

## Policy Responses to Inclusive Secondary Education in Malawi

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### Abstract

*This study analyses policy directives and strategies for inclusive secondary education in Malawi. The study argues that policy directives and strategies conceptualize inclusive education as a mere reversal of special education without considering the context of mainstream education, such as roles assigned to mainstream teachers. For example, the policy directives and strategies have not well defined the roles of mainstream teachers, yet mandated the same teachers to translate the directives into actions. This dire situation has led to policy-to-practice disparities in inclusive secondary education. The study uses documentary review and interviews as data generation methods. Disability studies critique is employed as a theoretical substratum to scrutinize inclusive secondary education policy and practice. The study recommends that future policy formulation in Malawi should be informed by teachers' experiences while putting their defined roles at the centre instead of simply reversing the tenets of special education which has proved to be backfiring.*

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**Keywords:** *Inclusive education, disability studies critique, education policy, inclusive education strategy, Malawi*

### Introduction

Undoing past social injustices has been a topical issue in all spheres of life. From resisting racial discrimination in the United States to narrowing the economic gap in post-apartheid South Africa, the quest has been towards a just society in which every individual thrives. Different 'undoing movements' have emerged in the education context, such as curriculum decolonisation, knowledge reorientation and inclusive education. For inclusive education, the desire is to move away from social injustices in the form of special schools, whereby learners are separated based on factors such as disability (Thomas & Loxley, 2022). The inception of special education came with its policy and action frameworks. The endeavour is to develop policy and action frameworks that align with inclusive education (Hardy & Woodcock, 2015). With this understanding, Malawi draws on international declarations and national frameworks to shape its implementation strategies for inclusive education. However, many research studies have found a significant disparity between policy and practice regarding inclusive secondary education in Malawi (Kamchedzera, 2010; Chimwaza, 2015; de Souza, 2020). This study argues that the disparity between inclusive secondary education policy and practice in Malawi originates from the entrenches of special education history and practices that emasculate transformed inclusive education policy formulation and practice implementation.

Through the 1800s, neither a particular model of disability nor an international policy supported the education of learners with disabilities (Borson, 2017). Later on, guided by the medical model of disability, educational systems across the globe segregated learners with disabilities to special education. The medical model of disability perceived disability as a medical condition. International declarations such as the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) of 1948 supported special education (Rossa, 2017; Block et al., 2019). Afterwards, schooling systems integrated learners with disabilities into mainstream education following a

psycho-medical model of disability in the 1950s to 1990s. With the psycho-medical model of disability, learners with disabilities spent a limited time in mainstream schools but later returned to their special schools (McIntyre, 2018; Hodkinson, 2019). For example, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 supported the integration system in the United States. From the 1990s, some educational settings, especially in the Global North, included learners with disabilities in mainstream education, which was the beginning of what is now termed inclusive education. The inclusion was when the social model of disability advocated removing barriers that hindered the participation of learners with disabilities in mainstream education. International frameworks such as Education for All (EFA) of 1990, Salamanca Statement of 1994 and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) of 2006 spearheaded inclusive education.

### **Literature review**

To realise inclusive education, Malawi developed the National Education Policy (NEP) of 2016 and the National Strategy on Inclusive Education (NSIE) of 2017. Both documents are currently under review for their revised replacements. As of mid-2022, Malawi has no standalone national inclusive education policy. Now, the country draws its broader aspirations for inclusive education from the NEP (2016) and specific objectives toward inclusive education from the NSIE (2017-2021). The NSIE is a direct result of the NEP. The implementation plan for the NEP explicitly states that “the [Ministry of Education, Science and Technology] shall be responsible for translating this policy into strategies and plans and ensure implementation of such plans in partnership with all stakeholders” (Malawi. Ministry of Education, 2016, p. 31). Thus, there is no doubt that the NSIE is a direct response to the NEP. The documents mentioned above are the most critical discourses on inclusive education in Malawi. However, some of the directives and strategies stipulated are moot and usually do not align with inclusive education's interactionist and transformative intentions.

