



Assessing the Effectiveness of Inclusive Education Strategies for Students with Special Needs in Urban Schools: A Case Study of Lilongwe, Malawi

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ABSTRACT

Inclusive education ensures equitable access to high-quality education for students with special needs in traditional learning environments. This study evaluates the effectiveness of inclusive education strategies in urban schools in Lilongwe, Malawi. The study used a mixed-methods research design that blends qualitative and quantitative techniques to assess the impact of inclusive education on children with special needs. The findings highlight the challenges faced by educators, administrators, and students and provide recommendations for enhancing inclusivity.

Keywords: Inclusive education, special needs, urban schools, Malawi, teacher preparedness, accessibility

1. Introduction

The purpose of inclusive education, a widely recognised idea, is to include students with special needs in regular classes while providing them with the support they need to improve their learning (UNESCO, 2020). It reinforces Sustainable Development Goal 4, which emphasises how crucial it is that every student receives an equal and excellent education. Malawi has adopted the National Inclusive Education Strategy (2019–2025) to increase educational inclusivity (MoEST, 2019). However, special needs students in urban schools encounter a number of challenges, including stigma, a lack of resources, and inexperienced teachers (Mambo & Kumwenda, 2021). Despite these policy frameworks, studies reveal that just 20% of Malawian special needs students attend traditional educational institutions, indicating inadequacies in implementation (MoEST, 2023). In urban areas like Lilongwe, factors including large class sizes, a shortage of specialised resources, and inadequate teacher preparation further hinder inclusivity. This study assesses the effectiveness of inclusive education strategies, identifies barriers to their implementation, and makes recommendations for improving inclusivity in urban secondary schools.

2. Literature Review

Over time, inclusive education has evolved from separate special education to integrated learning environments. According to the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the 1994 Salamanca Statement, every child has the right to a top-notch education, regardless of their potential (UNESCO, 1994). In 1990, the Education for All (EFA) movement reiterated the need for inclusive policies (UNESCO, 1990). There are ongoing problems with implementation even though Malawi's National Inclusive Education Strategy (2019–2025) provides a route towards inclusive education (MoEST, 2019). Research indicates that implementing inclusive education in Malawi's urban schools is fraught with challenges. Inadequate teacher training remains a significant issue since many educators lack the skills and expertise needed to effectively manage pupils with special needs (Mambo & Kumwenda, 2021). Assistive technology, such as Braille materials, hearing aids, and accessible classrooms, is scarce in schools (MoEST, 2023). Additionally, cultural stigma discourages parents from enrolling children with disabilities in regular schools (Kalembo, 2018), and large student populations make it challenging to provide tailored support (Banda, 2021).

The theoretical structure of this study is based on three main hypotheses. According to Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, a variety of environmental systems, such as the family, school, and policy contexts, have an impact on inclusive education results (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This method focusses on how interactions at various levels impact the effectiveness of inclusive education strategies. By shifting the focus from individual limits to institutional barriers that impede participation, the Social Model of Disability promotes structural reforms in education (Oliver, 1990). Meanwhile, Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory highlights the importance of social interactions, tailored instruction, and peer support in inclusive learning environments (Vygotsky, 1978). When combined, these ideas provide a systematic framework for understanding how inclusive education strategies operate and pinpointing areas that require improvement.

The conceptual framework for this study incorporates key components required for effective inclusive education. Teacher preparation is essential since qualified teachers are better equipped to implement inclusive solutions. The availability of resources, such as assistive technology and customised instructional materials, has a direct impact on the feasibility of inclusion. Institutional support, such as administrative aid and governmental rules, determines the extent to which inclusive education is prioritised in schools. Participation in the community also influences attitudes towards disabilities and whether or not parents decide to send their children to regular schools. These interconnected factors inform the study's recommendations and have an impact on the overall effectiveness of inclusive education initiatives.

