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## Implementation of inclusion policy in Malawian Secondary Schools

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### Background

Inclusive education (IE) has been a major policy initiative designed to improve the educational opportunities of all children with disabilities (UN, 1994; UNESCO, 2001; Ainscow, 2005; Lindsay, 2007). The Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994), accepted by 92 governments, was the first international recognition that in order to meet special needs of students the goal should be changed from inclusion in education to IE. More recently, Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN, 2006) has attempted to guarantee IE as a right. If IE is a right, however, fewer than 5% of children with disabilities in most of the world even finish primary schools (World Bank, 2003; Laurin-Bowie, 2009). Nevertheless, in an attempt to respond to disability-related inequalities in education, Malawi has adopted a policy of inclusion. As a result, there is increased access to mainstream secondary schools for pupils with disabilities (Ministry of Education's 2004, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009 National Education Statistics).

This paper draws upon a study of education of pupils with disabilities in Malawi's inclusive secondary schools, where no previous research has taken place. The study focused on the policy-to-practice context and experiences of pupils and their teachers.

### Research Questions

The research questions were as follows.

- (i) How do schools teachers implement the policy regarding inclusion of pupils with disabilities in secondary schools?
- (ii) What are the experiences of pupils' with disabilities and their teachers in inclusive secondary schools?
- (iii) What are the views of teachers tasked with the implementation of inclusion policy into practice at school level and the views of pupils with disabilities?
- (iv) What are the barriers to learning and participation faced by pupils with disabilities?

### Methods

The study was located within an interpretative paradigm. It adopted a mixed-methods approach to data collection. Mixed methods entails "employing the combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches" (Creswell, 2009:203). Data were gathered from national policy documents, elite interviews from policy makers, questionnaire from practitioners, classroom observations and interviews of teachers and disabled students.

### Frame

The study rejects the medical model of disability that views disability as a measurable defect located in the individual and requiring a cure (Gill, 1999 cited in Mertens and McLaughlin, 2004). At the same time it qualifies the social model of disability by underlining the importance of the 'child's within factor' (Lindsay, 2003) and the principles of non-discrimination, participation and valuing diversity. It thus employed Ball's policy-trajectory model (Ball, 1994) in order to explore the policy-to-practice contexts. Bowe et al (1992) attempted to give structure to Ball's model by proposing three primary contexts. These are the contexts of policy influence, text production, and practice. The context of influence is where policy is initiated and discourses constructed (Ball, 1994). The context of policy text production

focuses on the production of policy text for implementation. The context of practice concerns re-interpretation and re-creation by practitioners. In the context of the school, these are teachers, head teachers, and other staff entrusted with the implementation of policy into practice. Ball's trajectory model has not been applied widely in research on policy-to-practice contexts research in education. However, it aided this study to focus on the three contexts and the relationship among them.

## **Research findings**

The study established that inclusion policy does not succeed if there is no responsiveness to the views, experiences and needs of teachers, pupils' "within" learning factors, and historical factors that may have influenced the development of SNE in secondary schools.

The findings showed that inclusion is well accepted in the contexts of influence, contexts of text production and practice as an approach that encourages non-discrimination.

Documentary analysis indicated that at the point of text production, there has been ample reflection on inclusion and IE reflecting international standards. However, it revealed that policies in favour of macro-economic stability had dominated policies for inclusive education.

Elite interviews showed that there was a wide acceptance of the values of inclusion as a discourse and text with claims for its growing prominence. However, they revealed that there was lack of understanding of the context in which it should be applied. Perceived barriers to learning and participation were inadequacy/lack of teaching and learning materials, inadequacy/lack of specialized teachers and qualified teachers, and unfriendly/inaccessible infrastructure.

The linkage between capacity to deliver and results of inclusion appear very well understood by teachers. Questionnaire results showed teachers' commonly perceived positive experiences related to teaching competence; appreciation of pupils' good performance; and pupils' eagerness and interest in learning. Also revealed were the advantages of inclusion related to pupil socialisation/interaction; pupils learning from each other; and pupils' equal access to education. Commonly perceived barriers to learning and participation were inadequacy/lack of teaching and learning materials, lack of trained teachers in SNE, and lack of confidence on part of pupils. Commonly perceived negative experiences of pupils with disabilities were lack of active participation; inadequacy and lack of materials/resources; and discrimination. The teachers' perceived negative experiences were inadequacy and lack of learning and teaching materials, limited/lack of participation and inadequate assistance.

Findings from classroom observations data revealed that teachers recognised the need for the pupils to participate fully in the teaching and learning process but lacked appropriate sensitivity in methods and skills to keep pupils fully participating. They also lacked adequate teaching and learning materials.

Evidence from semi-structured interviews with pupils with disabilities revealed that their perceived main barriers to learning and participation were lack of specialist support; shortage of special teaching/learning materials; lack of resource centers, in the context of personal material poverty.

Overall there is much good will and much has been achieved to include secondary-school pupils with disabilities. Strong and effective policy is in place but Malawi now needs more targeted investment (government, international agencies and donors) for education system reform: specialist advice and resources at the school district level, teachers who are trained, skilled and knowledgeable about IE together with monitoring/feedback framework.

**Key words: Malawi, IE, disabilities**

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