents are responding negatively, they do not cooperate, others beg us for another chance, others ask us to return the learner to the same grade for a second year, maybe they will do better, unlike referring them, other parents transfer or move their children to other schools.”*

B-T-2: *“Some of the parents are in denial; they shift the blame to the teacher, but there are those who work hand in hand with us by providing us with information that will help us in helping the learner.”*

C-T-2: *“They do not respond in the same way. Other parents respond positively others not good at all; other parents are in denial, they will fight with you. They do not immediately accept, so as a teacher, you must then train the parent step by step involve him or her in every step of the way.”*

C-T-3: *“They do not respond well; most of them are in denial. Sometimes when they are part of the process, they are not cooperative.”*

It seems as if teachers and parents are not always interacting as expected in trying to support the learner and once there is no good relationship between the two parties the learner’s assessment and referral process might be delayed because nothing will happen if the parent does not approve of the referral, for example, the SNA forms have questions that the teacher cannot answer, only a parent or a guardian of the learner can give answers and the signature.

Von Solms (2020) confirmed that the teacher initiates frequent meetings with the learner and his or her parent throughout the assessment process(es). However, sometimes not every parent can be involved for several reasons. Other parents leave work late, some work away from home, and only return on weekdays, and as a result, they are unable to supervise or assist with their children's schoolwork (Perry-Jenkins, 2022).

Findings suggest that the collaboration between teachers and parents is not what it should be. There is a difficulty in the collaboration between the teachers and parents. While some parents do cooperate, other parents are not cooperative and are in denial regarding their child’s learning abilities. This has implications for their children’s future learning achievement and success. Similarly, findings in a study by Franklin et al. (2022) indicated that most parents refuse to acknowledge that their child has a learning disability(ies) and instead blame the teacher. The same is the case here; parents were shifting the blame onto the teacher instead of acknowledging that their child had a learning disability and needed more specialised and individual support.

Parents' defensiveness can also obstruct the support process. Von Solms (2020) confirms that the support process is also sometimes hampered by parents' failure to enforce support strategies like employing disciplinary approaches, such as withdrawing privileges (e.g., screen time) to curb undesirable behaviour in children. However, some parents often believe it is the role of the school or the teacher to support the learner, not realising that for a learner to progress, all stakeholders must take responsibility.

Parents may also respond defensively because some teachers are not taking them through and explaining the assessment and referral process step by step, which will possibly avoid the negative response that they get from parents. Most of the parents never knew what a

special school was until their children were placed. This shows that parents were not given a detailed explanation of the referral process.

The parents were asked whether they *had knowledge of what a special school is and how it is going to help their child improve, and whether someone explained the changes expected and how their child will be helped at the special school.*

Below are some of the responses given by the parents:

A-P-3: *“Yes, I had knowledge of special schools.”*

B-P-1: *“No, I did not have any knowledge about special schools, I only knew that special schools were for physically challenged learners and not slow learners. And I also knew that special schools focus on skills.”*

C-P-2: *“At the hospital, they briefed me, but before that, I did not have any knowledge about special schools. One of the schools that I knew, I thought it was for mentally ill learners.”*

The responses by the parents show that most of the parents are too relaxed and ignorant about the channels that their children can get help from. They do not go the extra mile in trying to find help for their children; instead, they only rely on the teachers. However, it is not entirely the parents' fault because most of the members of society are not well informed about special schools. Furthermore, the general social stigma associated with special schools, particularly those catering to learners with intellectual disabilities, makes it more challenging for the parents to embrace the transition. In her study, Lefakane (2023) noted that most of the parents whose children were referred to Intellectual Disability schools say they were overwhelmed by the news, to the extent that they cried.

4.9 THEME 3 - SUPPORT AVAILABILITY IN IMPLEMENTING THE SIAS POLICY

The third theme that emerged from the data was the support available in implementing the SIAS policy. This included support from the DBST, support from the SBST, and document analysis.

4.9.1 Sub-Theme 3.1: Support from The DBST

The support offered by the District-Based Support Team (DBST) is considered as being a crucial component of the country's overall improvement of educational support services (DoE, 2001). The DBST's responsibility is to review the intervention strategies by teachers together with the SBST, as well as ensure that resources and necessary support are made available to the schools (Von Solms, 2020). However, Nong's (2020) findings highlighted that support offered by DBST to SBST is efficient in terms of addressing learners' barriers.

There are different intervention strategies that schools use. However, these intervention strategies are not uniform because learners' needs are not the same, and the resources that the schools have are not the same, therefore, the support available in implementing SIAS varies according to the learner and the school resources.

From the teachers' responses, there is support for implementing the SIAS policy.

The SBST committee was asked *how often does the DBST visit the school in a term and what support do they provide?* Some of the responses are captured below.

A-FGP-1: *"The DBST visits the school once a term to check on progress and challenges. Mid-term they only come when there is a need".*

B-FGP-1: *"The DBST has only come twice since the year has started. It is all guided by the School Management Plan, the Head of Management tells us that on a particular day in a term, this is when the DBST can come. We tell them we are ready now; they come and reassess; we are done on our side".*

C-FGP-1: *"The DBST is always available; it is the school that calls for assistance. They also call to ask or pop by when visiting a nearby school, and we ask for help there and then, and they [DBST] help with every piece of information at their disposal".*

From the above responses, it was clear that DBST representatives do not visit the schools often, since it is highlighted that they visit the school once per term. The once-off visit per term cannot be sufficient to address the needs of the entire school; even if the DBST representative spent the entire day in the school, it would still not be enough.

Nong (2020) indicated that the school-based support team, together with the district-based support team, must empower teachers on how to address learning barriers. One will ask how and when teachers are empowered on how to address learning barriers if the DBST visits the school once per term. This implies that justice is not served, which cannot be considered correct. In addition to the above implication, Agulhas (2021) alluded that the DBST offers poor quality support to schools. The DBST representatives are not directly linked to the learners; however, they do not monitor referrals and do not visit schools (Mpanza & Govender, 2022), and if the DBST representatives have high workloads, they need to perhaps start thinking about how their challenges can be alleviated so that they can perform their duties as expected.

4.9.2 Sub-Theme 3.2: Support from The SBST

EWP6 (DoE, 2001) mandates the SBST to be compulsory in all public ordinary schools (mainstream, full-service, and special schools). Mokoko (2024) emphasises the role of the SBST as rendering and coordinating support to learners, teachers, and the institution, and further states that the establishment of collaborative and supportive networks, teacher development programmes, facilitation of resources, the encouragement of parent involvement and the monitoring of support offered to learners experiencing barriers to learning. In addition, Agulhas (2021) highlights that the SBST plays an important role in providing support to learners and teachers through deliberation on referrals, classroom strategies, case management, and decisions regarding resources within the school to identify and address barriers to learning.

When conducting the interviews, the researcher noted that the SBST committee in the participating schools is established. However, the SBST committees are not functional as per EWP6 (DoE, 2001) and the SIAS policy (DBE, 2014) expectation because the committees do not regularly meet and do not adhere to their management plan. The SBST committees at the schools only meet when there is a need because of the limited time they have.

The SBST coordinator must ensure that the committee follows the management plan since the SBST committee is one of the important committees in a school and it is expected to be functional. To ensure that this committee is functional, the principal must request a written report from the coordinator as to why the meetings are not happening as per the management plan.

According to Skinner (1953), the teachers being requested to write a report is deemed a form of negative reinforcement. The study's findings show that teachers are capable of implementing the correct assessment process since they have knowledge, support and guidance from the school. However, not all teachers are properly implementing the SIAS process. According to the behaviourism theory (Skinner, 1953), a strategy like monitoring and holding teachers accountable for not properly implementing the SIAS process must be implemented, as other teachers are following the process correctly. Therefore, schools need to develop strategies to address the challenges associated with the assessment process used when referring learners to special schools.

The cases that teachers refer to the SBST committee are not only academically related, but there are many areas in which support can be provided, including communication, behaviour, health, social competence, wellness, personal care, and teacher development.

4.9.2.1 Teachers' Views on the Support They Receive from the SBST

According to the study findings, teachers are not fully utilising the SBST committee as they are supposed to and the SBST committee does not support teachers enough, as a result, they end up not doing justice when supporting and referring learners to special schools.

Teachers only contact the SBST when submitting the SNA forms for referral and they do not request support. Also, the SBST committee does not follow up on evidence of support provided by the teacher. The findings suggest that the SBST is not fully functional in schools, nor do schools provide workshops or training to capacitate teachers on their roles. As a result, teachers are not effectively working together to support learners and their parents. This could be determined from the following quotes.

A-P-1: *"Am not sure because I was not informed when and where the child will be assessed."*

A-P-3: *"No, I can't answer any of these questions because I was there and I was not told when will the learner be assessed."*

B-P-2: *"I cannot give answers to this question because I don't know where and when my child was assessed."*

When teachers and parents do not receive or request support from the SBST, several implications may arise, such as a lack of parental engagement where parents feel excluded, which can affect their willingness to support the entire assessment and referral process. If parents are not fully informed about the entire referral process, they may miss the opportunity to assist their children in addressing learning barriers earlier. When the SBST does not provide a full explanation or support to teachers and parents, it can create barriers to effective collaboration (Mpanza & Govender, 2022).

4.9.2.2 Parents' Views on the Support They Receive from the SBST

The study did not highlight any support that the parents received from the SBST committee. Parents were only invited twice by the teacher, when the learning barrier was identified and when the parent was signing the SNA forms for referral. This can be derived from the statements below.

B-P-1: *“I was not invited to see review the learner’s performance after our first invitation, but during the first meeting, I was told that my child will be attending afternoon classes as one of the intervention strategies.”*

C-P-3: *“No, I was not invited for the review of the child’s performance, but I was invited to complete the forms for assessment and referral.”*

C-P-1: *“Yes, they called me for the second time when she was in Grade 2, and they are referring the child to the district for further assessment.”*

Most parents do not even know that the SBST committee is in existence in schools. This implies that the assessment and referral process is not fully implemented, and parents are not fully engaged in the support process. Behaviourism theory emphasises the importance of collaboration and consistency. Teachers ought to work with parents and other professionals to ensure that strategies and expectations are aligned across home and school settings, facilitating a holistic view of the learner's behaviour (Bachman et al., 2021).

