

# Malawi's special needs education (SNE): perspectives and comparisons of practice and progress

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**The sub-Saharan country of Malawi is steeped in a robust educational reform movement to ensure 'Education for All'. Based upon country immersion experience and a review of the literature, this report highlights Malawi's nationwide support for its special needs education (SNE) campaign. First discussed is a brief overview of Malawi, its people and its educational philosophy regarding SNE. Comparisons of sub-Saharan countries' educational provisions for students with special learning needs follow, as do explanations of the country's classroom practices and its national SNE Policy (revised in 2007). Described along with 'best practices' and the country's history of SNE teacher preparation initiatives is the structure of Malawi's SNE implementation, its design in the classroom, teacher preparation particulars and SNE programme milestones. Partners (organisations), integral to the success of Malawi's SNE efforts, are emphasised; and related policies and provisions are presented, along with closing discussion of assessment, diagnosis, programming, and future implications and conclusions.**

## Introduction

Malawi, known as the 'Warm Heart of Africa', is a country located in the sub-Saharan region of the continent and bordered by the countries of Zambia, Tanzania and Mozambique. With a population of over 13 million people, the country is known widely for its valiant efforts to overcome tremendous life-impacting and societal odds, namely those of acute problems related to poverty, illness and economic hardship (Ministry of Education (MoE) & United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), 2004; United Nations Department of Public Information, 2007). Observers from Western countries who familiarise themselves with Malawian cultural practices can appreciate that amidst the country's vast populous urban and rural establishments, caring ecosystems of families demonstrate keen sensitivity to their relationships and to the complex needs of community friends and families. Such compassion for their fellow man

exceeds what would perhaps be expected of a country engaged in relentless competition and drive, an established way of life for Malawians (Fox & Liebenenthal, 2006; Nkowan, 2006). The people survive and prosper in this very populated region of Africa, an ever-changing, developing democratic republic.

## Special needs education (SNE): an overview

Expressed concern for one another and their futures not only represents the general character of the Malawian people, but also provides an instructive backdrop to understanding the country's recent educational reform movement's focus on learners. Special needs education (SNE) initiatives in Malawi are achieving commendable strides in the country's pursuit to build a stronger, better educated and economically sustainable republic (Fox & Liebenenthal, 2006; Malawian Government, 2006; Ministry of Education (MoE), 2004b, 2005c; MoE & UNESCO, 2004; Republic of Malawi Government, 2003).

Students with special educational needs (SEN) include those learners, or students, with disabilities or special needs, whose access to academic accommodations is vital to their success in school. Malawi's Ministry of Education (MoE) identifies learners with SEN as those with sensory impairment (vision, hearing, deaf-blind); cognitive difficulties (intellectual, specific disabilities and gifted/talented); socio-emotional, and behavioural difficulties (autism, hyperactivity and other vulnerable children); and physical and health impairments (spina bifida, hydrocephalus, asthma and epilepsy). SNE is the educational/academic delivery system that focuses primarily on enabling students with SEN to learn in the modified environment and/or to learn with individualised accommodations for the diagnosed disability. The Malawi Government's MoE (Science and Technology, also) is chiefly responsible for overseeing policy implementation and the mainstreaming of SNE issues, providing technical, vocational and entrepreneurial services, and delivering SNE assistance at all educational levels (MoE, 2007).

Emerging from its conceptual origins, worldwide, SNE has expanded from the basic idea of teaching individuals with

disabilities critical ‘life skills’ to the current quest that seeks to provide the most appropriate and specialised, individual educational support. Appropriate accommodations and modifications, along with focused interventions, enable students to access and achieve individualised objectives. Various types of SNE support have ranged from those implemented in home-based placements to special schools for students with disabilities to resource rooms to inclusive practices that allow diverse learners to participate together in the general education (or ‘normal’) classroom (Hallahan & Kauffman, 2005; Kirk and Gallagher, 2000; Kopetz, 2003).

