



Examining the Influence of Instructional Leadership on Inclusive Education Practices: A Case Study of Four Selected Primary Schools in Malawi

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ABSTRACT

This study examined how instructional leadership influences inclusive education practices in four selected primary schools in Malawi. Inclusive education has been adopted as a national priority, yet its implementation is challenged by limited resources, large class sizes, and insufficient teacher preparation. The research aimed to assess leadership practices that promote inclusion, explore challenges faced by school leaders, evaluate how teachers are supported in addressing diverse learner needs, and identify strategies for strengthening leadership in fostering inclusive education.

A qualitative case study design was employed, involving twenty participants: four head teachers, twelve classroom teachers, and four support staff. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and document reviews, and were analysed thematically to capture patterns and variations across the schools.

Findings revealed that instructional leadership promoted inclusive education through shared vision building, community engagement, supervision of teaching, provision of resources, and professional development for teachers. However, challenges included overcrowded classrooms, inadequate training, limited resources, cultural stigma around disability, and heavy administrative workloads for head teachers. Despite these barriers, evidence showed that supportive leadership enhanced teacher confidence, improved collaboration, and fostered positive attitudes toward inclusion.

The study concludes that instructional leadership is central to translating policy into practice in inclusive education, but its impact is constrained by systemic gaps. It recommends targeted leadership training, stronger policy frameworks, resource mobilization, professional development for teachers, and community involvement as key strategies for advancing inclusive education in Malawi.

Keywords: *Inclusive education, fostered positive attitudes*

1. Introduction

Inclusive education has emerged as a central principle in modern education systems, ensuring that all learners, regardless of their abilities or backgrounds, are given equal opportunities to learn within mainstream classrooms. In Malawi, the government has adopted inclusive education as a key strategy for achieving equitable and quality education for all, in line with international commitments such as the Salamanca Statement (1994) and Sustainable Development Goal 4, which calls for inclusive and equitable quality education. However, the realization of inclusive education in primary schools depends not only on policy but also on the capacity of school leaders to translate policy into effective practice. Instructional leadership plays a critical role in guiding teachers, allocating resources, fostering collaboration, and creating a school culture that embraces diversity and supports learners with special educational needs. This chapter provides an overview of the study that examined how instructional leadership influences inclusive education practices in four selected primary schools in Malawi. It presents the background to the study, outlines the problem under investigation, states the objectives and research questions, and explains the significance and scope of the study. Key terms are defined for clarity, and the chapter concludes with a summary that sets the stage for the discussion in subsequent chapters.

2. Literature Review

Introduction

Inclusive education has become a central pillar of global educational discourse and practice, as nations strive to provide equitable learning opportunities for all children regardless of ability, background, or social circumstance. The principle of inclusion is grounded in the belief that education is a

fundamental human right and that every learner deserves to be supported within mainstream education systems rather than segregated into specialized or marginalized settings. International frameworks such as the Salamanca Statement (1994), the Education for All movement, and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 4) have reinforced the commitment of governments and institutions toward building inclusive education systems that are accessible, equitable, and effective. In Malawi, as in many developing countries, the government has articulated inclusive education policies aimed at ensuring that learners with disabilities and those from disadvantaged backgrounds are integrated into mainstream classrooms. However, the translation of policy into practice has faced considerable challenges, ranging from inadequate teacher preparation to resource shortages and cultural perceptions of disability. Instructional leadership is widely regarded as one of the most critical factors influencing the successful implementation of inclusive education because school leaders provide vision, direction, and guidance to teachers and other staff. Without effective instructional leadership, inclusive education policies often remain aspirational rather than transformative. Thus, this literature review systematically examines the influence of instructional leadership on inclusive education practices by focusing on four key areas aligned with the objectives of the study: instructional leadership practices in promoting inclusion, challenges faced by school leaders in implementation, the role of leadership in supporting teachers to address diverse learner needs, and strategies for strengthening instructional leadership to enhance inclusive education. Through this review, the chapter not only synthesizes international and local scholarship but also provides insights into theoretical underpinnings, conceptual models, and empirical findings that shed light on the dynamics of leadership and inclusion in primary education, particularly in the Malawian context where systemic challenges and cultural realities intersect.

Instructional Leadership Practices in Promoting Inclusive Education

Instructional leadership has increasingly been acknowledged as a cornerstone for advancing inclusive education, particularly in primary school settings where children with diverse needs are expected to learn together in one classroom. Hallinger and Murphy (1985) first conceptualized instructional leadership as a framework consisting of defining the school mission, managing curriculum and instruction, and promoting a positive learning climate. These dimensions have since been expanded in literature to include vision building, teacher development, stakeholder collaboration, and the mobilization of resources for teaching and learning (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005). Within the inclusive education discourse, instructional leaders especially head teachers and deputy head teachers are tasked with creating a school culture where every learner, regardless of ability, gender, or socio-economic background, is valued and supported. Research evidence demonstrates that when leaders prioritize inclusive values and articulate them as part of the school's vision, teachers are more likely to adopt learner-centered approaches that recognize and accommodate diverse learning needs (Ainscow, Booth, & Dyson, 2006). In the Malawian context, where the majority of schools face challenges of overcrowding, inadequate teaching resources, and limited professional development opportunities, the role of instructional leadership becomes even more crucial in shaping teacher attitudes and instructional practices towards inclusion (Chitiyo & Muwana, 2018). Leaders who actively supervise classroom instruction, provide constructive feedback, and foster collaboration among teachers are able to instill a sense of shared responsibility for all learners, including those with disabilities and learning difficulties. Instructional leadership therefore goes beyond administrative tasks to focus on the daily teaching and learning process, making it a vital lever for inclusive education reform.