4.9.2.3 The SBST Committee Members' Views

The SBST committee was asked: *“Does the school have a specific person who is responsible for assisting with the assessments and referral of learners to special schools?”*

Below are the responses given by the SBST members during the focus group interviews.

A-FGP-1: *“The school does have a SBST committee with a coordinator, but because we are quite a small school, all teachers are involved in the committee processes”.*

B-FGP-1: *“No, the entire SBST committee is responsible for this. We sit down and deliberate, put together the form, and send it to the DBST representative who is responsible for giving referral after doing assessments. The school chose me to be the SBST coordinator, because I have done Inclusive Education and Learner Support as part of my modules at university”.*

C-FGP-1: *“Yes, I am a Departmental Head and SBST coordinator. I did Inclusive Education”.*

Based on the study's findings, it implies that the SBST committees are established and coordinated by someone who has a background in Inclusive Education and understands the importance of a functional SBST committee. Nene (2023) stated that for SBSTs to be functional, there must be consistent communication between all members involved and high-quality teamwork. The SBST should effectively fulfil its responsibilities in schools to guide the assessment and referral process.

4.9.3 Sub-Theme 3.3: Document Analysis

Document analysis for learner support involves examining different documents to understand how learners' needs and challenges were addressed. The documents that were analysed are of a Grade 2 learner from School B who was not yet referred to the SBST but was identified as having learning barriers. The researcher could not get the documents of the referred learners. The schools were also a bit reluctant to share the learners' books and profiles.

The documents that were analysed in this study included:

- the screening, Identification, Assessment, and Support policy.
- the learner's book and
- the learner's Profile, which contained the following documents: Individual Support Plan, learner Support Needs Assessment (SNA1) forms, and parent invitation to the school letters.

Furthermore, SIAS documentation was analysed by linking recorded learner behaviours to corresponding support decisions, allowing the researcher to trace how behavioural observations informed referral processes. This ensured that data interpretation was not merely descriptive but was also theoretically grounded in Behaviourist principles.

4.9.3.1 The Screening, Identification, Assessment, and Support Policy (SIAS)

During the document analysis, the researcher noted that the SIAS policy document was published in the year 2014. Workshops, seminars and presentations were then conducted and are still conducted to develop and empower teachers in implementing the SIAS policy correctly.

Even if teachers or parents who are interested or wish to learn the SIAS protocol, they can go through the policy by themselves because it clearly outlines the purpose, aims, objectives, guidelines, principles, as well as roles and responsibilities of all stakeholders involved during the SIAS process (SIAS, 2014). Furthermore, the policy is available on the Department of Basic Education's (DBE's) website.

All forms that are required in the SIAS process are well explained and can be found at the back of the policy document (DBE, 2014). Despite this, teachers at the sample school are not correctly implementing the SIAS process as they are expected to. The teachers can identify the learning barriers, but they struggle to assess and support the learners. This implies that the SBST and the DBST do not fully monitor and support teachers when implementing the SIAS process.

Teachers were also struggling to gather or provide evidence of support that they have already given to learners in their efforts to overcome learning barriers. Lastly, teachers and the SBST committee are not fully involving parents as outlined and expected by the SIAS policy (DBE, 2014). This suggests that the schools were not adhering to the SIAS policy, which may hinder effective support for learners facing barriers to learning. The only challenge identified by the researcher is that the SNA forms have a lot of pages (are lengthy) and require extensive information, which often leads to teachers avoiding completing and not doing justice when completing them. Additionally, parents who wish to read and understand the SIAS policy in their home languages may encounter problems because it is only available in English. This

implies that individuals who wish to empower themselves with the SIAS process have several platforms available but can only access the policy in English. These findings indicate a need to translate the SIAS policy into other South African languages to accommodate diversity. Additionally, reviewing and restructuring the SNA forms is necessary.

4.9.3.2 *The Learner's Books*

The learner's books have sufficient work; the books are marked and neatly covered. The work is differentiated and adapted to meet the level of the learner. However, most of the learners' work was left incomplete, which could imply that more class assistance is needed to assist teachers because teachers end up not doing justice in supporting learners with barriers to learning. The parents have signed some of the learner's homework. This shows that parents are monitoring their children's homework.

4.9.3.3 *The Learner's Profile*

The Learner Profile contained confidential and personal information, including forms filled in by the parent, the Road to Health Card, the learner's term-end report cards, ISP and SNA1 forms signed by the parent, and the first parent invitation letter to the school.

According to SIAS policy (DBE, 2014), the main purpose of the SIAS process is to plan how support will be given to the learner by providing guidelines for support.

During the initial screening guided by the learner profile, the following documents and reports must be used to gather information about the learner: Admission form, Road to Health Card, Integrated School Health Programme reports, the reports of the teacher who is currently involved with the learner and previous teachers' reports, if available, and the parent and/or stakeholders' reports. If the case is referred to the SBST, the SNA 2 will be developed by the SBST, along with a plan of action that includes intervention strategies to help the learner (DBE, 2014). This plan will be reviewed after the teacher has implemented the intervention strategies. When the case is referred to the DBST, the DBST will then develop the SNA3 form (DBE, 2014).

Accordingly, the document analysis findings show that the Learner Profile is not regularly updated and contains insufficient information that can help and assist teachers during the Initial Screening Process. Evidence of support is found only in the learner's books and is not

available in the Learner Profile. It is essential to maintain accurate and comprehensive records of learners to provide the necessary support for their holistic development.

4.10 THEME 4: LEARNER SUPPORT AVAILABILITY

The fourth theme dealt with learner support availability. These included intervention strategies, parental involvement, and the learner profile.

4.10.1 Sub-Theme 4.1: Intervention Strategies

As outlined in the SIAS policy (DBE, 2014), once barriers to learning have been identified, the teacher is required to involve the learner's parent or guardian in the process. Together, they co-develop intervention strategies aimed at supporting the learner in overcoming the identified barriers. By employing positive reinforcement, consistent with the behaviourism theory, Skinner (1953) highlights that teachers can foster adaptive learning behaviour and strengthen learners' engagement with the educational environment.

Intervention strategies differ from one learner to another. At times, even if the barrier can be the same, how support is given to one learner may vary from that given to another learner. UNESCO (2019) also highlights that every learner has a unique combination of experience, strengths, weaknesses, and circumstances that can affect their learning.

Below are some of the responses teachers gave when they were asked, *"What structures are available to support learners with barriers to learning in primary schools?"*

A-T-1: *"Support depends on the case of the learner; Support differs from one learner to another. Support is continuous. We have afternoon classes but at times they are not fruitful because the learner is tired in the afternoon. We also give homework".*

A-T-2: *"We support the learner by doing one-on-one sessions, afternoon sessions and now that we have class assistance, we split the learners according to their functionality".*

A-T-3: *"We made Individual Support Plan (ISP) for struggling learners. We conduct afternoon classes, one on one interventions as well as a functional SBST. Stakeholders like SGB are willing to support".*

- B-T-2:** *“We do intervention programs, we downgrade the learners’ work, we categorise them according to their challenges. We have different workbooks and readers”.*
- C-T-3:** *“We have afternoon interventions programs done by the teachers, but we also have afternoon classes that are open for all learners, but the parents are the ones who pay for that if they see a need for a learner to attend”.*
- C-T-2:** *“Normally in our school, it is the teacher intervention and the SBST intervention”.*

Teachers from all three schools have their intervention strategies that are informed by the school context. However, some intervention strategies have disadvantages, for example, **A-T-1** highlighted that “We have afternoon classes, but at times they are not fruitful because the learner is tired in the afternoon”. The disadvantage of this intervention strategy is that learners are tired in the afternoon, and to expect learners who already experience learning difficulties to concentrate after school is more of a punishment than an intervention.

Another disadvantage identified in these intervention strategies is that some of the afternoon classes are not offered by the teacher but are offered by a private tutor. This means that these afternoon intervention classes are not offered for free and parents are expected to pay. When the parent(s) cannot afford the learner will be excluded from the afternoon intervention class.

Other teachers indicated that they also intervene by developing an Individual Support Plan (ISP) and conducting one-on-one sessions with learners who have learning barriers. Teachers categorize learners based on their level of support—high, moderate, and low support—and tailor interventions accordingly. Behaviourism strategies, such as shaping (reinforcing incremental progress) and task analysis, enable teachers to support learning effectively for learners experiencing barriers to learning (Skinner, 1953).

In a case where the teacher has exhausted all their intervention strategies and there is no improvement, the teacher will then refer the case to the SBST according to the SIAS policy (DBE, 2014). From the interviews with the SBST coordinators and members, it was mentioned quite a few times that they are aware that the SBST coordinators are overloaded since they oversee several schools. This poses the challenge of all schools being given support in a timely manner, resulting in extended delays, especially with the finalisation of the referral placement.

The successful implementation of SIAS does not lie on the shoulders of the teacher alone. The SIAS policy is clear that many stakeholders must work together and provide support to ensure that the SIAS process is effectively implemented and that learners with needs are correctly identified and the relevant support is provided to meet the learners' needs. The school's governing body (SGB), teachers, parents, school-based support team (SBST), district-based support team (DBST), full-service schools (FSS), and special school resource centres (SSRC) each play a key role in the school support system (Hess, 2020). The successful implementation of the SIAS policy requires a collaborative effort from all stakeholders to ensure that learners receive appropriate support (DBE, 2014).

4.10.2 Sub-Theme 4.2 - Parental Involvement

Based on Lefakane & Maseko's (2023) findings, it has been challenging to define parental involvement. Teachers and school communities describe parental involvement as participating in educational procedures, such as offering assistance with school assignments and homework or showing up at the parents' meeting. However, on the other hand, many parents see parental involvement as being more involved in their children's everyday lives, such as providing proper care in the home and involving their children in the community, church, or other activities. Ates (2021) indicates that obtaining exceptional academic and school success requires parental involvement.

