A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THE IMPLEMENTATION OF MALAWI NATIONAL STRATEGY ON INCLUSIVE EDUCATION BETWEEN PRIMARY AND SECONDARY SCHOOLS

Samson MacJessie-Mbewe
Ken Kaziputa Ndala
Elizabeth Tikondwe Kamchedzera
Paul Chiwaya
University of Malawi, Malawi

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to compare experiences of teachers and learners in the implementation of the National Strategy on Inclusive Education between primary and secondary schools in Malawi using a qualitative methodology with a phenomenological approach. The findings show that there is no clear difference in the way the National Strategy on Inclusive Education is implemented at both educational levels. Both levels face challenges of not having a system to identify and assess students for inclusive education; teachers do not have adequate knowledge and skills for inclusive education; training institutions do not offer practical programs on inclusive education; teaching and learning resources for students with special needs are not available; school infrastructure is not disability friendly; and some learners discriminate their fellow learners with special needs. These findings imply that there is a need to have all teachers trained in inclusive education; teacher training colleges and universities must offer both theoretical and practical inclusive education programs; there must be a system in schools to identify and assess learners; teaching and learning resources for those with disabilities must be provided; and conducive environment in schools that is disability friendly must be created.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The United Nations' 2030 Agenda for sustainable development goals indicates equity and inclusion as key to the socio-economic development of any country. Evidence has shown that education has the potential to transform lives and reduce inequalities. Numerous international declarations recognize education as a right for all children (UN, 1948; UN, 1962; UN, 1989; UN, 2009; UN, 2015; UNESCO, 1990; UNESCO, 1994;). The philosophy of inclusive education (IE) is that each learner should belong to a school, be valued and have a right to learn (UNESCO, 2012).

The 2020 Global Education Monitoring Report warns that education opportunities continue to be unequally distributed and barriers to quality education are still high for many learners (UNESCO, 2020). Globally, 59 million primary school-age children, 61 million secondary school-age children and 130 million upper secondary-age youths are out of school. The report indicates that half of these children and the youth are in Sub-Saharan Africa and that the global share in exclusion for Africa has increased from 24% in 2000 to 38% in 2018.

IE is "a process, actions and practices that embrace diversity and build a sense of belonging, rooted in the belief that every person has value and potential and should be respected" (UNESCO, 2020, p. 11). This agrees with the Malawi Disability Act's definition of IE as "a process of addressing and responding to the diverse needs of all learners through increasing participation in learning, cultures and communities, and reducing exclusion from and within education" (2012, p. 3).

In Malawi, IE began in 1950 under the guidance of faith-based organizations. The 1962-1967 Primary Education Development Plan indicates that the quest for Universal Primary Education

(UPE) started during that planning period. Educational plans for the districts indicate that it was impracticable to achieve UPE due to numerous challenges (Nyasaland Ministry of Education, 1963). The commitment of the government then was on learners with disabilities but later embraced IE agenda.

Malawi's commitment to IE became more evident in 2016 when it developed the National Strategy on Inclusive Education to implement the inclusive policies stipulated in the National Educational Policy of 2016 and strategies provided in the National Education Sector Plan of 2008 to 2017. Guided by the principles for embracing IE, the strategy aimed at promoting access, participation, and learning achievement of diverse learners at all levels by 2022. The goal of the strategy was to ensure that learners with diverse needs have equitable access to quality education in inclusive settings at all levels. Therefore, key areas in the strategy are: capacity for IE; learner identification and assessment; teacher education and motivation; enabling environment for teaching and learning; IE management information system; partners for IE; financing IE; and governance and management of IE (Ministry of Education Science and Technology [MOEST], 2016). For the purpose of this study, we considered three key areas as our conceptual framework to understand the experiences from the teachers and learners about the implementation of the National Strategy on Inclusive Education in both the primary and secondary levels. These are: (1) learners' identification and assessment; (2) teachers' knowledge and skills in IE; and (3) promotion of conducive environment for IE.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Promotion of IE is a global agenda and Malawi is not lagging behind in championing this agenda. Guided by international protocols, Malawi has developed a number of policy documents and strategies for enhancing IE. One of the policy documents is the National Strategy on Inclusive Education which specifically mentions the need to ensure that learners with diverse needs have equitable access to quality education in an inclusive setting at all education levels. The strategy stresses learner identification and assessment, capacity development for the teachers, a conducive environment, and the commitment of stakeholders in promoting inclusive education at all levels. Little, however, is known on how implementation of the strategy at both primary and secondary levels is being carried out.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose was to understand and compare the implementation of the National Strategy on Inclusive Education between primary and secondary schools in Malawi focusing on the experiences of teachers and learners.

MAIN RESEARCH QUESTION

What is the difference between primary and secondary schools in the way they implement the Malawi National Inclusive Education Strategy?

