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Regular schools as a straitjacket for zone of proximal development: A Vygotskian perspective of Malawian inclusive secondary education

Abstract

Malawi has a twin-track system of primary and secondary education. In this system, some learners with special educational needs are enrolled at regular schools while others are still in special schools. Research has shown that regular schools receive learners with special educational needs into the system, but with the possibility of enabling and constraining their developmental and learning abilities. Put metaphorically, when learners with special educational needs are placed at regular schools, they are dressed in straitjackets that may enable or constrain their development and learning. A straitjacket refers to the freedom and limitations that regular schools give learners with special educational needs. When prisoners and people with mental health conditions are dressed in straitjackets, the foremost reason is to ensure that they can easily be restrained once they turn violent. This situation can be understood through a theoretical frame of what Lev Vygotsky terms the zone of actual development versus the zone of proximal development employed in this study. The study conducted in-depth interviews with ten regular teachers from five regular secondary schools in the South-West Education Division in Malawi. The results from the interviews show that inclusive education is failing at the point of implementation due to (1) a lack of capacity development for regular teachers; (2) limited support for learners with special educational needs; (3) inadequate specialist teachers; and (4) lack of parental and community involvement. These challenges originate from an entrenched view of special education that makes the transition to inclusive education cumbersome. I argue that special education should be used as a steppingstone into inclusivity to expand learning, rather than as a discriminating tool against learners with special educational needs. The study proposes a third-space schooling model in which special education facilitates inclusivity towards the zone of proximal development. The study concludes that the third-space model has the potential to help Malawi and other countries to move towards meaningful, inclusive education.

Keywords: *inclusive education, Malawi, regular schools, special education, zone of proximal development*

1. Introduction

Education systems worldwide have come from a history of segregation based on factors such as race, disability, social status and language. *Ab initio*, Malawi's primary and secondary schools separated learners based on different factors such as disabilities. As such, learners with special educational needs were placed at special schools away from their peers in mainstream schools. With new models of disability, such as the social model that advocated social justice within the education systems, countries have put efforts into introducing inclusive education, a system whereby all learners are placed in one learning environment, and those with special educational needs are afforded appropriate support. Such efforts include policy frameworks such as the Malawian National Strategy on Inclusive Education (2017). When policy frameworks and practice advocates protest the placement of learners at special schools, they do not mean to abolish the specialised services available to such learners (Florian, 2019). Instead, they mean to restructure the schooling system so that all learners are educated together and afforded the necessary support.

Nonetheless, evidence from research suggests that the ones entrusted with offsetting inclusive education in Malawi got the message erroneously. Thus, learners with special educational needs in regular schools still face exclusion within the inclusion (Asongu, Diop & Addis, 2023; Done & Andrews, 2020; Hara, 2020). As this study puts it, the learners are dressed in straitjackets, like prisoners or patients with mental health conditions. They have the freedom to join the regular schools (as prisoners or patients with mental health conditions find freedom in loose clothing) but with a possibility that such freedom could be used against them by denying them equal education (just as prisoners or patients with mental health conditions would be easily restrained using the straitjackets). Therefore, I argue in this study that we need a 'third space' between special and mainstream education. I borrow the term 'third space' from Homi Bhabha to indicate the difference between special education and mainstream education that would truly translate into inclusive education.

2. Research focus and questions

2.1 Focus

The study focused on surfacing challenges affecting the implementation of inclusive education in regular secondary schools in Malawi to demonstrate how the challenges could be turned into opportunities for an effective schooling model towards inclusive education.

2.2 Questions

The study intended to answer the following questions:

- What are the challenges affecting the implementation of inclusive education in regular secondary schools in Malawi?
- How can the challenges be turned into opportunities for moving towards inclusivity?
- What kind of schooling model is needed to enhance inclusive education?