One of the questions asked to parents was whether, after the first invitation at the school to discuss the intervention strategies with the teachers that were to be implemented, they were invited again to review the learner's progress as outlined in the Individual Support Plan drafted collaboratively by the teacher and the parent.

The parents had the following to say:

A-P-3: "No, I was not called, but because I was concerned, I visited the school without any invitation".

B-P-2: *"I was not invited to see or review the learner's performance after our first invitation, but during the first meeting, I was told that my child will be attending afternoon classes as one of the intervention strategies".*

C-P-1: *"Yes, they called me for the second time when she was in Grade 2, that they are referring the child to the district for further assessment".*

According to the SIAS policy (DBE, 2014), parents must be updated on their children's progress. The review with the parent must be done before referring the case to the SBST (DBE, 2014). The parent must be invited to the school and look at all the evident work that the teacher/ school has done in supporting the learner in overcoming the particular learning barrier the learner is experiencing. However, the study findings highlighted that parents were not always called to school to review their child's progress, which contravenes the EWP6 (DoE, 2001) and SIAS policy (DBE, 2014).

Rossetti et al. (2021) suggest that schools must be committed to giving parents the impression that they are valued participants in their children's education. As a result, the learners' self-confidence and academic performance will be enhanced since they will understand that even their parents and other primary caregivers are concerned about their wellness. Sengonul (2022) highlighted that parental involvement contributes positively to the learners' performance.

Parental involvement can boost learners' self-esteem, increase engagement and motivation with learning and can lead to increased learning outcomes (Boonk et al., 2022). According to Bachman et al. (2021), the meaningful engagement of parents requires effective approaches that can be applied by the schools in involving parents in supporting learners with barriers to learning. The study found similar suggestions to Hornby and Lafaele (2023) on approaches to be utilised in engaging parents. The approaches are as follows: engaging parents in decision making, offering training and workshops, and parent meetings as strategies that the school could use to involve parents in supporting learners with barriers to learning.

Furthermore, the study findings outline that the majority of parents were called for the first visit to discuss learner intervention strategies. However, feedback was not given on whether the intervention strategies were successful or not. As a result, this affects parental involvement negatively. Moreover, some parents visited the school because they were concerned, as the feedback was not detailed. The teachers only told them that their children were to be referred for special education, but the referral process was not outlined and discussed with them, which raised concerns among the parents.

4.10.3 Sub-Theme 4.3- Learner Profile

A learner profile is a legal document that contains the learner's information and can be used to create an inclusive environment and adaptations that may be needed for the learner to perform better (Sharma, 2024). According to the SIAS policy (DBE, 2014), screening should be done at admission and at the beginning of each phase by the teacher, and all findings must be recorded in the learner profile.

Below are some of the responses given by the teachers during the focus group discussion when they were asked the question, '*Do teachers update the learner profiles and use them as part of the tool for screening or gathering information about the learner?*'

A-FGP-1: *"We try to update the profiles as often as we can. We had a system in place before, but it has been a challenge".*

B-FGP-1: *"Yes, they do because the learner profile has the child's information, as well as serious illness and if the learner is under treatment, it must be known what kind of treatment the learner is taking so that if a learner has a problem we know where to start. Especially because some of the learners are pre-term-labours, and if the learner is a pre-term-labour everything they do is going to be slow so you must be able to use his/her own pace, unlike those who were born on time".*

C-FGP-3: *"Yes, they do because remember they submit Screening Sheets at the district, and at the end of the term they need to go back to the Screening Sheet to see if there are any changes in the learners they identified as not coping, thereafter it goes to the learner profile. The learner profile is then kept at the school and is only sent to the school the learner is being referred to. The learner profile is further updated annually with details such as grades passed, repeated or was progressed and the subjects that were a challenge for the learner. We attach copies of progress report cards and other confidential things for that learner, say maybe history of abuse".*

A-FGP-2: *"Or if the learner was sick and went to the doctor, those reports are also attached".*

Findings from the document analysis showed that teachers hardly use the learners' profiles as a point of reference. This was evident because the learner profiles were not updated and had very limited information about the learner. However, they do update when it comes to medical information, but they don't use learner profiles for designated purposes such as the screening process. This implies that the SIAS process stages have a possibility of being breached, and this signals a compromise in the process; moreover, it leads one to question the authenticity of the assessment process and the final decision on the learner's support or referral. The SIAS policy (DBE, 2014) provides guidelines on using learner profiles as well as strongly recommends that the learner profile must be maintained and regularly reviewed and updated to reflect progress and changes. Utilising the learner profile enables teachers to effectively shape behavioural objectives in alignment with B.F. Skinner's theory of behaviourism, by targeting observable actions and reinforcing desired learning behaviours (Skinner, 1953).

4.11 THEME 5: TEACHER TRAINING

The fifth theme that emerged from the data was teacher training. This included pre-service teacher training and professional development for teachers to assess and refer learners to special schools.

4.11.1 Sub-Theme 5.1: Pre-Service Teacher Training

Pre-service prepares individuals to meet the requirements of a specific discipline. The teachers were asked whether they received any training in their pre-service training in inclusive education, particularly in the implementation of the SIAS process.

The following are some responses from the teachers:

A-T-2: *"Yes, I have received a number of SIAS training."*

B-T-2: *"No, I did not receive any training. I am applying my knowledge from university."*

B-T-3: *"Usually it is the SBST members who attend those workshops and come back to the school and share with us."*

C-T-1: *"No, I have not received any training on how to assess and refer a learner to special schools."*

The study findings indicate that the majority of the teachers did not receive pre-service training on how to assess and refer a learner to special schools. According to Napanoy et al. (2021), pre-service training assists in contributing to the implementation of policies, as teachers are regarded as implementation agents. This implies that there is no uniformity; everyone applies what they know. Others apply the knowledge they obtained from universities, their colleagues, and their prior knowledge in the assessment and referral processes of learners.

4.11.2 Sub-Theme 5.2: Professional Development for Teachers to Assess and Refer Learners to Special Schools

Teacher professional development is crucial to implement SIAS. Early identification of learning barriers by teachers is foundational to providing relevant support to learners. Learning barriers can be defined as anything that stands in the way of being able to learn effectively (Tomczyk et al., 2023). Learning barriers identification varies from learner to learner. Learning barriers for other learners may be identified at the beginning, middle, or end of the academic year. Furthermore, learning barriers can be identified through observations, assessments, student feedback, regular progress monitoring, cultural and linguistic diversity, parent input, teacher reflection and collaboration, and learner profiles, as well as by using screening and diagnostics (Parry & Metzger, 2023). It is therefore important that teachers familiarise and appraise themselves with the SIAS policy process to avoid incorrect identification, irrelevant support, and incorrect placement of learners.

Mabena et al. (2021) state that some teachers lack the skill to identify learners with learning barriers due to the large number of learners in their classes. Deghaye's (2021) findings are seconding Mabena et al. (2021) findings by outlining that teachers are having trouble comprehending screening, and most of them believe they are unable to identify learners who may have barriers to learning. However, Smith and Gillespie's (2023) findings highlight that teachers are willing to work, but they are not guided by the Department of Basic Education or encouraged to address their individual requirements as teachers. Msane (2021) further highlighted that the SIAS training is insufficient since some of the trained teachers are unable to put what they have learned in training into practice.

Assey and Babyegeya (2022) highlight that the SIAS training related to assessment appeared to be a formalistic, form-driven exercise. As a result, teachers are inadequately equipped to

facilitate effective assessment practices. This is evident in their frequent expressions of difficulty when implementing assessments following the training. Consequently, it would be unjust to place sole responsibility on teachers for the challenges encountered in the assessment process.

Below are some of the teachers' responses they gave when asked: *"What training did you receive to assess and refer learners to special schools?"*

A-T-2: *"I have received a number of trainings, mostly SIAS training".*

A-T-3: *"No, I have not received any training."*

B-T-1: *"I have received training from GDE, and because I am also a member of the SBST."*

B-T-2: *"No, I did not receive any training. I am applying my knowledge from university."*

B-T-3: *"Usually it is the SBST members who attend those workshops and come back to the school and share with us."*

C-T-1: *"I have not received any training on how to assess and refer a learner to special schools."*

C-T-2: *"We never had training specifically for assessing and referring learners to special schools. However, we did attend workshops on SIAS policy. But because we also did psychology as part of our teaching modules. And by making my own research and asking from my fellow colleagues".*

The above quotes imply that not all teachers have received formal SIAS training. To be able to identify learning barriers, teachers require certain skills. However, findings indicate that the SBST members are the ones who were getting the opportunity to attend training. As a result, the SBST members are expected to come back to the staff and share with their colleagues what they have learned. Other teachers are using their prior knowledge from the varsity. Therefore, a need for training to facilitate a deeper understanding of the SIAS process must be conducted for all teachers.

4.12 CONCLUSION

The focus of this chapter was on the data analysis and discussion of findings derived from individual interviews, focus group interviews, and document analysis to answer the research question. The researcher employed multiple data collection methods to enhance validity and capture diverse perspectives and insights.

The researcher presented the findings using thematic analysis, with quotes highlighting the participants' responses aligned with the identified themes. The next chapter (Chapter 5) will present the summary, recommendations, and conclusions of the study.

CHAPTER 5: LIMITATIONS, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 INTRODUCTION

The previous chapter provided an overview of data collected through interviews and document analysis. The data was analysed and organised thematically.

This chapter presents the theoretical implications, a summary of the research findings, critical appraisals, recommendations, and conclusions of the study. The study aimed to explore the assessment process that is used in mainstream schools when assessing learners who are referred to special schools.

The following research objectives served as a guideline to answer the main research question:

1. To determine the teachers' understanding of the assessment process followed in mainstream schools.
2. To determine the policy expectation regarding the assessment and referral of learners to special schools.
3. To establish how the assessment process is guided in mainstream schools to assess and refer learners to special schools.
4. To establish what support is available to learners with barriers to learning in mainstream schools.
5. To determine how trained mainstream school teachers are to assess and refer learners to special schools.