SPECIFIC RESEARCH QUESTIONS
1. How do primary schools compare with secondary schools in the way learners are identified and assessed for IE?
2. How do primary schools compare with secondary schools regarding the teachers' knowledge and skills in providing IE?

3. How do primary schools compare with secondary schools in promoting conducive environment for IE?

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section presents a review of related literature on the study and it is based on the priority themes from the research questions.

According to UNESCO (2019), inclusive education (IE) is considered a fundamental human right and a key component of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially SDG4 which ensures inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all. At both global and national levels, promotion of IE is influenced by international declarations and conventions, including human rights declaration on education (UN, 1948) and the convention against discrimination in education (UN, 1962). The World Bank (2021) notes that many countries have made progress in IE, but there is still a long way to go.

Teachers are usually at the locus of successful implementation of IE and several studies have examined the impact of teacher training on IE practices. For example, Loreman et al. (2021) found that teacher training programs that include practical experience working with students with disabilities can lead to more positive attitudes towards inclusion among pre-service teachers. Similarly, Ainscow et al. (2019) found that teacher education programs that focus on IE can have a positive impact on teacher attitudes, knowledge, and skills.

Another factor in promoting IE is the use of appropriate teaching materials and resources. Schools must ensure that their curriculum and teaching materials are accessible to all students, including those with disabilities (World Health Organization, 2020). This involves using alternative formats, such as braille or audiobooks, or providing assistive technology.

UNESCO (2020) positions IE as critical for promoting equitable and quality education for all children in Sub-Saharan Africa. However, there are challenges to implementing IE in the region like lack of resources, inadequate training, and negative attitudes towards children with disabilities. For example, Kalyanpur and Harry (2020) found that many schools in the region lack basic resources such as textbooks, instructional materials and assistive technology.

Moreover, many teachers in Sub-Saharan Africa have not received adequate training on IE practices which also affects their attitude. For example, Namusisi et al. (2021) found that teachers in Uganda lack knowledge and skills related to IE, which limits their ability to effectively teach children with disabilities. Mbaegbu (2021) adds that, in some cases, both teachers and students have negative attitudes towards learners with disabilities.

In Malawi, IE has recently received considerable attention. According to MOEST (2018), IE is seen as critical for promoting equitable and quality education for all children, including those with disabilities. However, a number of studies have unearthed challenges to implementing IE in the country. Many teachers lack knowledge for identifying learners with diverse needs, in particular, those that cannot be seen by eyes and in turn, such learners receive little or no attention during teaching and learning process. According to Banks et al. (2015), many schools lack basic resources such as textbooks, instructional materials, and assistive technology. Studies conducted in some primary and secondary schools by Chataika et al. (2017), Kamchedzera (2010), and Mbewe et al. (2021) reported similar findings. Another challenge is that many teachers in Malawi have not received adequate training on IE practices. According to Chikasanda (2020), teacher education programs in Malawi do not adequately prepare teachers to teach children with disabilities. These corroborate

earlier findings by Makoko and Chimutu (2007), Chavuta et al. (2008), Kamchedzera (2010) and Mbewe et al. (2021). Their findings also revealed inaccessible infrastructure as additional challenges to IE. In addition, Chataika et al. (2017) found that most teachers claimed to lack knowledge and skills in the use of appropriate methods in inclusive classrooms, which may imply that the needs of learners with special needs in inclusive classrooms were not met.

Negative attitudes towards children with disabilities also pose a significant barrier to IE in Malawi. According to Banks et al. (2015), negative attitudes towards children with disabilities are common in Malawi, which limits their access to education and other services.

Research Design and Methodology

Based on the interpretative paradigm, the study adopted a qualitative methodology with a phenomenological approach. According to interpretivism, individuals try to understand the world they live in and they develop subjective meanings of their experiences (Creswell, 2013). He further stipulates, "the goal of research, then, is to rely as much as possible on the participants' views of the situation" (p. 25). As such, this study intended to uncover how participants interpret the implementation of the National Strategy on Inclusive Education in primary and secondary schools. The main characteristic of qualitative research is to view the world through the eyes of the participants so that the phenomena can be described in terms of the meaning that they have for such participants (Maree, 2007). Qualitative research uses naturalistic inquiry and enables the researcher to generate data in a natural setting (Newby, 2010).

Furthermore, the aim of the interpretative phenomenological analysis is to provide an examination and an account of individuals' lived experiences as an interpretative task since humans can make sense of their environment (Smith & Osborn, 2015). In support, Creswell (2013) asserts, "a phenomenological study describes the common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon." (p. 76) Therefore, in this study, lived experiences of teachers and learners as a group were examined to understand the implementation of IE in primary and secondary schools.