The National Education Policy (NEP, 2016) presents many objectives. One of the policy objectives is “to create an enabling environment for the expansion of equitable access to education for all Malawians” (Malawi. Ministry of Education, 2016, p. 13). Even if the objective does not explicitly state inclusive education, the desire to expand “equitable access” may encompass inclusion. There are many priority areas mentioned in the NEP. One of them is the Policy Priority Area (ii), which focuses on “Accessible and Quality Secondary Education” (ibid, p. 14). On the other hand, the Policy Priority Area (ii) has several policy statements. One of them is Policy Statement (iii) in ensuring “Equitable access to quality and relevant special and inclusive secondary education is enhanced” (ibid, p. 20). Beyond the abovementioned priorities and strategies for inclusive education, the NEP offers nothing more in terms of inclusion. The brevity is understandable as the NEP is a broad policy encompassing all issues in education. Perhaps, an independent national inclusive education policy, which is currently non-existent, would articulate matters more profoundly.

In 2017, Malawi formulated the National Strategy on Inclusive Education (NSIE). The NSIE, too, fails the test as a viable guiding plan for inclusive education for the same reasons the NEP fails. Malawi framed the NSIE (2017-2021) “as a way of moving from the special education system to the newly introduced inclusive education system” (Ishida et al., 2017, p. 19). The NSIE (2017-2021) identified factors that exclude learners from and within the education system in Malawi. The most dominant factor identified is “teachers’ lack of experience, skills and knowledge to teach diverse classrooms, e.g., use of sign language and curriculum differentiation skills” (Malawi. Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 16). Among many priority areas that the Strategy presents, the most relevant ones are Strategy Priority Area (v): “Teacher Education and Motivation” and Strategy Priority Area (vii): “Enabling environment for teaching and learning” (ibid, p. 20). Each priority area has an accompanying strategic outcome. For the Strategy Priority Area (v), a strategy toward the outcome is to “introduce a rewarding system for educators in ECD [Early Childhood Development], primary and secondary schools” (ibid, p. 23). The activity that is supposed to enable the outcome is to “promote professional development for [inclusive education]” (p. 23). Strategy Priority Area (vii) is a strategy that intends to “adapt existing curriculum, methodology, teaching and learning materials to incorporate [inclusive education]” (ibid, p. 24). Likewise, the activity that will enable this strategic outcome is “developing a handbook on curriculum differentiation” (ibid, p. 24). With all these outlined, the attention now turns to the frontrunners in implementing these stipulations — the mainstream teachers.

### **Policy aspirations for inclusive education**

The National Education Policy (NEP, 2016) and the National Strategy on Inclusive Education (NSIE, 2017) give directions on each level of education in Malawi. Below are some of the directives that speak more to education in general and secondary education in particular:

- **Enhancement of inclusive education:** The NEP aspires to ensure that “equitable access to quality and relevant special and inclusive secondary education is enhanced” (Malawi. Ministry of Education, 2016, p. 20). The directive is under the government’s promise to ensure that mainstream education provides for all learners regardless of their (dis)abilities.
- **Mainstreaming of inclusive education in teacher education:** The NEP observes that teachers lack the necessary expertise for inclusive education. In response to the problem, the policy directs that “special and inclusive education is mainstreamed” in teacher education (Malawi. Ministry of Education, 2016, p. 22). The directive responds to the teachers’ lack of inclusive education expertise. However, no policy stipulation in the NEP shows that the directive is the appropriate response to the problem.
- **Promotion of education in inclusive settings:** The NSIE indicates that “the goal of the strategy is to ensure that learners with diverse needs have equitable access to quality education in inclusive settings at all levels through the removal of barriers to learning, participation, attendance and achievement” (Malawi.

Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 11). The strategy attempts to enlist efforts to transform existing education systems into inclusive ones.

### **Policy and practice shortfalls in inclusive education**

The National Education Policy (NEP, 2016) and the National Strategy on Inclusive Education (NSIE, 2016) acknowledge that many problems hinder the quality and implementation of inclusive education in Malawi. Below are some of the shortfalls highlighted in the NEP and the NSIE:

