

PERCEPTIONS OF SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL PRACTICES IN MALAWI: VOICES FROM  
PRIMARY SCHOOLS AND COMMUNITIES

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## ABSTRACT

### PERCEPTIONS OF SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL PRACTICES IN MALAWI: VOICES FROM PRIMARY SCHOOLS AND COMMUNITIES

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This doctoral research work explores the quality of educational experiences and access to opportunities for girls with disabilities in selected rural primary schools in Malawi. The context for this study lies within four of the six goals contained within the World Declaration on Education for All doctrine, a document which lays out a framework for achieving more equality in education for girls and other disadvantaged children.

This study employs a qualitative approach to investigate the perceptions of teachers, parents and community members from six rural primary schools and their communities. Data was collected at each site through personal interviews, school visitations, observations and other artifacts. Special education teachers from neighboring Malawian primary schools assisted the researcher in collecting and interpreting data at each site. Traditionally marginalized groups, including parents or caregivers and teachers of students with disabilities, are given power and voice.

Narrative inquiry and portraiture were utilized to explore what types of teaching and learning activities girls with disabilities experience when they attend primary schools in Malawi. The analysis provides a snapshot of the conditions that existed for primary school girls with disabilities during the year 2005 in six primary schools, and the communities adjacent to these schools. Issues of gender equity and opportunities to learn were carefully examined.

The concluding chapter discusses emerging issues involving girls with disabilities in school learning communities including expectations, perceptions and gender equality and safety. Varying perspectives on the development of educational systems in Malawi are also shared. Although expectations for the education of girls with disabilities appear to be high, primary schools in Malawi seem to be at the beginning stages of implementing educational policy and practice within classrooms. Developing leadership capacity, social capital and other available resources to better educate all students remains a great challenge.

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# **CHAPTER 1**

## **INTRODUCTION**

October 1994 marked the beginning of a new educational era in Malawi. With the government declaration of Universal Primary Education (UPE), basic education at the primary school level became free—but not compulsory (Nyirenda, 2002, p. 7). Prior to mandating of UPE, net enrollment, estimated at 60% during 1993/94, was relatively low compared to other countries. Many factors contributed to low enrollment and variations across educational districts. These included parents' inability to pay school fees or buy school uniforms, long distances to school, cultural barriers, and lack of appreciation for a western type of education (Nyirenda, 2002, p. 7).

The introduction of free primary education in Malawi resulted in a massive increase in enrollment—more than 1.3 million children went to school, further stressing Malawi's already under-resourced education system. This led to increased grade repetition rates, low completion rates, and poor overall school quality ("Malawi Education Support Activity," 2005). Other problems that prevailed related to access, equity and internal efficiency. Specifically, problems associated with equity included low enrollment of girls, low participation of children with special needs and the marginalization of other children, specifically those with disabilities (Nyirenda, 2002, p. 7).

During the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century the education crisis appeared to worsen in sub-Saharan Africa. The alarmingly low adult illiteracy rates (30.3% for males and 46.8% for

females) added a sense of urgency to a need for educational reform. In Malawi, in year 2000, only 60% of males and 45% of females completed primary school (“GenderStats,” 2005). The percentage of students with disabilities who attend school was substantially lower still. In 2003, only four to six percent of students with disabilities attended schools in Malawi (Yambeni, 2003). It is important to note that more than 65% of Malawi’s population lives below the poverty line and, in 2000, Malawi was among the bottom 7% of countries on the United Nations’ Development Programme’s Human Poverty and Human Development indices (“Information by Country,” 2005).

Primary school enrollment can be correlated with improved family health and infant mortality, economic productivity, attitudes, women’s social status, not only at home, but also in the community and society at large (Floro & Wolf, 1990, p. 5). With over sixty percent of Malawi’s population under the age of fifteen, the need for a quality education for all primary school students could never be greater. The World Bank (2003) concurs that “all countries, no matter how far they are today from universal primary completion, must simultaneously invest in and promote the balanced development of all levels of their educational systems” (p. 20).

### Purpose of the Research Study

The researcher is interested in how local social interpretations and implications of gender equity and access policies affect primary school students with disabilities. These policies not only impact student learning but also have significant influence on the ways that teachers interpret and enact various policies into classroom practices within the routines of daily teaching and learning activities. Given the researcher’s background as an educator and world traveler, she

is particularly interested in exploring the implications of these policies within developing nations in sub-Saharan Africa.

This researcher is currently serving as an assistant principal in a middle school in an urban mid-Michigan school district. Approximately 30 % of the 582 member student body has been classified as having special needs. Prior to this administrative position, the researcher worked for several years as a special education teacher in Michigan and as a United States Peace Corps special education teacher trainer in the northern African country of Tunisia for two years. The researcher has also worked as an English teacher trainer in the People's Republic of China and traveled through a multitude of developing countries in Asia, Africa and South America.

Throughout all of these teaching and traveling experiences, the researcher developed a strong curiosity for approaches that societies take to educate students with disabilities, and the impact that culture and community perceptions of children with disabilities has on their education and development. Over the years the researcher has witnessed local interpretations of national and international educational policies at numerous sites. Most local adaptations of policies appeared to be well intentioned but were not adequately supported by resources, materials and competent teachers to be properly implemented. The researcher came across numerous children with disabilities who should have been receiving a 'quality' education, but only a small percentage of these children had means to make it to even attend the school building. In light of recent changes to the international educational policy for students with disabilities, and the researcher's growing curiosity about how children with disabilities are being

educated, the researcher embarked on designing and carrying out a unique investigation of the educational system in Malawi—a developing country in sub-Saharan Africa.

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore the educational plight of girls with disabilities in Malawian primary schools. Specifically, this study documents the types of learning experiences and access opportunities for girls with disabilities in several rural primary schools in Malawi. This study describes the classroom teaching and learning practices in these schools. The researcher expects that findings from this study will shed light and enable stakeholders to better understand the opinions and perceptions of teachers, parents and community members regarding educating girls with disabilities in these schools, and at national levels.

The Dakar Framework for Action (2004), derived from Education for All, specifically commits itself to the following six goals:

1. Expanding and improving comprehensive early childhood care and education, especially for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children;
2. Ensuring that by 2015 all children, particularly girls, children in difficult circumstances and those belonging to ethnic minorities, have access to completely free and compulsory primary education of good quality;
3. Ensuring that the learning needs of all young people and adults are met through equitable access to appropriate learning and life skills programs;
4. Achieving a 50 percent improvement in levels of adult literacy by 2015, especially for women, and equitable access to basic and continuing education for all adults;

5. Eliminating gender disparities in primary and secondary education by 2005, and achieving gender equality in education by 2015, with a focus on ensuring girls' full and equal access to and achievement in basic education of good quality;
6. Improving all aspects of the quality of education and ensuring excellence of all so that recognized and measurable learning outcomes are achieved by all, especially in literacy, numeracy and essential life skills.

The context for this study lies within four of these six goals contained within the World Declaration on Education for All doctrine ("Dakar Framework for Action," 2004). Goals i, ii, iii, and v contain explicit language to gain more equality in education for girls and other disadvantaged children. These goals seek to address the educational plight of girls as well as children with disabilities.

The Education for All (EFA) 2000 assessment further highlights sub-Saharan Africa as one of the areas of greatest challenge for Education for All ("Dakar Framework for Action," 2004). Poverty, HIV/AIDS, child labor, lack of resources, and economic constraints, are but a few of the complex issues that challenge educational systems in Malawi. In addition to the learning experiences and perceptions of teachers, parents and community members, this study pays attention to the above issues within the contexts and lives of individuals involved with the education of girls with disabilities.

## Statement of the Problem

When this study was designed in 2005, the education crisis appeared to be at its worst in sub-Saharan Africa. With an adult illiteracy rate of 30.3% for males and 46.8% for females, a need for change in the educational system was clearly evident. In Malawi, in the year 2000, only 60% of males and 45% of females completed primary school (“GenderStats,” 2005). The percentage of students with disabilities attending school was even lower. In 2003, only four to six percent of students with disabilities attended schools in Malawi (Yambeni, 2003). It is important to note that more than 65% of the Malawian population lived below the poverty line and, in the year 2000, Malawi was among the bottom 7% countries on the United Nations’ Development Programme’s Human Poverty and Human Development scale (“Information by Country,” 2005).

## Need and Significance of the Study

This exploratory research may be one of the first of its kind in documenting and describing the health and economic conditions, as well as the educational experiences and opportunities for girls with disabilities in rural primary schools in Malawi. Although many educational policies and programs exist in Malawi, very few have documented effects and evidence from the correlating practices. Without accurate knowledge of current practices, economic conditions and institutional supports, it is not possible to have an impact on the education of girls with disabilities.

Even from preliminary data gathered by the researcher in Malawi, it became clear that policy makers and organizational leaders were very interested in learning about the impact of current classroom practices on teaching and learning for individuals with disabilities. They wanted to know how individuals in classrooms and communities were responding to educational innovation and how they could be more supportive of teachers and students. This study seeks to provide a basis from which future research and policies can be drawn.

Prior to 2005, only very limited amounts of literature existed on the issues of gender, disability, access and equity in sub-Saharan Africa. This challenge motivated the researcher to spend time in Malawi assessing current conditions for herself. The researcher collected preliminary data during a pilot study. The researcher followed the pilot study with a nine-month visit for intensive data collection supported by a Fulbright-Hays Doctoral Dissertation Research Abroad award.

The researcher expects findings from this study to supplement the limited data that exists regarding schooling of girls with disabilities in Malawi. The study should have an impact on the development of more equitable educational systems in Malawi and elsewhere in Africa. This critical gender based research can assist in broadening the paths for educational progress and equity for all students, including those with disabilities.

An important attribute of this study is the fact that it is grounded within the perceptions of special education teachers, parents/caregivers and community members. Members of these marginalized groups need to be empowered and be given opportunity to express their thoughts

and voices. In Malawi, female teachers tend to hold the majority of positions in primary schools; these positions require lesser levels of teacher training. On the other hand, male teachers dominate secondary positions; these positions require greater levels of teacher training. This configuration, in which male teachers hold the majority of higher level teaching positions, gives them more power and voice over their female counterparts.

Tyack and Cuban (1995) place much emphasis on enlisting the support and skills of teachers as key actors in the reform process. Teachers require resources of time and money, practical designs for implementing change, and collegial support in order to make changes in the practices of schooling. According to Tyack and Cuban (1995), “Change where it counts the most—in the daily interactions of teachers and students—is the hardest to achieve and the most important.” (p. 10). In exploring teachers’ perceptions of the problems associated with educating girls with disabilities, educational stakeholders can better understand and implement more effective educational policies and practices.

Finally, by exploring perceptions and documenting the voices and actions of those engaged in the fight for more equitable education, this study serves to bring increased attention and knowledge to schools in this region. Understanding the barriers that teachers encounter will lead to efficiently addressing higher pupil persistence, lower repetition rates, decrease dropouts and increase overall pupil learning (“Malawi Education Support Activity,” 2005). The researcher is extremely hopeful that this study will positively influence policy makers and administrators, thus increasing consciousness and awareness to improve educational programming and conditions of schooling for all students.



## Disability

The meaning of ‘disability’ can be defined by people, culture and society. Its meaning is often one of social construction, a term that is frequently used to exclude or marginalize individuals. It is through this lens of social construction that this qualitative study explores issues relating to the education of girls of disabilities. Perceptions and experiences are examined to construct meaning in an attempt to make sense of current educational policies and practices.

The term ‘disability’ can have serious implications on the lives of all involved, particularly in education. We do know that a ‘disability’ can often prevent children from receiving an education in their neighborhood schools. In fact, Peters (2009, p.2) makes reference to the point that “98% of children with disabilities in developing countries do not attend school (Action on Disability and Development, 2009).”

The following words provide a short glimpse into the education of students with disabilities in African schools:

*“The place of education for people with disabilities in Africa has been a source of concern for those who appreciate the need for such provision. Education of students with disabilities across Africa has not been given a proper planning and organizational orientation. Its planning, organization, and management have been characterized by lack of vision and commitment, inadequate funding, selfish interests among experts, and negative attitudes influenced by African values, tradition and culture. Many African countries, if not all, have shown a theoretical*

*interest in terms of formulating national policies in special education, which sum up to give concrete meaning to the idea of equalizing educational opportunities for all children irrespective of their physical and mental conditions. The policies of various non-governmental organizations are often recognized by the various governments. Despite these facts, the dreams of most disabled people in areas of adequate educational provision, employment, and support services are yet to be realized.”*

— Dr. O.C. Obosi, Associate Professor of Special Education, University of Botswana (“Thoughts on an Action Plan,” 2002).

Dr. Obosi, as well as other researchers exploring the Malawian education system, has campaigned for inclusive policies involving the education of all students, particularly those with disabilities. The goals contained within the World Declaration on Education for All may be considered to lay the framework for inclusive educational practices.

Finally, when considering the constructed meanings of disability and its effects, one must remember that “Disability does not inevitably lead to poverty. It is at the point of discrimination that the cycle could be broken. When disabled people are denied educational opportunities, then it is the lack of education, and not their disabilities that limit them (Peters, 2009, p. 5).”

### Context of the Research in Malawi

A major gap exists between the numbers of girls and boys enrolled in schools in many developing countries including Malawi. In 2000 the primary school completion rates for boys

was 60%, compared with only 45% for girls in Malawi (“GenderStats,” 2005). Anderson-Leavitt, Bloch, and Soumare (1994) describe this setting as an “environment of discouragement.” A plethora of qualitative research studies reveal the male-centeredness of educational institutions and myriad ways in which schools favor boys (Miske & VanBelle-Prouty, 1997, p. 1).

In Malawi, girls are typically not expected to perform academically at the same level as boys. Teachers often expect that girls will benefit less from education, anticipating early marriage for them at the end of primary school. Consequently, teachers subconsciously feel less inclined to be invested in their female pupils’ education. The problem of stereotyping girls who are low achievers is particularly acute in rural areas where the majority of teachers are male and boys dominate classrooms, especially in the upper grade levels. Girls are expected to be shy and submissive; they are less apt to ask questions in classes (Davison & Kanyuka, 1992, p. 457).

The United States Agency for International Development’s efforts in girls’ education has placed the education of girls and women as a top national issue. This program operates from the premise that schools do not operate in isolation from the larger social system. It asserts that the gender gap in education can only be closed by addressing the interacting set of constraints to girls’ school, including attendance and completion. These constraints, or barriers, include:

- Household’s access to resources (i.e. direct and indirect costs of schooling).
- Policy barriers (i.e. education policies, insufficient national education budget, under-enforced labor laws),
- Poor infrastructure (i.e. water, electricity, buildings, and transportation),

- Religious, cultural, social, and political norms concerning the value and role of girls and women in society, and
- Educational barriers (i.e. curriculum and teacher preparation) (Clay, 1997, p. 5).

All of these barriers and constraints contribute to a less than equal education for girls.

Although the United States Agency for International Development and many others have implemented programs to address gender barriers and gender equity programs for girls, the constituency of girls with disabilities is still under addressed. Estimates of the percent of disabled youth and children (across both genders) who attend school in developing countries range from less than 1% (Salamanca Framework for Action) to 5% (Habibi, 1999). In fact, in developing countries, 50% of all disabilities are acquired before age fifteen, which means that the estimated prevalence of school-aged children and youth with disabilities may be higher than the incidence rate of 10 percent. It is thus estimated that between 15 and 20 percent of all students will require special needs education during their primary and secondary school years (Peters, 2004, p. 8).

Additional research suggests that equity problems in education relating to gender have the greatest impact on girls with disabilities. This group is marginalized by gender, disability, and often poverty. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) states that the “education of girls with disabilities has gone largely unnoticed by those committed to promoting either gender equity or disability equity. Little policy attention has been paid, for example, to the combined sexual and disability harassment faced by female pupils” (UNESCO, 2003, p.14).

Kratovil and Bailey, in 1986, made the following observation:

*“Little attention has been given to the ‘double jeopardy’ that confronts disabled students when bias and stereotyping based on sex and on disabling condition interact. Consequently, disabled students may face unacknowledged barriers to equitable education – barriers that are products of stereotyping and bias based both on sex and disabling condition.”*

Unfortunately, over fifteen years after that text was written, very little seemed to have changed. Rousso and Wehmeyer (2001) concur that little attention has been given to the “double jeopardy” of disability and gender in the education of students with disabilities (p. 272).

Peters (2004) lists the following as barriers to the provision of quality of education for both girls and boys with disabilities in all educational contexts:

- Lack of early identification and intervention services,
- Negative attitudes,
- Exclusionary policies and practices,
- Inadequate teacher training, particularly training of all regular teachers to teach children with diverse abilities,
- Inflexible curriculum and assessment procedures,
- Inadequate specialist support staff to assist teachers of special and regular classes,
- Lack of appropriate teaching equipment and devices, and
- Failure to make modifications to the school environment to make it fully accessible.

Peters maintains that these barriers can be overcome through policy, planning, implementation of strategies and allocation of resources to fully include children and youth with disabilities in all national health and education initiatives (p. 50). The World Bank further claims the need to ensure that “adequate resources translate into cost-effective expansion of schooling coverage, effective teaching and learning, and the flexibility in service delivery and other supports needed to keep girls, the poorest, disabled, and other vulnerable children in school” (p. 115). The challenges remain vast, and at the same time clearly worthy of attention.

Unfortunately, due to the previously mentioned barriers and multiple layers of challenges, change in educational practices affecting girls with disabilities has been occurring extremely slowly. The developments and trainings sparked by Universal Primary Education continue to affect all sectors of education in Malawi, including children and youth with disabilities. It is worth noting that the government of Malawi does in fact advocate for equal access to education for every child (Nyirenda, 2002, p. 12).

With the goal of investigating the educational plight of girls with disabilities in primary schools in Malawi, the researcher visited six different primary schools—one primary school from each of Malawi’s six educational divisions. Initial contacts with the schools were made in collaboration with Lilian Yambeni, Special Education Director for the Ministry of Education in Malawi, and Alec Chuvuta, Professor at Montfort Teacher Training College. Each visit consisted of two weeks of classroom observations, various

interviews and data collection. The schools that were selected were classified as large rural schools, thus representing the majority of schools (86%) in Malawi.

### Delimitations of the Study

This study is exploratory in nature and does not test a hypothesis. The study is unique in that the research includes interviews with female rural primary school teachers, parents and community members about the education of girls with disabilities in Malawi. Because of the sensitive nature of the topic being investigated, interviewees' receptiveness and openness to communicate may have been somewhat restricted. Furthermore, this study does not claim to be an evaluation of any portion of the works executed by the Malawi Ministry of Education.

This study does analyze data collected from six primary schools and their communities to explore the educational plight of girls with disabilities in Malawian primary schools. Rich descriptions of classroom teaching and learning practices in these schools enrich the interview data. Findings will serve to better understand the opinions and perceptions of teachers, parents and community members regarding educating girls with disabilities in these schools. Data in this study was limited to the selected six primary schools and the experiences of the researcher.

## Research Questions

To better understand the meaning of quality educational experiences and access opportunities for girls with disabilities in selected Malawian rural primary schools, this study investigated the perceptions of teachers, parents and community members from six rural primary schools and their communities. This study addresses the following overarching research question: *What are the quality of educational experiences and access opportunities for girls with disabilities in selected Malawian rural primary schools?*

More specifically, sub-questions that were addressed in the study include:

1. What types of teaching and learning activities do young girls with disabilities experience when they attend primary schools in Malawi?
2. What type of evidence exists regarding gender equity in the Malawian classroom and opportunities for girls with disabilities to learn?
3. In what ways do Malawian teachers, parents and community members perceive and influence classroom teaching and learning for girls with disabilities in primary schools?