Sampling

Purposive sampling was used to sample schools and participants for the study. Purposive sampling is the process of intentionally sampling a group of people who can provide the best information about the research problem under examination (Creswell, 2013). Therefore, the following were the characteristics that were used in sampling: (1) region which were north (N), centre (C) and south (S); (2) school levels which were primary and secondary; (3) types of secondary schools which were conventional secondary schools (CSS) and community day secondary schools (CDSS); (4) students characteristics which were those with and without special needs; and (5) teacher characteristics which were mainstream teachers and special needs education (SNE) specialist teachers. Table 1 shows how sampling was done.

Table 1: Sampling

Region	No. of Schools Sampled			No. of Headteachers Sampled			N0. of Teachers Sampled			No. of Learners Sampled			Total
	P	S		P	S		P	S		P	S		
		Conv	CDSS		Conv	CDSS		Conv	CDSS		Conv	CDSS	
N	2	1	1	2	1	1	10	5	5	16	8	8	60
C	2	1	1	2	1	1	10	5	5	16	8	8	60
S	2	1	1	2	1	1	10	5	5	16	8	8	60
Total	6	3	3	6	3	3	30	15	15	48	24	24	180

P = Primary Schools; S = Secondary Schools; Conv= Conventional

Note: out of the 30 teachers sampled in primary schools, 6 were SNE specialist teachers. Out of the 30 secondary school teachers sampled, 8 were SNE specialist teachers and all were from CSSs and none was found in the CDSSs.

Data Generation

According to Willing (2013), "data collection in qualitative research is aimed at creating a comprehensive record of participants' words and actions." (p. 91). In order to capture these words and actions, face-to-face interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs) and observations were the techniques used in this study. Researchers were divided into three groups to collect data in the three regions within the same period. Table 2 shows what was involved in data generation.

Table 2. Data Generation

Schools	No. of Headteacher Interviews	No. of FGDs for Teachers	No. of Teachers per FGD	No. of FGDs for Learners	No. of Learners per FGD	No. of Schools whose Environments were Observed
Primary	6	6	5	6	8	6
CSS	3	3	5	3	8	3
CDSS	3	3	5	3	8	3
Total	12	12	60	12	96	12

Interviews for headteachers, and FGDs for teachers and learners were conducted. The items to be observed in the instruments were to identify the differences and similarities. Each interview guide and FGD guide had three sections: (i) learner identification and assessment; (ii) capacity for inclusive education; and (iii) enabling environment for teaching, learning, and assessment. The observation guide included checking for the availability of special resource room and special teaching and learning materials, special toilets, ramps, and general infrastructure accessibility. Twelve headteachers were involved in face-to-face interviews and 12 teacher FGDs were conducted with 5 teachers in each FGD. In addition, 12 learner FGDs were conducted with 8 learners in each FGD. Finally, the environments for 12 schools were observed. The research instruments are included in the Appendices.

Data Analysis

This study followed the data analysis steps presented by Rossman and Rallis (2003) and Creswell (2013). These involve organizing the data, reading the database repeatedly, coding and organizing themes, representing the data, and interpreting the data. In this study, data were first organized from the notes and recordings following the research questions and thereafter, data under each research question were read repeatedly and coded to determine categories or themes. The data were presented in discussion and interpreted to tell a coherent story about the implementation of the National Strategy on Inclusive Education. Even though these steps look linear, there was a process of moving back and forth in order to understand the data and the themes that were emerging. As commented by Creswell (2013), "to analyze qualitative data, the researcher engages in the process of moving in analytic circles rather than using a fixed linear approach" (p. 182).

ETHICAL CONSIDERATION AND TRUSTWORTHINESS OF THE STUDY

Before conducting the study, permission to access the schools was sought from the Ministry of Education (MoE). The MoE then wrote an introduction letter to the schools to introduce the researchers and the study. In addition, permission was sought from headteachers to interview teachers and learners. All participants were informed of the purpose of the study and consent was sought from them to participate in the study. They were also informed that they were free to pull out of the study at any point or that they were free to refuse to answer any question if they felt uncomfortable with it. Furthermore, participants were assured of confidentiality and that their names and the names of their schools would not be revealed in the results of the study.

Accordingly, data collection instruments were piloted with a small sample which was not included as participants of this study and necessary corrections were made to the instruments before data collection. And again, triangulation of sources of data, for example from learners, teachers and school environment, was made to make sure there was consistency in the data generated.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to carry out a comparative analysis of the implementation of the National Strategy on Inclusive Education in primary and secondary schools in Malawi focusing on the experiences of teachers and learners. For a comprehensive understanding of this qualitative study, the results and the related discussions are presented together focusing on three major areas (1) learners' identification and assessment; (2) teachers' knowledge and skills in IE; and (3) promotion of a conducive environment for IE.