- **Lack of stakeholder coordination:** The NEP acknowledges that “due to the absence of a well-defined education policy, different key players in the education sector have not been well coordinated” (Malawi. Ministry of Education, 2016, p. 12). Thus, the policy aims at putting all stakeholders, such as schools, teachers and parents, in coordinated interactions that improve education quality and enhance inclusive education implementation in Malawi.
- **Undefined roles for stakeholders:** The NEP further acknowledge that, apart from lack of stakeholder coordination, “their roles and responsibilities have not been clearly defined, thereby prompting non-conformity to set standards among stakeholders” (Malawi. Ministry of Education, 2016, p. 12). The policy suggested that since the roles of the key stakeholders are not defined, policy-to-practice disparities are inevitable.
- **Unqualified human resource:** In addition to the undefined roles of stakeholders, the NEP observes that “there is also a lack of qualified special needs lecturers and necessary facilities in teacher training colleges” (Malawi. Ministry of Education, 2016, p. 21). The lecturers and the colleges are some key players in inclusive education. As such, the NSIE argues that “the shortage of well-qualified personnel at basic as well as secondary education compromises the quality of education for all” (Malawi. Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 17).
- **Lack of teacher expertise:** Since lecturers and teacher training colleges lack the skills to train inclusive education teachers, there is a lack of expertise in the teachers being deployed to the schools. The NSIE pointed out that “teachers lack experience, skills and knowledge to teach diverse classrooms, e.g., use of sign language, curriculum differentiation skills” (NSIE, 2017, p. 16). Teachers, including those in mainstream schools, are crucial to realising inclusive education but lack the expertise to foster inclusivity.
- **Focus on special education than inclusive education:** As lecturers and teachers lack the necessary expertise on inclusive education, tenets of special education overshadow inclusive education. According to the NSIE, the “analysis reveals that existing teacher education programmes focus more on special needs education rather than inclusive education” (Malawi. Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 17). Some studies in Malawi also revealed that more emphasis is placed on special education than on inclusive education within mainstream education.

- **Disparities due to physical ability:** The NEP observes that “there are also disparities according to gender (in favour of boys), location of schools, the income of parents and/or guardians and *physical ability* [emphasis added] of students. Orphans and other vulnerable children (OVCs) are also disadvantaged” (Malawi. Ministry of Education, 2016, p. 20). For the context of this study, the interest is on disparities due to the physical ability of learners, as this has some implications for inclusive schooling within mainstream education.
- **Poor infrastructure:** Addressing all the problems above does not eventually guarantee the successful implementation of inclusive education in Malawi. There is the issue of infrastructure that is key in mainstreaming learners with physical disabilities. The NSIE articulated that: School infrastructure is another important aspect of inclusive education. These include classrooms, sanitation facilities, playgrounds as well as water points. Studies have shown that school infrastructure directly impacts education access, quality and equity. Extant data indicates that school infrastructure in Malawi remains a challenge. This is evident from the education sector's shortage of classrooms, sanitation facilities, water points, and playgrounds. (Malawi. Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 17)

### **Reimagining teachers in inclusive education**

The National Education Policy (NEP) and the National Strategy on Inclusive Education (NSIE) pointed out that the undefined roles of the stakeholders such as mainstream teachers are one of the problems hindering the implementation of inclusive education in Malawi. Surprisingly, both documents do not make the roles of mainstream teachers explicit. The NEP assigned the roles to the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MoEST). The NSIE assigned the roles to mainstream schools. The MoEST, as a government ministry, has many stakeholders under it. Mainstream schools usually have administrators, mainstream teachers, specialist teachers, learners and caregivers. Thus, the roles meant for mainstream teachers in the two policy documents are not assigned to specific stakeholders. There are a few roles defined in the two documents that may apply to mainstream teachers but these are masked with tenets of special education:

- **Providing remedial lessons:** The NSIE, through the roles assigned to mainstream schools, requires mainstream teachers to “provide remedial lessons to learners with diverse needs that have transitioned to mainstream schools and the existing learners with diverse needs” (Malawi. Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 28). The language used in the NSIE may be problematic regarding the models of disability. The provision of remedial lessons resonates with the medical model of disability that sees an individual as medically, physically and cognitively deficient and requiring remediation. Arguably, not all learners with disabilities transitioning to mainstream classes need remedial lessons; likewise, not all learners with disabilities already in mainstream education require remedial lessons. Mainstream teachers may prescribe remedial lessons to learners with disabilities to conform to the NSIE.