## **CHAPTER 2**

### **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

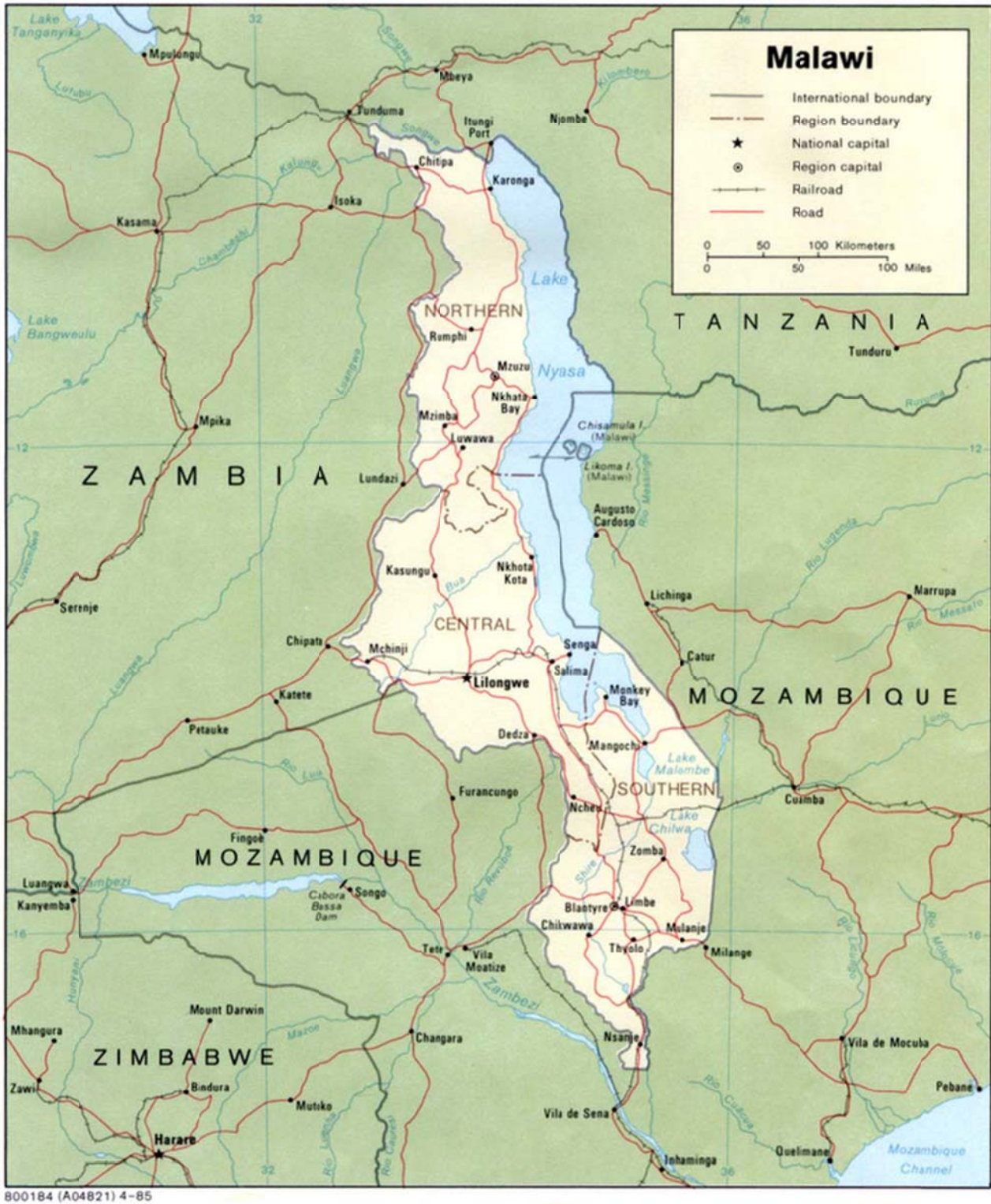
The World Bank (2003) has declared education to be one of the most powerful instruments known for reducing poverty and inequality and for laying the basis for sustained economic growth (p. 26). However, it is still widely known that those girls who attend school in developing countries are performing at much lower levels in comparison to boys. If we are to achieve the Millennium Development Goal of ensuring that, by the year 2015, children everywhere, boys and girls alike, will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling and have access to all levels of education, we must continue to work very diligently.

#### **Contextual Background**

Malawi is commonly referred to as the “Warm Heart of Africa” due to its friendly people, bright sunshine and warm hospitality. Located in sub-Saharan Africa (see Figure 1), this small landlocked country was formerly known as Nyasaland. It is bordered by Zambia to the northwest, Tanzania to the northeast and Mozambique on the east, south and west (see Figure 2). The Great Rift Valley runs from Malawi’s north to its south. On its eastern border lies Lake Malawi, famous for its indigenous fish species.



*Figure 1.* Political map of Africa



Malawi is one of the world's least developed and most densely populated countries. With a growing population of over fifteen million, the Gross National Income (GNI) per capita rests at approximately \$290 U.S. dollars. The World Bank (2009) estimated the average life expectancy to be about fifty-four years. Agriculture accounts for about 35% of Malawi's Gross Domestic Product with emphasis in the production of tobacco, sugar cane, cotton, tea, corn, potatoes, sorghum, cattle and goats.

On July 6, 1964, Malawi gained its independence and became an independent member of the Commonwealth (formerly called the British Commonwealth). Two years later, Malawi adopted a republican constitution with Dr. Hastings Kamuzu Banda as its first president. Banda governed Malawi from 1963 to 1994. He is known as the principal leader of the Malawi nationalist movement. Having received much of his education overseas, Banda was pro-western and spoke strongly against colonialism ("Hastings Kamuzu Banda," 2011). Banda strongly influenced educational programming and laid the basis for Malawian education today.

### Education in Malawi

In 1994 the government of Malawi ratified Universal Primary Education (UPE), mandating basic education at the primary level to be offered free of charge. This resulted in a massive increase in student enrollment, placing more stress on an already under-resourced educational system that was burdened by high teacher/student ratios, shortage of materials, and poor infrastructure (Kadzamira, 2003). Although more children gained access to schools, one must also consider the effects of higher student enrollment on teachers and quality of educational services.

The quick implementation of Universal Primary Education in Malawi rapidly resulted in increased grade repetition rates, low completion rates, and poor overall school quality (“Malawi Education Support Activity,” 2005). This also led to issues of equity, including the marginalization of certain groups of children, including girls with disabilities, becoming more prevalent and noticeable.

When one contemplates the implications of Universal Primary Education in relation to this research study, it is of particular interest to take a closer look at its effects on teachers in rural areas. In 2004, the official pupil-teacher ratio was 60:1. On average, rural areas had more than double (76.8) the ratio compared to the ratio in the capital area of Lilongwe (38.5). Teachers in general were reluctant to be posted in rural areas due to inadequate housing, lack of electricity and water, and difficulties in traveling (Kadzamira, 2003, p. 6)

There has been much discussion of a teacher motivation “crisis” in Malawi. Earlier research studies show that the overall levels of teacher job satisfaction and motivation are low in Malawi, in both primary and secondary schools (Kadzamira, 2004). Teachers have been very dissatisfied with their wages and other conditions of service. Other educational stakeholders, including community members and students, believe that “poor incentives and conditions of service have resulted in low morale and thus poor performance among teachers” (p. 2).

The EFA 2000 Assessment further highlights sub-Saharan Africa as one of the areas of greatest challenge for Education for All (“Dakar Framework for Action,” 2004). The educational system in Malawi is hindered by issues of poor access, high repetition and drop-out rates, poor

infrastructure and inequality (Kadzamira, 2003). Poverty, HIV/AIDS, child labor, lack of resources and economic constraints are but a few of the complex issues impacting educational systems in Malawi.

## Education For All

Miles and Singal (2008) define Education For All with the following:

“EFA represents an international commitment to ensure that every child and adult receives basic education of good quality. This commitment is based both on a human rights perspective, and on the generally held belief that education is central to individual well-being and national development...” (pg. 4).

The education of all children, including those with disabilities, must be a strong commitment by all world citizens. Miles and Singal (2008) discuss the “concept of children as a ‘natural’ resource, one that must be nourished (pg. 19) so that we can all reap the future benefits.” Whatever we invest in these children will be returned to us in future generations. Oxfam (2004) states that young people who have completed primary education are less likely to contract HIV/AIDS than those that do not complete their primary years (pg. 5). Given the current situation in sub-Saharan Africa, the need for educating all youth has never been greater.

Despite the international commitment and obvious need to educate all children, especially those with disabilities, Peters (2009) states that “98% of children with disabilities in developing countries do not attend school (Action on Disability and Development, 2009).” This is particularly worrisome as teachers are widely believed to greatly influence the development and

success of children. Several studies and organizations, including UNESCO, have shown that negative attitudes of teachers towards students with disabilities remain a major barrier to student learning (Peters, 2009, pg. 19). When students fail to learn, they often drop out of school and become non-productive citizens.

A rather recent World Bank (2003) data base depicts the average primary school completion rates across the developing world. This study shows that many countries are falling short of the progress needed for reaching the Millennium Development Goals for universal primary completion rates. Once again, sub-Saharan Africa has one of the lowest completion rates with less than half of all school-age children completing primary school (Bruns *et al.*, 2003, p.3).

### Situations in Malawi

As one of the poorest countries in the world, Malawi, in 2007, ranked the lowest in female participation in education and employment within the entire southern African region. Current statistics estimate the female illiteracy rate to be among the highest in the world, with estimates at 65 percent compared to 40 percent for men. Only about 9 percent of all women have completed more than four years of primary schooling (Mbilizi, 2008, p. 226).

Mbilizi (2008) describes the formal education system in Malawi as divided into three sections; the primary, secondary and tertiary levels. The official age to enter primary school is six years. Students complete Standards One through Standard Eight in primary school and then must complete national examinations in order to move forward into secondary schools.

Malawi hosts an estimated 150 secondary schools, consisting of either private, government or parochial/government aided schools. Less than 11 percent of students who qualify for this additional four years of secondary school education actually enroll. Mbilizi (2008) further elaborates that only a mere 4 percent of all girls who enter primary school find a place in secondary school. More boys than girls are selected for secondary schools, partly due to the disproportionate representation of boys and girls in primary school. Mbilizi (2008) also states that “the passing rate of girls in national examinations is lower than that of boys by 20 percent (p. 226).”

## HIV/AIDS

The HIV/AIDS pandemic has greatly affected all levels of social development and overall quality of life in Malawi. Official government statistics from the World Bank (2010) estimate the prevalence rate of HIV/AIDS to be only 11.9%, the sixth lowest rate in the region. HIV/AIDS occurrences tend to be higher in urban areas than rural areas. The incidence rate is also reported to be higher among women (13%) than men (10%) (World Bank, 2010, p. 5).

The effects of HIV/AIDS have been devastating to the education sector in Malawi. The deaths of both teachers and parents have significantly affected the development of schools and educational processes. The pandemic has greatly increased teacher absenteeism and increased the number of orphans, who are less likely to attend school than those children with families. The number of children orphaned by HIV/AIDS represents about 7% of the children under age 17



years. Prevalence rates are highest in the southern areas, particularly in cities (World Bank, 2010, p. 1).

### Girls' Education

Increased education for girls has proven to positively impact the health of infants and children, immunization rates, family nutrition and the next generation's educational levels. Recent data from research in Africa shows that "education for girls and boys may be the single most effective preventative weapon against HIV/AIDS." The simple truth is that education may be considered one of the most powerful tools to reduce poverty and inequality as well as for laying the base for sustained economic growth, sound governance and effective institutions (Bruns *et al.*, 2003, p.1).

It seems obvious that the primary education of all students, especially girls, across the world needs to become a top priority for schools and societies. Not only do girls need access to schools, they need to engage in meaningful educational opportunities that are comparable to that of boys. Sadker *et al.* (1994) state, "Sitting in the same classroom, reading the same textbook, listening to the same teacher, boys and girls receive very different educations" (p.1). However, Sadker *et al.* remind us "as children grow older, all work done at home can be undone, especially at school." Sadker *et al.* support this statement with evidence of parents beginning 'to educate' the educators, for example, by helping them to discover books about wise and resourceful women and girls to use in the classroom (Sadker & Sadker, 1994, p. 261). There appear to be creative solutions as long as we continue to search for them.

## Policies and Programs in Malawi

In Malawi, several specific policies and programs have been put into effect to address issues of gender inequality and access:

1. The Girls' Attainment in Basic Literacy and Education (GABLE) program: One of the most recognized projects in promoting girls' education and primary education in Malawi has been the GABLE program sponsored by USAID (United States Agency for International Development). The purpose of GABLE is to increase the enrollment, persistence, and achievement of girls in primary school while improving the overall quality and efficiency of the primary education system, thus benefiting both girls and boys. The components of GABLE that strategically target girls include:

- The waiving of school fees for non-repeating girls in primary school.
- The revising of the curriculum to make it more gender sensitive and training of teachers in the delivery of the new gender sensitive curriculum.
- A social mobilization campaign to encourage parents to send girls to schools and a scholarship program for girls in secondary schools.

Other components of GABLE seek to improve the overall effectiveness of primary education by increasing the budgetary allocations to the education sector. These include constructing more classrooms and teacher houses, providing learning material at a lower cost through competitive bidding, and utilizing teacher-training colleges more intensely and efficiently. This support of girls' education was viewed by USAID as a strategic objective in reducing fertility rates (Kadzamira, 1997, p. 70).

2. Other Equity Policies: Other equity policies have been designed to assist the education sector in achieving greater gender equity. One specific equity policy calls for the Ministry of Education to “put in place appropriate measures aimed at addressing the gender imbalance in teacher supply, provision, and deployment.” Another equity policy declares “appropriate affirmative action measures shall be taken to increase the number of girls gaining access to and completing secondary education from 39% in 1998 to 50% by 2012” (“Ministry of Education,” 2002).

### Gender and Teachers

UNESCO (United States Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) has identified female teachers as strong indicators of success in the education of girls. Current statistics indicate that women hold only about one-third, or less, of teaching positions in sub-Saharan African countries. It has been shown that countries with the lowest number of women teachers at the primary level are those with the highest gender disparities (UNESCO, 2003, p. 7).

Other studies have demonstrated that teachers play a pivotal role in influencing the academic motivation of their pupils. Teachers’ negative or positive expectations of what their pupils can accomplish in class exercises and in national examinations have a direct impact on pupil performance. The attitudes and expectations of teachers remain critical in encouraging girls to take an active role in class activities. Teachers are as much a product of societal attitudes as parents and students, and therefore they have a responsibility to implement changes in their classrooms and within the school community that will facilitate gender equity in education at all levels (Davison & Kanyuka, 1992, p. 466).

Malawi, with the majority of teachers being male (approximately 70.7%), can be found to illustrate many of these gender related phenomena. Certain attitudes and expectations can lead to negative imagery for girls. The presence of fewer female teachers can perpetuate the societal belief that boys are intelligent and usually continue with school, unlike the girls. In addition, most female teachers tend to teach lower level classes while male teachers teach the higher levels. This situation does work to the disadvantage of the girls because they lack role models as they go to upper classes – particularly at the time when girls need them most (Chimombo *et al.*, 2000, pgs. 69-70).

Furthermore, teacher-training institutes generally do not provide any training on gender issues in either the formal or informal curriculum. There is no questioning of sex bias in individuals or sex differences in teaching styles and no confrontation of sex bias in the education system. As a result these colleges replicate gender differences in society that, in turn, will be perpetuated by the trained teachers in the classroom. In addition, by continuing to focus on teaching aspects to the exclusion of management aspects of the job, teacher preparation misses the opportunity to break the stereotype that management is for males (Gaynor, 1997, p. 32).

### Education for Girls with Disabilities

As the purpose of this qualitative study is to explore the education of girls with disabilities in primary schools in Malawi, let's shift our attention specifically to those girls with disabilities. This is a very complex issue with many variables including gender and disability. Philippa (2005) attempts to add to our understanding of the meaning of disability with the following:

*“There is no universally agreed definition of disability. Historically disability was seen primarily as a medical condition, with the problem located within the individual. This medical or individual model was challenged by disability activists who reconceptualised disability as primarily a social phenomenon. This social model of disability draws a clear distinction between impairments and disability. Society disables people with impairments by its failure to recognise and accommodate difference and through the attitudinal, environmental and institutional barriers it erects towards people with impairments. Disability thus arises from a complex interaction between health conditions and the context in which they exist. Disability is a relative term with certain impairments becoming more or less disabling in different contexts” (p.3)*

Philippa (2005) further states that “there is no accurate data on the global number of disabled people or global prevalence rates for different impairments. The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that 10% of any given population will be “disabled” and that the prevalence of disability worldwide is growing (p. 4).

The World Bank estimates that over 20% of the world’s poorest people have disabilities (Philippa, 2005, p. 5). The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) do not explicitly discuss disability but most agree that the goals cannot be achieved without addressing the needs and rights of people with disabilities. MGDs do address hunger, poverty, and gender equality; all of which greatly impact females with disabilities (p. 7-8).

Universal Primary Education (UPE) is very specifically detailed in the MGDs. Philippa describes how UPE cannot be achieved without addressing the education of children with disabilities, most of whom do not attend school. In addition, most children with disabilities who are out of school do not directly contribute to the household economy. In Malawi, over 35% of children with disabilities have never attended school, compared to only 18% of other children (Philippa, 2005, p. 8).

Previous research in Malawi and other African countries has consistently revealed school cultures that tolerate varying degrees of violence and abuse, particularly toward girls with disabilities. These cultures have traditionally been known to promote conformity to gendered roles and practices. Many girls in these areas have reported being routinely subject to unwanted sexual advances by male teachers and older male pupils. Because little action has typically been taken to correct such behaviors, sexual misconduct and male aggressiveness have become ‘normalized’ as an acceptable and inevitable part of life at school (Leach, 2006, p. 1131).

Mbilizi (2008) has noted school drop-out rates as playing a significant role in increasing and maintaining gender gaps. At the primary level, the drop-out rate for girls is approximately 14 percent compared to 9 percent for boys. Girls are more likely to drop out early due to “early marriage, excessive responsibilities within the home, sexual harassment by teachers, poverty, long distances, and lack of latrines within school compounds, teenage pregnancy, lack of role models, and lack of boarding facilities” (p. 227).

In Malawi, the following supports have been enacted to specifically address issues of equity and access in the education of girls with disabilities:

1. Policy & Investment Framework: In response to Universal Primary Education and other such initiatives, the government of Malawi has developed a planned strategy, the Policy & Investment Framework (PIF), for the education sector. The PIF approach spells out government policy on educational programs that deserve the most attention. It confirms the Malawi government's commitment to paying the greatest attention to basic education. This is consistent with the Constitution of Malawi and Article 28 of the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child, which guarantees the right of the child to a basic education of minimum quality.

PIF proposes several policies and strategies specifically concerning equity for those with special needs as well as girls. The policies mention the following:

- The government shall provide an enabling environment for children with special educational needs and for the underprivileged within the conventional.
- The government shall be proactive in its investigation of strategies needing to be introduced to make education all-inclusive. Specific target groups include orphans (particularly those whose parents have died of HIV/AIDS), children with special educational needs, girls, and out-of school youth.
- Prioritizing the status of special needs education with the intention of getting a higher number of children with special education needs to complete the primary education cycle.

- The strategy of strengthening the Special Needs Education Support System is stated (Ministry of Education, 2002).

2. The Malawi Social Action Fund II: MASAF II and other such projects have worked to provide support specifically to marginalized groups, including persons with disabilities, while enhancing in-country capacities. MASAF II provides support to meet their basic needs of marginalized groups and to enable them to participate in community activities. This approach includes:

- Design and implement a funding mechanism to provide financial and technical resources for intermediary agencies to carry out programs targeted at marginalized groups.
- Support network-building activities that would strengthen linkages between non-governmental organizations, community-based organizations, and other key actors.
- Undertake a public education and awareness-raising campaign that will focus not only on the general public but also on the marginalized groups (“Malawi Social Action Fund II,” 2002).

3. Cabinet Committee on Gender, Youth and Persons with Disabilities: The government of Malawi established the Cabinet Committee on Gender, Youth and Persons with Disabilities to examine and review the Gender Policy, issues and legislations before they are presented to Cabinet and Parliament. The Gender Advisory Committee serves to advise the Cabinet on the activities of the Sectoral Ministries regarding gender (Malawi Gender Policy, 2002).



At the time this qualitative study was executed in 2005, there remained a very limited amount of literature available to the researcher. Since that time, more and more studies have been conducted relating to the education of girls and those with disabilities in sub-Saharan Africa.

Although it is hoped that current research and interest will continue to make education more equitable and accessible to all, a severe lack of quality literature on issues of gender, disability, access, and equity does further intensify the existing educational challenges. In a World Bank (2003) study, this dilemma is referred to as a “data gap.” It shows that advanced research is hampered by limited, inconsistent and outdated education statistics available in the countries analyzed (p. 20). Only through basic comprehensive research can ‘data gaps’ be filled and educational services in Malawi and elsewhere in Africa improve.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **METHODOLOGY**

#### Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore the educational plight of girls with disabilities in Malawian primary schools. The study is meant to increase awareness towards and give voice to traditionally marginalized groups—girls with disabilities, their parents/caregivers and their teachers. This study sought to document the types of learning experiences and access opportunities for girls with disabilities in predominately rural schools in Malawi and to describe the classroom teaching and learning practices in these schools.