Learners' Identification and Assessment

The first research question is aimed at finding out how learners were identified and assessed for inclusive education (IE) in primary schools as compared to secondary schools in Malawi. There were a number of themes that emerged in data analysis.

Learners Identified by Teachers in Class

First, the commonly mentioned way of identifying learners for IE was when they were already attending classes. Most of the respondents mentioned that teachers identify the learners in class through their behavior, performance and general observation of their physical characteristics, and there was no difference in the responses of the research participants between primary and secondary schools. For example, secondary school teachers in the center agreed that, "learners most of the times do not avail themselves but during classes when we teachers observe their conditions" (TFGD

1 SSC – 30/05/22). This was concurred by secondary school teachers in the south: "we observe how they behave in the classroom" (TFGD 2 SSS – 01/06/22). This was not different from what primary school respondents said. For example, in the north, they agreed that, "we identify some by their behavior and performance in class" (TFGD 1 PrSN – 31/5/22). Even primary school headteachers in the south agreed that "Teachers help with the identification of IE students during classes but it does not really work because we are talking about teachers that have no skills" (HT2 PrS – 02/06/22).

Learners also agreed that they were identified "through observation of every student's behavior during classes" but they also continued to say, "this is not a good way to identify someone with special needs because there are some you can't find out through observation" (LFGD 2 PrC – 02/06/22).

Learners Identification by Parents

Some respondents explained that parents inform the schools about the condition of their children. For instance, one secondary school headteacher in the centre explained, "Parents at the enrolment stage report the conditions of their children to the headteacher" (HT2 SSC – 01/06/22). In agreement, secondary school teachers in the south said, "Parents report to the school management" (TFGD 1 SSS – 30/05/22). In support, primary school teachers in the south agreed that, "During enrolment or the first time the students attend classes at this school, their parents are asked to provide information about their children" (TFGD 1 PrS – 31/05/22). Similarly, one of the primary school headteachers in the north iterated, "We get information from parents" (HT2 PrN – 02/06/22). This was repeated by primary school learners in the north who agreed that, "learners with special needs come with parents to be enrolled" (LFGD1 PrN – 31/05/22).

Learners Identification by Hospital and Ministry of Education

Very few respondents indicated that learners for IE are identified by the Ministry of Education and hospitals and these were mainly from secondary schools. For example, secondary school teachers in the center indicated, "Others are identified by the Ministry during Standard 8 (Grade 8) exams for selection to secondary schools" (TFGD 1 SSC – 30/05/22). This was corroborated by secondary teachers in the south who stated, "The students are selected from government schools and they come here already identified" (TFGD 2 SSS – 01/06/22). Furthermore, it was only in secondary schools where respondents indicated that learners are identified and assessed by hospitals. For example, secondary school teachers in the center elaborated that, "Doctors also help in identification of IE students. For example, when a visual problem is noticed amongst students, they are sent to hospitals for eye testing" (TFGD 2 SSC – 01/06/22). This was supported by secondary school teachers in the south who indicated, "They (leaners) come already classified" (TFGD 2 SSS – 01/06/22).

Established System for Identification and Assessment of Learners

Nine out of ten respondents in primary and secondary schools agreed that there was no established system for identifying IE students. For instance, secondary school teachers in the south agreed that:

> Even though learners with special needs are identified by teachers, the school does not have an established system of identifying and assessing such learners. The identification is at the discretion of teachers. Thus, they may decide to identify them or not. (TFGD 1 SSS – 30/05/22)

In support, one secondary school headteacher in the south emphatically said, "Honestly we do not have a system. We do the identification of learners unsystematically and there is no assessment" (HT 2 SSS – 01/06/22).

This was concurred by primary headteacher in the north who complained, "No! we do not have! We just do it haphazardly" (HT 1 PrN – 31/05/22). In agreement, the primary school headteacher in the center said, "There is no established system of identifying and assessing learners with special needs at this school" (HT 1 PrC – 31/05/22).

Results under learner identification and assessment show that, in both primary and secondary schools, teachers are the ones who mainly identify children for IE by just observing the behavior, performance and physical characteristics of the learners, especially in class. Sometimes the schools learn about the condition of their learners from parents. While respondents talked about identification, they did not mention any procedure that was used to assess learners for IE. There is therefore no established system of identifying and assessing learners for IE in both primary and secondary schools. This agrees with the quantitative study in South Africa by Matolo and Rambuda (2022) which indicated that even though there was a system put by the policy, but:

> Educators do not effectively use the screen resources such as the learner profile to screen barriers and the Support Needs Assessment is not effectively used to identify and assess the barriers experienced by learners. As a result, support of learners was found to be inadequate. (p.11)

Furthermore, the involvement of the Ministry of Education and hospitals in identifying and assessing learners for IE is very limited to a few secondary schools and this hardly happens in primary schools.

