

University of Cape Town

Faculty of Health Sciences



Exploring the Knowledge and Attitudes of Educational Stakeholders and How this Influences Inclusive Education Practices in Elementary Schools: A Case Study of a Rural Community in Kasungu, Malawi.

By

Priscilla Banda

Student Number: BNDPRI001

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Supervisor: Prof Judith McKenzie

Co-Supervisors: Dr Richard Vergunst & Dr Joerg Weber

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ABSTRACT

This research study explored knowledge, attitudes, and practices among educational stakeholders in a rural community within Kasungu, Malawi, focusing on inclusive education in elementary schools. A key underlying concern is the pervasive exclusion of children with disabilities from educational opportunities. One of the proposed responses to address this concern is the implementation of inclusive education (IE), which advocates for the full participation and meaningful engagement of all students, regardless of their abilities or differences. However, the successful implementation of IE hinges upon the collaborative efforts and active involvement of various stakeholders, including educators, parents, policymakers, community leaders, and support personnel. Without the collective commitment and engagement of these stakeholders, the effective realization of inclusive education goals remains elusive.

Recognizing the imperative to address these challenges, this study sought to investigate the knowledge, and attitudes of education stakeholders in-order to understand how these factors impact the practical implementation of inclusive education in elementary school community in Kasungu Malawi. Following the Knowledge, Attitudes, and Practices (KAP) model, this study employed a qualitative research approach and a descriptive case study design. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with ten education stakeholders from this community. Participant selection criteria were based on inclusion and exclusion criteria.

The data was analyzed thematically and the study revealed diverse perspectives and challenges. Knowledge disparities emerged, as stakeholders understood inclusive education differently, ranging from broader societal transformation to a narrower focus on integrating children with disabilities into mainstream classrooms. Many stakeholders lacked awareness of the National Strategy for Inclusive Education (NSIE), which hindered policy implementation. Attitudes varied among stakeholders, with caregivers and parents supporting the transformative potential of Inclusive Education, while educators and school principals expressed reservations due to readiness and practical constraints, often influenced by the severity of disabilities. Highlighting the critical need for improved collaboration, communication, and community involvement, the study revealed limited collaboration between teachers, parents, and specialists. Low levels of parental and community engagement were linked to factors such as education levels, poverty, and negative attitudes. Knowledge gaps in early identification and support of learners with special needs underscored the need for comprehensive training programs and community engagement initiatives.

These findings have significant implications for advancing inclusive education in this study area and similar context. Addressing knowledge disparities and fostering a deeper understanding of inclusive education principles are crucial. This requires comprehensive awareness campaigns and community engagement initiatives to reshape societal attitudes and promote inclusive values. Enhancing professional development for educators through continuous in-service training is essential to bridge the knowledge-attitude-practice gap. Improving collaboration and communication among stakeholders, especially between teachers, parents, and specialists, is key. Encouraging parent-teacher associations and organizing regular meetings to discuss students' progress and challenges can strengthen parental involvement. Adopting a community-based approach, including outreach programs and initiatives, can overcome barriers to parental participation and enhance community engagement. These recommendations provide a valuable guide for advancing inclusive education not only in this Elementary school community in Malawi but also in similar communities worldwide.

DECLARATION

I, Priscilla Banda (Student Number: BNDPRI001), solemnly acknowledge the importance of academic integrity and the significance of avoiding plagiarism. I understand that plagiarism is the act of using another person's work and presenting it as one's own. I am fully committed to upholding the principles of honesty and originality in academic endeavors.

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this research to all the dedicated education stakeholders in Malawi who tirelessly strive to promote inclusion despite the significant implementation challenges. Your unwavering commitment to advancing inclusive education exemplifies your dedication to creating a more equitable and inclusive society. It is your passion, persistence, and belief in the transformative power of education that serve as a beacon of hope for all learners, regardless of their abilities. Your collective efforts inspire change, foster understanding, and break down barriers, ultimately shaping a brighter and more inclusive future for the children of Malawi. This research stands as a tribute to your remarkable work and an acknowledgement of the profound impact you make on the lives of countless students. May your perseverance continue to inspire us and guide our collective journey toward a more inclusive and equitable education system in Malawi. Your dedication is a beacon of hope, and this research stands as a symbol of gratitude for your remarkable contributions.

DEFINITION OF TERMINOLOGIES

Knowledge: Knowledge refers to the awareness, understanding, and familiarity with information, facts, skills, and concepts acquired through experience, learning, or education (Liao, Nguyen, & Sasaki, 2022).

Attitude: Attitude is a predisposition or evaluation, positive or negative, that an individual holds towards a particular object, person, idea, or situation. It encompasses feelings, beliefs, and behavioural tendencies (Gall, Borg, and Gall, 1996).

Practice: Practice involves the application of knowledge, skills, and behaviors in real-life situations. It represents the habitual or repeated actions that individuals or groups engage in to achieve specific goals or outcomes (Kaliyaperumal, 2004).

Inclusive Education: Inclusive education is an education approach that ensures all students, regardless of their abilities or differences, are provided with equitable opportunities to learn and actively participate in the same educational environment (Haug, 2017).

Education Stakeholders: Education stakeholders include individuals or groups such as teachers, parents, administrators, policymakers, and community members who have a vested interest in and impact on the educational system (Freeman, 1984).

Elementary School: An elementary school is an educational institution typically providing education for children in the early stages of their academic journey, usually encompassing grades kindergarten through eighth grade ("Elementary school Definition & Meaning - Merriam-Webster" <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/elementary%20school>).

Community: Community refers to a group of individuals living in proximity or sharing common interests, values, and goals. It involves social interactions and a sense of belonging among its members (Driessen, 2019).

Collaboration: Collaboration is the act of working together, often among individuals or groups with diverse skills, knowledge, and expertise, to achieve a common goal or objective (Nel et al., 2014 & Fodo 2020).

Co-teaching: Co-teaching involves two or more educators working together in a shared classroom, combining their skills and resources to provide a more inclusive and effective learning environment for all students (Villa, Thousand, & Nevin, 2019).

Parental Involvement/Participation: Parental involvement or participation refers to the engagement of parents in their children's education, including activities such as volunteering, attending meetings, and supporting learning at home (Driessen, 2019).

Covid-19: COVID-19, caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus, is a respiratory illness characterized by symptoms ranging from mild cold-like symptoms to severe respiratory distress ("Coronavirus" https://www.who.int/health-topics/coronavirus#tab=tab_1).

LIST OF ACRONYMS

FGD: Focus Group Discussion

IE: Inclusive Education

IQ: Intelligence Quotient

KAP: Knowledge Attitudes Practices

LMICs: Low- and Middle-Income Countries

MEM: Ministry of Education and Malawi

MoE: Ministry of Education

MoEM: Ministry of Education, Malawi

NESIP: National Education Sector Investment Plan

NSIE: National Strategy for Inclusive Education

NSNEP: National Special Needs Education Policy

OECD: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

PEA: Primary Education Advisor

PTA: Parent-Teacher Association

SDGs: Sustainable Development Goals

SEN: Special Education Needs

SEND: Special Educational Needs and Disabilities

SMC: School Management Committee

UCT: University of Cape Town

UNGA: United Nations General Assembly

UNCRPD: United Nations Convention Rights of Persons with Disabilities

UNESCO: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

UNICEF: United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund

UN: United Nations

UNHCR: United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

WHO: World Health Organization

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Inclusive Education (IE) is an educational approach based on the principle that all students, including those with special needs, deserve access to quality education within a supportive and diverse learning environment (United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities [UNCRPD], 2016). IE stands as a vital component of educational systems worldwide, aspiring to provide equitable learning opportunities for all individuals, regardless of their abilities or backgrounds. Malawi, like many developing nations, has embraced IE policies to promote equitable and high-quality education. However, the transition from policy formulation to effective implementation encounters significant challenges, especially within local contexts like this community. Despite the Malawian government's commitment to providing equitable and high-quality education, obstacles persist in translating these commitments into reality. The National Strategy on IE (NSIE) 2017-2021 was introduced to enhance community engagement in IE. Nevertheless, the successful practice of IE is significantly shaped by the knowledge and attitudes of educational stakeholders about inclusion.

This research stems from the pressing need to comprehend the knowledge, attitudes, and practices of education stakeholders in Malawi, echoing the insights from the 2020 Global Education Monitoring Report (UNESCO, 2020). Focusing on the Elementary School community as a representative case study, the study aims to address these challenges and contribute to the advancement of a more inclusive and equitable education system. It aligns with global and national discussions on IE (IE) while emphasising the importance of respecting unique local nuances and experiences of individuals with disabilities and their families, as highlighted in the critical literature on IE in the Global South (Kamenopoulou, 2018a; Walton, 2018).

Moreover, the research recognizes the scarcity of context-specific studies conducted by Malawians within Malawi, echoing concerns raised in the discourse on Northern-led research dominating IE literature. Unlike previous studies concentrating solely on teachers' attitudes, this research broadens its scope to encompass the Knowledge, Attitudes, and Practices (KAP) of various education stakeholders related to IE. This approach acknowledges external pressures from donors, resource constraints, and multifaceted challenges that hinder the successful implementation of IE policies in the Global South (Grech, 2015; Rao and Kalyanpur, 2020). By delving into these multifaceted aspects, the study aspires to contribute significantly to shaping Malawi's IE policies, striving to ensure tangible and equitable educational opportunities for all learners. In doing so, it echoes the call for critical theoretical and research literature on IE from the Global South, emphasizing intersectional dimensions (Bešić, 2020). Ultimately, this research aligns with the broader vision of fostering inclusivity and educational equity within Malawi's educational landscape.

1.1 Background of the study

1.1.1 Historical context of IE

IE traces its origins to the historical context of special education. Dating back to the 19th century, children with disabilities were frequently perceived as having inherent biological limitations, resulting in their exclusion from mainstream public schools (Dyson & Forlin, 1999). Instead, they were typically cared for and educated by local churches and charitable organizations, aiming to protect them from exploitation.

This period also saw the emergence of Intelligence Quotient (IQ) tests and misconceptions about intellectual ability, which further segregated children with disabilities into separate schools and specialized teaching approaches. However, this model faced growing dissatisfaction over time. To combat the stigma tied to disability diagnoses, the term "special educational needs" (SEN) gained acceptance, shifting the focus from individual impairments to the interplay between a child and their environment (Walton, 2018). It was only in the 1970s, influenced by factors like civil rights movements and parental pressure, that the shift from segregated to integrated education began (ibid.). Integrated education initially aimed to provide support to individual students without modifying existing programs but faced criticism for not adapting to unique needs (Winter & O'Raw, 2010). These historical developments eventually paved the way for IE.

IE represents a significant shift towards accommodating a diverse range of learners within the education system, rather than focusing solely on individual children with disabilities (Srivastava et al., 2015). It aims to address the needs of all students and reduce exclusion from education (ibid.). This approach also serves as a framework for analyzing power dynamics within educational systems (Slee, 2009). International commitments have strengthened the concept of IE, notably following the 1994 World Conference on Special Needs Education in Salamanca, Spain. This event was built upon earlier initiatives like the 1990 Education for All campaign and the 1993 United Nations Standard Rules on Equal Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities. The resulting Salamanca Statement emphasized equal educational opportunities for children with disabilities (UNESCO, 1994). Article 24 of the CRPD, adopted in 2006, specifically advocates for IE systems, solidifying international commitment (UN, 2006).

It is crucial to acknowledge that the concept of "IE" lacks a universally agreed-upon definition and needs contextualization within each country (Schuelka et al., 2019). Despite extensive research on IE, there is still a research gap concerning the interaction of education systems with historically marginalized children with disabilities (ibid.), especially in the global South. This underscores the need for a more in-depth exploration of historical identification and policy strategies within these contexts.

1.1.2 Context of Inclusive Education in Malawi

The history of formal education in Malawi traces back to 1875 when missionaries initiated educational efforts, focusing on basic skills such as reading, writing, and arithmetic (Chavuta et al., 2008). In 1926, the Malawian government established the Department of Education, marking a significant milestone in the development of formal education. Special Needs Education (SNE) services began in the 1950s, initially addressing visual impairments in Chilanga (Kasungu) and Lulwe (Nsanje) districts. Over time, services expanded to include learners with hearing impairments in 1968 and those with learning difficulties in 1996. Currently, SNE services for Special Educational Needs (SEN) are provided through special schools and resource classrooms in mainstream schools, though these facilities are deemed insufficient for the growing number of learners with SEN (Chavuta et al., 2008).