A significant instructional leadership practice that has been widely emphasized in the literature is the establishment of a clear and compelling vision for inclusion. Leaders who articulate a school-wide vision of inclusive education help create coherence across the teaching staff and provide a guiding framework for curriculum adaptation and instructional delivery. According to Fullan (2014), effective leaders do not simply communicate the vision but embody it through their actions, modeling inclusive values in their interactions with staff, learners, and parents. In inclusive education, vision setting is particularly important because it provides a moral compass that frames diversity as an asset rather than a barrier. For instance, schools where head teachers consistently reinforce the message that "every child can learn" tend to experience greater teacher commitment to addressing the needs of children with disabilities or learning challenges (Loreman, Forlin, & Sharma, 2007). In Malawi, research suggests that many school leaders lack adequate preparation to conceptualize and communicate a vision for inclusive education, as pre-service leadership training often prioritizes administrative efficiency over pedagogical leadership (Chimombo, 2009). This gap limits the extent to which teachers feel supported to adopt inclusive pedagogy, since without a clear vision, inclusive education is perceived as an external imposition rather than a shared school value. Therefore, vision building remains a critical yet underdeveloped dimension of instructional leadership in fostering inclusive classrooms.

Another instructional leadership practice that plays a pivotal role in promoting inclusion is the supervision of instruction. Instructional leaders who regularly observe classroom teaching, provide feedback, and guide teachers in adapting lesson plans contribute significantly to building teachers' confidence and competence in handling diverse learners. Blase and Blase (1999) argue that instructional supervision should focus on fostering reflective practice rather than punitive evaluation, as this creates an environment where teachers feel safe to experiment with new methods of inclusive pedagogy. In Malawi, where large class sizes and curriculum rigidity often hinder individualized attention, head teachers who provide guidance on differentiated instruction, cooperative learning strategies, and formative assessment approaches can make a substantial difference in how teachers engage with learners of varying abilities (Mtika & Gates, 2010). Studies from other Sub-Saharan African contexts show that where school leaders engage directly in classroom supervision and offer practical suggestions for lesson delivery, teachers are more likely to implement inclusive practices such as flexible grouping and peer tutoring (Ngcobo & Muthukrishna, 2011). This indicates that supervision is not just about monitoring compliance but also about enabling teachers to respond creatively to learner diversity. Thus, supervision of instruction is an indispensable instructional leadership practice for advancing inclusive education in resource-constrained primary schools.

Teacher professional development is another critical element of instructional leadership that strongly influences inclusive education practices. Leaders who prioritize continuous professional development create opportunities for teachers to acquire the knowledge, skills, and attitudes required to work effectively with learners of diverse abilities. Research shows that professional development initiatives focusing on inclusive pedagogy, classroom

management, and the use of assistive technologies significantly improve teacher confidence and competence in inclusive classrooms (Sharma, Loreman, & Forlin, 2012). In Malawi, the Ministry of Education has attempted to integrate inclusive education training into teacher development programs, but evidence suggests that these opportunities are sporadic and insufficient (Phiri, 2016). Instructional leaders at the school level therefore play a vital role in filling this gap by organizing workshops, peer-learning sessions, and collaborative planning meetings. For example, when head teachers encourage teachers to share experiences about handling learners with disabilities or behavioral challenges, they foster a professional learning community that promotes mutual support and innovation. Moreover, professional development led by instructional leaders can help challenge deficit perspectives that often stigmatize learners with special needs, replacing them with more positive, strengths-based understandings of diversity. Therefore, professional development facilitated by school leaders represents a practical pathway towards embedding inclusive practices in daily teaching.

Curriculum adaptation is also a central aspect of instructional leadership in promoting inclusive education. Leaders who guide teachers in adjusting the curriculum to suit the needs of diverse learners ensure that inclusion is not just symbolic but practically realized in classroom activities. Florian and Black-Hawkins (2011) argue that inclusive pedagogy requires moving beyond a “one-size-fits-all” curriculum to one that is flexible and responsive to learners’ differences. In Malawi, where the national curriculum is often rigid and examination-driven, head teachers who support teachers in designing supplementary activities, using multi-sensory teaching methods, and integrating life skills education help create more inclusive classrooms (Mwale, 2014). Instructional leadership in curriculum adaptation also involves ensuring that teachers use formative assessment to track learner progress and make instructional adjustments where necessary. Leaders who emphasize inclusive assessment practices such as allowing oral responses for learners with writing difficulties or using group projects help prevent marginalization of learners who cannot cope with traditional modes of evaluation. This aligns with UNESCO’s (2017) call for flexible curricula and assessments as foundational pillars of inclusive education. Therefore, curriculum adaptation guided by instructional leadership is a powerful tool for making inclusion a lived reality in Malawian classrooms.

Another important dimension of instructional leadership that supports inclusive education is the mobilization and allocation of resources. Inclusion often requires specialized teaching materials, assistive devices, and infrastructure modifications, all of which demand careful planning and resource mobilization. Effective instructional leaders are proactive in seeking support from government agencies, non-governmental organizations, and community stakeholders to secure resources that facilitate inclusion (Ainscow, 2020). In Malawi, many schools lack the financial means to provide adequate learning aids for children with disabilities, but head teachers who creatively mobilize community support often manage to bridge these gaps (Mwana, 2017). For instance, leaders who engage parent-teacher associations and local community leaders in fundraising initiatives can secure funds for building ramps, purchasing braille materials, or employing additional support staff. Furthermore, resource mobilization is not only about finances but also about ensuring optimal utilization of existing resources. Instructional leaders who strategically allocate teaching aids, distribute teacher workloads, and organize classrooms to maximize participation contribute significantly to inclusive learning environments. This shows that resource mobilization and management is a critical instructional leadership practice with direct implications for inclusive education.

