

A Study of Special Educational Needs and Disability Provision in Malawi

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1.0 Introduction

Education is widely acknowledged as a gateway to a productive and successful future. Many parents who recognise this strive hard to give their child a quality education that gives their child a more favourable outlook in the everchanging, increasingly competitive world. Children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), find it difficult to access learning when delivered in a rigid or conventional way. However, they too have an equal right to gain a quality education and be fully equipped to lead productive lives. This paper examines the path of special needs education provision in Malawi with the objective of raising awareness and informing stakeholders. The paper however starts with exploring the broader global picture.

2.0 Disability: A global view

People with disability (PWD) are described as ‘those who have long term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation with society on an equal basis with others.’ (UNCRPD, 2006) (Soni et al., 2020, p.2)

There are roughly one billion people living with disability in the world, a tenth of which are children. At least 80% of these children with disabilities (CWD) live in developing countries. (Soni et al., 2020, p.1) About 53 million under-fives live with disability and 95% of them are in low income countries. (Soni et al., 2020, p.1) This indicates that there is a link between poverty and disability.

A decade ago, 98 % of CWD in developing countries were not enrolled in school (Peters, 2009) This implies another linkage between disability, poor education access and poverty. Groce et al (2011) closely examined the ‘bi-direction of the association between poverty and disability’ noting that people in poverty situations have a higher likelihood of being disabled as result of poor nutrition, health and injuries. (Groce et al., 2011, p. 24; Soni et al., 2020, p. 4)

2.1 Approaches and Challenges of Educational Access by Children with SEND

Seabol et al. quoted by Soni et al. (2020, p.4) notes that ‘the largest sole group of children that are not in education are the disabled (LUBESKI) UNESCO has also acknowledged that ‘disability is one of the least visible but most potent factors of educational marginalisation’. (ACPF,2011, p. 12) The important question therefore is why are the majority CWD not accessing education, the one thing capable of improving their outlook?

It is argued that contextual barriers in which impairment exists, determines how disabling this impairment is. (Pitchford et al.,2018, Lubeski 2011). According to the UNCRPD, these barriers can be attitudinal or environmental. Equal access to resources, and supportive social norms are some of the

things that determine how disabling and impairment can be. It is therefore critical to ensure that PWD live in a society where such barriers are minimised.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities (UNCRPD, 2006) which a majority of countries have ratified provides 'a comprehensive instrument which provides all necessary guidance for national law and policy to ensure non-discrimination, equality of opportunity, full participation and social inclusion of people with disabilities in all countries'. (ACPF 10) Its aim is to ensure that PWD access all available opportunities to enable them to live a full productive life. The United Nations Educational and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) emphasizes that, being able to access education and succeed in it, is a keyway to affect positive change in various aspects of life for a PWD. (ACPF, 2011) It is critical therefore that children with SEND access quality education, which has the potential to enable them to succeed socioeconomically. In support of this, the United Nations Children Fund (UNICEF), states that education is an important social and cultural right that is key to reducing poverty and child labour, bringing with it, various socioeconomic benefits. The World Bank has also declared education as one of the known key tools for addressing poverty, inequality and laying the foundation for lasting economic growth. (Lubeski, 2011)

The importance of an education for CWD is further supported by various other international conventions. The Convention on the Rights of a Child (UNRC) highlights a child's right to education among the areas that ensure the thriving and safeguarding of a child's future. The World Declaration Education for All Convention however has not achieved its target to meet basic learning need for all by 2015 (Chilemba, 2013).

2.1.1 How Attitudes Affect the Impact of Impairment

At global level, there has been a shift in the perception of disability as can be noted by the recentness of the UNCRDP -2007. Historically, disability was essentially considered a medical problem facing the individual. PWD were mainly regarded as requiring lifelong care with bleak outlooks for achieving independence or economic productivity (Lubeski, 2011, Mkandawire, 2016) As a result, the effort provided in pushing PWD towards realising their full potential was lacking. There was also a shortage of policy backing and other enabling processes in educational institutions. (Mkandawire 2016, Lubeski, 2011)

More recently a human-rights approach has been adopted as reflected by the UNCRPD. Focus is now on ensuring that people with disabilities access every right and opportunity that is enjoyed by those without impairment. Where there is an impairment, all means should be explored to accommodate and enable the person with impairment to enjoy their full rights. This shift in attitude is also reflected Sustainable Development Goal 5 which calls for 'inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all (Soni et al., 2020, p.1) This has forced policy makers at national level to rethink their priorities, a trend which is trickling down to the communities, although perhaps not quick enough.