Malawi has committed to international declarations and policies aimed at providing equal educational opportunities for all, including those with disabilities. These commitments include endorsing the Salamanca Statement (1994), which advocates for the inclusion of learners with disabilities in mainstream education and the ratification of the United Nations Conventions on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2009. Despite significant progress, Malawi faces challenges aligning with IE principles such as insufficient

funding, environmental and attitudinal barriers, limited teacher training for SNE, and a lack of coordination among stakeholders (Malawi MoEST, 2016, p.8). Goal 4 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) emphasizes the importance of inclusive and equitable quality education for all. However, the understanding and implementation of IE vary between the global North and the global South, with external pressures often influencing countries in the global South to adopt IE policies (Walton, 2018). Malawi does not have a Formal legal and policy framework on IE but introduced a National Strategy on Inclusive Education to guide the implementation of IE. Through it, the Malawi government aims to maintain special schools and resource centres as assets for promoting IE (NSIE, 2016). Unfortunately, these resource rooms are inadequately established, lacking essential resources to cater to the needs of children with SEN (DeSouza, 2021). Consequently, the utilization of resource rooms in Malawi tends to foster exclusion for children with SEN, resulting in significant disparities between policy and practice—a notable hindrance in the effective implementation of IE in the country (Chimwaza, 2015; Hummel & Werning, 2016).

Despite Malawi embracing an IE approach, persistent challenges arise due to a lack of understanding of IE policies. This results in disparities in practices and ongoing exclusion in education (Chimwaza 2015; Mkandawire et al., 2016). Unfortunately, the education landscape for individuals with Special Needs Education (SNE) in Malawi hasn't significantly improved since these policies were formulated. While Malawian education policies align with those of many African countries, the commitment to IE in mainstream classes doesn't ensure successful implementation. Bridging the gap between policy and practice requires crucial participation from stakeholders, including the local community. Walton (2011) emphasizes the role of community stakeholders in supporting inclusion, drawing upon the African philosophy of "Ubuntu," highlighting unity. This philosophy becomes especially relevant in the context of IE, fostering collaboration to address educational inequality exacerbated by the global COVID-19 pandemic (UNESCO, 2020).

In the ongoing global discourse on IE implementation, several authors advocate for countries in the global south, like Malawi, to tailor IE approaches to their unique cultural and historical contexts (Werning et al., 2016). Similarly, a focus on developing teacher competencies is recognized as pivotal in overcoming obstacles to inclusion in education. While ensuring change in education is a collective responsibility, the knowledge and attitudes of implementers play a significant role. The successful implementation of IE relies significantly on broader community attitudes and values, influenced substantially by national policies and strategies. However, the blind importation of policies from the Global North to the Global South, without considering local realities, can render these policies contextually insignificant, particularly in the face of prevalent poverty (Grech, 2011). This underscores the importance of considering local realities when contemplating IE in Global South countries (Kalyanpur, 2011; Kamenopoulou, 2018a; Karisa et al., 2023). Without proper contextualization, imported policies may lead to significant disparities in practices (Donohue & Bornman, 2014; Mariga et al., 2014; Teodoro, 2020).

Moreover, there is a critical gap in the literature regarding SNE in Malawi (Munthali et al., 2013; Mkandawire et al., 2016). While past studies have focused on teachers' attitudes (Ishida et al., 2017; Kamchedzera, 2010; Mwale et al., 2010; Arvelo-Rosales et al., 2021; UNESCO, 2023; OECD, 2023), there is an information void regarding the knowledge, attitudes, and practices of education stakeholders in IE

within local contexts like this study area. Bridging the gap between policy and practice requires the active involvement of all educational stakeholders, including community members, to combat educational inequality. The role of cultural and historical contexts, as well as teacher competencies, is vital in overcoming obstacles to inclusion in education. Additionally, the knowledge and attitudes of implementers play a significant role, with community attitudes and values influencing IE implementation.

1.2 Statement of the research problem and rationale of the study

While the discourse on IE has been significantly shaped by the Global North (Walton, 2018), translating these principles into practice in low- and middle-income countries, such as Malawi, has presented considerable challenges (Armstrong et al., 2011; Kalyanpur, 2016; Kamenopoulou, 2020; Sharma, 2020; Kalyanpur, 2022; Karisa et al., 2023). These challenges encompass negative attitudes towards IE, resource constraints, and a noticeable gap between policy formulation and actual implementation (Slee, 2001; Andrews et al., 2019; UNESCO, 2020). These challenges are not surprising as international frameworks, rooted in human rights, are predominantly led by the Global North and do not reflect the realities, values, and experiences of the Global South countries like Malawi (Kamenopoulou, 2018a). Moreover, the absence of a universally agreed-upon definition of IE and ongoing ambiguities in its interpretation further complicate matters (Florian, 2014; Mitchell, 2015; Ainscow et al., 2006). Given these obstacles, understanding the perspectives and knowledge of those directly involved becomes crucial. Specifically, in the Elementary School community of Malawi, assessing the knowledge and attitudes of educational stakeholders holds the potential to enhance the successful enactment of IE policies. This study aims to explore the Knowledge, Attitudes, and Practices (KAP) of these stakeholders, seeking to bridge the gap between policy and practice in the Elementary School community of Kasungu, Malawi.

1.3 Context of the study

The context of the study is an elementary school in Kasungu Malawi. For ethical reasons, the school's and community name is not mentioned; instead, it is referred to as an elementary school community. The selection of this rural community as a study area is deeply rooted in the unique context of this area. The community has a strong cultural identity tied to the Chewa ethnic group, prevalent across Central Malawi and Eastern Zambia. Geographically, it is surrounded by four villages, each overseen by a senior group village headman, and includes essential amenities such as one health centre, a community day secondary school, a primary school, and a trading centre. The primary school in this community serves approximately 1400-2000 learners and faces significant educational challenges, including a severe shortage of specialized teachers and resources (J. Bundi, personal communication).

Compounding these educational challenges is the fact that the nearest special school in the district, catering exclusively to blind students, is located 82 kilometres away from the community. Furthermore, the school system grapples with a teacher-to-pupil ratio of 1:120, with one teacher handling all subjects in a single class (R. Bwanthi, personal communication). Consequently, many children enroll in Grade 1 but subsequently drop out due to various factors, including the long commute, poverty, lack of interest, and a shortage of qualified teachers (ibid.). In terms of livelihoods, the majority of the community's population depends on farming and engages in small businesses such as providing bicycle transportation services (kabaza) (C. Banda, personal communication). Additionally, the production and sale of the traditional spirit Kachasu, as well as participation in various labour roles, including tenancy farming, driving, and security

positions within tobacco estates, contribute to the community's income sources (ibid.). These socio-economic conditions further complicate the educational landscape, impacting both student attendance and educational outcomes.

Moreover, there is a significant research gap concerning inclusive education practices in rural Malawian contexts, particularly in Kasungu. Existing literature predominantly focuses on urban settings, leaving rural communities like this one underrepresented. This study aims to fill this gap by providing insights specific to the rural context of Kasungu, which can inform both local and broader educational strategies. The strong community bonds and the pivotal role of local stakeholders in rural areas make this an ideal setting to explore how attitudes and knowledge shape educational practices. Understanding these dynamics is essential for developing tailored interventions that can effectively address the unique needs of students in rural areas, especially those with special needs and from marginalized backgrounds. By focusing on this rural community in Kasungu, this study not only aims to provide evidence-based recommendations for improving inclusive education practices locally but also offers insights that are scalable and adaptable to other rural communities facing similar challenges.

1.4 Research question

What are the knowledge, attitudes, and practices of education stakeholders in a specific Elementary School community in Kasungu Malawi when it comes to Inclusive Education?

1.4.1 Sub-research questions

- What specific knowledge do education stakeholders in the elementary school community possess regarding Inclusive Education principles, policies, and practices?
- How do education stakeholders' attitudes towards Inclusive Education influence their support or resistance towards implementing inclusive practices within the elementary school community?
- What are the current practices and approaches employed by education stakeholders in promoting Inclusive Education within the elementary school community?

1.5 Aim of the study

To examine knowledge, attitudes, and practices that impact Inclusive Education in an Elementary School community in Kasungu, Malawi.

1.6 Objectives of the study

To address the complex challenges highlighted in the problem statement, this research aims to achieve several key objectives.

1. To explore the knowledge, attitudes, and practices of educational stakeholders regarding Inclusive Education.
2. Develop a deeper understanding of how the knowledge and attitudes of education stakeholders promote or hinder the practice of Inclusive Education in an elementary school in the school community.

1.7 Significance of the study

The significance of conducting a Knowledge, Attitudes, and Practices (KAP) study with education stakeholders regarding IE in Malawi is multifaceted. Firstly, it addresses the pressing issue of the

disconnect between IE policies and their actual implementation. Malawi's policies emphasize equitable access to quality education for all learners, but this study seeks to reveal the factors that either impede or support the actualization of these principles in practice.

Secondly, while international research on IE provides valuable insights, it may not capture the unique context, cultural dynamics, and challenges specific to Malawi. Therefore, conducting a KAP study within the local context is crucial as it allows for the generation of knowledge that is grounded in the country's realities, vital for tailoring policies and practices to better suit Malawi's needs.

Thirdly, IE involves various stakeholders, including teachers, school administrators, policymakers, parents, and community leaders. Previous research has often focused on teachers' attitudes, leaving a gap in understanding the broader spectrum of education stakeholders. This study aims to provide a comprehensive perspective by encompassing all relevant stakeholders. It seeks to uncover the diverse roles, attitudes, and knowledge levels of these actors in the context of Inclusive Education.

Furthermore, external pressures from donors and international organizations can influence education policies in countries like Malawi. These changes may not always align with the capacities and readiness of local education stakeholders. By assessing the KAP of these stakeholders, this research can shed light on potential misalignments between external pressures and local implementation, informing more context-appropriate decision-making processes.

Ultimately, the significance of this study lies in providing a detailed perspective on how inclusive education (IE) policy is being implemented in an elementary school setting in Malawi. By identifying specific barriers and facilitators within this context, the study offers locally grounded insights that can inform and enhance current practices. The goal is to contribute to a more inclusive and equitable education system by highlighting the practical challenges and opportunities faced by stakeholders in one school community.

In summary, this KAP study on IE in Malawi is significant in addressing the policy-practice gap, offering context-specific insights, providing a holistic stakeholder perspective, and informing localized decision-making. While it may not directly create impactful policies at a national level, it aims to contribute valuable data that can support ongoing efforts to advance inclusive education within the country.

1.8 Conceptual framework: Knowledge Attitudes and Practice (KAP) model

Developed in the 1950s and essential to this study based on established research, the Knowledge, Attitudes, and Practices (KAP) model is a framework for assessing what is known, believed, and practised within a population (Schwartz, 1976; WHO, 2012). Grounded in Schwartz's cognitive-affective behaviour theory, the KAP model posits that an increase in knowledge influences attitudes, which, in turn, shape behaviour (Schwartz, 1976; Bano et al., 2013). The model's three stages - knowledge acquisition, attitude formation, and behaviour development - underlie human behaviour change (Ross & Smith, 1969; Fan, Zhang & Li et al., 2018). In this study, knowledge is defined as "the ability to acquire, retain, and use information; a blend of understanding, experience, judgment, and skill" (Kaliyaperumal, 2004). Attitude is "an individual point of view toward a particular object (person, thing, or idea)" (Gall, Borg, and Gall, 1996), reflecting one's thoughts and behaviour. Practice, according to Kaliyaperumal (2004), is how participants

demonstrate their knowledge and attitude. The KAP model, through its guidance in exploring knowledge, attitudes, and practices among educational stakeholders in IE (WHO, 2008; Launiala, 2009), plays a crucial role in understanding and influencing behaviour within this context.

Effective implementation of IE relies on a crucial understanding of the KAP of educational stakeholders (Liao, Nguyen, & Sasaki, 2022). This conceptual framework was particularly well-suited for examining how stakeholders' knowledge and attitudes influence their practices regarding inclusive education (Liao, Nguyen, & Sasaki, 2022). The KAP framework posits that the interplay between what stakeholders know about inclusive education (knowledge), their feelings and beliefs towards it (attitudes), and their actual behaviors and actions in their professional roles (practices) is crucial for understanding and improving educational outcomes (Schwartz, 1976; WHO, 2012). By systematically investigating these interconnected elements, the KAP framework allowed for a comprehensive exploration of the factors that shape educational practices. This approach helped in identifying specific gaps and challenges that need to be addressed to enhance inclusive education within the elementary school community in Kasungu, Malawi. Understanding the dynamics of knowledge, attitudes, and practices provided valuable insights that could inform the development of targeted interventions aimed at promoting more effective and inclusive education strategies.

1.9 Research Methodology

This study employed a qualitative approach to understand and examine how people comprehend phenomena, providing a richer and more comprehensive explanation of the phenomenon under study (Merriam, 1988; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). This approach was considered suitable for this study because it allowed for a detailed exploration and understanding of the meanings and interpretations of educational stakeholders regarding their knowledge, attitudes, and inclusive practices. The researcher employed an interpretive paradigm to uncover a deeper understanding of educational stakeholders' knowledge and attitudes regarding IE and how these factors influence their practices in addressing the challenges of inclusion for all students. This paradigm proved instrumental in exploring the implementation of IE policies and practices in the Elementary School community, as well as understanding how research participants perceive and experience disability and IE.