5.2 THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS FOR THE STUDY

The findings of this study contribute to the theoretical understanding of inclusive education and the SIAS process in mainstream schools. The study explores how learners are assessed before they get referral to special schools, identifies gaps in the assessment and referral process, as well as the extent to which mainstream schools adhere to the SIAS process (Von Solms, 2020).

This study, underpinned by behaviourism theory, provides important information on how learners, teachers and parents behave during the assessment and referral process.

According to behaviourism, learning is a change in observable behaviour caused by external stimuli and reinforcement (Rogti, 2021).

The theoretical implications for the study are as follows:

- *Focus on Observable Behaviour.* The assessment processes in mainstream schools often prioritize measurable behaviours such as classroom conduct, task completion, and response to instruction as indicators of learning challenges. This is in line with behaviourist principles that emphasize observable outcomes over internal cognitive processes (National University, 2025).
- *Decisions about referrals and reinforcement.* According to behaviourism theory, learners, teachers and parents' behaviour is shaped by both positive and negative reinforcement. According to the study, referrals to special schools may result from persistent behavioural issues that are not addressed with efficient reinforcement techniques. According to the Teachers Guide (2025), this highlights the need for structured behavioural interventions before referral.
- *The impact of the Environment on Learning.* Behaviourism theory emphasizes the role of the environment in shaping behaviour. According to the study, before concluding that the learner must be placed in a special school, mainstream schools must carefully evaluate environmental elements such as classroom dynamics, teacher responses, and parental involvement (Al-Shammari et al., 2019).
- *Policy and Systemic Alteration Implications.* According to the study's findings, for the assessment process to be successfully implemented in practice, systemic structures such as collaboration among professionals, resource allocation, and school assessment and referral policy must be in place (Maki, 2023).

5.3 SUMMARY OF THE RESEARCH FINDINGS

The study findings reveal that learners, teachers, parents, the SBST, and the DBST are collectively responsible for ensuring that the assessment and referral process used in public mainstream schools, particularly when referring learners to special schools, is correctly implemented. However, the study identified several procedural gaps that need to be addressed to strengthen the effectiveness and integrity of the referral system.

5.3.1 Teachers' Understanding of the Assessment Process

Subthemes under this theme included: Understanding the assessment process, and Teacher confidence with the assessment and referral process

5.3.1.1 *Understanding the Assessment Process*

The findings reveal a gap between knowing the policy and effectively implementing its assessment protocols. Although 99% of teachers are aware of the SIAS policy and its expectations. The difference between policy awareness and effective implementation is critical.

60% of parents reported being contacted only to complete forms, without being informed of when, where, or how their child was assessed. This lack of transparency highlights that the assessment process is not being communicated clearly to parents, nor are they being meaningfully involved in decision-making.

When learners and parents are excluded from the assessment process or receive insufficient information, it can lead to reduced confidence in the teacher's ability to support learning. This undermines the collaborative spirit of the SIAS process and may hinder learner progress.

The findings imply that some teachers may not fully grasp how to adapt assessment tools to meet diverse learner needs. This can result in ineffective use of resources, inadequate feedback for learners, and missed opportunities for academic improvement.

5.3.1.2 *Teacher Confidence with the Assessment and Referral Process*

Confidence in this process is essential, as it directly affects the accuracy of learner assessment and the appropriateness of support interventions. 40% of the teachers reported being confident, though not fully confident, in their ability to carry out the assessment and

referral process. Confidence was often linked to years of teaching experience and repeated exposure to the process.

Other teachers demonstrated initiative by researching the process independently and assisting colleagues. This reflects a positive attitude toward professional growth and collaborative practice.

Teachers who lack full confidence may unintentionally conduct unfair evaluations, provide vague feedback, or confuse learners and parents about expectations. These issues can demotivate learners and compromise the integrity of the assessment and referral process (Hill, 2024).

40% of teachers expressed a desire for proper training to enhance their understanding of the process. This aligns with Deghay's (2021) findings that many teachers struggle with screening and identifying learners with barriers to learning. Hess (2020) also notes that teachers find it difficult to manage the demands of inclusive policy implementation.

Document analysis revealed that learner profiles were rarely used or updated. This neglect undermines the SIAS policy's recommendation for maintaining comprehensive learner records (DBE, 2014). Incomplete profiles compromise continuity of support and raise concerns about the authenticity of assessment outcomes.

5.3.2 Policy Expectations Regarding the Assessment and Referral Processes

Subthemes under this theme included: The SIAS Policy Process, Time allocation and Resources, Inclusion of parents, and Parents' response to the assessment and referral process.

5.3.2.1 *The Sias Policy Process*

The SIAS (Screening, Identification, Assessment, and Support) policy outlines a structured protocol for responding to learners' needs, particularly those who are vulnerable. It emphasises the roles of teachers and district officials in early identification and support provision within inclusive education frameworks (DBE, 2014). Findings from the study revealed that 99% of teachers are aware of the SIAS policy and its expectations. However, not all teachers have a full understanding of the assessment and referral processes, which raises concerns about the reliability of implementation.

Differing understanding of the assessment and referral process among teachers highlights that the SIAS process is not being effectively implemented or monitored. This has implications for the accuracy and consistency of support provided to learners experiencing barriers to learning.

Teachers expressed difficulty in differentiating instruction to support learners with learning barriers, due to limited knowledge and overcrowded classrooms (Graham, 2023). This aligns with Hess's (2020) observation that teachers struggle to meet the demands of inclusive policy implementation.

Inadequate screening and assessment may result in learners being incorrectly placed in special or remedial schools, potentially affecting their educational outcomes (Deghaye, 2021). Learners with less visible disabilities are especially vulnerable to being overlooked and unsupported.

5.3.2.2 Time Allocation and Resources

Effective implementation of the SIAS policy and inclusive education depends not only on teacher commitment but also on systemic support through adequate resources and time for individualized learner support. Findings from the study revealed that the DBE provides financial resources to provincial departments (Daghanye, 2021). EWP6 (DBE, 2001) places the responsibility on School Governing Bodies to ensure resource provision. If these resources are inadequate, the state is expected to supplement them. This dual responsibility creates tension in resource allocation and delivery.

Time constraints lead to incomplete implementation of the SIAS policy stages. Teachers often face an overwhelming administrative load, particularly when dealing with learners who require additional support (Ntseto et al., 2021). Other teachers promote learners to the next grade prematurely to avoid completing the SNA forms, passing the responsibility to other teachers. The SNA forms call on teachers to carry out thorough assessments of learners' learning barriers, record interventions, work with parents or other caregivers, and create individual support plans (Von Solms, 2020). This undermines the integrity of the assessment and referral process and compromises learner outcomes.

The SIAS policy (DBE, 2014) does not specify time allocations for supporting learners, although it emphasizes continuous support and regular review of support plans.

Despite their willingness to support learners, teachers are constrained by limited time and insufficient specialized support staff. While countries like Zimbabwe have integrated specialized professionals into mainstream classrooms (Von Solms, 2020), South African schools often lack such support, leaving teachers frustrated and overwhelmed.

5.3.2.3 *Inclusion of Parents*

The role of parents and caregivers in the SIAS process emphasises their importance as equal partners in identifying and supporting learners with barriers to learning. The findings highlight both the potential and the limitations of parental involvement in the assessment and referral process.

The SIAS policy (DBE, 2014) mandates that parents or caregivers and learners aged 12 and above be involved throughout the assessment and support process. However, the data highlights that this involvement is often inconsistent, with many parents only contacted to complete SNA forms without being fully informed of the process or its implications.

40% of parents identified learning barriers early, either at birth or through assisting with homework. However, 60% of parents only became aware of their child's learning challenges after being invited to discuss academic performance.

The findings indicate that teachers often overlook key stages of the SIAS process, including regular consultations with parents and learners. This contradicts policy expectations and contributes to confusion among parents regarding when, how, and by whom their child was assessed (Von Solms, 2020).

Teachers and school communities often define parental involvement in terms of academic support, such as attending meetings and helping with homework. In contrast, many parents view it through a broader lens of caregiving and community engagement (Lefakane, 2023). These differing perspectives can affect the level and type of support provided to learners.

5.3.2.4 *Parents' Response to the Assessment and Referral Process*

Parents' response to the assessment and referral process when their children are recommended for specialised support or placement in special schools is that they fear for their child's future, denial or resistance, some struggle to accept the diagnosis or placement, others feel that the process can be overwhelming, and parents often need clear communication and guidance from teachers. The findings reveal communication gaps and

emotional reactions. 80% of parents reported that teachers explained the referral process and provided necessary forms, and 20% of parents indicated that they were asked to complete forms without being given any explanation.

According to the SIAS policy (DBE, 2014), the referral process cannot proceed without parental input and signature on SNA forms. When communication is poor or relationships between teachers and parents are strained, the process is usually delayed, potentially compromising timely support for the learner.

Socioeconomic factors such as work schedules and geographic separation limit some parents' ability to participate in their child's education (Perry-Jenkins, 2022). These constraints reduce opportunities for collaboration and shared decision-making.

Some parents struggled to acknowledge their child's learning barriers, often shifting blame to teachers. This defensiveness obstructs the support process and may prevent learners from receiving necessary interventions (Franklin et al., 2022; Von Solms, 2020).

80% of parents were unfamiliar with the concept of special schools until their children were placed in one. This lack of prior knowledge, together with limited explanation from teachers, contributes to confusion and emotional distress. Lefakane (2023) found that parents often feel overwhelmed and even devastated when informed of such placements.

Societal stigma surrounding intellectual disability schools further complicates parental acceptance. Parents may feel ashamed or unwilling to embrace the referral processes, especially when the broader community's understanding of special education is limited.

5.3.3 Guidance and Support Availability in Implementing the SIAS Policy

Subthemes under this theme included: Support from the DBST, Support from the SBST, and Document analysis.

5.3.3.1 Support from the District-Based Support Team (DBST)

The DBST plays a crucial role in strengthening educational support services across. As outlined in EWP6 (DoE, 2001), the DBST is tasked with reviewing intervention strategies developed by teachers and the SBST, also ensuring that schools receive the necessary resources and support (Von Solms, 2020).