A shift from the medical model, has also led to a new focus in inclusive education. Inclusive education is as such defined as a dynamic process that accepts that all children are capable of learning and enable all parts of the education 'structures, systems and methodologies' to cater for all children's needs. (Lubeski, 2011, p. 12) CWD are not to be confined to special schools, unless it is

impossible for reasonable modifications to be made to enable them to thrive in mainstream schools (Naicker, 2018)

There is therefore a push for wider realisation that impairments do not need to be disabling, and that children with various impairments can succeed in education, given the right support (Mkandawire, 2016). This support is a right not a gift. For inclusive education to succeed, It is 'critical to demonstrate that children with SEND can learn so that they are given an opportunity to access primary education that is provided by the state and teaches fundamental skills such as numeracy and literacy which form the bedrock of later learning' (Mutua and Dimitrov, 2001, Pitchford et al, 2018, p. 2)

Naicker (2018) argues that for inclusive education to work, systems need to change at structural level to allow 'the mainstream of education to take ownership of the ideology and practice' of it (Naicker, 2018:28) This also implies that the change of attitude should not be seen as a directive, but there's need for an actual understanding and appreciation of while things should be so.

2.1.2 Aspects of the environment that Affects the Impact of Impairment

Apart from attitudes, the UNCRP identifies the environment in which a person with impairment finds themselves is another important factor which determines disabling capacity of that impairment (UNCRDP). A resource-poor environment without enabling tools can be a major barrier even when the goodwill is present in the society. In addressing SEND it is therefore important to examine the factors in their environment capable of exacerbating the vulnerability or frustrating positive efforts.

As noted earlier, disability, poverty and lack of education seem to happily coexist. The African Child Policy Forum (ACPF, 2011) further notes that competing budgetary demands have seen governments putting the education and related needs of CWD very low in 'in their list of priorities for budgeting, resource allocation and planning' (ACPF, 2011, p.16) Budgetary constraints mean that school infrastructure remains inaccessible for the majority of persons with disabilities; schools and staff are ill equipped and the curriculum and teaching methodologies remain rigid. (ACPF, 2011, p. 17) As such 'meaningful access to subject content has been seriously lacking. (ACPF, 2011) Poor working conditions and professional development have also impacted on the support that CWD have been receiving in school. (Mkandawire, 2016; LUBESKI, 2011) This is the case for many developing countries.

The report proceeds to now examine the situation on Malawi.

3.0 The Malawi Socio-Economic Context

Malawi is the third poorest of the poorest countries in the world with an estimated population of 17.5 million as recorded in the 2018 census. At least 50.7 percent of the population in Malawi live below the poverty line, quarter of which are considered extremely poor and unable to satisfy food needs. (World Bank, 2017). Agriculture accounts for a third of the country's GDP, while subsistence farming is the main source of livelihood for two thirds of the population. The World Banks observes that despite not being a conflict and fragile state, Malawi displays features of one especially regarding the functioning of its governance institutions (IMF, 2017). 'Both climate-related external shocks, and domestic political and governance shocks, have collectively contributed to economic stagnation and a low pace of poverty reduction.' (IMF, 2017, p.1)

The most recent Malawi Demographic and Health Survey for 2015-2016 indicates that 48% of the population is under 15. Among children under 18, at least 12% had lost one or both parents. Levels

of literacy are also low as out of the 86 % of people who have ever been to school, only 5% of females and 8% of males were reported as having completed secondary school or gone beyond (MDHS 2017, p.15).

There have however been some positive gains in some non-monetary indicators. For instance, in 2013, the primary school completion rates had risen to 75% from 58% in 2004. However, although more children are now completing primary school, it remains the case however that upon completion, more than 50% have basic competence in maths and reading (Mkandawire 2016; Pitchford et al: 2018, p. 1) Access to quality education as such remains a dream for the most of the general public, which raises concerns for children with SEND. This is explored in the next section.

4.0 The SEND Situation in Malawi

The MDHS (2017) reports that 29% of children aged 2-9 had one functioning problem or disability while 21% of the age group could not name any objects around them. Among the 10-17 age group, 5% had hearing problems and 6% had memory and concentration difficulties. At least '37% of under five children 'are stunted, 3% are wasted, while 12% are underweight' (The EMIS (2013-14) indicated that there were 90,089 learners with disabilities enrolled in primary schools across Malawi.