Using a case study design, the research aimed to capture the essence of stakeholders' engagement with IE. The recruitment process involved collaboration with local community gatekeepers, and purposive sampling resulted in a diverse group of 10 participants. Data collection included in-depth interviews and a focus group discussion, with a pilot phase to refine the research tools. Thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2016) methodology, was used to analyze the data. To ensure trustworthiness, various measures such as triangulation and member checking were applied. Ethical considerations were a priority, with approvals from the University of Cape Town and the Malawian Ministry of Education. Stringent measures were implemented to ensure the confidentiality and rights of participants, and the findings will be widely disseminated within the Elementary School community through various channels.

1.10 Positionality and reflection of the researcher

I'm a 35-year-old disabled single mother of Chewa origin from Malawi. I was raised in a working-class household with limited financial resources. My identity encompasses various facets that intersect to form

a complex and multifaceted perspective. Being a woman in a predominantly patriarchal society has made me acutely aware of gender disparities and the importance of gender equity. My upbringing in a working-class family has instilled in me a strong work ethic and a deep appreciation for the value of education to improve one's circumstances. However, my disability, resulting from an amputation in 2015, stands out as a defining aspect of my identity. This experience has provided me with direct insight into the difficulties individuals with disabilities encounter, strengthening my commitment to IE. As a single mother, I am attuned to the unique challenges faced by parents in ensuring the well-being and education of their children. My citizenship in Malawi roots me in a specific cultural context, enriching my understanding of local dynamics and perspectives.

My life journey has been marked by diverse experiences that have significantly influenced my perspective and commitment to research and advocacy. I underwent a life-altering amputation in 2015, which propelled me into the world of disability studies and advocacy. This personal experience provided me with a profound understanding of the obstacles individuals with disabilities encounter, igniting my passion for IE. The process of adapting to life with a disability was emotionally and physically demanding, providing me with first-hand insight into the societal barriers and prejudices that individuals with disabilities encounter daily. This profound transformation instilled in me a strong sense of empathy and a resolute commitment to promoting inclusivity and dismantling these barriers. My professional experiences have also played a crucial role in shaping my identity and perspective. Working as a tutor in disability studies in education has allowed me to directly engage with students and educators in the field. This role has further deepened my understanding of the complexities and nuances of IE. It has exposed me to the academic and practical challenges faced by those striving to make education more inclusive for all learners, including those with disabilities. This first-hand experience has solidified my dedication to research and advocacy in this domain.

My worldview is fundamentally shaped by principles of human rights, social justice, and inclusivity, which align closely with the disability rights activist approach that I have wholeheartedly embraced. I firmly believe that every individual, regardless of their background or abilities, deserves equitable access to education and the opportunity to realize their full potential. This conviction drives my research and advocacy work in inclusive education (IE). I am committed to the principles of diversity and intersectionality, recognizing the importance of considering multiple dimensions of identity and their interplay in shaping individuals' experiences. My philosophical approach is informed by the disability rights perspective, which critiques existing systems and advocates for the rights and inclusion of individuals with disabilities. This perspective provides a powerful tool to analyze and critique what is happening in the school, highlighting systemic barriers and advocating for meaningful change.

In this research, I occupy a dual position as both an insider and an outsider. As an insider, my personal journey of adapting to disability gives me an intimate understanding of the challenges faced by individuals with disabilities, fueling my commitment to advocating for IE. As an outsider to the participants in my research, particularly those in the elementary school, I strive to approach the study with a balanced perspective, ensuring that I authentically represent their voices and experiences. This dual perspective allows me to facilitate a dialogue that amplifies the experiences and perspectives of the education stakeholders while maintaining the highest standards of ethical research.

Throughout the research process, it was crucial to maintain a balance between my views on disability inclusion and the diverse views held by study participants. Recognizing that each participant has a unique understanding of disability inclusion and their own approach to implementing IE practices, I refrained from imposing my personal opinions. Instead, I focused on capturing the varied perspectives and experiences of the participants, ensuring that their responses were uninfluenced by any external factors. This approach underscores the importance of respecting and valuing the voices of those directly engaged in IE, thereby contributing to a more inclusive and equitable education system.

1.11 Dissertation structure

Chapter 1 introduces the historical context of IE and its significance in Malawi. It defines the research problem, outlines the research question, aim, and objectives, and employs the KAP model as the conceptual framework. The chapter also discusses the research methodology, highlights the study's significance, and reflects on the researcher's positionality. Finally, it provides an overview of the dissertation structure, setting the stage for the subsequent chapters.

Chapter 2 delves into the literature review on IE, encompassing its historical context, fundamental principles, and the roles played by stakeholders. It further examines the KAP of education stakeholders on a global scale. The chapter emphasizes Malawian education policies, scrutinizing literature on the KAP of educational stakeholders in Malawi as groundwork for the empirical study. To provide a comprehensive understanding of stakeholder contributions to IE, it introduces the KAP Model as the conceptual framework guiding the study.

Chapter 3 outlines the research methodology for this qualitative study, emphasizing its focus on understanding behaviours, attitudes, and beliefs related to IE in the Elementary School community. It discusses the interpretive paradigm and the choice of case study research design. The chapter outlines population details, recruitment procedures, and sample selection methods, with a focus on purposive sampling. It elaborates on data generation techniques, incorporating pilot studies, in-depth interviews, and focus group discussions. Additionally, it addresses aspects such as data management, analysis, scientific rigour, and ethical considerations. By doing so, this chapter aims to uphold transparency and reliability throughout the research process.

Chapter 4 presents the study's results on educational stakeholders' involvement in IE within the Elementary School community. It introduces participants and primary themes covering knowledge, attitudes, and practices. These themes explore stakeholders' understanding of inclusion, familiarity with the National Strategy for IE (NSIE), awareness of their roles, and knowledge of support services. The chapter delves into attitudes towards inclusion, considering its impact, implementation challenges, and attitudes influenced by disability severity. It also examines practices, including collaboration, teacher training, early identification, case management, and involvement in IE. The chapter concludes by summarizing findings and highlighting challenges and facilitators for improving IE in the context of this study.

Chapter 5 discusses the research findings, revealing a notable absence of a shared understanding of IE, coupled with limited awareness of NSIE. It further explores the attitudes of stakeholders, acknowledging the positive impact of inclusion while shedding light on concerns related to practical implementation.

Furthermore, this chapter investigates various practices, encompassing effective strategies and challenges. These challenges include poor collaboration, low parental involvement, inadequate teacher training, and limited early identification orientation. The conclusion emphasizes the need to address knowledge gaps, promote positive attitudes, enhance collaboration, and involve parents and communities to advance IE effectively.

Chapter 6 presents the conclusion of this research by synthesizing the core findings regarding stakeholders' knowledge, attitudes, and practices, emphasizing the divergent perspectives and challenges that exist. The implications of these findings are explored, highlighting the need for comprehensive awareness campaigns, targeted teacher training, enhanced collaboration, and increased parental involvement. The recommendations derived from this study point to a more inclusive future, underpinned by informed policies, engaged communities, and well-prepared educators. Moreover, the chapter identifies promising avenues for future research, shedding light on the potential for further exploration of the factors affecting knowledge disparities, attitudes among educators, and strategies to promote inclusion. The study acknowledges its limitations and calls for future research to address these gaps.

1.12 Chapter summary

This chapter has laid the groundwork for this research. It has explored the historical context and significance of IE. in Malawi. It has articulated the research problem, defined the research question, and established the aim and objectives of the study. Using the KAP model as the conceptual framework, the chapter has outlined the methodology, emphasizing its focus on understanding behaviours, attitudes, and beliefs related to IE. With the interpretive paradigm and case study research design, the study aims to comprehend the lived experiences of educational stakeholders. The chapter has elaborated on key research aspects, including population, recruitment, data generation, management, analysis, scientific rigour, and ethics, ensuring transparency, reliability, and ethical practice. The subsequent chapter explores the literature review and conceptual framework for this study.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Introduction

This chapter delves into existing literature, focusing on Knowledge, Attitudes, and Practices (KAP) in IE. Significantly the review highlights a marked gap in research in this field in Malawi. The aim is to illuminate the broader narratives that shape discussions on IE, specifically examining the KAP of education stakeholders in the unique context of rural Malawi, particularly the Elementary School community. This review is not comprehensive but concentrates on education stakeholders' KAP in IE due to limited research in this area in Malawi. In addition, this chapter delves into the conceptual framework of this study.

2.2 The right to education

Education is a fundamental human right for all, regardless of gender, race, disability, creed, religion, etc. (Human Rights Watch, 2015; Sakellariou, 2022; Nyame et al., 2023). This principle was affirmed by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) in 1948 and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in 2000. Education is not a privilege but an empowering right crucial for realizing one's rights (United Nations General Assembly [UNGA], 2015). However, securing this right remains a global challenge for many people worldwide (UNESCO, 2020). Globally, 258 million children and youth were entirely excluded from education, and 773 million adults worldwide are illiterate (ibid.). When children are excluded from education or do not receive a quality education, it limits their ability to equally participate in the social, political, and economic life of their community (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2012). Consequently, they miss the opportunity to contribute effectively to the development of their families and communities, hindering the economic and social progress of the country (ibid.).

The notion of "education for all" was articulated in the UNESCO Constitution in London in 1945 (UNESCO, 2009). This idea found resonance in several subsequent declarations, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 (United Nations, 1948), the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989, the World Declaration on Education for All in Jomtien 1990, the UN Standard Rules on Equal Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities in 1993, UNESCO's Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education in 1994, the Education Action Forum in 2000, the Dakar Framework and the Millennium Development Goals, the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2007, and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015 (Stofile, 2008; Banks et al., 2022). These declarations, rooted in human rights, consistently advocate for the universal right to education, regardless of individuals' abilities.

These declarations have been signed and ratified by many countries, and education acknowledged as a human right by numerous national and international organizations (Sector Policy on IE, 2013). However, despite such recognition, ensuring this right remains a global challenge for many worldwide. The realization of the right to education does not automatically mean inclusion, as governments may sign international legal conventions but do little to implement them in their national legislation and policy guidance (UNESCO, 2020). This practice has resulted in many vulnerable children being excluded from

accessing their right to education, even though many states are required by the conventions to become inclusive (UNESCO, 1994; UNESCO, 2023).

2.3 Evolution of Inclusive Education

Historically, segregated special education perpetuated the medical model approach, which attributed educational difficulties solely to individual learners (Walton, 2016). This approach shifted blame away from systemic issues and instead blamed learners themselves, leading to exclusionary practices in education that barred many children with SEN from mainstream schooling. The consequences of this segregated model were profound, denying countless individuals with diverse educational needs the opportunities and support they deserved. Special schools, while designed to cater to specific needs, often proved inaccessible for many students due to their geographical distance from students' homes. This geographical barrier, combined with the inherent isolation of special schools, severely limited access for a vast majority of learners with diverse needs. This realization, as echoed by previous research, underscored the urgency to move beyond segregated educational models (Walton and Engelbrecht, 2022). Recognizing that the systemic issues within education needed to be addressed, advocates and educators sought an alternative. In response to this inadequacy, integration was introduced as a step toward change, allowing students with SEN to attend regular schools. Nevertheless, integration, although a positive step, did not fully eradicate segregation, marginalization, discrimination, and devaluation within these school environments (Haug, 2016). Dissatisfaction with the constraints of integration eventually gave rise to the concept of IE.

IE is considered a crucial strategy for upholding the fundamental right to education for all individuals, regardless of their diverse backgrounds and needs (Kamenopoulou, 2020). The international recognition of IE gained prominence during the 1990 World Conference in Thailand, coinciding with the adoption of the "Education for All" initiative (Kuyini & Desai, 2007). This global acknowledgement was reinforced in the 1994 Salamanca Declaration in Spain, which urged the inclusion of all learners in mainstream schools and called upon governments, schools, and educators to deliver effective education to all, regardless of diverse needs (UNESCO, 1994). The declaration emphasized the role of governments in fostering inclusive societies valuing diversity and the imperative of addressing discrimination and exclusion in the pursuit of education for all.

This marked a significant step forward, particularly for individuals with special educational needs (SEN), as they had long faced marginalization, discrimination, and exclusion, especially in African communities (Opuko et al., 2021). It was a crucial shift away from prevailing societal myths that stigmatized these individuals as curses, powerless, troublesome, and uneducable, leading to the violation of their right to education (ibid.). These harmful misconceptions persisted through generations, resulting in many children being denied access to essential services and the enjoyment of their human rights (Human Rights Watch, 2015).

IE is not only pivotal for realizing the right to education but also plays a crucial role in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) adopted in 2015. The SDGs aim to ensure that no one is left behind, with explicit targets set for countries to make education accessible to all (United Nations, 2015). Specifically, SDG 4 calls for inclusive, equitable, and quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all by 2030 (Schuelka, 2019). This goal emphasizes the importance of implementing IE across diverse

contexts for children with various needs. SDG 4.1 specifically targets ensuring that all children, regardless of their backgrounds, have completely free, equitable, and quality primary and secondary education, leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes by 2030. Thus, IE emerges as a pivotal concept in realizing these global development objectives as reflected in the literature, articles, projects, and initiatives that explore the most effective ways to advance the IE agenda in diverse contexts (Ainscow et al., 2019; Ainscow, 2020; Taneja-Johansson & Singal, 2021 cited in Kamenopoulou & Karisa, 2023).

