

# Report

## Disability and education: Qualitative case studies from Malawi

Summary of results

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### Summary of results

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**ABSTRACT**

The right to education is a human right, and it is also covered in the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and in the Sustainable Development Goals. Despite this, many children in low-and-middle-income countries face problems accessing education, and children with disabilities are particularly vulnerable to exclusion. Building on relevant policy and research, the objective of this study was to carry out an in-depth exploration of barriers and facilitators for access to education and scholastic achievement for children and young people with disabilities in a rural Malawian context. This report presents a summary of key results from the project.

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## 1. Introduction

The right to education is a human right, described in article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, 1948):

*Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. Technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit.*

It is also covered in Article 28 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989). The right to education for persons with disabilities is further recognised in Article 24 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 2006). The priority for education is also highlighted in the Sustainable Development Goals, through Goal number 4, '*Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all*'. Target 4.5 specifically aims to '*ensure equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples and children in vulnerable situations*'. Furthermore, target 4.a specifies the need to '*build and upgrade education facilities that are child, disability and gender sensitive (...)*' (United Nations, 2015).

In Malawi, the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MoEST) is responsible for ensuring access to education for the Malawian population. The country is signatory to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (Munthali, 2011). The responsibility of the Government of Malawi to ensure equal opportunities to education for its inhabitants is further covered in chapter IV (section 25 and 30) of the Constitution of the Republic of Malawi (Malawi Government, 1994), and in Section 10 of the Malawian Disability Act (Malawi Government, 2012). The education system is an 8-4-4 system, with eight years in primary school, four years in secondary school and four years in the university. Free primary education was introduced in 1994, which saw a massive increase in enrolment in primary schools, and major problems with infrastructure and quality emerged (Munthali, 2011). The Malawi Education Sector Plan (2008-2017) highlights a number of problems facing the education sector in Malawi, including shortage of teachers, poor strategic management of teachers, inadequate teaching and learning materials, inadequate infrastructure and poor access for children with special needs (Ministry of Education, 2008). In 2009 there were 3,671,481 learners in primary schools and 243,838 in secondary schools in Malawi. Among these, the proportion of identified pupils with special education needs was 2.3% in primary schools, and 1.1% in secondary schools. A number of learners with disabilities, however, are not captured by these statistics, and those who are not attending school are not considered (Munthali, 2011). A 2003 population-based survey of living conditions among people with activity limitations in Malawi reported that among children of school-going age, 35% of those with disabilities had never attended school (Loeb and Eide, 2004). This number was significantly higher for people with disabilities compared to those without, where only 18% reported that they had never attended school. However, given the opportunity to attend school, people with disabilities matched achievements of those without disabilities. Women and people living in rural areas were less likely to attend school compared to males and people living in urban areas. Informants with disabilities reported that their disability was the primary reason for not attending school, followed by lack of money, interest and illness. In all of the challenges mentioned above, there was a 'physical disability bias', where people with sensory, communication and intellectual/ emotional impairments were worse off on important inclusion indicators, and they also experienced greater activity limitations and participation restrictions (Loeb and Eide, 2004, Braathen and Loeb, 2011). Learners with special needs who are accepted

into mainstream schools face many challenges, including lack of mainstream and specialist teachers, inaccessible school environments, lack of teaching materials, poor communication and learning support in school (Munthali, 2011).

While some studies have been conducted exploring the challenges experienced by persons with disabilities in accessing education in Malawi, there is still lack of detailed in-depth individual narratives which can inform policy and program development. ***Building on relevant policy and research, the objective of this study was to carry out an in-depth exploration of barriers and facilitators for access to education and scholastic achievement for children and young people with disabilities in a rural Malawian context.***

This report presents a summary of key results from the project.

## 2. Research questions

In this study factors relevant for inclusion and exclusion of children and young people with disabilities in educational activities were identified. The data collected in this study aimed at addressing the following research questions:

1. How is access to educational facilities for children and young people with disabilities?
  - a. What are barriers and facilitators for access?
  - b. How is possible exclusion dealt with by the individuals/ their families?
  - c. What kind of assistance/ change is needed to improve inclusion?
2. What educational services and activities are there at local level and what is the relevance, appropriateness and quality of these services in terms of catering for and including people with disabilities (bearing in mind the variety of special needs)?
3. How are children with disabilities raised/ educated/ socialised in order to prepare them for life as adults (from the perspective of parents/ care-givers/ guardians)?
4. What are informants' thoughts about the future of children and young people with disabilities; participation in education and employment, their contribution to the household (chores/ income/ care-giving/ care-taking)?
  - a. What are the hopes/ ambitions/ aspirations of/ for children and young people with disabilities?
5. What are parent's/ family members/ guardian's thoughts on having a child/ family member with disability?
6. What is the school system's perception of children with disabilities?
7. What are community/ family/ friends perceptions of children with disabilities?

### 3. Study design

In this research project we carried out qualitative in-depth case studies focussing on five children and young people of school-going age in Jali, a rural community in the area of Traditional Authority Mwambo in Zomba District, southern Malawi.

The choice of a study design depends on the research questions one wishes to answer, and at the heart of any research design are the research questions and the objectives for the research. The research questions for this study are of an exploratory nature, linked to meaning rather than measurement, and therefore a qualitative research design is suitable (Morse and Richards, 2002, Willig, 2013). Qualitative research is concerned with meaning; what it is like, what it feels like, how situations are managed; with quality and texture of experiences, rather than identification of cause-effect relationships (Willig, 2013). **Case study methodology** is particularly useful when one needs in-depth information about an issue, event or phenomenon in its natural real-life context. It is well suited for exploring attitudes to and experiences of this phenomenon (Crowe et al., 2011). The design is particularly useful to illuminate processes of decision-making; why decisions are taken, how they are implemented and with what result (Yin, 2013). We utilised a multi-case approach, where five cases were selected to examine a particular phenomenon (Stake, 2006). In this study the cases are children and young people with disabilities, and the phenomenon is education and learning. For each case we have carried out multiple in-depth interviews with the individual him/ herself, his/ her family members, friends/ community members and educational service providers. We also did direct observations in the homes, communities and educational institutions where the cases lived and went to school. The aim was to gain information and perspectives from multiple individuals and actors on the situation for the particular case. It was important to choose diverse cases representing multiple perspectives to the research questions (Yin, 2013), and we therefore selected cases to represent various types of learning difficulties and activity limitations.

#### 3.1 Data collection techniques

Qualitative research commonly utilises multiple sources of evidence and multiple data collection techniques. This is referred to as triangulation, which is an overall method of gaining assurance or validity (Stake, 2006, Yin, 2013). Commonly used data collection techniques in qualitative studies utilised in this study were in-depth interviews, observation and overview of relevant background literature and official documents (Corbin and Strauss, 1990, Corbin and Strauss, 2008, Morse and Richards, 2002, Stake, 2006, Yin, 2013). In qualitative research, initial methodological decisions and plans are made, but it is crucial to revisit and revise these decisions throughout the fieldwork and adapt the methodology to the context and the real events of the data collection (Onwuegbuzie and Leech, 2007). Relevant literature and documentation provide a basis and theoretical backdrop for the study design, and help facilitate the data analysis process. Thematically and contextually relevant interview guides were developed based on the initial research questions, and these were adapted and changed throughout the data collection process. In-depth interviews are like conversations, but they are not conversations between equal partners (Kvale, 1996, Yin, 2013). They are controlled by the researcher/ interviewer; the person with a purpose and goal with the conversation. The interviewer introduces the topic and guides the conversation (Corbin and Strauss, 2008, Kvale, 1996). Rather than a rigid set of questions, in-depth interviews are fluid, following the stories of the informant (Yin, 2013). Interviews in this study were done face-to-face. This approach allows for broader data, if the interviewer is conscious of observing the surroundings for the interview, body-language and reactions of the interviewee, and so on (Hollway and Jefferson, 2013). The interviews were



carried out by two qualified researchers (the authors of this report) in the local language of the participants. A Malawian student at master's level worked as an interpreter for the non-Malawian researcher. A Norwegian student at master's level observed most of the interviews. The interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim and translated into English for the data analysis. In addition to the transcribed interviews, detailed field notes were taken by the researchers. Case studies take place in real-world settings and in real time, and therefore automatically allows for some direct observation. Direct observation is different from participant observation in that in the latter the researcher is a participant in the setting, not merely a passive observer (Yin, 2013). In this study we carried out direct observation, primarily in and around the interview settings in people's homes, in the community and at educational institutions. Observation in the actual interview is a crucial part of qualitative interviews, because emotions and reactions of participants are important data. Voice is the primary source of data, but behaviour, such as silent pauses, emotional reactions and hesitations, are also crucial (Holloway and Biley, 2011). Observations were recorded through field notes, and notes linked to each transcribed interview.