The Malawian Government’s commitment to SNE, announced via international declarations and national policies that aim to provide equal educational opportunities to all students, including those with special needs, has been a major catalyst in the country’s educational reform movement. Included among the tenets of the 2005 Malawi Growth and Development Strategy (MGDS) – strategies for economic empowerment, social protection, education and transport – is nationwide support for SNE (Department for International Development, 2007). Progress markers and milestones reached showcase and help define the current status of SNE in Malawi that offers insight into the country’s progress to ensure that individuals with special needs are aptly accommodated, from the primary school levels throughout their formal, educational experience (MoE, 2001, 2004b, 2005b, 2007; MoE & UNESCO, 2004; Republic of Malawi Government, 2003).

**Sub-Saharan Africa’s strife to ensure SNE**

The United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 1995) and Zindi (1997) claimed

that, contrary to the actual initiation, facilitation and follow-through of SNE strategies that assist students with disabilities, most African governments have demonstrated only *theoretical interest* in the education of learners with special needs (UNESCO, 1995; Zindi, 1997). With finances stretched, fledgling governments work to achieve programmes towards achieving universal education for school-age children, while recognising the existence of additional considerations, yet to be met, in order to meet needs of their students with disabilities. Recently, for example, while financial aid to sub-Saharan Africa has increased since the millennium, outside investments to these countries have remained unchanged, overall, since 2004 (when excluding debt relief and humanitarian assistance) (United Nations Department of Public Information, 2007).

The Republic of Malawi is dedicating attention to the design and implementation of rigorous policies that are intended to ensure and focus on achieving ‘Education for All’ (six goals that emphasise equitable access to quality education by all students). Further, the country’s National Policy on Equalisation of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities supports access to education and vocational training, without discrimination, for all students (MoE, 2004b, 2005a, 2007; Nkowane, 2006).

**A comparative study of neighbouring countries’ SNE initiatives**

Figure 1 highlights SNE initiatives implemented in Zambia, Tanzania and Malawi. Such information demonstrates the three nations’ critical need to train more SNE teachers, to accept into their schools more students with special needs, to provide greater funding that will ensure valid

**Figure 1: Comparison of special needs education (SNE) initiatives in sub-Saharan African countries: Zambia, Tanzania and Malawi**

|                                     | Zambia   | Tanzania   | Malawi   |
|-------------------------------------|--|--|--|
| SNE legislation policies            | Persons with Disability Act 1996<br>Education for All 1994 | National Policy on Disability 2004<br>Education for All 1994 | SNE Policy 2007<br>National Policy on Equalisation/ Disability 2004<br>Education for All 1994            |
| Types of SNE                        | Residential/special mainstreamed/integrated                | Integrated with minimal SNE<br>0.2% primary school enrolment | Residential/special mainstreamed/inclusive resource rooms  |
| SNE financial support               | Minimal  | Lack of funding  | Inadequate, with Plans + commitments to increase   |
| Teacher training                    | Zambia Institute of Special Education                      | Patandi Teacher’s College                                    | Montfort Teachers Training College (TTC)<br>All TTCs to incorporate SNE<br>In progress: Institute of SNE |
| Interagency collaboration           | Minimal  | None   | Minimal  |
| SNE integration in school curricula | Teachers adapt basic <i>General Education Curriculum</i>   | None   | Teachers adapt basic <i>General Education Curriculum</i> , advised by new primary school curriculum      |

Sources: Chavuta, 2005; Finland Government, 2006; Nkowane, 2006; Manchishi, 2004; MoE, 2004c; MoE, 2007; Kanyanta, 2003; Ojala, 2003; Republic of Tanzania, 2006; UNESCO, 2004.

implementation of their SNE legislative policies, to encourage interagency collaboration and to develop SNE integration in their school curricula.

The comparisons of SNE initiatives identify the countries' established attention to addressing equitable education standards (respectively) that meet students' individual learning differences. Resourceful enactments and pursuits of policy formulation and strategy developments express their efforts to achieve equity in educating *all* students, especially their populations of unique learners who require necessary, specialised instructional considerations. Because of each country's scant financial resources, prudent administration of SNE funding is critical. Government revenues and subsidies provided by faith-based or other non-governmental organizations (NGOs) support essential, key instructional applications and advancements (Department for International Development, DFID, 2007; MoE & UNESCO, 2004; Nkowan, 2006; United Nations Department of Public Information, 2007; UNESCO, 1995).