Despite these advancements, numerous children with diverse needs continue to be excluded from mainstream schools, with much receiving education in special schools, even in nations that have ratified the UNCRPD (UNESCO, 2020). Research indicates that around 240 million children with diverse needs encounter numerous barriers limiting their access to and participation in education (United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund [UNICEF], 2021). For example, a study across 15 low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) in 2018 revealed that having a disability reduced the likelihood of a young person attending school by 30.9% (Mizunoya et al., 2018). Additionally, children with diverse needs are less likely to enrol in school and face challenges transitioning to higher education compared to their peers without disabilities (Banks et al., 2017; 2022; World Health Organization [WHO] & World Bank, 2011).

In essence, the concept of IE transcends boundaries and is instrumental in realizing the fundamental right to education for all individuals (Ignacio & Allit, 2023). Its evolution from segregated education systems to an inclusive approach reflects the global commitment to eliminating discrimination, promoting diversity, and creating equitable learning environments. However, despite progress, there remain challenges in translating these principles into practice, with many individuals with diverse needs still facing barriers to education (see, for example, Kamenopoulou, 2018b; Moreno Angarita, et al., 2023; Karisa et al., 2021). The following section explores the diverse conceptualization of Inclusive Education (IE).

2.4 The concept of Inclusive Education

In contemporary educational discussions, the concept of IE has become a focal point, prompting diverse interpretations. As emphasized by Dyson (2001), Florian (1998), Forlin (2004), Green (2001), Swart et al. (2002), Mitchell (2006), Swart and Pettipher (2005), Haug (2016), Gorasson, and Nilholm (2014), along with Kristchier et al. (2019), there is a consensus that IE lacks a universal definition. This underscores the crucial need to explore how individuals perceive IE in specific contexts.

The multifaceted nature of IE necessitates a nuanced understanding of its various dimensions, encompassing educational practices, policies, and philosophical orientations. Florian (1998) aptly emphasizes that IE embodies a philosophy of education grounded in principles of equity, diversity, and social justice. However, the practical application of these principles can manifest differently across countries and regions, as evidenced by the works of Swart and Pettipher (2005) and Gorasson and Nilholm (2014), with national educational policies and cultural factors significantly influencing its contextual variability. Furthermore, Forlin (2004) underscores the dynamic nature of IE, highlighting that it adapts and evolves to meet the evolving needs of diverse student populations, necessitating engagement with local conceptualizations (Mitchell, 2006). These contextual variations often arise from the unique blend of historical, cultural, and societal factors in each region, shaping how IE is understood and practised.

In the conceptualization of IE, Haug (2016) highlights the distinction between narrow and broad perspectives, centered on who should be considered for inclusion. Haug (2016) distinguishes between narrow and broad perspectives in the conceptualization of IE, focusing on the inclusion criteria. The narrow approach, as defined by Florian (2008) and Thomas (2013), sees inclusion as placing students with disabilities in mainstream education. Mitchell's (2005) definition aligns with this perspective, emphasizing a single-oriented understanding that prioritizes the placement of students in special education. Green (2001) equates IE with integration, highlighting the rights of learners with disabilities. He defines it as "educational policies and practices upholding the rights of learners with disabilities to belong and learn in mainstream education" (ibid).

Artiles et al. (2015) highlight the drawbacks of a narrow approach, emphasizing the limited consideration of unequal access and outcomes for students with special educational needs (SEN) while overlooking the broader context of exclusion. They find this problematic due to the complex and interacting nature of exclusion experienced by students (ibid). In contrast, inclusion extends beyond the mere integration of children with disabilities into mainstream classrooms; it serves to provide educational opportunities to a diverse range of potentially marginalized students globally who may still face barriers to attending school (Forlin, 2004). This perspective prompts an exploration of the expansive definition of IE.

The comprehensive definition supports the inclusion of all students in education, regardless of any differences (Forlin, 2004; Polat, 2010; Haug, 2014 & 2016; De Souza, 2021). It asserts that "all children are educated in regular classrooms with age-appropriate peers" and this is facilitated by the "removal of barriers through reasonable accommodation" (Polat, 2010, p. 7). Therefore, a comprehensive approach to inclusion guarantees support, active involvement, participation, and educational benefits for all students with SEN (Haug, 2016). This encompasses all students, including those at risk of marginalization. The broader perspective of IE advocates for the inclusion of all students, irrespective of differences (Polat, 2010; Haug, 2014, 2016; De Souza, 2021), emphasizing the removal of barriers through reasonable accommodation to ensure that every student with SEN is supported, involved, participates, and benefits from education (Haug, 2016).

An illustration of the expansive concept of IE lies in the multiple-oriented understanding of IE. As outlined by Mitchell (2005), this perspective embraces multiple values and processes, encompassing all learners, including marginalized groups. This broad definition extends to various aspects such as location, conditions for social life, and learning in school, involving all students irrespective of their differences (ibid.). Nilsen (2020) adds to this by framing inclusion through three dimensions—organizational, social, and academic. His multidimensional definition aligns with the multiple-oriented understanding, as it applies universally, accommodating both individuals with and without SEN.

This study embraces a comprehensive understanding of IE, drawing from the conceptualization by Le Fanu, Schmidt, and Virendrakumar (2022) by General Comment 4 on Article 24 of the CRPD. According to this definition, IE is characterized by its lifelong nature, local availability, provision of quality learning opportunities, promotion of social inclusiveness, ensuring physical accessibility in schools, and yielding positive outcomes in both educational and social realms for children with disabilities (ibid.). Aligned with General Comment 4, this approach to IE incorporates elements such as reasonable accommodations, continuous personalized support, access to assistive technologies, and adapted curricula. Despite its

merits, some critics, as noted by Miles and Singal (2010), express concerns that the broad definition of inclusion might inadvertently overshadow students with disabilities in the effort to include other minority groups. However, the expansive perspective of IE is all-encompassing, considering all students, including those at risk of marginalization, and aligns with the international vision of providing education for all (UNESCO, 2020).

The discussion of IE indicates the ambiguity of the IE concept. The lack of generally accepted definition makes it difficult to conduct research across contexts because IE is regarded as "a highly slippery concept, particularly when used across the boundaries of different education systems" (Dyson, 2004, p. 614). Though agreement exists on the understanding of IE at a global level, different views become apparent when it's translated to national and local contexts. The evidence of this statement can be found in different education policies from different national and local contexts (Slee & Allan, 2001; Armstrong et al., 2011; Hardy & Woodcock, 2015). IE is widely praised as a valuable educational concept, yet its practical implementation presents a significant challenge. Although IE is firmly established as a fundamental aspect of the universal right to education, achieving a full IE system has proven difficult for all nations (DeSouza, 2021). Consequently, academic discussions have shifted focus from the theoretical underpinnings of IE to the urgent issue of how to effectively put these ideas into practice.

Furthermore, fostering change within the education system is a collective effort due to the complex nature of education itself. All parties involved, including policymakers, educators, parents, and communities, share the responsibility for promoting IE. Schuelka (2019) insightfully emphasizes the critical role of community stakeholders in this endeavour. The successful establishment of an IE system heavily relies on active participation and collaboration among all education stakeholders, including local community members.

However, this collective effort may encounter obstacles if these stakeholders do not exhibit a thorough understanding of IE. Therefore, it is crucial to gain insights into the knowledge, attitudes, and perceptions held by education stakeholders regarding IE and examine how these elements influence the practical implementation of Inclusive Educational practices. This comprehensive understanding is essential for guiding the way toward the effective realization of IE, ensuring equitable access to quality education within an inclusive framework for all learners. As IE continues to evolve, ongoing discussions play a pivotal role in shaping its future and ensuring that the fundamental principles of inclusion are effectively applied in educational settings worldwide. The following section explores education stakeholders and their roles and responsibilities in IE.

2.5 Educational stakeholders in Inclusive Education

According to Freeman (1984), the term "stakeholder" is defined as any group or individual capable of influencing or being influenced by an organization's objectives. In the context of education, stakeholders are actors who have an interest in matters related to education (Uleanya, Gumede & Kutame 2020). Educational stakeholders in IE encompass a diverse group of individuals and entities involved in the educational process, each playing a vital role in ensuring the effectiveness of inclusive practices (ibid). These stakeholders include teachers, special education professionals, parents, school administrators, policymakers, and the broader community. Teachers are at the forefront of IE, responsible for adapting

curriculum and instructional approaches to cater to the diverse needs of students (Janmaat, McCowan, & Rao, 2016). They potentially create inclusive classroom environments that promote acceptance and participation. However, they are not the only stakeholders.

An IE agenda is not the responsibility of schools or governments alone. Mitchell (2004) suggests that society should make a concerted effort to make this a reality by encouraging inclusive action by educators, researchers, parents, the wider community, and government. For instance, special education professionals, such as speech therapists and occupational therapists, provide specialized support to students with disabilities, working in collaboration with regular classroom teachers to address individual learning needs (NSIE, 2016).

Parents actively participate as advocates, collaborating with educators to develop individualized education plans (IEPs) and providing insights into their child's abilities and challenges (ibid). School administrators play a crucial role in creating inclusive school cultures, allocating resources, and ensuring compliance with legal requirements (Janmaat, McCowan, & Rao, 2016). Policymakers influence funding, accessibility, and legal protections, shaping the broader framework that supports IE (ibid). This collective engagement promotes personalized learning, equity, and the active participation of students within inclusive classrooms.

Community stakeholders are essential contributors to the education system, emphasizing the importance of their involvement in the inclusion of children with SEN in education (UNESCO, 2020). The broader community, including peers, neighbours, and local organizations, also plays a role in IE by nurturing a sense of belonging and acceptance for all students, irrespective of their abilities or disabilities (Uleanya, Gumede & Kutame 2020). This collective effort is vital in combating stigma and promoting social inclusion. Peers can be powerful allies in inclusive classrooms, fostering friendships and providing support to students (Janmaat, McCowan, & Rao, 2016). Local organizations and community initiatives can create opportunities for inclusive activities and events, further promoting a culture of acceptance and diversity beyond the school environment (ibid).

In many countries in the Global South, there is a widespread misconception that the responsibility for implementing IE rests solely with professionals, leading to a deficiency in involving education stakeholders (Werning et al., 2016). Nonetheless, it is crucial to acknowledge that every child, regardless of special educational needs, is part of a family. Therefore, recognizing the perspectives of education stakeholders on disability and IE is a foundational step for policymakers, school administrators, and teachers in supporting diverse needs.

The effective implementation of IE heavily relies on the understanding and beliefs of educational stakeholders. Avramidis and Norwich (2002) underscore the importance of stakeholders' knowledge, perceptions, and attitudes in the context of IE. Similarly, Ahmmed et al. (2012) contend that community knowledge and attitudes contribute to the inclusion of children with disabilities in local schools, emphasizing the pivotal role of these factors.

This indicates that the knowledge, perceptions, and attitudes of stakeholders can significantly influence the successful execution of IE. This is because knowledge plays a crucial role in shaping supportive inclusive

attitudes and is fundamental to attitude formation (Forlin, Loreman, and Sharma, 2014). Therefore, when implementing IE, it's essential to explore the knowledge and attitudes of stakeholders. It is important to note that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to IE, and the process is ongoing, requiring collaboration among all stakeholders to achieve tangible progress (Ainscow et al., 2019). To realize inclusion in practice, all educational stakeholders must establish a shared understanding of the concept, considering its various interpretations influenced by contextual factors (Amor et al., 2019; Artiles et al., 2006; Göransson and Nilholm, 2014). Developing inclusive practices necessitates a welcoming attitude toward diversity, an understanding of learning as a process of meaning creation, and a belief in the capabilities of all pupils (Sigstad et al., 2021). Exploring the knowledge and attitudes of parents, educational practitioners, and the wider community is crucial for implementing effective inclusion practices. This underscores the importance of investigating educational stakeholders' Knowledge, Attitudes, and Practices (KAP) regarding IE. The following section explores the knowledge, attitude and practice model.

2.5.1 Educational stakeholders' knowledge towards Inclusive Education

Education stakeholders, encompassing teachers, parents, administrators, and the wider community, hold the power to either advance or impede IE. The enhancement of their knowledge regarding IE can wield a positive influence on their attitudes and practices (Schwartz, 1976). Knowledgeable stakeholders tend to offer more substantial support for inclusion, advocating for children's rights and deploying effective strategies to promote inclusive practices (Ryan, cited in Davidson and Odongo, 2016). However, in many countries, policy awareness is an issue and requires stakeholders to understand its content if the policy is to be successfully implemented (Mbewe et al., 2021).

Empirical research highlights a widespread lack of understanding surrounding IE among various stakeholders, often attributed to a dearth of information regarding the policy framework and the available support services (De Boer, Pijl, and Minnaert, 2010). For instance, a qualitative study by Harding and Darling (2003) explored the perceptions of teachers in the United States regarding inclusion. The study aimed to assess both their knowledge and attitudes concerning inclusion. The findings illuminated that these educators lacked a comprehensive understanding due to inadequate preparation during their in-service training. However, it is noteworthy that, despite their limited direct exposure, all the teachers exhibited overwhelmingly positive attitudes toward inclusion.