Nong (2020) acknowledges that DBST support is effective in addressing learner barriers; the study findings reveal inconsistencies in its implementation. Intervention strategies vary across schools due to differences in learner needs and resource availability. Consequently, the support provided in implementing the SIAS policy is not uniform, and its effectiveness often depends on contextual factors.

A key responsibility of the DBST is to empower teachers to address learning barriers. However, Nong (2020) raises concerns about the frequency and depth of this empowerment. If DBST representatives only visit schools once per term, it limits opportunities for meaningful engagement and capacity-building. This raises further questions about the adequacy and fairness of the support provided.

Further evaluation is offered by Agulhas (2021), who notes that the quality of DBST support is often poor. Mpanza and Govender (2022) add that DBST representatives are not directly involved with learners, do not consistently monitor referrals, and rarely visit schools. These limitations hinder the effective implementation of the SIAS policy and compromise the support system intended to assist learners with barriers.

5.3.3.2 Support from the School-Based Support Team (SBST)

The EWP6 (DoE, 2001) mandates the establishment of SBSTs in all public ordinary schools, including mainstream, full-service, and special schools. The SBST is responsible for coordinating and rendering support to learners, teachers, and the broader school community. This includes facilitating teacher development programmes, managing resources, encouraging parental involvement, and monitoring support for learners experiencing barriers to learning (Hornby, 2023). Agulhas (2021) emphasises that the SBST plays a critical role in deliberating referrals, managing classroom strategies, and guiding decisions on resource allocation.

Although the participating schools had established SBST committees, the study found that these teams were not fully functional. Meetings were irregular and often sat only when it was necessary, rather than following a structured management plan as required by EWP6 (DoE, 2001) and the SIAS policy (DBE, 2014).

The SBST's role is beyond academics. Teachers reported referring cases related to communication, behaviour, health, social competence, wellness, personal care, and teacher development, highlighting the need for a holistic support system.

5.3.3.3 Teachers' Views on SBST Support

Study findings indicate that teachers are not fully utilizing the SBST as intended. The SBST committee does not consistently support teachers, which compromises the quality of learner referrals. Teachers often engage with the SBST only when submitting Support Needs Assessment (SNA) forms, without requesting additional support or guidance. Moreover, the SBST does not follow up on the evidence of support provided by teachers.

5.3.3.4 Parents' Views on SBST Support

Parents reported minimal engagement with the SBST. Most were only invited to the school twice or once, when the learning barrier was identified and again when signing the SNA referral forms. Many parents were unaware of the SBST's existence, implying that the assessment and referral process is not fully implemented and that parents are not meaningfully involved.

According to behaviourism theory, effective collaboration between teachers, parents, and professionals is essential for aligning strategies across home and school environments (Bachman et al., 2021). The lack of parental involvement undermines the consistency and effectiveness of learner support.

5.3.3.5 SBST Committee Members' Views

SBST members confirmed that each school had a designated coordinator responsible for assessments and referrals. These coordinators often had backgrounds in Inclusive Education, which contributed to their understanding of the SBST's importance.

5.3.3.6 Document Analysis

Document analysis provides insight into how learner support is implemented and whether the SIAS policy is being followed effectively.

The documents analysed included the SIAS policy document, learners' books, and the learner's profile, which contained the Individual Support Plan (ISP), Support Needs Assessment (SNA1) forms, and parent invitation letters

5.3.3.7 The SIAS Policy Document

The SIAS policy (DBE, 2014) was published to guide inclusive education practices. It clearly outlines the purpose, aims, principles, and roles of all stakeholders involved in the SIAS

process. All required forms are included and explained at the end of the document. Despite its availability and clarity, the study found that teachers at the sample school were not implementing the SIAS process correctly. While they could identify learning barriers, they struggled with assessment and support procedures. This highlights a lack of monitoring and guidance from both the SBST and the DBST.

Teachers also faced challenges in documenting evidence of support, and parental involvement was limited, contrary to the SIAS policy expectations. A notable barrier was the length and complexity of the SNA forms, which discouraged thorough completion. Additionally, the SIAS policy is only available in English, limiting accessibility for parents who prefer to engage in their home languages.

5.3.3.8 *The Learner's Books*

The learner's books were well-maintained, with differentiated and adapted work that reflected efforts to meet the learner's needs. Books were marked and neatly covered, and some homework had been signed by parents, indicating parental monitoring. However, it was observed that a significant portion of the learners' work was left incomplete, suggesting that teachers may require additional classroom support to effectively assist learners with barriers.

5.3.3.9 *The Learner's Profile*

The Learner Profile contained personal and confidential information, including Admission forms, Road to Health Card, Term-end report cards, ISP and SNAI forms signed by the parent, and Parent invitation letters.

According to the SIAS policy (DBE, 2014), the learner profile should be used during the initial screening to gather comprehensive information from various sources, including health reports, teacher observations, and stakeholder input. If a referral is made, the SBST develops the SNA2 form and a plan of action. The DBST later develops the SNA3 form if further referral is needed. However, the document analysis revealed that the learner profile was not regularly updated and lacked sufficient information to support the initial screening process. Evidence of support was found only in the learner's books, not in the profile itself.

5.3.4 *Learner Support Availability*

Subthemes under this theme included: Intervention strategies, Parental involvement, and Learner profile.

5.3.4.1 Intervention Strategies

The Screening, Identification, Assessment and Support (SIAS) policy (DBE, 2014) mandates that once barriers to learning are identified, teachers must collaborate with the learner's parent or guardian to co-develop intervention strategies. These strategies aim to address the learner's specific needs and promote inclusive learning. According to Skinner's behaviourism theory, teachers often use positive reinforcement to encourage adaptive learning behaviours and enhance learner engagement (Skinner, 1953).

Intervention strategies are usually individualized. Even when learners face similar barriers, the nature and delivery of support may differ. As UNESCO (2019) emphasizes, each learner possesses a unique combination of strengths, weaknesses, and circumstances that influence their learning experiences.

Teachers from the three participating schools reported using specific intervention strategies. These include afternoon classes, which are intended to provide additional academic support. However, expecting learners with existing difficulties to concentrate after school may unintentionally hinder rather than help their progress. In cases where afternoon support is outsourced to private tutors, parents are required to pay for these services. Learners whose families cannot afford the fees are excluded from interventions.

When classroom-level interventions are exhausted and no improvement is observed, teachers refer cases to the SBST in accordance with the SIAS policy (DBE, 2014). However, interviews with SBST coordinators revealed systemic challenges. Notably, DBST coordinators are often overburdened, overseeing multiple schools. This results in delayed support and prolonged referral finalisation, which can negatively impact learners requiring urgent intervention.

The successful implementation of the SIAS policy does not rest solely on teachers. It requires a collaborative, multi-stakeholder approach involving the School Governing Body (SGB), parents, SBST, DBST, Full-Service Schools (FSS), and Special School Resource Centres (SSRC) (Hess, 2020). Each stakeholder plays a critical role in ensuring that learners are accurately identified and receive appropriate, timely support.

5.3.4.2 Parental Involvement

According to Lefakane and Maseko (2023), teachers and school communities often interpret it as participation in school-related activities such as assisting with homework or attending parent meetings. In contrast, many parents view involvement more broadly, encompassing care at home and engagement in community, religious, or social activities. Mekgwe et al. (2024) affirm that meaningful parental involvement is essential for achieving academic and school success.

In alignment with the SIAS policy (DBE, 2014), parents must be continuously informed about their child's progress, particularly before referral to the SBST is made. This includes reviewing the learner's progress against the collaboratively developed Individual Support Plan (ISP). Parents should be invited to examine the evidence of support provided by the teacher and school. However, study findings revealed that this process is inconsistently followed. Many parents were not invited to review progress, which contravenes both the EWP6 (DoE, 2001) and the SIAS policy (DBE, 2014).

The lack of follow-up communication undermines the principle of inclusive and collaborative education. Rossetti et al. (2021) emphasize that schools must actively demonstrate to parents that they are valued partners in their children's education. Such recognition enhances learners' self-confidence and academic performance, as they perceive a shared concern for their well-being. Similarly, Boonk et al. (2022) and Sengonul (2022) highlight that parental involvement positively influences learner motivation, engagement, and overall learning outcomes.

Despite initial invitations to discuss intervention strategies, the study found that feedback on their effectiveness was often lacking. This gap negatively impacted parental involvement. Some parents returned to the school out of concern, noting that the feedback was vague. In certain cases, teachers informed parents that their children were being referred for special education, yet failed to explain the referral process in detail, raising further concerns.

5.3.4.3 Learner Profile

A learner profile is a formal document that captures essential information about a learner and serves as a foundational tool for fostering inclusive education. It facilitates the identification of necessary adaptations and support strategies to enhance learner performance (Sharma, 2024). According to the SIAS policy (DBE, 2014), screening must be conducted at the point

of admission and at the beginning of each educational phase. All findings from this process are to be documented in the learner profile.

The learner profile plays a critical role in ensuring that the SIAS process is appropriately implemented. However, the study findings imply that this process is not always consistently followed. When learner profiles are incomplete or not regularly updated, it compromises the integrity of the assessment and support process. This raises concerns about the authenticity of the assessment process and the validity of decisions regarding learner support or referral.

The SIAS policy (DBE, 2014) provides clear guidelines for the use of learner profiles, emphasizing that they must be maintained, reviewed, and updated regularly to reflect learners' progress and developing needs. When properly utilized, learner profiles enable teachers to tailor support strategies and monitor developmental milestones effectively.

Informed by Skinner's behaviourism theory, learner profiles also support the shaping of behavioural objectives by focusing on observable actions and reinforcing desired learning behaviours (Skinner, 1953). This alignment allows teachers to implement targeted interventions that are responsive to the learner's documented needs and progress.

