

Highlighting the Existing Gaps, the Ministry of Education Must Address for Comprehensive Special Needs Education in Malawi

By Erick Mcheka

Executive Summary

When Malawi Government first introduced universal primary education in 1994, the aim was to ensure that all the children access education. However not much has been done in the special needs education sector to cater for learners with disabilities. This document therefore highlights challenges government must address if provision of education to all learners with disability can become a reality. There are challenges like, inadequate budgetary allocation, construction of more Learning Resource Centers that government must seriously consider addressing

The document further points out that there is also a need for the Ministry of education to increase intake of specialist teachers in the colleges. Adaptation on the physical environment of most of the regular schools could be the most immediate thing that needs to be addressed.

The Government of Malawi first introduced free primary education in 1994 to enable all the children exercise their right to education. However, 12 years down the road only 37 % out of the total number of 120,000 learners with disabilities is in schools (Interview with the Deputy Director of Special Needs Education Department in the Min. of Education in Malawi 2006). There is need for more work to be done if indeed Malawi's quest for Education for All is to become a reality. This article, therefore seeks to highlight the challenges Government must address if all learners with special needs are to access free primary education.

One major challenge affecting service delivery in the department of special needs education (SNE) is inadequate budgetary allocation. The department has for many years suffered from under funding. For instance, out of the government funding of K12 billion (Malawi Kwacha) Ministry of Education got in the 2005-2006 fiscal year, only 0.1% of this amount was allotted to SNE sector. Hence the budget is insufficient considering that the department has to cater for 44,480 learners in the Resource Centres and Special Schools across the country.

Accessing education has also been difficult to learners with disabilities due to shortage of Learning Resource Centres in the country. Records show that there are only 62 Learning Resource Centres dotted across the country, besides the 19 Special Schools. Construction of more resource centres and special schools could create more room hence facilitate an increase in the enrollment of children with disabilities in schools. This could also serve the majority of pupils who go to mainstream regular schools.

Furthermore, shortage of specialist trained teachers in schools is a challenge in the SNE sector. At the moment Malawi has 478 qualified specialist trained teachers to cater for 45,000 learners in schools. An additional increase of 50% to the present intake of 90 teachers enrolled per year for training colleges can address the problem. Besides this,

introduction of in-service training for teachers already in schools on SNE could increase the number of specialist teachers available to learners with special needs.

Additionally, the physical environment of most of the schools is not disability-friendly. Research shows that only 20 % of schools in the country are accessible. Most of classrooms have narrow doorways that make it impassable for wheelchair or tricycle users. The grounds surrounding most schools is not only rugged but also lack of ramps to classrooms, teacher's offices libraries and toilets.

The enforcement of the policy on SNE is another area that needs addressing. Lack of enforcement, has made many stakeholders remain unaware of their roles in education of children with special needs. Therefore, Ministry of Education should engage in sensitization campaigns to raise awareness among the stakeholders and the nation at large.

Good co-operation between parents, guardians and stakeholders and specialist teachers need not be underrated. Specialist teachers need not work in isolation; rather they should be encouraged to work closely with parents or guardians learners with special needs. Apart from counselling, parents provide the needed emotional support and act as a source of inspiration to the child in the family. The following example illustrates the types of collaboration that can work well for learner with disability in a community.

“A Community Based Rehabilitation (CBR) worker contracts a social welfare officer with information about an older child who has never been to school and who has difficulty with mobility and with learning. The officer and the CBR worker collaborate to encourage the family to contact the health services and the school. The health services assess the situation to see if something can be done to improve the child's mobility. The teachers at the school assess the child's learning needs. If the child needs a wheelchair, for example, and there are no resources to pay for one, the social welfare officer requests assistance from other sectors, including NGOs” (ILO, UNESCO, WHO CBR Joint Paper 2004)

When all's said and done, it is government's responsibility to ensure the right to education is accessed by all the children in Malawi. As a nation we need to remember that education is and always has been the key to emancipation from fear and want. For this reason, the provision of education to all represents an indispensable safeguard for the development of Malawi and enjoyment of fundamental rights and freedoms. Learners with disability as citizens of Malawi have a right to education. What we should all aim for is to equip them with education, to enable them contribute to the social economic development of this nation. Otherwise the government's agenda of poverty alleviation will remain a pipe dream if majority of children with disabilities remain uneducated.