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Kirstein, Michelle

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Exploring the Challenges for Comprehensive Sexuality Education among Learners with Disabilities at Special Needs Schools in South Africa: A Systematic Literature Review.

Presented to the School of Education at the University of the Witwatersrand in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Education (Coursework and Research).

Submitted by: Michelle Kirstein (2274760)

Supervisor: Dr Preya Pillay

Declaration of Original Work

I, (Name and surname) Michelle Kirstein

Student number: 2274760

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Abstract

This systematic literature review synthesized research on the implementation of Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) for learners with disabilities in South African special needs schools, addressing a significant gap in the literature. Using Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, the review examined how different systemic levels, microsystem, mesosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem, impacted CSE delivery. Data was collected through a comprehensive search of eight academic databases, focusing on 42 studies published between 2000 and 2024, a timeframe chosen to coincide with the implementation of inclusive education policies in South Africa. Studies were assessed for quality using the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) tools, and key information was extracted using a standardized form. The synthesis revealed multi-level challenges including inadequate teacher preparedness and confidence at the microsystem level, poor communication between schools and families in the mesosystem, outdated sexuality education approaches failing to evolve with societal attitudes in the chronosystem, and restrictive policy implementation and cultural stigma at the macrosystem level. The research provided evidence-based recommendations for improving CSE delivery, including enhanced teacher training programs, policy revision, adapted teaching materials, and community engagement strategies. This study contributes to the advancement of educational practices and policy development aimed at promoting better sexual health and rights for learners with disabilities in South African educational contexts.

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Chapter 1:

1.1.Introduction and Background

South Africa's White Paper 6, *Special Needs Education: Building an Inclusive Education and Training System* (Department of Education [DoE], 2001), provides a progressive policy framework aimed at transforming the education system to accommodate the full diversity of learners, including those with disabilities. The policy recognizes the historical exclusion and marginalization of these learners and calls for the removal of barriers to learning and participation across all facets of education, including access to Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) through the Life Orientation curriculum. However, more than two decades after its release, the implementation of White Paper 6 has been inconsistent and insufficient in achieving meaningful inclusion, especially for learners with disabilities (Donohue & Bornman, 2014; Engelbrecht et al., 2017).

While inclusive education is supported in principle, the practical realities within South Africa's special-needs schools reflect ongoing structural, pedagogical, and attitudinal challenges. These include limited resources, a shortage of trained educators equipped to teach CSE in disability-sensitive ways, and persistent stigmas surrounding both sexuality and disability (Engelbrecht, Nel, Nel, & Tlale, 2016; Murungi, 2015). Consequently, learners with disabilities often receive little to no CSE, or receive content that is not age-appropriate, accessible, or relevant to their lived realities (de Reus, Hanass-Hancock, Henken, & van Brakel, 2015; Rohleder, Braathen, Swartz, & Eide, 2019).

This is especially troubling given the role CSE plays in empowering learners with the knowledge, skills, and values necessary to make informed decisions about their sexual and reproductive health and rights (UNESCO, 2018). Research shows that learners with disabilities are at greater risk of sexual abuse, coercion, and misinformation due to social isolation and lack of access to appropriate education (Ngwena et al., 2017; Chappell & Johannsmeier, 2009). Yet, current scholarship in South Africa has largely focused on educator or institutional perspectives, rather than on the experiences and insights of the learners themselves (Hanass-Hancock, McKenzie, & Plessis, 2021; McKenzie et al., 2021). This creates a critical gap in understanding how learners with disabilities perceive CSE, the barriers they face in accessing it, and what they consider effective or meaningful strategies for inclusion.

Furthermore, many CSE implementation efforts fail to adapt content and delivery methods to meet the cognitive, communication, or physical needs of learners in special-needs schools

(McKenzie et al., 2021). Despite the intent of inclusive policies, learners in these environments often find themselves excluded from full participation in this critical area of life skills education. These oversights not only contravene the aims of White Paper 6 but also violate the sexual and reproductive rights of learners with disabilities, as enshrined in both national and international human rights instruments (Ngwena et al., 2017).

Given this context, the present study seeks to address this significant gap by centering the voices of learners with disabilities in special-needs schools in South Africa. It aims to explore how they experience CSE, the challenges they identify in its delivery, how school-level and broader institutional factors affect their access, and what approaches they find most inclusive and relevant to their needs.

By applying Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory as a guiding framework (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), the study examines how individual experiences are shaped by interrelated systems—from the classroom (microsystem), to school policies (mesosystem), to national education frameworks and societal attitudes (macrosystem). This systems-based approach enables a holistic understanding of the barriers and enablers of inclusive CSE delivery for learners with disabilities.

In doing so, the research will contribute to a more participatory, learner-centered approach to CSE, aligned with global best practices (UNESCO, 2018) and national imperatives for inclusive education (DoE, 2001). It also aims to generate actionable recommendations to inform curriculum development, teacher training, and policy implementation that better support the sexual and reproductive rights of learners with disabilities.

I chose to pursue this study out of a deep concern for the persistent inequalities that learners with disabilities face within the South African education system—particularly in their access to **Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE)**. As an educator and researcher with a strong commitment to inclusive education and social justice, I have witnessed how the rights of learners with disabilities are often overlooked in both policy implementation and everyday classroom practices. This is especially apparent in the area of sexuality education, which remains a deeply stigmatized and underdeveloped component of the curriculum for these learners.

Although policies such as White Paper 6 (DoE, 2001) promote inclusive education in theory, I became increasingly aware, through academic readings, professional experiences, and informal conversations with educators and parents, that learners with disabilities are still not receiving

equitable, relevant, or accessible sexuality education. Literature highlights these gaps, yet very few studies prioritize the voices of the learners themselves—those who are directly affected by exclusionary practices and inaccessible curricula (Hanass-Hancock et al., 2021; McKenzie et al., 2021). This realization motivated me to design a study that would center the lived experiences, perspectives, and needs of learners with disabilities in special-needs schools, rather than speaking about them through adult or institutional lenses.

Moreover, the intersection of disability and sexuality remains an area fraught with social taboos, misinformation, and harmful stereotypes, which often lead to the infantilization and desexualization of people with disabilities (Rohleder et al., 2019). These attitudes are not only disempowering, but also dangerous, placing learners at increased risk of sexual abuse, exploitation, and poor health outcomes due to lack of knowledge and voice (Ngwena et al., 2017). I strongly believe that every learner has the right to receive accurate, age-appropriate, and inclusive sexuality education, and that this right must extend to all learners, regardless of disability.

This study is also personally significant to me because it represents a step toward amplifying marginalized voices and shifting the narrative around what inclusive education truly means. Rather than viewing learners with disabilities as passive recipients of care or protection, I wanted to highlight their agency, insights, and lived realities in navigating their education. By using Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory as a guiding framework, I aim to explore how learners are impacted by, and can influence, the interconnected systems around them, from classroom dynamics to broader societal norms.

Ultimately, I pursued this study to contribute to a more inclusive, equitable, and rights-based approach to CSE in South Africa. I hope that by documenting the experiences of learners with disabilities, this research can inform policy, curriculum development, and teacher training in ways that are both evidence-based and learner-informed. It is my belief that meaningful change can only happen when we truly listen to those most affected—and that starts with learners themselves.

1.2.Research Problem

Despite the provisions of White Paper 6 and the existence of special-needs schools in South Africa, learners with disabilities face significant challenges in accessing and receiving comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) as part of the Life Orientation curriculum. These challenges arise from various social, cultural, and institutional barriers that exist within the

different systems surrounding the learners, as outlined by Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory.

Learners with disabilities are often marginalized and face discrimination, which can limit their access to sexual and reproductive health information and services (Mall & Swartz, 2012; Mavuso & Maharaj, 2015). They may also encounter difficulties in understanding and applying CSE concepts due to their specific learning needs and communication difficulties (Chirawu et al., 2014; Hanass-Hancock et al., 2018). Furthermore, educators may lack the necessary training and resources to effectively deliver CSE to learners with disabilities (de Reus et al., 2015; Rohleder et al., 2019).

The implementation of White Paper 6 has faced challenges, and research suggests that learners with disabilities continue to experience barriers to inclusive education (Donohue & Bornman, 2014; Engelbrecht et al., 2017). Donohue and Bornman (2014) highlight that up to 70% of children of school-going age with disabilities in South Africa do not attend school while of those that do, most participate in separate, "special" schools. Special-needs schools, while providing specialized support and adapted educational environments, face several challenges, including limited resources and funding, shortage of trained special education teachers and support staff, stigma and negative attitudes towards disability, and difficulties in implementing inclusive education practices (Engelbrecht et al., 2016; Murungi, 2015). Addressing this research problem is essential for ensuring that learners with disabilities have equal access to comprehensive and inclusive sexuality education, which is crucial for promoting their sexual and reproductive health, well-being, and rights.

Hence, there is a need to explore the specific barriers that learners with disabilities face in receiving CSE at special-needs schools in South Africa. Understanding the reasons behind these challenges from the learners' perspectives is crucial for developing inclusive and effective CSE programs that meet the specific needs of learners with disabilities.

1.3.Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study is to gain a nuanced and in-depth understanding of how learners with disabilities in South African special-needs schools experience and engage with comprehensive sexuality education (CSE). Specifically, the study aims to explore the barriers learners perceive in how CSE is delivered, the ways institutional policies and school practices affect their access to this education, and the kinds of teaching approaches and strategies they find most meaningful, inclusive, and responsive to their lived realities.

By centering the voices, perspectives, and agency of learners themselves, who are often excluded from discussions about curriculum design and policy implementation, this study seeks to uncover the everyday experiences that shape their understanding of CSE and their ability to participate fully in it. It also aims to highlight how systemic factors, such as teacher preparedness, curriculum restrictions, and school-level practices, manifest in learners' daily lives and affect their right to comprehensive and inclusive sexual education.

Ultimately, the insights generated from this research are intended to inform educators, policymakers, and curriculum developers about how to adapt CSE to better meet the needs of learners with disabilities. By doing so, the study contributes to ongoing efforts to promote equity, inclusivity, and the sexual and reproductive rights of all learners, particularly those who face multiple and intersecting forms of marginalization within the education system.

1.4.Rationale for the Study

While there is a growing body of research on inclusive education and the experiences of learners with disabilities in South Africa (Donohue & Bornman, 2014; Engelbrecht et al., 2017), there is limited research specifically focusing on the challenges these learners face in receiving CSE (de Reus et al., 2015; Hanass-Hancock et al., 2018). This study aims to address this knowledge gap by providing insights into the specific barriers, reasons behind these challenges from the perspectives of learners with disabilities in special-needs schools.

As a teacher, I have witnessed firsthand the challenges faced by learners with disabilities in accessing comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) in South African special-needs schools. My personal and professional experiences have driven me to explore this issue further, as I believe that all learners, regardless of their abilities, have the right to receive quality and inclusive education that addresses their diverse needs, including their sexual and reproductive health and rights.

From a personal stance, I have seen the impact that a lack of access to CSE can have on the lives of learners with disabilities. These learners often face marginalization, discrimination, and stigma, which can limit their opportunities to learn about their bodies, relationships, and sexual health (Mall & Swartz, 2012; Mavuso & Maharaj, 2015). As a result, they may be more vulnerable to sexual abuse, unintended pregnancies, and sexually transmitted infections (Hanass-Hancock et al., 2018). This is a matter of great concern to me, as I believe that all learners have the right to be informed, empowered, and protected.

From a professional stance, I have encountered the challenges that educators face in providing CSE to learners with disabilities. Many educators, myself included, lack the necessary training, resources, and support to effectively adapt and deliver CSE content to meet the specific needs of these learners (de Reus et al., 2015; Rohleder et al., 2019). This is compounded by the limited research available on the experiences and perspectives of learners with disabilities in receiving CSE (Hanass-Hancock et al., 2021; McKenzie et al., 2021). As a result, we may struggle to create inclusive and accessible learning environments that promote the sexual and reproductive health and rights of all learners.

Moreover, as an educator, I am committed to supporting the implementation of inclusive education in South Africa, as outlined in White Paper 6 (Department of Education, 2001). However, I have seen how the realities in schools often differ from the ideals of inclusive education policies (Engelbrecht et al., 2016; Murungi, 2015). This study aims to bridge the gap between policy and practice by identifying the barriers to providing CSE to learners with disabilities and suggesting potential solutions to overcome these challenges.

1.5.Research Questions and Objectives

The following research questions guide this study:

- How do learners with disabilities experience the multi-level challenges teachers face when delivering CSE in the classroom?
- In what ways do school rules and national education policies shape learners with disabilities' access to comprehensive sexuality education?
- What approaches to CSE have learners with disabilities found most relevant, engaging, and responsive to their needs and realities?

The objectives are:

- To identify and describe the specific difficulties and obstacles that learners with disabilities experience when receiving comprehensive sexuality education.
- To explore and understand the perceived causes and underlying factors contributing to the challenges in sexuality education for special needs school learners.

To manage potential biases and ensure consistency in data extraction, a standardized data extraction form will be developed and piloted before full implementation. This form will capture relevant information about study characteristics, methodological approaches, findings, and recommendations. Additionally, a synthesis matrix will be created to systematically

organize and analyze findings across different studies, facilitating the identification of patterns and themes.

1.6.Conceptual Framework: Ecological Systems Theory

An enhanced understanding of learners with disabilities' experiences with CSE can be achieved by studying the literature available on CSE for learners with disabilities through the use of the Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). Firstly, the microsystem refers to a learner's immediate environment within which they have direct contact with the structures of which it comprises e.g. family, school, and neighbourhood (Ryan, 2001). This includes the learner's personality, beliefs, and temperament which have bi-directional influences with the previously mentioned structures (Crawford, 2020). The microsystem can be applied to gaining a deeper understanding of CSE for learners with disabilities by studying the aspects within their immediate school and home environments that impact their beliefs and behaviours regarding CSE (Ryan, 2001). This includes investigating how learners frame their opinions in relation to the provision of CSE as part of their curriculum while inspecting how other constant entities in their immediate environment such as caregivers act to further frame these opinions (Crawford, 2020). Caregivers, often influenced by cultural and religious beliefs, may view discussions on sexuality as inappropriate, leading to reluctance in supporting CSE for learners with disabilities (Khau, 2022). Teachers, who operate within school settings shaped by policy and societal norms, may lack training or confidence in delivering CSE, reinforcing exclusionary practices (Johns & Adnams, 2016). Similarly, learners' perceptions of sexuality are shaped by interactions with caregivers and educators, meaning that limited exposure to open discussions can lead to misinformation and stigma (Carpenter et al., 2023). Without proactive efforts to shift attitudes within the microsystem, negative perceptions of disability and sexuality persist, further marginalising learners with disabilities from SRH education (Neille et al., 2023).

Secondly, the mesosystem will also be applied to further this research. The mesosystem refers to the processes that occur in multiple interactions between different aspects within the microsystem (Ettekal & Mahoney, 2017). Bronfenbrenner (1979), as cited in Crawford, defines the mesosystem simply as "a system of microsystems" (Crawford, 2020). Each mesosystem has developmental consequences for the learner as it involves different activities and emotions (Rus et al., 2010). This system will add to an in-depth understanding of CSE implementations for learners with disabilities, for example, by inspecting if there are any collaborative efforts between schools, families, or community organisations involved in implementing quality CSE and making SRH resources available for learners with disabilities (Rus et al., 2010). Weak

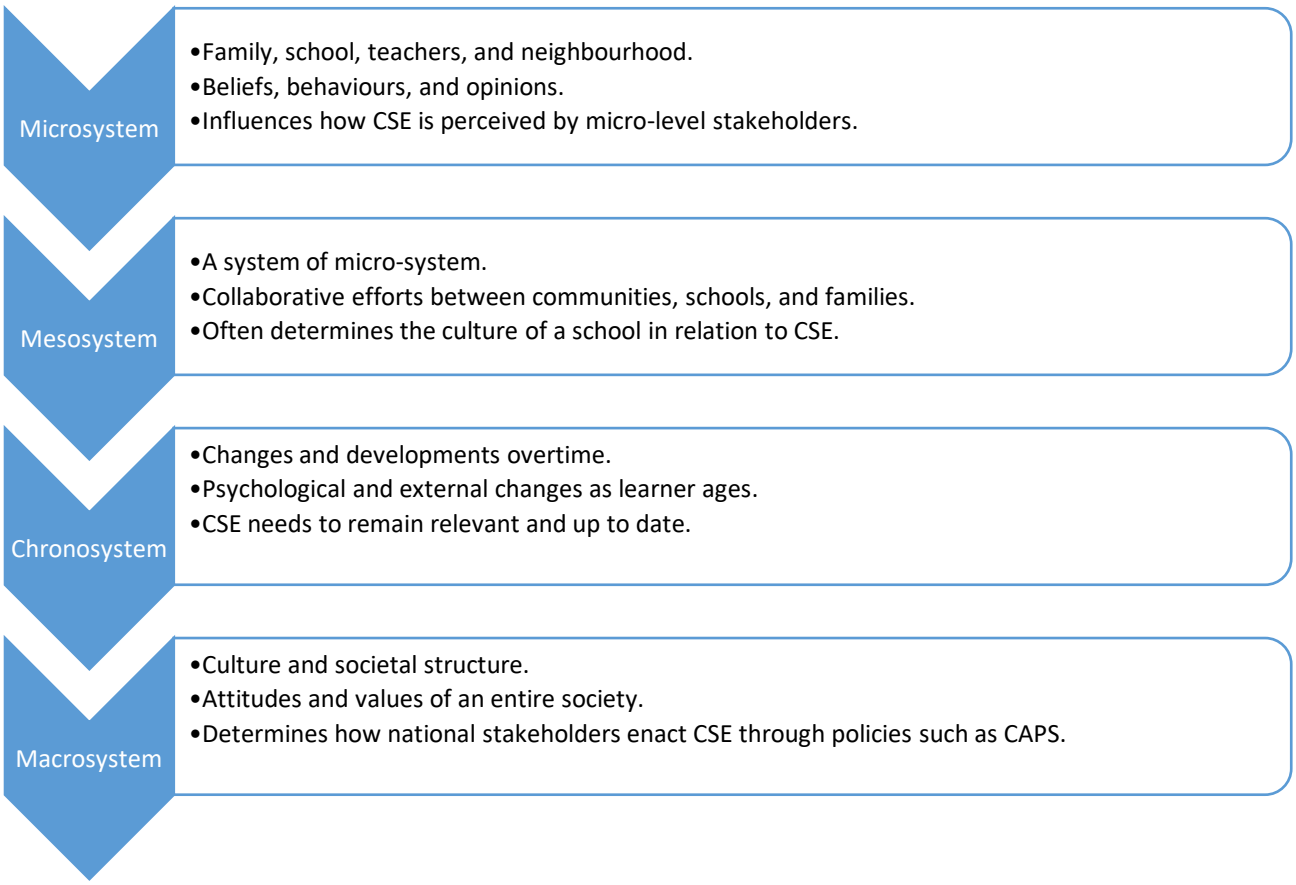
communication between parents, teachers, and healthcare providers can result in inconsistent messaging about sexuality, limiting students' access to accurate information (Mahlaule et al., 2024). If educators lack collaboration with disability specialists, CSE may fail to address the specific needs of these learners, reinforcing exclusion (Johns & Adnams, 2016). Additionally, societal stigma often discourages schools and families from openly discussing sexuality, creating a fragmented approach to CSE (Carpenter et al., 2023). Without strong interconnections within the mesosystem, learners with disabilities remain underserved in SRH education.

Thirdly, the chronosystem will also form an important part of underpinning this research as it refers to the notion of time in relation to a learner's development (Ryan, 2001). This means that individuals change over time along with the ways in which they interact with their environment. Numerous psychological and external changes occur as a learner ages in the context of the time in which the learner lives and develops (Crawford, 2020). This forms another important part of this study as numerous inferences can be made regarding the development of a learner across a specific time and context. This means that sexuality education similarly needs to understand that it needs to evolve in line with how learners mature and change over time to meet the needs of learners with disabilities (Ryan, 2001). Through familiarisation with literature , I will be able to measure whether the CSE provided to learners with disabilities aligns with their level of maturation and whether any substantial changes have been made to the curriculum to cater to the needs of a learner with disability living in the 21st century (Ettekal & Mahoney, 2017). Historically, education systems have marginalized disability and sexuality, with slow progress in integrating inclusive CSE (Donohue & Bornman, 2014). The lingering effects of apartheid-era exclusion in South Africa have contributed to the delayed implementation of inclusive policies (Mahlaule et al., 2024). Additionally, evolving disability rights movements and global frameworks, such as the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, highlight the growing recognition of inclusive CSE, yet systemic change remains slow (Michielsen & Brockschmidt, 2021). Without continuous policy reform and societal attitude shifts, learners with disabilities will remain excluded from essential sexual health education.

Finally, the macrosystem refers to the overall culture and societal structure of a learner's environment. This includes societal values, customs, and laws that form the blueprint of the society and are reflected in cultural, religious, and socioeconomic organisations of the society (Crawford, 2020; Ettekal & Mahoney, 2017). The larger principles defined by the macrosystem

have cascading effects throughout the interactions in all the other layers (Ryan, 2001). This system can inform this study by allowing the researcher to delve into the attitudes and values that the larger society harbours surrounding sexuality and sexual health policies for learners with disabilities (Crawford, 2020). This will also provide direct insights into the methods through which CSE is framed and implemented in and through CAPS and how the wider society's perceptions influence the accommodation for learners with disabilities in these policy documents (Ryan, 2001). The macrosystem shapes CSE provision for learners with disabilities through cultural norms, policies, and societal attitudes. Deeply rooted ableist beliefs and stigma around disability and sexuality contribute to exclusion from SRH education (Vanwesenbeeck, 2020; Crawford, 2020). Policy frameworks like South Africa's National Development Plan recognize the need for inclusion, but inadequate implementation and funding hinder progress (Department of Social Development, 2016). Additionally, resistance from influential societal figures, such as government and religious leaders, further limits CSE accessibility (Khau, 2022). These systemic barriers perpetuate the marginalization of learners with disabilities in sexuality education.