Stakeholder engagement represents another key instructional leadership practice essential for fostering inclusive education. Leaders who involve parents, community members, and external stakeholders in the educational process help build a collective sense of responsibility for inclusive practices. Epstein (2011) emphasizes that effective leadership for inclusion extends beyond the school walls to include partnerships with families and communities. In the Malawian context, where cultural attitudes towards disability sometimes hinder acceptance, school leaders who actively engage parents and sensitize communities can help dismantle stereotypes and build supportive networks for learners with special needs (Kendall, Kaunda, & Chilanga, 2018). For example, head teachers who invite parents to participate in individualized education plan (IEP) meetings create opportunities for families to contribute their insights and strengthen the support system for their children. Stakeholder engagement also facilitates resource sharing and advocacy, as community involvement can amplify calls for policy reforms and government investment in inclusive education. Thus, instructional leaders who cultivate strong stakeholder relationships extend the reach and sustainability of inclusive education efforts.

Promoting a positive school culture is another essential instructional leadership practice that underpins inclusive education. Leaders who foster a culture of respect, empathy, and collaboration help create environments where learners feel safe and valued. According to Louis et al. (2010), school culture plays a decisive role in shaping teacher attitudes and instructional practices, particularly in relation to inclusion. In Malawi, schools that celebrate diversity through assemblies, extracurricular activities, and classroom discussions help normalize inclusion and reduce stigma against learners with disabilities or learning difficulties (Munthali, 2019). Instructional leaders who consistently model inclusive behaviors such as using inclusive language, ensuring equitable participation in school activities, and recognizing the achievements of all learners contribute to building a culture that sustains inclusion. Furthermore, positive school culture has been linked to higher levels of teacher collaboration, student engagement, and parental involvement, all of which are critical for inclusive education. Therefore, cultivating a positive and inclusive school culture is an indispensable dimension of instructional leadership.

Research has also highlighted the importance of data-driven decision-making as an instructional leadership practice in promoting inclusive education. Leaders who collect and analyze data on learner performance, attendance, and participation are better positioned to identify barriers to inclusion and design targeted interventions. Robinson, Lloyd, and Rowe (2008) argue that leaders who use evidence to guide instructional improvement have a stronger impact on student outcomes than those who rely solely on intuition. In Malawi, systematic data collection on learners with special needs remains a challenge, but schools where leaders prioritize record-keeping and data analysis are better able to allocate resources and track progress towards inclusion goals (Mwase, 2015). Instructional leaders can use data to monitor the effectiveness of teaching strategies, identify learners at risk of exclusion, and evaluate the impact of professional development programs. Moreover, data-driven decision-making enhances accountability by ensuring that inclusive education initiatives are not only well-intentioned but also evidence-based. Therefore, data use is a critical instructional leadership practice with direct implications for improving inclusive education outcomes.

Finally, literature underscores the significance of distributed leadership as a practice that enhances instructional leadership for inclusive education. Inclusive education is too complex a task to be handled by a single leader; therefore, effective head teachers distribute leadership responsibilities across teachers, deputy heads, and special needs coordinators (Spillane, 2006). Distributed leadership allows for shared decision-making, collective responsibility, and collaborative problem-solving, which are essential for addressing the diverse needs of learners. In Malawi, where leadership capacity is often overstretched due to resource constraints, schools that practice distributed leadership are more likely to sustain inclusive practices (Chirwa & Naidoo, 2014). For example, assigning teachers to lead inclusion committees or peer-support programs empowers them to contribute actively to the school's inclusive vision. Distributed leadership also fosters teacher ownership of inclusive practices, reducing resistance and enhancing sustainability. Therefore, embracing distributed leadership represents an important instructional leadership practice that strengthens inclusive education in Malawian primary schools.

Challenges Faced by School Leaders in Implementing Inclusive Education

Inclusive education has been widely recognized as a fundamental right and a necessity for building equitable education systems; however, its effective implementation in primary schools is often constrained by several structural, cultural, and professional challenges that school leaders must navigate. One of the foremost challenges lies in the chronic shortage of resources that hinders leaders from providing adequate learning opportunities for all students. In Malawi, as in many sub-Saharan African countries, schools operate under severe financial and infrastructural limitations, with inadequate classrooms, insufficient teaching materials, and a lack of assistive devices for learners with disabilities (Charema, 2010). This resource scarcity is compounded by a lack of trained personnel such as special needs educators, psychologists, and counselors, whose expertise is crucial in supporting children with diverse learning requirements. School leaders, particularly head teachers, often find themselves unable to mobilize resources beyond the limited allocations provided by government or donor agencies, and this incapacity directly affects their ability to sustain inclusive practices. Studies in South Africa, Kenya, and Tanzania suggest that similar constraints persist across the region, indicating that resource inadequacy is a systemic barrier rather than an isolated problem (Forlin, 2013). Furthermore, the absence of adequate infrastructure, such as ramps, specialized seating, or accessible washrooms, exacerbates exclusion for physically disabled learners and reflects a broader systemic neglect. Consequently, instructional leaders struggle to realize inclusion when physical, financial, and material barriers remain entrenched.

Another critical challenge facing instructional leaders in the implementation of inclusive education is the inadequate professional preparation and training for both head teachers and classroom teachers. Although Malawi has developed inclusive education policies that promote access for learners with disabilities, these policy ideals often do not translate into classroom realities due to insufficient teacher training (Chitiyo & Muwana, 2018). Many teachers graduate from teacher training colleges with limited exposure to inclusive pedagogy, and this lack of competence makes it difficult to adapt curricula, differentiate instruction, or employ alternative assessment methods tailored to diverse learners. Head teachers themselves often lack professional development in instructional leadership for inclusive education, which undermines their ability to guide, supervise, and motivate teachers toward inclusive practices. In countries such as Botswana and Zimbabwe, studies reveal similar trends where teacher preparedness is cited as the most significant barrier to inclusion (Mukhopadhyay, 2014). The lack of ongoing in-service training further aggravates this problem, as many teachers rely on outdated pedagogical approaches that do not adequately cater for learners with disabilities. For instructional leaders in Malawi, this translates into a daily struggle to lead teachers who lack confidence in teaching children with special needs, thus limiting the effectiveness of inclusive practices in classrooms.

