

MALAWI DEAF EDUCATION AT A CROSSROADS: RESEARCH ON THE CHALLENGES DEAF LEARNERS FACE IN MAINSTREAM EDUCATION SETTINGS

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Abstract

Many deaf children who are unable to attend a special school are either left uneducated or find an alternative place in a mainstream 'inclusive' setting where they may face many challenges. This is a research study of deaf education in Malawi in mainstream settings. Deaf learners usually lag behind their hearing peers and find it hard to get a place at secondary school and institutions of higher learning (Alindiamao, 2010). This is also evident in other countries around the world (Antia, Sabers & Stinson, 2007). Recent research on Malawi mainstream education indicates that what contributes to poor academic performance among deaf learners in inclusive educational setting is lack of social relationships in mainstream settings, lack of political will in the pursuit of deaf education and special teachers' inadequate training (Munthali, 2011; Chavuta, Itimu-Phiri, Chiwaya, Sikero, and Alindiamao, 2008). All these are major obstacles to deaf learners' academic development. The study used qualitative and to some extent quantitative methods. The qualitative data will be collected from interviews and focus-group discussions. The published and unpublished literature on inclusive education in Malawi was reviewed. Quantitative data was collected from school and Ministry of Education records. The study explores the cause of poor academic performance among deaf pupils in mainstream settings and discusses approaches that might enhance education for deaf children in the cultural setting of Malawi. It is hoped the paper will be of importance to researchers and practitioners in other developing countries.

Keywords: Inclusive education Mainstream

1. Historical overview of deaf education in Malawi

Malawi is a land-locked country located in the south-eastern part of Africa with over 13 million human populations. Formal education in Malawi is traced back to 1875. However, it did not cater for learners with disabilities (Ng'ambi, 2010). It took about 75 years for children with disabilities in Malawi to start accessing formal education. It started with the education of visual impairment in early 1950s. This was followed by establishment of schools of the deaf in 1968. As in many parts of the world (Polich, 2001; Kanyanta, 2003), deaf education in Malawi was established by church people and Christian missionaries (Itimu and Kopetz, 2008).

Maryview School for the Deaf, established in 1968, is the first school for the deaf in Malawi. Traditionally, deaf schools enrol few children; between nine and 12 deaf learners per year, starting with pre-school. Usually, deaf children start school at age four or five with preschool education. As such, as has been explained by Kanyanta (2003) about Zambia, deaf children are often rejected for placement in residential special needs education schools because they are overage. At present, there are six schools for the deaf in Malawi.

In these schools, the method of teaching is oralism with combination of simple gestures and constant writing on the chalkboard. During classroom interactions, children are expected to wear hearing aids. The teacher expects children to either follow their lips or grasp sound through hearing aids. Unfortunately, these pieces of apparatus are good for those with residual hearing. However, there are some deaf children who have lip-reading skill.

Currently, there is no available data to show when mainstreaming education for deaf learners began. It is understandable that deaf learners who did not find a place at schools for the deaf were learning together with hearing children at home schools. However, they were not counted as having special needs. In those times, children with special needs were only confined in special schools. However, in the early 1990s, Maryview School for the Deaf started sending socially-mature and well-performing deaf learners to a neighbouring primary school, Montfort Demonstration School, since special schools do not administer national examinations as the teaching methods were different from normal primary schools.

Recently, nonetheless, the country has witnessed many deaf children that can find an educational placement close to their homes. This has led to the creation of special units within mainstream schools that are known as resource centres (Tables 1,2,3).

Table 1: Resource centres in Malawi (Ministry of Education, 2013)

Schools / centres	Total number in Malawi	North	Centre	South
Total number of primary schools in Malawi	5 561	1 335	2 221	2 005
Total number of secondary schools in Malawi	1 190	299	396	495
Total number of community day secondary schools (CDSSs) in Malawi	596	172	238	186
Resource centres (primary schools)	104	18	46	40
Resource rooms (secondary Schools)	30	7	8	15
Resource rooms (CDSSs)	9	1	5	3

Table 2: Schools for the deaf in Malawi¹

School for the Deaf	No. of pupils ²	Year of establishment.	No. of teachers	No. of pre-school classrooms	District	Region	Owner
Maryview	174	1968	13	4	Chiradzulu	South	RC
Mua	173	1984	19	4	Dedza	Centre	RC
Embangweni	196	1996	17	4	Mzimba	North	CCAP
Mount-view	153	1997	17	5	Thyolo	South	RC
Karonga	81	2005	6	4	Karonga	North	CCAP
Bandawe	84	2005	7	4	Nkhata Bay	North	CCAP

¹ Data source: Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, Special Education Directorate through email correspondence.