Malawi demonstrates considerable promise in such endeavours. Through its established initiatives and momentum, the country is moving forward, expanding its SNE philosophy to incorporate greater opportunities for students with exceptional needs and their access to special education and related services. Further, related to Figure 1 comparisons among neighbouring sub-Saharan African countries, Malawi's government declares firm provisions that stipulate SNE directives for implementation.

### **Malawi's Special Needs Education Policy revised in 2007**

Especially stated in its Special Needs Education Policy, revised in 2007, are the eight major components that include early identification assessment and intervention; advocacy; care and support; management, planning, and financing; access; quality; equity; and relevance. Each component is explained with policy statements and strategies that ensure its effective implementation. Recognising implementation challenges that include financial constraints, physical environmental considerations, limited capacity to train specialised personnel, designing disability-appropriate curricula, rigid administrative/supervisory divisional structures, and attitudinal barriers, the Policy announces achievable objectives, as follows:

- 1) Provide the education and training to learners with special needs
- 2) Ensure for all learners with special needs equitable access
- 3) Provide educational facilities with needed supportive provisions
- 4) Ensure accommodating learning environments for all learners with special needs
- 5) Increase provisions of SNE services by all education stakeholders
- 6) Improve co-ordination and networking among school and related personnel
- 7) Enforce adherence to standards and ethical practices in providing SNE services (MoE, 2007)

### **'Best practices' in SNE**

Ideally, the optimal classroom instruction procedures, or 'best practices', in SNE allow for effective delivery of specialised curricula and interventions for individuals with disabilities amidst a classroom setting that is least restrictive – that is, the educational support designed to specifically meet the unique needs of the individuals with disabilities is provided – and, at best, occurs in the typical classroom setting among non-disabled peers. Such individualised SNE services can vary, and for greatest effectiveness may include

- changes in the physical learning environment in which SNE services are delivered
- modifications of the curriculum content that meet the needs of children who perform markedly below and/or above classroom peers
- adaptations in teaching strategies to ensure students' mastery of skills and their meeting grade-level standards
- the use of assistive technology devices to help with communication and mastery of necessary knowledge and skills (Kirk & Gallagher, 2000; Kopetz, 2003; Kopetz, Lease & Warren-Kring, 2006; MoE, 2004a; MoE & UNESCO, 2004; Republic of Malawi Government, 1997).

### **Historical perspectives of SNE teacher preparation**

Past accounts of Malawi's SNE programmes chronicle efforts of educational provisions that primarily focused on meeting obvious needs of students with sensory barriers, such as visual and/or hearing impairments. For example, early missionaries in Malawi (circa late 1800s) were the first educators to initially provide such SNE support. By the 1950s, special schools were built in Malawi for the purpose of promoting independent life skills for such students. Individuals with visual impairments, specifically in the Malawian community of Linga, located in the Nkhotakota district, for example, learnt basket and mat weaving skills. In the years following, schools for students with visual impairments were opened in districts, such as the Lulwe area in Nsanje and Chilanga area in Kasungu, Malawi. Eventually, two schools were built to specifically teach students with disabilities in basic literacy skills, such as reading, writing and arithmetic (MoE, 2004c; Republic of Malawi Government, 2004). In later years, special schools for students with visual and/or hearing impairments, along with students with other categories of disability, changed their curricular emphasis to the teaching of life skills preparing them to attain academic standards established by the country's national curriculum for all students (MoE, 2001, 2004b, 2004c, 2005b, 2005c; MoE & UNESCO, 2004).

It was in 1968 that Malawi's Catholic Brothers of Immaculate Conception opened in the Chiradzulu district its first post-secondary (tertiary) teacher preparation college – Montfort Teachers Training College – to develop SNE teachers, providing training limited to that of assisting only students with visual and/or hearing impairments. By 1996, Malawi's progressive momentum had eventually boosted its

preparation of teachers in SNE instruction, with its adoption of the United Nations Development 5th Country Programme entitled ‘Children with Learning Difficulties’ (Montfort Teachers Training College, 2005). Such preparation skills offered in this programme equipped teachers with skills to assist learners with more extensive, varied and complex barriers to learning. In Malawi today, SNE focuses its goals to support individuals with different types of exceptional needs based upon educational programming that assists students diagnosed with learning differences that include