The Ecological Systems Theory:



1.7.Literature that will inform the study

a. Understanding Disability

The learners defined as having "disabilities" in this study refer to learners with a range of disabilities including physical, intellectual, developmental, and sensory disabilities. Agyekum (2018) asserts that disability is not a single, static state but a complex process. An individual is not disabled as a result of something that is "lodged" in their body but rather an individual is represented as disabled as a result of the negative impact of the physical, social, cultural, or legislative environment that inhibits one's ability to participate (Agyekum, 2018, p.1). This definition is further corroborated by Retief and Letsosa (2018) who describe disability through a social model that frames disability as a socially constructed phenomenon. This approach aids in applying a macro-level understanding of disability as it asserts that it is the society that disables people with impairments which implies that social conditions need to change in order to create conditions that are conducive to the lived realities of learners with disabilities (Bronfenbrenner, 1994; Retief & Letsosa, 2018).

It is also imperative to create a clear distinction between the learners with disabilities who are taken into account as part of this study and learners who have impairments in the social model. An impairment is anything that can be universally constant such as the inability to conceive children while a disability, as framed in this study, is based on the extent to which the impairment has social consequences for the learner in their specific context (Retief & Letsotsa, 2018). This study will therefore use the social model to take into account specific cases of learners with varied disabilities that have negative social consequences for their acquirement of quality CSE in their specific context (Retief & Letsotsa, 2018). This includes social consequences that require learners to attend special needs schools as their specific educational needs cannot be met by mainstream schools regardless of the inclusive model of education as endorsed by the Department of Basic Education (Chaskalson, 2023). Carpenter et al. (2023) argues that despite inclusive education policies, South Africa predominantly provides education to learners with disabilities through special needs schools (Carpenter et al., 2023).

b. Disability Rights

The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996) asserts that human rights are applicable to all people by virtue of being human. Section 9 and 10 of the constitution make provision to ensure that no person is discriminated against or treated unfairly based on one or

more grounds, for example, race, age, gender, or disability (South African Human Rights Commission, 2023). The United Nations on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities seeks to protect, promote, and ensure the full and equal enjoyment of all human rights by persons with disabilities (Department of Social Development, 2016). This includes the accelerated rollout of inclusive education that can enable learners with disabilities to participate effectively in a free society. The National Development Plan (NDP) recognises that education is imperative in providing the knowledge and skills needed for learners with disabilities to exercise a myriad of human rights such as rights to political participation, work, creating independent livelihoods, building the community, participating in cultural life and raising a family (Department of Social Development, 2016).

The NDP also touches on numerous CSE related topics such as strongly recognising that people with disabilities are not a homogenous group but have differing sexualities that need to be addressed. Furthermore, the NDP recognises that sexual exploitation and abuse are rife among people with disabilities including a lack of autonomy to seek justice for these instances (Department of Social Development, 2016). They also importantly note that numerous programmes geared towards addressing sexual violence and abuse in the community fail to reach out to people with disabilities. By studying the trends in disability rights in the country, a more intricate understanding can be obtained regarding the lack of provision made to equip quality CSE in combatting some of the common difficulties faced by learners with disabilities (Department of Social Development, 2016). This also provides a macro-level insight into how governmental policy affects learners along with a micro-level perspective by inspecting how these policies reflect in these learners' individual lives (Bronfenbrenner, 1994).

c. CSE in CAPS and South African Schools

Comprehensive Sexuality Education was introduced in 2000 within the subject of Life Orientation and continues to form an important part of the Curriculum Assessment Policy Statement with the goal of providing scientifically accurate information and cultivating positive attitudes to enable a smooth transition to adulthood (Department of Basic Education, 2019). The Department of Basic Education asserts that when CSE information is accurate, age-appropriate, and culturally relevant, it has the power to delay sexual debut, increase safe sexual practice, reduce HIV and STI infections, reduce gender-based violence as well as raise awareness surrounding health and psychosocial services. It is important to note that there is no direct mention of learners with disabilities within the guidelines of CSE as provided by the Department of Basic Education (Department of Basic Education, 2019). Ubisi notes that the

CSE scripted lesson plans provided to teachers by the Department of Basic Education only mention disability in grade 10 through three activities, raising concerns about the inclusivity of the CSE curriculum for learners with differentiated needs (Ubisi, 2021).

In addition to this, White Paper 6 (WP6) which is a policy that was developed by the Department of Basic Education in 2001 aimed to reenvisage education for learners with disabilities based on the principles of non-discrimination and human dignity, also does not make mention of CSE or the SRH of learners with disabilities (Chaskalson, 2023). This includes failure from the department as the implementation of WP6 has been too tedious while numerous complaints have been made that it is outdated and needs to be revised (Chaskalson, 2023). Kahonde and Johns (2022) and Chappell (2014) emphasized the importance of empowering individuals with disabilities to advocate for their sexual and reproductive health rights, and dismantling societal perceptions and stereotypes surrounding disability and sexuality, respectively (Chappell, 2014; Kahonde & Johns, 2022). However, the curriculum as well as its poor implementation in South African schools inhibits this (Department of Social Development, 2016). Examining how these policy documents are constructed and implemented provides a macro-level perspective through which to analyse CSE for learners with disabilities while also providing insight into the chronosystem through which to measure how accurate and appropriate CSE development has been over time to prepare learners with disabilities for adulthood (Bronfenbrenner, 1994).

d. International Debates

Through a systematic review of international evidence, Brown et al. (2020) assert that sexual expression takes many forms and contributes tremendously to a person's health and wellbeing. Internationally, health promotion and health education should be at the forefront to enable the safe expression of sexuality such as pleasurable sexual experiences free from violence, discrimination, and coercion (Brown et al., 2020). Brown et al. (2020) further argues that there is an increase in devising programs for young people concerning their sexual health to guide them into having a satisfying and fulfilling adult life. International research suggests that youth with disabilities want meaningful relationships and desire sexual intimacy and to be sexually active (Brown et al., 2020). Michielsen and Brockschmidt (2021) extend this argument by contending from an international perspective that as children and young people with disabilities transition into adults, they embark on a journey of complex sexual development while noting that young people with disabilities have similar needs concerning sexuality to their peers without disabilities and that sexuality education has been found to be helpful in responding to

these needs (Michielsen & Brockschmidt, 2021). The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities also binds numerous states to commit themselves to enabling people with disabilities to exercise their rights to enjoy the highest attainable standard of health without discrimination, most importantly including the provision of sexuality education (Michielsen & Brockschmidt, 2021).

Incomplete and inadequate sexuality education has been identified as one of the main elements inhibiting the development and execution of the sexuality of learners and adults with disabilities. Additionally, children and young people with disabilities are especially vulnerable to sexual ill-health while sexuality education has the power to mitigate these risks (Michielsen & Brockschmidt, 2021). Despite this, research has highlighted that learners with disabilities receive less sexuality education than their peers without disabilities. This is demonstrated through numerous settings and varied disabilities such as a review of studies in the USA indicated the lacking nature of formalised forms of sexuality education for learners with disabilities while a study in France found an immense disparity between the sexuality-related information received by young girls with hearing impairment in relation to those without (Michielsen & Brockschmidt, 2021). It is therefore valid to conclude that the sexual rights of learners with disabilities have not been fully recognised and that sexuality education for this population remains inadequate (Michielsen & Brockschmidt, 2021). Focusing on international debates is also imperative when using the Ecological Systems Theory as it provides insight into a macrosystem that dictates international debates surrounding CSE provision while allowing the mesosystem to become incorporated as each country or region has its own microsystems that function interdependently to reach these general consensuses regarding the needs and trials faced by learners with disabilities (Bronfenbrenner, 1994).

e. Attitudes from Stakeholders

Brown et al. (2020) assert that as young adults with disabilities transition from childhood to adulthood, service tensions become increasingly evident regarding the expression of their sexuality due to concerns surrounding the risks associated with exploitation versus the right to experience relationships and intimacy (Brown et al., 2020). Carpenter et al. (2023) and Khau (2022) explain that educators hold negative attitudes in relation to teaching CSE to learners with disabilities and generally employ a pedagogy of discomfort (Carpenter et al., 2023; Khau, 2022). Chapell also notes that numerous environmental and attitudinal barriers prevent these learners from accessing CSE such as negative or misconstrued attitudes from parents and communities exacerbating doubts about young people with disabilities' capacities to

experience romantic love, relationships, or reproduction (Chapell, 2014). Kamaludin et al. (2022) corroborate these findings by contending that although parents recognise the value of sexuality education, they maintain negative attitudes toward it as they believe that their children with disabilities will never engage in sexual activity (Kamaludin et al., 2022). Although CSE in South Africa maintains the importance of applying practices that meet the needs of all learners under inclusive education, this is clearly absent when inspecting policy documents (Chaskalson, 2023; Department of Basic Education, 2019). Khau (2022) adds to this by stating that CSE is generally not received in a positive light by numerous stakeholders such as government and religious leaders who believe it encourages promiscuity and a "laissez-faire" attitude while labelling sexuality as a taboo.. Myths, stereotypes, and negative attitudes towards disability have been found to heighten learners with disabilities' risk of sexual abuse within the South African context (Kahonde & Johns, 2022).

Through these negative attitudes from stakeholders toward CSE provision for learners with disabilities, they are portrayed as innocent beings needing protection (Kahonde & Johns, 2022). Whittle and Butler (2018) argue that youth with disabilities desire to express their sexuality in line with traditional socio-cultural norms while being sexual beings who have a capacity for a positive sexual life with the majority of studies reporting their wish to be in an intimate relationship (Whittle & Butler, 2018). Through these negative rhetorics, youth with disabilities are deprived of life-saving information through sexuality information and education that can help them protect themselves against instances such as sexual violence (Khau, 2022). This denial of reliable resources through which to access information regarding SRH for learners with disabilities further causes harm as these learners obtain partial, inconsistent, and skewed views regarding sexuality as they are forced to resort to unreliable learning sources such as television, magazines, and pornography (Whittle & Butler, 2018).

Additionally, numerous conflicting messages surrounding SRH also led youth with disability to be solely exposed to the negative consequences of sex and having it be portrayed as something "dangerous" or "dirty", leading some to only associate sex with sickness and disease (Whittle & Butler, 2018). Brown et al. (2020) argue that the only method through which provision programs for learners with disabilities such as CSE can be improved is through increased collaboration with all stakeholders involved. This includes young people with disabilities and their parents and teachers to help manage and construct useful CSE programs (Brown et al., 2020). Inspecting the attitudes of key stakeholders in influencing CSE provision for learners with disabilities is extremely useful as it provides a macro-level insight by

inspecting overarching socio-cultural values surrounding CSE, a meso-level perspective as one can observe how different micro-systems such as school and family domains interact to create certain perceptions as well as a micro-level insight as the bi-directional influences between learners and their parents, teachers, media and cultural and religious leaders further determine their positioning regarding sexuality education (Bronfenbrenner, 1994).

f. Training Provisions for Teachers

Hannas-Hancock et al. (2018) argue that literature suggests that teachers of learners with disabilities face additional challenges as opposed to those teaching in mainstream schools as they generally hold skewed beliefs about their learners such as that they are not sexually active as well as being undertrained and lacking in skills through which to make CSE content available for these learners (Hanass-Hancock et al., 2018). This convenes with a study conducted by Chirawu et al. (2014) in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, that found that while teachers recognized the importance of CSE for learners with disabilities, they often lacked the necessary knowledge, skills, and resources to effectively deliver inclusive and tailored programs (Chirawu et al., 2014). This finding diverges from the assumption that the primary barrier is negative perceptions and beliefs, suggesting that inadequate teacher training and resources may also contribute to the problem. Mavhandu-Mudzusi and Shoko (2020) found that teachers in Zimbabwe felt ill-equipped to address the unique needs and experiences of learners with disabilities in the context of CSE, corroborating the findings of Chirawu et al. (2014) and underscoring the need for comprehensive teacher training programs focused on inclusive CSE (Mavhandu-Mudzusi, 2020).

The National Development Plan asserts that training professionals and educators at all levels to teach learners with disabilities is a priority. Training regarding disability awareness, the use of appropriate and augmented alternative modes, varied means and formats of education, educational techniques and materials that can support learners with disabilities, and disability rights awareness training programmes must be integrated into the curricula of all education and training programmes (Department of Social Development, 2016). White Paper 6 also provide criteria for inclusive education training revolving around enabling education structures, systems and learning needs that meet the needs of all learners, acknowledging and respecting differences, changing attitudes, behaviour, teaching methods, curricula and environments to meet the needs of all learners as well as minimising barriers to learning to maximise learner participation (Department of Basic Education, 2001).

However, Treacy et al. (2017) note that teachers feel unprepared in teaching this sexuality education to learners with disabilities and report little to no training on this topic. A statewide study of special education teachers determined that while the majority of them believed sexual health education is important for learners with disabilities, they rarely broached the topic and rather focused on teaching abstinence. The most pivotal reason they did not feel confident enough to address more complex issues of sexual health was due to lack of preparation (Treacy et al., 2017). Based on these findings one can infer that although teacher training provisions for learners with disabilities are stressed in policy documents, there is little evidence of this training being applied in schools as teachers continue to struggle to approach SRH issues under CSE as part of the curriculum (Treacy et al., 2017). Studying teacher training is important under the Ecological Systems Theory as it provides a macro-level perspective by investigating what is stated in policy documents regarding teacher training for learners with disabilities. Additionally, it also provides a meso- and micro-level perspective as it highlights how the lack of implementation of these training programmes work within microsystems such as the school to impact learners' lives and prevent them from receiving quality, lifesaving CSE (Bronfenbrenner, 1994).

1.8.Methodology: Literature Review

This study will employ a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) design to investigate how learners with disabilities experience Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE). The SLR is chosen for its transparency, rigour, and replicability, allowing for a structured synthesis of existing knowledge rather than anecdotal evidence. The search strategy will involve systematically consulting academic databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, PsycINFO, and Google Scholar to ensure broad disciplinary coverage across education, psychology, and disability studies. Search strings will be developed using keywords such as "Comprehensive Sexuality Education," "learners with disabilities," "SRH education," "inclusive education," and "Ecological Systems Theory," refined with Boolean operators (AND, OR, NOT) to filter results. To capture relevant policy shifts and developments, the review will be limited to literature published between 2000 and 2024.

Inclusion criteria will focus on peer-reviewed journal articles, policy documents, and book chapters that address learners with disabilities in relation to CSE, SRH education, or sexuality. Excluded will be studies dealing exclusively with medical aspects of disability without reference to sexuality education, as well as grey literature unless it provides highly relevant policy insights. Screening will occur in three stages—title, abstract, and full-text review—against the inclusion and exclusion criteria. Once studies are selected, a coding framework will be developed to extract key variables such as disability type, CSE delivery method, barriers, and outcomes. The data will then be analysed using thematic synthesis, guided by Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, to categorise findings across the microsystem, mesosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem levels of influence.

To ensure quality assurance, a second reviewer will be appointed to enhance reliability and reduce potential bias. This reviewer will independently verify the inclusion and exclusion of studies during screening and cross-check a sample of coded studies for consistency. Discrepancies between reviewers will be resolved through consensus discussions, strengthening methodological rigour and trustworthiness of findings. **1.9.Ethical Considerations and Quality Assurance**

While this study does not involve primary data collection, several ethical considerations will be addressed. These include ensuring accurate representation of original research findings, proper attribution and citation of sources, and transparent reporting of methodology and analysis processes. Potential biases in both the original studies and the review process will be explicitly acknowledged and discussed.

Quality assurance measures will include independent screening of a sample of studies by a second reviewer, regular consultation with supervisors regarding the analysis process, and maintenance of a detailed audit trail documenting all decisions made during the review process. These measures will help ensure the reliability and validity of the review findings while maintaining high standards of academic integrity. Quality assessment criteria will be clearly defined using established tools such as the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) checklist, ensuring only methodologically sound studies are included in the final analysis.

1.10.Limitations and Quality Assurance

The review acknowledges several potential limitations. These include the possibility of publication bias, language restrictions (as only English-language publications will be included), and the inherent limitations of primary studies. To address these limitations and ensure review quality, several strategies will be implemented. These include comprehensive database searching, clear documentation of search strategies and selection criteria, and regular consultation with subject matter experts.

To handle disagreements in data extraction and analysis, a second reviewer will independently assess a sample of studies, and any discrepancies will be resolved through discussion and consensus. The review will maintain transparency by explicitly documenting all methodological decisions and limitations, allowing readers to assess the validity and applicability of findings.

Through these carefully considered methodological approaches and quality assurance measures, this systematic review aims to provide a comprehensive and reliable synthesis of existing research on CSE implementation for learners with disabilities in South African special needs schools, while acknowledging and addressing potential limitations and biases in the review process. Despite these measures, several limitations are acknowledged. Resource constraints may mean the second reviewer can only check a proportion of studies rather than the entire dataset, and subjectivity in coding may persist despite efforts to maintain consistency. Furthermore, restricting the review to English-language publications could exclude valuable research from non-English contexts, while the reliance on academic databases may lead to the omission of certain forms of grey literature.

Chapter 2

2.1.Research philosophy

The decision to conduct a systematic review is grounded in several compelling factors. First, while numerous studies have examined various aspects of CSE implementation in South African schools, there has not been a comprehensive synthesis of research specifically focused on learners with disabilities in special needs settings. This systematic review will address this gap by consolidating existing knowledge and identifying patterns across multiple studies. Second, the systematic review methodology allows for a rigorous examination of how different ecological systems influence CSE implementation, providing a more nuanced understanding of the challenges and opportunities in this field. Finally, the findings from this

systematic review will directly inform policy development and educational practice, offering evidence-based recommendations for improving CSE delivery to learners with disabilities.

The systematic review will follow established guidelines for conducting reviews in educational research, ensuring a methodical approach to literature identification, selection, and analysis. This methodology aligns well with the study's theoretical framework, Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, as it allows for the systematic categorization and analysis of findings across different systemic levels.**2.2.Research methodology**

2.2.1.Data collection methods

The search strategy will be comprehensive and systematic, utilizing multiple academic databases to ensure broad coverage of relevant literature. I searched 8 data bases which include Education Resources Information Center (ERIC), Academic Search Premier, PsycINFO, Sabinet, EBSCOhost, African Journals Online (AJOL), SA ePublications, and Google Scholar. Analysis of the first 100 results for each search string was done to ensure manageability while maintaining comprehensiveness.

The search terms are organised into three conceptual clusters to ensure comprehensive coverage of the topic. The first cluster focuses on disability-related terms, including variations of "disability," "special needs," and "impairment." The second cluster encompasses education-related terms such as "sexuality education," "CSE," and "life orientation." The third cluster addresses context-specific terms including "South Africa" and "special needs schools." These terms are combined using Boolean operators to create comprehensive search strings that capture all relevant literature.

Selection Criteria and Quality Assessment

The review includes literature published between 2000 and 2024, a timeframe chosen to coincide with the implementation of White Paper 6 in South African education. This period allows for examination of how CSE implementation has evolved over time while maintaining relevance to current educational contexts. Studies are included if they focus on the South African context, address sexuality education for learners with disabilities, and are available in English. Both primary research studies and systematic reviews are considered, as well as relevant policy documents and official educational guidelines.

Quality assessment is conducted using the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) tools, selected according to the methodological approach of each included study. This systematic quality assessment ensures that the review's findings are based on methodologically sound research. Studies are evaluated based on their methodological rigor, relevance to the research questions, and contribution to understanding CSE implementation for learners with disabilities.

A second reviewer will be selected to strengthen the reliability and validity of the study's findings. This individual will ideally:

- Have relevant expertise in education, disability studies, or sexual and reproductive health (SRH), ensuring they understand the context of the research.
- Be independent from the primary researcher to reduce bias.
- Review literature selection, coding, or thematic analysis to confirm consistency and accuracy.
- Engage in consensus-building discussions with myself as the primary researcher where discrepancies arise, ensuring transparency and methodological rigour.

This process aligns with best practices in qualitative and systematic research, as it minimizes the influence of researcher subjectivity and enhances credibility.

Inclusion criteria:

Inclusion criteria	**Rationale**
Published between 2000-2024	To ensure papers coincide with the implementation of White Paper 6 up to the present.
Related to disability	To ensure that the intersection of disability is studied in tandem with CSE.
Related to CSE	To inspect the provision of CSE for learners with disabilities.
Related to learners	To ensure the focus is on learners currently in schools or special needs schools and not adults with disabilities.
Related to South African context	To ensure the papers are related to a local context and applicable to the SRH needs of learners with disabilities in special needs schools in South Africa.

Data Extraction

The data extraction process is guided by a standardized form designed to capture relevant information from each included study. This includes basic study characteristics such as author(s), publication year, and geographical location within South Africa, as well as methodological details, participant characteristics, and key findings related to CSE challenges. Special attention is be paid to theoretical frameworks employed and recommendations made by the authors. Data extraction is conducted by myself with 20% of studies reviewed by a second reviewer for reliability.

2.2.2.Data analysis methods

Analysis Framework

Analysis is structured according to Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, with findings categorized across microsystem, mesosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem levels. This theoretical framework helps organise the synthesis of findings and provides insight into how different systemic levels interact to influence CSE implementation. The microsystem analysis focuses on immediate environmental factors such as classroom dynamics and teacher-student interactions. Mesosystem analysis examines interactions between different microsystems, such as school-family collaboration. Macrosystem analysis considers broader societal influences including cultural attitudes and policy frameworks. Finally, chronosystem analysis examines changes over time in both implementation and attitudes toward CSE for learners with disabilities.