3. Inclusive education: policy, practice and research

Inclusive education has reshaped the educational landscape on all fronts: policy, practice and research. For policy, the quest has been to develop sound frameworks to help education systems move towards inclusive education (Schuelka & Engsig, 2022). In the same vein, the

practice has focused on reorienting pedagogical practices so that all learners are meaningfully included at regular schools after transitioning from special schools (Florian, 2019). Equally, research in inclusive education has preoccupied itself with surfacing challenges that are frustrating the policy-to-practice trajectory (Messiou, 2017). In all three folds, the desire is to help education systems to transform to the inclusive model of schooling in which differencing factors such as disabilities are not the foci of the system but epistemological access and inclusive pedagogical proficiency.

Policy frameworks such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) are at the fore of the advocacy for inclusive education (Hodkinson & Williams-Brown, 2022; Le Fanu, Schmidt & Virendrakumar, 2022). Underpinning these policy frameworks on inclusive education is, to a more considerable extent, different models of disability, such as the medical and social models. The challenge of translating such policy frameworks as the CRPD lies in the discourse delineating inclusivity (Mpu & Adu, 2021). Most of these frameworks, including the CRPD, stipulate that the aim of education should be, *inter alia*, the development of learners' physical abilities. This situation is also persistent in key protocols such as the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child. Eventually, the international stipulations find their way into national policy frameworks and schooling practices. Thus, instead of epistemological access, the goal of special and inclusive education is reduced to a therapeutic arena for remedying disabilities. Such stipulations may affect how regular teachers implement inclusivity in mainstream education (Chitiyo & Dzenga, 2021).

The practice has shown more sayings than doings in implementing inclusive education in Malawi and worldwide (Muthukrishna & Engelbrecht, 2018). Government frameworks enabled some learners with special educational needs to move from special schools to regular schools (Florian, 2019; Phiri, 2021). It remains a matter of concern that countries (particularly those in the Global South) still need to move fully into inclusive education; another concern is emerging on whether those learners with special educational needs are truly included in regular schools (Finkelstein, 2021). As a result, countries, particularly those with socio-economic environments similar to Malawi, are in a dilemma as to whether the transition from special to inclusive education is beneficial and necessary (Rieser, 2012).

Andrews, Walton and Osman (2021) demonstrate that the policies and practices limit the scope of inclusive education while ignoring the interacting sociocultural systems that shape inclusivity. To borrow the words of de Souza (2021), the transition from special to inclusive education has been a back-and-forth endeavour. Inclusive education is about supportive and interactive schooling systems that reorient and transform towards inclusivity (Magare, Kitching & Roos, 2010). For inclusive education to succeed, regular teachers must be well acquainted with effective inclusivity practices (Opoku *et al*., 2021). In return, education policies and strategies influence inclusive pedagogical proficiency in regular and specialist teachers (Hodkinson & Williams-Brown, 2022). Nevertheless, evidence from research gives a despondent picture of the successful implementation of inclusive education, as what is mostly done in schools contradicts policy stipulations.

4. Vygotskian theoretical framework

This study adopts Lev S. Vygotsky's theoretical model of learning and development. The ideas of Vygotsky on sociocultural theory have made education policymakers, and practitioners rethink how learning occurs and relates to development. Vygotsky's sociocultural theory

argues that learning occurs when individuals interact with their sociocultural environment (Newman, 2018). In the educational sense, such an environment would include teachers, peers, parents, government policies and schooling activities. The study uses two Vygotskian theoretical notions: actual development level and zone of proximal development, to demonstrate how learners with special educational needs could achieve epistemological independence in regular schools. Vygotsky would call this situation *scaffolding* for learners with special educational needs.

Figure 1 below shows the framing and integration of the Vygotskian sociocultural theory and the concepts of special and inclusive education towards a schooling model for inclusivity.