### 3.2 Sampling

In qualitative research sampling is about finding a few relevant cases that shed light or give insight and meaning to processes or practices happening in a particular context (Onwuegbuzie and Leech, 2007). Sampling refers not only to the number and type of informants, but also to amount of data collected; the amount of time spent, the number of contacts and the number of questions that are asked to the informants. A number of factors come into play in sampling, first and foremost one must consider what is most suitable to answer the research questions, but other factors, such as available time and resources, are also important (Onwuegbuzie and Leech, 2007). Based on these factors, the study took place in one geographical area in Malawi, focussing on five case studies. For each case study we carried out 2-5 interviews.

Informants for the case studies were found in two ways; through the headmaster at one of the primary schools and through the special needs education teacher responsible for the school zones where we did our fieldwork. Below is a description of the five case studies, and the different interviews carried out for each case study. The names used in the table below and in the results section are pseudonyms, and some information has been changed to ensure informants' anonymity.

**Table 1: Case studies**

Case Number	Case studies <sup>1</sup> (pseudonyms)
<b>1</b>	<b>Joseph (M), 9 years, standard 5, learning disability (Twin sister Mese)</b>
	Joseph
	Mother
	Brother
	Special needs education teacher (Mr. Mataka)
	Teacher standard 5 (Miss Banda)
<b>2</b>	<b>William (M), 7 years, standard 1, hearing/ speech impairment</b>
	Mother
	Special needs education teacher (Mr. Mataka)
<b>3</b>	<b>Rose (F), 11 years, standard 2 (not passed), multiple disabilities: physical and intellectual</b>
	Rose
	Aunt
	Grandmother
	Special needs education teacher (Mr. Mataka)
<b>4</b>	<b>Atupele (F), 20 years, dropped out in standard 2, epilepsy and intellectual disability (Sister: Alinafe, 13 years, dropped out in standard 1, deaf and dumb)</b>
	Atupele
	Father
	Mother
<b>5</b>	<b>Edward (M), 12 years, completed standard 6, visually impaired</b>
	Edward
	Mother and father
	Teacher (Mr. Mafupa)

For a contextual understanding of the study area we also carried out interviews with some key personnel in the mainstream education and special needs education sectors. Primary informants for the contextual background were the District co-ordinator for special needs education, the special needs education teacher for the relevant school zones, and three primary school teachers from the relevant school zones as shown in Table 2.

**Table 2: List of key informants**

Informant	Pseudonym
Special needs education teacher for the relevant school zone	Mr. Mataka
District co-ordinator for special needs education	Mr. Zigoma
General teacher (primary school)	Miss Banda
General teacher (primary school)	Mr. Mafupa
General teacher (primary school)	Mother Joseph

<sup>1</sup> Pseudonyms have been used in Tables 1 and 2 and in the rest of this report.

### 3.3 Data analysis

In qualitative research analytical categories are to a large extent similar to the questions posed to informants. Categories derived from this research will be both theoretically constructed, as well as from the data itself. Theory and data inform each other at every stage of the project, from the planning to the write-up (Hollway and Jefferson, 2013). Qualitative findings are context bound, and so the analysis also take the context where the data is constructed into consideration (Onwuegbuzie and Leech, 2007). In multicase study analysis the cases are interesting first and foremost in relation to the overall research topic, not in relation to one another (Stake, 2006). In data analysis one starts by highlighting the most important themes emerging from each case, then analyses across cases, and finally makes assertions about the research topic and aims to answer the research questions based on the cross-case analysis (Stake, 2006). The transcripts were read and read again and content analysis was used to analyse the data.

## 4. Ethical considerations

The project has followed ethical standards and guidelines as set out by Norwegian and Malawian law, upheld by national ethics committees. Ethical approval was obtained from the National Committee on Research in the Social Sciences and Humanities (NCRSH) in Malawi, as well as from the Norwegian Social Science Data Services (NSD), which is SINTEFs data protection official.

To gain access to the field we met with a number of authorities and local gatekeepers in the district/ area/ community. We informed them about the study and asked for their permission to carry out the study in this particular area. We met with the District Education Manager (DEM) for the rural areas, the District co-ordinator for special needs education, the Traditional Authority (TA), the group village head (GVH) and two headmasters of the relevant primary schools where we recruited informants for the case studies.

Participation in this project was voluntary; participants could withdraw at any time and decline to answer any question throughout the interview. The confidentiality of the participants was assured. This meant that the real names of persons, addresses, and so on were not recorded or used in any research data or outputs. Interviews were recorded only when the informants agreed to this, and recordings were deleted after transcription was complete. The information above was given to the informants before an interview to help them make informed decisions. Before an interview we obtained informed consent from the participants. This means ensuring that they were informed about their rights as informants, and what is expected of them as participants. For informants above legal age (18 years) direct consent was obtained, while children and young people below 18 years gave assent, and their guardian gave consent to their participation.

This project required attention to the vulnerability of the target group; great care was taken to avoid disrupting daily life for participants (practically, financially, emotionally), to ensure that sensitive issues were brought up in a proper and contextually adapted way, and to avoid creating false expectations. People with disabilities are among the most vulnerable and marginalised of any population, and many are particularly vulnerable to exploitation and abuse (WHO and The World Bank, 2011, Groce and Trani, 2009, Eide and Ingstad, 2011, Maclachlan et al., 2011). This is true also for their involvement as research participants (Read and Maslin-Prothero, 2011), and thus special care must be taken when involving people with disabilities in research. The importance of involving vulnerable populations in research has been advocated for by politicians, researchers and user groups, but this involvement is also charged with potential challenges (Read and Maslin-Prothero, 2011, Capri and Coetzee, 2012, McDonald and Kidney,

2012, McDonald et al., 2013). At the heart of any research project involving human informants is informed consent, and it is the responsibility of the researchers to ensure that the informants meet the criteria for this. A number of approaches and criteria have been suggested in upholding ethical principals in research, while at the same time including potentially vulnerable participants. Suggestions include using researchers with particular skills to communicate with these informants, having a guardian or family members present in the interview together with the informant, communicating in the informant's mother tongue and using appropriate words and language (oral and written). In interviews with these informants, consent must be a continuous process, throughout the interview, and in some cases the informant may not be able to give consent, and thus this must be obtained from a guardian (and assent from the informant) (Capri and Coetzee, 2012).

## 5. Results

### 5.1 Context

Primary informants for the contextual background were the District co-ordinator for special needs education (responsible for the rural areas in the district), the special needs education teacher for the two relevant school zones for this study, and three primary school teachers from the same two school zones. The District co-ordinator for special needs education combined his coordination role with a regular job as a special needs teacher for one school zone. He had recently started as a co-ordinator, but he had many years' experience as a special needs teacher.

#### 5.1.1 The community

The study was carried out in Jali community, in the area of Traditional Authority Mwambo in Zomba District, southern Malawi. Jali is a rural community located some 30 kilometres, approximately 30 minutes' drive, from Zomba town. In Zomba there is a central hospital, a tertiary referral centre, with a specialist eye clinic, amongst other things. Jali community is typical for rural Malawi. Most families live off self-subsistence farming, and some are fishermen, as the area is nearby a lake. Poverty is rife. The District coordinator for special needs education said that he has noticed that families with children with disabilities appear to be poorer than other families. He feels that there is a need to provide extra support to these families.