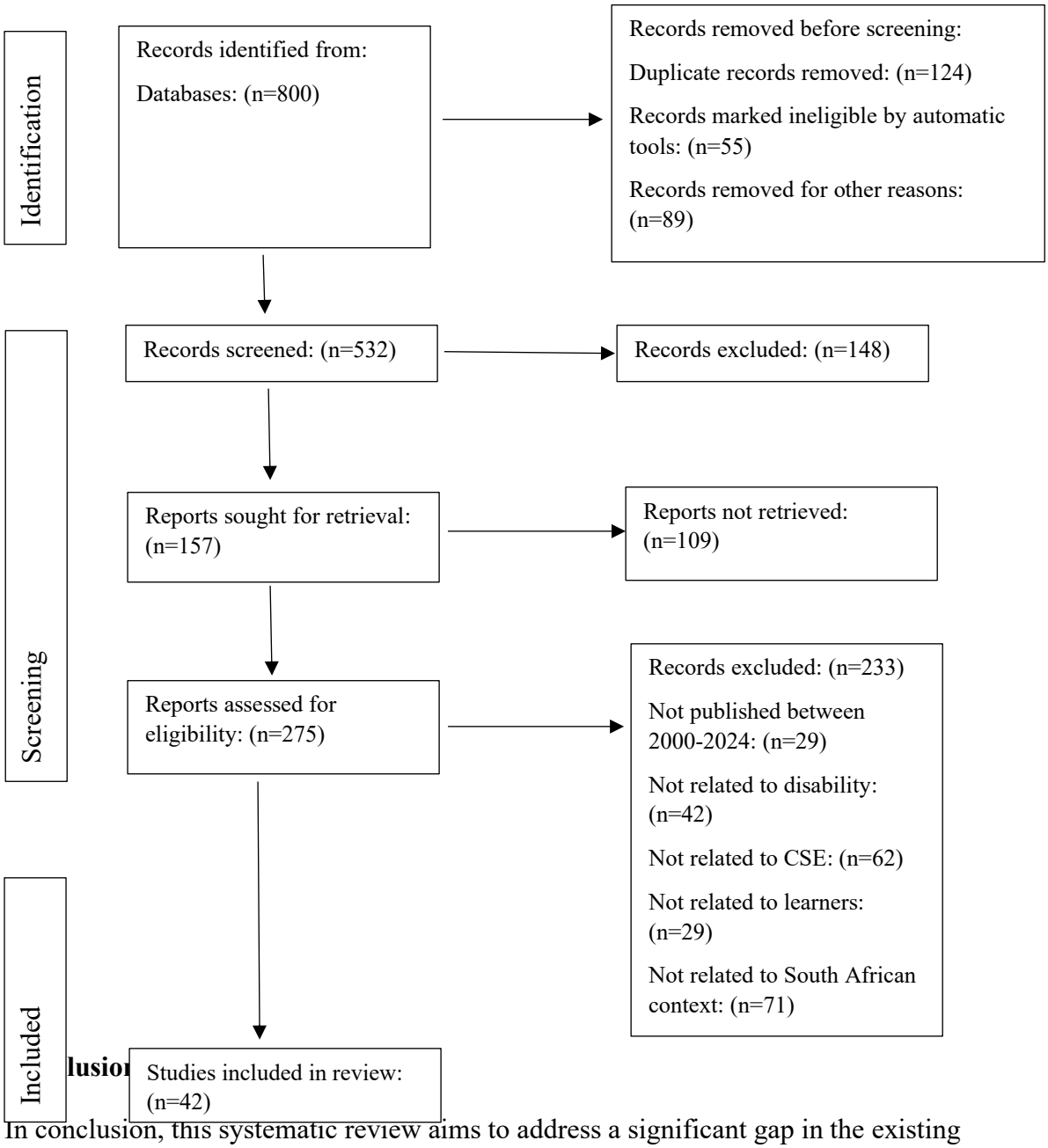
Synthesis and Reporting

The synthesis process employs a thematic approach, moving from descriptive to analytical themes. Initial coding of findings from primary studies is followed by the development of descriptive themes that capture key concepts and patterns across studies. These descriptive themes are then developed into analytical themes that provide new insights into CSE implementation challenges and opportunities. The synthesis explicitly considers how findings at different ecological levels interact and influence each other.

The final report follows the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) guidelines to ensure transparent and comprehensive reporting of the review

process and findings. This includes a detailed PRISMA flow diagram illustrating the study selection process, clear presentation of thematic findings, and explicit acknowledgment of any limitations in the review process or available literature.

PRISMA Flow Diagram:



lusion

In conclusion, this systematic review aims to address a significant gap in the existing literature by synthesising research specifically focused on the implementation of Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) for learners with disabilities in South African special needs schools. By adopting Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory as a guiding framework, the review will systematically analyse how different systemic levels—microsystem, mesosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem—affect CSE delivery. The

comprehensive data collection and analysis methods outlined in this review, including rigorous search strategies and quality assessments, ensure that the findings are methodologically robust and relevant to both the academic community and educational policymakers.

The outcomes of this review not only provide valuable insights into the challenges faced by educators and learners but also inform the development of evidence-based recommendations aimed at improving CSE delivery in special needs education settings. By emphasising the importance of teacher training, the need for supportive educational policies, and the crucial role of societal attitudes, this review contributes to advancing the inclusion of learners with disabilities in sexuality education programs. Ultimately, the findings serve as a foundation for future interventions, policies, and research that can enhance the sexual rights and health of learners with disabilities in South Africa and beyond.

Chapter 3

3.1. Introduction

This chapter will explore the theoretical framework of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory as well as include a systematic literature review guided by this theoretical framework that will focus on the nature of CSE currently provided to learners with disabilities in South Africa in special needs schools. This includes thorough explorations of emerging themes such as equipping social theory to understand the meaning of disability, the historical background of disability rights in relation to CSE, localised understandings of CSE provisions for learners with disabilities in South Africa by inspecting current policy documents, international debates that inform these documents, attitudes from stakeholders that determine the quality of CSE for learners with disabilities as well as the current training provisions being made for teachers to adequately teach CSE to learners with disabilities. This multitude of topics will be guided by the selected theoretical framework as this will provide a multi-layered understanding of how pervasive the issues surrounding CSE implementation for learners with disabilities are in South Africa in every aspect of their lives (Bronfenbrenner, 1994; Hanass-Hancock et al., 2018).

3.2. Theoretical Framework

Urie Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory will serve as a guiding lens for this study in exploring the multi-level issues faced by learners with disabilities in terms of CSE delivery in special needs schools (Ryan, 2001). Bronfenbrenner's theory focuses on defining a learner's

environment as consisting of complex layers, each having a different effect on a child's development (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). The interactions between different factors within a learner's environment such as their biology, immediate family, and wider social landscape all have different impacts in fuelling a learner's development. In studying the effects that CSE implementations have on learners with disability it is therefore important to not only look at their immediate environment but also interactions made with the larger environment that these smaller systems function within (Ryan, 2001).

Bronfenbrenner sought to create a theory of human development that would take into account the influence of the multitude of systems that play a substantial role in shaping and creating a learner's experiences and context. Crawford (2020) states that Ecological Systems Theory explains human development through the perspective of, "environmental interconnections and their impact on the force directly affecting psychological growth." (Crawford, 2020, p.1). Bronfenbrenner thus represents the learner as a malleable being with their outcome being dependent on the social milieu in which this learner functions (Crawford, 2020). In applying Bronfenbrenner's theory to gain a more complex understanding of a learner's environment, four of the systems that form part of the theory will be equipped, namely, the microsystem, the mesosystem, the macrosystem, and the chronosystem (Ryan, 2001). These levels of systems range from smaller, proximal settings through which individuals undergo direct interactions to larger, distal settings that impact learners' development on a more indirect level (Ettekal & Mahoney, 2017).

Urie Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory offers a comprehensive framework for exploring the complex dynamics of delivering Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) to learners with disabilities in special needs schools. By examining the interrelatedness of the microsystem, mesosystem, chronosystem and macrosystem, this study aims to uncover how these ecological layers influence the development and experiences of learners in relation to CSE (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). Bronfenbrenner's emphasis on the interplay between immediate environments, societal influences, and developmental changes over time provides a nuanced lens through which to understand the challenges and opportunities in CSE implementation for learners with disabilities (Ryan, 2001). By integrating qualitative data collection with insights from existing literature, this research seeks to contribute a deeper understanding of how educational environments and broader societal contexts shape the sexual health education experiences of learners with disabilities, offering pathways through which to explore CSE implementation for learners with disabilities (Crawford, 2020).

3.3. Literature Review

Several studies have underscored the significant barriers faced by individuals with disabilities in accessing comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) and sexual and reproductive health resources. Hanass-Hancock et al. (2018) and Neillie et al. (2023) highlighted the lack of inclusive methods and interventions, as well as the social exclusion and marginalization experienced by people with disabilities due to the absence of disability representation in sex education and sexual health information. These findings are corroborated by Johns and Adnams (2016), who assert that access to useful resources concerning sexual health eludes learners and adults with disabilities in South Africa due to negative perceptions and beliefs toward their sexuality and learning capabilities (Johns & Adnams, 2016). This literature review aims to define a "learner with disability" as represented in this study by exploring national disability rights. This includes understanding the neglect of inclusive methods and interventions for learners with disabilities by exploring how CSE is implemented through schools as well as CAPS. National and international debates regarding the appropriateness of CSE for learners with disabilities will also be investigated to gain a more informed understanding of the absence of disability representation in CSE (Neillie et al. 2023). This will be concluded with insights into the measures that are taken to invest into teacher training for learners with disabilities in CSE provision.

3.3.1.International Debates

Miedema et al. (2020) assert that in recent years CSE has gained immense traction within the international community as it is regarded as an important tool in informing learners about their rights and sexual health while improving public health outcomes and contributing to sustainable development. International research suggests that youth with disabilities want meaningful relationships and desire sexual intimacy and to be sexually active (Brown et al., 2020). Many states are required by the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities to guarantee that individuals with disabilities can exercise their right to the best possible standard of health without facing discrimination, which includes, crucially, the provision of sexuality education (Michielsen & Brockschmidt, 2021). Learners with disabilities also have increased vulnerability to sexual ill-health. This includes increased risk of acquiring sexually transmitted infections, experiencing unplanned pregnancies and falling victim to sexual violence (Michielsen & Brockschmidt, 2021). Sexuality education is universally

recognised as a key strategy in mitigating these risks by empowering learners and with disabilities and enhancing their capacity to seek support. Sexuality education is especially important for many learners with disabilities as their needs exceed their peers without disabilities as they face disability-specific issues such as having to cope with reduced privacy (Michielsen & Brockschmidt, 2021).

Andreassen et al. (2024) found that good quality CSE aligns with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals such as good health and well-being, quality education, gender equality and peace, justice, and strong institutions. It is generally acknowledged that within Australia, vague curriculum guidelines have created barriers to the delivery of CSE for learners with disabilities similar to the policy documents widely accepted in South Africa (Andreassen et al., 2024). Goldfarb and Lieberman (2021, in Andreassen et al., 2024), inspected school-based CSE programmes across the USA and beyond and found that quality CSE served as a gateway for increased inclusion of sexual diversity, healthy relationships, and social and emotional learning. The potential of good quality CSE is thus imperative regardless of disability status as it increases self-determination, independence and mental and physical health which has the power to combat numerous issues that learners with disabilities are vulnerable to such as family and domestic violence and child sexual abuse (Andreassen et al., 2024). The values accepted in the macrosystem through bodies such as the United Nations further emphasises the lack of cohesion between theory and practice as the potential of quality CSE is vast in its capacity to empower learners with disabilities, however, this potential is more often than not prevented from being realised in the meso- and microsystem as a result of vague curriculum guidelines and a lack of incentive to fund the improvement of policy documents (Andreassen et al., 2024; Bronfenbrenner, 1994).

International debates widely dictate that key barriers for learners with disability exist. These often being grounded in attitudinal constructs and stigma such as the misconception that learners with disabilities are either asexual or hypersexual and pathological which exacerbates the shame and stigma surrounding CSE provision for learners with disabilities (Andreassen et al., 2024). Lack of CSE for learners with disabilities has been identified as a key factor in contributing to this group being at increased risk of experiencing sexual violence. According to Goldman (2016, in Andreassen et al., 2024, p.831), "…the exclusion of people with disability from sexuality education defies logic and reduces the education and knowledge available to students". This once again highlights the Ecological Systems Theory as widely accepted stigmatisation on the macro-level in the culture of a society trickles down into the

mesosystem by inculcating these same attitudes in the classroom which negatively affects learners with disabilities in the microsystem as these learners' experiences are especially underscored by increased exposure to sexual violence (Andreassen et al., 2024; Bronfenbrenner, 1994).

This interaction between different systems through the Ecological Systems Theory is illustrated by numerous international studies (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). Holand-Hall and Quint (2017, in Michielsen & Brockschmidt, 2021, p.674) state, "While sexuality education can support children and young people with disabilities in their sexual development and contribute to their health and wellbeing, many do not receive sexuality education that is oriented to their needs and development, promotes a positive image of sexuality, or aims to empower them". It is thus clear that international debates also value the power of CSE yet experience some of the same barriers that learners with disabilities experience in South Africa. This is illustrated through numerous studies across the globe such as one conducted in the United States of America and similar Western societies where Gray et al. (2017, in Michielsen & Brockschmidt, 2021) found that women with cerebral palsy were less likely to receive sexuality education from their parents in comparison to a nationally represented sample. This overall lack of sexuality education for learners with disabilities includes a glaring gap in disability-specific sexuality education. Verhoef (2015, in Michielsen & Brockschmidt, 2021) found in a study in the Netherlands of persons with spina bifida that fewer than a quarter received sexuality education specific to their disability such as an increased risk of allergy to latex products which calls for scoping information on latex-free contraception methods.

CSE is increasingly recognized globally as a crucial tool for improving sexual health and public health outcomes, particularly for learners with disabilities, who are more vulnerable to sexual health risks such as STIs, unplanned pregnancies, and sexual violence (Michielsen & Brockschmidt, 2021). Despite international policies like the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which mandates the provision of sexuality education, learners with disabilities often face significant barriers to receiving appropriate CSE. These barriers include stigma, attitudinal constructs (such as misconceptions about asexuality or hypersexuality), and vague curriculum guidelines that limit the effectiveness of CSE (Andreassen et al., 2024). Studies from various countries, including the US and Australia, reveal that despite the potential benefits of CSE, such as increased inclusion and improved self-determination, learners with disabilities are frequently excluded or underserved (Goldfarb & Lieberman, 2021; Andreassen et al., 2024). Disability-specific sexuality education is also notably lacking, with many learners

missing out on information that addresses their unique needs (Verhoef, 2015). This systemic exclusion underscores the importance of addressing these gaps in the education system, as highlighted by the Ecological Systems Theory, which emphasises how cultural attitudes at the macro level influence learners' experiences at the microsystem level (Bronfenbrenner, 1994).

On the micro-level, this can manifest in learners' day-to-day experiences, for example, being denied access to classroom discussions on relationships or being excluded from puberty education because teachers assume it is 'irrelevant' to them. On the meso-level, parents and schools may reinforce these exclusions when caregivers resist collaboration with educators on sexuality topics, further limiting learners' access to consistent messages. The exo-level, which encompasses broader systems like district education offices and NGOs, influences learners when training opportunities for teachers are not prioritised or when NGOs struggle to secure sustainable funding to implement inclusive sexuality education programmes. Finally, the macro-level perpetuates stigma through cultural norms and religious ideologies that view sexuality as taboo, which trickles down into classrooms and family settings.

Summary of key inputs for international debates:

Author(s)	Key Inputs/Contributions
Andreassen et al. (2024)	Emphasises the benefits of good quality CSE in improving health, well-being, and inclusion, but also highlights barriers like vague curriculum guidelines that limit its effectiveness for learners with disabilities.
Brown et al. (2020)	Discusses how youth with disabilities desire meaningful relationships, sexual intimacy, and to be sexually active, underscoring the need for inclusive CSE.
Bronfenbrenner (1994)	Introduces Ecological Systems Theory, showing how societal attitudes and systems at multiple levels influence learners' access to CSE and their development.
Goldfarb & Lieberman (2021, in Michielsen & Brockschmidt, 2021)	Found that quality CSE programs can promote sexual diversity, healthy relationships, and social-emotional learning, benefiting all learners, including those with disabilities.

Gray et al. (2017, in Michielsen & Brockschmidt, 2021)	Found that women with cerebral palsy were less likely to receive sexuality education from their parents compared to a nationally representative sample, highlighting disparities in access to CSE.
Holand-Hall & Quint (2017, in Michielsen & Brockschmidt, 2021)	Asserted that many children with disabilities do not receive sexuality education tailored to their needs, impacting their health and well-being.
Michielsen & Brockschmidt (2021)	Highlighted the increased vulnerability of learners with disabilities to sexual ill-health and violence, stressing the need for disability-specific CSE.
Miedema et al. (2020)	Discusses the international traction of CSE as a tool for promoting sexual rights and health while highlighting the importance of inclusive education.
Verhoef (2015, in Michielsen & Brockschmidt, 2021)	Found that fewer than a quarter of individuals with spina bifida received sexuality education specific to their disability, underscoring gaps in tailored CSE.

3.3.2. Understanding Disability

From my own experiences of teaching as a locum teacher at a special needs school in Randburg, Johannesburg, I was able to personally experience the lack of understanding of disability that debilitated learners further from receiving CSE that truly acted to enhance these young people's SRH. For instance, when a learner with autism asked about consent in romantic relationships, the topic was dismissed as "not age-appropriate" despite the learner being 13 years old. In another case, a physically disabled learner who identified as LGBTQ+ was excluded from classroom discussions on relationships altogether, with the assumption that their sexuality was "irrelevant."Vanwesenbeeck (2020, p.1) argues that sexuality education plays an indispensable role in adolescents' and young people's lives with their "whole being in the world" being fundamentally laced with sexuality. This manifests in some of the central aspects of being a human such as sexual behaviours, gender identities, sexual orientations, and reproduction

(Vanwesenbeeck, 2020). However, the understanding of disability in relation to many of these pivotal aspects of being a human being remains at a rudimentary degree for teachers and parents at a micro-level as well as states and formal education bodies at a macro-level (Bronfenbrenner, 1994; Vanwesenbeeck, 2020). From my encounters, these learners were immensely diverse in terms of their sexual orientations and needs yet they were often subjected to an 'abstinence only until marriage model (AOUM)' with the topic of SRH often being excluded from the curriculum all together (Vanwesenbeeck, 2020). One of the main reasons for this form of discrimination stems from a misunderstanding of disability and the sexuality of learners at special needs schools on a multi-level scale with sexuality education hardly attempting to keep pace with the ongoing evolving social context in which these learners function and develop in the chronosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1994; Vanwesenbeeck, 2020). However, the understanding of disability in relation to many of these pivotal aspects of being a human being remains at a rudimentary degree for teachers and parents at a micro-level, for school management practices and peer relationships at the meso-level, for district curriculum developers and social service agencies at the exo-level, as well as states and formal education bodies at a macro-level (Bronfenbrenner, 1994; Vanwesenbeeck, 2020).

Disability types include but are not limited to physical disability, intellectual disability, hearing, and vision impairment. The type of disability and level of support allocated to each learner determines the type of special school required by learners with special needs in South Africa (Directive Inclusive Education, 2014, in Mahlaule et al., 2024). Special schools are established to provide appropriate support for low, medium, and high levels of needs of learners (Mahlaule et al., 2024). However, Mahlaule et al. (2024, p.1) argue, "Children with disability experience barriers to learning, such as inaccessible curricula, an unsupportive teaching environment, as well as difficulties with understanding the language and strategies used." Disability should not be viewed as a barrier that hinders educational attainment, rather systems should be inaugurated that support learners with special needs on the macro-level (Hayes & Bulat, 2017, in Mahlaule et al., 2024). Matshedisho (2010) further asserts that insufficient information exists regarding the availability and effectiveness of educational supports and how these supports might be used to allow the successful access and performance of learners with disabilities within postsecondary educational and eventual employment environments. This reiterates the point that not only is educational support as an umbrella term extremely underresearched and underfunded within South Africa, but educational support aimed solely at enriching and

progressing learners with disabilities' understandings of CSE and their SRH is even further neglected at a macro-level (Matshedisho, 2010).

The most prominent way to enhance the current provision of CSE for learners with disabilities at special needs schools in South Africa must be led with an incentive of transforming the ableist mindset that is often assumed on a micro-level by teachers, peers, and parents when confronted with the sexual needs of learners with disabilities but also at a macro-level by encouraging the incentives that stakeholders have in designing accessible and relevant CSE content for learners with disabilities in special needs schools. Chang (2004, in Matshedisho, 2010) contends that the implementation of the implicit incremental belief can enhance learners with disabilities' self-perception, especially when faced with situations that require problem-solving. These same problem-solving skills are also extremely relevant to the sexualities and sexual needs of learners as they will be confronted with scenarios that will require them to have an in-depth understanding of their SRH to make sound and safe decisions when they wish to pursue sexual relationships in the future (Chang, 2004, in Matshedisho, 2010). It has already been reiterated by authors such as Michielsen & Brockschmidt (2021), Kahonde and Johns (2022) and Chappell (2014), that learners with disabilities have the same desires to learn about their sexualities as their non-disabled counterparts with these authors emphasising the importance of empowering individuals with disabilities to advocate for their sexual and reproductive health rights while disrupting societal perceptions and stereotypes surrounding disability and sexuality, respectively. It is only once these societal perceptions of disability are disrupted that learners with disabilities at special needs schools in South Africa will have access to CSE that prohibits them from being excessively vulnerable to sexual crimes such as sexual abuse, unintended pregnancies, and sexually transmitted infections (Hanass-Hancock et al., 2018). It is of great concern that one the most vulnerable populations in South Africa is being barred from equal access to resources that can be life-saving and extremely empowering as a result of misconceptions regarding the abilities of learners with disabilities at a multi-level degree (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). Crawford (2020) states that Ecological Systems Theory explains human development through the perspective of, "environmental interconnections and their impact on the force directly affecting psychological growth." (Crawford, 2020, p.1). Not only is this the deprivement of adequate resources discussing SRH with learners with disabilities affecting how they view themselves within the social systems in which they function but it also hinders their development to a degree that they will skip imperative steps that are needed to be taken in them transforming into informed and confident adults who are

able to problem solve and navigate issues that they face in the exploration of their sexualities (Chang, 2004, in Matshedisho, 2010; Chappell, 2014). The barriers that learners with disabilities face in receiving quality CSE inspected through the lens of Bronfenbrenner's (1994) Ecological Systems Theory thus highlights the importance of all systems working in a symbiotic relationship to transform the perceptions of the sexualities of learners with disability by enhancing our current understanding of disability while taking substantial steps to prevent these learners from experiencing psychological decay in their quest of becoming sexually informed and savvy adults (Crawford, 2020; Johns & Adnams, 2016).