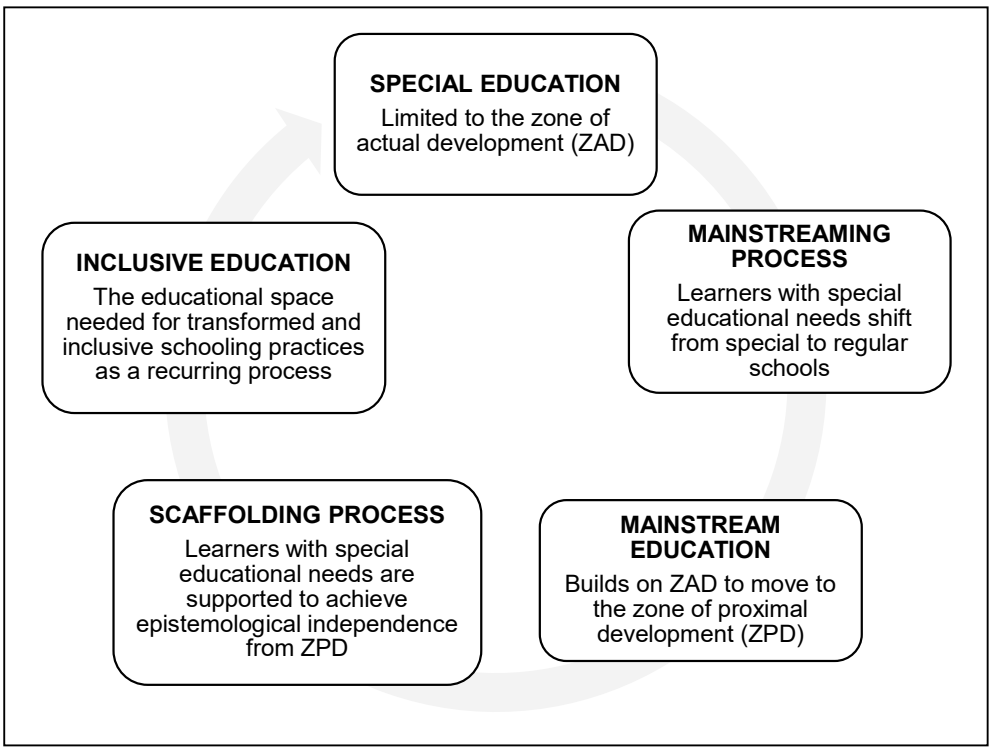

Figure 1: Theoretical and analytical framework for the study

The actual developmental level is a "level of development of a child's mental functions established as a result of certain already completed developmental cycles" (Vygotsky, 1978: 85). Education policy and practice frameworks that stream learners on differencing factors such as disability portray that such learners cannot learn anything beyond what they already know. In a Vygotskian sense, we have special schools because of the fundamental error that development supersedes or equates to learning. In this understanding, we employ the actual developmental level to believe that learners with special educational needs learn only concretely. This situation entails that learners with special educational needs are seen as incapable of potential learning abilities beyond their developmental abilities since "a child's actual developmental level defines functions that have already matured; that is, the end products of development" (Vygotsky, 1978: 86). Thus, the learning capabilities of such a learner end at the point their development capabilities end.

The zone of proximal development refers to "the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem-solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (Vygotsky, 1978: 86). The zone of proximal development embraces potential capabilities that a learner, such as one with a disability, may achieve with support from a peer without a disability in a regular school. In this study, I argue that instead of framing inclusive education as an opposition to special education, the latter could be used to ground the former in which a sociocultural model is employed to maximise the benefits of inclusivity for all learners, including those with special educational needs due to disabilities.

The study uses the notion of actual development level to trace the basis for special education and its implications on contemporary schooling that social justice frameworks have significantly reshaped. The study uses the zone of proximal development to illustrate the essence of inclusive education and how special education could be used as a stepping-stone into inclusivity to expand learning rather than as a discriminating tool against learners with special educational needs. Of course, more than the Vygotskian theoretical ideas are required in interrogating the transition from special to inclusive education. Nonetheless, the Vygotskian critique serves as a preamble to a continued conversation about harmonising special education with inclusive education in a quest for expanded learning capabilities for all learners. Much as the Global North theories present an entry point into thinking critically about policies and practices on inclusive education, more localised theories are needed to implement the Global South's national policies and practices on inclusive education.