This chapter describes the setting in which this study was carried out, the population that was investigated and the sample-selection criteria. The processes of data collection, analysis and additional confidential and ethical considerations are discussed.

#### Rationale and Approach

The researcher is motivated to shed light on the plight of girls students with disabilities, an otherwise neglected population. Very little information is currently available about the education of girls with disabilities in sub-Saharan Africa, even though numerous policies and funded programs have been created in support of their education. The researcher was interested in investigating how girls with disabilities were being educated in schools and how various stakeholders view education practices related to this population. The researcher was motivated to

empower girls with disabilities, their parents/caregivers and their teachers by giving voice to these traditionally marginalized and oppressed groups.

This research design of this study was developed using primarily a narrative inquiry approach in the analysis of the experiences of girls with disabilities and the perceptions of teachers, parents/caretakers and community members. A portraiture approach (Hackmann, 2002) was utilized to support the narrative inquiry methodologies. The primary basis of this study relies on artifacts that include documents and items collected from individual sites, classroom observations and narratives constructed through in-depth interviews with individuals involved in the education of girls with disabilities. Through the voices of the participants, the researcher sought to explore more than a single “truth”—to see multiple layers of perspectives and truths.

Keeping in mind the sensitive nature of the topic being investigated in this study, one that focuses on the authentic experiences of girls with disabilities in primary schools in an impoverished nation, the researcher used the following methods that qualitative researchers typically rely on under such settings for gathering information: (a) participant observation in the setting, (b) direct observation, (c) in-depth interviewing, and (d) analyzing documents and material culture (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). Based on these methodologies of qualitative research, this study seeks to develop a better understanding of the multiple layers and the players involved in educating girls with disabilities in primary schools in Malawi. A narrative inquiry approach, in combination with some portraiture methodologies, constitutes the backbone of this study while attempting to glean as much knowledge as possible from the participants and study sites.

The primary methodological approach for this study is a narrative inquiry approach based on artifacts including documents and select items from site visitations, and observations and narratives constructed through in-depth individual interviews. The focus throughout the study remained on individual experiences and perceptions of those stakeholders directly affected in order to describe the quality and access issues involving the education of girls with disabilities in predominantly rural primary schools.

Narrative inquiry refers to a subset of qualitative research designs in which stories are used to describe human action. Polkinghorne (1995) believes there is a growing interest in narrative inquiry among qualitative researchers. An interest in this methodology is merited as “narrative is the linguistic form uniquely suited for displaying human existence as situated action (p. 5).” When one considers activity by humans as purposeful engagement in the world, one can begin to understand a basic use of narrative descriptions. Polkinghorne further details narrative as “the type of discourse composition that draws together diverse events, happenings, and actions of human lives into thematically unified goal-directed processes” (p. 5). Thus, the researcher found narrative inquiry as a suitable design to describe the complexities of educating girls with disabilities in Malawi.

Polkinghorne (1995) explains the meaning of narrative as prosaic text that can be extended to refer to any data that is in the form of natural discourse or speech. Narrative is commonly regarded as the data from field notes or original interview data and their written transcriptions. In addition, an alternate way to view narrative is that of a story that tells of a culture’s world view or ideology and serves to legitimize its relative values and goals (p. 7).

Through an interpretative narrative inquiry approach, the conditions surrounding school opportunities, perceptions, and actions are investigated in an attempt to describe the educational experiences and opportunities for girls with disabilities in rural primary schools in Malawi. Specific Education for All goals (“Dakar Framework for Action,” 2004) were examined, focusing on issues of quality and access. Perceptions of those who were personally impacted were examined in order to explore the educational plight of girls with disabilities in rural primary schools in Malawi. Observations in schools provided authentic data, serving to connect perceptions to lived experiences.

Perceptions data (Bernhardt, 2001) helps us to better “understand what students, parents, teachers and others think about the learning environment” (p. 2) within school communities. This type of data can be gathered in a variety of ways, including questionnaires, interviews, and observations. When we know how individuals are thinking about school, we can begin to know “what is real and what is possible” (p. 2). Bernhardt (2001) further believes that “perceptions are important since people act based on what they believe and perceive” (p. 2). As soon as we gain knowledge of an individual’s thinking, what relations have been like in the past and what expectations they have for the future, we will be able to advance our own thinking and problem-solving abilities.

Using Bernhardt’s concepts of perceptions data can assist us in understanding what parents, teachers and others think about the learning environment within and around primary schools in Malawi. This type of data allows one to closely examine the emerging voices revealed through the framework of the complex and interrelated context of the participants’ views. It

enables the researcher to attempt to define the cultural experience in Malawian schools, which in turn contributes to a more holistic viewing as well as a more comprehensive and complete picture.

Creswell (1998) states that a narrative might capture a “typical day in the life” of an individual or a group of individuals (p. 168). Researchers often accomplish this by bringing in the voice of participants in the study, through the use of various quotations (p. 170). Short, eye-catching quotations are one type that Creswell describes. These are easy to read, take up little space, and stand out from the text but also serve to verify the text. Quotations are a means of representing different perspectives (p. 171) that are critical to describing complex educational systems and perceptions of girls with disabilities being educated in primary schools in Malawi.

When using quotations to represent varying perspectives, one must be cognizant of issues of subjectivity and power. Denzin and Lincoln (1994) challenge historic assumptions of neutrality in inquiry and assert that *all* research is interpretive, “guided by a set of beliefs and feelings about the world and how it should be understood and studied.” They further argue that research involves issues of power. Traditionally conducted social science research has in fact resulted in silencing groups that are marginalized and oppressed in society by making them the passive object of inquiry. Research strategies, like the narrative, that are openly ideological and that have empowering and democratizing goals are needed (Marshall & Rossman, 1999, p. 4).

A unique feature of this study lies in the fact that the narrative is used to detail the daily school experiences and lives of girls with disabilities in primary schools in Malawi. This study

does in fact give power to girls with disabilities even though they were not personally interviewed due to ethical concerns and approvals. The Michigan State University Institutional Review Board only approved interviews with adults over the age of eighteen due to the sensitive nature of topic being investigated in this study. This approval was based upon a recommendation from the researcher's doctoral committee upon completion of the defense of this dissertation proposal and study.

Other researchers view inquiry as leading to radical change or emancipation from oppressive social structures, either through a sustained critique or through direct advocacy and action taken by the researcher, often in collaboration with participants in the study. These critiques share four assumptions:

- Research fundamentally involves issues of power;
- The research report is not transparent but, rather, is authored by a raced, gendered, classed, and politically oriented individual;
- Race, class, and gender (among other social identities) are crucial for understanding experience; and
- Historic, traditional research has silenced members of oppressed and marginalized groups (Rossman & Rallis, 1998, p. 66).

These assumptions indicate that the researcher must pay close attention to the participants' reactions to the research and to the *voice* used in writing up their work, as a representation of the relationship between the researcher and the participants (Rossman &

Marshall, 1999, p.5). All interactions with research participants greatly affect the power and authenticity of the research.

Portraiture (Hackmann, 2002), an important supplemental strategy used in this study, does stand apart from more traditional research methods as it becomes a lens through which the researcher can process and analyze data collected throughout the study (p. 2). Portraiture is used to better understand the richness of information, observations, interviews, narratives, patterns and theories that emerge during the fieldwork. In combination, these reveal the essence of the culture (Fetterman, 1998). Portraiture essentially assists in providing the background for a more holistic view on the research, resulting in a rich, descriptive, comprehensive and complete picture of the participants.

Marble (1997) states that portraiture allows “multiple ways of knowing and understanding any particular event or situation, and that each has contexts and conditions which must also be recognized and considered” (Hackmann, p.3). Describing the culture of a Malawian school through multiple expressions of core beliefs, values, traditions, symbols, perceptions and patterns of behavior which provide meaning to the school community and which help shape the lives of students, teachers, parents and community members, best reflects the complexities and interrelated context of the way things are done in Malawian primary classrooms. These descriptions all contribute to “weaving competing truths into the final portrait” (Hackmann, p. 2), the art of a skilled portraitist and researcher.



Thus, to observe and describe the educational experiences and opportunities for girls with disabilities in predominantly rural primary schools in Malawi, a qualitative study with a narrative inquiry approach is utilized. Portraiture is employed as a supplemental approach to make better sense of participants, their voices, their culture and their traditions. Composite portraits are drawn from the data; each vignette is not an exact representation of each girl in the study. The focus remains on individual experiences and perceptions of those directly affected in order to best describe the multitude of quality and access issues. Traditionally marginalized groups, including parents or caregivers and teachers of students with disabilities, are given power and voice through the use of narratives and personal stories, constructed from in-depth interviews.

### The Population and Sample

In order to best explore the educational plight of girls with disabilities in Malawian primary schools, the researcher had originally intended to randomly select six school sites in which to conduct research. The researcher intended to randomly select one site within each of the six educational divisions within Malawi, all with the cooperation of the Ministry of Education in Lilongwe. This would have served to provide a holistic view of the education of girls with disabilities throughout the country of Malawi. At each selected site, the researcher would have interviewed one parent/caregiver, one teacher and one community member, all of whom were directly involved in the life of a girl with a disability in that particular community.

The need for this plan to be restructured became apparent as soon as the researcher met with officials in the Special Needs Department of the Ministry of Education. In talking with education officials, the researcher found that while there were classrooms for students with

disabilities throughout the country, it was uncertain as to which special education classrooms were self-contained—ones that instructed students with disabilities throughout the school day. They were also not certain as to which special education classrooms were integrating students with disabilities into regular primary school classrooms, for partial or full day schedules. Furthermore, the list of current special education teachers, locations, types of classrooms and category assignments was not current. Officials in the Special Needs Department in the Ministry of Education made a few phone calls, wherever possible (not all phone lines were typically functioning). Based on information obtained in these phone calls suggestions for study sites were made to the researcher, instead of the researcher being able to random select study sites from a pool of sites.

It was recommended that the researcher contact the Teacher Training College in Montfort, Malawi to obtain more information. Faculty members at Montfort would be able to provide a current list of special education teachers, locations, types of classrooms and category assignments. Since over 60 percent of students with disabilities were categorized as learning disabled, this population was most accessible to the researcher. Students that were categorized as learning disabled could have mild to severe mental retardation and/or difficulties in specific subject areas. Most commonly, these types of learners were simply thought of and referred to by local educators and community members as “slow learners.”

The other two categories of disabilities recognized by the government of Malawi include the visually impaired and hearing impaired. In both of these groups, children typically suffer from an impairment that is easily observable, with notable physical abnormalities. These two

groups typically attend special schools or boarding schools in which they live and learn together. Therefore, in order to explore how individuals, particularly girls, were being integrated into regular primary schools, it would be easiest and most beneficial for the researcher to observe girls with learning disabilities.

In consultation with faculty members at Montfort, the researcher was able to develop a plan for selection of research sites. Two teacher trainers in the learning disabilities department informed the researcher of the most recent teacher graduates in their learning disabilities program. These particular teacher trainers carefully described recent graduates and their current teaching assignments to the researcher. Based on this information the researcher prepared a master list of classrooms that contained students with learning disabilities and teachers who were certified to teach students with learning disabilities.

After visiting Montfort, the researcher returned to the capital city of Lilongwe to meet with officials in the Special Needs Department within the Ministry of Education. With assistance from officials in this department, a plan was developed for gathering data for the study. The lists of classrooms with students with learning disabilities and teachers who were certified to teach students with learning disabilities, were subdivided into six separate lists, one for each of the six educational divisions in Malawi (see Figure 3). After mapping the list of prospective schools with girls with learning disabilities and their locations, the researcher was finally able to randomly select one school from each educational division. In this way the researcher selected six research sites, two in the north, two in central Malawi and two in the south.



*Figure 3.* Six study sites were selected, one in each of the six educational divisions (locations are not displayed on the map to protect anonymity).

In a recent 2010 Human Development Report, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) states that over 85% of the Malawian population lives in rural areas (World Food Programme, 2011). Five out of the six schools that were selected were large rural schools. These schools represented the majority of schools in rural areas in Malawi. A sixth school that was selected was near the capital city of Lilongwe. This school had a sizable program for students with learning disabilities. Initial contacts with the selected schools were made in collaboration with the Ministry of Education. Letters of introduction (see Appendix A) were sent and personal contacts were made.

The list of participants included in this research was a purposeful sampling of eighteen individuals who had frequent, direct interaction with girls with learning disabilities in primary schools in Malawi. From each of the six research sites, one teacher, one parent/caregiver and one community member was interviewed. Due to the researcher's bias towards empowering women and providing voice to marginalized groups, whenever possible, preference for interviewees was given to females. In accordance with the approval granted by Michigan State University's Institutional Review Board for this study, all interview participants were required to be adults, aged eighteen years or older. Additional specific criteria for each interview participant included the following:

1. Teacher: Must be a primary school teacher for at least one female child with an identified learning disability.
2. Parent/caregiver: Must take care of and live with a female child with an identified learning disability who attended the local primary school.

3. Community member: Must reside within two kilometers of the school and have a direct relationship with a female child with an identified learning disability, who attended the local primary school. This person may be a neighbor, shopkeeper, friend of the family, etc.

### Data and Data Collection Tools

The multitude of languages and dialects spoken across the six research sites in Malawi added a layer of complexity to the data collection process for this study. Although English is the official language of Malawi, Chewa and Tumbuka are recognized as national languages. Approximately thirteen additional local dialectical languages are spoken throughout the country of Malawi (“Encyclopedia Britannica,” 2011). The researcher had studied Chewa for three and a half years prior to her visit to Malawi but had yet to reach advanced fluency levels. She was able to understand and communicate at basic levels but was unable to converse fluently, especially when the conversation called for technical jargon and advanced vocabulary. In addition, the researcher was unable to speak any other local dialectical languages fluently.

So that information collected from participants was not compromised due to the researcher’s lack of fluency in the local language or for lack of familiarity with local cultural norms, the researcher recruited a different Malawian research assistant for each of the six research sites. This research assistant accompanied the researcher on site visits. The following criteria were used in the selection of the research assistants:

1. The research assistant must be a practicing female special education teacher from a Malawian primary school. A female would be able to share housing with the researcher and offer cultural interpretations from a female perspective.
2. The female research assistant must reside in an educational division *different* than the selected educational division for research. This served to make the assistant more of an outsider to the selected research community; she would be less likely to be directly involved or directly related to the selected research community. This approach would ultimately minimize bias in the study.
3. The female research assistant would accompany the researcher for a period of two weeks at a research site. This was intended to minimize the time away from her regular teaching assignment.
4. The appointment must be made in collaboration with and approved by the Special Needs Department in the Ministry of Education. Getting the Ministry of Education's endorsement would ensure collaboration and support from the Ministry.

The research assistants not only accompanied the researcher on site visits but also translated interviews and conversations, interpreted classroom activities and sensitized the researcher to specifics of local Malawian cultural norms within primary schools and communities. The research assistants were critical to the success of this research study.

Data for this research was gathered through:

1. Observations of female students with learning disabilities in primary school classrooms and other school activities.

2. Interviews with selected teachers, parents or caregivers and community members.
3. Interactions with members of the local community.
4. Field notes and other artifacts.

### *School Visitations*

The researcher and her assistant visited each selected school site for two weeks. They arrived in the mornings before school commenced and stayed in the school premises until the pupils dispersed in the afternoon. Afternoons and evenings were typically spent within local communities surrounding the school, participating and observing daily rituals of the local community. The role of the research assistant was critical in this regards as she served to interpret local cultural norms and translate local languages as necessary. During their visits, both the researcher and the research assistant stayed in local hotels and homes within each community, thus attempting to immerse themselves in each community as fully as possible.

### *Observations*

During the two weeks at each site, the researcher and her assistant visited classrooms in which girls with learning disabilities were placed. Both the researcher and the research assistant drew sketches of classrooms, noted positions of students in the classroom, identified artifacts such as posters and materials within classrooms, and any other artifact or event of interest. In addition, they noted a plethora of conversations within the classrooms—between teachers, among students and between teachers and students. They also paid special attention to teaching



and learning, both for students with disabilities and for students without disabilities. The school community was also observed and documented—before school, during breaks, after school, etc.

### *Interviews*

Three formally structured interviews were carried out at each site (see Appendix D). These interviews were tape recorded. Consent forms (see Appendix B) were explained and signed prior to each interview. One interview was conducted with a parent or caregiver, one with a special education teacher and one with a local community member. All interviews occurred within a safe, natural environment of the interview participant's choice. Upon agreeing to be interviewed, each participant specified a preferred location at which they wanted to be interviewed. These locations included school classrooms, shops, homes, front yards, and under large shady trees in the community.

The primary purpose of these interviews was to explore how various individuals perceive, experience, interact and find meaning in the education of primary school-age girls with disabilities. These interviews allowed the researcher to explore the education of girls with disabilities through the lived experiences and voices of the participants. These interviews also sought to give voice to traditionally marginalized groups, girls with learning disabilities, and those people who are directly involved in lives of these girls. Furthermore, the interviews were intended to increase awareness and raise levels of consciousness within the community towards the education of girls with disabilities.

All interview participants completed the same biographical questionnaire and were asked the same basic framework of at least six questions (Appendices C and D). The biographical questionnaire gave the researcher and research assistant insight into the interview participant's personal and educational background. This information assisted the researcher and research assistant in providing context to the responses given throughout the interviews. Each interview lasted between thirty and ninety minutes, depending on the extensiveness of the responses of each participant and the need for interpretation and/or translation of the spoken language.

All interviews were conducted in English, Chewa, a local dialectical language, or a combination of these various languages. The interview participant was free to use the language in which they were most comfortable. All participants were aware and consented to the interviews being audio tape recorded. The research assistant assisted in the translation and transcription of the interview into the English language as necessary. The research assistant support was sought to ensure fidelity of transcription—to make sure that the essence and meaning of each interview participant's words were accurately captured in English, the language best understood by the researcher.

#### *Notes and Other Artifacts*

The researcher and research assistant were very conscientious in the taking of notes and the collection of any supplemental materials that may have aided in responding to the research questions in the study. Materials collected included school maps, attendance rosters, visual aids from classrooms including posters, and other related educational items and documents. All notes,

supplemental materials and artifacts served to deepen the understanding of the experiences of girls with disabilities in Malawian rural primary schools.

### Narrative Inquiry Analysis

The narrative inquiry analysis utilized in this study enabled the researcher to enter the field of perception of participants, teachers, parents, caregivers and community members closely involved with girls with disabilities who predominantly attended Malawian rural primary schools (with the exception of one urban school site). This study explores the voices and perceptions of how these individuals experience, interact, and find meaning in the education of girls with disabilities in primary schools. Silverman (2000) claims that narratives open up culturally rich methods in which interviewers and interviewees, in concert, generate plausible accounts of the world (Trahar, 2011).

Narratives were constructed from interviews to find meaning and to describe the educational experiences and access opportunities for girls with disabilities in primary schools in Malawi. Although narrative inquiry as a qualitative research method for the social sciences and applied fields is relatively new, it has a long tradition in the humanities because of its power to elicit “voice.” Narrative analysis values the signs, symbols, and expressions of feelings in language, validating how the narrator constructs meaning. There is open recognition that the researcher is constructing the narrator’s reality, not just passively recording and reporting. Connelly and Clandinin (1990) assert that researchers need to “be prepared to follow their nose and, after the fact, reconstruct their narrative of inquiry” (p.7). This becomes, in effect, the recounting of methodology (Marshall & Rossman, 1999, p. 123).

The value of narrative lies in its power to provide voice to its participants, and even closer personal accounts of the context with special educative values (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Narratives are personal accounts, a “culture’s primary meaning-making tool” (Gudmundsdottir, 1999) and assist us in making sense of perceptions at a more personal level. Narratives were constructed from in-depth interviews and grounded in behaviors recorded in the field as well as detailed accounts of the researcher’s data collection in relation to the participants.

