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An Investigation into the Experiences of Teachers and Head Teachers in Relation to Government-Run Primary Schools: A Case of Lilongwe Urban

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ABSTRACT

The focus of this paper is on the experiences of teachers and head teachers in government-run schools in the Lilongwe Urban area. Three schools were focused upon: Mkwichi Primary School in Area 47; Mbinzi Primary School in Area 3, and Tsokamkanansi Primary School in Area 43. This study was exploratory in that there has been a paucity of research carried out in the urban schools of Malawi particularly those run by the government. The study further utilized the qualitative approach and among the methods utilized included semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. In terms of the findings, the study found that in so far as inclusive education in urban schools is concerned, challenges do abound. These include the lack of specialist teachers trained in special needs including material required to assist teachers and head teachers with handling students of special needs. Among some of the propositions were for the government to provide them with resources needed to assist learners with special needs.

INTRODUCTION

The issue of inclusive education has garnered attention in recent times. This holds true in Malawi which is signatory to a number of international conventions, notably the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child in 1999, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2006, including the recent African Charter on Human and People's Rights in 2022. What prompted the need for Malawi to recognize inclusive education was when, in 1994 the government announced free primary education (FPE) after the country transitioned from a one-party to a multi-system of government. As a response to this, the numbers that enrolled in primary schools increased rapidly which in turn meant that there was a high-demand for new teachers (Kunje et al., 2003). In spite of the high enrolment of learners in primary schools, it would be found that those with special needs were often neglected. As a result of this, there was a need for a framework that defined the policy direction that the Ministry of Education sought to follow. After a number of consultations, it culminated in the National Strategy on Inclusive Education (NSIE) of 2017 – 2021. The NSIE aimed at moving from an education that merely focused on special needs to one that is inclusive (De Souza, 2022). This is especially true when considering that when Malawi first introduced the concept of “inclusive education”, it was normally associated with those learners with special education needs (SEN) and disabilities. As a country that grapples with socio-economic challenges, it was befitting that when it comes to the discussion concerning “inclusive education”, the definition ought to be one extended to children who headed households, child labourers, children with albinism including street children (De

Souza, 2022). Although a blueprint has been set up to address the challenges pertaining to inclusive education in Malawi, it is imperative to establish its state. Specific attention has been focused upon urban schools run by government. The study is an exploratory one in that it will seek to establish what has been the state of inclusive education in Malawi.

Purpose and Objectives of the Study

The purpose of this study was to investigate the experiences of teachers and head teachers in relation to government-run schools around Lilongwe Urban. The urban area of Lilongwe was chosen as a research site on the basis that considerable attention has not been paid to this site specifically in as far as inclusive education is concerned. The following objectives drove the research:

- To determine the knowledge of teachers and head teachers as it relates to inclusive education
- To investigate the challenges that both teachers and head teachers experience in inclusive education
- To determine teachers and head teachers' views regarding possible ways forward in so far as inclusive education is concerned including providing recommendations based on the responses provided by the teachers and head teachers.

Research Questions

The research will be determined by the following questions:

- i. What level of knowledge do both teachers and head teachers possess in so far as inclusive education is concerned?
- ii. What challenges do teachers and head teachers experience in so far as inclusive education is concerned?

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iii. What possible solutions can teachers and head teachers provide in terms of dealing with the challenges of inclusive education?

Significance of the Study

The study is significant in that there is a paucity of studies that examine the experiences of those in government-run urban schools in Malawi. Therefore this study contributes to the literature regarding inclusive education with specific attention paid to those in government-run urban schools in Malawi.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Inclusive education in Malawi is relatively new. This must be attributed to the fact that after Malawi voted for a multiparty system of government which transformed the dynamics of Malawian society. As a result of these changes, it would prompt the introduction of the Free Primary Education (FPE) programme. The intended purpose of this programme was to curb the dropout rate that existed in the pre-1994 period (Al-Samarrai & Zaman, 2006). What this led to was an unprecedented enrolment of learners from disadvantaged backgrounds. In spite of this, it would lead to an overcrowding of classrooms resulting in teachers being forced to teach under trees (Hummel & Werning, 2016).