Teachers' Knowledge and Skills in Inclusive Education

The second research question addresses how teachers in primary schools compare with those in secondary schools regarding the knowledge and skills that they have to implement IE.

General Teaching Knowledge and Skills versus Inclusive Education Knowledge and Skills

Apart from teachers of two secondary schools and two primary schools (out of 6 primary schools and 6 secondary schools) who indicated that they had the knowledge and skills of IE, most of the teachers in both primary and secondary schools (4 primary schools and 4 secondary schools) indicated that they did not have adequate knowledge and skills of IE. For example, secondary school teachers from the center agreed that, "We have no knowledge. We need to be trained" (TFGD 1 SSC – 01/06/22). This was supported by secondary school teachers in the north who agreed, "This is why we earlier suggested that teachers need to be trained on IE. We do not have enough knowledge and skills" (TFGD 2 SSN – 01/06/22).

Similarly, teachers in primary schools indicated that they did not have adequate knowledge and skills of IE. For instance, primary school teachers in the center indicated that "We don't have adequate skills because we haven't been trained properly" (TFGD 1 PrC – 31/05/22). In support, teachers in the north said, "Teachers have little knowledge on how to handle different learners with different needs. The learners have different disabilities and teachers might have general knowledge on dealing with all learners" (TFGD 2 PrN – 02/06/22).

The teachers who indicated that they had some knowledge of IE indicated knowledge of teaching in general but lacked knowledge and skills to deal with learners with special needs in

an inclusive manner. For instance, secondary school teachers in the south said, "We teach using methods which are learner centered like role play and discussion where all learners are given a chance to participate" (TFGD2 SSS – 01/06.22). These are general learner centered methods that are accepted but teachers could not come out clearly on how they facilitated discussions with leaners of low-level intelligence.

However, there were a few teachers who showed ability to reach students with special needs when teaching. These were mostly from the south and it was observed that their schools were closer to a special needs education college and probably they had some knowledge through interaction with members of this college. For example, one secondary school teacher in the south indicated that, "When you are teaching and you want to ask a question, you also write it on the board so that some of the students who are deaf should see" (TFGD 1 SSS – 30/05/22). Another primary school teacher added:

> We differentiate. For low vision we use large print; for total blindness we use brail. We also change the questions. For instance, instead of the learner drawing or labeling parts of a grasshopper, we tell him or her to mention parts of the grasshopper. (TFGD 1 PrS – 31/05/22)

Apart from learners without special needs, most of the learners with special needs lamented that they were not satisfied with how teachers taught them. They gave various reasons that showed that teachers did not have adequate knowledge and skills to handle learners with special needs. For example, learners agreed that, "We are not satisfied because most teachers say that they don't spoon feed if you ask them to repeat, hence leaving students with special needs behind" (LFGD 1 SSS – 30/05/22). Other leaners said, "Not satisfied especially to those with visual impairment; they can't see properly on the board but teachers continue to teach without regard of them" (LFGD 2 SSC – 01/06/22).

Furthermore, in another group, learners said, "They (Teachers) speak through the mouth and the deaf do not hear" (LFGD 1 PrC – 31/05/22). Another member with special needs painfully added, "The sign language teachers should be coming to teach us so we could pass in class too" (LFGD 1 PrC – 31/05/22).

Moreover, learners felt that their teachers did not have adequate knowledge and skills of IE because "They write small letters on the board and do not change even if we complain." They also added, "Harsh treatment of students is portrayed by some teachers because they don't have knowledge on how they should handle students with special needs" (LFGD 1 SSC – 30/05/22).

Theoretical Teaching of Inclusive Education in Teachers' Training Colleges/Universities

Both primary and secondary school teachers' inadequate knowledge in IE was reflected in the way they responded regarding what they learned while in teachers training colleges/universities. All of them indicated that teacher preparation for IE in colleges/universities was inadequate and theoretical. For instance, primary school teachers in the center stated, "At TTC only IE theory was taught with no details. It was just like an introduction to IE" (TFGD 2 PrC – 02/06/22). Teachers in the south agreed. One teacher said, "No hands-on experience. I only learned it theoretically" (TFGD 1 SSS – 30/05/22).

From the results on the knowledge and skills of teachers in IE, it is clear that teachers in both primary and secondary schools did not have adequate knowledge and skills in IE. Those who

claimed to have skills, they referred to general teaching methods which mostly cater for general students and still leaving learners with special needs behind, and no wonder that it was only those students without special needs who were satisfied with how these teachers were teaching them. This inadequacy is a result of not having a deep and practical IE in the teachers' training colleges/ universities and lack of in-service training on IE. These results concur with a mixed method study in Saudi Arabia by Alkahtan (2022) who found that teachers had no sufficient knowledge and ability to teach students diagnosed with Emotional and Behavioral Disorder. Similarly, a quantitative study in Ethiopia by Moti, Merdassa and Dessalegn (2016) found that primary school teachers had slightly moderate knowledge about IE and they rarely practiced IE.