In addition to the guiding clusters constructed in the emergent framework, Janesick’s (2000) common rules of thumb were used in the construction of narratives. These include: (1) searching for meaning, in the perspectives of the participants; (2) looking for relationships regarding the structure, occurrence, and distribution of events over time; and (3) the observation of points of tension: “What does not fit? What are the conflicting points of evidence in the case?” (p. 388). Narratives emerge as an important unit of analysis in this study as they allow participants the opportunity to tell their stories and collectively reflect as they describe their experiences.

Furthermore, narratives of relationships provided an account of interpretations (Denzin, 1989) of negotiations among people within the context of social structures in the school (White, 1992). The researcher then organized the narratives around the emergent conceptual framework themes for verification and further explored the significance of multiple meanings.

The method of narrative inquiry is very useful to this study as it assumes that people’s realities are constructed through narrating their stories. This interdisciplinary method draws from

traditions in literary theory, oral history, drama, psychology, folklore, and film philosophy, seeking to view lives holistically. The researcher can explore a story told by a participant and record that story. Narrative analysis can be applied to any spoken or written account—for example, an in-depth interview (Marshall & Rossman, 1999, p. 122).

More specifically, the researcher searched for statements in the interviews about the perceptions of participants and how they were responding to the education of girls with disabilities in primary schools. The researcher then developed a list of non-repetitive, non-overlapping statements in order to classify individual responses. Examining the statements or emerging themes helped the researcher describe what was occurring in classrooms and schools regarding the experiences and access opportunities in the education of girls with disabilities. The researcher sought all possible meanings and divergent perspectives, varied the frames of reference about the phenomenon, and constructed descriptions as to how exactly the phenomenon was experienced. Finally, through the development of detailed descriptions of the experiences, the researcher found the overall ‘essence’ of meaning for those involved (Creswell, 1998, p. 148-150).

### Verification of the Findings

Richardson’s (1994) metaphorical description of validity is considered in the study where the central image of “validity” is not rigid, fixed or two-dimensional. In this perspective Richardson recognizes that there are more than “three sides” from which to approach the world. Rather, instead of the traditional method of triangulation, the central image is the crystal, which

combines symmetry and substance with an infinite variety of shapes, substances, transmutations, multi-dimensionality, and angles of approach. The image of the crystal continually grows, changes, varies and alters. Even though it is not shapeless, crystals are “prisms that reflect externalities and refract within themselves” (p. 934).

This metaphorical sense of validity permits more than a single “truth,” allowing the consideration of different perspectives from various participants, in the analysis of participants’ perceptions. Richardson (1994) believes that “what we see depends on our angle of repose,” thus benefiting from the move of “plane geometry to light theory, where light can be *both* waves and particles” (Janesick, 2000, p. 934). Consequently, crystallization was the verification method used to provide a deep understanding of the complex, multiple perceptions involved within the education of girls with disabilities in the primary schools in Malawi that were selected in the study. Richardson adds that this method allows us to know more and to doubt what we already know. It leaves us with the confirmation that there is always more to know.

Verification occurred at each stage of the study’s development while respecting the reliability and credibility of data. The richness of the study shined through in the construction of narratives, in the perceptions and stories of each participant. The narrative allowed emergent themes to be validated and for new questions, and truths, to be posed.

Creswell (1998) recommends utilizing at least two of eight verification procedures in any given study. Following this advice, data verification in this study relied on detailed data collection and construction of narratives with narrative inquiry and a portraiture methodological

approach in the analysis of data. The researcher used rich, thick description to represent in detail the participants under study. This detailed description enabled the reader to transfer information to other settings and to determine whether the findings could be transferred “because of shared characteristics” (p.203).

Lincoln and Guba (1985) consider member checks to be “the most critical technique for establishing credibility” (p. 314). This approach involves taking data, analyses, interpretations and conclusions back to the participants so that they can judge the accuracy and credibility of the accounts (Creswell, 1998, p. 203). In this study, the researcher took the interview transcripts, observation and other relevant notes back to the interview participants in the selected schools for their critical review (see Appendix E). This occurred at the end of the two week visit at each site. The researcher and research assistant shared and interpreted text as necessary, continually checking for accuracy and credibility from participants. This process enabled each interview participant to view the interview transcript and observation notes, check the text for accuracy and clarify any remaining questions. It was only through this critical review that the researcher was able to determine the authenticity and accuracy of the methods used for data collection and interpretation.

The third method of verification consisted of the researcher’s prolonged engagement and persistent observation in the field. During the initial interview phase, the researcher spent at least two weeks in each of the six selected schools sites. Creswell (1998) recommends that the researcher builds trust with the participants, learns the culture and checks for misinformation stemming from distortions introduced by the researcher or informants. In the field the researcher

made decisions about what is salient to the study in terms of the focus on quality and access as well as relevance to the purpose of the study (p. 201). Spending considerable time in each of the selected primary schools and its communities enabled the researcher to establish personal relationships and trustworthiness with each interview participant.

The rigorous standards in this study paralleled those set by Lincoln (1995). These included positionality, community, voice, critical subjectivity, reciprocity, sacredness and sharing of the privileges (Creswell, 1998, p. 196). These standards were critical to the researcher's construction of procedures for verification. Positionality in this study involved the researcher making conscious efforts to display the authenticity and honesty of both the text and the position of the researcher. Detailed narratives were constructed to provide a forum for traditionally marginalized groups, empowering and giving voice to those engaged with girls with disabilities in primary schools.

The researcher possessed high levels of self-awareness in the critical subjectivity of the process, enabling herself to experience personal and social transformation throughout the study. Each research assistant provided explanations of local languages, customs and culture both inside and outside the school communities. This allowed the researcher to move from the role of an outside observer to the position of a respected guest within each school and the surrounding community. Reciprocity was developed between the researcher and the participants, creating environments of intense sharing, trust and mutuality. Following these standards ensured the sacredness and collaborative nature of the study. The researcher had utmost respect for the perceptions presented and shared all results and privileges of the study with the participants.



## Limitations

Several limitations of this study may exist. It is expected that a complete impact of findings from this exploratory research may not be realized merely because of the publication of this dissertation, or in the immediate future. Because the study is one of the first formal attempts to interview rural primary school teachers, parents, caretakers and community members about the education of girls with disabilities in Malawi, findings may be met with limited enthusiasm and receptiveness. This study may also be limited by the constraints regarding the number of sites visited, the duration of the visits and the openness of the participants to a foreign researcher. Although a Malawian female research assistant accompanied the researcher and translated conversation as needed, cultural and language barriers may still exist, particularly in rural areas where individuals are traditionally less educated and less exposed to foreigners.

This study may be further limited due to its limited time line. Marshall and Rossman (1999) believe that narrative inquiry requires a great deal of openness and trust between participant and researcher. Although the researcher spent at least two weeks at each primary school site, this study could have benefited from the researcher investing more time at each site. Inquiry should be a mutual and sincere collaboration, a caring relationship that is established over time for full participation in the storytelling, retelling, and reliving of personal experiences. The narrative still demands intense active listening and giving the narrator full voice (p.122-123). Previous experience and additional training of the researcher in narrative inquiry would also be beneficial to this study.

Qualitative research design requires the researcher to become a research instrument. This means that the researcher must have the ability to observe behavior and must sharpen the skills necessary for observation and face-to-face interviews (Janesick, 2000, p. 386). Once again, time constraints limited the researcher's ability to truly become a research instrument, to acquire and polish all the necessary skills to conduct a flawless study. That said, as an emerging scholar and researcher, data collection for this study was truly a learning and life-changing experience for the researcher and all others involved in this study.

### Confidential and Ethical Considerations

Letters of participation were procured from each participant who wished to be interviewed in this study. Sample letters are included in Appendix A. The identities of all the participants were protected to the maximum extent possible throughout the entire data collection process. The cassette tapes from all the interviews were transcribed collaboratively by the researcher and her research assistants. The names of the participants were changed and the tapes were coded according to the participant's school site. All cassette tapes and artifacts were carefully secured in a locked container.

During this entire process the researcher was very cautious not to conscientiously inject personal hypothesis, questions or experiences into the stories that were being shared. The researcher needed to carefully consider the collected evidence, incidences and events to critically evaluate each step of the study. One of the final steps in the analysis consisted of returning to the

philosophical underpinnings of the study, to the reasons why this particular study can be valuable in improving educational practices for all children, with and without disabilities.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **EDUCATION OF GIRLS WITH DISABILITIES: PERSONAL STORIES**

“Mwanawang’onasakuliradziwelimodzi”

“Crocodile kid does not grow up from one well only.”

—Malawian Proverb

This proverb implies that a child is raised not only by her parents, but by many others in the local community that enrich the child’s development. In other words, “a child is raised by an entire village.”

#### **Introduction**

This chapter discusses the preparedness of the Malawian primary education system with regards to providing quality education to girls with disabilities. The discussion is based on the examination of the educational experiences of Malawian primary school girls with disabilities within the context of six primary schools and communities surrounding these schools. The focus of each case often lies in a holistic view of the larger community, not only on each individual girl with a disability.

To facilitate a rich portrayal of experiences of girl students with disabilities, communications with key participants, both spoken and written, collected via interviews and observations during site visits are reported. This analysis provides a snapshot of the conditions that existed for primary school girls with disabilities during the year 2005 in six primary schools, and the communities adjacent to these schools. Portraiture and narrative inquiry methodologies

were utilized to gain insight into the personal lives and experiences of those directly affected by special education in rural communities.

### *Research Sites and Research Assistants*

The research sites were carefully selected through close collaboration with officials in the Special Needs Department of the Malawi Ministry of Education and professors at Montfort Teacher Training College. Each research site represents one primary school within each of the six educational divisions in Malawi. Two sites were located in the north, two in the central region and two in the south. At each site, the researcher and research assistant conducted classroom observations and interviews with special education teachers, parents/caregivers and local community members.

The data collected from Site 6 in central Malawi was not used for analysis purposes in this study. The researcher and research assistant were unable to collect quality data from this particular site. A multitude of factors contributed to this situation. Large numbers of students were absent while many others were completing several days of comprehensive exams. Teachers were under scrutiny as two male teachers had regular patterns of coming to work with alcohol on their breath. Many others were in attendance at a funeral. The site itself was much more urban than the other rural sites; it was much closer to a large city than the others.

Table 1 provides information about each research site including the dates for the site visit, and the number of instructors and students at the respective schools. A female Malawian research assistant accompanied the researcher at each of the sites. Each research assistant was

trained as a special education teacher and belonged to an educational division that was different from the one that was being researched. Research assistants' tasks included translating interviews and conversations from Chewa or other local dialectical languages to English, collecting and triangulating observations, interpreting classroom activities and sensitizing the researcher to specifics of Malawian cultural norms within primary schools and communities.

Table 1. Research Sites and Assistants

	Site 1	Site 2	Site 3	Site 4	Site 5	Site 6
School*	School A	School B	School C	School D	School E	School F
Location*	South	Central	North	South	North	Central
Dates	Apr 19 – Apr 29, 2005	May 19– Jun 16, 2005	Jun 21– Jun 30, 2005	Jul 5– Jul 15, 2005	Sep 9– Sep 22, 2005	Oct 5– Oct 14, 2005
Research Assistant*	Assistant 1	Assistant 2	Assistant 3	Assistant 4	Assistant 5	Assistant 6
Number of Teachers	17	16	48	19	20	34
Number of Students	824	829	1916	1107	1173	702

\*Note: Names and other identifying factors have been changed to ensure anonymity.

A unique aspect of this study is the time that the researcher was able to spend with each research assistant. The researcher and the research assistant spent the entire two weeks together at each site. This involved not only visiting each school site but also sharing transportation, meals, lodging facilities and free time. It was during this time that the researcher was able to gain valuable insight into Malawian culture, schools, family life and other aspects of daily life. The

research assistants shared much personal as well as professional information with the researcher. This greatly enhanced the researcher's perspective and knowledge of what it was like to be a Malawian citizen, teacher and friend.

### *Research Participants*

At each selected site, one special education teacher, one parent or caregiver and one community member were interviewed. The following tables detail information about each type of interviewee. Table 2 provides information relating to the six special education teachers (four males and two females) who were interviewed by the researcher. All six teachers had received special needs education certification in learning difficulties from Montfort Teacher Training College in Limbe, Malawi. Their ages ranged from 34 years to 42 years at the time of interview. Time involvement with their respective schools ranged anywhere from five months to 12 years, with an average of approximately 3.5 years.

Table 3 provides information relating to the six parents or caregivers that were interviewed by the researcher. Their ages ranged between 44 years to 66 years. Four of the parents/caregivers were female and two were male. One was a grandmother whose daughter had passed away from HIV/AIDS complications. All six interviewees were taking care of a child with a learning disability. The educational level of the parents/caregivers ranged from no formal schooling to secondary school education. Specifically, one of the parents/caregivers had never attended school, four attended only primary school, and one attended secondary school. The parents/caregivers were involved with the respective school anywhere from 3 years to 10 years.

Table 2. Profile of Special Education Teachers

	Site 1	Site 2	Site 3	Site 4	Site 5	Site 6
Name*	Lillian Kadzami	John Nkada	Wilson Mzira	George Mkama	Jonathan Banda	Phoebe Shongaza
Age at the Time of Interview	36 years	37 years	35 years	42 years	39 years	34 years
Educational Level	Learning Disability Certificate from Montfort, 2000	Learning Disability Certificate from Montfort, 2004	Learning Disability Certificate from Montfort, 2004	Learning Disability Certificate from Montfort	Learning Disability Certificate from Montfort, 2004	Learning Disability Certificate from Montfort, 2004
Duration of Involved with School	4.5 years	5 months	12 years	1.5 years	1 year	1.5 years
Gender	Female	Male	Male	Male	Male	Female

\*Note: Names and other identifying factors have been changed to ensure anonymity.



Table 3. Parents or Caregivers

	Site 1	Site 2	Site 3	Site 4	Site 5	Site 6
Name of Girl with Disability*	Amelia	Catherine	Ginny	Phoebe	Margaret	Martha
Name of Parent/ Caregiver*	Margaret Kalima	Joyce Mkhota	James Akhanto	Harold Nyembe	Esther Phitho	Salina Nikhata
Age at the Time of Interview	45 years	Unknown	46 years	66 years	50 years	54 years
Number of Children	8	5	7	Unknown	9 children, grandchildren and orphans in her home	8
Relationship with Girl with Disability	Mother	Mother	Mother	Mother	Grandmother	Mother
Educational Level	Primary School until Standard 4	Never Attended School	Primary and Secondary School	Primary School through Standard 7	Primary School through Standard 2	Attended Primary School
Years Involved with School	4	Did not know, involved since she arrived at Site 2	9	3	Did not know	10
Gender	Female	Female	Male	Male	Female	Female

\*Note: Names and other identifying factors have been changed to ensure anonymity.

Table 4 provides information relating to the six community members that were interviewed by the researcher. Three were males and three females. Each community member

personally knew a girl with a learning disability who was attending the selected school from the research site. Ages of the community members ranged between 23 to 41 years. Reported years of involvement with the school ranged from 2 to 9 years. Educational levels varied from primary school, to secondary school, to teacher training college.

Table 4. Community Members

	Site 1	Site 2	Site 3	Site 4	Site 5	Site 6
Name of Girl with Disability*	Amelia	Catherine	Ginny	Phoebe	Margaret	Martha
Name*	Ellen Mwada	Jane Nkhosi	Frederick Bhandu	Reginald Ghomaka	Frank Mkhomba	Ruth Nbosi
Age at Time of Interview	48 years	23 years	51 years	31 years	46 years	38 years
Number of Children	7	None	Unknown	1	3	6
Relationship to the Girl with a Disability	Amelia's neighbor	Catherine's neighbor	Ginny's neighbor	Phoebe's neighbor	Margaret's neighbor	Martha's neighbor
Educational Level of Community Member	Primary School through Standard 7	Primary and Junior Certificates	Primary School through Standard 8	Junior certificate from Site 4 Secondary School	Primary and Secondary School, Teaching Certificate	Junior Certificate
Years involved with school	Unknown	2	4	4	9	5
Gender	Female	Female	Male	Male	Male	Female

\*Note: Names and other identifying factors have been changed to ensure anonymity.

## Personal Stories

### *Margaret: Hidden Costs of Schooling*

In a school in the northern region of Malawi, Margaret sits quietly in the very last row of her Standard 4 classroom. She is one of the 35 girls in the class and the only one who has been officially identified with a learning disability. There are 73 students in her class. Her classroom has no furniture at all and no glass in any of the seven windows. She and her classmates await instruction while sitting on a dirt floor with a tin roof overhead.

By quarter past 10 a.m. the room was already very warm and dusty. Margaret's teacher sharply called on Margaret during the English lesson. The teacher said, "Margaret, stand up!" She repeated this same direction four times, while Margaret remained sitting. Giving up, the teacher said, "Read the words on the board." Margaret did not say anything but tried to cower closer to the dirt floor. As the teacher repeated herself three times, many of Margaret's classmates laughed at her unresponsiveness. Clearly, without appropriate instructional support, Margaret was not prepared to participate in the activities of the class. She was left feeling humiliated.

It was now close to 11 am. During the class break, Margaret kept sitting in the back of the room while most of her classmates went outside to play. Although nine other girls stayed inside the classroom, there was very little verbal or social interaction among Margaret and her classmates during the break.

After the break the students returned to the class, yet both of the regular teachers were not present. The special education teacher led the class. He stood behind Margaret and tapped her shoulder with a stick as he verbally assisted her in copying text from the board.

In this vignette, it appears that Margaret must bear the burden of gender barriers and other hidden costs of her education. She was subject to humiliation and mockery in a learning environment that left much to be desired. In addition, Margaret was the only student with an identified learning disability in a classroom which had 72 other students. None of these students seemed to be aware of Margaret's condition or special learning needs. While Margaret was sixteen years old, most of her classmates were nine to ten years in age.

It seemed that because of her experiences at school, Margaret had already made up her mind not to respond to her teacher's directions of reading words on the board. Her participation in class activities in general was minimal. During a forty-five minute class on English instruction, the researcher observed Margaret being verbally reprimanded and asked questions that she was clearly incapable of responding to. She was laughed at and mocked by her peers at least four times in a single day.

According to Margaret's grandmother, "others laugh at her because Margaret is older and her size is larger." Unfortunately, humiliation and harassment are two of the more obvious gender barriers Margaret encountered because of her condition. Terry & Hoare (2007) discuss several studies in the mid-1990's that investigated the low participation of girls in education in sub-Saharan Africa. These studies identified widespread harassment of girls by male teachers

and negative attitudes displayed by teachers—both male and female—towards girls, including verbal and physical abuse in the classroom (p. 107).

In addition to humiliation and harassment, differences in physical appearances and older ages often aggravate the problems that girls with disabilities have to face. Jonathan Banda, Margaret's special education teacher, had many older and larger girls enrolled in lower classes (Standard 3 and Standard 4). He described these girls as such: "They seem to look shy and what have you, people simply take advantage of them and they rape them. By giving them some money and giving them food and what have you. So in that way they actually take advantage of them. So raping is really common, especially here."

Jonathan reported that girls were often raped on their way back from school by members of the community. In towns like Margaret's in northern Malawi, where the school is near the city, "These children sometimes go into town and try to beg. When they beg in town, people take advantage of them and rape them by giving them some money, five or ten kwacha, or whatever they can give them. Some of them come back very late from begging in town and people again take advantage. So, the raping mainly occurs not at school but when they go from home to school and when they go to town to beg...Also when they are at home, in most cases they are left alone. So, at home, really people take advantage of that one. Yeah, it can be their own family members or whatever."

Margaret's grandmother, Esther Phitho, also expressed many concerns about Margaret's schooling and safety. Ever since Margaret's mother passed away from HIV/AIDS, her

grandmother had been caring for Margaret and eight other children, some of whom were her grandchildren while others were orphans. Margaret's grandmother expressed many concerns about Margaret's schooling and safety.

Esther, like other parents and caregivers of female children with disabilities, was hesitant to send Margaret to school. When asked to describe her experience with students with disabilities, Margaret's grandmother used the words, "beating, raping, begging for food, speaking problems and other challenges."

Jonathan concurred with Margaret's grandmother and identified two major problems for educating girls with disabilities: (1) Most girls with disabilities are not even enrolled, and if they are enrolled, they do not continue far past primary school with their education; and (2) More concerning, he believed that their human rights were simply not respected, even in the seemingly nurturing environment of their classroom. He stated that, "They are given a lot of work, have their things snatched away, mocked and, in most cases, they are raped."