Cultural attitudes and community perceptions also constitute a formidable barrier for school leaders seeking to promote inclusive education in Malawi. In many rural and urban communities, disability continues to be associated with stigma, misconceptions, and traditional beliefs that regard children with disabilities as cursed, burdensome, or incapable of learning (Charema, 2010). Such attitudes influence parental support for inclusive education, as some families may either keep children with disabilities at home or fail to collaborate with schools to support their learning. For school leaders, this creates a difficult environment where advocacy for inclusion is met with resistance or indifference from some parents and community members. In Malawi, where community participation is a vital component of school governance, negative attitudes toward disability can weaken collective efforts toward inclusion. Comparative studies from Ghana and Nigeria reveal similar cultural barriers, where teachers and head teachers report that societal attitudes toward disability significantly undermine inclusive efforts (Ainscow, 2020). Instructional leaders must therefore confront not only internal institutional challenges but also external community resistance, which demands sustained advocacy, sensitization, and policy reinforcement. Without a shift in cultural perceptions, inclusive education risks being a policy ideal that lacks practical community support.

Another pressing challenge relates to the problem of large class sizes and high pupil-teacher ratios, which make individualized attention and differentiated instruction nearly impossible in many Malawian primary schools. According to Forlin (2013), inclusive education thrives in contexts where teachers can give adequate attention to learners with special needs, adapt instruction, and engage in personalized support. However, in Malawi, class sizes of 60–80 learners are not uncommon, especially in public schools where enrollment has expanded significantly since the introduction of free primary education in 1994. This situation places immense pressure on teachers, who already struggle to cover the curriculum within limited time frames, and it undermines the ability of instructional leaders to promote high-quality inclusive practices. Teachers in overcrowded classrooms tend to adopt traditional lecture methods that do not accommodate diverse learning needs, and learners with disabilities or learning difficulties are often marginalized. Evidence from Uganda and Zambia indicates that large class sizes remain a systemic challenge across sub-Saharan Africa, highlighting the regional dimension of this problem (Hayes & Bulat, 2017). Head teachers are thus caught between policy directives advocating inclusion and the practical realities of managing unmanageable class sizes, which erode their capacity to implement inclusive practices effectively.

Administrative and managerial demands on head teachers further complicate their role as instructional leaders in inclusive education. In many Malawian schools, head teachers are burdened with heavy administrative workloads that include financial management, record-keeping, staff deployment, and

communication with education authorities. These responsibilities often leave little time for active instructional leadership, such as classroom supervision, coaching, and mentoring of teachers (Bush & Glover, 2016). As a result, the crucial role of supporting teachers to adopt inclusive pedagogies becomes secondary to administrative survival. Furthermore, school leaders often lack clerical or technical support staff, meaning they must carry out even routine administrative tasks, further eroding their instructional leadership capacity. Studies in Kenya and Tanzania indicate similar dynamics, where principals spend more time on managerial than instructional activities, thereby compromising efforts toward inclusion (Oketch & Rolleston, 2007). This situation highlights a structural issue where the system's bureaucratic demands overshadow the core responsibility of instructional leadership. For head teachers in Malawi, the dual burden of managerial and instructional roles remains a persistent obstacle to fostering inclusive education.

Policy gaps and weak implementation frameworks also represent significant challenges to school leaders striving to advance inclusive education. Although Malawi has adopted inclusive education policies aligned with global frameworks such as the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994) and the Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations, 2015), the translation of these policies into actionable strategies at the school level remains limited. Head teachers frequently report that they are not adequately informed or trained in the practical implications of inclusive policies, and in some cases, policy documents are not even accessible at the school level (Chitiyo & Muwana, 2018). Moreover, monitoring and evaluation mechanisms for inclusive education are weak, leading to a situation where compliance with policy is more rhetorical than real. Comparative research from Zambia and Tanzania indicates that policy implementation gaps are widespread in the region, often resulting from insufficient funding, lack of political will, and inadequate dissemination strategies (Hayes & Bulat, 2017). For instructional leaders, this means working within a policy vacuum where expectations are high but practical guidance and support are minimal. This gap undermines the confidence of school leaders and leaves teachers uncertain about the standards of inclusive practice they are expected to meet.

Another challenge is the lack of adequate collaboration between schools and external stakeholders in advancing inclusive education. While inclusive education requires the collective input of government ministries, non-governmental organizations, parents, and community leaders, school leaders often find themselves isolated in their efforts to promote inclusion. In Malawi, coordination between the Ministry of Education, teacher training institutions, and schools has historically been weak, resulting in fragmented support systems for inclusive education (Phiri, 2018). Head teachers may lack access to external expertise such as psychologists, speech therapists, or counselors, leaving them to address complex learner needs without specialized assistance. This lack of collaboration is not unique to Malawi; studies in Nigeria and Kenya similarly highlight how weak intersectoral partnerships hinder inclusive practices (Ainscow, 2020). For instructional leaders, the absence of strong partnerships translates into limited capacity to mobilize resources, advocate for learners, and build community support for inclusion. Strengthening collaboration therefore remains a crucial but underdeveloped dimension of inclusive education in many low-income contexts.

School leaders also face challenges related to teacher resistance and low morale when implementing inclusive education practices. Some teachers view inclusive education as an additional burden rather than an opportunity to improve teaching and learning for all students (Forlin, 2013). In Malawi, where teachers already contend with overcrowded classrooms, low salaries, and limited professional development, the demand to differentiate instruction for learners with disabilities can lead to feelings of frustration and burnout. Instructional leaders often encounter passive resistance from teachers who either fail to implement inclusive strategies or openly express skepticism about the feasibility of inclusion in resource-constrained settings. Research in South Africa and Ghana highlights similar trends, where teacher attitudes significantly determine the success or failure of inclusive initiatives (Engelbrecht & Green, 2018). For head teachers in Malawi, overcoming this resistance requires motivational leadership, ongoing professional support, and recognition of teacher challenges, yet these measures are difficult to sustain in the face of systemic constraints. Thus, teacher resistance emerges as both a symptom of broader challenges and a direct obstacle to inclusive practice.