#### 5.1.2 The School system in Malawi

The delivery of public education in Malawi is the responsibility of MoEST. At district level educational facilities are overseen by the DEM. In cities such as Zomba there are two DEMS, one for rural and one for urban areas.

Primary school in Malawi is eight years, Standard 1 to 8 and has been provided free of charge since 1994. Children usually start at the age of six. At the end of standard 8, pupils write the Primary School Leaving Certificate examinations, which are set, conducted and marked by the MoEST and the Malawi National Examinations Board (MANEB). Pupils have to pass this examination and get selected by a government committee to attend secondary school. Secondary school is four years, Form 1 to 4, and is subject to school fees. Pupils in secondary school sit two examinations, a Junior Certificate Examination (JCE) at Form 2 and a

Malawi School Certificate Examination (MSCE) at Form 4. Both of these are set by MANEB, jointly administered by the MoEST<sup>2</sup>. To progress from one level to another in both primary and secondary school pupils have pass an exam at the end of each school year. If the pupil fails the exam, he or she has to repeat the school year.

The special needs education teacher told us that the national or district secondary schools are the most renowned, while the local secondary schools are less renowned. The public secondary schools, he said, costs around 25 000 MK<sup>3</sup> per term, and there are three terms per school year. For the private secondary schools the prize is even higher, around 75 000 MK per term.

Part-time classes, also referred to as remedial lessons, were mentioned by many of our informants. These are extra classes which usually take place after school, sometimes carried out by school teachers, sometimes by others. Most parents we interviewed said that they pay for the part-time classes, but some teachers and others in the educational system said that teachers do these part-time classes for free outside their normal working hours. Some parents may give them a small token of appreciation, but this is not common because most parents are too poor.

### 5.1.3 Special needs education

Special needs education is managed by the Department of Special Needs Education in the MoEST. At district level public education, both mainstream and special needs, is the responsibility of the DEM. A District coordinator for special needs education coordinates and oversees all special needs education programmes in the area, and under him again are the special needs education teachers who are responsible for one or two school zones each. The special needs education teachers collaborate with the primary education advisors (PEAs) for the school zone and also with headmasters at the schools.

There are three types of special needs education delivery; residential systems, resource centres and itinerant teaching programmes. In residential systems, learners with special needs are taught outside the mainstream educational system. They are taught in separate schools divided into schools for the blind, deaf, and so on. Learners are taught by special needs teachers only, and do not interact with learners without disabilities. In a resource centre system, there are separate resource rooms and teachers within mainstream schools where learners with special needs are taught. In this system, special needs teachers and mainstream teachers work hand-in-hand, and learners with special needs interact with learners without special needs. In itinerant teaching programmes the special needs teachers are deployed at school zones, and they work hand in hand with PEAs and the head teachers at schools to identify learners with special needs and assist mainstream teachers in how to handle these learners. The latter is the most common in a rural Malawian context, and also in the study area for this particular study.

Special needs education is divided into several categories, such as hearing impairment, visual impairment, learning difficulties and so on. During their training special needs teachers are taught in all disability categories in the first year, before they specialise in one of the categories. In reality most special needs teachers have to be able to attend to learners with all types of disabilities, as described by the special needs education teacher; *"because of lack of many specialist teachers here, I combine my work, catering for all learners in various categories of disabilities."*

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.sdn.org.mw/Education2010/Edu-system.html>

<sup>3</sup> 1 MK equals 0,002 USD. 25 000 MK equals 44 USD.

In the whole district there are 8 special needs teachers catering for learners with special needs. Six of these teachers are specialised in visual impairment, and two in learning difficulties. There are 17 educational zones, and 12 of those have a special needs teacher. Thus, some of the special needs teachers are responsible for two zones, and five school zones do not have access to a special needs teacher at all. There are positions for one special needs teacher for each zone, but there are not enough special needs teachers in the country to fill these positions. Each school zone has approximately 10 primary schools. The District coordinator for special needs education feels that special needs education is not a valued education or job, and therefore there is a lack of such teachers.

The special needs teacher told us that he looks after two school zones, 18 schools in total. He also assists secondary schools in his school zones (eight in total) with accommodation for learners with disabilities during examination. Sometimes he also visits nursery schools, assisting teachers there in how to deal with children with special needs and how to prepare them for primary school. The special needs education teacher has itinerant programmes in the two school zones. In addition to this, a few days a week he teaches one class of three special needs learners in a separate room in one of the schools (resource centre system). When these learners are not in the special education class, they are in mainstream classes, and the special needs education teacher works hand-in-hand with their teachers in how to handle them. Sometimes he also teaches a whole mainstream class who has learners with special needs, and the teacher watches him. This is to show the teacher how one can teach a mainstream class, and at the same time include learners with special needs.

A major challenge faced by all the special needs teachers doing itinerant programmes is that of transport. They have to travel between the many schools they are responsible for, the areas they oversee are large, the terrain difficult, and their only mode of transport is bicycle. As expressed by the special needs teacher;

*So that I train the teachers on how to handle these learners with special educational needs, because it is difficult for me to travel maybe from one point to another, because the distance....some of the schools are maybe 20 kilometres from where I live, others 25 kilometres (...). So to say the truth, it's impossible to go there each and every time. So I have to trust the teachers and the head teachers.*

In the itinerant programmes, the special needs teachers visit the schools and identify learners with special needs. This is done through screening programmes done in collaboration with the DEM's office, PEAs, the head teachers at the schools and the special needs education teacher. They also bring a medical doctor along for the screening. They do visual and hearing tests, and if necessary they bring the special needs teacher specialised in learning difficulty to assist with these learners. When they identify learners with special needs the learners are referred to appropriate follow-ups at for example the hospital, special schools, education in braille, or to specialists for hearing or visual aids. The District Coordinator for special needs education told us that the screening is supposed to be done each term, but because of financial problems they only do it once every year. So far they have identified 400 learners with disabilities in the rural part of the district, across the 12 zones that have been screened so far. The majority of the 400 have learning disabilities, followed by hearing impairment and visually impairment. The District coordinator for special needs education believes that there are many more learners with special needs in the rural part of the district who has not yet been picked up. In the screening programmes they go to both primary and secondary school, but educational follow-ups by the special needs teachers are primarily done in primary schools. They may give some advice to teachers in secondary schools on how to handle learners with special needs, but they don't interact with the students, like they do to some extent in primary schools.

The District coordinator for special needs education told us that although they are able to identify the learners with special needs, they often lack the funding to assist these learners with what they need to succeed with their education. The special needs education teacher said that if they discover a child with special needs during primary school, they follow him or her until they complete primary school. When they move on to secondary school they hand over to the special needs teacher there, but if there is none, they also follow the child up in secondary school. He sees improvement in the children who are followed up by the special needs education teachers. Particularly he sees that they are better looked after at home, having advised the parents on how to care for the child. The coordinator for special needs education feels that him and the other special needs teachers do their very best to look after all learners with special needs, but they face many constraints to doing their job;

*I can say that we are trying, but not to the level that we want it to be. As I said we have about 17 zones but we are 7 in 12 zones. If there are learners with problems in the other zones they are not taken on board. So it's a worry to us and we have learners who are hearing impaired but we don't have a specialist teacher specialized in hearing impairment.*

#### 5.1.4 Mainstream education



##### The teaching environment

In the mainstream schools we visited and heard about we were told of school classes varying from 100 to 300 learners in one class. Most classes have two teachers, but they share the teaching and only one teaches at a time. A typical classroom is the size of 30-60 square metres, concrete floors and walls, and small open squares in the walls for windows. Some classrooms have no desks or chairs, and thus learners sit on the floor, other classrooms have concrete benches. There is a scarcity of books and other teaching and learning material, such as notebooks and pens. One teacher said that in one subject she only has one book for the whole class, including herself. In other subjects they have four or five books to share between everyone. One teacher explained;



*We have few books at this school and we give the books to students in a group and we have a leader who keeps them. If these children would have their own books which are enough, one could still be teaching them in other areas after school using their books.*

The learners are given two small exercise books for all the classes for the whole year. If they need more than that (which they do), they have to buy them on their own. They also have to buy pens on their own. Some children drop out of school because the parents cannot afford to buy the extra exercise books and pens, in addition to school uniforms and lunch for school.