The prevalence of disability in Malawi, has been exacerbated by poverty, food insecurity, malnutrition and poor access to health care. (Chilemba, 2013; Lubeski 2011) The prevalence of disability is higher in rural areas compared to urban area (Mkandawire) This is also the case for poverty. Chronically poor people have a higher likelihood of developing impairments due to poor nutrition, poor health as well as injuries (Lubeski 2011) This is the case for Malawi and is demonstrated in the following figures. '37% of under five children 'are stunted, 3% are wasted, while 12% are underweight' (MDHS survey, 2016) While not debilitating in themselves, these conditions can worsen and not ideal for a child already facing other impairments. Challenges facing CWD in Malawi are therefore multidimensional thus requiring a multisectoral response. The collaboration that currently happens between the health, education and agricultural sector is unclear in relation to addressing the needs of CWD.

4.1 SEND Support Provision in Malawi

Coordination of care for children with disability in Malawi is spread across ministries. Early child development is under the Ministry of Gender, Children, Disability and Social Welfare. The Ministry of Education Science and Technology is especially responsible for guiding, initiatives at primary, secondary and tertiary level. The Department of Disability and Elderly Affairs also has a role to play in addressing problems facing children with disabilities in Malawi. (Soni et al., 2020) This division of responsibilities clearly indicates that for inclusive education to succeed in Malawi, there is a need for a close collaboration between these ministries, data must be sharing being crucial for tracking.

Data on CWD in school is available through census reports, the National Statistics Office (NSO) and the Education Management Information Systems (EMIS). The NSO 2008 survey indicated that 3.8 percent of the population were disabled. (Mkandawire, 2016, p. 178) 2.3% of children in primary school were recorded as having SEND (Munthali, 2011, Chilemba, 2013) In 2003, only 4.6% of children with disabilities were registered in school (Lubeski, 2011, p.2). The EMIS (2013-14) indicated that there were 90,089 learners with disabilities enrolled in primary schools across Malawi (Mkandawire, 2016, p.179) Data on children with disabilities in Malawi appears rather fragmented, making it tricky to form a complete picture. There are no 'formal assessment tools for identification of disabilities' (Lubeski, 2011, p.11) This, according to the Global Partnership for Education (GPE), gravely undermines a country's 'ability to build and implement sound educational plans' (Mkandawire, 2016, p. 173)

Malawi has a National Special Needs Education Policy launched in 2007. It describes children with SEND as those 'who require special service provision and support in order to access education and maximise the learning process' (MOE 2007). The government recognises the need to equip teachers with skills to address SEND, and has now made it a requirement for pre-service teacher training to include elements of SEND training. (Pitchford et al., 2018) As this is a recent requirement, it means that all currently serving teachers also need some training in SEND, currently the proportion of those that have undergone this is still small.

Malawi has one main specialist SEND training institution, the Montfort College of Special Needs Education. This is however privately owned and has insufficient capacity to address the training needs that currently exist. (Chimwaza et al., 2015; Mkandawire, 2016) Established in 1968, Montfort College also mainly specialises in training related to auditory and visual impairments. (Itimu and Kopetz, 2008; Chimwaza et al., 2015) Teacher capacity is therefore low.

4.2 SEND Care in Early Development Settings

The informal sector plays a huge role in the provision of special educational needs care for under five children who are enrolled in Community Based Child Care Centres (CBCCs). CBCCs are 'a child care service owned and ran by parents, guardians, caregivers and the community at large and designed to promote holistic development of children' (Soni et al., 2020, p. 5) These were initially set up to assist in the care of orphans and vulnerable children whose numbers increased immensely due to the HIV/AIDS crisis in the 1990s. In 2015, over 1.6 million children were enrolled in CBCCs, which was about 45.3% of those eligible. (Soni et al., 2020, p. 5)

Although not fully subscribed, CBCCs bare a large chunk of providing early child development care and education for under-five children in Malawi. In their study of CBCCs in Malawi Soni et al. (2020) found that the majority of CBCC caregivers receive little or no remuneration and most of them have no formal training. They found that most lack of appropriate training led to lack of confidence and therefore some reluctance to enrol CWD. There was also lack of understanding among parents of CWD of the role of CWD.

There have been efforts by government to consolidate and coordinate the CBCC provision. Early Learning and Development Standards (ELDS) have been developed to provide guidance and benchmarks of care at CBCC level. One of these are the requirement that CBCC care givers receive 2 weeks of training. (GOM, 2017) However, considering that the carer givers are essentially volunteers, getting the provision of CBCC care to adhere to the ELDS seems a mammoth task. Nevertheless, CBCC care that is available is still of great value and it presents opportunities that can be harnessed in the care of CWD at community level.

4.3 Other Non-Governmental Responses to SEND in Malawi

There are several non-governmental initiatives that are in place to address the issue of access to quality education for CWD. One such organisation is Sandi Thandiza, an offshoot of the Sandi Rehabilitation Assessment and Therapy Centre which is a private practice. Sandi Rehabilitation provides 15% of money made from its practice to support Sandi Thandiza activities.