Similarly, in Hong Kong, parents and educational professionals, including teachers and principals, exhibited insufficient knowledge about IE and its associated practices (Leung & Mak, 2010; Lui, Sin, Yang et al., 2015). Meanwhile, in China, disparities in the understanding of IE were evident among teachers, with some perceiving it primarily as a matter of student placement and others adhering to a narrower perspective centred on disability (Ginja & Chen, 2021).

Remarkably, a survey conducted in Nigeria unveiled a direct link between education stakeholders' prior knowledge and their attitudes toward IE, with those possessing prior knowledge exhibiting more favourable attitudes (Ugwu & Onukwufor, 2018). In Ethiopia, a notable gap in comprehension regarding IE and its practices was observed among politicians, policymakers, and educators (Haye, 2018). Moreover, a study in Ghana shed light on the fact that many participants possessed neutral knowledge about IE, indicating a significant lack of awareness about the policy's principles (Opoku et al., 2019). This

underscores the idea that, while education stakeholders may express positive attitudes toward inclusion, their limited knowledge about the policy remains a prominent challenge. To fully comprehend stakeholders' conceptualizations of and attitudes toward IE, policymakers need to conduct a KAP study. Such a study can identify factors influencing stakeholders' practices and ensure that interventions align with the various interpretations and contextual factors impacting attitudes and practices in the realm of IE.

Berendt (2013) emphasizes the pivotal role of education stakeholders as the "driving force of change," with their attitudes and tolerance serving as vehicles for constructing an inclusive and participatory society (p. 17). This underscores the indispensability of stakeholder support in the pursuit of inclusion. Consequently, the attitudes of educational stakeholders emerge as critical factors that can either facilitate or hinder progress toward inclusion (De Boer 2012). The subsequent section delves further into the attitudes of education stakeholders toward IE.

2.5.2 Educational stakeholders' attitudes towards Inclusive Education

When examining the attitudes of educational stakeholders toward IE, it is essential to recognize that attitudes encompass cognitive, affective, and behavioural components (Opoku et al., 2021). The cognitive component involves stakeholders' beliefs, reflecting their understanding of IE. The affective component includes their emotional responses and feelings toward IE, while the behavioural component relates to their actions and reactions concerning its implementation (De Boer, Pijl, & Minnaert, 2011; Srivastava et al., 2017; Opoku et al., 2021; Ewing, Monsen, & Kielblock, 2018). In the context of IE, attitudes signify the disposition of stakeholders toward this concept, influenced by personal viewpoints, belief systems, cultural backgrounds, and past experiences (Srivastava et al., 2017; Voax, 2014; de Boer, Pijl & Minnaert, 2010).

Attitudes are pivotal, as constructive attitudes can ignite proactive endeavours, while negative ones may discourage inclusion. The beliefs and attitudes held by parents, school staff, students, and the community greatly influence a school's success in implementing inclusive practices (Gwala, 2006). Existing literature emphasizes the pivotal role of stakeholders' attitudes, underscoring that positivity is essential for the effective implementation of IE (Sharma et al., 2017; Opoku et al., 2021; Srivastava, De Boer & Pijl, 2017).

However, this literature also reveals a range of attitudes, spanning from positive to neutral and even negative. For instance, teachers' attitudes often vary based on their experiences, training, support, class sizes, and resource availability (Deboer, 2011). Similarly, parents' attitudes are shaped by their knowledge, perceptions of disability, and the value they place on education (ibid). Parental mixed attitudes were influenced by lack of knowledge, perception about disability and the value of education. For example, studies conducted in Ghana, Kenya, and Lebanon, indicated that education stakeholders held a positive attitude towards IE, but felt reluctant to include learners with severe disabilities (Opoku et al., 2021; Mutungi and Nderitu 2014; De Boer et al., 2012; UNESCO, 2020a). They cited reasons like disruptive behaviour that interfere with the learning process and retard the teacher's ability to teach effectively to justify their reasons (ibid).

Unfavourable attitudes towards inclusion can impede the full integration of minority students both in mainstream schools and society, often influenced by limited exposure or a lack of knowledge/experience in inclusive processes (de Boer, Pijl & Minnaert 2011; Boyle, Anderson & Allen 2020). In Botswana,

Mukhopadhyay (2013) found that "teachers without adequate training had negative attitudes towards inclusion" (p. 80). Negative attitudes from governments and school leaders towards children with disabilities can hinder the involvement and participation of all stakeholders in IE, negatively impacting its implementation in primary schools (Majoko, 2013). Such attitudes among educational stakeholders can obstruct the effective implementation of IE, hampering motivation and collaboration with other IE services stakeholders. Recognizing the significance of attitudes among educational stakeholders is crucial for promoting inclusion, as attitudinal barriers may pose a more significant challenge to IE than a lack of material resources, potentially derailing its implementation in society (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002).

Furthermore, cultural beliefs can profoundly shape the perception of IE, and addressing these perceptions is fundamental for fostering an inclusive atmosphere. IE necessitates a paradigm shift in the attitudes and values of all stakeholders, necessitating the challenging of prejudice and discrimination and the promotion of diversity and understanding (Ball & Green, 2014). Therefore, exploring stakeholders' perceptions of IE is vital due to their influence on attitudes (UNICEF, 2013; UNICEF, 2015). In African societies, diverse cultural contexts shape these perceptions, hindering the acceptance of children with disabilities (Donohue & Bornman, 2013). Disability is sometimes seen as a curse, triggering discrimination and secrecy (Kumar, 2013). In addition, traditional beliefs often label disability because of supernatural forces, leading to derogatory names for these children resulting in the marginalization of these children and their families (Agbenyega, 2003; Kassah, 2008; Geldof, 2016 cited in Opuku et al., 2021). For example, stigma and discrimination persist in Sierra Leone and West Africa (UNICEF, 2013). In Senegal, children with disabilities are hidden from the public (Drame & Kamphoff, 2014 cited in Okyere et al., 2019). Such biases are widespread in developing countries, excluding many children with disabilities from basic services like education.

Moreover, stakeholders' views are shaped by their perceptions of the advantages of IE. Many parents embrace IE positively, considering it their children's right to receive education in regular schools (Stevens & Wurf, 2018). They believe that academically focused mainstream schools offer essential academic literacy skills crucial for independent living (De Boer, Pijl, & Minnaert, 2010). However, challenges linked to insufficient resources and teacher capabilities can impede the actualization of IE (Mizunoya, Mitra & Yamasaki 2018; Banks et al., 2022). Some parents, not have children with disabilities, express concerns that IE might impact their children's learning as teachers could allocate more time to children with disabilities, potentially disrupting learning and leading to a decline in academic standards (Magumise & Sefotho 2018). Given the intricate nature of attitudes and perceptions related to IE, it becomes clear that understanding the practices of education stakeholders within the context of IE is crucial. The following section explores the education stakeholders' practices of IE.

2.5.3. Educational stakeholders' practices towards Inclusive Education

IE practices encompass a set of strategies and approaches designed to ensure that every student, regardless of their abilities or differences, can actively participate and thrive within the educational setting. These practices extend beyond mere accommodation, striving to foster an environment that celebrates diversity and addresses the individual needs of each learner. This section examines the various facets of IE practices by drawing insights from global studies.

Educational stakeholders' practices towards IE play a pivotal role in shaping equitable educational environments, particularly in Low- and Middle-Income Countries (LMICs) (Genovesi et al., 2022). However, teachers in these regions often grapple with challenges, such as insufficient knowledge and skills to support students with disabilities, lack of encouragement, teacher-centred instruction, and inadequate resources (Wapling, 2016). Examples from India and Cambodia illustrate how traditional teaching methods, overcrowded classrooms, and ambitious curricula hinder individualized instruction (Song, 2015; Singal et al., 2018). In Botswana and Namibia, research reveals that general education teachers face challenges due to a lack of necessary knowledge and skills (Chhabra, Srivastava, & Srivastava, 2010; Hausika, 2017; Mukhopadhyay, 2014). Similar trends were noted in Ghana, with teachers having limited or no knowledge of the Act for people with disabilities, and in Tanzania, where educators lacked awareness of the National Policy on Disability, underscoring the necessity for comprehensive initiatives (Pima, 2012). To address these challenges and enhance IE, a critical aspect is teacher training and professional development. Effective training programs are essential to equip educators with the necessary competencies and bridge gaps in understanding IE policies.

IE is a collective effort involving various stakeholders, including teachers, school leaders, administrators, other professionals, school staff, parents, and community members. Collaboration among these stakeholders is crucial for successful IE, promoting quality practices and innovation (Somech and Drach-Zahavy, 2011). Collaboration involves interactions and joint efforts, with teachers, parents, community members, and school staff working together. This collaborative approach enriches the learning environment and supports individual student goals (Friend et al., 2010). Effective collaboration is indispensable for a whole-school approach, where working groups formulate tailored support plans for learners encountering learning barriers (Potgieter-Groot et al., 2012). Recognizing and fostering collaboration among stakeholders is vital for successful IE.

In the discourse about IE, the identification of learners with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) and the development of Individual Education Plans (IEP) is crucial for supporting learners with SEND and addressing specific learning challenges (Hornby, 2014). However, to implement effective inclusive special education, education stakeholders need comprehensive knowledge about different types of SEND present in their school community (NSIE, 2016). Ensuring effective support for learners with SEND requires education stakeholders to have a comprehensive orientation covering early identification, case management, and referral processes (NSIE, 2016). This orientation equips educators, administrators, and support staff with the knowledge and skills to recognize early signs of SEND (ibid.). Case management training fosters a holistic understanding of each learner's requirements. Education stakeholders should also be well-informed about referral mechanisms to facilitate collaboration with specialized services and professionals, ensuring an inclusive learning environment (Mariga et al., 2014).

Parental and community involvement is crucial for IE, extending beyond school boundaries to influence children's development (RSA, DoE, 2001; Landsberg et al., 2005). Effective parental and community involvement builds a sense of belonging for children and establishes robust relationships among caregivers, school professionals, and the broader community (Landsberg et al., 2005). Despite global recognition, there is a substantial gap between acknowledgement and actual involvement, falling short of what is needed (Leyser & Kirk, 2011). International studies reveal concerns among parents and community

members regarding inclusive practices, emphasizing a lack of knowledge and support services (Stevens & Wurf, 2018; De Boer, Pijl, and Minnaert, 2010; Singal, 2016; Magumise and Sefotho, 2018; Wong et al., 2015). This diversity in findings emphasizes the necessity for a context-specific comprehension of the factors that influence the knowledge, attitudes, and practices of educational stakeholders concerning IE.

2.6 Background to the education system in Malawi

Malawi stands among the world's most impoverished nations, holding the 172nd position out of 189 countries on the 2019 UNDP Human Development Index (source: <https://concernusa.org/where-we-work/malawi/>). Approximately 52% of the Malawian population faces multidimensional poverty, entailing various deprivations in health, education, and standard of living (ibid.). Enhancing education is a key focus of the Malawi Government's Growth and Development Strategy (2017-2022), recognized as a prerequisite for socioeconomic advancement. Education in Malawi operates within various paradigms, encompassing the medical, social, and human rights models (Chilemba, 2013).

According to the National Statistical Office (NSO) Population and Housing Census 2018, in Malawi, there are approximately 1,734,250 persons with disabilities aged 5 years and above, which represents about 11.6 percent of the total population aged 5 years and above (National Statistical Office, 2019). Additionally, there are an estimated 937,536 women with disabilities, constituting 6.2 percent of the total population aged 5 years and above (National Statistical Office, 2019). The 2008 NSO Census approximated the number of children with disabilities aged 14 years or younger to be around 274,465, which accounted for 51.1 percent of all persons with disabilities at that time (National Statistical Office, 2019). Regarding the most prevalent forms of disability in Malawi, the 2018 Census identified seeing (49 percent), walking/climbing (27 percent), hearing (24 percent), intellectual (16 percent), and speaking (9 percent) as the most prevalent forms of disability in the country (National Statistical Office, 2019). The lack of specific data on children with disabilities in the 2018 Census presents significant implications for policy planning and resource allocation in inclusive education.

The special school approach, grounded in the medical model, segregates disabled children into separate educational institutions, operating under the premise that individual impairments hinder their ability to thrive in mainstream schools (Chimwaza, 2015). This approach, while well-intentioned, creates a division between disabled and non-disabled students, potentially perpetuating social segregation. The integrated approach, although aiming for inclusion, still shares similarities with the special approach. This approach views disabled children as problematic and aims to 'correct' them for integration into mainstream schools (Chilemba, 2013; Chimwaza, 2015). Both these models, though distinct, still fall short of achieving true inclusion.