² In the 2014/2015 academic year.

Note: All schools for the deaf are elementary schools. CCAP means Church of Central Africa Presbyterian, Livingstonia Synod. All Catholic schools were set up by Dutch Catholic missionaries.

Table 3: Number of special needs education (SNE) teachers in Malawi (Ministry of Education, 2013)

Teachers training specification	Teaching at special schools	Teaching at mainstream primary schools	Teaching at secondary schools	Teaching at Community Day Secondary Schools
Teachers of the deaf	79	22	38	9
Teachers of the blind	29	61	34	27
Learning difficulties	-	93	-	56
Others	2	-	1	-

2. The deaf and culture in Malawi

For a long period, deaf and deafness has been portrayed negatively in Malawi. Malawi National Association of the Deaf's (Malawi National Association of the Deaf (MANAD), 2009) recent research shows that many people do not look at it in social sense (MANAD, 2009). According to scholars, the term deaf is defined both in a medical and social context (Jones, 2002). Jones states that, socially, deafness signifies cultural identity where the deaf share characteristics, way of life and use the same language. However, in Malawi, there are prevailing myths associated with traditions and culture, stigma and other attitudes towards the deaf that still exist (MANAD, 2009).

3. Policy on inclusive and special education in Malawi

Inclusion constitutes an international and national policy imperative that promotes the rights of children with disabilities to be educated alongside their peers in mainstream classrooms (Liasiadou, 2012). The education system in Malawi is rhetorical and rests on a slogan that goes: *Free education for all*, which also includes children with special needs. That is a universal education for all children in standards One to Eight. However, in contrast to the slogan, primary schools in Malawi are generally poorly funded and UNESCO (2010) indicates that it is common to see one primary school teacher teach a hundred children in one classroom. Worse still, children enrolled in Standard One, for example, are put in the same class, but clearly not same age.

In Malawi, legal provision on equality of opportunities is expounded in the Disability Act (2012). This is a new law that is aimed at stopping discrimination and instead promoting equality. Sections 10 and 11 of the Disability Act (2012) encourage the government to recognise the rights of persons with disabilities to education on the basis of equal opportunity and prohibit any means of discrimination in education or training institutions. SNE is defined by the Malawian Government as education of learners with sensory impairments, learning difficulties, behavioural difficulties and physical or health impairments, all of whom require special measures to ensure their inclusion within schools (Itimu and Kopetz, 2008). As already explained, historically, it was the missionaries which established SNE and provided training for specialist teachers. It was in 2006, however, that a National Policy on Equalisation of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities was passed and since then interest in SNE has increased (Itimu and Kopetz, 2008).

4. Concept and meanings of inclusive and integration in education in Malawi

According to Hocutt (1996), mainstreaming and inclusion are concepts and movements, rather than precisely defined programmes. These movements are championed by societies that feel marginalised and demand equality in the society they live in (Hocutt, 1996). However, Malawi's concept on mainstream and inclusion is based on international appeals for education for every children; Salamanca Statement on Special Needs Education (UNESCO, 1994) and Education for All, Jomtien Declaration (UNESCO, 1990) are good example. But inclusive education started off from the field of Special Needs Education.

Concepts and meanings of inclusive and integration education in Malawi are well shared by many scholars. Spencer and Marschark (2010; Idol, 2006), for instance, argue that mainstream education occurs within schools and classes where most students are hearing. Therefore, deaf learners are expected to adapt to the general education system. This is also known as practice of inclusiveness. However, in Malawi, inclusive education is understood as a process of including all learners in the mainstream classroom of their diverse learning needs. Thus, the development is ongoing and cannot be achieved overnight. On the other hand, there is a tendency of believing that inclusion means having schools with adequate infrastructure and sanitation facilities that are accessible to learners with physical difficulties. As such, there is little emphasis on inclusive classroom practice.