Jonathan believed that the girls did not come to school mainly because parents did not hold high expectations for their daughters. Parents did not see potential in them and this mindset was reinforced at school when girls did not achieve well. Furthermore, Jonathan stated, "If their disability is severe, in most cases, girls are not provided much support. They are just locked either in their houses or if they can, they are asked to look after their younger siblings. But, they are not given anything that is important to them."

When the girls with disabilities did come to school they were typically put in lower classes because their performance was very poor. Jonathan explained how they could not keep up with the work beyond Standard 3 or 4. As a result, they were placed in lower classes so that they would “at least have some basic knowledge like reading, writing, and simple calculation.”

According to Jonathan, because these girls were much older than the rest of their classmates, they were routinely mocked and humiliated. This mocking manifested itself in a variety of ways—verbally as well as physically. Sometimes people make rude and demeaning comments to the girls, they tried to touch them inappropriately, and sometimes they punished students with disabilities by whipping them. Girls, in particular, were targeted as “they don’t really respond back.”

Jonathan believed that girls were mocked most frequently by their fellow classmates because “They can’t answer questions and don’t perform well in class. Teachers mock these girls because some of them are big and they don’t perform to their satisfaction...In addition, when they do go back home, members of the community and parents, actually mock them.” He explained this was often because they cannot perform to the expectation of others.

Clearly, the circumstances that girl students with disabilities had to face involved the parents, teachers, children, and community members. Ironically enough, the humiliation and mockery that Margaret witnessed in her school classroom on a daily basis was not the most serious concern. Margaret’s grandmother reported that Margaret has been raped multiple times while traveling to and from school. She stated, “The issue of raping is really disappointing

because these people—they need to think that these girls are disabled, but they still take advantage by raping them, it's really disappointing. It's disappointing for us as parents. But even so we do not stop sending the children to school, we want our children to go to school so that they can learn, we have no choice. If we keep them at home, they won't learn. Instead we need to send them to school despite all the problems.”

Margaret's grandmother further explained that, “Some parents, they are disappointed to send their children to school because of their disability. When coming to school, on their way, there are some drains and rivers and they fear that their children might be washed away by the river or might fall into the drains. That's why they fear they cannot send their children to school. Also on their way, they come across boys and men whom the parents fear might rape the children.”

Like Jonathan, Margaret's grandmother claimed that teachers, parents and other community members know about the physical abuse and incidents of rape. She recounted one of Margaret's rapes by describing, “When she was coming home from school, she had a rest on the road on her way home. Then she continued on her journey home and she met a man who raped her. Then people came to assist her.” She continues by stating that “these people who rape the children, they destroy the future of the child.”

Margaret's grandmother stated that “all girls with disabilities are being raped.” One particular man who raped Margaret on one occasion did go to jail for two years but not all rapists were necessarily caught and imprisoned. The protocol required that parents of the victim first



take the child to the hospital for testing to confirm the rape. Following this examination, the parents were required to press charges with the police. Given the humiliation and the risk of jeopardizing relationships in small close knit communities, many parents hesitated to take these steps.

The village chief in this rural community was aware of the incidences of rape and acknowledged its negative impact on individuals and the community itself. He stressed that all community members needed to work together to address the raping of young girls. He stated that he could talk to people to try to educate them but it was the people themselves who must act to stop the rapes. He was non-committal about other steps or actions he could take to address the problem.

Statistics demonstrate that the HIV/AIDS pandemic is itself aggravated by this gender violence problem, especially towards girls with disabilities. This issue is particularly problematic in Malawi due to its high poverty rates. In 2003, it was estimated that over 40 million people in the developing world were living with HIV/AIDS, with 60% of new infections occurring in the 19-24 year age group. The majority of infections were in women. Girls were the most vulnerable to infection. In countries with the highest rates of infection, such as Malawi, girls were five to six times more likely to be HIV positive than boys of the same age (Dunne *et al.*, 1996, p. 88).

In sub-Saharan Africa, studies on education and human rights abuses have found clear evidence of adolescent sexual violence in schools. In addition, it is widely reported that young girls (like Margaret) were increasingly targeted in high HIV/AIDS prevalence locations because

they were perceived to be free of the AIDS virus. In fact, the myth that sex with a virgin cures AIDS has led to the rape of very young infants (Dunne *et al.*, 1996, p. 89).

Despite the mockery, humiliation and issues of personal safety, Margaret's grandmother still insisted that parents needed to send their girls to school. She said that "even though the raping is there or common, parents still send their children to school because they know that school is where they learn." She reiterated that all parents know the educational and social benefits of attending school.

Margaret's grandmother felt strongly that parents needed to educate their children with disabilities, even though they faced problems. She made pleas for the government to work hand in hand with school officials and community members to create the best possible educational experience for girls with disabilities. On the whole, she was pleased with Margaret's education, with how the specialist and regular teachers worked together to teach her and other children with disabilities. She favored working at a slower pace until the children learned and achieved their individual goals. She summarized her thoughts with: "I can see that there is a future for these girls if they learn. They can help themselves, make business (and become self-reliant) and they can even go on to secondary school. And even do work to earn money to care and look after themselves. So I have seen that there is a future in them, so their education should continue."

#### *Catherine: The Courage to Repeat*

Catherine was the only student with a disability in her Standard 4 class of 77 students, 43 of whom were girls. Catherine was 17 years old, while the age of her classmates ranged between

8–12 years. She was considerably taller and physically more mature than the rest of her classmates. Like most of the students in this lakeside community in central Malawi, her clothes were old, and worn out.

To get Catherine's attention, her teacher sharply called out her name as Catherine's group was called upon to read aloud. The girls in her group were otherwise distracted and off-task in the absence of the teacher attention. The teacher now called on Catherine to read. Catherine was a slow reader, she frequently paused between words, but she persisted. When Catherine's turn was over, other students clapped to acknowledge Catherine's attempt at reading. Next the teacher called on a boy to read. Most students continued to be off task unless directly called upon by the teacher.

It was not surprising that some years ago Catherine had given up and refused to go to school. Joyce Mkhota, Catherine's mother, stated that, "Catherine tried to stay home and do nothing." Having never been afforded the privilege of attending school, Catherine's mother realized her personal loss and the value of education. Thus she strongly encouraged Catherine to go back to school and continue her education. Catherine had previously attended Standards 1 through 4, and then put herself back through these grades all over again. Ironically, Catherine made the decision to repeat the classes on her own because her friends had mocked her for not being able to read.

Joyce, Catherine's mother, thought that she was aware of what was happening at school but admitted to never entering Catherine's classroom. She was unable to read or write herself,

and because of this she felt that she could not fully participate in Catherine's education. She did not know that Catherine was frequently shuttled between the resource room and the regular classroom, sometimes changing rooms and teachers every three to four minutes. Someday, Joyce wanted Catherine to attend a vocational training school so that she could become self-reliant.

Joyce was very disappointed when her oldest of five children, Catherine, was moved from Standard 4 back to Standard 1. She thought that it was not proper for a child of Catherine's age, what was at that time 16 years old, to have to go back and start over in Standard 1. She knew that her daughter had not learned to read or to write, even simple words like "mother" or "grandmother." Yet she still believed that Catherine was too old and too physically mature to be back in Standard One.

Joyce strongly believed in the power and privilege of her daughter going to school. She did not want Catherine to be just sitting at home. Joyce stated that at school, "Catherine has to learn and change for the better." She wanted Catherine to be able to do doing whatever her friends were doing. Joyce did see positive academic and social differences once her daughter went back to Standard 1. She was very pleased when her daughter was invited by her peers to attend the youth group activities at the church.

Even though Joyce readily admitted that she herself was unable to read and write, she recognized the value of having these skills. She knew that when one can read and write, they are

able to participate in social events. For Joyce, literacy was a means, a tool, to have a voice in the community.

Joyce's own inability to read or write had hindered her participation in her daughter's education. She had spoken with Catherine's teachers but she never visited Catherine's classroom to observe her learning. She said, "The problem is that I don't know how to read. And I cannot tell what is really happening. I don't know exactly what Catherine is learning at school." However, Joyce still said that she "expects a disabled girl to be active when she is in a group with other people. And also, in the future, to have a chance for a job and be self-reliant and independent,"

Jane Nkhosi, a community member and neighbor to Catherine, had a slightly different perspective to share. Jane believed that it was the school teachers' decision (and not that of Catherine) to send Catherine from Standard 4 back to Standard 1. She claimed that the teachers sent Catherine back to Standard 1 so that she could learn to read and write. Jane also thought this was a good opportunity for Catherine to improve her otherwise poor reading and writing skills.

At the same time, Jane believed that Catherine's teachers were in part responsible for Catherine's problems in school. She recounted how the teachers kept promoting Catherine from grade to grade even though she had failed to learn the material. This, Jane believed, ultimately resulted in Catherine losing motivation to learn. She stated, "Because when a person fails and is being promoted, it makes her to not work hard. This made her not to put much effort into

classroom activities. If a person feels bitter because of her failure, she works hard to perform well. This made Miriam not to work very hard because she had a feeling of being promoted.”

Catherine’s special education teacher, John Nkada, bluntly described his experiences in educating girls with disabilities. He maintained that “The education of girls with disabilities is not satisfactory as of now because most of the girls are not paid adequate attention, especially in the classrooms. As a result, most of them drop-out of school.” He noted possible factors that may lead up to these circumstances:

1. The teachers misinterpreting the disability or the problem of a girl child as laziness.
2. The girl child herself having an inferiority complex, especially when she’s failing to accomplish assigned tasks.
3. The girl child is lacking support—especially from the parents. Most of the parents discourage their children from going to school because of their frequent failure or repetition in classes.
4. The girl child, most of the time, is a victim of mockery, especially of her peers.

The inferiority complex, John explained, began with failure in the classroom. According to him, it was common for a girl child with disabilities to feel that she may not be able to participate fully in the classroom activities. Furthermore, John said that when, “A girl child with a disability fails to answer a question in the classroom, you will find that most of the pupils laugh at them. So, as a result, each and every time the girl child attempts to answer a question, she is laughed at by her peers. In so doing, she becomes a victim of laughter in the classroom.”

John believed there to be many reasons for girls with disabilities to drop out of school.

These included:

- Teachers are lacking in management skills and are unable to control the classroom. When a class loses discipline, the girl with disabilities is laughed at whenever she attempts to answer a question.
- When a girl child fails and is asked to repeat a grade, parents are prone to discontinuing her education. In these situations, many parents encourage their child to marry. This further undermines educational opportunities for girl students, especially those with disabilities.
- Teachers are not trained to involve all students in classroom activities. Girls with disabilities, already lacking in motivation, lose interest.

As a special education teacher, John realized that he needed to encourage parents to get rid of negative attitudes. He was cognizant that he also needed to “sensitize” general education teachers to those students with disabilities. The teachers need to be more aware of individual special needs so that they can more effectively share their time among *all* the students in the classroom. He believed that “The classroom should be conducive to learning for each and every child. Only when the teacher is able to do these things, will the girl with a disability be able to participate fully in the classroom learning activities.” Thus, John realized that it was critical for him and other special education teachers to work closely with parents and general education teachers.

John believed that a number of factors could contribute to improvement in the education of girls with disabilities. These included:

- Positive reinforcement in class by the teacher. This will help keep students motivated.
- Parental support and provision of basic teaching and learning materials including writing materials and clothing.
- Teacher training—teachers use appropriate methodologies to accommodate individual student learning styles.

John stressed the importance of working with parents of girls with learning disabilities in order to establish positive attitudes that would encourage these parents to send their daughters to school. Furthermore, John believed that positive role models—women with disabilities who were able to find work in the village—could provide much encouragement to parents. He argued that these role models would help the parents see how education can benefit girls as well as women with disabilities.

At the same time, John testified, that disabled girls like Catherine were not taught at an appropriate standard (grade level). Because the number of general education children enrolled in the class was so large, children, especially girls, with a disability were often sidelined and did not get any special attention. Therefore, “You will find that the girl child, the education for a girl child, is not satisfactory, especially for those with disabilities.” This marginalization and sub-standard education opportunities for girls with disabilities, was very noticeable to the researcher during this study.



There did seem to be a glimmer of hope as John reported on positive interaction and cooperation between the regular and the special education teachers at his school. “We are working hand in hand so that the children with disabilities should benefit from the education that is delivered at this school.” Purposeful collaboration with parents and community members at schools will also be critical to future success.

*Phoebe: Beating the Odds*

Phoebe sat quietly in her Standard 4 classroom, Section B. Like her peers, she was anxiously awaiting taking an English exam. Students nervously talk with each other and as they perform some simple routines to revise their work just before the exam. Following their male teacher’s command, students exit the room and combine together in another classroom with the Standard 4, Section A students. The Standard 4, Section A teacher, a female, wrote the test on the board in Phoebe’s now empty classroom while the male teacher taught both classes of students in the other room.

One of Phoebe’s classmates was kind enough to push Phoebe’s wheelchair to the other classroom. Phoebe has been attending primary school for approximately three years now. Her father, himself educated only through Standard 7, started sending Phoebe to primary school as soon as the road from their house to the school got paved. The pavement made it much easier for him to push Phoebe’s wheelchair the three kilometers to school every day. Once Phoebe was in the school complex, her classmates typically helped her move around.

Phoebe's brick and mortar school was donated to the community by the African Development Bank. It was nestled among the sugar cane fields and wildlife preserves in the southern region. The school building itself had windows with glasses. Classrooms were equipped with desks, tables, and chairs. The Bank built the school structure and the community supported it by paying for water and other necessities. The school had drinking water fountains, latrines with running water and a special education teacher. According to local Malawian standards, it was a very well equipped facility.

Phoebe sat amongst her peers and completed her English exam. Although the exam was being taken by students in Standard 4, the researcher's assistant stated that this exam actually covered content from Standard 2 English. Even though the content in this exam appeared to be below grade level, it was taken by all students (general and special) in the class. No accommodations were made for students with disabilities. Furthermore, every student, irrespective of the disability, was assessed in exactly the same way.

Phoebe has an obvious physical disability, but she was also thought by teachers to be a "slow learner." Her special education teacher reported that she had difficulties reading in English. However, despite of these factors, Phoebe has managed to stay at the top of her class for the past two years—consistently ranking second or third in performance in her class of 88 students.

Phoebe smiled brightly in her blue school uniform and red wheelchair when she heard that she once again scored at the top of her class on her English exam. Phoebe's father was a

strong advocate for educating children with disabilities. He frequently visited the school and communicated with the school teachers and principal. Phoebe's special education teacher, George Mkama, advocated for her needs and insisted that she sat in the front and center of her classroom. She was supported by her peers and other members of the school community. George reported that everyone in the school had very high expectations of Phoebe and they were doing their best to support her.

Reginald Ghomaka, a member of the community, knew Phoebe and her family very well. He explained how Phoebe was very dependent on her peers to bring her to school. He stated, "She is very dependent on other people to push her in her wheelchair. So, in that part, there are a lot of problems as you know that somebody who relies on other people to push her. It's very hard for her to think that 'I can go to school on my own while those people who can push her are not willing to go to school.' For example, she comes to school with her fellow peers. So when they say that they are not going to school, there is no way Phoebe can go to school. So this is one of the problems this girl can face."

In addition to the paved road, a second important reason why Phoebe's father decided to send her to primary school was the arrival of George as a special education teacher at the school. George joined the school about one and a half years before Phoebe enrolled. Her father admitted that, "The specialist teacher was important in my decision because there is a teacher here who was trained on how to handle and teach children with disabilities. Therefore, I decided to move my daughter from her former school to this present one." Phoebe's former school did not have a special education teacher.

During the first few months of joining the school Phoebe had to face many challenges. Initially her classmates called her names and refused to push her wheelchair. Her father recollected the time when Phoebe was ridiculed almost on a daily basis. He attributed this to the other children not being used to her and not having disabled children in their homes. He detailed how “The other pupils were surprised to see my disabled child. And later on, they saw that there is no difference between themselves and my daughter.”

The specialist teacher, George, was a key player in advocating for Phoebe and getting other students to accept her. Phoebe’s father pointed out that, after George spoke to Phoebe’s other teachers and peers, everything—the mocking, the harassment, the unwillingness to cooperate—stopped. Her father stated that “She is learning well without facing any problems. Now some of her friends push her to school and back home.”

In fact, Phoebe’s father made very concentrated efforts to connect with the special education teacher. He reported, “My child’s experiences here at this school aren’t at all bad. I try hard to make connections with the specialist teacher on how she can have better education here at school. I try to do this through the special education teacher so that everything here goes on well.”

Phoebe’s special education teacher, George, said that he was very keen on the education of girls, especially those with disabilities. He regularly visited parents after school hours and encouraged them to send their daughters to school. He also facilitated monthly committee

meetings with parents to discuss issues pertaining to children with disabilities. This committee was formed by all the parents with children with disabilities. The committee was formally organized with a chairperson, a treasurer, and a secretary. In the coming years, George was planning to invite parents of children *without* disabilities to the meetings. He believed that the best solutions would emerge from the interactions and conversations of *all* parents.

Inclusive education was the focus of education at Phoebe's school. George believed that girls with disabilities and those without disabilities should learn together. If the disability was mild, the decision to leave them in regular education was a simple one for George. He sometimes pulled out children with learning disabilities for extra help. In general, his approach was to leave these students in the mainstream classrooms for inclusion. He advocated for placing students with more serious learning disabilities into the resource room. Therefore, decisions about placement were made on the perceived severity of the disability, not on any formalized evaluation or test score.

George believed that the education of girls with disabilities began at their homes. In his regularly scheduled meetings with parents he let them know about the educational programs for girls with disabilities. "I do it through encouraging parents to send their children with disabilities to school because some of the parents, some of the parents lock their children in houses uh...just because they don't know whether there are schools or not. Then, during meetings, after being informed, is when their...children are sent to school. Then also I encourage them not to isolate those girls with disabilities. They have to interact with their friends. Not only that, they should not be absent from school."

According to George, the apparent success of education for girls with disabilities at Phoebe's school can be attributed to four main factors:

- Inclusive education—girls with disabilities and girls without disabilities learning together in the mainstream
- Resource room—full or partial days
- Education at home by the parents
- Support from the administration—The school principal attended regularly scheduled meetings in which *all* the teachers in the school are made aware of the issues facing students with special needs and provided basic knowledge and skills on how to handle children with disabilities. This was found to be effective since general education teachers interacted with children with special needs.

George elaborated on the clear benefits of placing girls with disabilities into the mainstream. These included peer interaction, making friends, not isolating and labeling those with disabilities, and equitable opportunities in education. George noted that this approach encouraged a healthy competition among all students, regular and those with special needs, and led to comparable grades. According to George, inclusive classrooms inevitably lead to higher motivation and achievement for students with disabilities.

George actively campaigned for collaboration between special education and general education teachers whenever possible. He believed that “One of the causes of slow learning is a poor foundation in Standard 1. We pay particular attention to education at this grade level because this is the starting point—it provides the child a strong foundation to build upon. In so

doing, we are trying to reduce the number of slow learners....The Standard 1 teachers, well, one was out for three months on maternity leave, so I went to support the other one. I participate because special education is a new baby here. I go in there to support and to be exemplary, to promote cooperation between general and special education.”

In an effort to complement the teachers’ efforts, the school administration played a key role in the education of girls, especially those with disabilities. The principal regularly called meetings at the request of the special education teacher. George tried to schedule most of these meetings and phone calls through the principal’s office; he saw their participation and support to be critical to his efforts. When a girl with a disability was absent from school, George requested the principal to make a phone call to the girl’s parents to inquire why she was absent. The principal was also responsible for providing teaching and learning materials to special education teachers and children with disabilities. George gave credit to the school administration for providing him with a special room where he could teach children with disabilities.

Phoebe’s father recognized that the regular education teachers played a key role in the education of all children, those that were disabled and those that were not disabled. They were critical in assisting disabled girls to learn properly. He believed that “Teachers should be sure to give equal education to all children, those who are disabled and those who are not disabled. And, when they do that, then the children will be able to do well in their education.”

Further elaborating on Phoebe’s situation, he explained how the school teachers’ efforts were making a difference: “They moved her from the back of the class to the front where she

could learn without problems and she's able to see whatever the teacher is doing. So I feel that teachers are doing well and putting much effort in helping my child to continue with her education."

Phoebe's father indeed seemed very pleased with the education that Phoebe was receiving at her school. He stated, "I believe that, in the meantime, she's getting enough education both from Mr. George Mkama and her other teachers—in classes where there are children who are not disabled. She's getting education both in the resource room and in the regular classroom; she's learning with her non-disabled peers, getting the same education they are in the regular class. So it appears that there is an improvement and I'm sure that the education she's getting is really good and is the same education as the other children who are not disabled are getting."