5.3.5 Teacher Training

Subthemes under this theme included: Pre-service teacher training and Professional development for teachers to assess and refer learners to special schools

5.3.5.1 *Pre-Service Teacher Training*

Pre-service teacher education prepares teachers to implement inclusive education practices, particularly the SIAS assessment and referral process. Findings from the study revealed that 60% of teachers reported that they did not receive specific training during their pre-service education on how to assess and refer learners to special schools. This gap in foundational training limits their readiness to implement inclusive education policies effectively.

Due to the absence of standardized pre-service training, teachers rely on varied sources of knowledge, including university coursework, peer guidance, and personal experience to navigate the assessment and referral process. This results in inconsistent practices across schools where data was collected.

Napanoy et al. (2021) emphasize that pre-service training is essential for equipping teachers to serve as policy implementation agents. Without this preparation, teachers may struggle to apply SIAS protocols uniformly, potentially compromising the quality and fairness of learner support.

5.3.5.2 Professional Development for Teachers to Assess and Refer Learners to Special Schools

The role of ongoing professional development is to equip teachers to identify learning barriers and implement the SIAS assessment and referral process effectively. The findings highlight the importance of targeted training and systemic support for teachers.

Learning barriers vary across learners and may emerge at different points in the academic year. Accurate identification requires various approaches, including observation, assessments, learner profiles, and collaboration (Tomczyk et al., 2023).

Teachers struggle to identify learning barriers due to large class sizes and limited screening skills (Deghaye, 2021; Mabena et al., 2021). These challenges hinder early intervention and appropriate support.

SIAS training is often limited to School-Based Support Team (SBST) members, who are expected to share information with their colleagues. 20% of teachers rely on prior university knowledge or informal peer support, resulting in inconsistent application of SIAS protocols.

SIAS-related training is frequently described as overly formalistic and form-driven, leaving teachers with limited capacity to implement effective assessment practices (Boulmetis, 2025). Even trained teachers report difficulty translating theory into practice (Msane, 2021).

5.4 CRITICAL APPRAISAL OF THE STUDY

5.4.1 Strengths of the Study

The strength of this study was that it had 26 participants and used multiple data collection methods, such as individual face-to-face and telephonic interviews, focus group interviews, and document analysis. Relevant examples were made when the participant did not understand the question and the researcher could translate to the participant's language (isiZulu) when the participant did not understand the question. The study's overall validity was strengthened by this culturally sensitive approach, which not only allowed for more

authentic replies but also showed ethical sensitivity and respect for participants' different cultures.

5.4.2 Limitations of the study

Due to the limited sample size and scope, the findings cannot be generalized to all primary schools, teachers, or parents. However, the study provides valuable insights into the assessment procedures used in mainstream schools when referring learners to special schools.

The study was conducted within a specific district and school context, and therefore, the findings are context-specific. Educational contexts across South Africa vary in terms of resource allocation, DBST functionality, and teacher training, which further limits the generalisability of the findings to other provinces.

Several challenges were encountered during the research process. One major difficulty was arranging face-to-face interviews with some participants, as outlined in Chapter 3 (Methodology), due to their tight schedules. Additionally, load shedding posed a significant obstacle, affecting network connectivity during telephonic interviews and often leading to postponements.

The large number of participants also meant that transcribing and analysing the data took longer than anticipated. Another notable limitation was the variability in the depth and quality of responses, particularly among parent participants. Many parents provided brief, surface-level answers and often struggled to recall specific events or details relevant to the interview questions. This may have been influenced by factors such as limited engagement with the school system, discomfort with the interview setting, or language barriers. As a result, some data lacked the richness necessary for deeper analysis, potentially affecting the comprehensiveness of the findings related to parental perspectives. In addition, although the study highlights challenges related to teacher preparedness in implementing the SIAS policy, it does not include an analysis of formal training programmes provided by the Department of Basic Education, such as SIAS training materials, training delivery models, or certification processes.

5.5 RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE STUDY

The aim of the study was to explore the assessment and referral process that is used in public mainstream schools when referring learners to special schools. Therefore, the study recommends the following:

5.5.1 Professional Development for Teachers to Assess and Refer Learners to Special Schools

The study recommends a comprehensive, hands-on training for all teachers, not just SBST members, to ensure accurate screening, identification, assessment, support, and appropriate learner placement. Smith and Gillespie (2023) emphasize that teachers are willing to improve but lack guidance and individualized support from the Department of Basic Education.

5.5.2 The SIAS Policy Process

Implementing targeted workshops to capacitate teachers and parents/guardians on the expectations outlined in the Screening, Identification, Assessment and Support (SIAS) policy, particularly in relation to assessment and referral procedures (DBE, 2014).

5.5.3 Time Allocation and Resources

Teachers reported overcrowded classrooms, a lack of classroom assistants, and insufficient teaching and learning materials. These conditions significantly hinder their ability to identify and support learners experiencing barriers to learning. The individualized support required by the Screening, Identification, Assessment and Support (SIAS) policy demands more time and resources than are currently available, often resulting in some learners being overlooked (Kahveci, 2023). The study recommends that the learner-to-teacher ratio in South African primary schools be maintained at 1:40, and that this be directly monitored by District-Based Support Team (DBST) representatives to ensure effective implementation. The DBE (2011) recommended that the class size for South African primary schools is 40 learners per teacher; if the class has more than 40 learners, the curriculum will not be effectively implemented (DBE, 2011).

The study recommends that schools allocate dedicated time for teachers to engage in collaborative planning and implement individualised interventions, ensuring that learners with diverse needs receive appropriate support.

5.5.4 Inclusion of Parents

Many parents face challenges in accepting their child's learning barriers and often lack the knowledge or capacity to provide effective support. The study recommends that schools implement transparent, evidence-based communication strategies to help parents understand their child's developmental and educational needs. This includes guidance on appropriate interventions such as medication or placement in special schools, where necessary. This recommendation is supported by Hornby and Lafaele (2023), highlighting that when parents understand the concept and objectives of inclusive education, they tend to be actively involved and open in the educational process and become the main supporters and implementers of inclusive programs. Therefore, schools need to establish close partnerships with parents

Furthermore, the study advocates for the provision of counselling services for both learners and their parents. Schools should also conduct regular awareness programs aimed at educating the broader community about inclusive education and the nature of learning barriers, thereby fostering a more supportive and informed environment.

To strengthen early intervention efforts, the study recommends that schools host compulsory workshops for parents of learners admitted to Grade R, Grade 1, and Grade 2. These workshops should focus on early identification of learning barriers, available support systems, and strategies for parental involvement in inclusive education.

5.5.5 Parents' Response to the Assessment and Referral Process

Some parents reported being asked to complete forms without receiving any explanation, highlighting inconsistencies in how teachers engage families during the referral phase. This lack of communication can lead to confusion, mistrust, and resistance from parents. The study recommends that teachers provide clear, step-by-step explanations of the assessment and referral process to ensure transparency and build trust. Such proactive communication can help mitigate defensive reactions and foster more constructive parental involvement in supporting learners with barriers to learning.

5.5.6 Support from the District-Based Support Team (DBST)

Given the substantial workloads faced by District-Based Support Team (DBST) personnel, there is an urgent need to explore strategies that alleviate these operational pressures. Without adequate staffing, consistent oversight, and meaningful engagement with schools,

the DBST is unable to fully execute its mandate of supporting inclusive education. The study recommends pairing DBST representatives to share responsibilities, foster collaboration, and enhance the overall efficiency of service delivery. This strategy not only promotes teamwork and accountability but also helps mitigate burnout and ensures that schools receive timely, consistent, and comprehensive support.

5.5.7 Support from the School-Based Support Team (SBST)

To ensure accountability, the SBST coordinator should provide written reports explaining deviations from the management plan, and principals must actively monitor the committee's functionality.

While some teachers demonstrated competence in implementing the SIAS process, others did not follow it correctly. According to Skinner's theory, monitoring and accountability mechanisms should be introduced to reinforce correct practices and address inconsistencies. Schools must develop strategies to improve the assessment and referral process, ensuring that it is comprehensive and ethically sound.

5.5.8 SBST Committee Members' Views

SBST committee functionality depended heavily on consistent communication and teamwork (Agulhas, 2021). For SBST members to fulfil their mandate, the study recommends that they must actively guide the assessment and referral process, maintain regular meetings, and ensure that all stakeholders are informed and involved.

5.5.9 The SIAS Policy Document

A notable barrier identified in the study is the length and complexity of the Support Needs Assessment (SNA) forms, which often discourage thorough and accurate completion by teachers and parents. Additionally, the SIAS policy is currently available only in English, limiting accessibility for parents who prefer to engage in their home languages. This language barrier can hinder meaningful participation in the referral and support process. The study recommends that the SIAS policy be translated into multiple official South African languages to promote inclusivity and understanding. Furthermore, it advocates for the simplification and restructuring of the SNA forms to be revised for them to be less complex and user-friendly, encouraging accurate documentation and facilitating more effective support planning for learners with barriers to learning.

5.5.10 The Learner's Profile

The document analysis revealed that learner profiles were not consistently updated and often lacked sufficient information to support the initial screening process. In many cases, evidence of support was found only in learners' exercise books, rather than in their official profiles. This documentation gap undermines the effectiveness of the Screening, Identification, Assessment and Support (SIAS) process and limits the ability of educators to track progress and plan appropriate interventions. The study highlights the urgent need for regular and systematic updating and monitoring of learner profiles. Accurate documentation of support strategies, learner progress, and contextual factors is essential for maintaining comprehensive records and ensuring that learners with barriers to learning receive timely, targeted, and effective support. These profiles must also be filed by the schools and made available to all teachers teaching the learner.

5.6 SOME RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE STUDIES

The following recommendations for future research are based on the findings of the study:

- *Enquiry-based research should be conducted with parents to find out how learners who are already placed in a special school cope in the new learning environment.* Future studies should look at how parents perceive their children performing in their new learning environments after being placed in special schools. Gaining insight from these experiences can help identify gaps in transition planning and guide support strategies. Gal et al.'s (2025) study supports this recommendation.
- *A qualitative study on the possibility of learners returning to mainstream schools after showing improvement or overcoming the learning barrier.* Finding out whether learners can be returned to mainstream schools after overcoming learning barriers is crucial. This would shed light on the education system's adaptability and responsiveness as well as the long-term effects of special school placement. Kasztelan Chapman et al.'s (2025) study has the same vision as this recommendation.
- *A qualitative lens should also be used to find out how learners from special schools are being assessed.* Research should delve into how learners in special schools are assessed, including the tools, criteria, and accommodations used. This can help determine whether assessments are equitable and aligned with

learners' individual needs. Gillies's (2014) study has the same aim as this recommendation.