In contrast, the inclusive approach, aligned with the social and human rights models of disability, places paramount importance on the school environment. It endeavours to dismantle systemic barriers within the education system to accommodate disabled children within mainstream schools (De Souza, 2021). This approach advocates for the removal of obstacles, encompassing attitudinal, policy, practice, environmental, and resource-based issues, to ensure equal participation and inclusion of diverse students. It recognizes disabled children as rights holders, and capable contributors to society, and underscores the imperative of addressing systematic barriers that hinder their inclusion. This perspective emphasizes the

importance of the education system in fulfilling its responsibility to remove attitudinal, policy, practice, environmental, and resource-based barriers, thereby safeguarding the fundamental rights of all children (Chilemba, 2013). This approach offers a path toward a more equitable educational system. Embracing this perspective not only aligns with international standards but also empowers disabled children to actively participate in their communities, emphasizing their capabilities over limitations. Thus, promoting the inclusive approach is not just a matter of educational policy; it is fundamentally a human rights issue that holds the potential to transform Malawi's educational landscape, fostering inclusivity and equity for all students.

2.7 Policies relating to Inclusive Education in Malawi

Malawi's commitment to IE is evident through various national policies and strategies aligned with international conventions. Notable examples include the National Policy Guidelines on Special Needs Education (2007) (Eide & Munthali, 2017), the National Education Investment Plan 2020–2030 (UNICEF Malawi, 2020), the National Disability Mainstreaming Strategy and Implementation Plan 2018–2023 (UNICEF Malawi, 2020), and the National Policy on the Equalisation of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities (2006) (Eide & Munthali, 2017). Additionally, the Malawi Growth and Development Strategy III 2017–2022 incorporates disability-specific education goals (Government of Malawi, 2017). Despite the absence of a dedicated policy on IE, Malawi draws inspiration from the National Education Policy (NEP, 2016) (DeSouza, 2021), the National Strategy on Inclusive Education (NSIE, 2017-2021) (Ishida, 2017), and the Malawian National Education Sector Investment Plan (NESIP, 2020-2030) (DeSouza, 2020) to advance inclusion.

The National Special Needs Education Policy (NSNEP) of 2007 focuses on accommodating learners with disabilities within the education system, addressing early identification, advocacy, management, planning, and financing, among other components. While it does not explicitly use the term "IE," it aims to eradicate challenges faced by learners with disabilities (Chilemba, 2013). Some scholars have referred to NSNEP as an inclusive policy, but its emphasis on segregated settings can perpetuate exclusion (De Souza, 2021). To guide the shift from special education to IE, the National Strategy on Inclusive Education (NSIE) for 2017-2021 was introduced. NSIE envisions preserving special schools and resource centres to promote inclusion, with mild disabilities integrated into mainstream schools and severe cases still accommodated in special schools (NSIE, 2016). However, resource limitations hinder the effective establishment of these resource rooms, contributing to exclusion (Banks & Zuurmond, 2015; Artiles et al., 2015; Hummel & Werning, 2016; De Souza, 2021). The Malawian National Education Sector Investment Plan (NESIP) for 2020-2030 emphasizes inclusion, particularly for children with disabilities. It acknowledges resource inadequacies and aims to add 1675 centres by 2024 (NESIP, 2020). NESIP highlights the significance of guaranteeing access to education at all levels for learners with Special Educational Needs (SEN) (DeSouza, 2021). It advocates for the establishment of an IE Coordination Unit at both national and district levels to oversee IE initiatives and offer technical support (ibid).

While these policies provide a foundation for IE, effective implementation depends on stakeholders' understanding and commitment (Pima, 2012). Despite strong legislative support, Malawi still faces

exclusion, systematic inequalities, and social injustice in education (Itimu & Kopetz, 2008; Banks & Zuurmond, 2015; DeSouza, 2021; Banks et al., 2022).

Research reveals that, despite government commitments to IE, children with disabilities remain largely excluded because “the effectiveness of the policy is dependent on how it is understood by its stakeholders” (Ntombela, 2006, cited in Pima, 2012, p. 16). Hence, for inclusion to succeed, education stakeholders bear the responsibility of fostering effective learning. This involves establishing a conducive and supportive learning environment where learners feel valued, tailoring the curriculum to meet individual needs, and utilizing effective teaching strategies to promote IE (Ainscow et al., 2019). This section will now explore the knowledge, attitudes, and practices of education stakeholders in Malawi towards IE.

2.8 Education stakeholders` Knowledge, Attitudes and Practices towards Inclusive Education in Malawi

2.8.1 Stakeholders’ knowledge towards inclusive education in Malawi

The comprehension of IE in Malawi remains a multifaceted issue, influenced by intricate contextual factors. To navigate this complexity and promote the meaningful transition to IE, it becomes crucial to delve into the Knowledge, Attitudes, and Practices (KAP) of education stakeholders in Malawi (Engelbrecht, 2006). Such an investigation is vital not only for the advancement of IE but also for the attainment of Sustainable Development Goal 4 by 2030, as outlined by the United Nations (2015).

In the context of Malawi, IE remains relatively new and is frequently confused with the education of children with disabilities, as noted by Mwale et al. (2010). The lack of clear understanding and awareness about IE within the educational community poses a significant obstacle. Research highlights this challenge, revealing that many parents and community members have limited comprehension of IE policies and the support services it entails, as documented by Munthali (2016), Chavuta et al. (2008), Rothe et al. (2016), Banks and Zuurmond (2015), Banks et al. (2022), and de Souza (2022). Often, they associate IE primarily with the care of disabled children, overlooking its broader implications, as observed by Chavuta et al. (2008), Chilemba (2013), and De Souza (2021).

Furthermore, the lack of awareness extends to educators, as regular teachers often feel unprepared due to insufficient training in IE, as highlighted in studies by Rothe et al. (2016), Banks and Zuurmond (2015), Banks et al. (2022), and de Souza (2021). Mwale et al. (2010 as cited in Mbewe et al., 2021) emphasized that many teachers in Malawi are unfamiliar with Special Needs Education (SNE) policies, except for primary education advisors and district education managers. Consequently, they may suggest keeping children with significant needs at home or placing them in special schools. This knowledge gap poses a significant challenge to the effective implementation of IE in Malawi, despite generally positive attitudes held by stakeholders toward the concept, as outlined by Okyere et al. (2019b).

2.8.2 Educational stakeholders’ attitudes towards Inclusive Education

In the context of stakeholders' attitudes towards IE in Malawi, there is a mixture of both positive and negative perspectives. These attitudes are influenced by a complex interplay of cultural and family perceptions. In Malawi, these perceptions range from positive to neutral to negative, significantly

impacting parents' and community stakeholders' willingness to send their children to school (Munthali, 2011; Chimwaza, 2015; Rothe et al., 2016).

In the context of IE in Malawi, it is evident that a significant number of stakeholders hold favourable views. Numerous studies have demonstrated that teachers and community members respond positively to the idea of inclusion (Chitiyo et al., 2015). Regular teachers, in particular, express favourable attitudes toward students with special needs (Chimwaza, 2015). Children and their caregivers also tend to share these positive sentiments about education, especially when they are informed about the many advantages of IE (Chimwaza, 2015; Banks & Zuurmond, 2015; Rothe et al., 2016; DeSouza, 2021). These stakeholders see IE as a way to improve the lives of children and the broader community. They view education as a powerful tool for societal progress and believe it provides children with valuable social skills and access to alternative employment opportunities (Rothe et al., 2016). They also share the belief that enrolling children with disabilities in basic education helps prepare them to be productive citizens (Munthali et al., 2014).

On the other hand, despite the positive sentiments expressed by some stakeholders, it is crucial to recognize the concerns and negative attitudes that persist. Parents who do not have children with disabilities may have worries about their children sharing classrooms with students who have disabilities (Chimwaza, 2015; Banks and Zuurmond, 2015; Rothe et al., 2016; Banks et al., 2022). Similarly, some educators believe that learners with emotional and behavioural challenges are more appropriately placed in specialized schools. They cite concerns about potential disruptions and their own perceived lack of ability to support such learners (Banks et al., 2022). Additionally, practical challenges such as the distance to school, class sizes, negative attitudes, a shortage of trained teachers, transportation issues, and a lack of accessible facilities have contributed to scepticism among various stakeholders (Chavuta et al., 2008; Chilemba, 2013; Banks, 2017; MEM, 2021).

It is noteworthy that the National Education Special Needs Policy has highlighted the presence of negative community attitudes surrounding the integration of learners with SEN into mainstream schools (MoE, 2006). These prevailing negative perceptions at the community level have further compounded the challenges faced in fostering an inclusive educational environment in Malawi. Considering these complexities, understanding the interplay of historical, cultural, and practical factors that contribute to these negative attitudes is essential. Having presented the literature on attitudes and perceptions of education stakeholders, the following section explores the practices of IE in Malawi.

2.8.3 Educational stakeholders' practices towards Inclusive Education

In the context of Malawi's education system, the notion of inclusive practices is characterized by a multifaceted landscape that balances positive intentions, real-world challenges, and the influential role of policy frameworks. This complexity becomes apparent when considering the perspectives of various stakeholders, including educators, parents, and policymakers. While there is a commendable willingness among these stakeholders to endorse and support IE (Chimwaza, 2015; Chitiyo et al., 2015), the practical realities on the ground reveal a series of tangible obstacles that require systematic attention to ensure the effective implementation of inclusive practices within Malawi's educational framework.

One significant challenge is the gap between policy intent and practical execution. This gap arises primarily because these policies are often adopted and enforced without considering local realities, resulting in a lack of necessary details for successful implementation. Despite policy directives and strategies in Malawi highlighting the commendable aim of enhancing equitable access to quality education for all, including learners with disabilities, there exists a noticeable gap between these well-intentioned directives and their practical implementation in the country's educational landscape (Malawi. Ministry of Education, 2016).

Previous investigations by De Souza (2021) and Chirwa, Lingolwe, and Naidoo (2021) have exposed significant challenges in realizing IE. These challenges arise, in part, from the absence of orientation and training for teachers responsible for transforming their mainstream classrooms into inclusive environments, along with insufficient resources to support IE. Consequently, there is inadequate support for learners with disabilities (Chavuta et al., 2008; Mwale et al., 2010). For instance, a notable challenge in implementing IE in Malawi relates to the shortage of well-qualified personnel, affecting various levels of the education system, including specialized educators, trained teachers, and support staff. This deficiency significantly impacts the overall quality of education in the country (Malawi. Ministry of Education, 2016; Malawi. Ministry of Education, 2017). The scarcity of adequately trained human resources poses a tangible barrier to the successful implementation of IE.

Infrastructure poses another challenge. Many schools in Malawi lack essential facilities like classrooms and toilets, and these structures often lack the necessary ramps to facilitate mobility for students with physical disabilities (Chavuta et al., 2008). Moreover, the scarcity of specialized teaching and learning materials, including braille resources and resource rooms, exacerbates these challenges (Banks and Zuurmond, 2015; Chavuta et al., 2008; Munthali, 2011; Mwale, 2010). High poverty rates form yet another formidable barrier. The financial burden of school uniforms, materials, transport costs, and secondary school fees often falls on parents, rendering education inaccessible for many (FAWEMA, 2012; MoEM, 2021). This leads to dropouts, particularly in secondary education. In rural areas, long distances to schools create additional obstacles and increase vulnerability to gender-based violence (MoEM, 2021). Large class sizes and negative attitudes also undermine IE efforts in Malawi (Banks et al., 2022).

As a result, Malawi's educational system has traditionally historically prioritized special needs education over IE, as reflected in teacher training programs and the NSIE document, which tend to prioritize special needs education (Malawi. Ministry of Education, 2017; Kaunda, 2022). This limited focus results in a knowledge gap essential for the effective and comprehensive implementation of IE within mainstream educational environments. In addition, it directly contradicts the very premise of IE. Slee (2018b) notes, that exclusion, for whatever reason, is not inclusion. In line with this, Cologon (2019) argues that there is no 'type' of student that is 'appropriate' (or 'inappropriate') for inclusion because 'inclusion is about ... all' (p. 3) and 'all means all' (UNESCO, 2020; 2023). Such an understanding of IE affects the way it is practised in each context, as it leads to "many different practices filtered through individual educational actors with different constraints and agency" (Mac Ruairc, 2020).

Considering these, it becomes evident that conducting a KAP study is of paramount importance when addressing IE with education stakeholders. Such a study is indispensable for bridging the knowledge gap, altering biases, and ultimately promoting IE practices that genuinely encompass 'all' students. Having explored the literature review for this study, the following section will present a conceptual framework guiding the methodology of this study.

2.9 Conceptual framework

In the realm of IE, gaining insight into the interplay among educational stakeholders' knowledge, attitudes, and practices (KAP) is essential for facilitating meaningful progress. This study employs the Knowledge, Attitudes, and Practice (KAP) model as its guiding framework to offer a conceptual grasp of educational stakeholders' KAP in the context of IE.

2.9.1 Knowledge Attitudes and Practice (KAP) model

The KAP model was developed in the 1950s and serves as an analytical tool to assess what is known (knowledge), believed (attitudes), and done (practices) concerning a specific topic of interest (World Health Organization (WHO), 2008; Launiala, 2009; Andrade et al., 2020). Illustrated above, this model is rooted in the cognitive-affective-behavior theory in social psychology, proposing that an increase in knowledge influences attitudes and, consequently, practices (Schwartz, 1976; WHO, 2012; Bano et al., 2013) (refer to Figure 1 below). Fan, Zhang & Li et al., (2018) assert that knowledge forms the foundation of behaviour change, and the right attitudes and perceptions drive this change. It assumes that shifts in human behaviour unfold through three sequential processes: knowledge acquisition, attitude generation, and behaviour formation (Ross & Smith, 1969). Knowledge is regarded as the cornerstone of behaviour change, with attitudes and perceptions serving as the propelling forces behind this change (Fan, Zhang & Li et al., 2018).