- **Teaching learners with diverse needs:** The prominent role assigned to mainstream schools, which may apply to mainstream teachers, is the mandate to “teach learners with diverse needs” (Malawi. Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 27). The role speaks to the intention of transformative education, which is critical in realising inclusive education. Initially, mainstream schools and classes catered for learners without disabilities. However, with the introduction of inclusive education, schools and teachers in mainstream education have to transform and embrace inclusivity.
- **Collaborating with communities and parents:** The NEP directed enhancing inclusive education partnerships. In response, the NSIE expects mainstream schools and perhaps mainstream teachers to “collaborate with local communities on [inclusive education] issues” (Malawi. Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 27). Communities and parents play a crucial role in the schools. This collaboration is relevant for the implementation and realisation of inclusive education.
- **Incorporating NSIE in school planning:** Though obscurely, planning is one of the roles assigned to mainstream teachers. The mainstream teachers should “incorporate [the National Strategy on Inclusive Education] in school planning” (Malawi. Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 27). The role suggests that mainstream teachers should first know what the NSIE stipulates. In that case, the planning for teaching should draw on the NSIE. However, actual actions that would translate into inclusive planning are absent in the NSIE itself.
- **Safeguarding the rights of learners with diverse needs:** As one of their roles, mainstream schools, and implicitly mainstream teachers, should “establish and/or strengthen child protection mechanisms to ensure the rights of learners with diverse needs are safeguarded” (Malawi. Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 28). The NSIE does not state what safeguarding learners' rights would entail in mainstream education. The role speaks more to advocating the right to education, which may not be within the practicalities of mainstream teachers.

### **Strategies for improving inclusive education**

Apart from identifying problems and giving directives on inclusive education, the National Education Policy (NEP, 2016) and the National Strategy on Inclusive Education (NSIE, 2017) offer strategies for implementing inclusive education in Malawi. The sections below present some of the strategies and describe activities that could translate the strategies into action:

- **Raising awareness about inclusive education:** To implement inclusive education, the NSIE mandates stakeholders to “prepare [inclusive education] awareness raising tools [...and] orient teachers, caregivers, teacher educators, education managers, inspectors, advisors, PEAs, community members and learners on [inclusive education]” (Malawi. Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 21). The awareness aims at equipping stakeholders with relevant knowledge regarding inclusive education.

- **Increasing human resource capacity:** As a way of ensuring talented human resources, the NSIE encourages the relevant authorities, especially the Ministry of Education, to “train and recruit teachers, caregivers and support assistants for [inclusive education]” (Malawi. Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 21). The strategy addresses the problems of unqualified human resources and lack of teacher expertise in implementing inclusive education.
- **Improving teacher education:** In recognition of the crucial role that teachers play in inclusive education implementation, the NSIE encourages the relevant authorities to “develop inclusive education training manual for ECD, primary and secondary teacher education” (Malawi. Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 23). The training manual would inform part of the curriculum for pre-service teachers. When the teachers are deployed to schools, they will apply what they were trained regarding inclusive education.
- **Enhancing partnerships for inclusive education:** The NEP observed that activities of stakeholders in inclusive education do not occur in a coordinated manner. In response, the NSIE mandates authorities such as the Ministry of Education, education managers and headteachers to “hold quarterly meetings for stakeholders on [inclusive education] at different levels” (Malawi. Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 25). The intention is to foster meaningful and productive relationships between inclusive education stakeholders, including teachers, parents and communities.
- **Strengthening leadership for inclusive education:** Leadership plays a significant role in implementing inclusive education. There is a need to “train school managers and administrators on [inclusive education] management and administration” (Malawi. Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 21). The NSIE assumes that inclusive education leaders need to understand their roles to spearhead its implementation effectively.
- **Curriculum differentiation:** Since inclusive education intends to transform the existing systems and content to cater for all learners, there is a need to “develop a handbook on curriculum differentiation” (Malawi. Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 26). The handbook would enhance teachers' expertise in inclusive teaching and learning methodologies. Curriculum differentiation entails that the same learning objectives and content purposely differ in their delivery to cater to all learners' needs, including learners with disabilities. To do away with special education, where learners with disabilities would have a separate curriculum in a special school or classroom, the NSIE recommends a differentiated curriculum, which fosters inclusion as all learners encounter knowledge together regardless of their (dis)abilities. Curriculum differentiation is not a synonym for inclusive education. Instead, it is a strategy within inclusive education. Inclusive education calls for new and transformative approaches in the existing curricula to include learners previously excluded based on factors such as their physical ability.

### **Theoretical framework**

Theoretically, policy directives and strategies for inclusive education fit into the disability studies critique (DSC) framework of Clough and Corbett (2000). The DSC is the latest in a series of historical developments in inclusive education and disability studies. The five historical developments in inclusive education that Clough and Corbett (2000) identified, in this order though not exclusive are:

- the psycho-medical legacy (1950s)
- the sociological response (1960s)
- curricular approaches (1970s)
- school improvement strategies (1980s) and
- disability studies critique (2000s).