Promotion of Conducive Environment for Inclusive Education

The last research question is intended to investigate how a conducive environment for IE is being promoted in primary schools as compared to secondary schools. Data analysis indicated that, in both primary and secondary schools, the environment was not very conducive for the implementation of the Strategy on IE.

Availability of teaching, learning and assessment resources

One of the provisions for a conducive environment for IE is the availability of resources. However, all the participants interviewed in both secondary and primary schools indicated that there was no adequate teaching, learning and assessment resources for all learners in schools. For example, secondary school teachers in the south agreed that, "The availability is very low." (TFGD1 SSS – 30/05/22). In support, secondary school teachers in the center stated, "Not enough resources." (TFGD 2 SSC – 01/06/22). In agreement, the teachers in the north explained, "We have no resources to cater for all learners" (TFGD 2 SSN - 01/06/22).

The sentiments by secondary school participants were not different from those in primary schools who also indicated that there were inadequate teaching, learning and assessment resources in their schools. As indicated by one of the primary headteachers in the north, "We lack most of the teaching and learning materials for learners." (HT1PrN – 31/05/22). Primary school teachers in the center also agreed that, "The resources are not sufficient at all" (TFGD 1 PrC – 31/05/22).

While all the participants agreed that there were inadequate teaching, learning and assessment resources for all learners in both secondary and primary schools, they bitterly complained that resources for learners with special needs were totally not available. One secondary teacher in the south angrily stated, "We do not even have a resource room but we have almost 41 students with disabilities," and others agreed, "The resources for students with special needs were most of the times forgotten" (TFGD1 SSS – 30/05/22). Learners in secondary schools also concurred that, "No! They are not available and even the teachers for these students are not available" (LFGD1 SSS – 30/05/22).

Similarly, teaching, learning and assessment resources for students with special needs are also not available in primary schools. As stated by one primary school headteacher in the north, "The school does not have teaching and learning materials necessary for learners with special needs" (HT 2 PrN – 02/06/22). In agreement, central primary school teachers stated, "No resources, it's really difficult for students with disabilities" (T FGD2 PrC – 02/06/22).

Our physical observations agreed with what the participants said as the majority of the schools observed had no resource rooms. For the very few schools that had resource rooms, these rooms

do not have resources. Even in school libraries, there are no resources specifically for students with special needs.

As a result of data analysis, it is clear that in both secondary and primary schools there are inadequate teaching, learning and assessment resources for all learners even though they are required to implement IE. Furthermore, most of the schools have no specialist teachers and for those that have them, they are not sufficient to meet the various special needs categories in schools.

Challenges in Accessing School Infrastructure

The study has found that a conducive environment for the implementation of the Strategy on IE is deterred by challenges that students with special needs face in accessing school infrastructure.

In both primary and secondary schools, infrastructure cannot be easily accessed by students with disabilities because they are not disability friendly. Secondary school teachers in the center agreed that, "The wheel-chaired and the visually impaired students use long routes to get to another point just because the school corridors are in bad shape." (TFGD 1 SSC – 30/05/22).

This was further elaborated by primary school teachers in the north who said, "The infrastructure is not user friendly because many classrooms don't have ramps" (TFD 2 PrN – 02/06/22). In addition, primary school learners in the south agreed with their group member with disability who complained, "We bump into one another sometimes and the campus has a lot of steps." (LFGD1 PrS – 31/05/22). Our physical observations found that out of the 12 schools we visited, only three had ramps with the third one only having two ramps for the whole school campus.

There are also no special toilets and bathrooms for learners with disabilities. Primary school learners in the center agreed that, "The toilets and bathrooms are made for regular students. There is no special toilet for those with special needs." (LFGD 2 PrC – 02/06/22). Secondary school teachers in the south agreed that, "Our bathrooms and toilets are for students without disabilities. Some students with disabilities crawl in the unhygienic toilet." (TFGD 1 SSS – 30/05/22). Secondary school learners in the north concurred that "there are no handrails or special seats for those with physical impairments" (LFGD 2 SSN – 01/06/22).

Our physical observations confirmed that there were no special toilets and bathrooms in both primary and secondary schools. In addition, some secondary schools and all primary schools had pit latrines that would make it difficult for students with disabilities to use.

Furthermore, participants indicated that some classrooms have poor lighting hence learners failed to see what teachers wrote on the chalk board. One secondary school headteacher in the center explained, "Poor lighting in classrooms is not favourable to those visually impaired" (HT 1 SSC – 30/05/22). In support, primary school learners in the north agreed, "Even those who sit close to the chalkboard are unable to see" (LFGD 1 PrN – 31/05/22). Our observations also confirmed that some classrooms in both primary and secondary schools had cemented blocks with holes that acted as windows and could not allow enough light in.