In addition to her regular lessons at school, three times a week Phoebe received tutoring lessons at her home. These lessons were taught by a teacher from her former school. Her father happily paid for the extra lessons as he knew they would help Phoebe's confidence and education. A community member from Phoebe's community noted, "Disabled children: now they are well taught because, apart from the lessons they have daily at school, there are also extra lessons which they can get at home by different teachers. And also at home, parents do take part in educating the children so that when they go to school, there can be an easy link with the teachers."



*Ginny: Does Anyone Care?*

It was a very hot and dusty morning in the north at Primary School C. The school-wide assembly had begun five minutes late as only 17 of 57 teachers were currently present. By 7:30 students were patiently waiting in classrooms for teachers to arrive. The wind carried the red dirt in and out of the open classrooms.

In the Standard 4 classroom, the first twelve students to arrive, including Ginny, were busy chatting with each other. The faded blue paint has peeled off most of the walls. The chalkboard was old and very hard to see. A large hole in the ceiling revealed the overhead rafters. Small holes permeated the rest of the ceiling.

By 7:46, twenty-three students were present to greet their teacher. Upon entering the classroom, in a very mean voice the teacher said, “You are sitting there without any chairs or a chalkboard. How do you expect to learn?” She left only to return a short time later with three male students carrying a chalkboard.

At 7:53, the second female teacher arrived in the classroom and greeted students. Students routinely stood up to return the greeting. By now there were 47 students in the classroom, 35 of whom were girls.

At 7:58, another classroom joined Ginny’s classroom. Students were now squeezed into every available space in the room. There were now 86 students and two teachers in the room.

At 8:07, students listened to the sounds of workers, saws and falling tree branches as a tree (less than fifty feet from the classroom) was being chopped down. Students took out their copy books to begin the day's lesson as the first teacher sat on a chair basking in the sunshine.

At 9:07, a girl approached the front of the room to read aloud from the chalkboard to her peers. The teacher called on a girl, a boy, and then two more girls to come to the front of the classroom to read. The teacher instructed each student to point to the selected word on the board as they read aloud. Next, the teacher called on the one girl with a disability in the classroom, "Is Ginny present?" Other students responded that, yes, Ginny was here. Ginny made no attempt to respond or to go to the chalkboard. The teacher proceeded to call on the girl sitting next to her, and then called on two more girls and a boy. Meanwhile, another girl from the adjacent resource room sang very loudly and distracted students in Ginny's class. Eight teachers sat outside in the sun, calculating accounts from their personal businesses. All of them were eagerly awaiting the arrival of the next day's paychecks.

This was a typical day at Ginny's primary school. During the two weeks the researcher and research assistant spent at this school, they observed teachers reporting to school late every morning, leaving early, running personal businesses outside their classrooms—all in all demonstrating an irresponsible work ethic. Classrooms were overcrowded and students could be found learning outside under the shade of trees. Teachers were on strike and did not work at all on two of the ten days; school was cancelled another day due to a funeral for a student.

James Akhanto, Ginny's father, described the quality of education at his daughter's school to be poor. He stated that, "The standard of learning here is below standard. One major factor can be the lack of or poor management...Girls are not encouraged to learn here at Primary School C." He has also heard teachers complaining of low salaries and little incentive to perform well. Although his daughter had been enrolled at this school for eleven years, she was still unable to read and write.

James was perplexed how his daughter could be in Standard 6 and still not able to read or write. Ginny has told her father that she was in Standard 6 but the researcher observed her attending the Standard 4 classroom. The researcher's interview with James marked the first time that he had ever been invited to the school to discuss his daughter's education. James was not aware of any type of special lessons at the school or that there was even a special education teacher. He was also not aware that the resource room opened last year. He simply thought that his daughter was in a regular class with her peers. This lack of formalized procedure and communication between the parent and teachers appeared to distance the parent from his daughter's education.

As a parent, James was not sure how he could assist his daughter in performing better in school. The best thing, he believed, was to encourage Ginny to go to school and be serious about her education. As far as the teachers are concerned, he stated that, "They must know their work first ...because I don't think there is anything wise about a teacher to promoting a child into the next class yet she doesn't know how to read and write." He further claimed that the teachers were not serious about education due to poor salaries and poor management.

The lack of collaboration and communication between teachers and parents was a significant problem, according to James. If a child was performing poorly and not able to catch up to their peers, the parents should be called in for a meeting. He had not witnessed any improvement in his daughter's ability to read and write, yet no teacher has ever communicated with him. Even though his family did not have many resources, he stated that if asked, he was willing to pay extra fees to the school to arrange after school or weekend remedial lessons for Ginny.

Frederick Bhandu, a local farmer and treasurer of the committee at the school, had dropped out of school after repeating Standard 8 three times. He readily shared the stories of two of his daughters with disabilities, one of whom has passed away due to insufficient medical care. Frederick has devoted his time to walking to villages in the area to meet with families with children with disabilities. He has gone door to door, informing parents of the importance of sending their children to school. He stressed the need for children with disabilities to be in school so that they can have bright futures, "futures full of hope like their non-disabled peers." He believes that when girls with disabilities attend school, they improve their chances for a brighter future. Frederick claimed to have made much progress as many of the children with disabilities, even those who could not speak, have attended school due to his efforts.

Some local organizations had requested from Frederick a list of children with disabilities in the villages. These organizations then approached the school and donated money to help support the education of children with disabilities. Frederick has continued his visits to homes of children with disabilities, encouraging parents on every visit to send their children to school. He

sent his second daughter to school and hoped for a bright future for her. Fredrick's daughter still resided with her mother, about four hours away. As soon as the special needs education becomes more developed in Ginny's school, Fredrick does plan to move his own daughter to Primary School C.

Frederick regularly participated in local meetings sponsored by NGO's (Non-Governmental Organizations). During these meetings he shared news concerning the welfare of local orphans and children with disabilities. He realized the importance of working with other organizations to benefit and educate children with disabilities. He strongly advocated for children with disabilities to go to school to learn, gain practical experience, and become self-reliant. Frederick believed that all children "should have the privilege of a good education...and to be accepted members of society."

As testimony to his commitment to education, Frederick collaborated with the Malawi Social Action Fund (MASAF) to build an entire block of classrooms for students with special needs at Ginny's school. They were also planning to build a house for the special education teacher near the school. MASAF preferred that this local community had bricks and material ready to build before approving loans to commence projects. At the time of the interview, Frederick and other community members had molded and burned some bricks in preparation for the construction. As long as the bricks were ready, they were not anticipating problems in getting the loan approved.

Wilson Mzira, the special education teacher at Ginny's school, believed that girls with disabilities needed to be educated so that they can learn basic skills and become self-reliant. He also encouraged these girls to attend vocational schools to acquire more self-help skills like tailoring and carpentry. He argued that once these girls have an education and self-help skills they will "not be a burden to the community." He claimed that vocational training schools provided girls the skills to produce things needed by the community which would then allow these girls with disabilities to become independent and self-sufficient. Wilson also articulated that the government needed to build more vocational schools to accommodate the large number of girls that could benefit from them.

Ginny's father, James, supported Wilson's perspective. He believed that girls with disabilities, like his daughter, should definitely be educated so that she can be self-reliant. He stated that, if a girl is educated, she will have the skills to be self-sufficient. After her parents pass, these girls will be able to get a job and take care of themselves. They will also not have to be solely dependent upon a marriage. He was candid in saying that his daughter may not be able to find a person to marry. Therefore, he felt it was even more critical for her receive an education to give her the necessary skills to become a nurse, tailor, or perform some other service needed by the community.

In this rural community there appeared to be a strong need for positive role models for children, particularly girls, with disabilities. Fredrick and others had seen women with disabilities performing jobs on television, but there were very few of these working in the local community. On television, women with blindness have been viewed sewing and working on

computers. Frederick sincerely believed that, with the assistance of education and role models, girls with disabilities in the local community could be motivated to attend vocational schools to learn the skills to become self-sufficient.

As evidence of his commitment to the education for girls with disabilities, Wilson opened a new resource room at his school. At the time of this interview the resource room had been open for a year. During his time with the community, Wilson had noticed a lot of girls with disabilities were not being sent to school, so he first worked on sensitizing the parents, educating them about sending their daughters to school. His approach was effective in that at the time of the interview, there were 12 girls and 10 boys with disabilities who were attending special education classes in his resource room.

Wilson worked in collaboration with the community, school and other organizations to begin special education classes at his school. He met with community leaders and non-governmental organizations such as PODCAM (Parents of Disabled Children's Association of Malawi). These organizations encouraged parents to send their children to schools and provided materials like tables and chairs. Wilson also acknowledged the school principal who gave him a room to conduct special education classes. Much of the teaching material in the room was either created or improvised from locally available materials by Wilson.

Although Wilson advocated for the provision of special education services for girls with disabilities, he admitted that there are very few incentives for teachers to want to educate those children with disabilities. He believed that special education teachers should receive specialized

training for at least two years to learn about the various types of disabilities. The existing nine-month training program was not extensive enough to prepare them well. He believed this was due to “The government does not take special education seriously. The budget that is allocated to the special needs education is just minimal compared to the problems which are faced in special education...The government should at least add or improve the budget in order for special education to be at least fruitful.”

The process itself to become a teacher for children with special needs can be less than motivating. Wilson stated that after completing all the requirements to be a general education teacher, the practicing teachers then go for an interview to study for special needs teacher training at Montfort Teacher Training College. Not everybody who applies gets accepted for specialized training; it can be quite competitive. At Montfort teachers choose a specific category of disability to study. Wilson further explained, “...but, after completion of the course, there is no increase in salaries and no incentive which is given to the specialist teacher. We are just as equal as regular teachers. The certificates of completion are held for a year or two, with the knowledge that maybe you can be given the certificate but only if you work. This again encourages many people not to like the special education teaching.”

Wilson noted that there were six teachers in his area who were trained to be special education teachers. Four of those six trained teachers actually worked as regular teachers because of the lack of incentive to teach children with disabilities. Wilson believed that because working with special needs children was so demanding, the government needed to create special



incentives. With the government's assistance, he believed that specialized teachers may return from regular education back to special education.

According to Wilson, the quality of education of girls with disabilities could be improved if the government began to take special needs education more seriously. Wilson claimed that the government was currently ignoring special needs education. He believed the government should provide specialized teaching and learning materials to the special education classrooms at his school. The government also needed to network and collaborate more with teachers, parents and other non-governmental organizations. Everyone would have to come together and try in unison if educational efforts were to improve.

Wilson said that he chose to become a special education teacher because he wanted to help those children with disabilities. He believed that children with disabilities should be educated according to the ability they have, not the disability. He stated, "I thought that children with disabilities are just ignored. And in order to help the nation, I decided to become a specialist teacher."

#### *Amelia: Knowing One's Place*

Of the 110 students in Amelia's Standard 3 classroom, only five have recognized disabilities—two boys and three girls. While the ages of the general education children ranged between 7 to 9 years, the age range of students with disabilities was between 15 and 26 years. This classroom had two teachers, two chalkboards and five windows along one wall. With an average of 55 students per teacher, it was difficult for students to gain individualized attention or

instruction. In fact, the researcher observed very few students receiving any individualized attention.

The 15 year-old boy with a disability and three girls with disabilities, ages 16-26 years, sat through a very mundane morning of school. All four students with disabilities were considered to be “slow learners.” Amelia was one of the girls with disabilities. She, along with other students with disabilities, was seated in the very back corner of the room, by the door.

During the time that the researcher and research assistant observed Primary School A, very little instruction occurred. The teachers were busy talking to guest student teachers and faculty who were visiting from the Teacher Training College. Amelia’s school was a designated model school in the south. The model schools were considered exemplary and welcoming to educational learners. The guests were visiting the school to gain practical insight into classroom teaching and learning.

Amelia and other students with disabilities attempted to copy the board but the print was small, illegible, and blocked by the students sitting on the floor in the front. They also attempted to use the one text book in their group of twelve students. They sang and clapped with the rest of the students.

Amelia and the other girls with disabilities all spent the morning break by themselves, outside the classroom. Even though they may have needed to use the toilet, this was not an option for these girls. There was no facility which they could use. The existing toilet facilities

consisted of two sets of latrines—an older latrine which had four unisex toilet stalls and a brand new latrine with twelve toilet stalls, six for females and six for males. The new latrine was built with donated money and had a nice trough with six connections for water faucets. The only problem was that the faucets were missing—they had either not been attached or were stolen. There was no running water, no buckets of water, and the facility was extremely dirty. The standards of hygiene were poor.

After school was dismissed, Amelia and the other girls with disabilities stayed behind to sweep the classroom and outside drain gutters. The only justification for them being assigned this job was that they were older, and therefore could be held responsible for the upkeep of the classroom. Even so, the boys with disabilities did not help with the cleaning. The girls busied themselves with cleaning while their classmates hurried home to have lunch.

This vignette presents a picture of what a school day is typically like for three girls with learning disabilities at Amelia's school. These girls were part of an overcrowded classroom with much younger students, many of who were not even half their ages. They sat in the very back corner by the door, safely tucked out of the way. They are unable to see the print on the chalkboard. Clearly, this classroom suffered from a shortage of resources—both in terms of instructional materials and teacher-time. Very little instruction and learning occurred, especially from the point of view of the students with disabilities.

Inside and outside of the classroom, no formal toilet facilities were available. During the morning break, none of the “normal” students made any attempt to interact with the girls with

disabilities either inside the classroom or outside, At the end of the school day, the classroom emptied quickly and students hurried back home to have lunch. The girls with disabilities remained behind to sweep the classroom floors.

In this Standard 3 classroom, the researcher observed lessons in Chewa, English, General Studies, Drawing and Music. Amelia, a 26 year-old girl with a disability, a “slow learner,” often sang and clapped with other students; the other two girls with disabilities, other “slow learners,” did not participate much at all. The 21 year-old often sat with her head down and the 16 year-old was often fidgeting with objects like blades of grass or pens. During one attempt at peer partner work, the teacher touched the hands of Amelia and the 21 year-old disabled girl, indicating that they should partner with each other. But this cue from the teacher was not sufficient, the girls continued to sit quietly, not interacting throughout the exercise. The teacher failed to check back with the girls, leaving them sitting silently in the back of the room while other students seemingly learned together.

In order to better understand the teaching environment and the learning experiences of girls with disabilities, we focus our attention on Amelia, the 26 year-old girl with a disability. How is it that a 26 year-old could be placed in classroom with 7 to 9 year olds? Amelia’s mother, Margaret Kalima, said that Amelia previously attended a neighborhood school, where she was promoted to the next class without passing. Amelia reported learning nothing at that school. Although she now has to walk over one hour one way to come to her school, her mother says that Amelia has made significant improvements, especially in mathematics. Margaret has begun teaching Amelia at home too, noting that “these disabled girls need assistance in education.”

Margaret was also intending to ask Amelia's teacher for a book so that she can continue to teach Amelia reading at home. Margaret attributed her daughter's success to Amelia being educated with other students with disabilities and to the teachers working hard to teach those with disabilities.

Margaret hoped that girls with disabilities should be independent when they grow to be women—"They should be able to work and be self-reliant. They should be promoted in school so that are able to get jobs and work." According to Margaret, over half of the mentally disabled girls did not get married. This meant that instead of being under the care and responsibility of the husband, they are forced to fend for themselves. Thus, she argued, the girls with disabilities needed to learn vocational skills so that they could be employed. Amelia's mother was advocating for vocational training schools to open in their community.

Although Amelia did spend the majority of her time in Standard 3 with general education students, her resource room teacher, Lillian Kadzami, still oversaw her educational programming. Lillian stated that, "We need to support them (girls with disabilities), we need to care in such a condition. It also needs patience and tolerance. And most of all, it needs our understanding."

The resource room teacher was quick to express her frustration with working with the general education teachers. "It is hard to work with those who do not know what special education is...for example, regular primary teachers... You'll find always that these children with disabilities, especially girls, are sat at the back of the classroom. They are always at the

back and they are not attended to. They are neglected.” She continued to explain how the students with disabilities were usually put in the back of the classroom, even if it was a child with a visual impairment who should sit in the front of the room near the teacher. She stated that the students with disabilities were almost always put together in the back of the room, thus gaining very little of the teacher’s attention. Their assignments were usually not looked at and because of this they do not receive feedback. Lillian complained that she then had to grade these girls’ work when they came to the resource room.

Lillian explained that it was difficult to provide girls with disabilities what they need. She attributed this to the negligence on the part of the general education teachers. “They don’t like those kids with disabilities because they (general education teachers) don’t have the knowledge maybe. We try to educate these teachers, but we are not able to do enough of this.” Lillian explained that she tried her best to do this, out of her own free will. Therefore, she admitted, very little time was actually spent educating the general education teachers. But, even when she was able to get across to the teachers, “They don’t follow it. Those kids are neglected.”

In the following narrative, Lillian elaborated on how she felt her work can be more successful, how she can keep working with teachers to more fully involve students with disabilities into all activities.

“However, we think that little by little, the teachers are going to understand some of the reasons as to why we want those steps to be followed. For example, marking the kids work and involving them in whatever activities are done in the classroom. Because there’s also this

problem that when those are going for P.E. (physical education), those L.D. (learning disabled) students, those with disabilities, are left behind to either sweep or mop while their friends are outside playing football or net ball. The reason given is that disabled students cannot participate in these activities. This is not true. Even if someone on a wheelchair can blow a whistle. And by doing so it means she is participating in the lesson. But they [disabled students] are left on their own in the class and there's no way you can say, 'Madame, madame, you can get this one and he can blow a whistle too.' ...And if we try to teach them slowly and slowly, though it's hard for them to understand our aim is inclusive education because students with disabilities are supposed to be in the regular classroom, not in the special class. ...Also the specialist teacher at the school, I'm assisting the teachers to reconsider their seating plans, though very few are following my suggestions. Still in other classes, you'll find that those kids with learning difficulties, especially girls, are in front and other teachers are following that."

Lillian commented on the abilities teachers have to move towards more inclusive education, little by little. Teachers need to find some purposeful task for students to do to be included. It could be blowing a whistle or simply changing seating plans. "Little changes can lead to big differences." She also mentioned that some teachers are doing very well in that girls with learning difficulties are sitting in the front of classrooms.

At Amelia's school it was usually only the parent, the special education teacher, the principal and a regular primary teacher who were present for an assessment of the student's disabilities at the time of admission. During these events, Lillian, in the capacity of the special education teacher for the school, interviewed the parents and checked the child's adaptive,

behavioral, social and functional skill levels. The school staff filled out forms that the parents were asked to sign. In addition, Lillian had the parents sign a form stating that they were leaving their child “under my supervision so that I will be out of danger” in case something should happen.

It is worth noting that professional assessment and advice was not available during the interview process. Lillian does not even have telephone access to a doctor or a professional. On occasion, some parents hid information about their child’s disabilities to make their child appear to be more able and improve their chances of admission. For example, some parents did not tell the school officials about their child’s history with epilepsy. It was only after the child had seizures at school that the school became aware of the condition. Lillian noted, “That is why we have a lot of problems, even when we are teaching.”

At Amelia’s school if the child was not toilet trained or if she had severe behavioral issues, she was placed in the resource room full time. If a child had a less severe condition, for example, speech difficulties, she was placed in the resource room and then into Standard 1 as soon as improvement was noted. After receiving services from both the resource room teacher and the regular teacher, the child was promoted to the next class level. Discussions among the regular teachers, the special education teacher and the principal were supposed to occur throughout this process.

In this ‘model’ primary school, many of the girls with disabilities were placed in grades far below their actual ages. All three girls with disabilities at Amelia’s school were in that



situation. They were ages 16, 21 and 26 years and placed in a classroom with children between the ages of 7 to 9 years. Upon probing, Lillian offered the following explanation: “To say the truth, these girls are put in that class not because of their age but because their ability is still at Standard 1 level. Yes, so because of their ages, and they are not interested to repeat in Standard 1 for three, four, or more years. So we just did that to please them and they are happy in that lower class. They are repeating for the second time and they are doing nothing just because the class is too high for their level.”