Clough and Corbett (2000) designated disability studies critique (DSC) as an experimental term to illustrate the newest trends and efforts toward inclusive schooling. Based on Clough and Corbett's (2000) arguments, this study understands DSC as a philosophical framework that considers a need for inclusive education based on equal opportunities and access for all learners regardless of their (dis)abilities.

Historically, DSC responded to and countered the psycho-medical legacy and its succeeding disability perspectives. The psycho-medical model led to the establishment of special schools. It regarded an individual learner as deficient, needing a special curriculum and context. Contrary, the DSC is a new way of philosophical thinking that resonates with the intentions of inclusive education. Since the tenets of DSC speak to the intentions of inclusive education, the theory is a necessary explanatory tool for this study. It provides the means and premises to analyse policy directives and strategies for inclusive education in Malawi. The theory, therefore, provides an analytical lens to interrogate the Malawian government's interpretations of inclusive education. The DSC offers a tenet to understand inclusive education policies as a political response, which then gives the lens to understand how mainstream secondary teachers could implement the inclusive education policies in the mainstream secondary classroom.

### **Research methodology**

The study took a qualitative approach to explore the transition from special education to inclusive education in Malawi with a specific focus on policy and practice for secondary education. In tandem with the conventions of the qualitative approach, the research involved a document analysis of policy documents and semi-structured interviews with four mainstream secondary teachers in Malawi. The document analysis involved a critical reading of international, regional and national policy frameworks that shape inclusive education in Malawi (Rapley, 2018). The document analysis was essential in this research because it gave an entry point into understanding the basis of inclusive education in the country. Thus, the critique of policy done in this study comes from the results of document analysis. The research also involved interviewing four secondary school teachers in Malawi to supplement the document analysis. In-depth semi-structured interviews involved open conversations with the selected participants through



guiding questions (Brinkmann, 2014). Likewise, the practice critique done in this study is informed by insights from the results of the interviews. The data from both the policy frameworks and the interviews were analysed in a triangulate fashion. A thematic analysis was employed to develop central themes emerging from the data (Swain, 2018). Then, similar themes from both the document analysis and the interviews were put together to have different data sources on the same point of inquiry for discussion.

The policy documents that were involved in the research were publicly available online. The participants in the interviews voluntarily participated in the research after explaining the purpose of the research and their rights. These participants were purposively selected. Only participants who had characteristics relevant to the research were requested to participate willingly (Schreier, 2018). The general characteristic was that such a participant should be a mainstream secondary teacher with experience teaching inclusive classes with learners with disabilities. To respect their identities, the data reporting in this study replaces the participants' names and their schools with pseudonyms. Institutional access to the schools was negotiated with the head of institutions after obtaining a permission letter from the education division manager with jurisdiction over the concerned schools. The Rhodes University Ethical Standards Committee (Human Ethics Sub-committee) approved the overall ethical clearance for a larger research project from which this study has been derived.

### **Research findings**

This section presents research findings from the interviews and the documentary review of the policy frameworks for implementing inclusive education in Malawi.

#### **Misleading policy frameworks for mainstream teacher practices**

A document review of both international and national policy frameworks for inclusive education reveals that the stipulations of such policies have the potential to mislead mainstream teacher practices. To illustrate this situation from a policy framework point of view, the African Charter on Human and People's Rights (ACHPR) serves well here. The African Union (AU) members adopted ACHPR in 1981 and enforced it in 1986. The ACHPR aimed "for the establishment of bodies to promote and protect human and peoples' rights" (p. 1). Of particular interest is Article 17, which says: "every individual shall have the right to education" (p. 3). The Charter recognised that every individual, including learners with disabilities, has the right to access education. However, the Charter did not specify the type of education. The ACHPR is problematic to use for inclusive education policy formulation and implementation. One is unsure of the kind of education suggested in the Charter. The silence of the international protocols like ACHPR on a need for inclusive education fosters and nurtures exclusion. An argument not to implement inclusive education may be that the Charter belonged to the 1980s when the concept of inclusive education was unknown. The counterargument is that the Charter is still in force, and member states, including Malawi, must ensure its implementation. Even the National Strategy on Inclusive Education hinted that inclusive education could not

accommodate all learners. It “stresses the need for educating all learners in an inclusive setting; however, some learners with [Special Educational Needs] will continue receiving their education in special settings as the system moves towards full inclusion” (Malawi. Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 11).