Sandi Thandiza has been providing similar services as those provided by its parent company but free of charge to children in 6 teaching practice schools in Malawi. They have received funding to enable them to have a phased expansion to other schools. Sandi Thandiza has developed resource rooms in their target schools and has trained teachers on how to identify hidden disabilities such as autism

and ADHD. They have also developed a training manual with Ministry of Education which could hopefully be rolled out to across the country. In a discussion with the author, Sandi Thandiza emphasized that the gap in the provision of care for children with hidden disabilities is huge and that more can be done in this area.

Another organisation that has been active supporting the provision of quality education in Malawi is Link Community Development. In 2015 they facilitated Malawi's first National Education Standards. They are also supporting the building of a digitised school improvement system to feed data into a government central system (Link Malawi, 2020) This could be a useful tool for SEND information as well.

Link is also embarking on an Inclusive Community Engagement (ICE) programme aimed at 'rolling out practical community-led solutions to improve participation, inclusion and enhanced school improvement planning that is supported by the whole community and meets the needs of every learner' (Link Malawi, 2020). Links focus is on broader marginalised groups such as girls, extreme poverty and disability. These initiatives are currently being implemented in three districts namely Lilongwe, Dedza and Mchinji. (Link Malawi, 2020)

It is common practice among NGOs initiatives ns Malawi to target Orphans and Vulnerable Children (OVC) as a group. Children with Special Educational Needs can easily be overlooked this way.

4.4 Some Policies that Support the provision of SEND Care

Other government efforts at addressing the SEND situation are embedded in the further policies that and acts that have been developed in recent years. The Ministry of Education has developed the National Special Educational Needs Policy which articulates the shift in perspective from the medical response model to a rights-based approach. (Mkandawire 2016; Chilemba, 2013) Also in place is the National Child Development Policy, effective from 2006 and the National Sports Policy launched in 2007 (Lubeski, 2011, p. 12) Also key is the Disability Act which was launched in 2012 'prohibiting discrimination based on disability' (Lubeski, 2011, p. 10) The Act also requires that 5% of school places in all educational institutions be reserved for people with disabilities. (Lubeski, 2011, p. 10) There also exists a Policy Investment Framework (PIF) which sets priorities among educational programmes. Ensuring completion of secondary school for SEND children is one. (Lubeski, 2011, p. 31) In 2018, the National Disability Mainstreaming Strategy and implementation plan was also launched.

Ratified Conventions

Malawi is a signatory to various international conventions which commit and guide its national responses in the topics discussed here. These include the Universal Declaration on Human Rights in 1948, the Convention on the Rights of a Child, ratified in 1991; United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities, ratified in 2009; The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education (when), the World declaration on Education for All (2000), the Framework for Action to Meet Basic Learning Needs (1990)

It appears on paper that Malawi is not short of political will as far as provision of meaningful SEND provision is concerned. However, the connectivity between policies and practice has been big challenge (LUBESKI, Mkandawire)

5.0 Barriers to Successful SEND Provision in Malawi

The provision of quality education for children with SEND in Malawi has met great challenges.

5.1 Challenges in Early Learning

In 2015, the World Bank lamented about the poor quality of early child care provision, citing a number of reasons behind this including the lack of formal training for community caregivers which means that they lack key skills in addressing various child needs, especially those with special needs (Soni et al., 2020). The absence of remuneration means that contractual agreements are not as binding, which can lead to negligence. The structures that they operate in are usually makeshift and usually of poor quality. They also lack basic resources to create a conducive learning environment within their facility. (UNICEF, 2017) Many parents of CWD are also still not aware of the benefits of enrolling their children in early learning development services. (Soni et al.2020; Lubeski, 2011)

5.2 Skills and Training Deficiencies

Like in early child development care, the problem of lack of relevant training remains. Most teachers have not receive SEND training, as the curriculum changes to training courses are only recent. As such teachers feel ill-equipped to handle the unique needs children in their classes, especially those with SEND (Chilemba, 2013; Mkandawire, 2016) When teachers feel ill equipped, they sometimes develop negative attitudes towards CWD. (Mkandawire 2016, Chavuta et al., 2008) The OECD has stressed that both preservice and in-service training improve the quality of teacher child interactions and improve children outcomes (Soni et al. 2020,) If Malawi is to change its current SEND outcomes, this area would need addressing.