Although the girls’ ages and their abilities did not align with the class placement, the girls’ parents and members of the local community were still supportive of the girls with disabilities attending school. One community member observed, “Some children do not do any household work. But when they start going to school, they learn to do some of these activities. They learn to do these activities from their friends. They are included in different activities. They also socialize with their friends. This helps them to all be the same, united, as one (as if no one has a disability).”

Margaret, Amelia’s mother, agreed that the community was supportive of educating the girls with disabilities. She mentioned seven households in their community that had disabled children. She said that, “Some of the children are dumb, some are mentally retarded, some are physically disabled. But we all work together including our chief (village headman). And people in the community do not segregate the disabled children.”

Margaret firmly believed that it took an entire community to raise and educate a child with a disability. Everybody can and should have a role. She declared that, in her community, “The community members including the village headman take part in the education of the disabled girls. Even parents who have normal children are taking part in disabled girls’ education. For example, they can help to guide a disabled child who is lost to return to her home. So with this, we know that we are working together with these other parents. Parents who have normal children also support the idea of sending disabled children to school.”

Unfortunately, as Margaret pointed out, there are still many girls with disabilities who do not have access to a school. She carefully explained the situation of Elizabeth, a young teen with lame legs. Elizabeth was given a wheelchair but she still cannot come to school due to the long distance between her home and the school. Margaret maintained that Elizabeth is intelligent and very capable of doing simple office work. However, there is no one to take her the long distance to school every day.

Margaret was advocating for the school to provide boarding facilities for children with disabilities like Elizabeth. She said, “I’m really concerned because I know that she cannot be the only one. There are other children with similar problems. Some have their parents but they cannot manage to send them to school.” By living at the school site, the girls with disabilities would not encounter all the problems associated with traveling long distances to and from school.

Margaret reported that very few girls were fortunate enough to attend Amelia's school—the only vocational training center in the area. She gave the example of Florence who lived in her community and had a lame hand. Florence had been on the waiting list for Amelia's school for three years. As the years went by and Florence got older, Lillian had begun to lose hope for a placement for Florence in her school. Margaret stated that everyone cannot depend on the vocational school: "But this is only one center. It is very hard for it to accommodate every girl with a disability."

Lillian believed that the government of Malawi needed to step up to the plate and increase the money and support provided to educate those with disabilities. She stated, "We also need government support because up until now, we don't have special equipment for children with disabilities. We still lean on the regular primary schools. And there is no way we can use the same materials because the abilities of the children are different. So, it's also hard for us to improve the quality. However, if the government can support us, it's very easy to improve."

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **EMERGING ISSUES, CONCLUSIONS AND REFLECTIONS**

#### Introduction

The primary goal of this study was to describe the educational experiences and opportunities for girls with disabilities in rural primary schools in Malawi. Towards this goal this study identified the factors which support or provide barriers to girls with disabilities learning in regular classrooms in primary schools. The factors identified in this study emerged from on-site visitations and classroom observations, interviews with stakeholders—parents/caregivers, teachers and community members—that revealed the perceptions of those directly engaged with the girls with learning disabilities, field notes and other artifacts.

In an attempt to discover answers to the research question and find practical implications of the overarching national and regional policies, personal accounts and perceptions from parents/caregivers, special education teachers and community members were heard. Evidence of varied experiences and expectations for girls with disabilities was diligently collected. Observations of classrooms activities, and other activities and interactions within the school premises provided detailed accounts of the education that girls with disabilities are receiving at school. This research also resulted in rich narratives and portraits of the personal and community lives of select girls with disabilities in Malawian primary schools.

The stories, experiences and observations ranged from hopelessness to signs of positive successes and exemplary learning in the face of adversity. They tell stories of how educational

systems can sometimes benefit some students, while often underserving and disappointing others. Real life expectations placed upon girls with disabilities, some more plausible than others, are clearly described. They offer evidence of and explanations for the gender barriers existing within schools, and in the local cultures. Desperation, hope, optimism, perseverance and resilience resonate throughout some of the tales documented in this research.

These stories describe how individual girls with disabilities are educated and in what ways they are included in general education classes in primary schools. Personal stories from family members, teachers and community members were explored in order to better understand the function of schooling for female students with disabilities. The data offers explanation for status quo, and for innovation, of how things sometime work in the Malawian educational system—all this within the context of local, regional and national policies and culture. Most importantly, through rich description and explanation, the stories provide insight into how education for all students, including girls with disabilities, can be improved.

It is important, for the purpose of this study, to continue to consider disability as a socially constructed term, shaped by local communities and cultures. This study examines not just the girls with disabilities but how they are viewed within the contexts of their local communities. It is a more holistic approach in which the lives of the girls, their families, their schools and their communities are explored.

## Contributions of Research Assistants

The knowledge gleaned from this study was greatly enriched by the contributions from the various research assistants. Each research assistant served as a guide through which each individual, school and community could be better understood. Not only did the research assistants translate local languages, they patiently elaborated on the complexities of Malawian culture and education. They successfully enabled the researcher to see the bigger picture, in schools, families and communities.

The research assistants quickly became colleagues as well as trusted friends to the researcher. Personal stories were shared and lessons were learned. An example of this relates to the challenges HIV/AIDS presents to Malawians. Official government statistics reveal the HIV/AIDS prevalence rate to be about 12%. Unofficial statistics by local Malawians paint a much grimmer picture with an infection rate of about 30%. The research assistants described how approximately one third of teaching staff is lost every year to HIV/AIDS or AIDS related illnesses. This presents enormous challenges when one thinks about building teacher capacity and professional development for educators.

On a more personal note, research assistants detailed the impact of HIV/AIDS on their own lives. One research assistant was caring for her sister's daughter, who is HIV positive. Her sister had passed away several years earlier and had passed HIV/AIDS to the daughter. This research assistant was the only one in the family capable of caring for the daughter. Another research assistant knew that her husband was unfaithful but could do nothing to protect herself.

All in all, these personal stories enabled the researcher to better understand and appreciate many of the daily challenges that are encountered.

## Background

Primary education has become a priority in the battle to reduce poverty and improve living conditions in many areas of the world. Research has shown that primary education is vital to the improvement of economic and agricultural productivity (Bruns *et al.*, 2003, p.1). Even more importantly, the education of girls has proven to improve health conditions as well as reduce fertility rates, infant mortality rates and morbidity rates. Thus, Millennium Development Goals have been set to achieve Universal Primary Education (UPE) by 2015. Supporting education has become desirable both socially and economically. In addition, increased access to good education is seen as working to decrease extreme hunger and poverty (Kadzamira, 2003, p. 501).

The umbrella policy which provides the context for this study is the World Declaration for All, specifically four of the six goals contained in the Dakar Framework for Action doctrine. Goals i, ii, iii, and v contain explicit language that advocates for more equality in education for girls and other disadvantaged children. These goals seek to address the educational plight of girls as well as children with disabilities (“Dakar Framework for Action,” 2004). This policy and many others have laid the foundation for girls with disabilities to be educated inclusively with their non-disabled peers.

## Emerging Issues

Teachers, families and community members in this study have made great efforts to provide the best possible educational experience for girls with disability. They have sought advice and outside resources, involved the community, and struggled to improve their current situations. They have experienced similar obstacles in family, community and school. These include a multitude of gender barriers and issues of access and acceptance. Most are doing what they can and what they deem necessary to support the girl as much as possible. Clearly understanding their complex situations and actions will contribute to building stronger bridges to the future and better education for all.

This chapter carefully considers a holistic view of the education and lives of girls with disabilities across select primary schools in Malawi. Policies form the underlying parameters and boundaries of present descriptions and future possibilities. We know that policies can greatly influence practices. Without relevant information and well-constructed policies, one cannot hope to improve the educational practices in primary schools for girls with disabilities.

Before we can develop and implement meaningful policies, we must first have a very clear sense of what is needed given current circumstances. This concluding chapter carefully describes conditions and challenges involved with the education of girls with disabilities. The goal is also to discuss ways in which current situations may be improved. I have argued that, in addition to more effective policy development, educational practices will only improve when available resources and supports are better utilized. These available resources and supports



include human capital, social capital and stronger commitments from all the stakeholders—those within local communities as well as those within national organizations.

Tyack and Cuban (1995) state that change, where it counts the most, is in the hands of teachers (p. 10). Therefore, if we really want progressive change within educational systems in Malawi, we must provide opportunities for teachers to develop their own professional practices. Teachers are more likely to provide better quality educational services for girls with disabilities if they are empowered to see themselves as advocates and participants in meaningful professional development activities. Without adequate training and support, even the most well-intentioned teachers will not be able to make the best instructional decisions for their students. Additional professional training, supports, and development opportunities for practicing teachers, both regular and special education teachers, remain critical to the success of all Malawian students, including those with special needs.

One very effective form of professional development involves increased amounts of time for teachers to collaborate together, to spend time working together toward common goals. According to Floden and Bell (2006), collaboration “...is as important in professional development as it is in classroom learning. Teachers need to break deeply engrained habits of isolated work and perceptions of professional development as a source of tips and resources for individual use.” (p. 188). Through close collaboration at both local and national levels, teachers will be able to better utilize available resources and supports to better their classroom practice.

In the following paragraphs, we carefully review emerging issues that arise from expectations and experiences within special education policies and practices in rural schools in Malawi.

### *Expectations*

In a pedagogical context, it is commonly believed that individuals either rise or fall to a teacher's expectations. Much evidence of this phenomenon has been documented in the fields of education and psychology about self-fulfilling prophecies and teacher expectations. If one expects a child to perform well, they will typically work to meet those high expectations and perform well. If, on the other hand, one perceives a child as incapable of learning, the child most likely will not perform well and thus reinforce negative expectations. This is especially true in schools. Teachers' expectations, attitudes and actions will greatly influence the success or failure of learners, particularly those who are vulnerable or have difficulties learning with their peers.

These assumptions notwithstanding, the data in this study revealed hopeful and realistic expectations for girls with disabilities. Although many of those interviewed had witnessed negative experiences and interactions with girls with disabilities, most held very high but realistic expectations and goals for the future. Several parents verbalized the expectation and need for girls with disabilities to attend school. One parent stated that girls need to be educated to become independent—"They must learn knowledge as well as practical skills like mathematical calculations so that they can someday operate a small business."

Another parent thought it was essential that their daughter learned to read and write. Because of her own limited schooling, this mother was not able to read or write. She regularly sat down with her daughter and discussed the importance of school. She communicated to her daughter that she must learn to read and write—how being able to read and write would enable her to participate in community group meetings and gain access to other opportunities.

The expectations of special education teachers resonate with that of the parents. Teachers passionately advocated for the need to educate girls with disabilities so that they won't be a burden to the family, community or nation. They believed that only through education and the acquisition of skills will these students be able to be productive in society. Many special education teachers firmly believed in teaching to the ability of the child, not the disability. Most special education teachers that were interviewed and observed taught core subject areas of English, Chewa and Mathematics, those subject areas which could directly benefit a girl with a disability in the future. These teachers expected that it was essential that girls with disabilities be able to communicate and do simple mathematical procedures in order to be self-reliant.

### *Infrastructure, Instruction and Student Experience*

Although the previously mentioned interviewees seemed to hold high expectations and strong desires to educate girls with disabilities, the evidence collected during interviews and classroom observations indicated that actual experiences often differed from intentions. The following section details actual observations within the schools and classrooms of the selected research sites.

A wide range of facilities and classrooms were observed during the observations at schools. Some classrooms had furniture including desks, tables, chairs, benches as well as doors and window panes; others did not. Students were often observed sitting on a stone or a mud floor. Some classrooms were very well furnished; others were not. Students were also observed learning outside under makeshift roofs of palm tree leaves and grass. Others were under the shade of trees, sometimes with a chalkboard, sometimes not.

Classes were often combined due to frequent teacher absences. Teachers were absent due to illness, funerals or other personal reasons. There were no substitute teachers to fill in the vacancies left by absent teachers. Instead, the researcher observed special education teachers and/or general education teachers conducting their own class as well as the class of the absent teacher. Two or more classrooms of students would often consolidate themselves into one classroom, with one teacher left to instruct all the students. On one instance, as a result of an absent teacher, the researcher observed over three hundred students in one classroom with only one teacher. Furthermore, documentation from classroom visitations revealed numerous unprofessional teacher practices, including frequent tardiness and absences. These unprofessional teacher practices frequently led to overcrowded classrooms and poor student instruction and learning.

As a matter of fact, all the research sites revealed less than adequate use of instructional time within classrooms. Students, those with disabilities as well as those without disabilities, were off task much of the time. Students were frequently observed talking with each other, fighting, daydreaming, looking out the windows, or sleeping. In addition, teachers were regularly

observed talking with one another, sitting in the sun or engaging in other types of non-instructional activities.

The lessons observed by the researcher in the general education classrooms were typically of the traditional “sit and get” type in which students sat while instructional material was delivered to them. This was usually done in the traditional lecture format with very little student involvement and interaction. Students often repeated what the teacher said, copied off the board, and waited for their notebooks to be checked by the teacher.

This traditional “sit and get” format appeared to be problematic for students with disabilities. This venue did not support active involvement from students; most students with disabilities had great difficulties maintaining their attention and following the lesson with their peers. The problem was compounded by teachers not using appropriate visual aids to supplement lessons. When the chalkboard was used for copying or note taking purposes, it was often very difficult to read due to the poor condition of the chalkboard and small handwriting by the teacher. It was particularly difficult for students sitting in the back of the room, a common location for students with disabilities to sit.

In order to learn from these personal descriptions of expectations and experiences, we must consider the impact that these factors have on a girl with disability. We must begin thinking about how their education is carried out in light of the previously mentioned extenuating circumstances challenging even those in the general education system in Malawi. Exploring in

depth the education that a girl with a disability is given will enable us to develop more comprehensive solutions for current and future challenges.

### *State of Malawian Special Education*

From the time of inception of this study, the researcher observed a lack of concrete knowledge and information about special education programming in Malawian primary schools. For example, the Special Needs Department within the Ministry of Education was unable to provide a current comprehensive listing of special education students, classrooms, teachers and schools. Complete information about students with learning disabilities, schools, class size, teachers for students with learning disabilities, etc. was not available to the researcher. The researcher had to travel to Montfort Teacher Training College to obtain this information. She had to interview teacher trainers in order to gain the information necessary to select research sites and conduct this study.

On-site visitations, observations and interviews revealed great insight into how schools organized and administered education for girls with disabilities. The researcher sought to understand evaluation, classification, and placement of students with special needs. The Ministry of Education was able to provide only very limited documentation detailing the evaluation process for a student with a suspected special need. In addition there were no official documents provided to the researcher describing or defining the three recognized types of disabilities in Malawi: hearing impairments, visual impairments and learning difficulties.

### *Evaluation and Placement*

The researcher found no consistent, formalized process for the evaluation and placement of students with special needs at any of the selected sites in which she made visitations. Each special education teacher seemed to informally evaluate students by speaking with the child's parent/caregiver and through direct observation and interaction with the child. Based on the information collected, the teacher made recommendations for placements. Very rarely was a formal, documented evaluation conducted with a psychologist, social worker, medical doctor, regular classroom teacher and/or other professional. Special education teachers admitted to learning strategies for working with their students while they were on the job, on site. These processes and strategies were modeled on the British system and taught at the Montfort Teacher Training College. Teachers cited lack of resources, inability to access qualified professionals, poor methods of communication including broken telephones and no computer access, and inadequate funding to pay appropriate senior professionals to come to their schools to evaluate and provide guidance.

One special education teacher stated that parents typically bring their children with disabilities to her school. She then interviews the parents and checks the child's adaptive, behavioral, social and functional skill levels. Other school staff members complete forms that the parents are asked to sign. This teacher expressed her frustrations with professional advice and other resources not being available during the initial interview/evaluation stage.

At this primary school, students who were deemed to have disabilities were placed into classrooms by the special education teacher. Whether the child was placed in the resource room

all day, partial day, or in general education was determined by the special education teacher's perceptions of the child's ability. She admitted that many older girls were placed in classes with peers far below their age levels due to the low functional and academic levels of the girls with disabilities. Appropriateness of behavior and toilet training abilities often seemed to play roles in placements as well.

### *Access*

Hyde (1999) describes access as being merely the first hurdle in the pursuit of educational opportunity in Malawi. Standard administrative and pedagogical practices in both primary and secondary schools often lead to a replication of societal conditions, resulting in a reduction of access to opportunities. Many other barriers existed even for those students who were fortunate enough or persistent enough to gain access to schools. These barriers can be social or economic, often the result of poverty and low socioeconomic development (p. 133).

More specifically, female educational participation in Malawi can be most prominently identified by high dropout rates and low achievement relative to boys. Hyde (1999) links the low participation of females to the low socioeconomic status of women, characteristics of the schools themselves and the attitudes and behaviors of parents (p. 135). Thus, even though girls seemed to have increased access to schools, they were still plagued by high dropout rates and low achievement.

In addition, many girls with disabilities still did not even have access to their local community schools. Data from this study indicated several reasons for this phenomenon:



- Distance to and from school is too far,
- Transportation is limited or unavailable,
- Roads are not suitable to disability, i.e. need tarmac roads for wheelchairs,
- Disability (i.e. lame legs) prevented student travel to/from the school building.

Within the schools themselves, additional conditions that limit access for girls with disabilities included:

- Physical structures including classrooms do not accommodate various types of disabilities,
- No special education teacher,
- Non-functioning latrines,
- Shortage of resources including textbooks and other instructional materials.

These findings remain consistent with the literature detailing limitations to accessing school in sub-Saharan Africa.

## Meaning—Research Questions

### *Implications for Girls with Disabilities*

#### 1. Teaching and Learning Activities

During the two weeks that the researcher spent at each selected school site, she witnessed a wide variety of classroom practices. The educational experiences of girls with learning difficulties seemed to directly depend upon the efforts of the special education teacher as well as

the regular education teachers. These teachers placed the girls with disabilities into particular classroom assignments based on perceived needs and instructed them accordingly.

Girls with learning disabilities were initially evaluated by the special education teacher. Based on this assessment of a girl's academic skills, her ability to engage socially, and her functional performance, a determination was made whether the student should be placed in a resource room for severe special needs or in a general education classroom if she was deemed to have only a mild learning difficulty. No documentation of testing, evaluation or placement procedures existed at any of the research sites that could be shared with the researcher. The evaluation and placement processes appeared to be subjective, with no data records that would back the decisions.

This study focused on the girls with learning difficulties that were included in regular education classrooms. Most of these girls were placed in regular classrooms where they had little support or accommodations by the general education teachers. As a result girls with learning difficulties received instruction that was most of the times identical to regular classroom instruction, and they were expected to do the same work as every other student—they were given the same assignments and assessments as their peers. There were typically no apparent modifications made to classroom instruction to accommodate for the disability.

The seating arrangements for girls with disabilities greatly varied by classroom and by schools. Several of the special education teachers, parents and community members complained that the girls with disabilities were seated in the back corners of classrooms, out of the way of

everybody else and far from the teacher and blackboard. Even students with visual impairments were observed sitting in the backs of classrooms, far from the one chalkboard in the front of the classroom. Special education teachers cited general education teachers as not willing to listen or accommodate even basic needs, such as sitting closer to the teacher or chalkboard.

Maps drawn by the researcher of various classrooms setups during the field trips showed girls with disabilities sitting in the front, middle and rear of classrooms. They were scattered throughout classrooms, but were more commonly seated in the rear of classrooms. It was not uncommon to see all students in the back half of the classroom, while the front half of the classroom near the chalkboard and teacher's desk remained empty. These particular arrangements varied from classroom to classroom within the same school as well as from school to school.

The majority of learning activities in the general education classroom can be described as less than stimulating. From the documentation of classroom visitations, the researcher noted large portions of classroom instructional time was devoted to exercises that required students to copy text from the chalkboard to notebooks and then wait for the teacher to check their copied work in the notebooks.

A typical lesson consisted of the teacher writing on the board, calling on individual students to read the board and then waiting while students copied the words from the board into their own exercise books. Noise often could be heard from outside the classroom while the teacher systematically checked most of the copy books. The teacher then would ask questions of

the students who would stand up to answer the questions. Other students would clap if the answer was correct or make other noises if the answer was incorrect. Students would then be called upon to read from the textbooks they were sharing with others in their group. The researcher observed anywhere from one text book for two students to one text book for eighteen students. The lesson typically ended with no conclusion or homework assignment.