Since policies have the potential to influence teacher practices, the study probed this further through interviews. One of the key findings from the interviews is that some mainstream teachers are challenging the mainstreaming of learners with disabilities in regular schools. They have their reasons for this perspective. During one interview, Participant #2 complained that *“the disadvantage is you try to cater for the ability of the learners with disabilities, at the same time the abled ones tend to be slowed down when they have dire need to learn fast”*. Thus, *“the learners with disabilities are not able to catch up with friends very easily, so teachers have to work extra hard in order to make them catch up with friends and if not, they cannot catch up”* (Participant #3). In essence, the mainstream teachers regard special education as the most convenient type of schooling for learners with disabilities. It is a well-known fact that teacher attitude is a problem in implementing inclusive education (de Souza, 2020; Saloviita, 2020). The Malawian National Education Policy (2016) and the National Strategy on Inclusive Education (2017-2021) mention teacher attitude as one setback in ensuring inclusive education. The mainstream teachers involved in the research justified their attitudes against inclusive education on the school system's inability to incorporate learners with disabilities.

### **Disability mistaken with inability**

The implications of special education may be more profound than a mere separation of learners with disabilities from their peers. The situation becomes intricate when international declarations mandate countries to provide special education to learners with disabilities. For example, Malawi is a signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). Drafted in 1989 and adopted in 1990 by the UN member states, CRC aimed at, among other things, accelerating the right to education for children. Of particular interest are Articles 23 and 29, which alluded that a child with a disability has a right to special care and education. Article 29 (1a) of the CRC recommended that the aim of education should be *“the development of the child’s personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential”* (p. 9). Regrettably, teachers are expected to develop ‘physical abilities’ of learners instead of their cognitive proficiency, something problematic and excluding for learners with physical disabilities in an inclusive education context.

Likewise, the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC) is a regional policy framework Malawi likely uses for policy formulation and implementation of inclusive education. Adopted in 1990 and operationalised in 1999 by the African Union (AU), the ACRWC aims to protect children's rights in Africa. The ACRWC followed the Declaration's adoption of the Rights and Welfare of the Child (DRWC) in 1979. The ACRWC is more of an implementation strategy for the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). This

observation suggests that policies and protocols are usually in response to preceding ones. Thus, the demerits of the preceding policy or protocol could easily misinform the succeeding one. Of particular interest from the ACRWC is Article 11 (of the Charter) on education. Section 2(a) of Article 11 declared that the aim of education should be "the promotion and development of the child's personality, talents and mental and *physical abilities* [emphasis added] to their fullest potential" (p. 3). Like the CRC, the ACRWC puts learners with physical disabilities in a discriminatory situation since the emphasis is not on epistemological or physical access but physical abilities. Thus, the ACRWC has a possibility of misleading countries, including Malawi, in terms of inclusive education policy formulation and practice implementation. Since the country's policy frameworks on inclusive education, such as the National Education Policy (2016) and the National Strategy on Inclusive Education (2017-2021), are guided by international frameworks such as ACRWC, they tend to make the policy implementors such as mainstream secondary teachers to believe that some learners with disabilities deserve to be in special schools as they may have 'severe' disabilities. It is then not surprising that all the four mainstream teachers in the study doubted the feasibility of inclusive education in Malawi during the in-depth interviews.

Since key policy frameworks designate disability as inability, some mainstream secondary teachers believe that there are some things learners with disabilities cannot do. During the interviews, participants voiced against inclusive education. According to two of the participants, the issue necessitates separating the learners with disabilities from their peers in science subjects. Mostly, "*the students with disabilities opted not to take science subjects, especially Chemistry*" (Participant #1). Thus, the participant believed separating learners with disabilities from their peers would be helpful as they would do subjects of their choice. Science subjects such as Chemistry, Physics and Biology are compulsory in mainstream secondary education across Malawi. However, learners with disabilities opt out of science subjects on their own. There is tension with the idea of special education where "*there is a special curriculum that does not involve science subjects*" (Participant #4). Thus, since learners with disabilities have been mainstreamed into regular schools, they want to maintain the status quo of special education. Mainstream teachers, in resonance with policy frameworks, support this status quo as they think learners with disabilities cannot pursue science subjects such as Physics in mainstream education.