5. Research design and methodology for the study

5.1 Ontological framework

Critical realism underpins the study philosophically, particularly the ideas of Bhaskar and Danermark (2006). Roy Bhaskar (1944–2014) is regarded as a founding father of critical realism especially starting with his magnum opus, *A Realist Theory of Science*, based on his doctoral thesis. Breaking away from hegemonic understandings, Bhaskar proposes that ontology (the study of the nature of being) offers a better understanding of the world than epistemology (the theory of knowledge). Danermark (1951–present) is a Swedish academic interested in disability theory, practice and research. Unlike Bhaskar, Danermark is from a sociology background. Like Bhaskar, Danermark is a 'thoughts rebel' who departs from the hegemonic views in sociology to emphasise a need for interdisciplinarity. This ontological underpinning resonates well with the sociocultural theoretical framework employed in the study. Critical realism gave the philosophical lenses to look critically into the state of inclusive secondary education in Malawi from a sociocultural perspective in which regular teachers gave diverse outlooks of their inclusive pedagogical practices.

In "Metatheory, Interdisciplinarity and Disability Research: A Critical Realist Perspective", Bhaskar and Danermark (2006) essentially present what the two authors are interested in and use to stand their ground. It is interesting and relevant because it is threefold: theory, practice and research. They propound critical realism as a philosophy, moved to demonstrate how the theory could be applied or employed, i.e. practice and then illustrated with evidence from research. It gives examples of how the theory worked in disability research and the implications. This approach was a model for this study with the way I employed the Vygotskian theoretical framework because, in my understanding, theory, practice and research are the

three dimensions that preoccupy our scholarly inquiries. We pick or suggest a theory, propose how to employ or utilise it and later research it to live up to our proposals. One of the aims of theory is to explain how a certain phenomenon can be explained in our social reality. Bhaskar, amongst others, developed a critical socialist lens that proposes dialectics and reflexivity, forming part of this study's core.

Bhaskar and Danermark (2006) argue that theory should not dictate what to do in research, but rather help one find one's pursuits. Thus, this study's context led to the research's direction. We must maintain presuppositions in research. As social scientists, we are naturally embedded in the world we research. Thus, a theory is somewhat present in our inquiries, whether explicit or implicit. Therefore, this study assumed that regular teachers exist in a schooling environment that presents both enablers and constraints in their inclusive pedagogical proficiency. In developing the critical realist perspective, Bhaskar and others posit that the perpetuation of specific social structures could be influenced by the generation of distorted or erroneous social beliefs (Pearl, 2020). They contend that identifying a systematic link between inaccurate beliefs and oppressive social structures not only characterises these beliefs but also provides a rationale for advocating changes to these structures (ibid.). Not only knowledge in terms of powerful scientific processes, but all humans contribute to knowledge construction processes. As such, the sociocultural theoretical framework was employed to help understand how regular teachers could build on special education to advance the learning capabilities of learners with special educational needs in inclusive education.

5.2 Methodological and ethics framework

The study generated data through ten in-depth interviews with regular teachers from five mainstream secondary schools in the South-West Education Division in Malawi. The interviews used an interpretive paradigm to understand inclusive education practices from the teachers' subjective experiences. The interviews focused on the position of social stratification and the impact of inclusive education policies and practices on relationships of privilege and inequality. This focus framed within a critical realist ontology helped me understand how policies defined inclusion by following its epistemological roots and construction. According to Young and Diem (2017), policy meaning is produced between the text, the people and their interpretations, implying that they are negotiated products of people, communities and ideological positions. The interviews addressed some critical aspects of inclusive education policies' impact on the environmental, structural, and attitudinal barriers affecting the lives of learners with special educational needs and which have the potential to hold back their abilities. A thematic analysis framework for the interviews was adopted whereby central and alike ideas from the participants' responses were synchronised.

The study adhered to the Rhodes University-established research ethics frameworks. Ethical clearance was sought and granted through my student project on inclusive education in Malawi at the South-West Education Division office, from which this paper is derived. An informed consent form was presented to the interview participants, and participants had a chance to discuss the terms of consent with me before the commencement of interviews, discussions and consultations. Anonymity was strictly upheld throughout the research by using pseudonyms such as A, B, C, etc. to report the participants' identities. Potential benefits, such as improved inclusivity practices, were explained to the participants before the interviews. Respect for all participants' personal feelings, backgrounds and orientations was upheld, and they could withdraw from the research process at any stage.