In this study, the KAP model was employed to investigate the knowledge, attitudes, and practices of educational stakeholders in IE within the elementary school community. Knowledge is conceptualized in this study as "the ability to acquire, retain, and use information; a blend of understanding, experience, judgment, and skill" (Kaliyaperumal, 2004). Attitude is defined as "an individual point of view toward a particular object (person, thing, or idea)" (Gall, Borg, and Gall 1996, p. 273), that is, the way someone thinks and behaves. According to Kaliyaperumal (2004), practice is defined as the way participants demonstrate their knowledge and attitude.

Exploring the KAP of educational stakeholders regarding IE in Malawi holds significant importance. This research not only drives behavioural change but also addresses a crucial gap within the country, contributing to the development of context-specific strategies (Liao, Nguyen, & Sasaki, 2022). Unlike much of the IE research in Malawi conducted by global northern scholars, this localized approach bridges the gap by considering cultural and contextual nuances essential for effective implementation. It serves as a remedy to challenges posed by international agreements that may not align with local intricacies. Moreover, adopting a comprehensive approach involving diverse stakeholders empowers Malawi to make substantial progress toward more effective and culturally relevant IE practices.

The application of the KAP model in this study serves as a comprehensive framework to evaluate the understanding, beliefs, and actions of educational stakeholders concerning IE within the elementary school community. Knowledge is assessed by gauging stakeholders' comprehension of IE, including their awareness, familiarity, and grasp of the concept, drawing from various sources (Siltrakool, 2018). Attitudes, being closely intertwined with knowledge, encompass stakeholders' viewpoints and emotional aspects, contributing to their actions and decisions, with attitudes categorized as positive, neutral, or negative (Siltrakool, 2018). Practices, the actual behaviours and actions of educational stakeholders, involve participation in IE initiatives, implementation of inclusive practices, and activities that promote inclusivity. This comprehensive approach, recognizing the intricate nature of IE, underscores the necessity for collective efforts from all stakeholders, fostering transformations in attitudes, policies, practices, and resource allocation to uphold human rights, equality, and social justice (Mitchell, 2015). Exploring the KAP of educational stakeholders in the context of IE provides valuable insights for policymakers, school administrators, and educators to promote an inclusive educational environment that caters to diverse children's needs (Fauske, 2011).

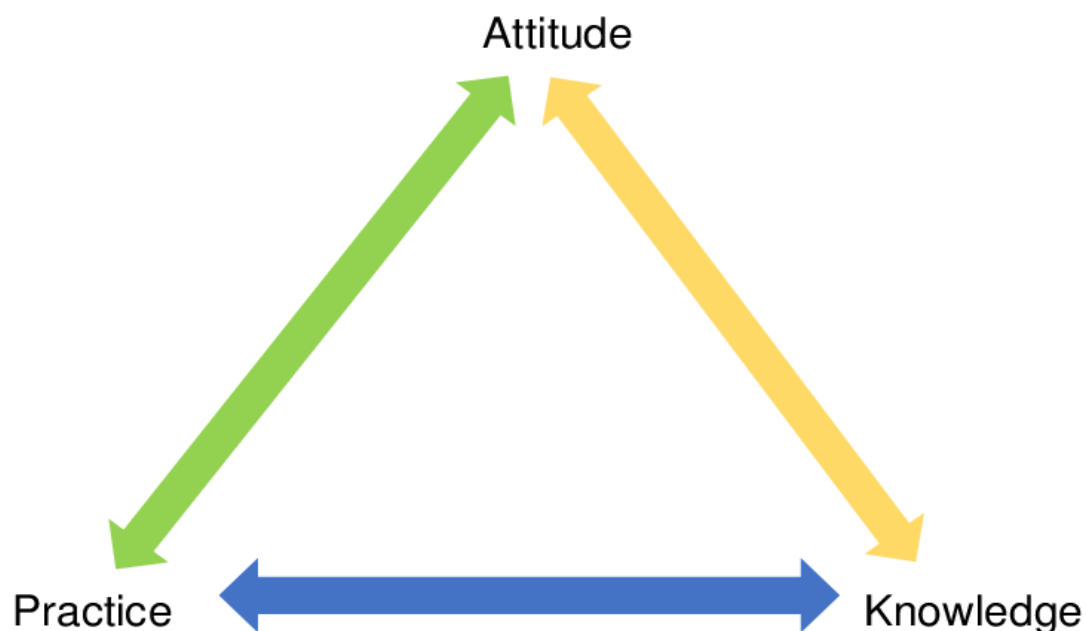


Figure 1: The Knowledge-Attitude-Practice Model

(Source: Bano et al., 2013)

Overall, the KAP model serves as an invaluable tool for assessing the educational landscape within the elementary school community, focusing on knowledge, attitudes, and practices related to IE. This KAP study is of paramount importance, enabling a structured examination of IE within this rural community, and uncovering patterns in knowledge, attitudes, and practices that impact the understanding and implementation of IE (World Health Organization, 2008). Moreover, it has the potential to raise awareness among educational stakeholders about the concept of inclusion, paving the way for the adoption of more

positive inclusive practices. The success of IE relies on the comprehension and endorsement of this concept by educational stakeholders (Kaunda, 2022), and the KAP model plays a pivotal role in shedding light on the prevailing knowledge, attitudes, and practices, unveiling the factors that shape these components in the context of IE. This valuable insight allows for the development of contextually relevant intervention strategies, thereby contributing to the advancement of IE in the community. The following paragraph presents the conclusion of this chapter.

2.10 Chapter summary

This chapter has reviewed the current literature on IE, highlighting its global importance and its relevance to Malawi. Throughout this exploration, the historical development, various interpretations, and diverse roles of educational stakeholders have been highlighted. A recurring theme has been the significance of stakeholders' knowledge, attitudes, and perceptions towards IE. While we have gained insights into the fundamental principles of IE, a critical gap remains in understanding how these stakeholders' knowledge and attitudes shape their in-ground practices and actions, especially in specific contexts like this elementary school community in Kasungu, Malawi. Bridging this gap is essential, as these perceptions and beliefs can profoundly impact the success of IE initiatives in local settings.

This research aims to uncover the specific knowledge gaps, attitudes, and practices among educational stakeholders within the community, shedding light on how these factors influence the implementation of inclusive education at the local level. This understanding is essential for developing targeted strategies to enhance inclusive education practices within the elementary school and similar contexts. Based on insights from the literature review, this research aims to answer the following Research Question: What are the knowledge, attitudes, and practices of education stakeholders in the elementary school community in Kasungu, Malawi, regarding Inclusive Education? The following chapter will present the research design and methodology used in conducting this study.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

Before embarking on a research journey, a researcher must consider a research approach, paradigm, design, and methods that will be employed to address the research questions (Creswell, 2013). This chapter addresses this process and then focuses on methodological processes such as recruitment and sampling, followed by data collection and analysis tools. It ends with an overview of data management, trustworthiness, and ethical considerations.

3.2 Qualitative research approach

According to Creswell (2009), qualitative research is an approach that explores and understands people's behaviours, attitudes, subjective beliefs, and actions. Creswell (2009) further states that qualitative research provides researchers with a systematic process for describing individual experiences, behaviours, feelings, etc. This form of research is primarily focused on understanding people's experiences from a humanistic and interpretive perspective (Jackson, Drummond, & Kamara, 2007).

A qualitative approach facilitates the understanding and examination of how people comprehend phenomena, providing a richer and more comprehensive explanation of the phenomenon under study (Merriam, 1988; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). This approach was considered suitable for this study because it enabled the researcher to grasp the meanings and interpretations that educational stakeholders associate with Inclusive Education (IE) (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). It allowed for a detailed exploration and understanding of the meanings and interpretations that participants attribute to their social or individual experiences. Moreover, the researcher could fully engage with the participants in their natural environment, a characteristic of this approach. This qualitative approach facilitated an understanding of the interpretations of educational stakeholders regarding their knowledge, attitudes, and inclusive practices. It played a crucial role in comprehending the factors influencing the success or failure of IE in this Elementary School community classrooms.

3.3 Research paradigm

The research paradigm serves as the conceptual lens through which the researcher perceives the methodological aspects of their research project, guiding the choice of research methods and shaping the nature of data analysis (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). It reflects the researcher's underlying beliefs that influence their worldview (Kivunga & Kiyuni, 2019). Before selecting a research paradigm, understanding one's beliefs about ontology, epistemology, and methodology is crucial. Ontology addresses the nature of the reality under study and what is known about it. In this study, the researcher delved into the perspective of educational stakeholders by reflecting on their experiences with IE. Epistemology defines the nature of the relationship between the researcher (the knower) and what can be known. The researcher and educational stakeholders engaged in an interactive process, interpreting socially constructed knowledge acquired in the natural environment of this Elementary School community. This process is expected to furnish the researcher with "important and multi-layered contextual information" during the study (Henning et al., 2004). The methodology section outlines how the researcher conducts the actual work of exploring everything that can be known (Henning et al., 2004).

In this study, the aim was to reveal the essence of participants' experiences within a specific context, requiring a paradigm that permits the interpretation of participants' perceptions of their reality. Interpretive researchers adhere to the belief that reality is shaped by people's subjective experiences of the external world. Their goal is to elucidate the opinions, attitudes, and beliefs of individuals regarding a subject or experience. This paradigm enables the researcher to delve into a thorough exploration of key constructs and encourages an examination of complexities and tensions within actions that might otherwise be deemed natural and straightforward (Kivunja & Kiyuni, 2017).

The researcher employed an interpretive paradigm to comprehend the subjective realm of human experience, aiming to uncover the meaning of the social world from the participant's perspective. This paradigm facilitated a deeper understanding of educational stakeholders' knowledge and attitudes regarding IE and how these factors influence their practices in addressing the challenges of inclusion for all students. It proved instrumental in exploring the implementation of IE policies and practices in the Elementary School community, as well as understanding how research participants perceive and experience disability and IE. A core principle of the interpretive paradigm is that "research is never observed objectively from the outside but must be internalized through direct human experience" (Neumann, 2011, p. 72). Thus, the interactive process between the researcher and participants in their natural environment provided an opportunity to identify barriers and strategies supporting inclusive practices.

3.4.1 Researcher's Background

I am a 35-year-old disabled single mother of Chewa origin from Malawi, with specialized training in disability studies. My personal journey of acquiring a disability through an accident in 2015 profoundly influenced my approach to research in inclusive education (IE). This unique blend of academic training and lived experience provided me with a distinct perspective that shaped every aspect of the research process. Drawing from my background, I approached interactions with education stakeholders with a heightened sensitivity and understanding of the challenges faced by individuals with disabilities. My firsthand experience allowed me to empathize deeply with the experiences shared by stakeholders, enabling me to listen attentively and interpret their voices with nuance and empathy.

Furthermore, my training in disability studies equipped me with theoretical frameworks and analytical tools to critically engage with the complexities of IE. This combination of theoretical knowledge and lived experience enabled me to navigate discussions with stakeholders, ensuring that their perspectives were accurately represented and understood. In essence, my standpoint and experience as a person with a disability uniquely prepared me to interact with and interpret the voices of different stakeholders in the community studied. My ability to listen, understand, and interpret what I heard and saw was informed by a deep personal understanding of the challenges faced by individuals with disabilities, combined with academic rigor and theoretical insights from disability studies. This holistic approach ensured that the research process was not only rigorous but also deeply empathetic and inclusive, capturing the diverse array of perspectives within the education community.

3.4.2 Research Design

The selection of the research design for this study was guided by the research questions and the study's aim. A research design is a strategy informed by the researcher's underlying philosophical assumptions, providing specific directions for procedures such as participant selection, data collection techniques, and data analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Maree, 2013; McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). Creswell and Creswell (2017) identify five types of qualitative research designs: narrative research, phenomenological research, grounded theory, ethnography, and case study. This study adopted a case study design.

3.4.2.1 The case study research design

As per Creswell (2014, p. 96), a research design is described as a "procedural plan used by the researcher to answer questions validly, objectively, accurately, and economically." This study adopted Yin's (2017) approach to case study methodology, based on an interpretivist paradigm. According to Yin (2017), Houghton, Casey, Shaw, and Murphy (2013), Fouche and Schurink (2011), and Creswell and Creswell (2017), a case study is a research design that allows a researcher to closely examine the subject of study to produce rich and in-depth information about the participants within their context. A case study was chosen for this research to gain an in-depth understanding of the meanings that study participants attached to their IE experiences in an elementary school context, based on the belief that these conditions impact their inclusive practices. Yin (2017), Fouche and Schurink (2011), and Creswell and Creswell (2017) identify three types of case studies: explanatory, exploratory, and descriptive. Additionally, Yin (2017) differentiates between single, holistic, and multiple-case studies. This study employed a descriptive, single-case study approach.

