An Exploration of the Challenges Faced by Regular Primary School Teachers in Planning Instructional Strategies for Inclusive Classrooms

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Abstract

Teaching in an inclusive classroom where teachers have to meet needs of all learners can be difficult. This study explored challenges faced by regular primary school teachers in planning instructional strategies for inclusive classrooms in Lilongwe Urban district of Malawi. Qualitative case study research design, with purposive sampling technique, was employed. The sample size was 19 regular primary school teachers and 16 primary school learners. Semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions and observations were used to collect data. Thematic data analysis was employed to analyse data. The findings of the study revealed that teachers faced challenges such as lack of knowledge and skills, inadequate teaching and learning materials, large classes, inadequate time for planning, and assisting learners with special needs. Furthermore, it was observed that some regular primary school teachers did not accommodate the needs of all learners during the teaching and learning process. It was, therefore, suggested that there should be professional development for both regular and special education teachers on teaching all students with diverse learning needs in inclusive classrooms.

Introduction

Research shows that globally the number of inclusive classrooms has increased greatly in the past two decades and will continue to do so. The 26th Annual Report to Congress on the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) estimated that 96% of general education teachers in the USA had students with learning disabilities in their classrooms (Rock, Greg, Ellis & Gable., 2008). EMIS (2011) reported similar results in South Africa where 110,300 learners with Special Educational Needs were found in regular public schools. This represented 25.3% of the learners enrolled in ordinary public schools. A recent report on inclusive education in Malawi indicated that the Malawi government mainstreamed about 90,000 children in schools (Naira, 2015). However, the central issue remained on what instructional strategies regular primary school teachers used in their inclusive classes in order to meet the needs of exceptional learners.

Lip sky and Gartner (1997) described a wider range of disabilities and levels of severity amongst students. Thus the needs and abilities of learners within the general education classroom are more diverse than ever before, making it essential that teachers understand the complex differences among learners so that all can reach their full potential in education. Hallahan and Kauffman (2005) state that teachers should apply effective teaching strategies and techniques, pay attention to selection of materials, and adapt the curriculum task design and classroom management skills in order to cater as effectively as possible to the diverse learning needs of all learners.

Historical Overview of Special Needs Education in Malawi

Globally, the provision of Special Needs Education (SNE) began with residential schools for the blind and deaf students in the eighteenth century in Europe (Peters, 2003). Charitable and religious organisations played a major role in providing services to students with special needs during these early years (Peters, 2003). Education of children with disabilities by that time was viewed as a charitable act. In Malawi, the provision of Special Needs Education followed the same path. It also started with residential schools namely, Lowe School for the Blind in

Nsanje, Chilanga School for the Blind in Kasungu, and Montfort school for the Deaf in Chiradzulu in the 1950s (Chavuta, Itimu-Phiri, Chiwaya, Sikero & Alindiamao, 2008). The provision of services in the named schools was also done by charitable and religious organisations (Itimu & Kopetz, 2008). Later, around the 1980s, the resource centre system followed, whereby learners with special needs received special services through resource centres. Under this system, specialist teachers supported both learners with special needs and regular teachers in the regular classroom.

Current Situation of Inclusive Education in Malawi

In Malawi, like in some countries, children with disabilities are taught in the general class alongside learners without disabilities and receive this additional instruction outside of normal class hours in the resource rooms. As of 2015, Malawi had 126 resource centres (16 residential and 110 day schools) out of Malawi's 447 educational zones (Banks & Zuurmond, 2015). Given the limited availability of resource centres and special schools, many children with Special Needs Education attended mainstream primary schools. The Malawi government had managed to mainstream about 90,000 children in schools under the inclusive education programme (Naira, 2015). This figure doubled over the years since the establishment of the Department of Special Needs Education in the Ministry of Education in 2005. Schools in Malawi started modifying their physical structures by providing ramps and disability friendly toilets. However, Namanja (2015) noted slow progress on inclusive education particularly in building up knowledge and skills on how to mainstream inclusive education.