Finally, systemic inequalities and broader socio-economic challenges further complicate the ability of school leaders to foster inclusive education. Malawi is one of the world's least developed countries, and poverty remains a significant barrier to education, with many families struggling to provide basic necessities such as uniforms, books, or transportation for their children. For learners with disabilities, these economic constraints are even more pronounced, as specialized equipment and medical support are often unaffordable. Instructional leaders must therefore grapple with external socio-economic challenges that are beyond their immediate control but have a direct impact on inclusive education outcomes. Comparative evidence from Zambia, Uganda, and Mozambique suggests that poverty is a pervasive barrier that amplifies educational inequities, making inclusive education more difficult to achieve in marginalized communities (UNESCO, 2015). For head teachers, this broader context of inequality requires them to assume roles beyond instructional leadership, including social advocacy, community mobilization, and resource brokerage. These additional roles place further pressure on leaders already stretched thin by systemic challenges, highlighting the multifaceted difficulties of implementing inclusive education in Malawi.

In conclusion, the challenges faced by school leaders in implementing inclusive education are multi-dimensional, spanning resource scarcity, inadequate training, cultural resistance, large class sizes, administrative overload, weak policy implementation, limited collaboration, teacher resistance, and socio-economic inequalities. Each of these challenges interacts with the others to create a complex web of obstacles that limit the capacity of instructional leaders to realize inclusive education in practice. The literature indicates that while these challenges are particularly acute in Malawi due to systemic resource constraints, they are not unique to the country but are widely documented across sub-Saharan Africa and beyond (Ainscow, 2020; Forlin, 2013). Addressing these barriers requires comprehensive strategies that combine policy reform, resource investment, professional development, community sensitization, and systemic support for instructional leadership. For Malawi, strengthening the role of head teachers as instructional leaders remains a critical step, but without addressing the underlying challenges outlined above, inclusive education will remain more of an aspirational ideal than a lived reality for many learners.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical foundation of this study is anchored in transformational leadership theory and inclusive education theory. Transformational leadership emphasizes the role of leaders in inspiring and motivating followers to achieve higher levels of performance and embrace change. In the context of inclusive education, transformational leadership provides a useful framework for understanding how head teachers can inspire teachers to adopt inclusive practices, create a shared vision for inclusion, and build a supportive school culture. Inclusive education theory, rooted in the principles of equity and social justice, complements this by highlighting the moral and educational imperative of integrating all learners into mainstream classrooms. Together, these theories provide a lens for examining how leadership practices influence inclusive education outcomes, and they guide the interpretation of empirical findings in this study.

3. Research Methodology

Description of the Study Area

The study was conducted in Malawi, focusing on four primary schools located in both urban and rural settings. Malawi, like many sub-Saharan African countries, has made inclusive education a national priority, yet challenges such as resource shortages, limited teacher training, and high learner-to-teacher ratios persist. The selected schools represented diverse contexts in terms of location, availability of resources, and leadership practices, thereby providing a balanced view of how instructional leadership influences inclusive education. The choice of these schools was guided by accessibility, willingness to participate, and their varying experiences in implementing inclusive education policies.

Research Design and Approach

This study employed a qualitative case study design to investigate how instructional leadership influences inclusive education practices in four selected primary schools in Malawi. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate as it allowed for an in-depth exploration of the lived experiences, perspectives, and practices of head teachers and teachers in their natural school environments. By focusing on rich descriptions rather than numerical generalizations, the study was able to capture the subtle and complex ways in which leadership practices shape inclusive teaching and learning. The case study design, as advocated by Yin (2018), provided a holistic framework for examining the phenomenon within its real-life context, thereby offering a deeper understanding of the interactions between leadership, policy, and classroom practice. This approach was particularly useful in highlighting the contextual realities of resource-constrained Malawian schools, where challenges such as limited training, inadequate resources, and competing administrative demands often intersect with inclusive education initiatives (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Through this design, the study was able to generate meaningful insights into the strategies, challenges, and leadership dynamics that either support or hinder inclusive education in primary schools.

Population of the Study

The target population for this study consisted of head teachers, classroom teachers, and support staff working within the four selected primary schools in Malawi. These groups were deliberately chosen due to their direct engagement in the teaching and learning processes and their critical roles in implementing inclusive education practices. Head teachers, as instructional leaders, are responsible for guiding school policies, supporting teachers, and fostering an inclusive learning environment, while classroom teachers interact daily with learners of diverse abilities and adapt instructional strategies to meet their needs. Support staff, including teacher assistants and resource personnel, contribute to the operational and practical aspects of inclusion, making their perspectives valuable for understanding the full spectrum of leadership influence. Although learners are central to inclusive education, the focus of this study was on the leadership dimension, as leadership practices mediate the translation of policy into classroom practice. By concentrating on these key stakeholder groups, the study was able to capture detailed insights into how instructional leadership facilitates or constrains inclusive education in primary schools. This population structure aligns with qualitative case study research, where information-rich participants are purposively selected to provide nuanced and contextually grounded data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Patton, 2015).