6. Research findings

This section presents the analysis of interviews conducted with regular teachers from selected secondary schools in the South-West Education Division in Malawi. The interviews focused on challenges affecting the implementation of inclusive education in the country. Thus, the interview results speak to the study's first research question. The second and third research questions are answered in the discussion section while discussing how the challenges could be turned into opportunities for a better schooling model.

6.1 Challenges faced in implementing inclusive education in Malawi

The study found that several challenges hinder the implementation of inclusive education at regular secondary schools in Malawi. Some of these challenges are a lack of capacity development for regular teachers; limited support for learners with special educational needs; inadequate specialist teachers; and a lack of parental and community involvement. These are presented separately below.

6.2 Lack of capacity development for regular teachers

The National Strategy on Inclusive Education mandates authorities to "establish development programmes which will take care of capacity development in the context of aligning technical assistance with associated commodity aid, training requirements and improved structural and systemic approaches in the execution of the policy" (Malawi Ministry of Education, 2017: 12). In one of the interviews, Participant A indicated that

> *It is good to teach these students inclusively, but on the other side, we should be oriented on how we can handle these students because we are required to support these learners with special needs, yet we cannot.*

The request made by Participant A resonates with the National Education Policy of 2016. The policy stated that the "Teaching Service Commission (TSC) will take into account professional development programmes" (Malawi Ministry of Education, 2016: 12). However, evidence to vindicate the materialisation of this aspiration is seldom available. Therefore, Participant C lamented that

> *There must be special training for teachers like me who are not specialists to have the knowledge and skills to handle these special [needs] students.*

The call for inclusive education remains speculative and needs capacity building for regular teachers. Participant B shared a story about their experiences:

> *When I landed in Form One, at one point when I was teaching it came a time when I was asking questions, so I saw a certain boy in front of me with the hearing aids, so I thought it was the headsets, so other students had to say no he has a hearing problem.*

This situation expresses the need for implementing deliberate educational initiatives to ensure regular teachers develop the capacity for inclusive education. Also,

> *Extra training should be given to teachers as not all have undergone training on inclusive education. I think teachers should be oriented on handling these students with disabilities.* (Participant J)

From the interviews, we get examples of some forms of capacity development that are needed, i.e. could it orient them towards embracing pedagogical approaches that enhance inclusive education, capacity development on issues to deal with health emergencies in inclusive classes, and capacity development in terms of time management in inclusive education set-up. Focusing on such capacity development needs would help identify further challenges affecting the implementation of inclusive education apart from capacity development. Such an approach would ground the process more on the practical implementation of inclusive education for all learners, including those with special educational needs.

6.3 Limited support for learners with special educational needs

To transition from policy to practice and ensure parity between the two, regular teachers called for support for learners with special educational needs. The call resonates with the National Education Policy of 2016 and the National Strategy on Inclusive Education of 2017. Government policies and strategies call for inclusive education implementation, but one participant noted that,

> *In most cases, the government does not provide anything. The government should walk the talk by supplying teaching, learning and assessment resources for learners with disabilities.* (Participant F)

The regular teachers suggested that allocating adequate teaching and learning resources may help implement inclusive education. Participant E said,

> *We need more learning materials to assist these students. The government should come up with special materials that can assist those with disabilities to learn better. The materials should be readily available in schools, e.g. braille materials.*

A critical analysis of this challenge suggests that learners with special educational needs also need pedagogical support, where they explore concepts inclusively with other, more capable peers to enable transition within the zones of proximal development, i.e. a pedagogy of empowerment. Such a pedagogy emanating from the sociocultural theory would tap into the learners' cultural heritage knowledge and tools, reducing this overwhelming need for teaching and learning resources as they could now use what is local and readily available.