After the inception of resource centre systems in the 1980s in Malawi, most primary schools experienced an increase in the number of learners with Special Educational Needs. Such learners spent most of their education with peers without special education needs in the regular classrooms (Research for Inclusive Education in International Cooperation -RIEIC, 2015). This meant that teachers needed to plan and teach their classes effectively to promote the learning of all learners. The Ministry of Education Science and Technology (2013) indicated that there were 90,089 learners with Special Needs Education in Malawian schools. This figure almost doubled from 43,532 learners since the establishment of

the Department of Special Needs Education in the Ministry of Education in 2005 (Naira, 2015). Suka (2006) pointed out that the previous teacher training institutions did not include the aspects of special needs education and inclusive education in the teacher training programmes. This was an indication that some teachers serving in regular primary schools were not equipped with skills and knowledge to meet the needs of diverse learners in their inclusive classrooms.

Some Conditions for Successful Inclusion

In order for inclusion to be successful, a number of conditions need to be met. Staff development needs to take place to prepare staff to support the learners, and good working relationships need to be established with the special educators in the school (Muijs & Reynolds, 2011). The diverse learning characteristics displayed by learners in schools makes it necessary for teachers to use a wide variety of strategies in their classes (Bender, 2012) and differentiate instruction (Cox, 2008). Teachers need to have sound knowledge of instructional strategies to use to address the needs of all learners in their classrooms. In addition to this, teachers must plan their instruction to respond to learners of varying needs by adjusting what to teach and how to teach it (Tomlinson, 2003). Researchers have emphasised the role of instructional adaptation in inclusive settings as an indispensable means for accommodating the needs of learners with disabilities (Friend & Bursuck, 2002; Mastropieri & Scruggs, 2000; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development-OECD, 1995; Salend, 2001; Tomlinson, 1995).

However, in many studies, it appears that inclusion is attempted without providing adequate and appropriate professional development, a state which may be very disadvantageous to those learners who are included (McLeskey & Waldron, 2002). Furthermore, many general education classroom teachers do not feel they have adequate knowledge or skills to plan appropriately for or instruct students with learning disabilities (Kosko & Wilkins, 2009; Schumm, Vaughn & Gordon, 1994; Zulu, 2014). Individualised instruction typically does not occur in the general education classroom (Chisamba 2014; Ford, 2013; Peterson, 2011) and many teachers make few or no adaptations for learners with special education needs (Kuyini & Desai, 2014; Mabena, 2011; Peterson, 2011). This means that teachers need to have wide knowledge and skills on how to plan

and instruct all learners including those with special education needs.

Makoko and Chimutu, (2007) and Chavuta et al. (2008) revealed that regular schools in Malawi lack trained teachers in special education and inclusive education. Montfort Special Needs Education College in Chiradzulu is the only institution that train specialist teachers for learners with visual impairments (VI), hearing impairments (HI) and learning difficulties (LD) at primary school levels. However, the number of teachers trained is not sufficient to cater for all primary schools in Malawi.

Teacher Preparation for Inclusion

According to Jung (2007), college courses prepare future teachers for positive attitudes towards students with disabilities and appropriate teaching skills. Different scholars identified the issue of training, or lack thereof, as a hindrance to inclusive classrooms. Roberts and Teigland (2008) state that training of both special and general education teachers needs to be ongoing and individualized for the unique needs of specific students in classrooms. Causton, Theoharis and Trezek (2008) identified the need to provide explicit training to teachers and staff to build the capacity for supporting all students in inclusive settings. It was proposed that the training must also include ways to differentiate instruction and learn collaboration techniques. Wilkins (2009) reported that general education teachers were relatively confident in adapting their instruction to students with disabilities during the training. Along with this, there was a positive correlation between the amount of professional development the participants received and their views on their ability to adapt instruction. Kosko and Wilkins (2009) concluded that training had provided an impact on perceived ability of adapting instruction, and the more training one received the greater the impact it may have on their confidence to teach students with disabilities.

This proved that professional training is very important for preparing teachers to be positive and confident towards all learners including students with disabilities and to develop skills in instructional adaptation to meet these students' needs. Austin (2001) states that the inclusion model seems to be gaining more acceptance and teacher education programs need to provide the training and supports to prepare teachers to serve in inclusive classrooms. Both general and special educators feel that knowledge barriers exist in inclusive classrooms whereas a number of general educators do not feel equipped to meet the diverse learning needs of all learners.