5. Problem statement

Characteristically, deaf children in Malawi expect to acquire primary school education at schools for the deaf, which they generally use to undertake training in low-level trades and crafts as they scarcely proceed to or excel at secondary schools and beyond. However, due to inadequacy of space at schools for the deaf, children who have missed places end up at their home primary schools together with non-deaf learners. However, as indicated by Musengi, Ndofirepi, Shumba, (2013), the seeming capability of regular and SNE teachers and the apparent failure of their pupils are contradictory facts. This study aims to explore the cause of poor academic performance among deaf pupils in mainstream settings.

6. Participants

The research was done in mainstream inclusive schools in one of Central Region district of Malawi. Participants in the study were a sample of 20 regular teachers – who received a four-day in-service teacher training on inclusive education at their school bases, four Primary Education Advisers, two SNE teachers and 20 deaf learners. One official from the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, Special Education Directorate was involved through email correspondence.

7. Data analysis

After collecting data, analysis was done within research site as advocated by Robson (2011). After reading through all the data, three themes emerged from this process: lack of social relationships in mainstream settings, lack of political will in the pursuit of deaf education and finally regular and SNE teachers' inadequate training and teaching skills. These themes are used to organize the results below.

8. Result of findings

8.1. Lack of social relationships in inclusive mainstream schools

Perhaps a good starting point for successful inclusive education in the inclusive mainstream schools is not to focus on inclusive schools but rather to invite people to think about their values and beliefs with respect to children, community and society (Mariga, McConkey and Myezwa, 2014). However, in Malawi, the practice of inclusive education in terms of social relationship is a great challenge. Specialist teachers usually think that they are the ones who know all issues relating to special and inclusive education. They hardly share ideas with regular teachers. This scenario creates poor coordination among teachers.

Another problem is that most of the school-based committee members and communities lack knowledge on and passion for the matters relating to deaf and deafness. Moreover, it has been established that most of committees in schools like Parents and Teachers Association (PTA) and village communities do not include parents of children with disabilities in their meetings where ideas and plans for schools are being shared.

Munthali (2011) reported that people with disabilities are at high risk of social exclusion, starting from the early stages of education. In African culture, people's view and meaning of disability and wrong beliefs in the causes of impairments (Agbenyega, 2007; Musengi, et. al., 2013) drive them into a deep-rooted fear of how to interact with people with disabilities. This contributes to holding back progress of inclusion in mainstream communities in general (MANAD, 2009; Batamula, 2009) and in inclusive mainstream schools in particular.

8.2. Lack of political will in the pursuit of deaf education

Malawi has many education policies. Most of them are determined to improve education in the country, including SNE. However, the problem of lack of political will in pursuit of deaf education can be found at all levels of the education system. For example, there is a reform agenda, an education sector policy reform and strategic priorities formulated by the government. One of the goals of the policy reform is Equity and Access (Ministry of Education, 2009). Unfortunately, its policy target is to enhance girl-child education and does not say anything about accessible education in relation to deaf children and other learners with disabilities. The failure of the policy to include learners with disabilities complicates inclusive education practices on the ground.

Another policy paper; 'Implementation Guidelines for the National Policy on Special Needs Education' (Ministry of Education, 2009), provides guideline on implementation of SNE. The paper mentions the development of Sign Language and provision of Sign Language interpreters. However, it does not talk of ways of how to support deaf learners in their education. Malawi has 5,561 primary schools (Ministry of Education, 2013) against small number of teachers of the deaf, a development that forces deaf learners in mainstream schools to learn in an unproductive environment. This affects their education and their class performance is usually compromised.

The research revealed that deaf education receives meagre funding either at special schools or mainstream schools. This scenario hampers progress of education for the deaf. Moreover, School Improvement Plans being devised by most school communities hardly think about learners with disabilities.