A lack of understanding about disability hinders learners' access to comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) and sexual and reproductive health (SRH) information. Disability education remains underdeveloped at both micro (teachers, parents) and macro (state, educational bodies) levels, contributing to a limited and often abstinence-based approach to SRH. Learners with disabilities, who are diverse in sexual orientation and needs, face barriers such as inaccessible curricula and insufficient support. This emphasises the need to transform ableist mindsets and provide relevant, accessible CSE that empowers these learners to make informed decisions about their sexual health, while also challenging societal misconceptions about disability and sexuality. The application of Ecological Systems Theory suggests that improving CSE for learners with disabilities requires a collaborative approach across all societal levels to ensure their psychological and sexual development. At the meso-level, I observed how collaboration between parents and teachers frequently reinforced silence around SRH topics, as parents often requested that teachers "avoid talking about sex," which further restricted what could be taught in the classroom. At the macro-level, local education district offices provided little to no guidance on inclusive sexuality education for special needs schools, creating a gap between policy intentions and practical implementation.

Summary of key inputs for understanding disability:

Author(s)	Key inputs/contributions
Bronfenbrenner (1994)	Introduces Ecological Systems Theory, emphasising the need for systems to work together to support the sexual development of learners with disabilities.
Crawford (2020)	Explains how Ecological Systems Theory views human development through environmental interconnections, stressing the need for a supportive environment to address learners' SRH needs.

Hanass-Hancock et al. (2018)	Warns that a lack of CSE for learners with disabilities increases their vulnerability to sexual abuse, unintended pregnancies, and sexually transmitted infections.
Johns & Adnams (2016)	Highlight the importance of understanding disability within its ecological context to promote sexual development and empowerment for learners with disabilities.
Kahonde & Johns (2022)	Emphasise the importance of empowering learners with disabilities to advocate for their SRH rights, challenging societal stereotypes about disability and sexuality.
Mahlaule et al. (2024)	Discusses the barriers learners with disabilities face, such as inaccessible curricula and unsupportive environments, and stresses the importance of adequate support.
Matshedisho (2010)	Highlights the lack of research and funding for educational support aimed at learners with disabilities, particularly in sexual and reproductive health education.
Michielsen & Brockschmidt (2021), Chappell (2014)	Emphasise the importance of empowering learners with disabilities to advocate for their SRH rights, challenging societal stereotypes about disability and sexuality.
Vanwesenbeeck (2020)	Argues that sexuality education is vital for adolescents and highlights how disability is often misunderstood in relation to sexuality.

3.3.3.Disability Rights

Donohue and Bornman (2014) present concerning statistics when they state that in South Africa up to 70% of children of school-going age with disabilities do not attend school while of those that do, most participate in separate, “special” schools. It is also important to note that there is no consensus regarding what is classified as a disability in South Africa with this lack of clarity further impeding the rights of learners with disabilities to quality education and inadvertently CSE (Donohue & Bornman, 2014). This occurs in direct contradiction with The United Nations on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities’ goals of seeking to protect, promote, and ensure the full and equal enjoyment of all human rights by persons with disabilities (Department of Social Development, 2016). This includes the accelerated rollout of inclusive education that can enable learners with disabilities to participate effectively in a free society.

This lack of clarity regarding the nature of disability and the rights afforded to this group in terms of their education is further marred by the complex history of South Africa's education system. This has birthed a society that is in great disagreement regarding the needs of learners with disabilities when faced with topics such as the provision of effective CSE (Donohue & Bornman, 2014). Miedema et al. (2020) further contribute important insights regarding the conceptual wooliness that encapsulates CSE by drawing on McCormack's (2014, in Miedema et al., 2020, p.748) ideas on "ethical engagement with epistemologies" to highlight the fact that the conflicting politics of knowledge production through CSE often leads to certain groups' knowledges and experiences to be underscored or excluded, such as learners with disabilities, in the quest to establish equal rights to education for all through policies such as inclusive education. This lack of consensus regarding whose knowledges and experiences and muddling of epistemologies in South African education regarding the provision of CSE highlights the importance of macro-systems obtaining ethical agreements to prevent the current course on which CSE provision for learners with disabilities is headed, which is one that is blatantly obscuring and violating the rights afforded to learners with disabilities under paradigms such as inclusive education aims (Miedema et al., 2020).

The National Development Plan (NDP) also touches on numerous CSE related topics such as strongly recognising that people with disabilities are not a homogenous group but have differing sexualities that need to be addressed which further highlights the importance of bodies at a state, and macro-level recognising the complexities of disability and the myriad of epistemologies that will need to be considered to implement fulfilling and enriching CSE for learners with disabilities (Department of Social Development, 2016; McCormack, 2014, in Miedema et al., 2020). At the macrosystem level, decisions made by district officials and education departments often fail to allocate adequate funding and teacher training for CSE, which trickles down to classrooms where learners with disabilities are left unsupported. For example, locum and permanent teachers are rarely provided with specialised training on teaching CSE in accessible ways, which limits implementation in the microsystem. However, the normalisation of the rights afforded to learners with disabilities will ultimately start in the microsystem and mesosystem within familial and classroom relationships. A culture must be created at home and at special needs schools that normalises learners with disabilities' rights to receiving CSE as this will create a greater incentive for systems at a macro level to seriously consider how these learners' are being deprived of their rights under the constitution of South Africa (Bronfenbrenner, 1994; Donohue & Bornman, 2014).

Furthermore, the NDP recognises that sexual exploitation and abuse are rife among people with disabilities including a lack of autonomy to seek justice for these instances (Department of Social Development, 2016). They also importantly note that numerous programmes geared towards addressing sexual violence and abuse in the community fail to reach out to people with disabilities which once again highlights how the basic rights of learners with disabilities are not prioritised at a macro-level which seeps into systems operational in the microsystems and mesosystems within learners' immediate communities (Bronfenbrenner, 1994; Department of Social Development, 2016). Polat (2011, in Donohue & Bornman, 2014, p. 5) suggests, "that resources and improved infrastructure are necessary but not sufficient for inclusion and that changing attitudinal barriers among school professionals and in the wider community … is one of the essential aspects of making inclusive education happen in low-income countries". Meaningful contributions by adults and learners with disabilities in the school and community on micro-and meso-level is largely dependent on the cultural attitudes and values of South Africa's citizens in the macrosystem (Donohue & Bornman, 2014). In the microsystem, parental attitudes play a central role, with some parents continuing to believe their children are "asexual" or incapable of understanding CSE. In the mesosystem, the relationship between parents and teachers often leads to conflict when teachers attempt to include CSE, but parents resist on cultural or religious grounds. If the community continues to cultivate disregard and prejudice towards learners with disabilities and their rights to CSE, discriminatory practices will continue to be propagated at a multi-level degree in the country.

These cultural attitudes also give important insights into the large percentage of learners with disabilities who are deprived of meaningful CSE at special needs schools as parents with children with disabilities often view their children as uneducable while the financial expenditures surrounding enrolling children at special needs schools further demobilise a society that is already burdened by unemployment and economic difficulties (Donohue & Bornman, 2014). By studying the trends in disability rights in the country, a more intricate understanding can be obtained regarding the lack of provision made to equip quality CSE in combatting some of the common difficulties faced by learners with disabilities (Department of Social Development, 2016).

The lack of a clear definition of disability impedes access to quality education, including comprehensive sexuality education (CSE), contradicting the goals of the United Nations' Rights of Persons with Disabilities (Department of Social Development, 2016). The country's education system, influenced by a complex history, creates disagreements about how to provide

CSE for learners with disabilities, with some groups' needs being overlooked (Miedema et al., 2020). The National Development Plan (NDP) emphasises the need for inclusive CSE that recognises the diversity within the disability community and calls for cultural shifts at the micro and mesosystem levels, including families and schools, to normalize these learners' rights to CSE (Department of Social Development, 2016; Bronfenbrenner, 1994). However, issues like sexual exploitation and a lack of resources to address these concerns highlight how learners with disabilities are further marginalized (Department of Social Development, 2016). Overcoming attitudinal barriers in schools and the community is crucial for fostering inclusion and providing meaningful CSE (Polat, 2011, in Donohue & Bornman, 2014). At the macrosystem level, this is also evident in how police and healthcare systems are not adequately trained to support people with disabilities who report abuse, creating systemic barriers outside the immediate school and home environment.

Summary of key inputs for disability rights:

Author(s)	Key Inputs/Contributions
Bronfenbrenner (1994)	Introduces Ecological Systems Theory, emphasising the need for a collaborative approach to support learners' rights to CSE.
Department of Social Development (2016)	Highlights the need for inclusive education and the recognition of the diverse sexualities of people with disabilities. Identifies the lack of resources and programs addressing sexual abuse and exploitation in the disability community.
Donohue & Bornman (2014)	Discusses the lack of access to education and CSE for learners with disabilities, emphasising cultural and attitudinal barriers at multiple societal levels.
Miedema et al. (2020)	Explores the complex and conflicting politics of CSE, highlighting how certain groups, such as learners with disabilities, are excluded from knowledge production and educational policies.
Polat (2011, in Donohue & Bornman, 2014)	Argues that changing attitudinal barriers in schools and communities is essential for achieving inclusion and improving education for learners with disabilities.

3.3.4.CSE in CAPS and South African Schools

According to the Department of Basic Education, CSE information can delay sexual debut, increase safe sexual practice, decrease HIV and STI infections, decrease gender-based violence, and increase awareness of health and psychosocial services when it is accurate, age-appropriate, and culturally relevant (Department of Basic Education, 2019). Vanwesenbeeck et al. (2015) goes as far as to argue that valuable information contained in CSE can improve developing countries' such as South Africa's socioeconomic development as it supports adolescents in undergoing safe passage into adulthood to ensure a capacity for societal participation as it provides learners with necessary information about their bodies and sexuality to reduce cases of misinformation, shame and anxiety while improving their abilities to make safe and informed choices regarding their SRH. This is especially important in the context of learners with disabilities as they are afforded the same rights and privileges to be able to participate in society as other learners under the claims made in policy documents such as White Paper 6 (WP6) and the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) widely accepted in South African schools (Chaskalson, 2023). This once again highlights how regulatory bodies in the macrosystem of society has immense impact on the individual lives of learners with disabilities in special needs schools as the very basis on which education is shaped, fails in meeting the needs of all learners (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). South Africa's new constitution includes an explicit section on the rights of people with disabilities. WP6, as argued by the Department of Education (2001, in Donohue & Bornman, 2014, p.2), "outlined the government's new policies for a single, undivided education system for all learners, including those with disabilities, in the hopes that inclusive education would provide …a cornerstone of an integrated and caring society". However, the lack of clarity in policy as well as issues pertaining to the poor implementation of this policy through policy documents such as CAPS continues to deprive learners at special needs schools from receiving quality CSE (Donohue & Bornman, 2014). Mckinney and Swartz (2016) argue that there is now a shift towards an inclusive education approach which is based on the social model of disability. They report similar findings to those of Donohue and Bornman (2014) when stating that there is an immense gap between policy and practice when it comes to CSE provision for learners with disabilities as a progressive policy such as WP6 looks ideal on paper, it still fails to achieve its objectives due to a lack of implementation (Mckinney & Swartz, 2016).

While the approach to policy has improved drastically, there is a lack of a holistic approach being implemented within schools as, in theory, all learners with disabilities should be geared with resources to be able to thrive with other learners in a collaborative space within schools

(Mckinney & Swartz, 2016). As a result of the ineffective application of policies contained in WP6, a plethora of issues such as inaccessible buildings, lack of accessible transport, low skills levels amongst staff, and very high learner/staff ratios, the majority of learners with disabilities are still accommodated in special segregated schools (Mckinney & Swartz, 2016). This further emphasises the importance of viewing learners with disabilities' access to CSE at special needs schools through the Ecological Systems Theory as inclusive education's goals are far from being realised, as decisions made by schools in the mesosystem are directly influenced by policy documents in the macrosystem that are either ineffective or outdated leading to learners with disabilities facing immense barriers to equal CSE in their everyday lives (Bronfenbrenner, 1994; Chaskalson, 2023).

Chaskalson (2023) makes an imperative point when noting that WP6, even with its principles of non-discrimination and protection of human dignity, fails to make mention of or include workable strategies to incorporate SRH and CSE into the curriculum through CAPS and inadvertently the lives of learners with disabilities. This especially highlights how deprived learners with disabilities are of fundamental sexuality education as Vanwesenbeeck (2020, p.1) earlier stated that sexuality education plays an indispensable role in adolescents' and young people's lives with their "whole being in the world" being fundamentally laced with sexuality. Concerns regarding the inclusivity of the CSE curriculum for learners with differentiated needs are also raised by Ubisi (2021), who points out that the Department of Basic Education's CSE scripted lesson plans for teachers only make reference to disability in grade 10 through three activities. This means that not only is the quest of normalising disability within the culture and attitudes of a society and different school spaces thwarted by a lack of attention to the CSE and SRH needs of learners with disabilities but also that mainstream schools make it impossible for learners with disabilities to attend these institutions as they are barred from receiving pivotal information that can lead them to make safe and responsible choices in regards to their sexuality (Mckinney & Swartz, 2016; Ubisi, 2021). At the micro-level, this has a direct influence on students' daily experiences with peers, teachers, and family members, who often perpetuate stigma or lack the knowledge to provide guidance. At the chrono-level, learners' access to SRH education also shifts depending on broader societal changes, such as South Africa's evolving HIV/AIDS policies, gender equality movements, and ongoing reforms in inclusive education policy (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). Chaskalson (2023) further argues that numerous calls have been made to update WP6, however, a lack of incentive from the Department of Education further impedes learners with disabilities from receiving CSE that is relevant and applicable to

the constant changing social domain of the chronosystem in which they function (Bronfenbrenner, 1994).

Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) can significantly impact learners by delaying sexual debut, increasing safe sexual practices, and reducing HIV/STI infections when it is accurate, age-appropriate, and culturally relevant (Department of Basic Education, 2019). Vanwesenbeeck et al. (2015) argue that CSE can also boost socioeconomic development in countries like South Africa by providing adolescents, including those with disabilities, with necessary information to navigate adulthood safely. Despite policies like White Paper 6 (WP6) and the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) supporting inclusive education, a gap between policy and practice persists, leaving learners with disabilities without adequate CSE (Donohue & Bornman, 2014; Mckinney & Swartz, 2016). This gap is exacerbated by issues such as inaccessible facilities, high staff-to-learner ratios, and ineffective implementation of inclusive education policies (Mckinney & Swartz, 2016). Chaskalson (2023) and Ubisi (2021) emphasize the failure of WP6 to include clear strategies for incorporating SRH education, with minimal reference to disability in the CSE curriculum. The lack of relevant CSE for learners with disabilities is a critical issue, preventing them from making informed and safe decisions about their sexuality and exacerbating their marginalization in the educational system (Bronfenbrenner, 1994).

Summary of key inputs for CSE in CAPS and South African schools:

Author(s)	Key Inputs/Contributions
Bronfenbrenner (1994)	Introduces Ecological Systems Theory, emphasizing how systems at multiple levels affect learners' access to CSE and their development.
Chaskalson (2023)	Highlights that WP6 fails to provide practical strategies for integrating SRH and CSE into the curriculum, which limits access for learners with disabilities.
Department of Basic Education (2019)	Argues that accurate, age-appropriate, and culturally relevant CSE can reduce sexual risks and improve health outcomes, including for learners with disabilities.
Donohue & Bornman (2014)	Discusses the gap between policy and practice in South Africa's education system, which deprives learners with disabilities of quality CSE.

Mckinney & Swartz (2016)	Critique the gap between the inclusive education policies and their actual implementation, highlighting barriers like inaccessible facilities and high staff-to-learner ratios.
Ubisi (2021)	Points out that CSE lesson plans for learners with disabilities in South Africa are insufficient, with disability only briefly mentioned in Grade 10, hindering inclusive sexual education.
Vanwesenbeeck et al. (2015)	Argues that CSE plays a crucial role in improving socioeconomic development by helping adolescents, including those with disabilities, make informed choices regarding their sexuality.

3.3.5.Attitudes from Stakeholders

According to Brown et al. (2020), when young adults with disabilities grow from childhood to adulthood, service tensions about how they express their sexuality become more apparent because of worries about the dangers of exploitation versus the right to intimacy and relationships. Chappell (2014) notes that a large body of exploratory material is available relating to the sexual identities of non-disabled learners in South Africa, however, very little is known about learners with disabilities and how they go about constructing their sexual identities. This stems from complications in the macrosystem as beliefs and attitudes surrounding learners with disabilities' SRH needs, often influence the values of teachers and parents on a micro-and meso-level as Carpenter et al. (2023) and Khau (2022) explain that educators hold negative attitudes in relation to teaching CSE to learners with disabilities and generally employ a pedagogy of discomfort while parents maintain indifference toward it as they believe that their children with disabilities will never engage in sexual activity (Kamaludin et al., 2022). In a study conducted by Kahonde and Johns (2022, p.5) of 27 participants with intellectual disabilities in Cape Town, they found that many of the participants' responses indicated that sexual intimacy was discouraged by parents and service providers with one participant stating that he did not like talking about topics such as sex because his parents never talk about such things with him.

Additionally, research (Carpenter et al., 2023) indicates that adolescents and young people with disabilities lack access to the correct information regarding sexuality from their parents, caregivers, or peers. In the absence of quality sex education in special needs schools that can successfully accommodate learners with disabilities, the responsibility often falls on parents who are ill-equipped to deliver this information (Neille et al., 2023). Ballan (2001, in Neille et

al., 2023, p.4) finds, “parents may suppress their children’s sexuality, and thus fail to equip them with the knowledge to deal appropriately with the sexual experiences they will encounter”. Parental overprotection has been identified as one of the main barriers that prevents learners with disabilities from accessing information about sex, sexuality and sexual health as parents are worried about their children’s ability to appropriately express their sexual impulses in fear of sexual abuse which ultimately deprives learners with disabilities of their sexual rights and freedoms (Neille et al., 2023). Parents, who are key stakeholders in their children’s sexuality education, are therefore influenced by these widely held beliefs and attitudes in the macrosystem regarding CSE provision for learners with disabilities, which ultimately has bi-directional influences regarding how these learners view their sex lives and sexuality in the microsystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1994).

These misconceptions in the macro-system regarding CSE provision for learners with disabilities also come into play in the mesosystem within the classroom and within micro-level relationships between educators and learners (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). Educators also often hold negative attitudes about CSE and the intersection of disability and sexuality and may fear possible repercussions due to widely accepted community norms regarding CSE, sexuality, and disability in the macrosystem. The attitude of discomfort regarding CSE provision for learners with disabilities is emphasised in a study conducted by Hanass-Hancock et al. (2018) through cross-sectional questionnaires and in-depth interviews with a diverse set of educators regarding their experiences implementing CSE for learners with disabilities. Some comments included negative judgment of sexual activity with educators assuming an ‘abstinence only until marriage model’ (AOUM), reiterating how learners should have a changed mindset and “realise that they have done something wrong” when engaging in sexual activities. This includes educators drawing attention to “babies that nobody loves” or having learners be “more responsible” i.e. not engaging in sexual activity at all (Hanass-Hancock et al., 2018, p.114; Vanwesenbeeck, 2020). These comments create further misconceptions regarding the sexuality of learners with disabilities as they associate it with something that is “wrong” which means an immense shift is required in educators’ attitudes so that they are able to reach a point where they can openly discuss matters such as consent and healthy sexual relationships rather than labelling all sexual behaviour as negative and irresponsible (Hanass-Hancock et al., 2018, p.114).

Khau (2022) further adds to this argument surrounding the numerous stakeholders in CSE for learners with disabilities by stating that CSE is generally not perceived in a positive light by

stakeholders such as government and religious leaders who believe it encourages promiscuity and a "laissez-faire" attitude while labelling sexuality as a taboo (Khau, 2022). Myths, stereotypes, and negative attitudes in the macrosystem towards disability have been found to heighten learners with disabilities' risk of sexual abuse within the South African context (Kahonde & Johns, 2022). In South Africa, where Christianity and other religious traditions heavily influence public discourse, this often results in resistance to implementing CSE in schools (Francis & DePalma, 2014). Such resistance is rooted in the belief that sexuality education undermines cultural and religious values, and consequently, many policies and curricula are developed or resisted through the lens of religious morality rather than inclusive rights-based frameworks (Ngabaza et al., 2016).

These intersections between religion and education have material consequences for learners with disabilities. Myths, stereotypes, and negative attitudes in the macrosystem towards disability have been found to heighten learners with disabilities' risk of sexual abuse within the South African context (Kahonde & Johns, 2022). This is exacerbated when religious ideologies perpetuate silence around sexuality, creating gaps in learners' knowledge and leaving them more vulnerable to exploitation. Johns and Adnams (2016) argue that the reluctance of prominent stakeholders, influenced by these religious and cultural ideologies, has contributed to the scarcity of programmes or resources for CSE targeting learners with disabilities. Instead, the bulk of meaningful efforts to provide SRH education for these learners fall on small-scale organisations, particularly non-governmental organisations (NGOs), which often lack sustainable funding and systemic reach.

Johns and Adnams (2016) argue that these attitudes from prominent stakeholders have contributed to the fact that South Africa has few available programmes or resources for CSE for learners with disabilities which often means that the commitment of individuals within small-scale organisations, such non-governmental organisations (NGOs), reflect the majority of the efforts made to educate these learners regarding their sexuality. It is thus pertinent that the influence of the overwhelmingly negative attitudes of the main stakeholders involved in possibly realising a functional and relevant CSE programme for learners with disabilities within special needs schools, are indoctrinated by the beliefs and attitudes widely accepted in the macrosystem which leads to learners with disabilities becoming increasingly vulnerable in their relationships on a micro-scale in their everyday lives as they are forced to obtain partial, inconsistent, and skewed views regarding sexuality from unreliable learning sources such as television, magazines, and pornography (Bronfenbrenner, 1994; Whittle & Butler, 2018).

In South Africa, limited research exists on how learners with disabilities construct their sexual identities, and educators and parents often hold negative attitudes towards sexuality education (CSE) for these learners (Chappell, 2014; Carpenter et al., 2023; Khau, 2022). This stems from misconceptions in the macrosystem, where disability and sexuality are seen as taboo, influencing attitudes in the mesosystem and microsystem, particularly among parents and teachers (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). Parents, fearing sexual abuse, often suppress their children's sexuality and fail to provide essential sexual health information (Neille et al., 2023). Educators also exhibit discomfort with teaching CSE, reinforcing negative stereotypes of learners with disabilities as sexually inappropriate (Hanass-Hancock et al., 2018). These barriers, shaped by societal attitudes, contribute to a lack of appropriate CSE resources, leaving learners with disabilities vulnerable to sexual ill-health and abuse (Kahonde & Johns, 2022; Johns & Adnams, 2016).