6.4 Inadequate specialist teachers

Much as inclusive education intends to transform and mainstream learners with special educational needs into regular schools, the necessity of specialist teachers remains unchanged. For example, regular teachers use

> *A specialist, so whenever we have problems, we always contact this gentleman who gives us some direction and how to handle those challenges. Some of us teachers are not specialists. We assign specialists with assignments then the specialists translate their braille.* (Participant H)

Thus, the essence of specialist teachers in implementing inclusive education policies and practices must be supported. However, the problem is, as one participant noted,

> *We have only one specialist teacher, and that is a barrier. These guys are many here. We have many students with disabilities here, and having one specialist at this institution is a barrier. Government must post specialist teachers.* (Participant D)

Evidence from research and personal experiences show that there are few trained specialist teachers in Malawi. Many teacher training colleges and universities must enrol teachers specialising in this area. Presently, only two religious-owned institutions train specialist teachers in Malawi. Thus, the government has yet to contribute to training specialist teachers in the country. Still, the government expects such teachers to be available in regular schools.

6.5 Lack of parental and community involvement

As inclusive education happens in regular schools, with headteachers, administrators, and teachers as key players, the system must recognise the essence of other stakeholders, such as parents and communities. The National Strategy on Inclusive Education "encourages networking and collaboration of stakeholders as one way of strengthening efforts aimed at improving the efficiency of the education system and its structures" (Malawi Ministry of Education, 2017: 11). The strategy asserts that "communities, families, and parents will provide the general management of schools, mobilise resources, and provide learners with their physical and social needs" (Malawi Ministry of Education, 2017: 13).

Some teachers believed that since learners with special educational needs come from a home in the communities, national policies and strategies should clearly state when and how communities should be involved in inclusive education. In one of the interviews, Participant B suggested,

> *I want as many people as possible, like parents, to be involved in inclusive education in terms of planning and developing ideas on how the programme can be more effective.*

One of the roles of regular schools stipulated in the National Education Policy of 2016 is collaboration with communities and parents in inclusive education (Malawi Ministry of Education, 2016). However, Participant G expressed a concern that parents and communities are not involved in inclusive education and the general education of their wards.

7. Discussion and recommendations

The thematic analysis of the interviews shows that inclusive education needs to be improved in its implementation due to several challenges affecting it. An in-depth analysis of the challenges emerging from available interview data suggests that the problem arising is the antagonistic nature in which inclusive education is framed. This situation led to a suggestion that inclusive education has been set in Malawi as the undoing of special education. As such, learners with special educational needs require meaningful pedagogical support from regular teachers (Kidman *et al.*, 2022). The discussion and recommendations in this section focus on turning challenges into opportunities and propose a schooling model that could enhance inclusive education. By turning the challenges faced in implementing inclusive education, the intention is to ensure that learners with special educational needs are placed in regular schools on equal footing with their peers and not as suspects of failure.

7.1 Tightening the straitjacket: Turning challenges into opportunities

The study found that lack of capacity development for regular teachers, limited support for learners with special educational needs, inadequate specialist teachers, and lack of parental and community involvement are some of the challenges hindering the successful implementation of inclusive education in the Malawian mainstream secondary schools. A critical analysis of these challenges shows that the challenges have come from special education. For example,

regular teachers cannot implement inclusive education because, *ab initio*, their roles are not in that context. Teacher education was philosophised with a presumption that mainstream education is for learners without special educational needs who are supposedly capable of abstract thinking (Done, Murphy & Irving, 2013). Thus, much as some learners with special educational needs are now in regular schools, the exclusion is inevitable because teacher education has yet to reorient itself towards inclusivity.

On the other hand, there needs to be more support for learners with special educational needs because support for such kinds of learners is primarily challenged to special schools that are still in existence than regular schools. It is logical to have inadequate specialist teachers because the philosophy has been to undo the tenets of special education, forgetting that the presence of specialist teachers in regular schools is an expressed need for inclusivity (Kinsella, 2020). The problem with the lack of parental and community involvement has been that the transition from special to inclusive education has not taken a holistic approach (Šukys, Dumčienė & Lapėnienė, 2015; Walton, 2018). Parents and communities are not regarded as stakeholders in inclusive education.