Empirical research have provided valuable information on the effectiveness of inclusive education programs in several African contexts, highlighting a number of factors that influence their success. For instance, a study by Opoku et al. (2021) in Ghana demonstrated that teacher preparation is crucial to the effectiveness of inclusive education. Their findings indicate that educators who have undergone specialised training in inclusive education techniques are better equipped to accommodate the diverse learning needs of their students and ensure that those with special needs get the support they need. This study demonstrates the importance of professional growth in creating an inclusive learning environment. Similarly, Mugo et al. (2020) discovered that a lack of funding is one of the main obstacles to inclusive education implementation in Kenya. The effective implementation of inclusive education in Kenyan schools has been hampered by a lack of qualified staff, inadequate learning resources, and limited access to assistive technology. These findings align with a broader trend in sub-Saharan Africa, where inclusive education is nevertheless hampered by a lack of resources.

According to research conducted in Malawi, Chitsulo and Munthali (2021) discovered a discrepancy between the indicated intentions of policies and their actual implementation in the nation's educational system. Malawi has enacted inclusive education legislation, but due to poor implementation, not much has been done to achieve completely inclusive education. Numerous problems, such as a lack of infrastructure, insufficient funding, and a paucity of skilled labour, have contributed to the slow pace of change. By focussing on the special opportunities and issues present in Lilongwe's urban schools, the current study adds to this body of literature. By examining the unique context of Malawian urban schools, this study aims to provide a greater understanding of the challenges facing inclusive education and explore possible solutions. It also examines how to improve the effectiveness and inclusivity of instructional strategies in urban environments, where resource and infrastructure constraints are typically more obvious.

3. Research Methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods approach, integrating both qualitative and quantitative techniques (Creswell & Clark, 2018). A comprehensive analysis of inclusive education practices is made possible by this design, which triangulates statistical data with qualitative observations. Parents, special needs students, teachers, and school administrators in Lilongwe's urban secondary schools are the main subjects of the study. A sample of 130 participants—90 students, 30 teachers, and 10 administrators—was selected using stratified random sampling for quantitative analysis and selective sampling for qualitative data gathering.

Teachers and school administrators were provided with standardised questionnaires as part of the study to ascertain the effectiveness and prevalence of inclusive education strategies. Focus groups and semi-structured interviews with chosen teachers, parents, and children are used to gather in-depth viewpoints on problems and best practices. Analysis of secondary data from government publications, policy documents, and past research offers contextual insight. Thematic analysis of qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006) reveals key themes related to inclusive education practices and challenges, whereas SPSS, which employs descriptive and inferential statistics, is used to examine quantitative data.

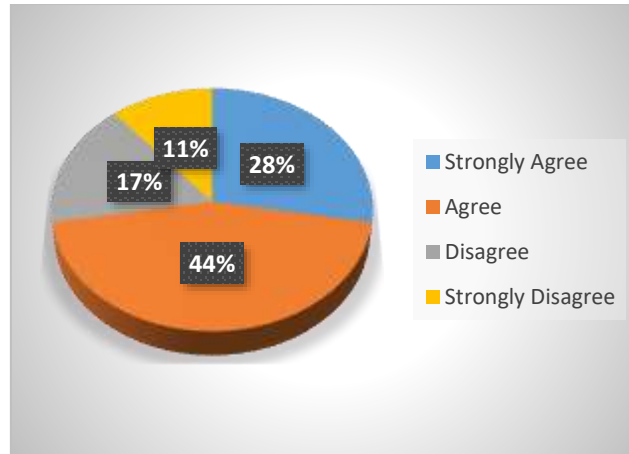
Ethical considerations, such as informed consent, confidentiality, and voluntary involvement, are strictly adhered to. Ethical permission was given by the relevant institutional review board. Inclusive education is crucial to ensuring equitable access to education for students with special needs. Despite Malawi's significant policy advancements, problems like inadequate budget, poor teacher preparation, and societal stigma keep full implementation from happening. This study highlights the need for targeted programs like teacher capacity building, infrastructure improvements, and community sensitisation efforts. The findings will be used to inform practical strategies and policies aimed at enhancing inclusive education in Malawi's urban schools.

4. Research Findings and Interpretation

4.1 Quantitative Findings

Objective 1: Availability of Learning Materials and Assistive Technologies

According to the findings, while 72.2% of students acknowledged the existence of assistive learning resources, 27.8% felt they were insufficient. This suggests that inequalities in the distribution of resources persist notwithstanding some advancements.