The broader influence of religious ideologies within the macrosystem indoctrinates schools, caregivers, and policymakers with negative attitudes that trickle down to the microsystem, shaping daily interactions between learners, teachers, and families. This resistance not only delays the development of functional and contextually relevant CSE programmes in special needs schools but also leaves learners with disabilities to piece together fragmented and often unreliable information from alternative sources such as television, magazines, or pornography (Bronfenbrenner, 1994; Whittle & Butler, 2018). Such sources provide partial, inconsistent, and skewed views of sexuality, further deepening learners' vulnerability. Ultimately, the intersection of religious ideologies with educational practices and policy resistance underscores how deeply rooted societal values in the macrosystem limit the accessibility of inclusive and empowering CSE, thereby perpetuating cycles of exclusion and risk for learners with disabilities.

Summary of key inputs for attitudes of stakeholders:

Author(s)	Key Inputs/Contributions
Ballan (2001, in Neille et al., 2023)	Parents often suppress their children's sexuality, failing to equip them with necessary knowledge about sex and sexuality.
Carpenter et al. (2023)	Found that educators hold negative attitudes towards teaching CSE to learners with disabilities, and parents are often indifferent or uninformed.

Chappell (2014)	Noted a gap in research regarding how learners with disabilities in South Africa construct their sexual identities.
Hanass-Hancock et al. (2018)	Found that educators often associate sexual activity with learners with disabilities as "wrong" and emphasized the need for a shift towards positive sexual education.
Johns & Adnams (2016)	Argued that negative attitudes from key stakeholders in South Africa have contributed to the lack of CSE resources for learners with disabilities.
Kahonde & Johns (2022)	Found that parents and service providers discourage sexual intimacy in learners with intellectual disabilities, impacting their sexual education.
Kamaludin et al. (2022)	Highlighted that parents believe their children with disabilities will never engage in sexual activity, leading to indifference towards their sexuality education.
Khau (2022)	Argued that CSE for learners with disabilities is viewed negatively by government and religious leaders, contributing to stigma around disability and sexuality.
Neille et al. (2023)	Found that parental overprotection prevents learners with disabilities from accessing sexual education, impacting their sexual rights.
Whittle & Butler (2018)	Stressed that learners with disabilities often obtain distorted views on sexuality from unreliable sources like television and pornography.

3.3.6.Training Provisions for Teachers

To successfully implement inclusion anywhere in the world, educators must have adequate training, sufficient support, and positive attitudes (Frankel, Gold & Ajodhia-Andrews, 2010, in Donohue & Bornman, 2014). The UNESCO report on sexuality education in Southern Africa stipulates that participatory teaching methods present a significant gap that needs to be addressed through sufficient training in the delivery of CSE (Johns & Adnams, 2016). Despite inclusive education policies, South Africa predominantly provides education to learners with disabilities in special needs schools. This means that teachers are often teaching across subjects hence all teachers are necessary for implementing quality sexuality education (Carpenter et al., 2023). Carpenter et al. (2023, p.679) argues, "…when assessing educators' likelihood of implementing CSE, we need to evaluate their CSE teaching intention, skills, and environmental conditions under which they are supposed to teach CSE".

The silence surrounding the sexuality of learners with disabilities is marked by educators struggling to engage with the topic while having little opportunity to reexamine their beliefs regarding CSE provision for learners with disabilities. Educators commonly feel inhibited by 'social norms' that prevent them from providing information about sexual behaviour to learners with disabilities (Johns & Adnams, 2016). This reiterates how widely accepted beliefs and social norms in the macrosystem inhibits teachers from reexamining their own beliefs that are translated into everyday classroom practice in the meso-and micro-system (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). Research of educators at special needs schools with learners with disabilities in Southern and Eastern Africa indicated that these educators often feel ill-equipped to provide CSE in an accessible manner to learners with disabilities (Carpenter et al., 2023). A more positive attitude towards sexuality education for learners with disabilities is near impossible to obtain without a whole school approach. There is a dire need for increased leadership from ruling bodies such as principals and the education department to prioritise and formalise sexuality education for learners with disabilities in relation to their rights outlined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and South African law, especially in a country that is plagued with high levels of sexual abuse and HIV infections (Johns & Adnams, 2016). This further reveals how the Ecological Systems Theory can be used to analyse how actors in the macro-and mesosystem such as ruling bodies and principals in the managerial sector's decisions regarding CSE provision for learners with disabilities has a resounding impact on teachers' confidence in skills regarding their ability to provide quality CSE for learners with disabilities (Bronfenbrenner, 1994).

A recent study based in special needs schools in South Africa found that teachers presented a supportive attitude in relation to CSE provision for learners with disabilities but tended to focus on information related to bodily hygiene, body development, self-respect, abstinence, and the need to use a condom but typically avoid topics such as sexual behaviour, contraception, sexual orientation and how to use condoms (Johns & Adnams, 2016). Educators who are passionate regarding CSE for learners with disabilities typically lack the confidence, skills, or resources to present information in an accessible manner (Johns & Adnams, 2016). This convenes with a study conducted by Chirawu et al. (2014) in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, that found that while teachers recognised the importance of CSE for learners with disabilities, they often lacked the necessary knowledge, skills, and resources to effectively deliver inclusive and tailored programs (Chirawu et al., 2014). The lack of

initiative from ruling bodies in the school environment has bi-directional influences on the competence of teachers attempting to teach CSE to learners with disabilities on a micro-level as they feel ill-equipped to tackle pivotal SRH concepts without the support from proper training programmes being devised at a meso-and macro-level (Bronfenbrenner, 1994).

According to the National Development Plan, preparing educators and professionals at all levels to instruct learners with disabilities is a top priority. All education and training programs must incorporate training on disability awareness, the use of appropriate and enhanced alternative modes, a variety of educational methods and formats, educational strategies and resources that can assist learners with disabilities, and training on disability rights awareness (Department of Social Development, 2016). In order to maximize learner participation, White Paper 6 also outlines criteria for inclusive education training that center on enabling educational structures, systems, and learning needs that meet the needs of all learners, recognizing and respecting differences, and altering attitudes, behavior, teaching methods, curricula, and environments to meet the needs of all learners. White Paper 6 was designed to transform the South African education system by constructing an integrated system for all learners with the goal of having no distinction between mainstream schools and special needs schools (Donohue & Bornman, 2014). This means using a curriculum that is flexible and suitable to the needs and abilities of all learners. This includes developing district-based support teams to provide systematic support for all teachers who require this and strengthening the skills and knowledge of teachers to be able to cope with an increased level of diversity in terms of ability in their classrooms (Muthukrishna & Schoeman, 2000, in Donohue & Bornman, 2014). Policy documents and the curriculum at a macro-level thus further impact how policies are enacted at the meso-level as a lack of mobilization from ruling bodies impacts how effective district-based support teams are for teachers teaching CSE to learners with disabilities which ultimately means that these teachers are left to grapple with extremely abstract and difficult topics on their own when they are relayed to learners within the classroom in the micro-system (Bronfenbrenner, 1994).

To successfully implement inclusive education and quality CSE for learners with disabilities, educators require adequate training, support, and positive attitudes (Frankel et al., 2010, in Donohue & Bornman, 2014). However, many teachers in South Africa, particularly those in special needs schools, feel ill-equipped to teach sexuality education (Carpenter et al., 2023). This is exacerbated by societal norms and attitudes that inhibit educators from addressing the

topic of sexuality (Johns & Adnams, 2016), and the lack of institutional support, as leadership often neglects to prioritize sexuality education for learners with disabilities (Johns & Adnams, 2016). Research indicates that while teachers are supportive of CSE, they typically focus on basic topics like hygiene and abstinence, avoiding more complex subjects such as sexual behavior and contraception (Johns & Adnams, 2016). This gap in training and resources highlights the need for a comprehensive, whole-school approach to CSE that includes leadership and support from governing bodies. Policies such as White Paper 6 stress the importance of inclusive education and the need for district-based support teams to assist teachers in addressing the diverse needs of their learners, yet these initiatives are often poorly implemented (Department of Social Development, 2016; Donohue & Bornman, 2014). Ultimately, the lack of adequate support and training at the macro- and meso-levels leaves teachers to handle complex topics without proper resources, affecting the quality of CSE in the classroom (Bronfenbrenner, 1994).

Students' experiences with sexuality education are shaped by multiple interconnected ecological levels. At the microsystem, direct interactions with peers, teachers, and parents influence learners' self-esteem and engagement in class (Bronfenbrenner, 1994; Johns & Adnams, 2016). The mesosystem involves links between these immediate environments, such as communication between parents and teachers or coordination with local health services, which affect the effectiveness of CSE delivery (Chirawu et al., 2014; Carpenter et al., 2023). This includes indirect factors like school district policies, community resources, and teacher professional development, which impact teachers' competence and confidence (Department of Social Development, 2016; Donohue & Bornman, 2014). The macrosystem encompasses broader societal norms, cultural beliefs, and legislation, such as South African disability rights laws and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, shaping expectations and resources across all levels (Johns & Adnams, 2016; Frankel et al., 2010, in Donohue & Bornman, 2014). Finally, the chronosystem reflects changes over time including evolving policies, social attitudes, historical inequalities, and public health crises like HIV/AIDS that influence both teachers' readiness and learners' experiences (Bronfenbrenner, 1994; Carpenter et al., 2023).

Summary of key inputs for training provisions for teachers:

Author(s)	Key Inputs/Contributions

Carpenter et al. (2023)	Emphasise the need for teachers to have adequate skills, intention, and support to implement CSE. Highlight that many educators feel ill-equipped to teach CSE due to a lack of training and resources.
Chirawu et al. (2014)	Found that while teachers recognise the importance of CSE for learners with disabilities, they lack the necessary knowledge, skills, and resources to deliver inclusive and tailored programs.
Department of Social Development (2016)	Stated that preparing educators with appropriate training on disability awareness and CSE is a top priority, as outlined in the National Development Plan.
Donohue & Bornman (2014)	Discuss the importance of inclusive education and the need for policies like White Paper 6 to support diverse learners, though they argue implementation is often ineffective.
Frankel, Gold & Ajodhia-Andrews (2010, in Donohue & Bornman, 2014)	Assert that successful inclusion requires adequate educator training, support, and positive attitudes.
Johns & Adnams (2016)	Found that educators are generally supportive of CSE but focus more on hygiene and abstinence, avoiding topics like sexual behavior and contraception. Emphasized the need for stronger leadership and institutional support for CSE.
Muthukrishna & Schoeman (2000, in Donohue & Bornman, 2014)	Highlight the importance of district-based support teams to assist teachers in adapting to diverse classrooms, especially in inclusive education settings.
White Paper 6 (2016)	Outlines the need for inclusive education that recognizes and respects differences and adapts teaching methods to meet the needs of all learners, aiming for no distinction between mainstream and special needs schools.

3.4.Conclusion

In conclusion, this literature review centered on the themes of understanding disability, disability rights, CSE in CAPS and South African schools, international debates, attitudes from stakeholders, and training provisions for teachers highlights that learners with disabilities struggle with a range of issues that all have bi-directional influences on one another through the lens of Brenfrenbronner's Ecological Systems Theory functioning on a micro-, meso-, chrono-, and macrolevel degree (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). Not only are learners with disabilities deprived of their rights and freedoms to quality CSE and SRH resources, but they are also experiencing the effects of misconceptions and widely accepted beliefs surrounding the relationship between sexuality and disability that function broadly across all spectrums of the Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1994; Donohue & Bornman, 2014; Kahonde & Johns, 2022). It is thus apparent that if state-constructed policies such as inclusive education and White Paper 6 wish to reach their intended goals, large- and small-scale changes will have to be enacted promptly from parties such as governing bodies at a national scale, district, and managerial support teams at the mesosystem, updated and relevant policy documents in the chronosystem as well as the complete reexamination of misconstrued attitudes and beliefs in the microsystem from family members, immediate communities and teachers (Bronfenbrenner, 1994).

Chapter 4

Research Findings

4.1.Introduction

The myth of asexuality 'strengthens the belief that people with intellectual disability should not be exposed to sexuality education'. The myth of hypersexuality strengthens the fear that teaching about sexuality will increase indiscriminate sexual behaviour (Johns & Adnams, 2016). Numerous misconceptions regarding the SRH needs of learners with disabilities with a lack of consensus in relation to defining disability continue to thrive within governing bodies creating policy documents on a macro-level. This ambiguity filters down into mesosystems such as familial and school settings while affecting learners with disabilities' personal lives as they continuously fall victim to poor implementation from a multitude of systems functioning in the Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). These findings will therefore explore how the information collected in the literature review can be synthesised in the

categories of the Ecological Systems Theory, namely the microsystem, mesosystem, chronosystem, and macrosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1994).

4.2.Findings

4.2.1.Microsystem

There is a significant lack of understanding among teachers, peers, and parents regarding the sexuality of learners with disabilities. This misunderstanding leads to inadequate or even exclusionary sexual and reproductive health (SRH) education. I observed this firsthand at a special needs school as learners with disabilities have diverse sexual orientations and needs, but often only receive limited or stigmatized sexuality education, such as the 'abstinence only until marriage model' (Vanwesenbeeck, 2020). For example, when a learner expressed curiosity about safe same-sex relationships, the teacher avoided the topic entirely, citing "inappropriateness," while another learner with an intellectual disability was told that sexual feelings were "not for people like you." My experience highlights how learners with disabilities are discriminated against and excluded from proper sexuality education due to prevailing misconceptions about disability and sexuality. This reflects an ableist mindset that hinders the learners' ability to access comprehensive SRH education that is both relevant and empowering (Bronfenbrenner, 1994; Vanwesenbeeck, 2020).

On a micro-level, teachers and caregivers often lack the knowledge and resources to provide inclusive and accessible sexuality education. This inadequate support system further marginalises these learners and fails to address their specific needs related to sexual health and rights (Mahlaule et al., 2024). This is accompanied with an emphasis on the scarcity of educational resources and awareness surrounding the sexuality of learners with disabilities, leading to missed opportunities for these learners to receive the necessary tools and information to make informed decisions about their sexual health (Matshedisho, 2010). The attitude of parents toward their children with disabilities also presents a glaring issue. Many parents view their children as "uneducable," which contributes to their reluctance to enrol them in special needs schools or to advocate for their right to receive education, including sexuality education. This perception creates a barrier to ensuring that learners with disabilities receive the support they need to develop knowledge and skills related to sexual and reproductive health (Donohue & Bornman, 2014). Parents' negative views on the capabilities of their children reinforce the cycle of exclusion from education.

Learners with disabilities face tensions around the expression of their sexuality as they grow, with concerns about exploitation versus their right to intimacy and relationships. This struggle stems from the challenge of navigating their sexual identity and the social attitudes surrounding it (Brown et al., 2020). Parents' suppression of sexuality and reluctance to discuss topics related to sex leaves many learners with disabilities ill-informed about their sexual health and relationships. One participant in the Kahonde and Johns (2022) study reported being discouraged from talking about sex because of their parents' refusal to engage in such conversations, demonstrating how the family dynamic limits access to crucial sexuality education. Learners with disabilities lack access to adequate and tailored CSE from parents, caregivers, or peers. Many parents suppress their children's sexuality or do not feel equipped to provide appropriate information (Neille et al., 2023; Ballan, 2001, in Neille et al., 2023). This leads to a lack of preparation for learners to navigate their sexual health and make informed decisions about their relationships and bodies. Overprotection by parents further emphasise these micro-level findings as this leads to the deprivation of their sexual rights and freedoms, resulting in the mismanagement of sexuality and potential vulnerability to sexual exploitation (Neille et al., 2023).

An urgent shift of perspective is desperately needed at the micro-level—particularly from teachers, peers, and parents—toward recognizing and respecting the sexual needs and rights of learners with disabilities. This shift is crucial for ensuring that learners can access education that empowers them to make informed decisions regarding their sexuality and navigate sexual relationships safely (Chang, 2004; Michielsen & Brockschmidt, 2021; Kahonde & Johns, 2022; Chappell, 2014). Teachers, school professionals, and the broader educational community contribute to the micro-level challenges learners with disabilities face. The literature review suggests that attitudinal barriers among school professionals and in the wider community are a major obstacle to inclusion and meaningful education for these learners (Polat, 2011, in Donohue & Bornman, 2014). When teachers and school staff fail to recognize the rights of learners with disabilities to comprehensive sexuality education, it results in exclusionary practices that deny them access to critical SRH knowledge. These cultural attitudes shape the learning environment and contribute to the perpetuation of discrimination against learners with disabilities (Donohue & Bornman, 2014).

Furthermore, a micro-level finding that affects the ability of learners with disabilities to access CSE is the financial burden of enrolling in special needs schools. The literature review notes that financial difficulties and unemployment in South Africa lead to many families being

unable to afford the costs of specialised education for their children with disabilities (Donohue & Bornman, 2014). This economic strain prevents learners from attending special needs schools, where they might otherwise receive tailored education, including comprehensive sexuality education, which could support their sexual and reproductive health needs. At the micro-level, learners with disabilities are particularly vulnerable to sexual exploitation and abuse. The literature review mentions that there is a lack of autonomy for these learners to seek justice for instances of abuse or sexual violence (Department of Social Development, 2016). This is compounded by the fact that many programs aimed at addressing sexual violence and abuse in the community do not reach people with disabilities, leaving them more exposed to harm. The lack of support structures within the home and school environments prevents these learners from accessing the protection and education they need to avoid such risks Bronfenbrenner, 1994; Department of Social Development, 2016).

Furthermore, educators feel ill-equipped and inhibited in delivering CSE to learners with disabilities, often due to a lack of training and resources (Johns & Adnams, 2016). This results in a focus on basic topics like hygiene and abstinence, while complex issues like sexual behavior, contraception, and sexual orientation are typically avoided (Carpenter et al., 2023). These limitations arise because educators lack confidence and skills to teach comprehensive, inclusive sexuality education (Chirawu et al., 2014). Despite their positive attitudes towards CSE, teachers often lack the confidence and necessary resources to provide accessible education on sexuality for learners with disabilities (Johns & Adnams, 2016). This includes a failure to engage in topics related to consent and healthy sexual relationships.

These findings also stress the importance of creating a supportive and inclusive classroom culture at the micro-level, where learners with disabilities' rights to receive CSE are normalised. When schools and classrooms are not inclusive and do not address the diverse needs of all learners, including those with disabilities, they fail to provide an environment conducive to learning about sexuality. Changing these cultural attitudes within schools and classrooms is crucial to ensuring that learners with disabilities are not excluded from receiving meaningful CSE (Bronfenbrenner, 1994; Donohue & Bornman, 2014). The literature review further foregrounds that learners with disabilities are often still placed in special segregated schools, which hinders their access to quality education, including CSE. The failure to implement policies like WP6 (White Paper 6) means that these learners are not included in the mainstream educational environment where inclusive CSE may be provided. Instead, these learners are often isolated in special schools where the resources and opportunities for comprehensive

education on sexual and reproductive health (SRH) are severely limited. The school environment plays a significant role in either enabling or restricting access to CSE for learners with disabilities (Mckinney & Swartz, 2016).

Summary of key areas in microsystem:

Key area	Challenges	Consequences	Solutions
Teachers & Education	Lack of training & resources, fear of addressing sexuality topics, attitudinal barriers.	Inadequate CSE, denial of rights, limited discussions on consent.	Provide training, equip with resources, foster inclusive attitudes.
Parents & Caregivers	Overprotection, reluctance to discuss sex, perception of disability as a barrier.	Limited home education, increased vulnerability, suppressed identity.	Encourage parental involvement, raise awareness, provide support.
Learners with Disabilities	Lack of access to tailored CSE, barriers in expressing sexuality, vulnerability to exploitation.	Inability to make informed decisions, lack of knowledge, psychological struggles.	Develop accessible CSE, promote autonomy, empower learners.
Educational Environment	Segregation in special schools, failure to implement inclusive policies, financial constraints.	Restricted access to CSE, lack of integration, exclusion from mainstream education.	Implement inclusive policies, integrate CSE in all schools, increase funding.
General Societal Attitudes	Misconceptions about disability & sexuality, ableist mindsets.	Discrimination, exclusion, reinforcement of stigma.	Advocacy for rights, shift in cultural attitudes, legal protections.

4.2.2.Mesosystem

The meso-level findings indicate a strong disconnect between the various systems influencing the learners with disabilities' sexuality education. Teachers, parents, and caregivers often lack a shared understanding of how to address the sexual and reproductive health needs of learners with disabilities. This lack of collaboration and communication prevents the development of a coherent, inclusive, and supportive environment for learners with disabilities to learn about SRH (Bronfenbrenner, 1994; Vanwesenbeeck, 2020). For example, my observations point to an "ableist mindset" that persists within families and schools, hindering the development of appropriate sexuality education programs. The meso-level environment also includes peer groups and families, both of which often reinforce misconceptions and negative attitudes toward the sexuality of learners with disabilities. As noted in the literature review, peer interactions and family attitudes frequently limit or entirely exclude discussions around SRH, contributing to a more harmful or stigmatized environment for learners. These social dynamics play a crucial role in shaping how learners perceive their own sexual rights and bodies (Chang, 2004, in Matshedisho, 2010; Vanwesenbeeck, 2020).

These findings further emphasise how schools and families often fail to align their efforts in providing sexuality education to learners with disabilities. While special needs schools might be focused on academic and developmental support, there is a distinct lack of resources and trained personnel to deliver comprehensive sexuality education. Families, who are the primary support system for learners, often have limited knowledge of how to address SRH issues or may not prioritise them. This disjointed support system fails to create a unified approach to equipping learners with the necessary knowledge about their sexuality (Mahlaule et al., 2024; Matshedisho, 2010). The broader community also plays a crucial role in providing necessary resources and support for sexuality education. These findings suggest that community resources, whether formal or informal, are underdeveloped or absent when it comes to sexuality education for learners with disabilities. The lack of engagement from community leaders and stakeholders exacerbates the issue, as they often fail to advocate for inclusive SRH programs and policies that address the needs of these learners (Hayes & Bulat, 2017, in Mahlaule et al., 2024; Matshedisho, 2010).