In such a teaching environment it is challenging for the teacher to recognise or pay special attention to learners with special needs. As one teacher explained;

*So it becomes difficult to identify the child with learning difficulties as he is within a large group of other children. But during second term, a lot of students drop out so you start noting when marking that the way this child's age is it is not normal for them to fail just to copy words from the blackboard. You start noting something, and you rush to the special needs education teacher and ask him to come and observe the child. He has his own technique of assessing the child and when he identifies his needs, he isolates him from the group and adopts him to his class. At some point he gives the child back to the class to let the child also learn how to learn with the other students in a group.*

This was corroborated by the District coordinator for special needs education;

*For example if the classroom has got 172 learners, against one learner with special education needs within the class, and one or two teachers, it is difficult to pay attention to this one (the special needs learner). The result is they suffer. So, in my own opinion, they are not given enough attention. The effort is there, the willingness is there, but due to those pressures, as they teach against time, a period of maybe 35 minutes to teach 135 learners. And that class, we have one or two learners with special needs, so to pay attention to that one may be difficult. When they are trying to assist, time is out for another lesson. Sometimes we tell them, or advise them, to arrange for remedial lessons. After class, maybe they can arrange for 30 or 40 minutes or 25 minutes to assist this learner if they feel he has not achieved the intended concept. So we advise them to do that. Because most of the time I may not be there, that's my problem.*

Similarly, one of the mainstream teachers explained that he experiences several constraints to the inclusion of children with various disabilities in mainstream teaching, such as shortage of books, desks, and other materials. Furthermore, he feels that many learners with special needs should have part-time lessons, and this has to be done by the teachers in their free time, for free. This particular teacher has part-time lessons with ten students after school three times per week. He believes that the greatest barriers to education for children with special needs are lack of "*spiritual support, material support and financial support, that's the big challenge.*"

Adding to this, one of the mainstream teachers said that in his teacher training they had been taught very little about inclusion of learners with special needs in mainstream schools. He feels that they do not have sufficient knowledge to properly look after those learners;

*(...) the lessons were not as much as that we can have enough information to assist learners (with special needs).*

### Inclusive education

It was emphasised by both the special needs education teachers and the mainstream teachers which we spoke to that it is possible for mainstream teachers to better accommodate learners with special needs in mainstream classes. This does not necessarily require more resources in terms of staff, money or equipment, but what it does require is awareness and sensitisation, which is partly the responsibility of the special needs education teachers.

One mainstream teacher explained how she makes sure learners with special needs are included in mainstream education: She teaches the whole class first, and she gives everybody exercises to do on their



own. While the other students work on their own she takes the children with special needs aside, and she speaks to them, making sure they have understood what she has taught. If need be she also works with them during break time or after school, ensuring they have understood everything that she has taught the whole class. For children with learning difficulties and/ or attention problems it can be challenging, but she finds that in combining teaching and playing it is easier to keep their attention and for them to learn.

Another teacher explained the procedure she uses to identify and assist children with special needs. This procedure has been taught to her by the special needs education teacher;

*When we have identified the child by virtue of them not being able to write-down what you are teaching, you have tried to make them sit in front but with no change. You decide that maybe if I take this child to the special needs teacher he would know how to handle him. The teacher then gets the child and starts to teach him until a point when they are following what he is saying. This is when he is returned to class. The separate class is not permanent as the teacher is responsible for looking after all the schools here. So the days that he will not work at this school, the child is brought back to class and we are told how to deal with the child. So you make the child sit in front, you teach them together with the other children but you focus much on this particular child as the other children can see and hear you. You make sure that the child sees you if they can't talk or hear. You make them sit in such a way that they have direct contact with you. You shake them, to direct them to where you are writing or what you are teaching about. He (the special needs teacher) told us how to treat the child but stressed that what is important is that he should be able to see us, as he can't follow what we are teaching like the other children who can hear and see.*

She follows this procedure, herself, but not all her fellow teachers do;

*It is only a few that take the instructions seriously. I say this because I am not the only teacher in Standard 1. As you know that these children are troublesome, they start fights, play in class and go out anyhow, they don't attend the child. When I see this, it pains my heart so I just take all the students with special needs from other classes and put them in my class. (...) I just get concerned with the children because it could happen to anyone in future. If there would be anyone who is concerned then it's the head teacher.*

## Awareness

The District coordinator for special needs education was a regular teacher before he trained in special needs education. He said that as a general teacher he did not have the knowledge to identify or accommodate children with special needs, and he has seen that this is the case for many mainstream teachers. There is nothing about this in the syllabus at general teachers colleges. He feels that most teachers do not care about learners with special needs, and therefore do not pay attention to them, they ignore them instead of giving them special attention, as they should;

*Most of these learners are seen as a problem. Seen as a problem by the teachers and the parents. You know sometimes if a learner has got some learning difficulties maybe because of that problem the learner is aggressive, or sometimes inactive. So he is taken as a problem in a classroom situation, because he is not doing well. So for the teacher to plan another activity for that learner, he sees it as a challenge. So as a result the learner fails, or he is not assisted.*

This was corroborated by one of the mainstream teachers, who said the following about how his fellow teachers view learners with special needs;

*There are some who love them knowing that these are people just as I am, some they take them as useless. So maybe if they are sensitized that will be much better.*

The District coordinator for special needs education said that part of the job for special needs education teachers is to sensitise teachers and communities about these learners;

*(...) we are trying to sensitize the communities to accept these learners. They are part and parcel. They have a right to access education, but some teachers try to ignore them. So we go flat out sensitizing them to accommodate these learners. They have a right to education and need equal opportunities like the other learners.*

The special needs teacher also talked about the importance of sensitisation of teachers and also of parents. But he feels that this has a very low priority amongst stakeholders at all levels namely school, zone, district and national levels.

*Let me cite an example. There's a school improvement plan, whereby the schools are being funded something. They talk of continuous professional development. I have been talking to the head teachers that 'sometimes you can organise those continuous professional development activities, and you can call for me to talk about learners with special education needs. But recently, just two months ago we got that one (the funding). I just observed to see if any of the head teachers would invite me to say 'come, do this as you talked about that previous time.' But no, they did these days without inviting me to talk about issues with special needs education. So to me I feel the willingness of other stakeholders like head teachers, PEAs, is a problem.*

The teachers said that the other learners can also label or segregate learners with special needs, but sometimes they are very helpful to them; helping them take notes, playing with them, looking after them, assisting them if they get sick (i.e. epilepsy), as explained by one of the mainstream teachers;

*Suppose the mentally disturbed child, if you ask him a question and he fails, the others start to laugh at him. So he feels disgraced and maybe the next day fails to come to school. So I do encourage him to come and if I find anyone doing anything bad to him I do give punishment to them to stop that habit. (...) and in our life skill lessons I do teach that all people are the same and anybody can do anything despite his disability, and by and by some learners are able to refrain themselves so that the disabled feels at home.*

The teachers also said that attitudes of parents are major barriers for children with special needs going to school. The problem they see is that parents don't believe these learners are capable of succeeding in education, and therefore they see no point sending them to school;

*Many parents do not prefer those children with disability to go on with education. They take them as they can't go on with education, so they sometimes discourage them to go to school. (...) Because they don't see any future for them. They think that it's a waste of resources, they can't go on with their education.*

The teacher will tell these parents about people with disabilities who have succeeded in their education and in getting a job, encouraging them to send their disabled child to school. This particular teacher has taught many learners with various disabilities. The same teacher said that he sees negative attitudes not just from teachers and parents, but also from other people in the community, even traditional authorities and chiefs;

*Of course other members of the community they don't see any capability in those disabled children, but I tell them that these can do school even up to college, if they get supported.*

### Mode of examination

The mode of examination is a barrier for many learners with special needs, as they are usually given the same examination and the same premises as 'normal' learners during exams, and these are often not appropriate for learners with special needs. For some learners continuous assessment would be more appropriate; that is focussing on their achievements over a period of time and in several activities, and not just how they do in one written exam. Other learners need special considerations during the actual test, like large print, braille, more time to complete the exercises, doing the exam in a separate room from other learners, and so on.