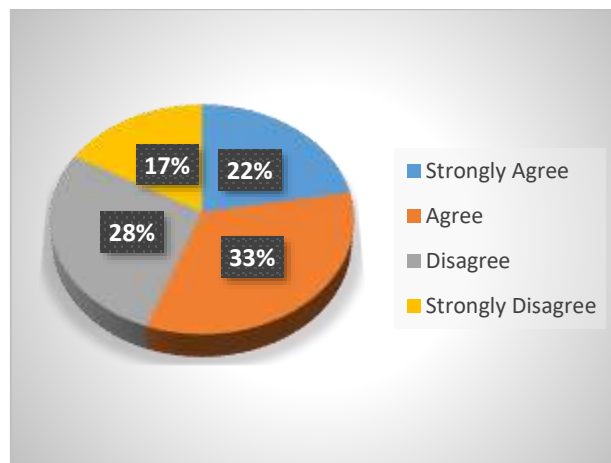
Objective 2: Teachers’ Training in Inclusive Education

According to data on teachers' training in inclusive education, 53.3% of teachers agreed they had received some training, while 46.7% disagreed or strongly disagreed, demonstrating the need for more specialised training programs.

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Strongly Agree	6	20.00%
Agree	10	33.30%
Disagree	8	26.70%
Strongly Disagree	6	20.00%
Total	30	100%

Objective 3: Accessibility of School Facilities for Students with Disabilities

While 49.5% of students believed that physical accessibility was insufficient, 50.5% of students indicated that their schools had accessible infrastructure, indicating that disability-accessible educational facilities continue to be a critical concern. These findings highlight how important it is to improve infrastructure adjustments.



Objective 4: Role of Parental Involvement

Although 38.9% of respondents said parental involvement was insufficient, 61.1% of respondents acknowledged active parental participation, indicating the critical role that parental involvement plays in inclusive education.

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Strongly Agree	20	22.20%
Agree	35	38.90%

Disagree	20	22.20%
Strongly Disagree	15	16.70%
Total	90	100%

4.2 Qualitative Findings

Thematic analysis of the focus group discussions revealed several issues and opportunities pertaining to inclusive education in urban schools in Lilongwe. One of the most significant problems identified was the lack of teacher preparation for inclusive education. Many teachers expressed concerns about their ability to give special education students the care they need because they were ill-prepared. Teachers reported that, despite their commitment, they often lacked the specialist knowledge required to teach students with disabilities. For example, according to one teacher, *"we do our best to accommodate students with special needs, but it is difficult to know if we are meeting their requirements effectively without proper training."* This discrepancy in teacher preparedness is a major barrier to the successful implementation of inclusive education, underscoring the need for professional development programs to give teachers the knowledge and abilities they require.

Another important topic was the need for specialist professional development to advance inclusive education. Due to the teacher education curriculum's frequent lack of exposure to special education techniques, teachers expressed that they were ill-prepared to work with kids with disabilities. One teacher noted, *"We weren't adequately prepared for the challenges of inclusive education by our training. Although we were taught theory, we still need practical abilities"*. Demands were made over and over again for more seminars, in-service training, and access to specialist materials that would help teachers better address the needs of different children. Teachers emphasised the significance of ongoing professional development for successful inclusion because many still employ outdated teaching methods that fall short of meeting the unique requirements of children with disabilities.

The lack of resources was seen as a significant barrier to the implementation of inclusive education. Despite the availability of some resources, many educators and administrators realised that they were insufficient to meet the needs of every kid with special needs. A teacher clarified, *"We have textbooks and some assistive devices, but they are not enough to support all students with special needs."* This shortage of resources not only affects the ability to provide individualized support but also creates inequities in educational outcomes for students with disabilities. The reliance on shared resources, such as assistive devices, further delays learning and hampers students' ability to fully engage in the educational process. Furthermore, some resources were described as outdated, which only exacerbates the difficulties faced by both students and educators in ensuring that students with disabilities receive the support they need to succeed academically.