Judith (2005) defined a classroom as a community of learners each with unique learning preferences, interests, strengths, needs, and potential. Planning instruction that acknowledges and honours these differences means providing each learner with opportunities to learn in different ways so that each can reach his or her potential (Judith, 2005). It means thoughtfully selecting learning and teaching strategies, materials, and supports that will maximise learner achievement. Student learning profiles offer a starting point for instructional planning (Judith, 2005). Research supports the idea that when teachers incorporate various levels of instruction for many different students into unit or lesson planning, students can work toward individual objectives within the context of large group instruction (Christopher & Elizabeth, 2012).

Theoretical Framework

This study was guided by Tomlinson's differentiation model of instruction. Tomlinson's model of differentiation instruction is grounded in the educational theory and research, which advocates for responsive teaching that attends to students' variance in readiness, interests, and learning profiles (Tomlinson & Allan, 2000). Differentiated instruction entails the planning of curriculum and instruction using strategies that address student strengths, interests, skills, and readiness in flexible learning environments (Gartin, Murdick, Imbeau & Perner, 2002). This differentiation instruction model is based on the premise that all learners are different in terms of readiness, interests, and learning profiles (Tomlinson, 2003). Therefore, learning requires a connection of a student's own abilities and interests, and lesson planning requires providing learners with the type of instruction that can address their needs and the educational objectives simultaneously.

Preparation of various levels of instruction is one of the tenets of the differentiated instruction model in order to cater for the abilities of every learner in the inclusive classroom. Gardner (1999) asserts the importance for teachers to take students' types of intelligence into account when planning instruction and teach in a way that attends to all types of intelligences, to ensure that each student is able to learn in a way that capitalizes on his or her strengths. However,

studies by Vaughn and Schumm (2004) reveal that many teachers report that time for planning activities for both mainstream and general education teachers is virtually non-existent.

In Malawi, the challenges faced by primary school teachers in planning instruction strategies are not known and this poses a challenge in designing remedial plans aimed at improving planning and delivery of instruction strategies in an inclusive classroom. It is, therefore, against this background that this study was conducted to explore the challenges faced by regular primary school teachers in planning instructional strategies for inclusive classrooms. The purpose of this study was to explore the challenges faced by regular primary school teachers in planning instructional strategies for inclusive classrooms. The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the challenges faced by teachers in planning their instructional strategies?
2. How do teachers address the challenges they face when planning their instructional strategies?

Method

Research Design

Based on interpretative paradigm, the study adopted a qualitative case study design because the intent was to search for in-depth information on what instructional strategies regular primary school teachers used in inclusive classrooms. The study used semi-structured interviews with regular primary school teachers, focus group discussions with learners, and lesson observation to collect data.

Sampling

Purposive sampling was used to select the participants and the study site. The primary consideration in purposive sampling is the judgement of the researcher as to who can provide the best information to achieve the objectives of the study (Kumar, 2011). The size of the sample was 19 regular primary school teachers and 16 primary school learners. The study was conducted at two inclusive primary schools in Lilongwe Urban district between January and February in 2016. The researcher purposefully selected two inclusive primary schools which had a resource centre attached to them.

Trustworthiness in this study was achieved through piloting of the data generation tools, use of various data generation methods, and use of two sites of study. Ethical considerations such as informed consent, the right to withdraw from the study, anonymity, and confidentiality (Kumar, 2011) were also considered during data collection and analysis. In terms of informed consent, letters seeking permission from relevant authorities and schools secured the consent of gate-keepers. The participants were also told of their right to withdraw from the study whenever they felt like. Furthermore, the participants were assured that all data collected would be treated with strict confidentiality and that their anonymity and privacy would be protected.