The interactions within the meso-system are also influenced by broader cultural and social norms surrounding disability and sexuality. In many cases, societal perceptions of disability restrict the way in which sexuality is discussed or taught, especially in communities where conservative views about sexuality are prevalent. This social context further perpetuates ableism and exclusion in both family and school settings (Crawford, 2020; Michielsen &

Brockschmidt, 2021). The literature review refers to the lack of clarity surrounding disability classifications and the associated rights of learners with disabilities in the South African education system. This issue highlights the relationship between local educational systems and the legal or policy frameworks intended to protect these learners' rights. The lack of clear policies regarding disability further complicates the provision of CSE, as there is no unified approach to how disability should be addressed in the curriculum (Donohue & Bornman, 2014). The interplay between these systems (e.g., local educational institutions and national disability rights policies) often leads to confusion and inconsistencies in how learners with disabilities access education and sexual health resources.

The financial burden associated with enrolling children in special needs schools is a major factor that impacts the ability of learners with disabilities to access quality education. Families in South Africa face significant economic difficulties due to high unemployment rates and financial strain, which can result in a lack of community support for special needs education. Schools and communities are interconnected in the sense that if local communities cannot provide sufficient economic resources or social support, families are less likely to enroll their children in special needs schools that would offer them CSE (Donohue & Bornman, 2014). Economic barriers within local communities limit the participation of learners with disabilities in the educational opportunities they need.

The literature review stresses the importance of aligning inclusive education goals with practical implementations at the school level. The mesosystem is evident in the interaction between the Department of Education and individual schools, where the goal of inclusive education is hindered by issues such as inaccessible school buildings, inadequate teacher training, and limited resources. The mesosystem plays a role in ensuring that different educational structures (local schools and broader educational policies) work together to create an environment where learners with disabilities are supported in receiving comprehensive education, including CSE. The failure of policy-to-practice alignment creates a fractured system where learners with disabilities continue to face barriers in their education and sexuality education (Mckinney & Swartz, 2016).

The findings in the mesosystem also touch upon the issue of sexual violence and exploitation among learners with disabilities, emphasizing the lack of community-based programs that reach out to this vulnerable group. The interaction between the community and school systems (mesosystem) is crucial to ensuring that learners with disabilities are protected from sexual violence and abuse. Without a community-wide effort, including schools working in tandem

with local resources and advocacy groups, learners with disabilities may continue to be marginalized and vulnerable to sexual abuse without the necessary education or support (Department of Social Development, 2016). This is further illustrated by educators in special needs schools who often hold negative attitudes towards teaching CSE for learners with disabilities. Studies indicate that many educators are uncomfortable discussing sexuality and disability, with some endorsing an abstinence-only approach, deeming any sexual activity as "wrong" (Hanass-Hancock et al., 2018). This pedagogy of discomfort further discourages open discussions about healthy sexual relationships, consent, and sexual rights for learners with disabilities.

In addition to this, at the school level, there is a significant gap in training for educators, as the education system does not provide sufficient professional development to help teachers deliver CSE in an inclusive and accessible manner (Carpenter et al., 2023). Teachers' struggles reflect the lack of support from ruling bodies and school leadership (principals and education departments) to provide adequate training and resources. Educators in special needs schools often report feeling unsupported by the broader school environment, with leadership failing to prioritize CSE for learners with disabilities, which impacts their ability to implement a high-quality curriculum (Johns & Adnams, 2016). Social norms and beliefs within the school community often inhibit educators from discussing sexuality with learners with disabilities. These attitudes are grounded in broader societal beliefs about disability and sexuality, which are translated into classroom practices (Johns & Adnams, 2016). Educators' discomfort in approaching sensitive topics such as sexual orientation and contraception is directly influenced by these norms.

Summary of key areas in mesosystem:

Key area	Challenges	Consequences	Solutions
Lack of Collaboration	Disconnect between teachers, parents, and caregivers in addressing SRH needs.	Fragmented support system, inadequate sexuality education.	Foster communication and collaboration among schools, parents, and communities.
Peer & Family Attitudes	Misconceptions and negative perceptions	Reinforces stigma, limits discussions on SRH.	Raise awareness through family and

	of sexuality and disability.		peer education programs.
Community & Resources	Lack of community engagement, limited advocacy for inclusive SRH policies.	Inconsistent SRH education, lack of support systems.	Develop community-based programs and policy advocacy.
Cultural & Social Norms	Conservative views and ableist attitudes shape discussions on sexuality.	Perpetuates exclusion, reinforces discrimination.	Promote social inclusion and challenge cultural taboos.
Policy & Education System	Lack of clarity on disability rights and inconsistent implementation of inclusive education policies.	Confusion, inconsistent CSE delivery, lack of structured support.	Align policies with school-level implementation, ensure clear guidelines.
Economic Barriers	Financial burden on families to enroll in special needs schools.	Limited access to education, especially CSE, due to financial strain.	Increase financial support for inclusive education programs.
School Leadership & Training	Inadequate teacher training, lack of leadership support for CSE.	Teachers feel unprepared, limited comprehensive sexuality education.	Provide professional development and leadership support for CSE.
Sexual Violence & Protection	Lack of community programs to protect learners from abuse.	Increased vulnerability to exploitation and abuse.	Strengthen protection mechanisms, involve schools and advocacy groups.
Educator Discomfort	Teachers hesitant to discuss sexuality due	Limited discussion of essential topics like consent,	Address stigma through training, policy

	to personal and societal beliefs.	contraception, and relationships.	reinforcement, and cultural shifts.

4.2.3.Chronosystem

The literature review emphasises that the current provision of SRH education for learners with disabilities has not kept pace with the evolving social context. As societal norms and attitudes toward disability and sexuality change, there remains a lag in adapting the educational system to meet the sexual and reproductive health needs of learners with disabilities. The failure to update and adjust sexuality education to reflect current social understandings of disability, gender, and sexuality contributes to the exclusion and marginalisation of these learners (Vanwesenbeeck, 2020; Bronfenbrenner, 1994). CSE does not evolve with the changing times, leaving learners with disabilities vulnerable to outdated and inadequate sexuality education. These findings further reiterate that learners with disabilities are missing out on crucial opportunities for lifelong learning about sexuality, particularly as they mature and their sexual needs evolve. Due to the lack of inclusive and adaptive sexuality education, learners with disabilities are not equipped with the necessary tools to navigate sexual relationships in the future, potentially putting them at greater risk of sexual abuse, unintended pregnancies, and sexually transmitted infections (Hanass-Hancock et al., 2018). The failure to provide progressive CSE means that these learners may not be able to make informed decisions as they transition into adulthood, where their sexual and reproductive needs will be more pronounced.

The literature review suggests that there are generational gaps in understanding and attitudes toward disability and sexuality, particularly within families, schools, and communities. These gaps mean that each new generation of learners may continue to face the same stigmatisation and exclusion around issues of sexuality. Teachers and parents may not have received adequate education about the sexual rights of individuals with disabilities, and this generational cycle perpetuates the lack of inclusive CSE (Crawford, 2020; Vanwesenbeeck, 2020). This generational delay in addressing disability and sexuality in education systems perpetuates the stigma and discrimination faced by learners with disabilities (Vanwesenbeeck, 2020). These findings also reflect the slow pace of systemic and policy changes in South Africa regarding inclusive education for learners with disabilities. Although there are policies in place (e.g., the Directive on Inclusive Education), there has been insufficient action at the macro-level to implement these policies effectively, particularly in terms of CSE (Mahlaule et al., 2024). The slow pace of policy change contributes to the ongoing exclusion of learners with disabilities

from meaningful SRH education, depriving them of the opportunity to develop a comprehensive understanding of their sexuality as they grow older (Mahlaule et al., 2024).

These findings highlight the long-term effects of inadequate SRH education on the psychological and emotional development of learners with disabilities. Over time, the absence of appropriate CSE impacts how these learners view themselves and their abilities to navigate sexual relationships safely. Without the necessary guidance, these learners may struggle to develop the problem-solving skills needed to make informed decisions regarding their sexual health (Chang, 2004, in Matshedisho, 2010; Chappell, 2014). This lack of education in their formative years can have lasting effects on their ability to engage in healthy sexual relationships as adults. The literature review also stresses that societal perceptions of disability and sexuality must evolve over time to break the cycle of exclusion and discrimination. The more these perceptions change, the greater the chance that inclusive sexuality education will be provided for future generations of learners with disabilities. As societal understanding of disability and sexuality grows, there may be better opportunities to integrate more inclusive and progressive CSE that empowers learners with disabilities (Michielsen & Brockschmidt, 2021; Kahonde & Johns, 2022).

The literature review further emphasises how the historical development of South Africa's education system, shaped by apartheid and ongoing disparities, continues to influence the present state of education for learners with disabilities. The legacy of exclusion and separate schooling for children with disabilities has created systemic barriers to inclusive education, which affects the provision of CSE. As a result, the current education system still struggles to fully integrate learners with disabilities into mainstream education, hindering their access to sexual and reproductive health education (Donohue & Bornman, 2014). The rollout of inclusive education in South Africa has been slow and uneven, with the NDP recognizing the need to accelerate this process. This reflects the ongoing historical challenges of implementing inclusive education effectively. The slow pace of change in educational practices and policies regarding learners with disabilities has prolonged their exclusion from mainstream education and comprehensive sexuality education. This delay in system-wide change is a significant chronosystem finding, as it highlights the persistence of historical barriers to education that learners with disabilities face (Donohue & Bornman, 2014).

Over time, the recognition of the rights of people with disabilities has evolved, with policies such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and South Africa's National Development Plan (NDP) highlighting the need for inclusion and equal

rights. Despite these advances, the text notes that there is still a lack of clarity regarding the classification of disabilities and the rights of learners with disabilities in education. This ambiguity has persisted over time, limiting the development of effective policies and the provision of services such as CSE for these learners. The evolving nature of disability rights and the gap between policy intention and implementation are critical factors in understanding the chronosystemic challenges faced by learners with disabilities (Department of Social Development, 2016; Donohue & Bornman, 2014).

Although there is growing recognition of the importance of CSE for learners with disabilities, attitudinal shifts in both society and education systems are slow to materialize. This results in the continued exclusion or misinformation regarding sexuality education, despite increased international attention (Brown et al., 2020). In the South African context, the lack of CSE programs for learners with disabilities has persisted over time, with only small-scale initiatives from non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and individual teachers addressing this gap (Johns & Adnams, 2016). This highlights how policy gaps and inconsistent educational practices have failed to address the unique needs of learners with disabilities in relation to sexuality education. Over time, there has been an increasing recognition of the importance of training educators to teach learners with disabilities. The National Development Plan emphasizes the need for disability awareness training at all educational levels. This gradual shift reflects a growing commitment to preparing educators for inclusive practices and sexuality education (Department of Social Development, 2016). However, this change is still unfolding and needs further mobilization to be fully effective in practice.

Summary of key areas in chronosystem:

Key area	Challenges	Consequences	Solutions
Outdated CSE Curriculum	SRH education does not align with evolving social attitudes on disability and sexuality.	Learners with disabilities receive inadequate and outdated sexuality education.	Regularly update CSE curriculum to reflect modern understandings of disability and sexuality.
Lack of Lifelong Learning	No adaptive sexuality education as learners mature.	Increased risk of sexual abuse, unintended	Develop age-appropriate, lifelong

		pregnancies, and STIs due to lack of knowledge.	CSE for learners with disabilities.
Generational Gaps	Parents and teachers lack education on disability and sexuality.	Cycle of stigma and exclusion continues across generations.	Provide intergenerational education and awareness programs.
Slow Policy Implementation	Policies supporting inclusive CSE exist but are not effectively implemented.	Ongoing exclusion from meaningful SRH education.	Strengthen enforcement of inclusive education policies.
Psychological Impact	Lack of CSE affects self-perception and confidence in relationships.	Learners struggle to navigate sexual relationships and decision-making.	Incorporate emotional and psychological aspects into sexuality education.
Historical Barriers	Legacy of apartheid and special schooling limits inclusion.	Many learners with disabilities remain in segregated educational settings.	Accelerate inclusive education reforms and mainstream disability rights.
School Attendance Issues	Up to 70% of children with disabilities do not attend school.	Missed opportunities for CSE and inclusive learning environments.	Improve access to education for learners with disabilities.
Ambiguity in Disability Rights	Lack of clarity in disability classification and rights.	Inconsistent implementation of disability-inclusive education policies.	Standardise and clarify disability rights in educational policies.
Limited Global Progress	CSE for learners with disabilities remains	Key gaps in education persist, even in countries like	Increase international collaboration and research on

	underdeveloped globally.	the USA and the Netherlands.	disability-inclusive CSE.
Slow Attitudinal Shifts	Societal and educational perceptions of disability and sexuality evolve slowly.	Continued exclusion and misinformation regarding CSE.	Promote widespread disability awareness and advocacy.
Educator Training Gaps	Lack of formal disability awareness training for teachers.	Teachers feel unprepared to deliver inclusive sexuality education.	Expand professional development for educators.

4.2.4.Macrosystem

The findings reiterate that while South African educational policies, such as the Directive on Inclusive Education, recognize the need for inclusive support for learners with disabilities, there is a significant gap in the implementation of these policies. Educational support systems for learners with disabilities are underfunded and under-researched, particularly in the area of sexuality education (Mahlaule et al., 2024). This lack of systemic support at the macro level results in inadequate CSE programs that fail to meet the needs of these learners, limiting their access to life-saving and empowering knowledge about sexual and reproductive health (Matshedisho, 2010). The macrosystem is heavily influenced by cultural and societal norms, particularly in relation to disability and sexuality. The literature review notes that there are deeply entrenched ableist attitudes and misconceptions surrounding the sexuality of individuals with disabilities. These views are pervasive at the societal level and often translate into educational practices that exclude or stigmatise learners with disabilities. These cultural perceptions hinder the development of inclusive policies and educational practices that would empower these learners to access comprehensive sexuality education (Vanwesenbeeck, 2020; Crawford, 2020). The broader societal reluctance to view learners with disabilities as sexual beings contributes to their exclusion from SRH education.

At the macro level, there is limited advocacy for the sexual and reproductive health rights of learners with disabilities. The literature review notes that while some academic and policy authors argue for the inclusion of learners with disabilities in SRH education, there is insufficient public and governmental engagement in promoting these rights (Michielsen & Brockschmidt, 2021; Kahonde & Johns, 2022). This lack of advocacy from governmental bodies and disability rights organizations perpetuates the marginalization of this group in the larger discourse surrounding sexual health and rights. The text highlights how national and regional educational curricula often fail to include sexuality education that addresses the needs of learners with disabilities. Sexuality education programs are often developed with a "one-size-fits-all" approach that ignores the diverse needs of learners with disabilities. This oversight reflects the broader societal and governmental neglect of disability issues in the design of educational content. The result is that learners with disabilities are denied access to SRH education that is both relevant and accessible to them (Vanwesenbeeck, 2020; Hayes & Bulat, 2017, in Mahlaule et al., 2024). The broader macro-system's failure to create inclusive curricula limits the learners' ability to receive appropriate and comprehensive sexuality education.

The macrosystem's failure to integrate disability support with SRH education contributes to the exclusion of learners with disabilities from vital education. The educational system, at a macro level, treats disability and sexuality as separate issues, which leads to a lack of cross-collaboration between departments responsible for disability support and those responsible for sexuality education. This results in fragmented and incomplete education for learners with disabilities, particularly in relation to sexual and reproductive health (Mahlaule et al., 2024; Vanwesenbeeck, 2020). Additionally, South African policies, such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the National Development Plan (NDP), recognize the need for the inclusion of learners with disabilities in mainstream education and the provision of equal educational opportunities. However, despite the recognition of disability rights in international and national frameworks, the practical implementation of inclusive education remains limited. These policies outline the need for an accelerated rollout of inclusive education but face challenges due to ambiguous classifications of disability and insufficient resources. The lack of clarity in disability definitions within national policy frameworks impedes the effective implementation of inclusive education and CSE for learners with disabilities (Department of Social Development, 2016; Donohue & Bornman, 2014).

The macro-level findings highlight a significant gap between policy and practice in South Africa's inclusive education framework. While White Paper 6 (WP6) and the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) advocate for an inclusive education system that caters to learners with disabilities, the poor implementation of these policies has hindered their success. This lack of effective policy translation into school practice has contributed to barriers to the provision of CSE for learners with disabilities, further depriving them of their educational rights. According to Mckinney & Swartz (2016), policies like WP6 look ideal on paper, but they fall short in execution, highlighting a disconnect between government policy (macrosystem) and classroom realities (mesosystem) (Chaskalson, 2023). The National Development Plan (NDP) acknowledges the importance of addressing the sexuality of people with disabilities, yet it fails to adequately fund or prioritise specific programs aimed at ensuring CSE for these learners. The NDP notes that people with disabilities are not a homogeneous group and have varying sexual needs, but the lack of targeted action at the national level has left learners with disabilities without appropriate education or resources regarding their sexual and reproductive health (Department of Social Development, 2016).

The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities requires states to ensure that individuals with disabilities can access the best possible standard of health and that sexuality education is part of this provision (Michielsen & Brockschmidt, 2021). The global recognition of CSE as an essential component of public health and sustainable development is driven by international bodies such as the United Nations and aligns with broader goals such as gender equality and good health and well-being (Andreassen et al., 2024). Vague curriculum guidelines at the national level in various countries (such as Australia and South Africa) contribute to barriers in CSE delivery for learners with disabilities (Andreassen et al., 2024). Even with the UN advocating for the inclusion of sexuality education in national curricula, the lack of coherent policy and incentives for implementation results in policy failures at the macro-level, which ultimately affect learners with disabilities in the mesosystem and microsystem (Andreassen et al., 2024; Bronfenbrenner, 1994).

These beliefs shape the attitudes of key stakeholders, including parents, educators, and policy-makers, contributing to a lack of emphasis on providing adequate sexuality education to learners with disabilities (Carpenter et al., 2023; Neille et al., 2023). This societal prejudice limits opportunities for learners with disabilities to express their sexuality freely and access accurate, comprehensive education about sexual health. Government and religious leaders often oppose CSE for learners with disabilities, citing concerns that it encourages promiscuity

and undermines moral values (Khau, 2022). These influential figures contribute to the perpetuation of myths and negative stereotypes that label sexuality as a taboo for learners with disabilities.

Despite the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and South African law which guarantee the right to sexuality education for learners with disabilities, there is a lack of systemic implementation at the macro-level. This failure is due to insufficient leadership from education authorities and government bodies, which affects the formalization and prioritization of CSE for learners with disabilities in schools (Johns & Adnams, 2016). This policy gap affects both teacher preparedness and the resources available for effective delivery. This failure is due to insufficient leadership from education authorities and government bodies, which affects the formalization and prioritization of CSE for learners with disabilities in schools (Johns & Adnams, 2016). Societal attitudes towards sexuality and disability are a key component of the macrosystem that shape educational practices. Social stigma around the sexuality of learners with disabilities often results in silence on the issue of sexuality in schools. This stigma is further reinforced by social norms that discourage discussions around disability and sexuality, making it difficult for teachers to feel empowered to teach CSE (Johns & Adnams, 2016).

Summary of key areas in macrosystem:

Key areas	Challenges	Consequences	Solutions
Policy Implementation Gap	Policies like the Directive on Inclusive Education exist but are not effectively implemented.	Limited access to CSE for learners with disabilities.	Strengthen enforcement and monitoring of inclusive education policies.
Underfunded and Under-researched Support	SRH education for learners with disabilities is underfunded and lacks research.	Inadequate sexuality education programs, leading to exclusion.	Increase funding and research for disability-inclusive CSE.
Cultural and Societal Norms	Deep-rooted ableist attitudes and	Learners with disabilities are	Challenge ableist norms through

	misconceptions about disability and sexuality.	stigmatized and excluded from SRH education.	awareness campaigns and advocacy.
Lack of Advocacy	Limited public and governmental engagement in promoting SRH rights for learners with disabilities.	Marginalisation of these learners in sexuality education policies and programs.	Strengthen advocacy efforts at governmental and community levels.
"One-size-fits-all" CSE Programs	National curricula fail to include disability-specific sexuality education.	CSE remains inaccessible and irrelevant to learners with disabilities.	Develop tailored CSE content addressing the diverse needs of these learners.
Fragmentation in Education Systems	Disability support and SRH education are treated as separate issues.	Lack of collaboration between responsible departments leads to incomplete education.	Integrate disability support and sexuality education initiatives.
Ambiguity in Disability Policy	Vague disability classifications in national policies.	Inconsistent implementation of inclusive education and CSE.	Standardize disability definitions for clearer policy implementation.
Policy-Practice Disconnect	Policies like WP6 and CAPS promote inclusion but lack effective execution.	Barriers to delivering CSE to learners with disabilities persist.	Ensure policy translation into school-level practices.
Limited Funding in National Plans	NDP recognizes disability inclusion but lacks funding for CSE programs.	Learners with disabilities remain without necessary sexuality education resources.	Allocate specific funding for disability-inclusive CSE initiatives.

Global Policy Gaps	International guidelines (e.g., UNCRPD) call for inclusion, but national implementation lags.	Barriers to CSE delivery for learners with disabilities worldwide.	Improve national alignment with international disability rights frameworks.
Stakeholder Attitudes and Stigma	Parents, educators, and policymakers hold negative perceptions about disability and sexuality.	CSE remains deprioritized and inaccessible to learners with disabilities.	Provide disability and sexuality education training for stakeholders.
Resistance from Religious and Government Leaders	Concerns about CSE promoting promiscuity hinder its inclusion in education policies.	Perpetuation of myths and stereotypes about disability and sexuality.	Engage religious and political leaders in constructive CSE discussions.
Teacher Preparedness Gaps	Lack of training for educators to teach sexuality education to learners with disabilities.	Teachers feel unprepared, leading to poor delivery of CSE.	Implement comprehensive teacher training on inclusive sexuality education.