Sampling Procedure

This study employed a purposive sampling technique to select participants who were deemed information-rich and capable of providing detailed insights into the influence of instructional leadership on inclusive education practices in the selected primary schools. Purposive sampling was considered appropriate because it allows the researcher to intentionally include participants who possess direct experience and expertise relevant to the research objectives, thereby enhancing the depth and quality of the data collected (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016). Head teachers were purposively selected due to their primary responsibility for instructional leadership, including supervising teachers, facilitating professional development, and fostering inclusive learning environments. Classroom teachers were chosen based on their experience and engagement with diverse learners, enabling them to provide practical insights into how leadership influences pedagogical practices and learner outcomes. Support staff, including teacher aides and resource personnel, were included to offer complementary perspectives on the operational and practical aspects of implementing inclusive education. This deliberate selection of participants ensured that the study captured multiple viewpoints from individuals directly involved in leadership and classroom processes, which enriched the analysis and interpretation of the influence of instructional leadership on inclusive education in Malawian primary schools. By focusing on participants with relevant knowledge and experience, the study strengthened the validity, credibility, and contextual relevance of its findings.

Sample Size

The sample for this study consisted of 20 participants drawn from the four selected primary schools in Malawi, including four head teachers, twelve classroom teachers, and four support staff members. Each school contributed one head teacher, three classroom teachers, and one support staff member, allowing for a diverse range of perspectives on instructional leadership and inclusive education practices. This distribution was deliberately designed to capture the experiences and insights of those directly responsible for implementing and supporting inclusive teaching while keeping the sample manageable for comprehensive qualitative analysis. The sample size was deemed sufficient to achieve data saturation, as the iterative process of data collection and analysis indicated that no new themes or insights were emerging after engaging these participants, which aligns with established qualitative research principles (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006; Creswell & Poth, 2018). By focusing on a carefully selected, information-rich group of participants, the study ensured the depth and richness of data necessary for understanding the complex dynamics of instructional leadership in fostering inclusive education within the Malawian primary school context.

4. Data Analysis & Interpretation

4.1 Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

The demographic profile of participants provides important context for interpreting the findings of this study. The sample comprised twenty (20) respondents drawn from four selected primary schools in Malawi, including:

Category	Male	Female	Total
Head Teachers	2	2	4
Classroom Teachers	6	6	12
Support Staff	2	2	4
Total	10	10	20

Each school contributed one head teacher, three classroom teachers, and one support staff member. The participants' roles reflect the multi-level perspectives necessary to examine instructional leadership and inclusive education. Classroom teachers were responsible for delivering instruction to diverse learners, while support staff included special needs assistants and school counselors who provide direct support to learners requiring additional educational resources.

Participants' ages ranged from 27 to 58 years, with an average of 15 years of professional experience in primary education. Among the head teachers, three had over 20 years of combined teaching and administrative experience, while one had 12 years of service. Classroom teachers had between 8 and 18 years of teaching experience, and support staff members had 5 to 15 years of experience in their respective roles.

Regarding qualifications, all head teachers held either a Diploma or Bachelor's Degree in Education. Among classroom teachers, nine out of twelve held Diplomas, while the remaining three held Bachelor's Degrees. Support staff included two individuals with Certificates in Special Needs Education, one with a Diploma in Guidance and Counselling, and one with a Certificate in Early Childhood Education.

The gender distribution was balanced, with an equal number of male and female respondents (10 each). This balance provided a wide range of perspectives on instructional leadership and inclusive education practices, reducing potential gender bias in interpreting findings.

Overall, the demographic characteristics of participants demonstrate a well-rounded and experienced sample, offering a credible foundation for understanding the dynamics of instructional leadership and its influence on inclusive education practices in Malawian primary schools.

4.2 Instructional Leadership Practices that Promote Inclusive Education

This section presents findings on how instructional leadership in the four selected primary schools influences inclusive education practices. Data were collected from head teachers, classroom teachers, and support staff through semi-structured interviews and school observations. The analysis revealed that instructional leadership promotes inclusivity primarily through community engagement, shared vision building, teacher support, systematic monitoring, and professional development.

Respondents emphasized that inclusive education extends beyond the classroom and involves families and local communities. Head teachers described actively involving parents, guardians, and community leaders in understanding the needs of learners with diverse abilities. As one head teacher noted:

"Inclusive education here does not stop in the classroom. We deliberately involve families and community leaders so that children with different needs are accepted and supported at home and in society." (Respondent 2025, Head Teacher)

This perspective was echoed by classroom teachers who highlighted that community collaboration reinforces acceptance and support for learners with special needs.

Instructional leadership fosters a collective responsibility for inclusion. Head teachers actively model inclusive practices and communicate expectations during assemblies, staff meetings, and school events. A classroom teacher reflected:

"Our head teacher reminds us that inclusivity is a collective responsibility. They model inclusive practices during assemblies and staff meetings, and this motivates us to do the same in class." (Respondent 2025, Classroom Teacher)

The emphasis on shared vision ensures that all staff members understand and embrace inclusive education as a core school value.

Respondents reported that instructional leaders equip teachers with resources, strategies, and ongoing guidance to handle diverse learner needs effectively. One classroom teacher explained:

"The school leadership provides us with practical tools and ideas for teaching. This has boosted our confidence to teach learners with special needs without feeling overwhelmed." (Respondent 2025, Classroom Teacher)

Support staff also confirmed that instructional leaders provide coaching and mentorship to enhance teaching and support strategies for inclusive classrooms.

Instructional leaders were described as proactive in observing lessons and analyzing student performance data to guide teacher practice. A support staff member commented:

"Head teachers observe our lessons and later analyze student data with us. Their feedback makes us better in handling learners who require additional support." (Respondent 2025, Support Staff)

This structured monitoring ensures that interventions are evidence-based and that teachers receive actionable feedback to improve inclusive practices.

The study found that head teachers prioritize ongoing training and capacity building to strengthen inclusive education competencies among staff. Teachers reported attending workshops, in-service trainings, and peer learning sessions designed to improve understanding of differentiated instruction and special needs education.

The findings indicate that instructional leadership in the selected primary schools is central to promoting inclusive education. Leaders cultivate a supportive and participatory school culture by engaging the community, promoting a shared vision, empowering teachers, monitoring classroom practices, and facilitating professional growth. Collectively, these practices create an enabling environment where learners with diverse needs are better supported, highlighting the critical role of instructional leadership in fostering educational equity and inclusion.