- Cognitive difficulties
- Sensory impairments
- Socio-emotional and behavioural disorders
- Physical and health impairments (MoE, 2007; Republic of Malawi Government, 2004)

**The structure of Malawi’s SNE**

From the earliest stages of SNE, when the government of Malawi started to provide the specific funding for SNE instruction and related services, the Department of Basic Education at the ministry level included SNE teachers. Later, a separate division, or unit, was established to represent SNE teachers at the ministry level. Currently, the SNE Department operates with a director of SNE and three principal officers at the ministry headquarters level. As an illustration of Malawi’s SNE administrative and teaching design, Figure 2 presents an organised diagram of the country’s established education personnel structure and arrangement.

**SNE in Malawi’s classrooms**

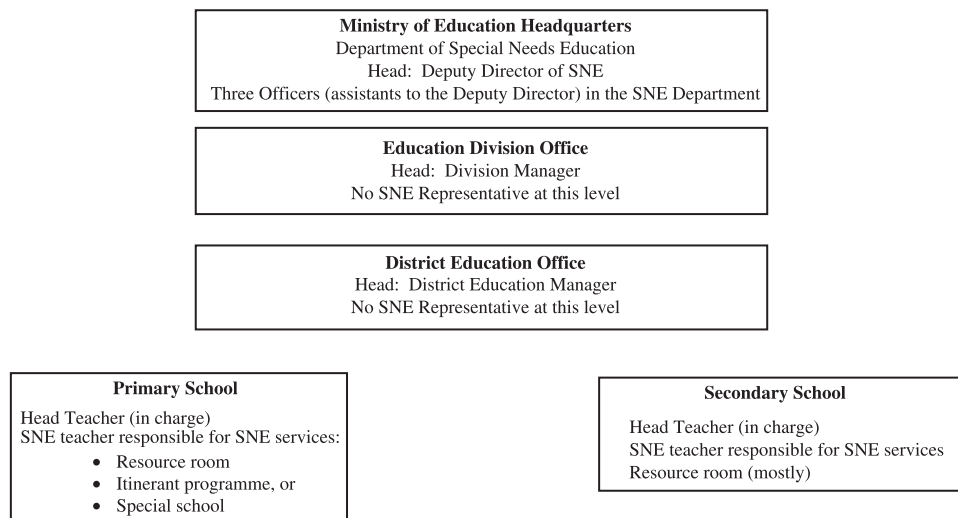
The authors learned, when meeting with teachers in schools in Malawi for this study and reported findings, that in the teachers’ professional judgments, to achieve the greatest impact and efficiency of classes in SNE resource rooms,

each class should be limited to assisting no more than 20 children per school placement. Malawi’s government forecasts a reduction in the student–teacher ratio in SNE classrooms from the current and typical student to teacher ratio of 20:1 to 5:1 by the year 2015. Although some children are evaluated as needing to repeat a class level, it is observed that learners with either visual or hearing impairments typically perform well in their academic endeavours, once adjusted to modifications provided to accommodate their disability (MoE, 2005b; Republic of Malawi Government, 2003).