4.3.Conclusion

These findings highlight micro-, meso-, chrono-, and macro-level issues faced by actors who play crucial roles in the successful implementation of CSE for learners with disabilities such as learners, parents, peers, teachers, principals as well as governing bodies (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). From these findings, it can be deduced that all of these actors need to become conscious of the role that they are actively playing across social systems to reinforce the current state of CSE provision for learners with disabilities in special needs schools. This stretches beyond the design of quality policy documents to the entire ethos on which the society functions as widely accepted values and beliefs surrounding disability and sexuality continue to hamper small- and

large-scale attempts to implement quality CSE provision for learners with disabilities (Bronfenbrenner, 1994; Michielsen & Brockschmidt, 2021; Vanwesenbeeck, 2020).

Chapter 5: Discussion

5.1.Introduction

The implementation of CSE for learners with disabilities is influenced by complex interactions within different levels of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). These interactions span individual experiences, school systems, societal norms, and broader policy frameworks. Understanding these levels helps reveal how the education system can either support or hinder the sexual rights and health education of learners with disabilities.

5.2.Discussion of the findings

The findings highlight a significant gap in understanding and provision of comprehensive Sexual and Reproductive Health (SRH) education for learners with disabilities. These learners face exclusion from adequate education on their sexual health due to misconceptions, stigmatization, and ableist attitudes from teachers, parents, and peers. These attitudes perpetuate a cycle of discrimination, restricting learners' ability to navigate their sexuality and relationships safely.**Misunderstanding and Exclusion of SRH Education**

One of the primary barriers to comprehensive SRH education is the widespread misunderstanding of the sexuality of learners with disabilities. Teachers and caregivers often lack the knowledge and resources to provide inclusive and accessible sexuality education, further marginalising these learners (Mahlaule et al., 2024). For instance, many educators emphasize topics like hygiene, body development, and abstinence, while avoiding more complex issues such as sexual behavior, contraception, and sexual orientation (Carpenter et al., 2023). This limited approach fails to address learners' diverse sexual health needs. The focus on the "abstinence-only-until-marriage model" also reflects a lack of comprehensive education that is both empowering and relevant (Vanwesenbeeck, 2020). Additionally, many parents hold ableist views that their children with disabilities are "uneducable," which hampers efforts to provide them with essential sexuality education (Donohue & Bornman, 2014). These parents often suppress their children's sexuality, either due to fears of exploitation or misconceptions about their children's ability to engage in relationships (Neille et al., 2023; Ballan, 2001, in Neille et al., 2023).

Another key challenge highlighted in the findings is the ambiguity in disability classifications within national policy frameworks, which further hinders the implementation of inclusive education and sexuality education (Donohue & Bornman, 2014). The lack of clear definitions of disability in both national and international frameworks makes it difficult to develop tailored educational policies and programs for learners with disabilities. For example, the NDP acknowledges the diverse needs of people with disabilities but fails to provide clear mechanisms for ensuring that these needs are addressed in educational settings (Department of Social Development, 2016). This ambiguity creates challenges in determining which learners qualify for specific educational supports, including SRH education, and in ensuring that resources are allocated appropriately.

Attitudinal Barriers and Institutional Support

The attitude of educators plays a crucial role in this exclusion. Studies have shown that many educators feel ill-equipped to teach CSE to learners with disabilities due to inadequate training and resources (Johns & Adnams, 2016). Educators' lack of confidence and the absence of institutional support structures prevent these learners from receiving quality and inclusive sexuality education. Additionally, these educators often work in environments where prevailing social norms, reinforced by both peers and parents, discourage discussions about sexuality with learners who have disabilities (Johns & Adnams, 2016). As a result, these learners are denied the right to explore their sexuality in a safe, informed, and empowering environment.

Societal attitudes towards disability and sexuality play a crucial role in shaping educational practices. Stigma surrounding the sexuality of learners with disabilities often leads to silence on the issue within schools. This silence is reinforced by social norms that discourage discussions about sexuality, particularly in relation to disability. As a result, many teachers are ill-equipped to teach comprehensive sexuality education to learners with disabilities, and in some cases, may feel uncomfortable addressing the topic altogether (Johns & Adnams, 2016).

Additionally, religious and governmental leaders often contribute to the perpetuation of myths and negative stereotypes about the sexuality of learners with disabilities. For example, concerns about CSE encouraging promiscuity or undermining moral values have led to opposition against providing such education to learners with disabilities (Khau, 2022). This

opposition further entrenches the marginalization of learners with disabilities, limiting their opportunities to access the comprehensive sexuality education they need.

Vulnerability to Abuse and Exploitation

Learners with disabilities are particularly vulnerable to sexual exploitation and abuse due to the absence of adequate protection and education. Many of these learners lack the autonomy to seek justice for instances of abuse, and the lack of support structures within their homes and schools exacerbates this vulnerability (Department of Social Development, 2016). Furthermore, community programs addressing sexual violence and abuse often fail to reach individuals with disabilities, leaving them unprotected and uninformed about their rights and how to report abuse.

The issue of sexual violence and exploitation among learners with disabilities is also tied to the interactions within the meso-system. These learners are particularly vulnerable to sexual abuse, especially due to the lack of community-based programs that address their needs. Without the involvement of community leaders, local organizations, and educational institutions working together, learners with disabilities are left unprotected and uneducated about sexual violence and their rights (Department of Social Development, 2016). The failure to establish a comprehensive and coordinated approach to sexual violence prevention and education means that these learners are at increased risk of exploitation.

Policy and Systemic Change

There is an urgent need for a shift in perspective at the micro-level, involving teachers, caregivers, and parents, to better recognize and respect the sexual rights of learners with disabilities (Chang, 2004; Michielsen & Brockschmidt, 2021). The implementation of inclusive education policies, such as White Paper 6 (WP6), which promotes an integrated approach to education for all learners, is critical for ensuring that learners with disabilities have access to comprehensive sexuality education (Donohue & Bornman, 2014). However, the failure to fully implement these policies results in many learners with disabilities being isolated in special schools, where resources and opportunities for comprehensive SRH education are limited (Mckinney & Swartz, 2016).

The meso-level findings underscore the systemic disconnect between various systems—teachers, parents, caregivers, peers, schools, and the broader community—that influence the sexuality education of learners with disabilities. These findings emphasize the lack of coordination and collaboration between these stakeholders, which hinders the development of

an inclusive and supportive environment for learners to receive comprehensive Sexual and Reproductive Health (SRH) education.

Disconnect Between Key Stakeholders

A major issue at the meso-level is the disconnect between teachers, parents, caregivers, and peers regarding the sexual and reproductive health needs of learners with disabilities. This misalignment results in an incoherent approach to sexuality education, where no unified support system exists to address these learners' needs effectively (Bronfenbrenner, 1994; Vanwesenbeeck, 2020). Families and schools, which should be central in providing SRH education, often fail to communicate and collaborate on addressing learners' sexual health needs. Parents, for example, may lack knowledge about how to address SRH issues, or may not prioritize them, while teachers often lack training or resources to provide inclusive CSE (Mahlaule et al., 2024). This creates a fragmented support system that prevents learners from receiving the holistic education they need to make informed decisions about their sexual health.

Cultural Attitudes and Ableism

The persistence of ableist mindsets in schools and families exacerbates the problem. These views, rooted in societal perceptions of disability, often hinder the development of appropriate sexuality education programs. For example, in many communities, learners with disabilities face stigmatization and exclusion when it comes to discussions about their sexuality, largely due to negative social norms and conservative beliefs about sexuality (Crawford, 2020; Michielsen & Brockschmidt, 2021). Peer interactions and family attitudes also reinforce these misconceptions, limiting or entirely excluding discussions around SRH. This lack of open communication creates an environment that is harmful and stigmatized, affecting how learners with disabilities perceive their own sexual rights and bodies (Chang, 2004, in Matshedisho, 2010; Vanwesenbeeck, 2020).

The failure to adequately support SRH education for learners with disabilities is not only due to policy shortcomings but is also influenced by entrenched cultural norms and societal perceptions. There are deeply held ableist attitudes that deny the sexuality of individuals with disabilities, viewing them as asexual or incapable of forming sexual relationships. These attitudes are pervasive and often result in exclusionary educational practices that prevent learners with disabilities from accessing sexuality education (Vanwesenbeeck, 2020; Crawford, 2020). Societal reluctance to view learners with disabilities as sexual beings

contributes significantly to their exclusion from SRH education programs, creating a vicious cycle of stigma and marginalization.

Lack of Resources and Support

Special needs schools, while focused on academic and developmental support, often lack the necessary resources and trained personnel to deliver comprehensive sexuality education (Matshedisho, 2010). As highlighted in the literature, these schools may provide basic educational services but fail to equip learners with the knowledge they need regarding their sexual health (Mahlaule et al., 2024). On the other hand, families, despite being the primary support system for these learners, often fail to provide appropriate SRH education due to a lack of knowledge or awareness about the importance of such education. The lack of a well-coordinated approach between schools, families, and the broader community means that learners with disabilities are not adequately supported in learning about their sexuality.

The broader community plays a significant role in providing resources and support for sexuality education. However, many communities fail to engage in or develop necessary resources to support sexuality education for learners with disabilities (Hayes & Bulat, 2017, in Mahlaule et al., 2024; Matshedisho, 2010). The lack of engagement from community leaders and stakeholders exacerbates the situation, as there is little advocacy for inclusive SRH programs and policies that address the needs of learners with disabilities. Without a community-wide effort to improve access to inclusive SRH education, learners with disabilities continue to be marginalized and excluded from necessary education on their sexual rights and health.

Broader Cultural and Societal Norms

The interactions within the meso-system are also influenced by broader societal and cultural norms surrounding disability and sexuality. In many cases, societal perceptions of disability restrict the way in which sexuality is discussed or taught. In communities where conservative views about sexuality dominate, there is often a reluctance to engage in discussions about sexuality for learners with disabilities. These social attitudes contribute to the perpetuation of ableism and exclusion, both in schools and within families (Crawford, 2020; Michielsen & Brockschmidt, 2021). As these cultural norms are deeply embedded, they shape the learning environment and contribute to an overall lack of inclusion and support for learners with disabilities in accessing comprehensive sexuality education.

This societal bias is reflected in educational policies and practices, as well. Many sexual and reproductive health education programs continue to adopt a "one-size-fits-all" approach, which fails to address the specific needs of learners with disabilities (Hayes & Bulat, 2017, in Mahlaule et al., 2024). Such programs overlook crucial considerations such as disability-specific risks or needs, making them inadequate for learners with disabilities. The macrosystem—which encompasses broader societal and cultural influences—thus plays a crucial role in shaping educational content and practices. It shapes the ability of educational systems to create inclusive curricula, ensuring that all learners, including those with disabilities, receive relevant and accessible education.

Educational Policy and Practice Disconnect

There is a clear disconnect between inclusive education policies and the practices within schools. While the South African education system aims for inclusive education, schools often fail to align these policies with practical implementations, resulting in barriers for learners with disabilities in receiving comprehensive SRH education. Issues such as inaccessible school buildings, inadequate teacher training, and limited resources hinder the ability of schools to provide inclusive education (Mckinney & Swartz, 2016). The lack of coordination between the Department of Education and individual schools creates a fractured system where inclusive education goals are not effectively realized, and learners with disabilities continue to face challenges in accessing quality sexuality education.

One of the most significant findings is the gap between South African educational policies and their implementation. South Africa has recognized the need for inclusive education through various policies, such as the Directive on Inclusive Education and White Paper 6 (WP6), but these policies have not been effectively translated into practice (Mahlaule et al., 2024; Mckinney & Swartz, 2016). While these policies outline the need for inclusion and equal educational opportunities for learners with disabilities, including comprehensive sexuality education (CSE), there is insufficient funding, research, and political will to ensure that these provisions are meaningfully implemented.

The lack of resources allocated to special education needs, especially in sexuality education, results in poorly funded programs that fail to meet the needs of learners with disabilities (Matshedisho, 2010). This is exacerbated by the slow pace of policy change and a failure to prioritize disability-specific programs, as highlighted by the National Development Plan (NDP) (Department of Social Development, 2016). Despite policy recognition, the practical

implementation of inclusive education remains limited, particularly in the realm of SRH education for learners with disabilities.

Educators' Attitudes and Training Gaps

The attitudes of educators towards teaching sexuality education to learners with disabilities also play a crucial role in the meso-system. Many educators feel uncomfortable discussing sexuality and disability, with some endorsing an abstinence-only approach or deeming any sexual activity inappropriate (Hanass-Hancock et al., 2018). This "pedagogy of discomfort" not only discourages open discussions about healthy sexual relationships and consent but also contributes to the exclusion of learners with disabilities from receiving comprehensive sexuality education. Moreover, there is a significant gap in training for educators. Without proper professional development, teachers struggle to deliver inclusive and accessible CSE to learners with disabilities, further contributing to the disconnect between educational policies and actual practice (Carpenter et al., 2023; Johns & Adnams, 2016).

The Lag in Adaptation to Evolving Social Contexts

One of the primary findings from the literature is that the current provision of sexuality education for learners with disabilities has not kept pace with the evolving social context. Societal attitudes toward disability and sexuality are changing, yet the educational system remains largely stagnant, failing to adapt to these changes (Vanwesenbeeck, 2020; Bronfenbrenner, 1994). While there is growing recognition of the sexual rights of individuals with disabilities, SRH education has not been updated to reflect these shifts in societal understanding of disability, gender, and sexuality. As a result, learners with disabilities are deprived of up-to-date, inclusive sexuality education, leaving them vulnerable to outdated information that does not adequately address their needs.

The failure to evolve sexuality education to be more inclusive and adaptive has significant consequences. Learners with disabilities often lack the necessary tools to understand their sexual rights and navigate sexual relationships as they mature. This gap in knowledge can place them at higher risk for sexual abuse, unintended pregnancies, and sexually transmitted infections (STIs), as they do not receive the information they need to make informed decisions (Hanass-Hancock et al., 2018). Moreover, without progressive sexuality education, learners are not equipped to navigate the complexities of sexual relationships as adults, leaving them vulnerable as their sexual and reproductive needs become more pronounced.

Generational Gaps and Slow Policy Implementation

The literature review also points to the existence of generational gaps in understanding and attitudes toward disability and sexuality. These gaps are particularly evident within families, schools, and communities. Teachers and parents may not have received adequate education on the sexual rights of individuals with disabilities, and this lack of knowledge is passed down through generations, perpetuating stigma and exclusion (Crawford, 2020; Vanwesenbeeck, 2020). This generational delay in addressing disability and sexuality in educational settings has a profound effect on the attitudes and educational opportunities provided to learners with disabilities, further entrenching stigma and discrimination.

In South Africa, this issue is compounded by the slow pace of policy change concerning inclusive education. While there are policies like the Directive on Inclusive Education that aim to ensure the inclusion of learners with disabilities, there has been insufficient action at the macro level to implement these policies, especially in terms of providing comprehensive SRH education (Mahlaule et al., 2024). The lack of effective implementation of policies contributes to the ongoing exclusion of learners with disabilities from meaningful sexuality education, depriving them of the opportunity to learn about their sexual rights and health.

Long-Term Psychological and Emotional Effects

The failure to provide adequate SRH education has significant long-term effects on the psychological and emotional development of learners with disabilities. The absence of appropriate sexuality education during formative years can shape how learners view themselves and their ability to engage in healthy sexual relationships later in life (Chang, 2004, in Matshedisho, 2010; Chappell, 2014). Without the necessary guidance, these learners may struggle to develop the problem-solving skills required to make informed decisions regarding their sexual health. In the absence of progressive and inclusive CSE, learners may feel isolated and unable to engage in intimate relationships in a healthy and informed way.

The emotional and psychological consequences of inadequate SRH education can persist into adulthood, affecting not just the ability to engage in sexual relationships but also influencing self-esteem and overall mental well-being. This highlights the importance of early, inclusive sexuality education that equips learners with disabilities to handle both the challenges and opportunities related to their sexuality.

The Evolution of Societal Perceptions of Disability and Sexuality

As societal perceptions of disability and sexuality continue to evolve, there is an opportunity to break the cycle of exclusion and discrimination that learners with disabilities have faced in

the past. Changing these perceptions could create a more inclusive environment where sexuality education is seen as a right for all learners, including those with disabilities (Michielsen & Brockschmidt, 2021; Kahonde & Johns, 2022). The growing understanding of the sexual rights of individuals with disabilities could lead to more inclusive and progressive CSE programs that empower these learners to make informed decisions about their sexual health.

However, the process of changing societal perceptions is slow and requires concerted efforts at all levels of society, including education, policy, and the broader community. The evolution of these perceptions is essential for fostering a more inclusive educational environment that recognizes and supports the sexual and reproductive health needs of learners with disabilities.

Historical Development and Legacy of Apartheid

The historical context of South Africa's education system, shaped by apartheid and ongoing disparities, continues to affect the education of learners with disabilities. The legacy of exclusion and separate schooling for children with disabilities has created systemic barriers to inclusive education that persist to this day (Donohue & Bornman, 2014). These historical barriers are reflected in the current education system, which still struggles to fully integrate learners with disabilities into mainstream education, hindering their access to comprehensive sexuality education.

The rollout of inclusive education in South Africa has been slow and uneven. Despite the recognition in the National Development Plan (NDP) of the need to accelerate inclusive education, many learners with disabilities remain outside the education system. Studies indicate that up to 70% of children of school-going age with disabilities do not attend school, and many of those who do are placed in separate "special" schools (Mahlaule et al., 2024). This reflects the ongoing challenges in implementing inclusive education practices, and the slow pace of change contributes to the continued exclusion of learners with disabilities from SRH education.

At the macro level, there is a lack of advocacy for the sexual and reproductive health rights of learners with disabilities. While international frameworks such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) call for the inclusion of individuals with disabilities in SRH education, South Africa has not seen sufficient public or governmental engagement in promoting these rights (Michielsen & Brockschmidt, 2021;

Kahonde & Johns, 2022). This lack of advocacy perpetuates the marginalization of learners with disabilities in the broader sexual health discourse, leaving their unique needs largely unaddressed.

The NDP acknowledges the need to address the sexuality of people with disabilities but fails to take concrete steps toward the inclusion of disability-specific SRH education (Department of Social Development, 2016). This lack of targeted action means that learners with disabilities continue to be excluded from essential education about their sexual health, and the policy's failure to prioritize these programs leaves a significant gap in the educational rights of these learners.

Global Perspectives and the Role of International Bodies

International frameworks, such as the UNCRPD, recognize the right of people with disabilities to access the best possible standard of health, including sexuality education (Andreassen et al., 2024). These global frameworks emphasize the importance of CSE as an essential component of public health and sustainable development, aligning with broader goals such as gender equality and well-being. Despite these international mandates, the implementation of inclusive CSE remains slow, with many countries, including South Africa, facing significant challenges in translating these global goals into local practices.

The lack of coherent policy and incentives for implementation is a key factor in the continued exclusion of learners with disabilities from sexuality education. In countries like South Africa, vague curriculum guidelines and insufficient funding contribute to barriers in CSE delivery for learners with disabilities. Even when policies exist at the macro level, without clear and enforceable mechanisms for their implementation, learners with disabilities remain underserved in terms of sexuality education (Andreassen et al., 2024; Bronfenbrenner, 1994).

5.3.Conclusion

Overall, the findings underscore the need for significant improvements in the provision of SRH education for learners with disabilities. The lack of understanding, resources, and support from teachers, parents, and peers, coupled with institutional and economic barriers, leaves these learners vulnerable to exclusion, exploitation, and inadequate sexual health education. To address these issues, a paradigm shift in both educational attitudes and systemic support is necessary to ensure that learners with disabilities can access the comprehensive and inclusive sexuality education they deserve. This approach would

empower them to make informed, healthy decisions about their sexual health and relationships, safeguarding their sexual rights and promoting overall well-being.

Chapter 6: Conclusion and learning journey

6.1.Introduction

This learning journey has led me to completely reexamine and transform my own beliefs as a teacher surrounding learners who live with a disability as well as the level of access they have to life-saving resources in relation to their peers such as CSE. This includes being able to see gaps that are present in current literature surrounding CSE provision for learners with disabilities in South African schools and special needs schools. From this, I was able to deduce that the impact of this literature review does not only highlight and analyse the challenges surrounding CSE implementation for learners with disabilities but also provides insights into some of the future research that can be conducted to bridge some of these gaps.

6.2.Impact of research/key conclusions

This study aimed to conduct a comprehensive systematic review of existing literature to examine the implementation of Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) for learners with disabilities in South African special needs schools. The primary research question sought to identify and analyse the challenges documented in implementing CSE programs within these specialized educational settings. Through careful examination of published research, the study explored how various systemic barriers and facilitators influence the delivery of sexuality education to learners with disabilities.

The second research question delved deeper into the complex interplay between different ecological systems that shape CSE implementation. Using Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory as a theoretical framework, this question examined how microsystem factors (such as classroom dynamics and teacher-student relationships), mesosystem elements (including school-family partnerships and community engagement), macrosystem influences (encompassing cultural norms and policy frameworks), and chronosystem aspects (reflecting changes over time) collectively impact the challenges identified in CSE delivery. This multi-layered analysis provided insights into how various systemic levels interact and influence each other in the context of sexuality education for learners with disabilities.

The third research question addressed the critical need to identify gaps in current literature regarding CSE implementation in South African special needs schools. This analysis also

highlighs areas where research is lacking or insufficient, pointing to opportunities for future investigation and improvement in both research and practice.

6.3.Recommendations for future research

Educators:

- Educator training programmes and professional development in relation to teaching learners with disabilities CSE must be further inspected to equip them with the necessary skills, resources, and confidence to deliver inclusive and accessible CSE to learners with disabilities. Research should focus on identifying best practices for training educators in special needs schools as well as mainstream schools that include learners with disabilities. Exploring the impact of participatory teaching methods tailored for learners with diverse abilities will help refine teacher training. Future studies can also assess the long-term impact of training programs on educators' confidence levels, teaching practices, and the quality of sexuality education they provide (Carpenter et al., 2023; Khau, 2022).