5.3 Resource Constraints

Schools are oversubscribed with teacher rations generally sometimes at 78:1 or more. As such classrooms are overcrowded and not conducive to specialised teaching. SEND children tend not to have a separate space to access specialised support. While the government has plans to build separate resource rooms for children with SEND, Mkandawire (2016) notes that only 100 out of 2,849 had been built.

The school structures are seldom accessible to children with significant disabilities (Chavuta et al., 2008) Government now requires that all new structures be accessible although not of these are being built.(Lubeski, 2011) Accessibility is also a broad term so it remains to be seen how this would look in reality.

Another major problem is lack of assistive materials to cater for various needs. These range from mobility aids, teaching materials, access to technology, and lack of tools to accommodate the learning needs of all children. (Chavuta et al., 2008; Lubeski, 2011) This sector needs much more investment.

5.4 Teacher Motivation

Many teachers suffer from low wages, and many must supplement their salaries in order to make ends meet. Other conditions such as poor housing, salary delays mean that job

satisfaction among teachers is low. (Chavuta et al. 2008, Lubeski 2011) Despite this, expectations on them continue to grow.

Lubeski (2011, p. 134) further notes that there is generally poor 'connectivity between administrators and teachers as well as between policies and actual practices. This implies that calls for support and improvement are seldom acted on at higher level.

5.5 Attitudes

Negative attitudes to people with impairments still exist at community level, leading parents to sometimes experience shame, and keep their child away from education. (Mkandawire, Soni et al. 2020; Naicker, 2019) Many parents still do not appreciate the importance of educating a disabled child, as sensitisation has been lacking (Chavuta et al., 2008) Since there are no follow up structures on school attendance, parents can keep a child off school for prolonged periods with no legal implication.

5.6 Poor Data Availability Absence of Formal Assessment Tools

There are no formal assessment tools for disability. Information is pieced together from various sources such as census, EMIS and NSO (Mkandawire, 2016; Itimu and Kopetz, 2008), meaning that many CWD risk slipping through the gap if they do not get captured in any of the above. (Mkandawire 2016; Lubeski, 2011; Itimu and Kopetz, 2008)

Linked to the above problem is the 'lack of early identification and intervention services' (LUBESKI, 13) Consequently, children miss out on opportunities of care, and they also risk being left further behind due to delayed interventions.

6.0 SEND Provision in Malawi: What Needs to Be Done?

There are areas and structures in place that are promising although in need of strengthening. The most promising factor about the provision of SEND in Malawi is the political will that has been demonstrated by the government through ratification of key conventions on the rights of children and people with disabilities, and the launching of various policies to improve the lives of children with disabilities.

The Early Learning Development Standards are in place to provide guidance for early childcare providers; the Policy Investment framework (PIF) to prioritise that SEND children finish secondary school. The disability Act is also in place to ensure places for CWD in educational institutions. It is implementation level that many cracks appear.

6.1 Areas to be worked on

This paper has found that tackling disability starts at conceptualisation level. An important differentiation exists between impairment and disability. The rights of a person with impairment should be protected and enacted to ensure that impairment does not become disabling or do not become more disabling than it should be.

It is not enough for government to develop policies and Acts if these are not enforceable. There is need for robust national workplans with realistic outputs and timelines, to address the pertinent

issues and challenges that face children with disabilities. Malawi faces broad challenges which require active leadership at the highest level.

More needs to be done in consolidating the SEND interventions in Malawi. A multisectoral approach would yield better results considering the multidimensional nature of factors that affect children with disabilities in Malawi. All stakeholders in this area need to consolidate their efforts and move away from piecemeal approaches.

The issue of data consolidation on the prevalence of SEND needs to be addressed with clear linkages between data collected by those providing early child development care, and those in the rest of the educational sector. There is also a role for health practitioners, considering their role in healthcare provision and assessment.

Government also needs to develop standardised and easy to use assessment tools which could be widely rolled out for community use. Linkages with the Ministry of Health would also be useful considering their role in ensuring child health.

Even where goodwill exists among implementing institutions and communities, there is need for them to be enabled with skills, resources and other types of support as identified locally.

There has been poor sensitisation of communities and the general public on the issues affecting people with disabilities; how equally important enabling their socioeconomic outlook is; as well as roles that everyone can play to ensure that their rights are realised.

8.0 Conclusion

The soil is fertile enough to enable Malawi to make positive and lasting change in the lives of children with SEND, and achieve 'inclusive, equitable quality education and lifelong learning for all by 2030' (SDG5). Some structures and positive interventions are in place, but there is need to strengthen communication, resources, capacity and address the data gaps that exist. A multi sectoral approach is required along with strong leadership, guidance and an enabling environment at all levels of implementation.

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