Students Safety

When the participants were asked how they ensured safety for students with special needs bearing in mind that some get attacked due to the mystical beliefs that their bodies can make people rich, participants from both primary and secondary schools showed strong commitment to making their students safe.

The commonest way that schools use to keep students with special needs safe is to allocate fellow students to look after them or to encourage them to walk in groups. For instance, secondary school teachers in the south explained, "Those students using wheel chairs with albinism have fellow students are assigned with them to look after them." (TFGD1 SSC – 30/05/22). In support, secondary school teachers in the south said, "We encourage them to be coming to school as well as going home in groups." (TFGD2 SSS – 01/06/22).

Primary school teachers in the north supported, "For example, we have a student with albinism and her friends escort her from home to school and back to home." (TFGD 2 PrN – 02/06/22).

The other ways of protecting students that participants indicated were: Giving students with albinism gadgets like alarm to sound when in danger and providing them with special lotion for their skin; discouraging teasing and bullying; and some schools without fence are considering to construct fences.

However, there were some few learners who indicated that they did not feel safe "because the school is not fenced." (LFGD 2 SSC – 01/06/22). Others indicated that, "We don't feel safe, like the toilets are not clean. We who use wheel chairs use the ordinary toilets. We crawl on dirty floors." (LFGD 2 PrS – 02/06/22).

Learners' Interaction with Students with Special Needs

Most of the respondents in both primary and secondary schools indicated that learners with and without special needs interact freely and do help one another. For example, teachers in the center explained, "They do interact with each other in a good manner; they protect each other. The relation is just good." (TFGD 1 SSC – 30/05/22).

Teachers in the south added, "They (The learners) are used to each other. Some are even learning the sign language." (TFGD 2 SSS – 01/06/22). Even in primary school, some learners indicated that, "We interact with them (the learners with special needs) very well." (LFGD1 PrN – 31/05/22).

However, while most of the teachers and few learners indicated that learners with and without special needs interact well, most of the learners indicated that there are some discriminations of learners with special needs by their fellow learners. For example, some learners in the center said, "There is some discrimination portrayed by some students." (LFGD2 SSC – 01/06/22). Other learners especially those with special needs added, "Some chat with us because they just want to learn sign language, but when we ask them sometimes to interpret for us certain things they don't answer us." (LFGD1 SSS – 30/05/22).

One primary school learner with special needs in the north lamented, with a somber face:

No! Some learners without special needs tell me openly that 'there is no way you can be chatting with us.' So, I just isolate myself because other learners do not want to interact with learners with special needs…Many learners do not want to chat with me. (LFGD2 PrN – 02/06/22)

Other learners in the same group concurred, "One day during class quiz, some friends without special needs prevented her (learner above) from participating. They said, 'what can you tell us?' She did not participate in that quiz, I remember!" (LFGD2 PrN – 02/06/22).

Even though schools try to promote conducive environment for the implementation of IE, the environment in both primary and secondary schools is still not very conducive. Teaching, learning and assessment resources, especially those for learners with special needs, are not available; learners

face challenges to access school infrastructure; learners with special needs are discriminated against by some fellow learners without special needs. While most of the learners feel safe, there are some who do not feel safe at school. These results agree with the study by Faizefu (2018) in Cameroon which assessed the learning environment of learners and found that it was not conducive to implementation of IE and this affected the performance of students with different disabilities.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to compare the implementation of the National Strategy on Inclusive Education at primary and secondary school levels in Malawi by exploring experiences of teachers and learners. This was based on the policy direction in the National Education Policy that states that promotion of IE shall be at all levels. This study concludes that there is no remarkable difference in the way the strategy is implemented in both primary and secondary schools. Furthermore, in both levels, the implementation of the strategy has not been successful because it is impeded by a number of challenges. The first challenge is that in both levels of schools, there is no established system to identify and assess learners for IE. Teachers just do what they think can help them identify learners, and assessment is hardly done. The ability to identify learners for IE is recognized in Malawi by the country's Disability Act and IE Strategy as instrumental in ensuring the success of IE. So, it is clearly worrisome to note that at the school level, which is the main implementation locus of IE, systems for identifying learners for IE are deficient. Second, teachers in both education levels do not have adequate knowledge and skills to handle students in an IE manner. This is aggravated by lack of deep and practical IE programs in teacher training colleges and universities. This seems to go against the spirit of the UN convention against discrimination in education which upholds the provision of suitable education that is responsive to the needs of students. Third, the environment in both primary and secondary schools is not conducive to implementing the Strategy on IE. Teaching, learning and assessment resources, especially those for learners with special needs are not available; learners face challenges to access school infrastructure; learners with special needs are discriminated against by some fellow learners without special needs; and while most of the learners feel safe, some do not feel safe at school. This contravenes the agreement of the parties (including Malawi) to the UN convention against discrimination in education and the UN convention on the rights of children to undertake concrete steps in creating schools that offer quality IE to all children.

IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATIONAL PLANNING

There are four implications for planning based on the results of the study. First, for effective implementation of IE policies and strategies, planning should be done to establish a system of identifying and assessing learners with diverse needs at the entry level of primary education. The system, among others should provide training to all stakeholders in identifying and assessing learners with diverse needs. The system should trace and follow up the learners as they move to the next level of education, that is, secondary and higher education. The second implication for planning is making sure all teachers receive preservice training that includes aspects of IE and continuous professional development (CPD) for teachers who are already in schools to acquire skills to implement IE agenda. In addition, teacher training colleges and universities should plan to review their curricula to include comprehensive and practical preservice IE to prospective primary and secondary school teachers. This recommendation is rooted in the realization that teachers are a critical ingredient in the successful implementation of IE (UN, 1962; MOEST, 2016; UNICEF, 2012). The third implication for planning is the provision of teaching and learning resources to schools and special attention should be given to resources to cater for learners with different disabilities.

Finally, planning should be done to sensitize learners and communities on how they should handle and interact with learners with special needs to avoid discriminatory tendencies towards them. The need to involve multiple stakeholders in ensuring the success of IE is also promoted by the National Strategy on IE in Malawi. Moreover, the school environment including infrastructure must be made friendly to suit all types of learners' needs. Rendering school infrastructure accessible to all types of learners is recognized as a necessary concrete step in ensuring the success of inclusive education (MOEST, 2016; UNICEF, 2012).

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Focus Group Interview Guides for Teachers

Learner Identification and Assessment

i.   How are the learners identified and assessed for the special needs?

ii.   Do we have an established system of identifying learners with special needs? If yes, describe it.

Capacity for Inclusive Education

i.   How would you comment on the knowledge and skills you have to assist learners with special needs?

ii.   At the TTC, when you were doing your pre-service training, did you receive enough training on how to teach learners with special needs in your teaching approach? (If not, what is your suggestion? If yes how adequate was the training)

iii. How would you rate yourselves as having the capacity for inclusive education? To a greater Extent or smaller extent? Explain your answer

Enabling Environment for Teaching, Learning and Assessment

i.   How would you describe the availability of teaching, learning and assessment resources for IE at this school?

ii.   What challenges do students with special needs face when accessing infrastructure at your school?

iii. How do you ensure safety for students with special needs at your school?

iv.   How do students with and without special needs interact?

Appendix 2: Focus Group Interview Guide for Learners

Learner Identification and Assessment

i.   How were you identified as learners for IE?

ii.   Did you follow any established system to identify and assess your learning difficulty?

Teacher Training for Inclusive Education

i.   Do you think your teachers have necessary knowledge and skill to help you with your learning?

ii.   Out of all the teachers who teach you, how many teachers do you think have the necessary knowledge and skills to handle special needs students at this school?

iii. What other skills are lacking in the teachers to teach well students with special needs?

Conducive Environment for inclusive education

i.   How would you describe the availability of teaching and learning materials for your learning at this school?

   ii.   What challenges do students with special needs face when accessing infrastructure at your school?

   iii.   Do you feel safe when you are at school? Explain.

   iv.   How do students with and without special needs interact?

Appendix 3: Key Informant Interview Guides for Head Teachers

Learner Identification and Assessment

   i.   How would you describe the identification process of learners with special needs at your school?

   ii.   Do we have an established system of identifying learners with special needs? If yes, describe it.

Capacity for Inclusive Education

   i.   How would you comment on the knowledge and skills for teachers to assist learners with special needs?

   ii.   At the TTC, when you were doing your pre-service training, did you receive enough training on how to teach learners with special needs in your teaching approach? If not, what is your suggestion? If yes, how adequate was the training?

   iii.   How would you rate yourself as having the capacity for IE? To a greater extent? or a smaller extent? Explain your answer.

Enabling Environment for Teaching, Learning and Assessment

   i.   How would you describe the availability of teaching, learning and assessment resources for inclusive education at this school?

   ii.   What challenges do students with special needs face when accessing infrastructure at your school?

   iii.   How do you ensure safety for students with special needs at your school?

   iv.   How do students with and without special needs interact?

Appendix 4: Observation Guide

Name of the School: _____

Region: _____ **District:** _____

To be observed	Comments
Special Needs Resource Room	
Special toilets	
Ramps	
General infrastructure accessibility	
Special needs teaching and learning materials	