There is no doubt that the FPE was one strategy that sought to address the disparities as it concerns access to education. The reality, however, was that it did not adequately address the issue of inclusive education. Even before inclusive education appeared in the picture, Malawi initially focused their focus on learners with special needs. One of the few institutions to look into the issue concerning learners with special needs was the Montfort College of Special Needs situated in Nguludi, Chiradzulu District. What prompted this need for a special needs college was when the Catholic missionaries recognized that it was not sufficient to provide formal education if the needs of those with special education needs are not met (Chimwaza, 2015). It was imperative that a school be developed that would cater for their needs along in what would become known as the Montfort College of Special Needs. Two decades later, a new special education programme for learners with difficulties would be established by the Ministry of Education.

During its early stages, it was found that when it came to defining what constituted “inclusive education”, it came to be understood as those learners who had learning difficulties and disabilities (Ministry of Education, Science and Technology [MoEST], 2021). At present, Montfort College of Special Needs is the only institution in the country that offers specialized training on special needs education. With that said, it does not adequately address the question as to what constitutes “inclusive education”. When speaking of inclusive education, it is not focusing solely on those with learning difficulties and disabilities but also those that have been marginalized. In the case of Malawi, those that have been marginalized include those

that are abused and neglected, those living with HIV/AIDS, unwed teenage mothers and so on (MoEST, 2021). The argument behind inclusive education is that every child irrespective of their circumstances, should have a fair chance (Chimwaza, 2015).

That said, it has been acknowledged that as a developing country, Malawi has found itself in a position where it has had to import concepts that do not mirror the realities facing the education system in the country (Hummel & Werning, 2016). This specifically holds true when it comes to inclusive education. In a study conducted by Chimwaza (2015), it has been acknowledged that when it comes to the understanding of what constitutes “inclusive education”, teachers had a limited view of what it was all about. This has to be attributed to the lack of teacher expertise (De Souza, 2022). It is found that because both lecturers and teacher training colleges lack the skills to train inclusive education teachers, there is a lack of expertise in the teachers being deployed in the schools (De Souza, 2022). Other challenges include the fact that as lecturers and teachers lack the necessary expertise on inclusive education, it is found that tenets of special education tend to overshadow inclusive education (De Souza, 2022). Even within mainstream education, it is found that more emphasis is placed on special rather than inclusive education (De Souza, 2022). Most public schools in Malawi have had to contend with lack of proper infrastructure.

As school infrastructure is an essential aspect of inclusive education, most public schools in Malawi have had to contend with a lack of proper classrooms, sanitation facilities and playgrounds, including water points, which have had a direct impact on education access quality and equity (De Souza, 2022). Moreover, there is the issue of gender disparity to consider. De Souza (2022) noted that boys are often favoured over girls and these often hinder the prospects of achieving inclusive education.

It is further worth mentioning that as a country, Malawi is made of four urban centers which are Blantyre, Lilongwe, Mzuzu and Zomba. Being said, it is worth stating that the challenges that have been addressed thus far tend to be prominent in the rural as opposed to the urban areas. It is because of this that one would conclude that these are challenges solely faced in the rural areas. In response to this, the study will determine whether the challenges mentioned can be found in the urban schools as well.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

With regard to the methodology, three urban schools were sampled upon. These included Tsokamkanansi Primary School in Area 43, Mkwichi Primary School in Area 47 and Mbinzi Primary School in Area 3. Initially, it was intended that a total of 47 teachers and 3 head teachers would be sampled but due to time constraints, it was found that a total of 31 were sampled instead.

Considering that the sampled population was small, it was felt that a quantitative approach would not be appropriate in this regard. This is because a quantitative approach would require a large population of 100 and above.

Therefore, a qualitative approach was utilized for this study. Among the methods that were employed for this study they included focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews. When it came to the focus group discussions, teachers were divided into five or six individuals. It is worth mentioning that this was dependent upon the schools visited. Semi-structured interviews were utilized when it came to addressing the experiences of teachers and head teachers with regard to inclusive education.

When it came to data analysis, it was organized and summarized into themes. Considering that the study employed a qualitative approach and at the same time, focused on the experiences of both teachers and head teachers in the urban schools, specific quotes were obtained to express the sentiments of both teachers and head teachers alike.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Knowledge of the Teachers and Head Teachers in Regard to Inclusive Education

To address the main question concerning the experiences of both teachers and head teachers regarding inclusive education, it was imperative to begin by establishing their knowledge of inclusive education. In all three schools that were visited, it was established that both teachers and head teachers had basic knowledge of inclusive education. This knowledge is normally acquired through workshops and seminars.