The goal now should not be to reconceptualise inclusive education *de novo*. Instead, the focus should be on turning the challenges into opportunities for inclusivity. Metaphorically, learners with special educational needs are dressed in straitjackets at regular schools. This situation speaks to the zone of actual development, which represents the developmental and learning capabilities that a learner has already achieved. Education policies that support special schools are the bedrock of this level of development with a supposition that a learner with disabilities cannot learn anything beyond the concrete. This situation undermines the supposition that "what children can do with the assistance of others might be in some sense even more indicative of their mental development than what they can do alone" (Vygotsky, 1978: 85). Much as such a learner is placed in a regular school, a possibility remains that they will face exclusion within the inclusion as there is no deliberate effort to get support from their more capable peers, and regular teachers themselves lack the capacity.

For example, a regular teacher lacking the capacity to support a learner with autism would exclude such a learner from certain lesson activities to ensure progress for other learners. Such a teacher is unaware that the learner with autism has "those functions that have not yet matured but are in the process of maturation, functions that will mature tomorrow but are currently in an embryonic state" (Vygotsky, 1978: 86). However, if such a teacher develops inclusive pedagogical proficiency, they would realise that such learners can perform the same activities at their own pace and with the support of their more capable peers. This situation would entail that "what is in the zone of proximal development today will be the actual developmental level tomorrow" (Vygotsky, 1978: 87). This situation speaks more to the education agenda that places learners without disabilities in mainstream education, assuming that these children are more capable of abstraction than their peers in special schools. Contrary, "although learning is directly related to the course of child development, the two are never accomplished in equal measure or parallel" (Vygotsky, 1978: 91).

Consequently, the hegemonic conception that abstraction is for learners without special educational needs has to be challenged, because learners with special educational needs have abilities for potential development and abstract learning. As Vygotsky would say, support is the only thing such learners lack. In special schools, the learners are limited to learning to a certain extent. Regular schools should thus challenge such learners to go beyond the

limitations of their disabilities or barriers with the support of teachers and more capable peers. The process would require regular teachers to build on the capabilities that the learners with special educational needs have, the zone of actual development, to move to potential capabilities they can develop, the zone of proximal development. Importantly, the teachers would require the necessary training for inclusivity.

7.2 Scaffolding for inclusivity: Towards a third-space schooling model

Special schools place learners with special educational needs in a segregated learning environment with a special curriculum (Kern, 2020). This situation undermines that "any learning a child encounters in school always has a previous history" (Vygotsky, 1978: 84). Special education does not build on the previous knowledge that a learner with a disability may have, for example. Special education forgets that "learning and development are interrelated from the child's very first day of life" (Vygotsky, 1978: 84). An outcry was made that keeping learners with special educational needs in special schools not only infringes on their human rights but also defeats the basic goals of learning and development. Thus, the advocacy is that learners with special educational needs should be placed in regular schools. With this advocacy comes many changes, including the roles of teachers (Dreyer, 2013).

However, the fundamental gaffe we make is that we forget that regular schools have impediments, such as the limitations experienced from the side of the teachers that can make the advocacy for inclusivity speculative. Thus, inclusive education is different from mainstream education. Instead, inclusive education is the difference between special education and mainstream education. It is a third space that has emerged due to the social model of disability, among other frameworks. The idea of a third space originated through the ontological conceptions of Bhabha (1994), whereby a person's uniqueness and characteristics form a hybrid version of such an individual. Concerning inclusive education, it would be the features of both special education and mainstream education that would merge to translate into meaningful inclusivity. Thus, any schooling model for inclusivity should embrace this third space. The sociocultural context that shapes learning and development is at the core of this third space. The third space recognises that "developmental processes do not coincide with learning processes. Rather, the developmental process lags behind the learning process; this sequence then results in zones of proximal development" (Vygotsky, 1978: 90). Figure 2 below shows the proposed schooling model for inclusive education.