Policy makers:

- More research is needed to examine learner-centered approaches to CSE for learners with disabilities, particularly how they can be tailored to specific needs such as intellectual disabilities, sensory impairments, and mobility limitations. Researchers should explore the learning preferences of learners with disabilities regarding CSE. This includes assessing how topics like consent, sexual rights, and safe sexual behaviours are best delivered in formats accessible to different cognitive and physical abilities (Michielsen & Brockschmidt, 2021).
- Future research should investigate the effectiveness of current policies related to sexuality education for learners with disabilities at both national and local levels. Scholars should assess the gaps in policy frameworks such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and national documents like White Paper 6. Specifically, researchers can examine how policies are translated into practice within schools and the impact of school leadership on the success of these policies (Chaskalson, 2023).

Parents:

- Research should further explore parental attitudes toward sexuality education for children with disabilities and their role in reinforcing or hindering CSE delivery

(Chapell, 2014). Studies could investigate how parental beliefs about the sexuality of children with disabilities shape the level of support they provide for CSE. Understanding the barriers parents face in discussing sexuality with their children will be key in developing supportive programs to engage them effectively (Mahlaule et al., 2024).

Societal attitudes:

- Research should examine the societal attitudes and cultural norms that stigmatize the sexuality of people with disabilities, and how these norms influence the delivery of CSE. Future studies could explore community-based research to understand how negative stereotypes about the sexuality of learners with disabilities affect not only educators but also the wider community's response to CSE programs. This research could identify strategies for changing societal attitudes and reducing stigma around disability and sexuality (Neille et al., 2023).

6.4.Learning journey

Throughout this research process, I have gained increased awareness surrounding the topic of disability and its interplay with education. This has provided me with immense insight regarding the topic of sexuality and how it relates to disability. Not only was I able to closely study the issues that learners with disability face in regard to a society that continues to revolve around ableist mindsets but how this mindset consistently harms one of the cornerstones of human existence and being, sexuality. I was given the tools to inspect a multi-level issue that is exacerbated by numerous stakeholders in education and CSE which has given me a renewed investment in a topic that is far removed from my everyday interactions with social systems.

This research highlights the pressing need for more inclusive sexuality education, which can significantly inform my teaching practice in the future. One of the key takeaways is the importance of adapting teaching methods to meet the diverse needs of learners with disabilities. Since a "one-size-fits-all" approach is inadequate, I can implement differentiated instruction by incorporating visual aids, sign language, and accessible materials. Additionally, providing alternative communication methods, such as assistive technology and picture-based communication, can help ensure all students have equal access to sexual and reproductive health (SRH) education.

Another crucial aspect is addressing the stigma and misconceptions surrounding disability and sexuality. The research indicates that ableist attitudes and societal stigma contribute to the exclusion of learners with disabilities from comprehensive sexuality education (CSE). As a teacher, I can challenge these misconceptions by fostering open, respectful discussions that normalize conversations about disability and sexuality. Creating a safe and non-judgmental learning environment will encourage students to ask questions and engage meaningfully with the subject matter.

The findings also emphasize the gap between policy and practice in the implementation of inclusive CSE. While policies like the Directive on Inclusive Education exist, their practical application remains limited. As an educator, I can advocate for stronger implementation by pushing for more inclusive resources and training within my school. Ensuring that CSE materials are accessible in different formats, such as braille, large print, and audio, will help bridge this gap. Additionally, collaborating with school leadership to integrate disability-inclusive CSE into the curriculum can make a lasting impact.

Providing comprehensive and context-specific CSE is another key area of focus. The research underscores that learners with disabilities often lack the necessary knowledge to navigate relationships safely. I can address this by teaching essential life skills such as consent, personal boundaries, self-advocacy, and protection against abuse. Additionally, considering specific health needs, such as reproductive health concerns for students with physical disabilities, can make sexuality education more relevant and practical.

Since generational gaps and parental misconceptions often hinder progress, engaging parents and the community is vital. The research suggests that many parents may not have received proper education on the sexual rights of individuals with disabilities, leading to their reluctance to support CSE. By involving parents in discussions and providing guidance on how they can support their children, I can help shift these attitudes. Collaborating with disability rights organizations and NGOs can also strengthen advocacy efforts and raise awareness.

Furthermore, the research highlights the lack of teacher training in delivering sexuality education to learners with disabilities. To address this, I can seek professional development opportunities, participate in workshops, and share best practices with colleagues. Advocating for school-wide training programs will also help build a more inclusive approach to sexuality education. Lastly, creating a safe and supportive environment is essential, as learners with

disabilities are often more vulnerable to abuse due to a lack of SRH education. By fostering a culture of safety and empowerment, I can equip students with the knowledge and confidence to protect themselves and make informed decisions.

By integrating these insights into my teaching practice, I can contribute to closing the education gap for learners with disabilities and ensure they receive the comprehensive and inclusive sexuality education they deserve.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this systematic review provides a thorough and multidimensional analysis of the challenges and opportunities associated with implementing Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) for learners with disabilities within South African special needs schools. By applying Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, the review illuminates how multiple interconnected layers—ranging from immediate classroom interactions (microsystem), to relationships between teachers, parents, and community health services (mesosystem), to institutional policies and resources and broader societal norms and legislation (macrosystem), and temporal changes in policy and social attitudes (chronosystem)—collectively shape the effectiveness of CSE delivery.

The findings reveal that while teachers generally acknowledge the importance of CSE, they face substantial barriers, including limited training, lack of confidence, and insufficient resources, which are compounded by societal taboos and cultural norms surrounding disability and sexuality. Moreover, inadequate coordination at the meso- and exosystem levels, such as weak collaboration between schools, district support teams, and local health services, further undermines the consistent and inclusive implementation of sexuality education. At the macro level, while South African policies like White Paper 6 and national disability legislation provide a progressive framework for inclusion, their inconsistent enactment and limited institutional support result in micro-level challenges that directly impact learners' experiences and engagement. The chronosystem perspective additionally underscores how historical inequalities, evolving social attitudes, and public health crises such as HIV/AIDS continue to influence both teachers' readiness and learners' access to meaningful CSE.

This review also highlights significant opportunities for systemic improvement. Comprehensive, evidence-based teacher training that emphasizes inclusive pedagogical strategies, adaptive teaching methods, and disability-sensitive content is critical. Equally important is fostering supportive leadership at the school and district level, enhancing

collaboration between families, educators, and health professionals, and ensuring that policies are translated effectively into practice. Inclusive curricula that address not only hygiene and abstinence but also sexual behavior, contraception, sexual orientation, and rights-based sexual health information are essential for equipping learners with the knowledge, skills, and agency to make informed decisions about their sexual health.

Ultimately, this research underscores that the successful delivery of CSE for learners with disabilities is contingent upon coordinated action across all ecological levels. By addressing existing gaps, promoting inclusive educational practices, and creating a supportive and responsive learning environment, stakeholders—including educators, policymakers, and community leaders—can collectively enhance the sexual health, autonomy, and rights of learners with disabilities. In doing so, the findings not only contribute to the academic discourse on inclusive sexuality education but also provide actionable guidance for building more equitable and effective educational systems that recognise and respond to the diverse needs of all learners.

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Appendix A: Sample of data extraction

Part 1: Categories 1-5					
Full and accurate APA reference	Research questions/ focus	Theory/ concepts	Paradigm/ worldview	Approach to inquiry/ methodology	Design of research/ research strategy
Chappell, P. (2014). How Zulu-speaking youth with physical and visual disabilities understand love and relationships in constructing their sexual identities. *Culture, Health & Sexuality,* 16(9), 1156-1168. https://doi.org/10.1080/13691058.2014.933878	This paper focuses on how a group of Zulu-speaking youth with physical and visual disabilities in KwaZulu-Natal (KZN), South Africa, understand notions of love and relationships in constructing their sexual identities.	The concept of identity in relation to disability and sexuality. The intersectionality of identity discourses e.g. gender, culture, race, and sexuality.	Post-structuralist framework.	Qualitative methodology.	Participatory research design.
Kahonde, C.K. & Johns, R., (2022), 'Knowledge, perceptions and experiences of risk to sexual violence among adults with intellectual disabilities in Cape Town, South Africa', *African Journal of Disability* 11(0), a837. https://doi.org/10.4102/ajod.v11i0.837	The purpose was to explore and describe the knowledge, perceptions and experiences of risk to sexual violence among adults with intellectual disabilities with the aim to identify gaps and opportunities to inform services for their empowerment and prevention of sexual violence for this group.	Intellectual disabilities; sexual violence; abuse; risk; knowledge; perceptions; experiences.	Ecological framework based on the Ecological Systems Theory.	Exploratory qualitative approach.	Action research.

Neille, J., McEwen, H., & de Andrade, V. (2023). An exploration into people with disabilities' access to sex, sexuality, and sex education in South Africa. *Sexuality and Disability, 42*(1), 101–117. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11195-023-09827-6	The needs of people living with disabilities regarding sex and sexual health remain largely neglected. Knowledge and resources about disabled sexuality have emerged mainly from the global north and have centered on heteronormative ideas about sex, gender, and sexuality.	Disability; sexual identity; gender identity; social exclusion; sexual violence; sexual health services; comprehensive sex education.	Critical theoretical frameworks: critical disability studies, intersectionality theory, and queer theory.	Qualitative approach through collaborative and interdisciplinary initiative.	Cross-sectional study.
Hanass-Hancock, J., Chappell, P., Johns, R. *et al.* (2018) Breaking the Silence. Through Delivering Comprehensive Sexuality Education to Learners with Disabilities in South Africa: Educators Experiences. *Sex Disabil* 36, 105–121.	Comprehensive sexuality education is seen as a key intervention to address the high HIV-incidence rate and low knowledge among young people in South Africa, yet this lacks inclusion of learners with disabilities. At the same time, educators of learners with disabilities experience cultural barriers and lack skills and	Sexuality education; Disability; HIV; Sexual and reproductive health; South Africa; Young people; Adolescents; Learners	Rights-based framework	Participatory and inclusive methodology	Cross-sectional study.

	knowledge on how to deliver sexuality education in accessible formats.					
Chirawu, P., Hanass-Hancock, J., Aderemi, T. J., de Reus, L., & Henken, A. S. (2014). Protect or enable? Teachers' beliefs and practices regarding provision of sexuality education to learners with disability in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. *Sexuality and Disability*, 32(3), 259-277. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11195-014-9355-7	People with disabilities lack access to sexuality education. Teachers should be at the forefront to address this; however there is little understanding of the knowledge, attitudes, practices and needs of teachers of learners with disabilities in regards to sexuality/HIV education in Africa.	Disability; Sexuality; South Africa; Sexuality education; Learners; Teachers	Theory of planned behaviour	Mixed method approach – quantitative and qualitative methods.	Case study.
Part 2: Categories 6-11						

Full and accurate APA reference	Research methods/ techniques	Population/ sample	Data analysis	Ethical issues	Trustworthiness	Notes on usefulness to own study
Chappell, P. (2014). How Zulu-speaking youth with physical and visual disabilities understand love and relationships in constructing their sexual identities. *Culture, Health & Sexuality,* 16(9), 1156-1168. https://doi.org/10.1080/13691058.2014.933878	Focus group discussions. Four single sex and one mixed-sex focus- group discussions Four	Purposive sampling. Participants selected based on: their age (between 15–20 years), type of disability (visual and	Content analysis. Foulcaudian discourse analysis. All the focus-group discussions and	Ethics approval was obtained from the Ethics Committee at the College of Humanities, University of KwaZulu-Natal. An informed	Author recognises aspects that may affect the validity and credibility of the study e.g. as the data was being	Article provides important insight into the topic of my research project while also highlighting

	individual interviews	physical) and geographical location.	interviews were translated and transcribed by a professional transcriber from isiZulu to English.	consent form and letter describing the study were distributed to and signed by both the young participants and their parents. The co-researchers and participants each chose pseudonyms in order to protect their confidentiality and anonymity during the analysis and write up of the research.	translated from isiZulu to English, there is the possibility that the nuances of particular words and phrases could have been lost in translation. Also recognises that due to the smaller sample of participants with physical disabilities, their voices were not so fully represented as those of others.	important ethical and methodological (qualitative methodology) aspects to consider when interviewing participants with disabilities.
Kahonde, C.K. & Johns, R., (2022), 'Knowledge, perceptions and experiences of risk to sexual violence among adults with intellectual disabilities in Cape Town, South Africa', *African Journal of Disability* 11(0), a837. https://doi.org/10.4102/ajod.v11i0.837	Focus group interviews. Twenty-four focus group discussions were conducted with six groups of	Purposive sampling. Twenty-seven participants were recruited through facilities offering services for	Thematic analysis. Systematic coding of data.	The study was approved by the Stellenbosch University, Faculty of Health Sciences Human Research Ethics Committee.	Recognises aspects that may impact trustworthiness of the study e.g. the communication abilities of participants	Article provides great insight into the nature of group interviews with participants with

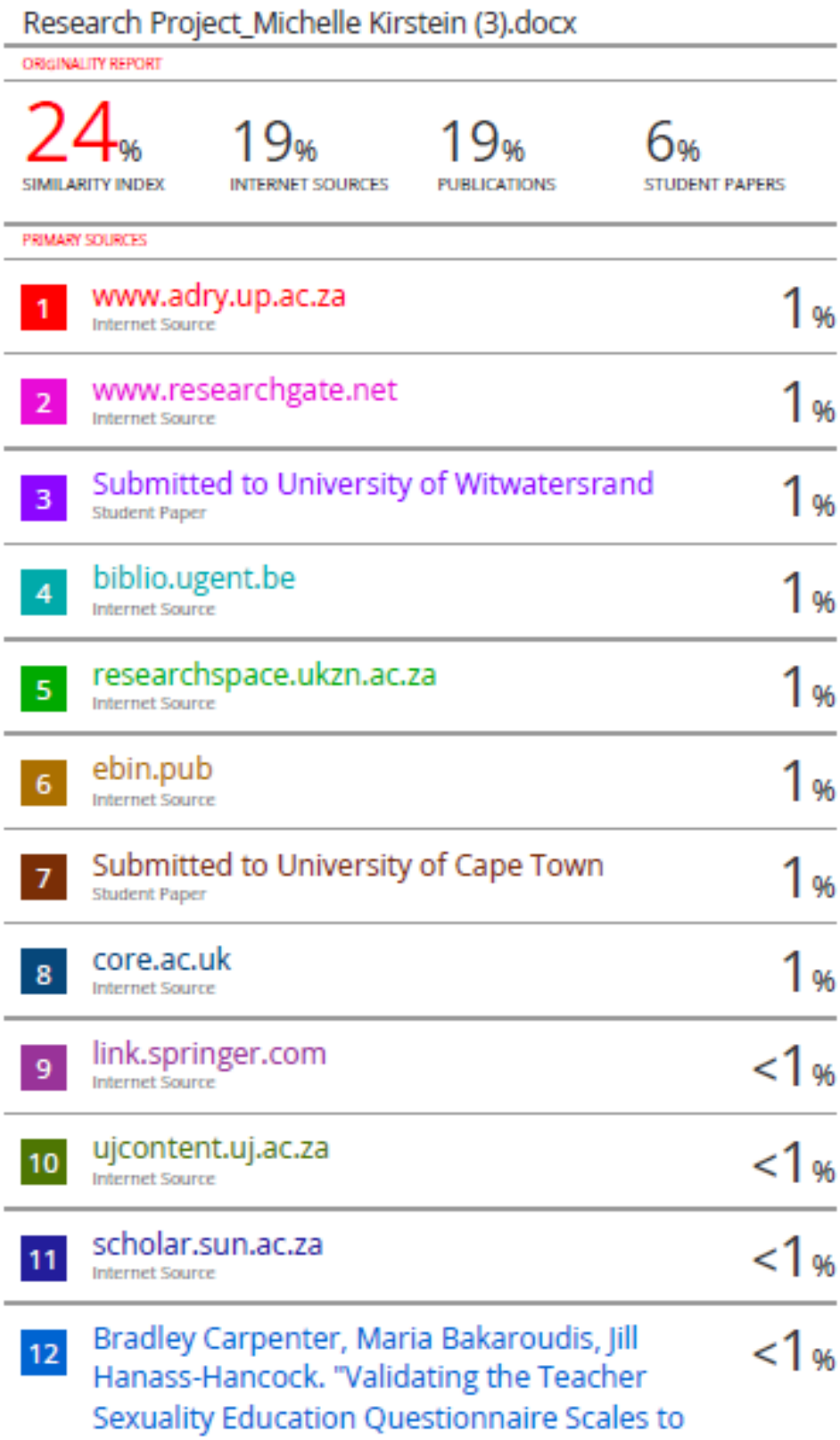
	adults with intellectual disabilities.	adults with intellectual disabilities. This includes participants from different backgrounds in terms of language, ethnicity and socio-economic status.		The principal investigator wrote letters seeking permission to the family caregivers which the coordinators of the facilities gave the adults with intellectual disabilities to deliver to their families with a reply slip. The participants' identities are protected by the use of pseudonyms in this article and all other documents reporting the study.	were diverse and those with more verbal communication dominated the discussions although the researchers were alert to this and kept encouraging everyone to respond. The group setting of a focus group may have inhibited some participants from expressing themselves fully.	disabilities such as the use of different supporting tools during these interviews.
Neille, J., McEwen, H., & de Andrade, V. (2023). An exploration into people with disabilities' access to sex, sexuality, and sex education in South Africa. *Sexuality and Disability, 42*(1), 101–117. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11195-023-09827-6	Semi-structured and in-depth interviews were conducted over a period of one year by members of the project	Purposive sampling. A total of 27 participants with various sensory, physical, cognitive and/or	Inductive and deductive coding.	The conceptualization of the project, data collection, analysis, and dissemination of results were guided by the Declaration of Helsinki.	A team of extremely diverse researchers was used to conduct empirical research thus their ability to address and	Provides nuanced explorations of the diminished access people with disabilities have to resources surrounding

	committee in English, isiZulu, seSotho, and/or South African Sign Language (SASL).	communication impairments participated in the study.		Only individuals who were able to provide consent for their participation were considered for the study, and consent was obtained for both participation and use of quotations in the write up of findings. All participants consented to the audio recording of the interviews. During the process of data collection all participants were asked to select pseudonyms which they felt reflected their identities.	understand the multifaceted issues and dynamics that shape disabled sexuality in South Africa was improved. This elevated the credibility of the findings.	sexuality in South Africa as well as information on how to conduct semi-structured interviews with people with varied disabilities.
Hanass-Hancock, J., Chappell, P., Johns, R. *et al.* (2018) Breaking the Silence. Through Delivering Comprehensive Sexuality Education to Learners with Disabilities in South Africa: Educators Experiences. *Sex Disabil* **36**, 105–121.	Pre-intervention and post-implementation cross-sectional questionnaires	The participants were purposively sampled from urban and rural schools for	Conventional content analysis and NVIVO version 10.	The study received Ethical Clearance from the UKZN Ethics committee and the KZN	Transferability of article is compromised as a result of it being a pilot study which means that it	This article provides an example of using an approach on which to develop

	as well as in-depth qualitative interviews with a diverse set of educators.	learners with special educational needs (LSEN) through the KZN Department of Basic Education. Altogether, eight schools of learners with intellectual disabilities participated in the post-implementation assessment.		Department of Basic Education.	cannot be generalised across different contexts in South Africa for students with disabilities.	strategies to improve sexuality education for students with disabilities.
Chirawu, P., Hanass-Hancock, J., Aderemi, T. J., de Reus, L., & Henken, A. S. (2014). Protect or enable? Teachers' beliefs and practices regarding provision of sexuality education to learners with disability in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. *Sexuality and Disability*, 32(3), 259-277. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11195-014-9355-7	Focus group discussions and survey questionnaire.	Purposively selected sample of educators was drawn in cooperation with the KwaZulu-Natal Department of Education consisting of 99 educators of learners with disabilities	Descriptive analysis. Quantitative data entry and statistical analysis were performed using IBM SPSS Statistics 21. Cronbach's alpha were developed to	Ethics approval for the study was given by the University of KwaZulu-Natal Human and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee. Participation in the study was voluntary and participants were fully informed about their rights and choice of	The instrument, though mostly based on scales developed for teachers in other contexts, went through a rigorous validation process in the local context. Furthermore, the scales' reliability values	This article provides useful insight into equipping a purposive sampling strategy.

		from ten public schools in the province.	determine the scales' reliabilities. Frequencies, means and standard deviations were calculated for the Howard-Barr scales.	participation. Informed consent was signed by all participants and data was kept confidential with no names of schools or individuals attached.	(Cronbach's alphas) were within the acceptable range.	

Appendix B: Turnitin similarity index



Research Project_Michelle Kirstein (3).docx

ORIGINALITY REPORT

24%	19%	19%	6%
SIMILARITY INDEX	INTERNET SOURCES	PUBLICATIONS	STUDENT PAPERS

PRIMARY SOURCES

1	www.adry.up.ac.za Internet Source	1%
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9	link.springer.com Internet Source	<1%
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12	Bradley Carpenter, Maria Bakaroudis, Jill Hanass-Hancock. "Validating the Teacher Sexuality Education Questionnaire Scales to	<1%

Appendix C: Ethics clearance certificate

UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND, JOHANNESBURG | WSoE Wits School of Education

SCHOOL OF EDUCATION ETHICS COMMITTEE

CONSTITUTED UNDER THE UNIVERSITY HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE (NON-MEDICAL)

CLEARANCE CERTIFICATE **PROTOCOL NUMBER: W2024ECE066M**

PROJECT TITLE

Exploring the Challenges for Comprehensive Sexuality Education among Learners with Disabilities at Special Needs Schools in South Africa: A Systematic Literature Review.

INVESTIGATOR	Michelle Kirstein
SCHOOL/DEPARTMENT OF INVESTIGATOR	WSoE
DATE CONSIDERED	04 November 2024
DECISION OF THE COMMITTEE	Approved unconditionally
RISK LEVEL	No Risk
EXPIRY DATE	Date of submission of the Research Report
ISSUE DATE OF CERTIFICATE	28 November 2024
CHAIRPERSON	Dr. Lawan Abdulhamid

Supervisor: Dr Preya Pillay

DECLARATION OF INVESTIGATOR

To be completed in duplicate and ONE COPY returned to the Chairperson of the School/Department ethics committee.

I fully understand the conditions under which I am are authorized to carry out the abovementioned research and I guarantee to ensure compliance with these conditions. Should any departure to be contemplated from the research procedure as approved I/we undertake to resubmit the protocol to the Committee.

Signature _____ Date 11 / 28 / 2024