Despite having acquired this knowledge, they indicate that handling learners with special needs was insufficient. They further highlighted that in spite of this, knowledge they have acquired is beneficial in the sense that it would deter them from chastising and abusing those with special needs. For instance, one teacher highlighted the benefits of knowing inclusive education:

As teachers you find that in addition to the general education we receive from our respective colleges and universities, we need to acquire training in inclusive education. This training not only enables us to handle learners with special needs alone but also prevents us from abusing them. They, like any other normal learner have the right to an education as enshrined in the constitution.

Challenges Experienced by Head Teachers and Teachers as it Relates to Inclusive Education

Aside from establishing the knowledge both teachers and head teachers have as it relates to inclusive education, it was imperative to explore the challenges experienced by both teachers and head teachers as it relates to inclusive education. In all the three schools that were visited, most did admit that the challenges were numerous. Among the challenges that were highlighted in all three schools mentioned was the issue of the lack of teachers who specialized in inclusive education. Most did highlight the fact that despite having the required knowledge to handle learners with special needs, what was most important was for schools to have a specialist trained in inclusive education.

Other challenges that were highlighted included the lack of teaching resources most notably Braille for those that are blind and have difficulties with sight and hearing aids for those that are hard in hearing. Most of the teachers did highlight that this had an impact on their school performance. As one teacher highlighted:

We cannot neglect these learners. By not having all the necessary equipment needed to aid in their education, we are actually giving the message that they are not worthy of our attention which I think is not right. You will find that among these learners there are those that are talented. These need to be nurtured.

Furthermore, there was the issue concerning large classrooms. Both teachers and head teachers have highlighted that there have been situations whereby because they handle large classrooms, they often find themselves neglecting those learners with special needs and this puts them in a disadvantageous position as it sends a wrong message to them.

Suggestions on How to Improve the State of Inclusive Education as Given by Both Teachers and Head Teachers

There was further need to look into how the state of inclusive education could be improved. Among the suggestions provided by both teachers and head teachers was the fact that there was need for teachers to be trained in inclusive education. They emphasized on the need for a component of inclusive education to be incorporated in the education curriculum as this will lead them to acquire the necessary skills needed to handle those with special needs.

Other suggestions include the fact that there was need for government and stakeholders through city councils to improve the School Improvement Programme as it did not cater all the problems surrounding inclusive education. There was further need for institutions of higher learning to train more teachers in inclusive education

Limitations of the Study

The study was not without its limitations. Some of the limitations included the issue of time and resources needed to undertake the study on a wider scale as it is not a complete reflection of the situation in the wider Malawian context. This is specifically when considering that undertaking such a study in a singular research site is not sufficient to provide an accurate picture of the situation on the ground.

CONCLUSION

Although inclusive education is relatively new in the Malawian context, it is slowly receiving the attention it deserves in recent times. This study is no exception. When it comes to inclusive education, focus has tended to be placed on the experiences of schools in rural areas, and this is often at the neglect of those schools found in urban areas. In this case, the focus was upon local urban schools found in Lilongwe district. Based on the findings from this study it has demonstrated that the issues found

in urban schools are no different to those in the rural areas. Some of the greatest threats facing inclusive education in most schools in Malawi include the fact that there is a lack of teachers that have specialized training in inclusive education, lack of adequate teaching resources and issues of overcrowding in the schools. In light of the fact that Malawi seeks to build a democratic society that is inclusive of everyone, what this study has come to demonstrate is that more must be done to improve the state of inclusive education in Malawi.

Based on the findings that have been presented thus far, the following recommendations can be made:

- There is a need for more higher learning institutions especially those with an Education Faculty to incorporate a component of inclusive education in their curriculum.
- The government can collaborate with international partners and well-wishers to provide the necessary resources for teachers of learners with special needs.
- As Montfort College is the only institution in the country offering training in special needs, there is need for more institutions in the country that could offer training in inclusive education in order to address the challenges facing schools in Malawi.

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