I, and my research assistants, did not notice many teachers using lesson planning books to guide their daily classroom instructional practices. The vast majority seemed to get in front of students and simply talked, failing to follow any formalized lesson or use any type of visual and/or physical prompts. Some teachers conducted more structured lessons in which they gave new information to students. The researcher observed a science lesson in which the teacher was teaching the parts of a flower using a real flower and a drawing in which she labeled the parts and then posted it on the classroom wall. She later explained to the researcher how she was following the science curriculum for that grade level.

### *Gender Equity and Safety*

Consistent with this previous research, the primary classrooms that were observed in this study were found to strongly reflect varied gender expectations and conditions within Malawian society and culture. The researcher observed female students being mocked, harassed and humiliated by their teachers. Girls with identified disabilities as well as girls without disabilities were often singled out by teachers only to be laughed at and/or belittled in front of their peers. The researcher repeatedly observed girls being verbally and physically mistreated. Girls were

frequently yelled at, chastised, hit with sticks and made to stay after class to clean the classrooms and the school premises.

Additionally, this research raised significant concerns concerning the physical safety of girls. Many interview participants freely described the raping of girls, especially those with disabilities. They reported the rapes as occurring on the way to and from school as well as in local communities. Sometimes the rapists were caught and put in jail, sometimes not. A village chief admitted that he needed to do more within his community to prevent the frequent raping.

In fact, sexual violence towards females with disabilities is not a problem that is unique to Malawi. Previous work in the United States has shown that during times of extreme hardship, women, children and people with disabilities are at increased risk of becoming victims of violence. Alriksson-Schmidt *et al.* (2010) reference sexual violence as encompassing a variety of behaviors including verbal harassment, completed or attempted nonconsensual intercourse as well as other forms of sexual contact and abuse. They note that, because people with disabilities are often portrayed as being powerless and reliant on others for daily living, they may experience higher levels of sexual violence than others (p. 362).

Alriksson-Schmidt *et al.* (2010) acknowledge that, as growing numbers of students with disabilities are mainstreamed into general education classrooms, it is important for school health professionals and administrators to be aware that these children with disabilities are at increased risk for sexual abuse. School staff can be instrumental in identifying, treating, and working with others to expose and negate issues of sexual violence for these individuals. They recommend that

any type of intervention to prevent or reduce exposure to sexual violence should be accessible, understandable and available in alternative formats (p. 366).

Additionally, research by Leach (2006) discusses the therapeutic benefits of enabling the children to talk about themselves and their experiences in the presence of a capable adult. This is particularly important for children with emotional, behavior or learning difficulties or those struggling with trauma or the consequences of family loss, war, rape, etc. A number of non-governmental agencies working in the developing world have adopted these practices of encouraging children to tell their stories and articulate their own needs (p. 1129-1130). Leach (2006) draws upon additional research that identifies gender violence as a contributing factor to dropout rates and underachievement in Sub-Saharan Africa (p. 1130).

This research study also indicates that teacher collaboration and communication directly influence levels of gender equity within classrooms. General education teachers who actively communicated and collaborated with parents and the special education teacher were more likely to restructure their classroom and instruction to accommodate girls with disability. Those general education teachers who frequently communicated with parents and teachers, were more likely to seat girls in locations that were most conducive to their learning needs, encourage girls to work with peers and positively reinforce efforts made by girls with disabilities. They tended to be less likely to mock, harass and humiliate girls.

A general trend in certain African countries including Malawi has been a tightening of the code of conduct for teachers. The media has been exposing and reporting more cases of

abuse, resulting in complaints being investigated more frequently. However, there remains a very strong need for continued future research that is supported by committed governmental bodies. Relevant policy formulation and enforcement remain critical components in improving issues of gender equity within schools (Leach, 2006, p. 1144).

In addition to increased teacher communication, collaboration and professionalism, the research data from this study clearly indicates that parents are a key advocate in the success of the education of a girl with a disability. This study revealed that, the more years of education that the parent had, the more likely their girl was to stay in school and do well in school. At the selected research sites, male parents/caregivers had the most education and the strongest connection to the school. They were most involved in talking with the teachers and advocating for their daughter's needs at school and in the local community. In contrast, female parents/caregivers had lower levels of formal educational experience and were less successful in advocating for their daughter's needs. They tended to have lower levels of literacy, had rarely visited their daughter's classroom and were unsure of exactly what was happening at school. Their daughters were more likely to repeat grades and demonstrate little progress in school.

In summary, it remains critical to be cognizant that gender equity can greatly affect all students, boy and girls, in a wide range of learning environments. Peters (2004) identifies numerous barriers to the provision of quality education for both boys and girls with disabilities in all educational contexts:

- Lack of early identification and intervention services,
- Negative attitudes,

- Exclusionary policies and practices,
- Inadequate teacher training, particularly training of all regular teachers to teach children with diverse abilities,
- Inflexible curriculum and assessment procedures,
- Inadequate specialist support staff to assist teachers of special and regular classes,
- Lack of appropriate teaching equipment and devices, and
- Failure to make modifications to the school environment to make it fully accessible.

In this research study, one community member stated that the culmination of many of the above barriers had devastating results. She stated that, “Most of the time, they (the girls with disabilities) face problems in schools and are discriminated upon by their friends.” Until these barriers and other issues of gender equity are acknowledged and sufficiently addressed, it will be very difficult to improve the quality of educational experiences for all students.

## 2. Perceptions of special education teachers, parents and community members

Although a plethora of challenges currently plague Malawian society and its school systems, interview participants in this research study appeared to be cautiously optimistic. Many are living with the daily realities of HIV/AIDS, malaria, poverty, social and cultural inequities, and much more. Despite these hardships, individuals seemed to strongly believe in the value of education and the need for all children, including those with disabilities, to go to school. They described education as the one single factor that may improve the lives of their children and their country.



Many interview participants described ignorance as a leading factor that challenges the daily lives of girls with disabilities. A commonly cited situation was how parents were not always aware of the benefits of sending their daughter with a disability to school. They believed that because of a lack of adequate information, encouragement and incentive, many girls with disabilities stayed home. The researcher was able to witness the severity of this problem in the south of Malawi. One special education teacher had over fifty special education students on his itinerant list, ones that were at home and not coming to school.

In addition to contributing to a large number of girls with disabilities staying at home, ignorance also affected classroom teaching and learning. As previously mentioned, general education teachers who regularly collaborated with parents and special education teachers were perceived as being most competent at providing quality educational services for girls with disabilities. Parents reported wanting the best possible educational services for their daughter but seemed unsure as to what exactly that was or how they should go about advocating for better services.

A large number of interview participants expressed teacher quality as a concern. Some felt the schools were too loosely managed, resulting in teachers who did not put forth adequate effort or care about the success of students. Teachers were known to have frequent absences and take care of personal business during school hours. The resulting attitude of apathy seemed to negatively affected student learning.

Amidst a climate of ignorance and apathy, educational stakeholders did recognize that some things were being done correctly. They talked about positive outcomes when conscientious and engaged parents visited schools and community members advocated with families and neighbors. When a girl with a disability was supported by her peers, teachers and other school community members, she tended to be more successful. She tended to rise to their high expectations, despite all the potential barriers.

### So Where Do We Go From Here?

The data obtained from this study strongly suggests the need for more comprehensive use of both human and social capital. Additionally, many of the schools were lacking in physical materials including basic school supplies such as classroom furniture, textbooks, pens, notebooks, chalk, and other instructional materials. That said, this study also indicated that the physical classrooms, buildings and materials were not the strongest indicators of academic success of girls with disabilities.

In this research study, the stakeholders—teachers, parents or caregivers and community members—involved in the educational processes played the largest role in determining whether or not a girl with a disability was going to be successful in her school experience. The parents, teachers and community members who collaborated and worked together did indeed succeed in providing the most meaningful educational experiences for the girls with disabilities. Those who strongly advocated for the individual needs of a girl with a disability, served on committees, made regular visits to the schools and classrooms and frequently communicated with one another created the most meaningful educational programs.

This study lends further support to the notion of strengthening training and development opportunities for those directly involved in the educational processes of girls with disabilities. Educational administrators and policy makers can take this opportunity to re-examine how local teachers and communities are supporting one another in providing better educational practices for all students, with and without disabilities. Strategic planning and collaboration amongst all educational stakeholders remains critical to creating positive change for all.

Ultimately, the success of a girl with a disability in a primary school in Malawi seems to lie in supporting the people around her—the stakeholders that have a voice in her education. But how can this be achieved in an already, over-burdened and under-resourced system? The answer may lie in an approach that focuses on utilization of social capital.

### *Social Capital*

Natural, material (man-made) and human capital are recognized as the primary building blocks of economic growth and development. Thierry van Bastelaer (2002) cites social capital as the missing link in building economic growth and development. Van Bastelaer describes social capital as including the institutions, the relationships, the attitudes and values that “govern interactions among people and contribute to economic and social development.” Social capital is essentially the glue that holds societies together. “It includes the shared values and rules for social conduct expressed in personal relationships, trust and a common sense of ‘civic’ responsibility that makes society more than a collection of individuals.” (p. 3).

Narayan (1997) describes both social capital and social organization as having been long recognized by sociologists and anthropologists as critical building blocks of community and society. He details a World Bank study on poverty in Tanzania that described the great impact of village-level social capital on household welfare. This study provided powerful support that “social capital is a productive asset, with significant impact on the welfare of households” (p. 77). Most importantly, the findings of this study remain critical to “formulating decentralization policies designed to provide basic services to the poor and engage in management of local resources” (p. vii).

The concept of better utilizing social capital within local schools and communities in Malawi deserves utmost consideration when considering the future for education of all students, especially girls with disabilities. Interview participants in this study cited economic gain as an expectation and priority for the education of girls with disabilities. By increasing the use and management of local resources, steps can be taken towards improving an already over-burdened educational system and economy. Building upon personal relationships, values and shared attitudes, one can facilitate change at local levels. Localized policies within small communities may be more effective than those mandated by central governments. Those interviewed at the research sites in Malawi have already confirmed that connectivity to others within local schools increases success rates for students.

Although extensive research exists on the value of primary education to societies, Narayan points out that primary education is not necessarily a priority for the poor, especially for girls. He cites the benefits of education as being too remote, especially under severe financial

circumstances. He discussed how fee reductions for the poorest families may enable more girls to have access to schools (p. 76). This may be yet another possible venue to increase access to schools for girls with disabilities.

Thus, leadership initiatives and policies executed at local community levels seem most promising in improving education for all students. Those teachers and parents in Malawi that participated in local leadership activities such as parent teacher organizations and monthly community meetings at schools experienced higher rates of satisfaction with the educational experiences of students.

Promoting community participation in managing social services has become one of the latest buzzwords in international development programs. The concept of community participation in education management and governance can be viewed as a key policy in development and emergency education programs. Aid workers and educators hold high hopes on efforts to include marginalized or excluded voices in reform efforts (Burde, 2004, p. 83).

Burde (2004) further describes community participation in educational governance as part of the formula to achieve both traditional development goals and social reconstruction after a conflict (p. 73). Burde cautions that a lack of a long term vision as well as confusion over roles can lead to breakdowns in services (p. 82-83). Although the people of Malawi have not experienced a devastating war or conflict, there remains a very strong need for development in educational services and better utilization of social capital.

In many schools, including those in Malawi, it could be considered very beneficial to build on and strengthen existing networks within schools and communities. Head teachers and traditional leaders must be recognized for the roles they can play in fostering community support. Rose (2003) details the importance of community participation in policy. He explains that the motivation for participation needs to occur at local levels, not as directives from policy makers. Community members must also have the skills necessary for effective decision-making (p. 62). Therefore one needs to be very cautious and purposeful when engaging the community in moving forward.

### Conclusions

Although expectations for the education of girls with disabilities appear to be high, primary schools in Malawi seem to be at the beginning stages of implementing educational policy and practice within classrooms. Throughout this study the researcher observed great variation in school facilities as well as support for girls with learning disabilities in regular education classrooms. There appeared to be an overall lack of connectivity between administrators and teachers as well as between policies and actual practices. Due to immediate environmental constraints including poverty, hunger, deep-seated issues of gender equity and a multitude of other challenges, developing meaningful educational experiences for girls with disabilities was not always the top priority. Daily practices for educating girls with disabilities largely depended on locally available resources including social capital in schools and communities.

In fact, Hyde (1999) states that “the introduction of equality to education through legislation, education policy implementation and equal opportunity policies is in practice

problematic (p. xvii).” Hyde further explains how implementation of existing policies can be hindered by an imbalance of economic and social issues. Cultural conditions, fluctuating labor markets and shifting political climates can also serve as active barriers to efficient implementation of policies.

Hence, policies for the inclusion of girls with disabilities are often ratified but seldom enforced. Executing policies for inclusive educational practices can be very difficult when resources are limited, poverty is rampant and education levels are low. At the same time we know that when *we educate a girl, we educate a nation*.

### Reflections

As one has an opportunity to reflect upon all the complexities of educating girls with disabilities in Malawi, one cannot help but think what will be most effective in improving educational systems. While conducting this research, I often had to ask what school leadership and administrators were actually doing. Across the country, from site to site, it appeared that individuals were screaming for some type of leadership intervention. Parents, teachers and community members were doing things to improve the education for girls with disabilities in their local communities but there seemed to be a lack of larger involvement. Their efforts often seemed to be in isolation, with no one leading or coordinating their actions.

As my awareness of the complexities of the Malawian education system grew, the less convinced I became of the existence of a “silver bullet,” a magic solution that would “fix” the

country's education system. As my understanding of the "whys" behind the "hows" deepened and the complexities of the situations in Malawi revealed themselves, I became less certain that any simple solution exists. How does one fix poverty, disease, corruption, politics, ignorance and apathy that have developed over the course of several hundred years?

On a more positive note, this study sparked enthusiasm and excitement about educating girls with disabilities. Certainly, more studies that provide deep understandings of the many facets of the Malawian education system will be useful. Given all that I have learned, I also recommend more specialized teacher training for teachers who work with students with disabilities.

### Looking Towards the Future

A grandmother, who lost her daughter to HIV/AIDS, now takes care of her granddaughter with a disability. The grandmother cares deeply for her granddaughter's future. The grandmother summed up her vision for her granddaughter and all Malawian girls with disabilities as such, "I can see that there is a future for these girls if they learn. They can help themselves, make business (and become self-reliant) and they can even go on to secondary school. And even do work to earn money to care and look after themselves. So I have seen that there is a future in them, so their education should continue."

Important work lies ahead for all of us!



## **APPENDICES**

## Appendix A

### Letter of Introduction

Nancy Lubeski  
Michigan State University  
College of Education,  
East Lansing, MI 48824, USA  
lubeskin@msu.edu

(date)

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

My name is Nancy Lubeski, a Ph.D. Candidate at Michigan State University. I am a doctoral student in K-12 Educational Administration and International Development Studies. I am writing to you because I am conducting a study entitled, "Perceptions of Special Educational Practices in Malawi: Voices from Primary Schools and Communities." This study explores special education practices in the context of Education for All goals. Because this study is designed to reflect your perceptions and voice, your participation is very important. I would like to invite you to talk about your perceptions and experiences with the education of girls with disabilities in your school.

The information collected in this study will be used as part of the process for completion of my Ph.D. in K-12 Educational Administration at Michigan State University. Your cooperation, participation and sharing of information will be strictly confidential. All data and information will be kept under lock and key and will be password protected on my laptop computer.

You are being asked to voluntarily participate in this study because of your expertise and experience with the special educational programming in Malawian primary schools. Your participation will consist of one biographical questionnaire, one interview ranging in time from fifteen to forty-five minutes, and a short follow-up interview that will last approximately fifteen minutes. The interviews will be tape-recorded and notes may be taken by the researcher.

I am including a consent form that briefly summarizes the purpose of this research project, the voluntary participation status, the intention to retain your anonymity and confidentiality of all data, and your time commitment in this project. Please sign and return the form to me when I visit your school.

If you have questions, please feel free to contact me. If you would like to know more about the research process, you may contact Dr. BetsAnn Smith, primary investigator for this project at Erickson Hall, Michigan State University, USA. Her email address is bas@msu.edu

Sincerely,  
Nancy Lubeski

## Appendix B

### Consent Form

This consent form acknowledges your invitation and participation in the research study entitled Perceptions of Special Educational Practices in Malawi: Voices from Primary Schools and Communities. This study has been developed by Nancy Lubeski, Doctoral Candidate in K-12 Educational Administration at Michigan State University, USA.

Your participation will include a biographical questionnaire, in-depth interview and a short post-project interview. The interviews will be conducted by Nancy Lubeski, Ph.D. candidate and emergent researcher and investigator under the primary researcher, Dr. BetsAnn Smith. You will receive a biographical questionnaire prior to the in-depth interview. This should take you no more than fifteen minutes to complete. I will be tape recording our conversation during the interviews and taking notes. Please be informed that you can request that I turn off the tape recorder at any time during the interview. You also have the right not to answer any particular questions. Each interview is expected to last between fifteen and forty-five minutes. The researcher will be later transcribing the conversations.

The interview tapes and notes will be kept in a safe location, under lock and key, and in a password-protected laptop computer. Your identity (if you choose not to be identified) will not be disclosed. A pseudonym will be used for yourself and also for the school and its location. Your privacy will be protected to the maximum extent allowable by law. Please be informed that your participation in this study is voluntary and that you may choose not to participate at any time. Your withdrawal will not incur in any penalty or loss of benefits to you.

Should you have any questions or concerns regarding the rights of subjects and the duties of investigators, or are dissatisfied at any time with any aspect of this study, you may contact, anonymously, if you wish, Dr. Peter Vasilenko, Ph.D., Chair, University Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects at (517) 355-2180, fax (517) 432-4503, email: [ucrihs@msu.edu](mailto:ucrihs@msu.edu) or by regular mail: 202 Olds Hall, East Lansing, MI 48824. Should you have any questions about the interview or this study, you can also contact the project's primary investigator, Dr. BetsAnn Smith, associate professor in the department of K-12 Educational Administration, Erickson Hall, East Lansing, MI 48824, email: [bas@msu.edu](mailto:bas@msu.edu), phone: (517) 353-4686.

Your signature below indicates your voluntary agreement to participate in this study.

Participant name (please print):

Contact information: (school, address, phone number, email)

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Participant Signature

---

Date

## Appendix C

### Biographical Questionnaire

#### Introduction for participant

The purpose of this biographical questionnaire is to provide us with a starting point for our interview. Please respond to the questions and open-ended statements with brief written answers. Feel free to include any personal information (like Curriculum Vitae) or other information about your school, special education, or Education for All.

1. What is your full name?
2. What is your date and place of birth?
3. Where did you spend most of your childhood?
4. Family – parents, siblings, etc.
5. Describe your formal school experiences (schools attended, diplomas earned, etc.)
6. Information about professional and educational attainment (or attach a curriculum vitae).
7. How long have you been involved with this school?
8. Describe your experiences with students with disabilities.

## Appendix D

### Interview Protocol

The purpose of this interview is to document, describe and understand the varied types of learning experiences, practices and expectation of girls with disabilities within primary schools. The researcher's role is to pose open-ended questions and encourage the participant to share stories about his/her perceptions and experiences involving the education of girls with disabilities.

#### *Instruction to the participant(s):*

Thank you for your willingness to participate in this interview and research project. The purpose of this interview is to explore teachers', parents' and community members' experiences with the education of girls with disabilities in primary schools. This interview will include a variety of probes that will be used to expand your responses: to understand your role in education at your school, to better understand your responses and to clarify the meanings of your responses.

This interview should take between fifteen to forty-five minutes. I will be tape-recording our conversation and you can ask me to stop the recording at any time. Please be informed that I may also be taking notes during the interview. You can also feel free to ask questions during this entire process. The tape recordings will be kept under lock and key, and if you choose, your identity will not be disclosed. (I will use different names, or pseudonyms).

#### *Interview Protocol:*

1. Tell me about your experiences involving the education of girls with disabilities.
2. What do you think of these experiences and your role in these experiences?
3. Tell me how girls with disabilities are being educated. Tell me about special education in your school.
4. What are your expectations for educating a girl with a disability?
5. How can a better quality education be provided to students with disabilities, particularly girls?
6. Is there anything else you would like to add or any questions you would like to ask me?

Appendix E  
Follow-Up Questionnaire

The Follow-Up Questionnaire is intended for member checks as well as to collect additional information from participants in the study.

Circle one: Member Check

Additional Information:

For Member Check follow-up, include interview transcript and other relevant observation notes with this form.

Additional Information/ Questions/ Notes:

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## REFERENCES

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