- *Lastly, research should be conducted on whether the learner's previous teacher and DBST make a follow-up on the referred learner.* Examining whether learners who are referred to special schools receive follow-up or ongoing assistance from previous teachers and DBSTs is crucial. This consistency is essential for tracking development and making sure learners don't get lost in the system. It has been demonstrated that collaboration between parents, teachers, and other stakeholders has an additive impact that improves learner development. This recommendation also relates to Agulhas (2021).

5.7 CONCLUSION OF THE STUDY

The study aimed to explore the assessment process that is used in mainstream schools when assessing learners who are referred to special schools. It has been demonstrated that the assessment and referral process is being implemented in mainstream schools. However, several challenges hinder its effective execution in accordance with the SIAS policy protocol. These challenges include limited resources, inadequate parental involvement, poor communication between parents and teachers, insufficient time, and a lack of teacher training in the implementation of the SIAS policy.

A more effective and consistent assessment and referral process can be achieved by addressing these underlying issues and fostering collaboration among all stakeholders involved.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: UNISA Ethical Clearance Certificate



UNISA COLLEGE OF EDUCATION ETHICS REVIEW COMMITTEE

Date: 2022/04/14

Ref: **2022/04/13/50111930/22/AM**

Name: Mrs ZZ Mathebula Motloung

Student No.: 50111930

Dear Mrs ZZ Mathebula Motloung

Decision: Ethics Approval from
2022/04/13 to 2025/04/13

Researcher(s): Name: Mrs ZZ Mathebula Motloung
E-mail address: 50111930@mylife.unisa.ac.za
Telephone: 0731749782

Supervisor(s): Name: Dr. JS Rubbi Nunan
E-mail address: rubbijs@unisa.ac.za
Telephone: 0124294461

Title of research:

Exploring the assessment process used in public schools when assessing learners that are referred to Special schools

Qualification: MEd Inclusive Education

Thank you for the application for research ethics clearance by the UNISA College of Education Ethics Review Committee for the above mentioned research. Ethics approval is granted for the period 2022/04/13 to 2025/04/13.

*The **medium risk** application was reviewed by the Ethics Review Committee on 2022/04/13 in compliance with the UNISA Policy on Research Ethics and the Standard Operating Procedure on Research Ethics Risk Assessment.*

The proposed research may now commence with the provisions that:

1. The researcher will ensure that the research project adheres to the relevant guidelines set out in the Unisa Covid-19 position statement on research ethics attached.
2. The researcher(s) will ensure that the research project adheres to the values and principles expressed in the UNISA Policy on Research Ethics.



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APPENDIX B: APPROVAL LETTER FROM GDE



GAUTENG PROVINCE

Department: Education
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

2/6/4/1/2

GDE RESEARCH APPROVAL LETTER

Date:	13 July 2022
Validity of Research Approval:	08 February 2022- 30 September 2022 2022/295
Name of Researcher:	Mathebula-Motloung Z.Z
Address of Researcher:	1321 Imbizane street Senaoane Soweto
Telephone Number:	073 174 9782
Email address:	zzmotloung3f@gmail.com
Research Topic:	Exploring the assessment process used in public schools when assessing learners that are referred to Special schools.
Type of qualification	Masters Degree
Number and type of schools:	3 Primary Schools; 1 District
District/s/HO	Johannesburg Central

Re: Approval in Respect of Request to Conduct Research

This letter serves to indicate that approval is hereby granted to the above-mentioned researcher to proceed with research in respect of the study indicated above. The onus rests with the researcher to negotiate appropriate and relevant time schedules with the school/s and/or offices involved to conduct the research. A separate copy of this letter must be presented to both the School (both Principal and SGB) and the District/Head Office Senior Manager confirming that permission has been granted for the research to be conducted.

The following conditions apply to GDE research. The researcher may proceed with the above study subject to the conditions listed below are met. Approval may be withdrawn should any of the conditions listed below be flouted:

Making education a societal priority

Office of the Director: Education Research and Knowledge Management

7th Floor, 17 Simmonds Street, Johannesburg, 2001

Tel: (011) 355 0485

Email: Faith.Tshabalala@gauteng.gov.za

Website: www.education.gpg.gov.za

APPENDIX C: PERMISSION LETTER- GDE



Appendix C – Permission letter- GDE

29 March 2022

The Research Unit; Resource Planning
Gauteng Department of Education
PO Box 7710
Johannesburg
2000

Dear Sir/Madam

Request for permission to conduct research at [REDACTED] Primary School, [REDACTED] Primary School, and [REDACTED] Primary School.

I, Zinhle Zandile Mathebula am a student at the University of South Africa, and I am doing research under the supervision of Dr JS Rubbi Nunan, a supervisor in the Department of Early Childhood Education, towards a Master's degree in Inclusive Education. We are requesting permission to do research in the primary schools with the study title:

EXPLORING THE ASSESSMENT PROCESS USED IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS WHEN ASSESSING LEARNERS WHO ARE REFERRED TO SPECIAL SCHOOLS

The aim of the study is to determine the challenges with the assessment process used in public schools when assessing learners that are referred to special schools in Johannesburg central district, South Africa.

The study will entail focus group interviews with the SBST, interviews with the DBST representative, 3 foundation phase teachers, and the parents/guardians of 3 learners at each school. The benefits of this study are that it will highlight any challenges in the assessment process to help find suitable and practical ways to assess and support learners who are identified to have barriers to learning. It will furthermore assist in getting suitable support to help those learners achieve the set objectives as per the National Curriculum Assessment Policy Standards. It will also suggest ways or guidelines that will ensure that the School-Based Support Teams are functional and upskilled to make informative decisions regarding the learners' educational needs. Lastly, to guide in the process to correctly place learners with barriers to learning, not necessarily taking them back to mainstream schools but correctly placing them in Special, Remedial or Full-Service schools that will cater to their needs. The potential risk of this study is that the topic may trigger emotional memories in some parents/guardians. Should this occur, the researcher will be sensitive and lend comfort as well as stop and continue with the interview once the parent/guardian is ready. The aim of the study is to make a positive and useful contribution to society and will not cause any harm to the participants in anyway.

A summary of the research findings will be made available to the principals upon completion of the study.

There will be no reimbursement or any incentives for participation in the research.

Feedback procedure all participants will get a copy of the research report.

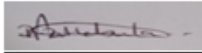
Should you require any further information or want to contact the researcher about any aspect of this study, please contact Ms ZZ Mathebula on Cell: 0731749782; e-mail:50111930@mylife.unisa.ac.za



University of South Africa
Preller Street, Muckleneuk Ridge, City of Tshwane
PO Box 207 UNISA 0002 South Africa

Should you have concerns about the way in which the research will be conducted, you may contact my supervisor Dr J.S Rubbi Nunan on 0124294461, rubbijs@unisa.ac.za.

Yours Sincerely,



(signature of researcher)

Miss ZZ Mathebula (name of the above signatory)

Researcher (signatory's position)

APPENDIX D – PERMISSION LETTER – SCHOOLS



Appendix D – Permission letter – Schools

29/03/2022

THE PRINCIPAL

_____ PRIMARY SCHOOL

Dear Principal

Request for permission to conduct research at _____ primary school.

I, Zinhle Zandile Mathebula, am a student at the University of South Africa (UNISA) currently undertaking research for my Masters Degree in Inclusive Education, under the supervision of Dr JS Rubbi Nunan, a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Early Childhood Education. We are inviting you to participate in the study titled:

EXPLORING THE ASSESSMENT PROCESS USED IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS WHEN ASSESSING LEARNERS WHO ARE REFERRED TO SPECIAL SCHOOLS

In my endeavor of collecting data pertaining for my research, I chose this specific school because I am an educator at a public special school for learners with severe intellectual disabilities. It did not take me very long to realize that some learners that are referred to the school from surrounding public mainstream schools can perform better than learners who are admitted to the school, that is, learners “clinically” diagnosed with severe intellectual disability. Many of the learners referred to the school from the mainstream system do not fit this definition. Therefore, I am conducting this research to explore the assessment process used in public schools when assessing learners that are referred to special schools in Johannesburg central district, South Africa. Your school is in a unique position to be included in this study as the school implements the assessment process to refer learners to special schools.

Data collected will be guided by a strict code of ethics as prescribed by the University of South Africa, Ethics Committee. All data collected will be treated within the strictest confidence and the school, learners nor parents will be identifiable in any reports that are written. Participation of the school is voluntary, and participants may withdraw at any time from participating in the study without any negative consequences.

The benefit of this study is that it will highlight any challenges in the assessment process to help find suitable and practical ways to assess and support learners who are identified to have barriers to learning. It will furthermore assist in getting suitable support to help those learners achieve the set objectives as per the National Curriculum Assessment Policy Standards. It will also suggest ways or guidelines that will ensure that the School-Based Support Teams are functional and upskilled to make informative decisions regarding the learners’ educational needs. Lastly, to guide in the process to correctly place learners with barriers to learning, not necessarily taking them back to mainstream schools but correctly placing them in Special, Remedial or Full-Service schools that will cater to their needs.

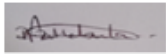
© 2022 College of Education
All rights reserved

It is also important to note that there are no anticipated risks in this study. Interviews will be conducted after school or according to the availability of the participants. The research undertaken will not affect teaching and learning, and dates will be communicated to the school before time.

Should you require any further information, have any clarity seeking questions, or want to contact the researcher about any aspect of this study, please contact Ms ZZ Mathebula on Cell: 0731749782; e-mail: 50111930@mylife.unisa.ac.za

Should you have concerns about the way in which the research will be conducted, you may contact my supervisor Dr J.S Rubbi Nunan on 0124294461, rubbijs@unisa.ac.za.