The special needs education teachers explained that they can help children with special needs to have the school examinations in an appropriate mode, suitable for them. This has to be organised with the Malawi National Examinations Board (MANEB). MANEB usually provide whatever the teachers ask for children with special needs, but it requires that the teacher or a special needs education teacher knows of the child and his/ her special needs, and reports this to MANEB. It's in the mandate of MANEB to accommodate for these children.

For the end-of-the-year exams, the examination is the responsibility of the school, and it is the headmaster of the school who has to make sure that the mode of examination is suitable for each student. For students with special needs, their teachers or the special needs teacher has to notify the headmaster, ensuring that he will make appropriate accommodations for those children.

### 5.1.5 Challenges for learners with disabilities

We asked the special needs education teacher what he saw as the greatest challenges different categories of learners with disabilities face in accessing and succeeding in their education. For learners with physical disability he said that their major challenges are mobility issues, lack of wheelchairs and lack of medical attention. For learners with hearing impairment he highlighted communication difficulties as the major challenge. This is made even more difficult with the lack of availability of hearing aids and limited knowledge of sign-language. For learners with visual impairment he said that lack of appropriate teaching and learning materials, such as large print and braille, is the major barrier to education. And, for learners with intellectual disabilities or learning difficulties he said that mainstream teachers lack knowledge in how to handle them. Learners with learning difficulties can be looked after in primary school, but they often drop out before or during secondary school. Learners with visual impairment, on the other hand, he says often go on to college, once they have gotten into the educational system.

Several of the teachers and special needs education teachers highlighted parents as a challenge and a barrier to accessing education for children with disabilities. One teacher said that the problem with the

parents is that they don't see the potential in these children, and thus don't understand why they should send them to school;

*They feel like they (disabled children) are not capable to do something.*

She feels, however, that such attitudes are slowly changing for the better. When people see people with disabilities who get an education and a job, parents start to believe that their disabled children can also accomplish these things.

One general teacher said that the children themselves, and their lack of self-esteem and motivation, is a barrier to success. This, however, is closely linked to lack of support and discrimination experienced by these children. The special needs education teacher and the mainstream teachers said that in their experience children with special needs who are not attended to lose interest and drop out of school. Many learners with special needs drop out of school, particularly those with learning difficulties. The special needs education teacher sees it as a big problem. He attributes this to many factors, such as lack of awareness among both teachers and parents, early marriages (especially among girls) and poverty. There are also many children with special needs who never start school, or start school very late, and this he attributes primarily to lack of early intervention;

*That's why there is a move to encourage early intervention. Sometimes I go to the nursery schools, that is to try to intervene earlier on, because there when we find that this learner have got some disabilities, we have to intervene, maybe advising the teacher how to handle that learner. Advising the parents to take that child to the hospital for medication if needed. So that the child should be used at school, so that when the time comes to start standard 1, the child is already aware of what happens at school, socialisation is there. So that's the problem; there's no early intervention, that's why learners don't start school early, because sometimes you find the child comes to standard 1 at the age of 12. And when he comes to that school he finds that there is not enough specialised teachers and learning materials. The child is not motivated as a result, and go (quit school).*

He said that more and more children go to nursery schools, early learning centres, these days, but very few children with special needs. He finds that parents sometimes keep these children at home;

*Parents, they sometimes don't expose the learner to his or her fellow peers to chat with. Sometimes they lock the child in the house, maybe just keep the child indoor, because maybe he has got some sort of disability. That is a problem also. At the end you may discover that "ah, that house, they are keeping a child", and you hear maybe from the neighbours or the social workers, and the child has already grown up. So that is another problem.*

A mainstream teacher said the following when asked what will happen to children with disabilities who drop out of school;

*Big problem because there is no job, no means of getting money to support their lives and at the end there is poverty.*

The District coordinator for special needs education said that for children with special needs to succeed in school, a collective effort is needed;

### The five case studies

**Joseph** is a nine year old boy with learning disability. He reads and writes very slowly, and struggles to keep up in school. He is also very restless, has attention problems and can be aggressive. He is in standard 5, and he has failed both standard 3 and standard 5 previously.

**William** is a nine year old boy who is completely deaf. He does not know sign-language, and thus his communication is very limited. He has just passed standard 1. He started school a few years late, after the special needs education teacher encouraged the parents to send him to school.

**Rose** is an 11 year old girl with physical and mild intellectual disability. She is HIV positive, and has lost both her parents to AIDS. She started school when she was very young, but became sick and was away from school for two years, and the illness left her disabled. Now she is in standard 2.

**Atupele** is a 20 year old woman, with intellectual disability and suffering from epilepsy. She dropped out of school early in primary school. Both her and her parents said that she dropped out because of the epilepsy. They feel she is now too old to go to school, and she does not think she can go to school while she still suffers from epilepsy. She has a two year old child.

**Edward** is a 12 year old boy with visual impairment. He reads and writes slowly, and struggles to concentrate. He is in standard 7, but he failed and had to do standard 6 twice.

*It requires actually collective efforts, with you supporting the learners, assisting the teachers to support the learners. So once we work together whether that child has a problem, we work together with the parents supporting this one. That when he has a problem the teacher should come in, when he has a problem the parents should come in. Whether the learner has a problem with specific learning areas, we support and by the end of that day that will make sense.*

## 5.2 The case studies

The five case studies presented in the box to the left, were purposely chosen to represent a wide variety of disabilities, namely learning disability, hearing impairment, intellectual disability, physical disability, epilepsy and visual impairment. In the sections to follow we present barriers and facilitators to inclusive education from the perspective of the five case studies, representing children and young people with the different disabilities, as well as their families and teachers.



### 5.2.1 Joseph: Learning disability

Joseph has a learning disability. He has not progressed in school like other children of his age, having previously failed both standard 3 and standard 5, and had to repeat. He struggles to sit still in class, often has problems responding to questions, and he can be aggressive. His main problem in school, however, is that he is a very slow reader. One of Joseph's mainstream teachers picked up on his problems, and suspected that he had a learning disability. She referred him to the special needs education teacher,

who confirmed her suspicions. His parents used to think that he was simply lazy and unintelligent, until his teacher and the special needs teacher told them that he had a learning disability. Joseph, himself, does not think that he has any problems in school, except from problems all the learners face. For instance, he complained that some teachers had very bad handwriting, and therefore the learners struggle to keep up with the teaching.

Joseph said that there are 115 learners in his class, and two teachers. He showed us his classroom. It was a small room of about 30 square metres with no desks or chairs, so learners sit on the concrete floor. This learning environment was described by the special needs education teacher as a barrier to inclusive education for Joseph;

*Apart from lack of resources, another contributing factor is that of large enrolment of learners. We have learners more than 100 in a class, and they sit corner to corner in a classroom, even sometimes closer to the chalkboard. So, having Joseph in that classroom, and to be attended to, becomes a problem, against one or two teachers.*

One of Joseph's teachers, Miss Banda, sees that in teaching Joseph it's important to give him extra time, as he takes time to learn. Most of his teachers don't do this for him, and as a result he does not learn. She believes that some teachers don't know how to deal with children like Joseph, while others have been taught, but they don't care about children like him. Miss Banda said that in Joseph's case, many of the teachers find him challenging to teach, and therefore they ignore him;

*Most of the Teachers here ignored him; they said he very is troublesome. But when I come across the problem with him I said "no this one is not troublesome but he has learning difficulties", so I took him from the root, now he is my friend and he loves me so much because I showed him the love too. And in so doing he wants most of the time to be with me even at home, at my home.*

Joseph learns, but he is a slow reader and writer, so it is crucial for him to have enough time, more time than the other learners, both in class and when he does tests. If he is not given enough time during tests he fails, even though he knows the answers, he often does not have sufficient time to write them down, because he writes so slowly. The special needs education teacher told us that although Joseph has many learning difficulties, with good help he is able to learn. He believes that when Joseph failed standard 5 the last time, he was assessed using an inappropriate mode of examination for him, and had he been assessed using a modified test for him or using continuous assessment, he would have passed.