Data Analysis

Thematic data analysis was done following seven steps as proposed by Braun and Clarke (2013). Phase 1 involved familiarisation with the data. Thus the researcher read and re-read the transcribed data. This process assisted in identifying patterns that were emerging from the data. The developing patterns were marked for possible coding. Similar ideas from the responses were categorized under the same research questions. Phase 2 involved generating initial codes from the data into meaningful categories (Tuckett (2005) as cited in Braun & Clarke, 2006). Coding was done manually as suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006). This exercise was aimed at identifying repeated forms that would translate into themes. Repeated forms were highlighted by a coloured pencil and were later coded by writing short notes against them and grouping them. In Phase 3, the researcher searched for possible themes. Similar codes were translated into possible themes. This activity involved sorting the codes into potential themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Themes were derived basing on the frequency in which they came up from the transcripts. From this process superordinate (main) and subordinate (sub) themes were developed.

Phase 4 involved reviewing and refining themes that were developed. A few themes were discarded because they did not cohere to the pattern. Instead, the themes that reflected ideas in the transcriptions were refined to produce a clear and true reflection. This was done by testing them if they showed a relationship to the data set. Naming and defining the themes were done in Phase 5. This was based on establishing what each

theme meant and captured. In other words, defining and naming of the themes depended on what the themes were communicating from the data in connection to the research questions. Finally, Phase 6 involved producing a report through a write-up. The write-up contained an analytical account of the data through the themes. The analytical narrative was presented according to the main research question. A template or framework was created in which superordinate and subordinate themes were recorded based on the research questions. The framework was useful in categorizing the themes in accordance with their relevance to the research questions. This process assisted in interpreting the perceptions and experiences of participants in inclusive education. The frequency or recurrence of the themes informed the process of interpreting the viewpoints of the participants with regard to the challenges faced by regular primary school teachers in planning instructional strategies for inclusive classrooms.

Demographic Data of Participants

According to the data shown on Table 1, the majority of regular primary school teachers who participated were females representing 73.7%. The general teaching experience of the participants ranged from a minimum of one year to a maximum of 30 years with an average of 19 years. According to Figure 1, most of the teachers had experience of not more than 10 years, teaching in inclusive classrooms. This information revealed that most of the teachers who took part in this study had acquired some professional experience in the teaching of inclusive classrooms. Therefore, the teachers who had teaching experience were at a better position to handle the issues of inclusion.

Results and Discussion

Challenges Teachers Face in Planning Their Instructional Strategies

In response to the challenges the teachers faced when planning for their instructional strategies, several challenges emanated. These are described next.

Lack of Knowledge and Skills. The findings from the interviews with teachers showed that teachers lacked knowledge about using some instructional strategies. One teacher from school B stated that she did not know how to adjust content

for learners with special education needs. Another teacher who was a specialist from school A elaborated by stating that:

> *Our special training is divided into three categories: hearing impairment, learning difficulties, and visual impairment, but when we go into inclusive classes, we meet all types of learners. For example, in my class, I had a learner with HI but I specialised in LD hence to communicate with the learner is a challenge because I don't know sign language.*

This explanation was evidenced during lesson observation when the learner with hearing impairment in that class was not fully involved in the lesson due to the teacher's lack of knowledge on how to instruct her. Some teachers from school B stated that they did not have knowledge on how to use some teaching and learning resources indicated in teacher's guides such as feathers, mirrors, raised diagrams, and sign language interpreters. Another teacher stated that she did not know how to communicate with the learner who had speech problems. This teacher from school B stated:

> *Sometimes I fail to get what he says and even what he writes, sometimes I fail to see properly what he writes.*

Some teachers stated that they do not know how to handle large classes with learners having SEN. For instance, one teacher from school B stated:

> *I don't have adequate skills on how best I can use group work and involve learners in an inclusive setting.*

This was evidenced through lesson observations whereby learners were making a lot of noise and playing during group discussions. Other teachers stated that although they had taught in inclusive classrooms for long, they did not have adequate skills in all the strategies for meeting needs of all learners especially those with special education needs. Another teacher stated that she did not know how to teach mobile and moody learners with learning disabilities. This was evidenced during lesson observation when such learners were too mobile to control. The teacher was just observing the learner moving in and out of the