4.3 Challenges Faced in Implementing Inclusive Education

This section presents the findings on the challenges faced by instructional leaders in implementing inclusive education practices in the four selected primary schools in Malawi. Data were collected through interviews with head teachers, classroom teachers, and support staff. Despite strong leadership commitment to inclusive practices, participants identified a range of structural, resource-based, and systemic challenges that constrain effective implementation.

Respondents frequently noted that overcrowded classrooms limit their ability to provide individualized attention to learners with diverse needs. One classroom teacher stated:

"Our classes sometimes have over 80 learners, including those with disabilities. It is not possible to give each learner the individual attention they deserve." (Respondent 2025, Classroom Teacher)

Head teachers corroborated this challenge, emphasizing that large class sizes make differentiation and inclusion difficult to implement consistently.

Limited access to teaching aids, assistive devices, and specialized learning materials was cited as a major barrier. A head teacher explained:

"Inadequate funding has affected us. We cannot buy enough teaching aids or assistive devices. Without these, inclusive education becomes difficult to achieve." (Respondent 2025, Head Teacher)

Teachers also noted that the absence of visual, tactile, and audio resources reduces the effectiveness of instructional strategies for learners with special needs.

The physical learning environment in many schools was described as unsuitable for children with disabilities. Support staff highlighted that inadequate facilities contribute to learner exclusion and dropout:

"Learners with disabilities often drop out because the school has no ramps, the toilets are not suitable, and the classrooms are not adapted to their needs." (Respondent 2025, Support Staff)

The lack of accessible infrastructure was seen as a structural barrier that instructional leadership alone cannot fully overcome without external support.

Several participants reported that insufficient financial support from government and community stakeholders hampers inclusive education initiatives. Without consistent funding, schools struggle to maintain specialized programs, procure learning materials, or conduct professional development workshops for staff.

Although instructional leaders provide guidance and mentorship, some teachers reported lacking formal training in inclusive education practices. This limits their confidence and effectiveness in meeting the needs of learners with disabilities or learning challenges.

The findings suggest that while instructional leadership is proactive in promoting inclusive education, systemic and structural barriers limit its success. Overcrowded classrooms, inadequate teaching resources, poor infrastructure, limited funding, and insufficient teacher training constrain the practical implementation of inclusive policies. These challenges highlight a gap between leadership intentions and the realities faced by staff and learners. Effectively addressing these barriers requires coordinated action involving school leaders, government agencies, community stakeholders, and teacher development programs.

Taken together, these challenges underscore the complexity of translating instructional leadership into tangible inclusive practices, revealing that leadership commitment alone is insufficient without supportive infrastructure, adequate resources, and continuous capacity building.

4.4 Instructional Leadership Support to Teachers

The findings of this study revealed that instructional leadership plays a critical role in equipping and motivating teachers to effectively implement inclusive education practices. Teachers and school leaders consistently described support as being delivered through training, mentorship, sensitization campaigns, and the transformation of teacher attitudes towards inclusivity. These interventions have not only improved teaching skills but also created a culture of collaboration and acceptance within schools.

A recurring theme was the organization of workshops and in-service trainings facilitated by school leaders. These sessions exposed teachers to innovative methods of differentiating instruction and accommodating diverse learning needs. One teacher explained:

"We have attended workshops and trainings organized by our leaders. These opportunities gave us new teaching methods that help us handle learners with diverse needs." (Respondent 2025, Classroom Teacher)

Such initiatives have strengthened teachers' pedagogical competence, enabling them to design lessons that consider learners with disabilities and those with learning difficulties.

Teachers further emphasized the value of mentorship programs initiated by school leaders. By fostering collaboration and peer learning, instructional leaders ensured that teachers could rely on each other for professional guidance. A classroom teacher reflected:

"Our leaders encourage us to work together and mentor each other. This kind of collaboration has improved our skills and confidence." (Respondent 2025, Classroom Teacher)

Through this mentorship, less experienced teachers benefited from the expertise of their colleagues, while experienced teachers gained fresh perspectives on inclusive pedagogy.

Another significant area of support was the deliberate effort by instructional leaders to reshape teachers' perceptions of learners with disabilities. Several respondents admitted that they initially held exclusionary views but were later transformed by continuous guidance and sensitization. One teacher noted:

"Some of us used to think children with disabilities belonged in special schools only. But with continuous guidance from our leaders, we now accommodate them in our classrooms and adapt teaching methods to meet their needs." (Respondent 2025, Classroom Teacher)

This transformation demonstrates the power of instructional leadership in not only providing technical skills but also in fostering empathy, acceptance, and an inclusive school culture.

Teachers also highlighted the moral encouragement they receive from instructional leaders, which boosts their confidence and resilience in handling challenges associated with inclusive classrooms. A head teacher remarked:

"I always remind my staff that inclusive education is about patience and compassion. By encouraging them, I help them believe they can make a difference for every child." (Respondent 2025, Head Teacher)

Such encouragement helps sustain teacher motivation, especially when resources are limited.

The findings suggest that instructional leadership provides both technical and emotional scaffolding for teachers, enabling them to embrace inclusive education. By organizing training workshops, promoting mentorship, reshaping teacher mindsets, and offering moral support, instructional leaders empower teachers to confidently manage diverse classrooms. This support extends beyond skill development, cultivating a professional environment grounded in collaboration, empathy, and shared responsibility.

Overall, these results demonstrate that the effectiveness of inclusive education in primary schools is strongly influenced by the extent to which instructional leadership actively supports teachers. The leadership's role in capacity building and attitude transformation is particularly significant in contexts where resources are scarce but commitment to inclusivity remains strong.