The mother said that she pays MK 1500 for part-time classes for Joseph. She also sends her other children to part-time classes, as she believes education is so important, and she wants them to perform at their very best. The part-time classes take place at school, after school has ended. It is usually one of the teachers who do the part-time classes, and they have a small group of students they teach.

Joseph has been assessed and assisted by the special needs education teacher. Since he started helping Joseph, his brother sees that Joseph has changed a lot. He does more school work and seems more interested in school, he can sit still for longer, and he has started to have hopes for his own future. After meeting with the special needs education teacher Joseph often comes home and talks about what he wants to be when he grows up. Joseph receives a lot of help with his school work from his older brother, and he also receives help from Miss Banda, even when she is no longer his teacher in school. Joseph often visits her at home, and she takes the opportunity to teach him. He comes in the afternoon, during weekends and even holidays, sometimes several times a week. They don't plan to meet, he just comes by

her home, and she accepts him. When she teaches him English or maths, for instance, she makes sure she combines teaching, playing and chatting. She said that to keep his attention and to keep him interested it is crucial to make learning like a game.

Joseph's mother feels that there should be more special needs education teachers to assist all those children with special needs, and also to assist the mainstream teachers to better teach children with special needs. She also thinks that there should be more books. There are not enough books for all the students; some classes only have one book to several hundred learners. If Joseph had his own book in all his subjects it would be easier for the family to assist him with his school work also after school.

The mother hopes Joseph will have a bright future, but for him to have that she believes he has to have an education. For him to achieve this she encourages him to go to school, she pays for part-time lessons for him, and she speaks to his teachers about looking out for him and his special needs.

*He should be able to get a job and be able to support himself.*

The brother also stresses the importance of going to school, and expresses concern that Joseph keeps failing in school.

*Nowadays it is important that people should go to school; to be educated. And if they don't, they will experience a lot of problems. Such as HIV/AIDS; to know about these diseases, you need to go to school and learn. If you don't, you are going to have problems.*

When we asked Joseph what he would like to do when he grows up, he said he wanted to be a doctor. He has also expressed this wish to Miss Banda, and she believes he has the potential to make it if he works hard. He also said that he likes school, because it will allow him to get a job;

*I like going to school, because when I finish I would be able to get a good job.*

### 5.2.2 William: Deaf

William is completely deaf, and since he does not know sign-language, he has no proper language for communication. The family has made up some simple signs and instructions that they use for basic communication. He lost his hearing when he was six months old, after a bout of malaria. He can sometimes be aggressive and violent for no obvious reason. The mother said that he is much more troublesome than his peers. Also, his lack of hearing is often taken as rudeness by people who don't know of his disability. Those who know him tolerate it, because they know his problems, but those who don't know him get into fights with him.

William has mostly just stayed at home his whole life, but for a short period of time he went to a nursery school. His mother said that before he started nursery school William never wanted to sit with his friends and family, even during meals, but at nursery school he learnt to sit with his friends, and he also started eating with the rest of his family. But his friends at nursery school were teasing him and beating him, so the teacher had told the mother not to take him there anymore. When his friends of the same age started school, William also wanted to go, but the mother discouraged him;

*At that time I was just feeling sorry for him as he was envying the other children from the household when they were going to school, so he would cry. Crying to go with them to school. (...) But we were telling him that 'even if you were to go to school, maybe your friends will just be beating you or the teacher will not be able to teach you properly'.*

It was only when the special needs education teacher came to the school that they started sending William to school, and he has now just passed standard 1. A few days a week William is in a special class with three other children with speech and hearing impairments. This class is run by the special needs education teacher. The teacher explained how the class came about and how it works;

*First we had to work on communication and socialisation, so after that there was a full-time programme in that room, we were given a special room that was used as a staff-room previously, but nowadays is being used as a storeroom, so we just cleared part of it and used it as my classroom. So I was living with that there. (...) Then we also identified (three other children). So we made a good classroom. So through just playing, maybe football, minor games, then I started introducing them to the numbers and writing. The result, we found that they were catching up. Now we have made a good class. (...) Then I am trying to introduce to them simple sign language, in terms of maybe alphabet. So, that is where we are now.*

The rest of the days, however, when this teacher is not at the school, William is in a mainstream class. Because the special needs education teacher is responsible for a number of schools in two school zones, he is unable to teach William's class every day. The teacher said that ideally he would have liked to stay with them all the time, but he also has other children, other schools and other responsibilities to tend to. The mother told us that on the days he is in the mainstream class William sometimes comes running home from school early because he was teased and beaten by his classmates.

*So when the teacher would be away, sometimes he would be coming home whilst crying because his friends had beaten him. He has a friend who lives nearby and is in Standard 1 and he would tell me that 'the teacher didn't come today and he (William) was in our class and the other children beat him'.*

Another problem William faces in school is that he struggles to read and write when he is in the mainstream class. When he is in the class with the special needs education teacher, however, he learns and progresses well. The special needs education teacher plans to continue teaching William and the other special needs students also next year when they have progressed to standard 2. At the same time he plans to spend more time educating the mainstream teachers in handling learners like William, so that learners with special needs can be better integrated into mainstream education in the future.

In order for William to continue and succeed with his education, the mother said that there should be more special needs education teachers. Furthermore, the school lacks space for a separate classroom for children with special needs. At the moment they are taught in a corner in a storage room. She also wishes that the family could be given appliances, like a blackboard, to teach William at home.

We asked the mother about her hopes for all her three children. For the oldest son and youngest daughter, she said that she thinks they will be able to continue their education and go to college. For William, she said;

*Are dumb people also found at colleges?*



She continued to say that she would be happy if he could just reach secondary school. She believes that his disability will make life more difficult for him. Even if he was to get an education, she thinks he will struggle to get a job. On his future, she said;

*It will be different from those that are hearing. (...) They can hear and he can't. (...) He will have a difficult life.*

### 5.2.3 Rose: Physical and intellectual disability

Rose is an orphan; she is cared for by her grandmother. When she was seven years old she was sick with malaria-like symptoms, and she was diagnosed with both malaria and HIV. She was bedridden for two years, and in the end was left paralysed on one side of her body. She has reduced functioning in the left side of her body. She was unable to stand and walk for a long time, but now, with the help of physiotherapy, she can walk with a walker. She also has reduced functioning in her left arm and back and up to her neck. She is right-handed, so she can use that hand for writing. Rose also has some intellectual disability. She struggles to understand and answer questions, and can sometimes speak incoherently. This was confirmed by her grandmother and her aunt, as well as the special needs education teacher. Her grandmother explained;

*I am seeing how she talks. Some days she will talk things that make sense and other days she won't make sense. Her walking has improved but the way she talks seems like something is wrong with her mentally, it is not like she was before. She will be talking things that don't make sense, but she will be able to walk properly.*

Before Rose got sick and became disabled, she had started school at an early age. Her mother had felt that she was smart enough to start when she was five years old, and they had accepted her into the school. She was in standard 2 when she got sick. Her aunt explained that after she fell sick and became disabled, she was no longer as intelligent as before she fell sick. After she had been sick and away from school for two years, Rose had to go back to standard 1.

The headmaster told us that at school Rose faces some problems. First, the toilet facilities at the school are difficult for her to use. Secondly, there are no ramps at the school, so the buildings are not accessible. Finally, her school performance is not up to speed because of lack of coordination between her paralysed hand and head. He also said that Rose has a walking aid, and she can use it to walk to and from school, although with some difficulty. She understands what the teachers are saying, but she often fails to do what they tell her. Although she writes with her right hand, and she is paralysed in her left hand, she still struggles to write. The special needs education teacher said that the mode of examination in school is bad for Rose, and as a result she fails. She performs well in her oral exam, but in the written, she fails because of her troubles with coordination.