Table 1

Demographic Data for General Teaching Experience of Teachers by Gender

Years of experience	Number of teachers		
	Male	Female	Total
0-5years			1
6-10 years			2
11-15 years			2
16- 20 years			6
21-30 years			8
Total	5	14	19
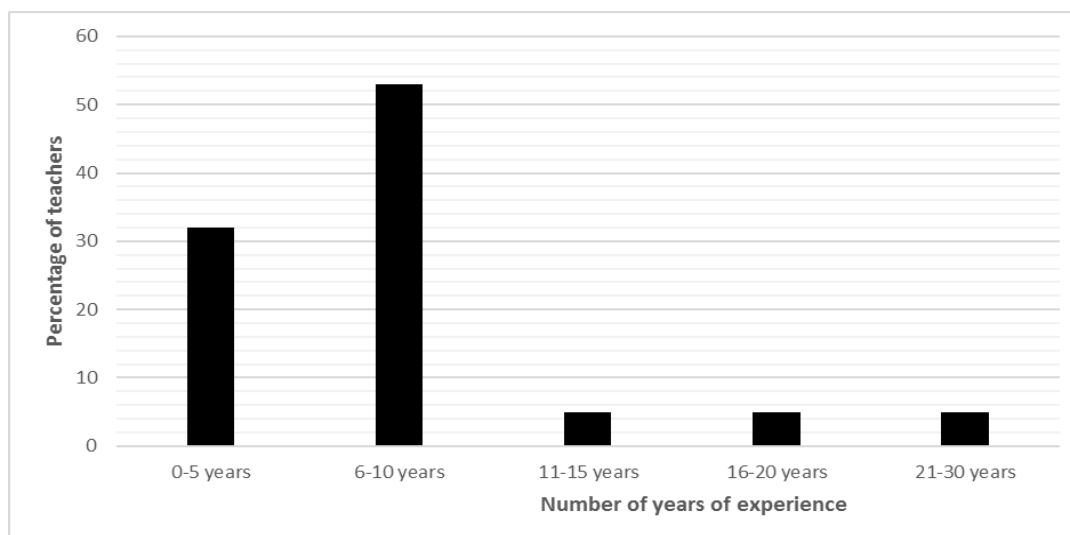
Figure 1. Demographic Data of Teachers by Teaching Experience in Inclusive Classrooms (n=19)

class. Some learners were busy paying attention to what these learners with learning disabilities were doing instead of paying attention to the lesson.

Peters (2003) contends that teaching learners with special education needs in inclusive classroom is not easy; it is a challenge since teaching needs to be more specific in meeting the needs of each student. Teachers must be both competent and confident in their teaching abilities (National Council for Special Needs-NCSE, 2010). Lack of knowledge of teaching in inclusive classrooms was one of the challenges that teachers faced when planning and using different instructional strategies. This finding resonates with Florian and Rouse (2010) who argue that most mainstream teachers in developing countries, such as Botswana, do not believe that they have

the skills or knowledge to teach learners with learning disabilities because they have not taken a specialist course. Fakudze (2012) revealed that a majority of the interviewed teachers in South Africa had not been trained in inclusive education whilst undergoing their initial teacher training. This explained their lack of clear and precise knowledge and understanding of inclusive education.

Studies done in Temeke, in Tanzania proved that teachers did not have enough knowledge of teaching in inclusive classrooms (Lewis & Little, 2007; Miles, 2003; Mmbaga, 2002). However, lack of knowledge among teachers seems to be a global problem, since the study done in Turkey and Spain, also showed lack of knowledge among teachers who were teaching students with visual

impairments (Kesiktas & Akcamete, 2011). Inclusive education does not merely mean put learners in schools, it involves making appropriate adjustments to teaching strategies to meet the needs of all learners. Hence, teachers need to have adequate knowledge and skills on planning and adaptation of instructional strategies to meet the needs of all learners in inclusive classrooms.

Inadequate Teaching and Learning Materials and Large Classes. Learners learn differently, some learn by feeling, touching, and smelling while others learn by hearing seeing or doing. Teachers need to use differentiated teaching and learning resources in order to meet needs of all students. However, during the interviews with teachers, the findings showed that most teachers in both schools under study lacked resources to use the instructional strategies appropriately. Almost all the teachers stated that they lacked resources for both learners with special education needs and those without.