Yours Sincerely,



(signature of researcher)

Miss ZZ Mathebula (name of the above signatory)

Researcher (signatory's position)

APPENDIX E – PARTICIPANTS CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY



Appendix E – Participants consent to participate in the study

I, _____ (participant name), confirm that the person asking my consent to take part in this research has told me about the nature, procedure, potential benefits, and anticipated inconvenience of participation.

I confirm that I agree to participate in the study and grant consent that the information I share during the interviews may be used by Ms Zinhle Zandile Mathebula for research purposes. I am aware that the interviews will be digitally recorded and grant consent for the recordings. I understand that my privacy will be protected. I undertake not to divulge any information (to anyone other than the researcher) that is shared during the interviews.

I am aware that the findings of this study will be processed into a research report, journal publications and/or conference proceedings, but that my participation will be kept confidential unless otherwise specified.

Participant's Name (Please print): _____

Participant Signature: _____

Date: _____

Yours Sincerely,

A rectangular box containing a handwritten signature in black ink. The signature appears to be "Z. Mathebula".

(signature of researcher)

Miss ZZ Mathebula (name of the above signatory)

Researcher (signatory's position)

APPENDIX F– INTERVIEW SCHEDULE- (FOCUS GROUP - SBST)



Appendix F – Interview schedule- (Focus group - SBST)

The following questions will be asked during the 3 focus group interviews with the SBSTs:

Questions

1. What are the processes that guide the school in assessing and referring learners to a special school?
2. How familiar are teachers with the Screening Identification, Assessment, and Support (SIAS) process?
3. What strategies do teachers use when supporting learners with learning barriers? Is there a whole school collaborative culture/plan or each teacher uses his/her own discretion?
4. Do teachers update the learner profiles and use them as part of the tools for screening or gathering information about the learner? If yes, explain further how the use of these documents assists in assessing learners with learning barriers. If no, what do you use a learner profile for and how do you screen and identify learners with barriers to learning.
5. Does the school have a remedial class? Do teachers have any form of assistance in their classes? E.g. assistant teacher.
6. Does the school have a specific person who is responsible to assist with the assessment and referral of learners to special schools? If yes, further explain whether he/she is a post-level 1 teacher or a HOD, etc., and who nominated him/her? How much experience does he/she have, and lastly do you find that particular person helpful?
7. How often does the DBST visit the school in a term and what support do they provide?
8. Does the learner get counselling from the DBST that clearly explains the process to be followed before placing the learner? If yes, how long does the counselling last?
9. Have you ever had a case where a learner was wrongly placed/referred and how has this impacted on how you identify and refer learners with barriers to learning to a special school?
10. Which loopholes do you think need to be corrected in the SIAS policy?

APPENDIX G – INTERVIEW SCHEDULE – (DBST REPRESENTATIVE)



Appendix G– Interview schedule – (DBST Representative)

The following questions will be asked during the individual interviews with the DBST representatives:

Questions

1. Policy expectations regarding assessments and referrals

- 1.1 What is policy expectation regarding the assessment and referral of learners to special schools?
- 1.2 After how many assessments do you give a possible report of a learner's barrier to learning? How long does it take for a learner to be placed in the correct school after being assessed?
- 1.3 Have you ever had a case where a learner was wrongly placed/referred and how has this impacted on how you identify and refer learners with barriers to learning to a special school?
- 1.4 Which loopholes do you think need to be corrected in the Screening Identification and Support (SIAS) policy?
- 1.5 How does assessment take place and how is the assessment process guided in mainstream schools to assess and refer learners to a special school?

2. Support available to schools with implementing SIAS policy

- 2.1 How many schools does one DBST coordinator oversee; and is it practical? Elaborate.
- 2.2 How often does the DBST visit each school in a term and what support do you provide? Are any of the schools you coordinate given any form of assistance in their class (es)? E.g. assistant teachers, Readers, Scribes.
- 2.3 What are some of the strategies you advise teachers to use when supporting learners with learning barriers? Do you take into consideration that most schools are under-resourced?
- 2.4 How are mainstream school teachers trained to assess and refer learners to special schools?
- 2.5 Are teachers provided with training on Screening, Identifying, and Supporting learners or, do teachers only have an option of reading the policy and applying how they understand it, and how best do you think you can help teachers who are unfamiliar or are still struggling to implement with the Screening Identification and Support processes?
- 2.6 How best do you think you can assist teachers who have no time to fill SNA forms?

3. Support available to learners experiencing barriers to learning

- 3.1 What support is available to learners with barriers to learning in mainstream schools?
- 3.2 Does a learner in the process of referral get counselling from the DBST that clearly explains the process to be followed before placing the learner? If yes, how long does the counselling last?

APPENDIX H – INTERVIEW SCHEDULE (TEACHERS)



Appendix H – Interview schedule (Teachers)

The following questions will be asked during the individual interviews with the teachers:

Questions

1. Policy expectations regarding assessments and referrals

- 1.1 What is the policy expectation regarding the assessment of learners who are experiencing barriers to learning?
- 1.2 How does policy inform you regarding the assessment of learners who are experiencing barriers to learning?
- 1.3 What is the policy expectation regarding the referral of learners to special schools?
- 1.4 How does policy inform you regarding the referral of learners to special schools?

2. Assessment processes in mainstream schools

- 2.1 What is your understanding of the assessment process that is followed in mainstream schools?
- 2.2 What processes are in place to assess and refer learners to a special school?
- 2.3 What processes do you follow to assess and refer learners to a special school?
- 2.4 How do you assess learners for the referral?
- 2.5 What informs you that a learner is experiencing barriers to learning?
- 2.6 What guides you/How are you guided during the assessment process?
- 2.7 How do parents respond to the assessment and referral process?

3. Support available to learners experiencing barriers to learning

- 3.1 What structures are available to support learners with barriers to learning in primary schools?
- 3.2 How do you support learners with barriers to learning in mainstream schools?

4. Teacher Training

- 4.1 What training did you receive to assess and refer learners to special schools?
- 4.2 How confident are you to assess and refer learners to a special school?
- 4.3 Have you had any referrals that were declined, if so, explain the reason?

APPENDIX I - INTERVIEW SCHEDULE (PARENTS/GUARDIANS OF THE LEARNERS)



Appendix I – Interview schedule (Parents/Guardians of the learners)

The following questions will be asked during the interviews with the parents/guardians:

Questions

1. How did you come to know that your child had experienced barriers to learning?
2. Did you get an invitation from the school inviting you to discuss the performance of your child and how to support him/her? If yes, please state how many times (if applicable please indicated from which year) and when?
3. Were you invited to review the learner's performance after the first invitation? If yes, after how long and what was the decision?
4. Did the school explain to you the further steps to be taken in supporting your child and did you understand them? If your answer is yes, did you fill any form together with the teacher or signed any form (Any other official document)?
5. Did you ask any further questions during the meetings with the teacher? If your answer is yes, were your questions fully answered? (If you can remember your questions and the answers you got, please share them.)
6. During the learner assessment at the district:
 - ◆ How was the setting?
 - ◆ Who assessed your child?
 - ◆ Was the child aware of what was happening?
 - ◆ Were you in the room with your child during the assessment?
 - ◆ How was the mood of the learner during assessment?
7. How many times was the learner assessed at District?
8. What concerns did you have with the assessment process used when assessing your child to go to a special school?
9. Do you have knowledge of what a special school is and how it is going to help your child improve? Did someone explain the changes to expect and how your child will be helped at the special school?
10. Were you given options or a list of special schools that you can choose from for your child? How did this make you feel?

APPENDIX J: TURNITIN REPORT

Similarity Report

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AUTHOR

ZINHLE ZANDILE MATHEBULA

WORD COUNT

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CHARACTER COUNT

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Summary

APPENDIX K: LETTER FROM THE EDITOR



SEM RESOLUTIONS
CLARITY INSIGHT RESOLUTION



Ref: Zinhle Zandile Mathebula Motloung

Enquiries: Mr Evens Masemola

Tel: 078 035 2297 **Email:** info@researchresolutions.com

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

LETTER OF CONFIRMATION OF PROOFREADING AND EDITING SERVICES RENDERED TO MS ZINHLE ZANDILE MATHEBULA MOTLOUNG WITH STUDENT NUMBER 50111930 FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AFRICA

This letter serves to confirm that proofreading and editing services were rendered to Ms Zinhle Zandile Mathebula Motloung on her research project titled "Exploring the assessment process used in public schools when assessing learners who are referred to special schools", a research paper submitted in partial fulfillment for a Master's degree of Education (Inclusive Education) in College of Education at the University of South Africa.

At SEM Resolutions, we pride ourselves in providing exceptional proofreading and editing services to postgraduate students in the pursuit of their research dissertation journey. As such, this letter serves to confirm the rendering of such services to the student and confirm that the research project has been proofread according to the highest standards in alignment with acceptable academic writing guidelines. We therefore recommend that the research paper is grammatically coherent and has been edited to eliminate language and grammatical errors.

For any enquires relating to the above, please feel free to contact the company Director Mr Evens Masemola, who oversees all editing and proofreading of research papers.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Evens Masemola", written over a circular scribble.

Mr Evens Masemola

Director

SEM Resolutions

Date: 18/11/2025

APPENDIX L: TECHNICAL EDITING CERTIFICATE

TECHNICAL EDITING CERTIFICATE

23 4TH STREET
MENLO PARK
PRETORIA
0102



I, Sharon Baxter, certifies that the work titled: **EXPLORING THE ASSESSMENT PROCESS USED IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS WHEN ASSESSING LEARNERS WHO ARE REFERRED TO SPECIAL SCHOOLS** authored by ZINHLE ZANDILE MATHEBULA MOTLOUNG, student number 50111930, has been technically formatted to improve the general layout, consistency and flow of the document as per the set specifications of the University of South Africa.

Date: 23 November 2025

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'S. Baxter'.

Sharon Baxter

Email: (H) nbaxter@lantic.net

Cell: 0722502075