Rose can move to and from the school with the help of a walker. Someone walks with her, usually the grandmother, but she can walk on her own with her walker. The special needs education teacher said that he plans to find someone who can give Rose a wheelchair, and talk to the school about getting ramps constructed at the school to make it accessible for a wheelchair.

The aunt wishes the school could help find a chair for Rose to sit on in class;

*If they would find her a chair to enable her to sit without any problems it would be good and make her feel comfortable in class. It is very difficult for her to move about and she gets stuck at the same position we left her.*

Rose is in a mainstream class. The aunt thinks that Rose should get extra attention from the teacher in class to perform well. They should check on her regularly during class, to make sure she is following the lessons. She believes that Rose does not understand a lot of what is taught in class, and that it is necessary for the teachers to continuously check that Rose has understood what has been taught. She feels, however, that the school has done nothing to assist Rose. The grandmother also feels that the school does nothing to assist Rose. The aunt also said she wishes that the school could assist with part-time classes for Rose. She feels that she would benefit from this.

The special needs education teacher said that to assist Rose he advises the family to continue to bring Rose to school, and to focus much attention on sensory-motor development activities while promoting her according to the areas she performs better. He also said that he plans to come up with a special programme assisted by a specialist teacher twice per week, and carry out home visits during school holidays.

Both the aunt and the grandmother were hopeful about Rose's future. The aunt expressed a wish for her to complete her education;

*I want her to go far with her education and that's why I encourage her to go to school so that if she does well she can even support her sisters.*

When Rose first fell ill and became disabled the grandmother was worried about Rose's future. But, with the progress that Rose has made over the past few years; learning to walk with the walker, going back to school and so on, the grandmother feels more hopeful;

*I can see her future, I will leave her behind when I die but I think she will be happy and will have a brighter future. Because of how I am seeing her, she can now walk.*

She believes that with the ability to walk, Rose can finish form 4 and get a job.

#### 5.2.4 Atupele: Epilepsy and intellectual disability

Atupele has epilepsy, and her regular seizures were cited as the reason why she dropped out of school at an early age. The seizures have caused and continue to cause many problems for her; they make her aggressive, and as a result she struggles to keep friends and maintain relationships. According to her father the seizures also make her speak differently and act "abnormally"; she speaks incoherently, she does not understand what is said to her, and she roams around aimlessly. For the most part, however, she understands and communicates well, and she is able to look after herself and her young child. When she has seizures, however, she is completely helpless. The seizures can last for several days, on and off.

Atupele cannot read or write. Both her and her parents all said that she dropped out of school because of the seizures, but their explanations were more complex. The mother said the following on why she dropped out of school;

*I don't know the exact age, but I just know that she dropped out because her head was not functioning properly. (...) Because of (the seizures).*

Atupele herself had a slightly different explanation;

*When it (the seizures) would start at school, I would just beat everyone and I just decided to just leave school.*

When she had the fits at school she says that her friends and teachers did nothing to help her, they just stared at her. Atupele and her family do not think that the school could have done anything to help her stay in school, as they firmly believe that having seizures is not compatible with going to school. As explained by her mother;

*Maybe they (the school) would have still worked harder with her, but this would have been without success because it is difficult for someone with seizures to understand what the teacher is teaching. (...) they knew that even if they tried anyhow, it wouldn't change anything.*

Atupele continues to have seizures, and is convinced that it would be impossible for her to go back to school as long as she has them. The family also feel that the school has given up on her, and would not be willing to teach her now. Adding to this, she feels she is now too old to be in primary school, and she has a young child to look after as a single-parent. As a result she has completely given up on getting an education.

Aside from the lack of educational hopes, the mother said that she sees that Atupele has the ability to accomplish things, and she has hopes for her future;

*I see that she likes knitting, she would go to (...) do some piece work. The house you see there was built from her proceeds from the piece work. She also farms. (...) I want her to have a bright future. If they would give her a job at (xxx), it would be nice.*

Atupele herself was more uncertain about her own future;

*I don't know what will happen. I just know to grow rice or to be knitting.*

### 5.2.5 Edward: Visual impairment

Edward is visually impaired, but has no visual aids. He often complains that his head is hurting. Both he and his parents have a feeling that his eyesight is degenerating. He struggles to see the blackboard in school, but he can read print, even as small as font 12. He has never seen an eye specialist or any other health professional for his visual problems. The parents think that he could benefit from glasses, but believe that he would not be eligible.

Edward failed standard 6, and had to repeat. He faces several challenges in school. First, and foremost, he struggles to see the blackboard, but he also has behavioural problems (aggression), he reads and writes slower than his peers, and he struggles to concentrate in class. Edward's teacher in standard 6 said that sometimes Edward can act rude, but he believes that the behavioural problems are closely related to his visual problems;



*But because I know him, I do handle him according to his situation but other teachers maybe see him as a rude boy. But because I know his problems, I do handle him well, chat with him, befriend him. He is my friend at this now and he is able to...he does come sometimes at my home to chat and I encourage him to cope with education. I will be happy if I will see you at college. Now he is working hard. (...) Sometimes the attitude of people to a disabled can make someone to be angry, and that attitude comes because of anger from the attitude from other people but generally he is not rude.*

He said that when he discovers bad attitudes of some teachers towards Edward, he speaks to them, explaining Edward's situation, and he feels that they are now treating him better. Similarly, he expressed concern that also Edward's family lack awareness of his condition and his needs, and thus fail to treat him with the kindness and assistance he needs. Edward sometimes confides in his teacher about his problems at home.

Edward has a few good friends at school, he specifically mentioned two. Many of the other children in school, however, tease him. Edward said this happens "most times";

*(...) what I don't like at school is what my friends say, they talk a lot of things about me. (...) They say that, with my problem I can't do anything special, its better I should just go and stay idle at the village and that there is nothing I will achieve from school. (...)They say that because of this problem, that no matter what the teacher is teaching I can't understand as I can't see on the black board. (...) I don't feel good and sometimes when they are laughing at me I just leave school and come home.*

Edward is capable of learning and of participating in most, if not all, aspects of life, but in order to do so he requires some assistance. The types of assistance needed can be divided into visual aids, learning assistance, awareness and emotional assistance.

Edward is short sighted, and thus he needs an object to be close for him to see it well. He could probably benefit from glasses, but he has never seen an eye specialist to be assessed for this.

Edward prefers to sit in the front of the classroom to see the blackboard better;

*I sit in front because the blackboard feels like when you have been sitting for a long time in the sun and then you shift to a place in the shade.*

But even when he sits in the front, he sometimes struggles to see, and thus Edward said that the best for him would be if the teachers would write on a piece of paper for him what they write on the blackboard, because he can read better what is on paper in front of him, as opposed to what is on the blackboard. Some teachers don't allow him to sit in the front, as they have class rules saying that boys should sit in the back, and girls in the front. Edward told us about one of his standard six teachers;

*When we insist on sitting in the front the teacher says that if we don't want to do what he is saying then we should leave. We then also just leave.*

He does not think that this particular teacher knows about his visual problems, saying that if the teacher knew, he wouldn't treat him that way.

The standard 6 teacher, said that in Edward's class there had been a total of 117 learners, and among them there were four children with disabilities; Edward with visual impairment, one with physical impairment and two with intellectual disability. One teacher teaches the class at a time, but there are four primary six teachers. Edward and his class sit on the ground in the classroom, as they don't have any desks, and there is a scarcity of books and other educational equipment. Under these circumstances it is challenging for teachers to pick up on and accommodate the special needs of their learners. Because of Edward's visual impairment he reads and writes slower, and thus learns slower than his peers. To prevent him from failing in school he needs extra time and attention, and to give him that the parents have paid for part-time classes for him throughout most of his education. In standard 6 Edward did not have part-time classes, and as a result he failed. When he started getting part-time classes again he passed. To prevent him from failing, the parents believe that part-time classes are necessary. The parents also believe that Edward could do even better in school and in life if he could be accepted into a special needs education school, as expressed by the mother;

*We also hear, like on the radio sometimes that there are some institutions which care for students with special needs in Blantyre or somewhere. I also desire for my child to go to these schools to have a bright future but the problem is we don't know what we can do to get him there.*

The parents also feel that a special needs education teacher would be very helpful to Edward. The one that is now they only see a few times every year, and they feel it is not sufficient. The special needs education teacher encourages Edward to continue with his education and he has also examined his eyes.