The findings of this study also revealed lack of material resources and large classes as challenges regular teachers faced when planning and using instruction. This finding of lack of material resources and large classes in in agreement with the findings of Eloff and Kgwete (2007) who revealed that South African teachers noted that large classes and insufficient resources were challenges to inclusive education. The findings are also consistent with Dart (2007) in Botswana who concluded that the implementation of inclusive education for children with disabilities was hampered by a lack of resources. In Zimbabwe, the shortage of resources has also been found as an impediment to the implementation of inclusive education for children with special education needs (Chireshe, 2011; Mavundukure & Nyamande, 2012; Musengi & Chireshe, 2012).

Adequate provision of resources for the inclusion of children with special education needs in the regular primary schools needs to be available for teachers to effectively meet the needs of all learners. The finding of large classes is also affirmed by the findings of a study in Lesotho that revealed that large class sizes tended to take a toll on the social and intellectual growth of learners with and without disabilities (Johnstone & Chapman, 2009). At school B the class sizes were large, for example, all the classes observed had at least 100 learners; hence, teacher interactions with learners was limited. Large class sizes also were thought to diminish the adaptation of learning materials, use of differentiated instructions, and peer-assisted learning.

Large Classes. Another common challenge mentioned by the teachers was large classes. Most teachers in both schools explained that large classes hindered them from adequately assisting learners with special education needs within the allocated teaching period. Other teachers stated that because of large classes, monitoring of learners' activities was a problem. Therefore, another teacher said that since most learners are not supervised, class management in terms of noise was a problem.

Time for Planning. Some teachers mentioned time as a challenge when planning instructional strategies. One teacher explained that the English subject had a number of activities to be covered in one lesson; hence, time was not enough to teach everything. Thirty seven percent of the teachers stated that it took time to assist learners with special education needs during teaching and learning. Hence, failure to finish teaching the planned work. Planning time was also another challenge mentioned by some of the teachers. For example, one teacher from school A stated:

> _I teach up to 3pm, thereafter start preparing for next day's work. But the problem is that I am always tired during this time hence fail to plan properly._

Lack of time for planning and assisting learners with SEN in inclusive classrooms in this study is consistent with other researchers (Gwala, 2006; Eloff & Kgwete, 2007) in South Africa who concluded that teachers were frustrated by the unavailability of time for planning together with other teachers such as specialists. Mukhopadhyay, Nenty and Abosi (2012) concluded that teachers involved in inclusive education felt that there was insufficient time available for collaboration and consultation with other teachers to meet the needs of learners with special education needs. They believe that learners with special education needs could not receive quality support from their teachers because there was no time for teachers to sit down as a team to design strategies that could best serve the needs of the learners. The lack of time compromised the implementation of inclusive education for children with special education needs in schools. Teachers were likely to have limited time to deal with the challenges of learners with special education needs as they would have to complete the syllabus with other learners in the same class. The shortage of time for planning in this study was likely to have a serious implication for learners with special

education needs in the classrooms. The implication here is that learners' needs were compromised and they could not be identified or supported because teachers did not have the time to design their support programmes.

The findings of this study also revealed that teachers did not plan together with specialist teachers in terms of adjustments of content and other instructional strategies. This finding is in line with Spungin (2002) who also found that teachers with knowledge of learners with special education needs were the ones who taught the students effectively in inclusive classrooms. Similarly, Lypsky and Gartner (1997) contend that collaboration is important because one teacher cannot have all the skills and competences needed to meet the diverse needs of all students in an inclusive classroom.

Conclusion

Teaching in an inclusive classroom where teachers have to meet needs of all learners can be difficult. This study sought to explore instructional strategies regular primary school teachers used in inclusive classrooms in Lilongwe Urban district, Malawi. Most teachers claimed to lack knowledge and skills in the use of appropriate methods in inclusive classrooms, which may imply that the needs of a majority of learners with special education needs in inclusive classrooms were not met.

Inadequate teaching and learning resources and inadequate time for planning and assisting learners with special education needs compromised the learning of students with special needs. Large classes were also some of the constraints faced by the regular primary school teachers in this study. Furthermore, it was observed that some regular primary school teachers did not make necessary adjustments in order to meet needs of all learners during the teaching and learning process.

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