In addition to economic constraints, the physical infrastructure of schools was shown to be a significant barrier to inclusive education. Since many of Lilongwe's schools were not constructed with accessibility in mind, it might be difficult for students with physical limitations to navigate the school environment. As one government official noted, *"Most schools were not built with accessibility in mind. Some lack ramps, adapted washrooms, and assistive technologies, making it difficult for students with physical disabilities to navigate."* Teachers emphasised that in addition to limiting pupils' physical mobility, this inaccessibility affected their social and educational opportunities. Inadequate building modifications and infrastructure undermine the implementation of inclusive education policies, underscoring the need to invest in accessible facilities to ensure that students with disabilities can participate fully in school life.

Finally, the focus group discussions showed that inclusive education was severely hampered by stigma and societal views on disability. Parents and community members continued to hold traditional views about the education of children with impairments, often holding the view that these children should be educated apart from their peers. *"A lot of people still think that kids with disabilities shouldn't be in the same classroom as other kids,"* a parent stated. *"Some parents are deterred from enrolling their children in mainstream schools by this attitude."* The stigma attached to disabilities not only deterred parents from sending their children to inclusive schools, but it also created a hostile learning atmosphere where students with disabilities were routinely excluded. Addressing this stigma and changing societal perceptions of disability are necessary to promote an inclusive learning environment where all students, regardless of ability, are accepted and encouraged.

5. Discussion, Conclusion, and Recommendations

5.1 Discussion

The analysis confirms past findings that Malawi's implementation of inclusive education policies has significant flaws (Chitsulo & Munthali, 2021). Even though policy frameworks promote inclusiveness, inadequate infrastructure, training, and resources prevent full implementation. The results are in line with Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, which emphasises the influence of environmental factors on educational outcomes, such as community attitudes, institutional support, and laws (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Teacher preparedness is a key element of successful inclusive education. Even while some teachers have received training, the results show that many still lack the skills necessary to successfully implement inclusive teaching approaches. This is in line with studies that demonstrate the need for continual professional development to improve inclusive education outcomes. Additionally, schools require more specialist teaching aids to serve students with extraordinary needs.

The accessibility of school buildings has a significant impact on the educational experiences of students with impairments. The survey revealed that while some schools had ramps and accessible facilities, others lacked basic accessibility features. The Social Model of Disability, which maintains that social and environmental barriers, rather than individual limitations, keep people from being included, is consistent with this. Resolving infrastructure issues is necessary to increase inclusive education's overall effectiveness.

One of the most important factors influencing the effectiveness of inclusive education is parental involvement. The Ecological Systems Theory emphasises how families influence kids' educational journeys. The results show that family involvement improves special needs pupils' learning outcomes. Some parents are still unaware of their responsibility to promote inclusive education, though. The efficacy of inclusion initiatives can be increased by bolstering parental involvement through awareness campaigns and support systems.

5.2 Conclusion

In urban schools in Lilongwe, inclusive education techniques have shown great potential in promoting educational equity by giving students with special needs a more adaptable and accommodating learning environment. (Ainscow & Sandill, 2020) These strategies—which include differentiated instruction, assistive technology, and creating a more inclusive classroom environment—are crucial to ensuring that all students, regardless of their abilities or disabilities, have access to high-quality education. But these strategies often fall short of their full potential due to many significant concerns. Lack of resources, such as specialised teaching materials and insufficient money for support services, limits the scope and quality of inclusive practices. Furthermore, many of the instructors in Lilongwe's urban schools are undertrained in special education, which makes it difficult for them to effectively address the diverse needs of their students (Mukeredzi, 2021). Due to a lack of professional development, the instructors' knowledge of inclusive teaching techniques and strategies is inadequate. Inadequate facilities, such as classrooms that are inaccessible to children with physical disabilities or inadequate school buildings, exacerbate the problem. If we want to fully benefit from inclusive education, these barriers must be eliminated by financing teacher development programs, improving resources, and updating school structures to be fully accessible. In addition to being incorporated into the educational system, we can ensure that children with special needs can thrive and reach their full potential by overcoming these obstacles.

5.3 Recommendations

Improved teacher preparation is required to advance inclusive education. Ongoing professional development on inclusive education approaches should be offered by the government and interested parties. More money is also needed to improve school infrastructure and purchase assisted learning resources. In order to lessen stigma and encourage inclusive practices, community awareness initiatives has to be stepped up. Finally, to assess inclusive education policies' efficacy and modify tactics appropriately, policy implementation should be routinely reviewed.

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