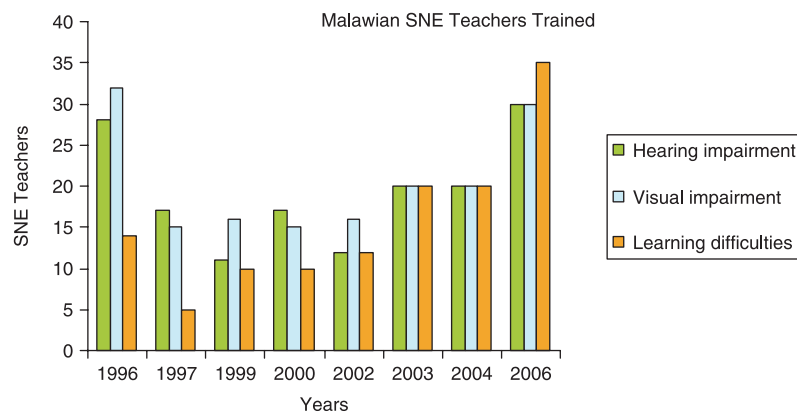
**SNE teacher preparation**

It is unfortunate that, at present, neither the University of Malawi nor Mzuzu University, the only two national universities that offer degrees in Education, offer specialised programmes for SNE. However, with the current Primary Curriculum Assessment and Review (PCAR) efforts that review, examine and critique primary school studies and instruction, Malawi’s national teacher training colleges (TTCs) are slated to begin offering SNE teacher preparation as part of its core curriculum for primary school general education teachers’ professional programmes of study (Department of Planning, 2008; MoE, 2004a; MoE & UNESCO, 2004). A current SNE report identified the nation’s achievement of increased enrolment of candidates in SNE teacher training programmes, and significant numbers of SNE students, themselves, enrolled into tertiary level programmes of study at universities and TTCs (MoE, 2008). In addition, Malawi’s 10-year education plan, established by the UK’s Department for International Development in 2007, establishes teacher preparation opportunities for professionals who work with students with special needs, continuous professional development of primary teachers and the design of instructional materials useful in curricula for children with special needs (DFID, 2007).

**Figure 2: The special needs education (SNE) structure from ministry level to the SNE teacher at primary and secondary school levels**



Source: Office of Ministry of Education, Government of Malawi (2006)

**Figure 3: Increases in graduated special needs education (SNE) teachers from Montfort Teachers Training College in Malawi**

Source: Montfort Teachers Training College, 2006 (no data available for 1998, 2001, and 2005).

As an example of Malawi's teacher-training efforts in SNE, educators who graduate from Montfort Teachers Training College (MTTC), located in the Chiradzulu district of Malawi, specialise in one of three areas of expertise:

- Learning difficulties (LD),
- Visual impairment (VI), or
- Hearing impairment (HI) (MoE, 2004c, 2007; Nkowani, 2006).

As was indicated in Figure 1, three modes of SNE services provide learners with special needs in Malawi's school districts:

- Residential special schools
- Resource rooms within typical schools, and
- Itinerant programmes, where SNE teachers travel to schools within the district or the school zone to provide SNE support services to students identified with disabilities.

The SNE teachers trained through the MTTC programme receive intense, specialised skills that prove helpful in assisting students with special learning needs in each of the three areas of specialisation, respectively: Learning difficulties (LD), visual impairments (VI), and/or hearing impairments (HI) (Montfort Teachers Training College, 2006).

MTTC teacher preparation in SNE, since 1996, is illustrated in Figure 3. The graph indicates the number of teachers graduated per year during the past decade, offering the successfully certified educators ample expertise to enable them to satisfy instructional requirements of specific student educational exceptionalities. It is interesting to note that, aside from high numbers of initial enrollees in 1996's display of 'programme start up zeal', the graph depicts increasingly larger numbers of graduates, representing greater interest in the field of SNE (Montfort Teachers Training College, 2006).

### Milestones in Malawi's SNE programmes

Since Malawi's government endorsed SNE in 1968, and the Catholic Brothers opened MTCC's SNE teacher preparation programme in 1996, the country's additional, progressive accomplishments – as a signatory nation to many such declarations – include many that commit to equitable access to quality education for all its people, regardless of (dis)ability:

- Special Needs Education Policy – (revised 2007)
- United Nations Stand Rules on Equalisation of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities (2007)
- Education for All (2004)
- Policy Investment Framework (2001)
- The South African Development Corporation (SADC) Protocol on Education (2001)
- The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education (1994)
- The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) (MoE, 2005c, 2007, 2008; Republic of Malawi Government, 2004; UNESCO, 1994).

Further, to illustrate the country's commitment to equal opportunity and access to education for all its people, Malawi's Parliament in 2004 enacted the National Policy on People with Disabilities, emphasising the need to ensure that essential services, like education, are made available for identified populations of individuals with disabilities (Republic of Malawi Government, 2004). The current Special Needs Education Policy, written by the Malawian Government's MoE, clearly articulates and establishes placement of SNE in *all* sectors of the country's educational system and offers comprehensive guidance to all who collaborate in providing SNE services by promoting equitable resource allocations necessary to meet the needs of learners with unique learning styles and behaviours (MoE, 2006, 2007).