4.5 Strategies to Enhance Instructional Leadership in Inclusive Education

The following results relate to the fourth objective of the study, which sought to identify strategies that could strengthen the role of instructional leadership in promoting inclusive education in primary schools. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with head teachers, classroom teachers, and support staff across the four selected schools. A thematic analysis of the responses revealed several strategies consistently recommended by participants. These include strengthening collaboration, setting clear inclusive goals, building peer support networks, investing in professional development, and cultivating a positive and inclusive school culture.

A dominant theme was the importance of collaboration between schools, parents, and communities. Respondents agreed that inclusive education cannot be achieved by schools alone but requires a collective approach. One head teacher explained:

"Collaboration between teachers, parents, and the community is vital. It makes inclusivity a shared responsibility, not just a school issue." (Respondent 2025, Head Teacher)

This view suggests that partnerships with parents and community leaders enhance resource mobilization, advocacy, and support structures for learners with disabilities.

Teachers emphasized the importance of clearly defined inclusive education goals at the school level. Such goals would provide a framework for teachers to follow and ensure alignment in practice. A classroom teacher stated:

"When inclusive goals are clearly outlined, it becomes easier for teachers to know what is expected of them. Training should follow these goals." (Respondent 2025, Classroom Teacher)

This highlights the need for leadership to provide vision and direction so that inclusivity becomes a measurable and practical commitment.

Support staff highlighted the role of peer networks in strengthening instructional leadership. They observed that peer-to-peer learning helps teachers share experiences and develop creative strategies for supporting learners with diverse needs. One staff member remarked:

"Through peer support, we share ideas and encourage each other. This strengthens our ability to work in inclusive settings." (Respondent 2025, Support Staff)

Such networks were viewed as informal but powerful tools for capacity building, enabling collective problem-solving and mutual encouragement.

A recurring strategy mentioned by teachers was the need for more consistent professional development opportunities. Respondents felt that ongoing training and mentorship would provide instructional leaders with the skills and knowledge to guide teachers effectively. A teacher emphasized: *"We need more CPDs and mentorship trainings. This will help leaders gain more knowledge to guide us effectively in inclusive settings."* (Respondent 2025, Classroom Teacher)

This aligns with the broader idea that inclusive education requires not only initial sensitization but also continuous learning to adapt to evolving challenges.

Several participants underscored the role of school culture in sustaining inclusivity. They stressed that leaders should model inclusive attitudes and encourage teachers to do the same, thereby creating an environment where diversity is embraced. One teacher explained:

"Inclusivity works better when the whole school believes in it. Leaders need to promote respect, patience, and acceptance so that every learner feels valued." (Respondent 2025, Classroom Teacher)

This shows that inclusivity thrives in environments where attitudes and values are aligned with inclusive practices.

The findings indicate that enhancing instructional leadership for inclusive education requires a holistic approach that integrates technical, relational, and cultural strategies. Collaboration fosters shared responsibility, while clear goals provide direction and accountability. Peer support networks and continuous professional development equip teachers with the tools to manage diverse classrooms. Finally, cultivating a positive school culture ensures that inclusivity is embedded not just in policies but also in everyday practices. Collectively, these strategies highlight that effective instructional leadership in inclusive education is dynamic, participatory, and sustained through ongoing learning and collaboration.

5. Suggestions & Recommendations

Based on the findings and discussions of this study on instructional leadership and its influence on inclusive education practices in four selected primary schools in Malawi, the following recommendations are proposed. They are directed at policymakers, school administrators, teachers, and other stakeholders to enhance instructional leadership, support teachers, and strengthen inclusive education implementation.

6. Conclusion

This study set out to examine the influence of instructional leadership on inclusive education practices in four selected primary schools in Malawi. Specifically, it sought to explore the strategies, support mechanisms, and challenges associated with promoting inclusion in contexts characterized by

limited resources and diverse learner needs. In this investigation, the aim was to assess how instructional leaders particularly head teachers facilitate inclusive practices through teacher empowerment, professional development, collaborative networks, and the creation of supportive school cultures.

The study has shown that instructional leadership significantly shapes the implementation of inclusive education. Across the four schools, leaders were found to provide both technical and emotional support to teachers, equipping them with the skills, knowledge, and confidence to address diverse learners' needs. Key strategies, including workshops, mentorship programs, peer collaboration, and sensitization campaigns, emerged as effective mechanisms for enhancing teacher competence and fostering an inclusive mindset. These findings complement existing literature, which emphasizes the pivotal role of instructional leaders in creating conditions that promote teacher efficacy, collaboration, and inclusive school cultures (Bush, 2011; Ainscow & Sandill, 2010; Forlin, 2013).

At the same time, this study highlighted systemic and structural challenges that limit the full realization of inclusive education. Overcrowded classrooms, inadequate infrastructure, insufficient teaching resources, and negative societal attitudes toward disability were consistently cited as barriers. Despite the commitment and proactive efforts of instructional leaders, these constraints underscore the importance of policy support, resource mobilization, and targeted interventions to bridge the gap between leadership intent and classroom practice.

Moreover, the research identified several strategies that could further strengthen instructional leadership in promoting inclusion. These include setting clear school-level inclusive goals, fostering stronger community and parental engagement, investing in continuous professional development, building peer support networks, and cultivating positive, inclusive school cultures. Taken together, these strategies suggest that effective instructional leadership is not only about technical guidance but also about relational and cultural facilitation—creating an environment where all learners are valued and supported.

In conclusion, this study reinforces the critical role of instructional leadership in translating inclusive education policies into practice. It establishes that while leaders can significantly empower teachers and shape school cultures, the sustainability and effectiveness of inclusive practices require systemic support, resource provision, and ongoing capacity building. Overall, the findings contribute to a growing understanding of how instructional leadership can serve as a catalyst for inclusive education in Malawi, providing practical insights for school leaders, policymakers, and educational stakeholders committed to ensuring that no learner is left behind.

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