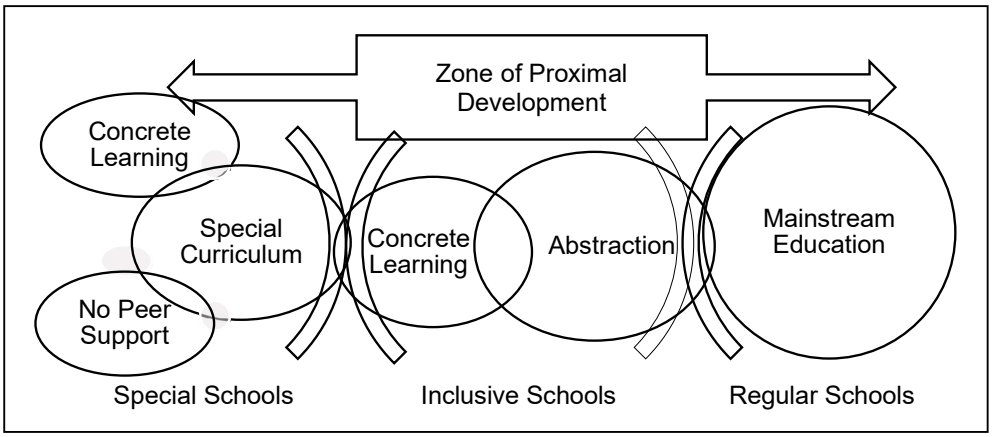

Figure 2: Third Space Schooling Model for Inclusive Education

It is that third space that would truly translate into inclusive education. In the third space, the schooling system would be restructured to use special education as a steppingstone into inclusivity. In the Vygotskian sense, special education would be the zone of actual development for learners with special educational needs, and mainstream education would be the zone of proximal development for them. The difference between the two would then present an opportunity for scaffolding, whereby learners with special educational needs are brought to the same epistemological levels as their peers in the same learning environment. Thus, in whatever form it should be delivered, special education has to be embedded within mainstream education in a quest for inclusive education.

8. Limitations of the study

Firstly, the study only focused on interviewing regular secondary teachers as this was part of a larger study with such a focus. Secondly, the observable data generated sketches a picture of a group of teachers (regular) insufficiently equipped by an educational system (inclusive education) to purposefully guide a specific group of learners (special educational needs). Thirdly, it may seem problematic that the learner voice (special educational needs and regular) and teachers from special needs schools remain silent. Nevertheless, interviewing regular teachers and the corresponding choice to silence other voices can be a thought-provoking contribution to how we view inclusive education. Also, it may be problematic that learner voices are silent from constructivist, sociocultural and collaborative perspectives. If we argue for the real to be imperceptible and suggest a third space between special needs and mainstream education, this picture of the third space can be painted more clearly by including some of the silences that can help to fill the picture – for example, the voices of both special needs and regular teachers to be included. Therefore, further research to interrogate the missing voices in the third space schooling model could be essential in a quest for meaningful, inclusive education systems and practices in Malawi and beyond.

9. Conclusion

The study argued that inclusive education is different from special and mainstream education. Central to this argument is the observation (as guided by available data) that the current framing of inclusive education is in binary opposition to special education. Data presented in this paper and the discussion demonstrate that special education can be used to achieve inclusive education if grounded in sociocultural contexts and not just ideologically delineated. This endeavour would require turning challenges such as lack of teacher capacity, resources and parental involvement, as reported by regular teachers during interviews in Malawi, into opportunities for inclusivity. These opportunities would open a third space translating into the aspiration for inclusive education. As highlighted by the available data, one could surmise that the current situation is not a true representation of inclusive education. If anything, this is a straitjacket clothing whereby learners can be included in regular schools at their own risk. When prisoners or patients with mental health conditions are dressed in straitjackets, they are prejudiced as suspects of violence. Much as they could freely relax in those straitjackets, they could also be easily restrained once they turn violent. Thus, regular schools, being straitjackets of the zone of proximal development, prevent learners with special educational needs from developing their potential capabilities; hence a need for the third space schooling model for inclusive education.

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