## **Discussion**

The disability studies critique (DSC) argues that policies on inclusive education are usually a political response to exclusion (Clough & Corbett, 2000). A critical analysis of Malawian policy documents such as the National Education Policy (NEP, 2016) and the National Strategy on Inclusive Education (NSIE, 2017) justifies that policy frameworks are political responses to call for inclusive education. Since the exclusion of learners with disabilities from mainstream education received international condemnation, the Malawian government made a determined effort to respond; to portray a political will for inclusive education implementation and realisation, especially at primary and secondary levels of education. This situation shows that the NEP and the NSIE have been developed against

international critics, not as a sustainable response to the national problem of inclusive education. As such, there is a need to reframe the policies and strategies concerning inclusive education in Malawi and related educational settings to utilise practical implementing strategies, including mainstream teachers' experiences and their understood roles.

The implementation of inclusive education has its history in the social model of disability in which barriers that exist in societies, including school infrastructure, pose problems for learners with disabilities (Lindsay, 2007; Imray & Colley, 2017; Teodoro, 2020). However, the study's findings revealed a shift from the social perception of inclusive education to a political view. Government policies and strategies initiate the shifting because they disregard the practicalities of inclusive education implementation in schools. For Malawi, the National Education Policy (NEP) 2016 and the National Strategy on Inclusive Education (NSIE) 2017-2021 admit that exclusions exist in some levels of education in Malawi. The rationale behind formulating the NEP and the NSIE is to curb exclusion within mainstream education. The NEP of 2016 acknowledges that "there are also disparities according to [...] physical ability of students" (Malawi. Ministry of Education, 2016, p. 20). The understanding is that, within mainstream education, learners with disabilities are disadvantaged when it comes to learning as emphasis focuses more on body abilities than epistemological access and systems change (de Souza, 2020; Schuelka et al., 2020).

The research findings indicate that the concept of inclusive education is initiated in mainstream secondary education because of government policy stipulations. The findings also highlight that inclusive education has relevance due to the issue of 'right to education', which is more of a political craft. The NEP and the NSIE state that mainstream schools, and implicitly mainstream teachers, are crucial in implementing inclusive education policies and practices. Mainstream schools and teachers have become more important than before regarding inclusive education. The political model of disability and inclusion in education rests on mainstream teachers' perceptions and interpretations of government policies and strategies regarding inclusive education implementation. As a political response, according to disability studies critique (DSC), the NEP (2016) and the NSIE (2017-2021) stipulate some propositions that, in practice, are not attainable. For example, the NSIE compelled mainstream schools and teachers to "provide appropriate care and support to learners with diverse needs" (p. 27). Teachers are obliged to provide appropriate care; however, they have not received training in proper care (Kamchedzera, 2010; Chimwaza, 2015). This suggests that the NSIE contradicts the implementing mechanism for inclusive education. If anything, this situation and many other contradictions witnessed in the policy directives and strategies on inclusive education in Malawi can be related to a motor vehicle driver who attempts to accelerate while reversing simultaneously. This attempt is not usually smooth. The results from this attempt are usually a catastrophe. In the context of inclusive education, this entails exclusion within the inclusion.

## **Conclusion**

The presence of a disability does not and should not warrant special education. Instead, all learners should learn together, and those with special educational needs, regardless of their abilities, should receive the necessary support within mainstream schools. The research described in this study included a documentary analysis of international, regional and national policies and frameworks for inclusive secondary education in Malawi. The research also included four in-depth, semi-structured interviews with mainstream secondary teachers in Malawi. The analysis in this study showed that the legacy of special education masks the need for inclusive education. This argument supported some findings on the gap between policy and practice in inclusive education in Malawi. These differences may be due to the country's over-focus on international frameworks, making it appear on par with international affairs and formulating its policies by imitating the international ones without considering the country's unique inclusivity needs. The study recommends a transformative agenda for inclusive education praxis, moving away from the theoretical traps of special education and towards contextualised inclusive education practices. This shift will require the government and its education partners to establish classrooms in mainstream secondary schools that are accessible to learners with disabilities; restructure existing teacher education curricula and provide workshops that include differentiated instructional strategies; and reduce teacher-student ratios for greater focus on the different needs of all learners in mainstream schools and corresponding roles for mainstream teachers in the context of inclusivity.

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