When we asked Edward what kind of assistance he would want from his teachers to help his learning he said that he would want them to stop his friends from laughing at him. The teacher confirmed that he has seen Edward being teased by the other learners, and as a result Edward has left school. As a teacher he punishes the children he catches teasing, and he encourages the learner to come back to school. This also happened with Edward at one point, and the teacher went to his home and spoke to him and his parents to encourage Edward to come back to school. He did come back, and he began working hard and passed standard six. Adding to this, in a class called life skills he teaches the learners that all people are the same, and that a disabled person "can do anything despite his disability". The teacher we interviewed has been a particularly important teacher and influence to Edward, but the parents are worried, because when Edward moves on to standard seven next term he will have a different teacher. The mother said the following about the teacher;

*He is a good teacher and even when he is absent from school he follows up with him at home to check why he has not reported for class and to encourage him to go the next day.*

Edward has many dreams for the future, and most importantly he wants to continue with his education. He cites assisting his parents when they get older as his primary reason for wanting to do well. When he grows up he wants to be a teacher so that he can assist children with visual impairment, like himself, with their learning. His parents also have hopes for Edward's future, and in him assisting them when they get older. Despite their hopes, the parents realise that Edward's challenges in school may prevent him from getting an education. When asked how his disability may affect his education, the mother said;

*Yes, it is very possible for this to affect his ability to do some things because of the way he is learning (his school performance) he might just give up and drop out of school like most of the children in this village and this would be painful to us. That's why I referred to those places where children with special needs go to learn properly and do well to the point that you can rely on them.*

The teacher also expressed concern about Edward's future education. He worries that without his help Edward may have dropped out of school, and when he continues his education with new teachers he may not get the necessary support and assistance to succeed.

## 6. Summary of key results

### 6.1 Special education

The **Lack of resources** has been highlighted as a major problem for the field of special education in general. There are too few special education teachers, covering too many schools and having too many learners to attend to. Adding to this they struggle to move around between the many schools each special needs teacher is responsible for, using a bicycle as their only mode of transport.

Study participants also highlighted **lack of funding for special needs equipment** as a major barrier to inclusive education. From the case studies we find the example of Rose, who could benefit from a wheelchair, but has yet to be given one. Edward also experiences the lack of special equipment, with a visual impairment that could most likely be improved considerably with visual aids. For William, who is deaf, the lack of sign-language knowledge is a major barrier to his education. He has been lucky to have been noticed by a special needs teacher who looks after him, but other hearing impaired learners will probably never go to school, or will drop out quickly because of lack of communication.

The special needs education teachers are worried that **many students with special needs are not picked up**. Firstly, because many schools in the district are not covered by any special needs education programme, and secondly because they do not have the capacity to carry out as many screenings as they should in the schools that do have a programme.

## 6.2 The teaching environment

The **poor physical accessibility** at many schools is a major barrier for some children with disabilities. For Rose, for instance, with her physical disability, the lack of ramps and high doorsteps are problematic. She has to be carried into the classroom every morning, and be picked up and carried out when school is finished. She can move to and from school with her walker, but she cannot enter the school building. Furthermore, the toilet facilities are not accessible for Rose. The result is that she sits in the same spot in the classroom all day, and this spot is on the floor. The seating is uncomfortable for her, but there are no chairs for her or any of the other students to sit on.

The schools also face a serious **lack of infrastructure** such as desks and chairs and also the lack of text books and writing materials. For many of the learners with special needs who need part-time lessons, or extra help with school work outside of school, the lack of teaching books is a problem. Several family members said that they wished that their learner had his or her own book, so that they could continue the teaching also at home after school.

It was highlighted by both teachers and learners that the **size of a class** is a major barrier to inclusive education. When one teacher alone has to as many as hundred or several hundred learners, they have very little time and capacity left to attend to the learners with special needs. However, some mainstream teachers do find that this is possible, and with minimal effort, and they believe that the **knowledge or attitudes of teachers towards learners with special needs** is more defining than their actual abilities, capacity or time. For instance in the case of Joseph, with the learning disability, many of his teachers find him challenging; he requires extra time and attention, and he can be a nuisance in the class, disturbing the other students. As a result, many teachers are reluctant to teach him. But Joseph has been lucky and has had one passionate teacher, and for her it was not challenging to accommodate Joseph and other learners with special needs. Teachers like her can make an enormous difference for children with special needs. William, the case who is deaf, has been lucky to have been followed up closely by the special needs education teacher. When he is in the special class taught by him he is happy, but he is not happy on the days he is taught in mainstream class. He complains about other learners teasing him, and the mainstream teachers not paying enough attention to him. When he was in nursery school his teacher found him too challenging to teach and told the mother to keep him at home. Also in Rose's case, the family and the special needs teacher believes that she could have performed better in school if the mainstream teacher had paid more attention to her, made sure she understands, as she often struggles to follow in class. Edward can be aggressive and frustrated because of his visual problems, which make him struggle in school. This makes some teachers to have negative attitudes towards him, but he has one teacher who supports him and this teacher also speaks to the other teachers who are not supportive. Atupele, with epilepsy, and her family felt that she received no support when she had seizures in school, not from peers and not from teachers. The result was that she dropped out.

## 6.3 Parents' awareness

Also **awareness and attitudes of parents** can be barriers to education for learners with special needs. On the other hand, they can be facilitators. In the case of Joseph, with a learning disability, his parents both have an education, and they value education. They make it a priority for their children, including Joseph, to get an education. Thus, they spend money on part-time classes, and follow recommendations of teachers and special needs teacher to send him to school. Their value for education is a facilitator for Joseph going to school and getting the necessary accommodations to succeed. For Atupele, on the other hand, who

comes from a family with generally low levels of education, quitting school seemed to be the only option they saw for her when she started struggling in school. Her parents do not think that someone with epilepsy can go to school, so they have completely given up on her. As a result she has also given up herself, and no longer sees school and education as an option in her life. The mother of William, who is deaf, said that she would not have sent him to school had the special needs teacher not told her to. She used to believe that the best for him was to stay at home, and that because he cannot hear or speak school is not for him.

## 6.4 Mode of examination

The special needs education teachers and one of the mainstream teachers believe that many children with special needs would have progressed better in school, and could have avoided failing, if they had been assessed using a **mode of examination** more suitable for them. Many children with special needs fail in school because they are assessed using the same tests as all the other students, but with a more appropriate mode of examination they would have passed. For instance, in the case of Joseph, with learning disability, both his teacher and the special needs teacher believe that with an appropriate mode of examination, Joseph would not have failed. He should have been assessed using a modified test, given more time, oral test instead of written, or with continuous assessment instead of a once-off test. Similarly, Rose, with a physical disability, performs well in oral exams, but struggles in written, because she struggles to write due to poor coordination as a result of her disability. But Rose is given the written test, like all the other learners, and as a result she fails.

## 6.5 Hopes for the future

With support and encouragement from parents, teachers and special needs education teachers, fellow learners and learners with disabilities are more motivated in school, and are more likely to believe in themselves. Learners who are motivated and believe in themselves perform better in school. In the case studies we see a variety of hopes and worries for the future of the learners with special needs.

The mother of William does not think a deaf and dumb child can succeed with his education. Because of this she worries that he will have a difficult life. Similarly, in the case of Atupele, with epilepsy, the family has no educational hopes for her, and she has no educational hopes for herself. They believe that epilepsy is not compatible with school. They do believe, however, that she can contribute to farming or other income-generating activities even without an education. Edward has high hopes for his future. He wants to be a teacher, to assist learners like him. His parents also have hopes for him, but they worry that his visual impairment will prevent him from succeeding in school. Edward's teacher also expressed concern that when he is no longer teaching him, Edward will not succeed, because he is dependent on a supportive teacher to succeed.



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