8.3. SNE teachers' inadequate training and teaching skills

Malawi has 148 teachers for the deaf at primary and secondary levels against many deaf children (Ministry of Education, 2013). However, it is difficult to capture the exact number of deaf children because most of them are out of school. Special Education Directorate indicates that in order to reduce teacher for the deaf to deaf pupil ratio, Malawi needs to produce over 500 specialist teachers every year.

The shift towards including more deaf learners in general education settings requires changes in teacher preparation for both general and special teachers (Spencer & Marschark, 2010). In mainstream classrooms in Malawian schools, teachers struggle to construct an inclusive lesson plan that suits the needs of all learners. Most teachers have limited knowledge and skills in curriculum adaptation. Teachers forget that every learner has unique characteristics, interests, abilities and learning needs. Again, some teachers do not believe that deaf learners can make grades in their education. However, Powers (2011) notes some positive achievements of deaf learners. This is also evident in Malawi, where few deaf children are doing exceptionally well in the mainstream schools. Therefore, teachers have to devise mechanism that can help deaf learners realise their potential rather than labelling deaf learners as failures.

9. Recommendations on findings

9.1. Social relations in the mainstream schools

The research findings indicate that there is little or no interdisciplinary cooperation among teachers, schools and committees. In order to make inclusive education a success, different schools and community committees on education should work as a team. Therefore, inter-committees cooperation and collaboration should be encouraged to promote the education and safeguard the welfare of learners as has been envisioned by Hill, Head, Lockyer, Reid and Taylor (2012). Moreover, all influential groups of professionals that have vested interest in education for the deaf and hearing learners must work together. Sharing information in deaf learners' education is necessary. This is aimed at improving sharing issues relating to the education and economic well-being of the deaf learner (Phiri, 2013).

Deaf learners often feel excluded from mainstream education life; they tend to revert to the base where the rest of their deaf peers are. They infrequently participate in extracurricular activities. Therefore, deaf learners need to be given a responsibility and role to play in the mainstream school rather than being a spectator or a passive listener or a visitor in their own school community (Antia, et al, 2002).

9.2. Political will in the pursuit of deaf education

Effective implementation of inclusive education requires joint effort among all education stakeholders at all levels. The government through Ministry of Education must take a leading role in ensuring that inclusive education is responsive to sound policies and carry constant school supervisions to ensure success of the inclusive education agenda. So the country needs dynamic leadership and effective management of change that is key to a successful drive towards inclusive education in the mainstream settings. Policy papers should have clear and achievable guidelines on how to implement inclusive education. Moreover, There should be a well-structured funding procedure which is desirable for meeting the additional cost of providing adequate educational services for students with disabilities in inclusive schools.

9.3. Teachers inadequacy and their special skill

The number of teachers for the deaf is not adequate to cater for the needs of deaf learners in Malawi, both in special and mainstream schools. There is also a need to equip the regular teachers with special skills needed to assist deaf learners at the mainstream schools. In general, teachers have to adapt to the needs of deaf learners (Phiri, 2013). They have to devise variety of methods such as oral, signing or any other strategies that help the deaf child learn.

Teachers have to change their attitude towards deaf learners. Deaf learners should not be labelled as failures. They have to raise the bar, expectations and confidence of the deaf cleaner so that they succeed in what they set out to do (Phiri, 2013). Thus, teachers have to understand that deaf learners are capable of achieving in class like any hearing learner (Powers, 2011).

Conclusion

Many deaf children in the mainstream schools face many educational challenges that lead to poor academic performance among deaf learners. One of the challenges is lack of social relationships among learners, staff and even school-based committees. For the success of inclusive education, different schools and community committees involved in education

should work as a team. Deaf learners need to be involved and be given a variety of responsibilities than being a spectator at their own school. There should be political will in the pursuit of deaf education. There should be a robust action translating policy into real and desirable practice. Effective implementation of inclusive education requires joint effort among all education stakeholders at all levels. There should be a well-structured funding procedure which is desirable for meeting the additional cost of providing adequate educational services. Teachers are inadequate to meet the educational needs of deaf learners. There is need to increase the number of teachers to meet educational needs of deaf children. Teachers have to not only adapt to the needs of deaf learners but also devise variety of methods.

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