### Partners helping to provide effective SNE

Malawi receives the help of missionary groups and NGOs that greatly help to complement its government's efforts to

support individuals with special needs in schools and related placements. Such ancillary assistance often provides financial support, technical reinforcement, equipment and supplies, and even specialised, intensive professional services such as physiotherapy, counselling, medical care and other essential services vital to individuals with disabilities. An exhaustive list of the 'partners' perennially includes, among many organisations, Every Child, Saint John of God, Sight Savers, Malawi Council for the Handicap, SOS Malawi, UNESCO, United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), United States Agency for International Development (USAID), DFID, World Health Organization (WHO), and the International Foundation for Education and Self-Help (IFESH) (MoE, 2006, 2007; MoE & UNESCO, 2004; United Nations Department of Public Information, 2007).

#### *Related policies and provisions that fuel Malawi's SNE efforts*

In addition to its policies and procedures ensuring SNE, the Malawian Government's 2004 PCAR is valued for its facilitating the translation of directives to actual practice in schools. For example, PCAR has ensured, and continues, to support a teacher-training curriculum that includes SNE as core knowledge for all the pre-service teachers studying basic classroom pedagogy. In addition to PCAR, a stringent curriculum review process provides general education teacher guides that offer strategies applicable to assisting learners with special needs. Along with the added assistance provided by a special handbook for the general education teachers – a source of practical accommodations and modifications for learners in the general education system who exhibit special learning needs – educators can ably design best practices that establish alternative methods of assessment as necessary (MoE, 2004a, 2005c).

#### **Discussion**

##### *Assessment, diagnosis and programming*

The practice of identifying students with learning difficulties includes an intense review of each child's past academic performance; recorded observations of the student's involvement and participation in the classroom and natural environments; personal interviews with the child, parents and other caregivers; as well as, referrals from teachers, other persons and/or organisations (social welfare, religious, medical, etc.). Unfortunately, at present in Malawian schools, no standardised, psycho-educational assessments for identifying specific learning difficulties are administered (MoE, 2001, 2004c, 2005c; Republic of Malawi Government, 1997).

As evidenced by the achievements in policy and curriculum reform, Malawi embraces the tenets of inclusive education, where possible. Legislative efforts and funding initiatives discussed demonstrate the country's intentions for improving the quality of SNE services in Malawi through policy formulation and curriculum review. The MTTC continues to train SNE teachers yearly. Zindi (1997) reported Malawi to be an example of a country that,

through its initial reliance on expatriate skills to establish and guide SNE programmes, faced an ultimate collapse, as the skilled expatriates returned home and abandoned the country. However, contrary to that negative speculation (refer to Figure 1, for example), SNE in Malawi is alive and well, and progressing (MoE, 2008; MoE & UNESCO, 2004).

#### *Future endeavours*

Plans are also being developed to establish Malawi's first Institute of Special Needs Education, further evidence of the country's impetus and progressive way forward to move beyond educational policy formulation. Institutes that feature such critically needed, specialised pedagogy as this SNE programme of professional study, not only greatly contribute to Malawi's tertiary (higher education) selections of inquiry and study, but serve to benefit a necessary commodity, the 'Education for All' – important to the country as a premiere national achievement. Providing access to quality educational opportunities for teachers of learners with special needs enables qualified educators to successfully contribute to improving the quality of life and self-reliance of all learners, especially those who require the individualised, special curriculum (MoE, 2004c, 2008; Republic of Malawi Government, 2004).

#### **Conclusion**

As estimates of individuals with disabilities vary from about 4% to 10% of the national population (no actual statistics exist, but are strongly desired), providing the most appropriate SNE for all learners with special needs presents great challenges to most educational systems. However, with contemporary, established and available specialised SNE programming to complement accurate psycho-educational evaluation data that identify students' disabilities, along with the promised establishment of Institutes of Special Needs Education and continued government legislation, Malawi's capacity to provide effective services to special populations of children nationwide will continue to gain momentum and readily achieve its goals (Loeb & Eide, 2004; MoE, 2005a; Nkowanji, 2006). Only through quality education for all will developing countries, like the Republic of Malawi, achieve the strong economic growth needed to alleviate poverty and encourage its sustainable development to become a thriving nation: the 'Heart of Africa'.

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