A descriptive case study is used to describe an intervention or phenomenon and the real-life context in which it occurred (Yin, 2017; Houghton et al., 2013; Fouche & Schurink, 2011; Creswell & Creswell, 2017). In this study, the phenomenon is IE, the real-life context is the elementary school, and the aim was to understand the KAP of education stakeholders towards the concept of IE in these elementary schools in Kasungu, Malawi. The goal was not to make generalizations or comparisons but to describe the lived experience in relation to their knowledge and attitude and how it influenced their practices in inclusive education.

Creswell and Creswell (2017), Houghton et al. (2013), Creswell and Poth (2017), and Merriam and Tisdell (2015) outline three advantages of using a case study design: it helps explore or describe the context in which the study is conducted; it allows for both qualitative and quantitative data analysis; and it explains the complexities of a context that might not be captured through survey research. Despite these advantages, case studies face criticism. Creswell and Creswell (2017), Houghton et al. (2013), and Merriam and Tisdell (2015) mention three disadvantages: case studies often lack rigor; they provide little basis for scientific generalization due to the small number of subjects, sometimes just one; and they can be long, difficult to conduct, and produce a massive amount of documentation.

This design provided the researcher with the opportunity to capture not only the contextual conditions but also the subjective knowledge, attitudes, and perceptions of the educational stakeholders (Koopman, 2017). This approach allowed an in-depth analysis by examining the real-life context of the participants' inclusive education practices (Padilla-Díaz, 2015). The researcher opted for a case study design to interpret the contextualized experiences of participants. This choice is justified by the design's emphasis on a

comprehensive examination of the subject within its real-world context (Yin, 2017). Additionally, this approach facilitated an exploration of how individuals describe their experiences and practices in connection to the studied phenomenon, as articulated by the participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). This research design was relevant to the present study because it helped gather necessary data about the complex experiences, opinions, beliefs, understandings, and attitudes of educational stakeholders about the concept of IE (Mwintsi, 2012). The design was consistent with the interpretive paradigm because the goal was to 'interpret' the educational stakeholders' experiences and practices regarding IE.

3.4.3 Research site

The context of the study is an elementary school in Kasungu Malawi. For ethical reasons, the school's and community name is not mentioned; instead, it is referred to as an elementary school community. The selection of this rural community as a study area is deeply rooted in the unique context of this area. The community has a strong cultural identity tied to the Chewa ethnic group, prevalent across Central Malawi and Eastern Zambia. Geographically, it is surrounded by four villages, each overseen by a senior group village headman, and includes essential amenities such as one health centre, a community day secondary school, a primary school, and a trading centre. The primary school in this community serves approximately 1400-2000 learners and faces significant educational challenges, including a severe shortage of specialized teachers and resources (J. Bundi, personal communication).

Compounding these educational challenges is the fact that the nearest special school in the district, catering exclusively to blind students, is located 82 kilometres away from the community. Furthermore, the school system grapples with a teacher-to-pupil ratio of 1:120, with one teacher handling all subjects in a single class (R. Bwanthi, personal communication). Consequently, many children enroll in Grade 1 but subsequently drop out due to various factors, including the long commute, poverty, lack of interest, and a shortage of qualified teachers (ibid.). In terms of livelihoods, the majority of the community's population depends on farming and engages in small businesses such as providing bicycle transportation services (kabaza) (C. Banda, personal communication). Additionally, the production and sale of the traditional spirit Kachasu, as well as participation in various labour roles, including tenancy farming, driving, and security positions within tobacco estates, contribute to the community's income sources (ibid.). These socio-economic conditions further complicate the educational landscape, impacting both student attendance and educational outcomes.

Moreover, there is a significant research gap concerning inclusive education practices in rural Malawian contexts, particularly in Kasungu. Existing literature predominantly focuses on urban settings, leaving rural communities like this one underrepresented. This study aims to fill this gap by providing insights specific to the rural context of Kasungu, which can inform both local and broader educational strategies. The strong community bonds and the pivotal role of local stakeholders in rural areas make this an ideal setting to explore how attitudes and knowledge shape educational practices. Understanding these dynamics is essential for developing tailored interventions that can effectively address the unique needs of students in rural areas, especially those with special needs and from marginalized backgrounds. By focusing on this rural community in Kasungu, this study not only aims to provide evidence-based recommendations for improving inclusive education practices locally but also offers insights that are scalable and adaptable to other rural communities facing similar challenges.

3.5 Research Population and Sample

3.5.1 Population

The population of this study is education stakeholders from the Elementary School community in Malawi. Educational stakeholders include, in general, actors who have an interest in matters related to education (Uleanya, Gumede & Kutame 2020). These actors included local council members, a primary school counsellor, village leaders, school committee members, mothers' groups, parent-teacher associations, parents, local community members and education professionals.

3.5.2 Recruitment of study participants

To recruit these participants, I first approached the Ministry of Education to obtain formal approval to conduct this study in the Elementary School community in Kasungu district, Malawi. I consulted with the Kasungu district Education Manager, who provided me with useful information about the state of IE in the district. To secure access to the study area, I visited the primary school counsellor and village chief of this area and requested the opportunity to conduct the study in this community. This was granted to me. The recruitment of the study participants was at the initiative of the community. The researcher asked the gatekeepers i.e., the village head, the primary school counsellor, and the school principal, for their assistance in recruiting potential participants who were interested in the study. The gatekeepers received invitational letters together with information sheets and consent forms to distribute to potential participants. These documents were written in the native Malawian language. Gatekeepers were successful in recruiting 10 educational stakeholders each, for a total of 30 potential participants.

3.5.3 Selection and recruitment of sample group

A sample serves as a representative subset of the population (Strydom, 2011a). In this study, the sample was obtained using purposive sampling, a non-probability method wherein the researcher decides who to include in the sample (Vilela, 2019). This selection was based on specific inclusion and exclusion criteria, such as knowledge of the research topic and willingness to participate (Creswell, 2013). Purposive sampling is commonly employed in qualitative research to identify information-rich cases related to the phenomenon of interest for an in-depth study (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006). The researcher intentionally chose individuals who have firsthand experience and understanding of the central phenomenon, aligning with the main research question (Creswell, 2014).

Invitations were extended to the 30 potential participants to convene at the Elementary School Community Centre, where the researcher provided information about the study. During this meeting, the invitation letter was read aloud to guarantee that everyone fully comprehended the purpose and nature of the research. Only those who expressed continued interest were provided with additional information about the study, including an informed consent form, specifying benefits, potential risks, privacy, and confidentiality. Only 15 participants expressed interest, as many potential participants withdrew from the study when they learned they would not receive financial gain. Participants with low levels of literacy were accommodated by translating the consent form into the local language (Chichewa) and having it read aloud to them. A neutral third party facilitated this process, ensuring participants understood the information before confirming their willingness to take part in this study.

The researcher compiled a list of interested potential participants, including their contact details. Afterwards, the researcher reviewed the list, applying inclusion and exclusion criteria to select 10 participants for the study. Striving for maximum diversity, a heterogeneous sample was formed to encompass various perspectives, incorporating individuals from the local council, Elementary School counsellors, village leaders, school board members, mothers' groups, parent-teacher associations, parents, and education professionals. Participants were explicitly informed of the voluntary nature of their involvement, with the assurance that they could withdraw at any point without facing consequences. Consent for in-depth interviews and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) was obtained from participants before initiating the study, based on predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria:

3.5.4 Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Inclusion criteria

- Education stakeholders such as parents, education staff, local organisation leaders, community members, traditional and religious leaders from Elementary School community
- They can communicate orally in English and Chichewa, the native language of the Elementary School community.
- They are between 18 and 65 years old.

Exclusion criteria

- Vulnerable participants who are unable to give consent.

10 education stakeholders were identified through this process.

3.6 Data generation methods and procedures

Data collection in this study involved conducting in-depth interviews and FGDs.

3.6.1 Pilot study

Before initiating data collection through in-depth interviews and FGDs, a pilot interview schedule was formulated and tested with educational stakeholders who were not part of the main study. The pilot phase aimed to refine the interview questions, eliminating redundancy, and enhancing clarity. Specifically, one teacher and one parent participated in the pilot study, which led to minor modifications in the interview schedule. These adjustments ensured that the data collection process remained consistent. During the pilot study, the participants consented to having their interviews recorded and confirmed the anonymity of their responses. Additionally, written notes were taken to extract deeper insights from the responses.

3.6.2 In-depth interviews

O'Leary (2017) defines in-depth interviews as a data collection method that seeks detailed responses to open-ended questions about a specific topic. For this study, participants' homes served as the setting for conducting in-depth interviews. This method sought to explore the knowledge, attitudes and practices of education stakeholders concerning IE. The participants, comprising 10 education stakeholders from the Elementary School community, represented various roles, including a local council member, a primary

school counsellor, village leaders, school committee members, mothers' groups, parent-teacher associations, parents, and education professionals.

Semi-structured questions were used to guide the in-depth interviews. Participants were asked about their understanding, knowledge of and attitudes toward IE and the practical strategies they use to influence inclusion. This allowed for an in-depth exploration of knowledge, attitudes, and practices of educational stakeholders related to IE because participants were able to communicate more freely and provide more detailed information about the phenomena being studied (Creswell 2009). Participation was voluntary and participants received no compensation for their time. The interview lasted 30-45 minutes, following Covid 19 guidelines (Creswell, 2013; Miles & Huberman, 1994). All interviews were scheduled at the participants' utmost convenience, both in terms of time and location.

A voice recorder was used for data recording. Written notes were added to the audio recordings to ensure that nothing was missed by the researcher. This served to enrich the data by capturing aspects not easily captured through audio recordings alone.

3.6.3 Focus group discussions

The focus group discussion serves as a method to capture the lived experiences of research participants on a specific topic (Creswell, 2013; Maykut & Morehouse, 1994; Punch, 2009; Robson, 2002). It emphasises dynamic group interactions to capture diverse perspectives from participants. Ideally, this approach fosters a relaxed environment, allowing participants to discuss and contemplate a topic from various angles (Kaehne & O'Connell, 2010). The social context enhances the opportunity for researchers to generate new ideas that may not emerge in individual interviews. It was originally planned to conduct two focus group discussions with 5-6 participants, but due to circumstances, two members withdrew from the study. One 60-minute focus group discussion with 8 education stakeholders at the Elementary School Community Center was conducted.

In conducting a focus group discussion, the steps for focus group discussions as described by Maykut and Morehouse (1994) were followed. Firstly, the focus of the study, which revolved around IE, was determined. Subsequently, a sampling plan was developed and employed to select participants and determine the timing and location of the study. An interview guide was also prepared to facilitate the discussion. One day before the interview, all necessary materials and equipment were assembled, and participants were duly informed of the time and place for the FGDs. Before the discussion, participants were reminded of the study's purpose and assured that they had the option to exit the discussion at any point if they felt uncomfortable. Concerns were raised by participants about the possibility of their statements being disclosed to authorities, and these concerns were addressed by emphasizing the confidentiality of their participation. The discussion commenced by greeting the participants and posing an opening question to the group. Participants were encouraged to engage in discussions and expand upon their ideas and responses. The focus group consisted of 8 participants, evenly distributed with 4 men and 4 women.

In this study, mixed-gender focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted. Power dynamics were addressed by creating a neutral and inclusive environment. The researcher encouraged balanced participation from all, particularly women who might face societal barriers. Sensitive topics were

introduced with awareness of power differences, and clear ground rules for respectful communication were established. Non-verbal cues were used to monitor comfort levels, and follow-up individual interviews ensured all viewpoints were validated. These strategies fostered equitable participation and meaningful dialogue, ensuring diverse voices were heard and valued.

The focus group discussion explored educational stakeholders' knowledge and attitudes and how this informs their practices in IE. The focus group was conducted in the Chichewa language, and all Covid 19 protections were followed. This enabled the researcher to gather more detailed and in-depth information, facilitating data triangulation alongside the information collected in the in-depth interviews (Creswell, 2012). Participants were advised that confidentiality could not be guaranteed in the focus group as other participants may disclose the information outside of the research setting. However, a binding confidentiality agreement was signed for the focus group. The researcher conducted and moderated the FGDs, ensuring the effective achievement of the research objectives.

3.7 Data management

The primary objective of the data management strategy was to safeguard participants' confidential information (Creswell, 2013). To achieve this, stringent measures were implemented. All data, including transcripts and recordings, were securely stored on encrypted university servers with access restricted to the researcher and supervisors. Personally identifiable information (PII) was anonymized or removed during data entry and transcription. The servers used strong security protocols like firewalls, encryption, and regular backups to prevent unauthorized access. During data analysis, any remaining personal details were further anonymized. These procedures followed the University of Cape Town's ethical guidelines and data protection regulations, with approval from the Human Rights Ethics Committee. Participants were informed about data management and their confidentiality rights. After data analysis, any remaining identifiable information was permanently deleted. These practices ensured participant privacy, data integrity, and ethical research conduct. Access to this information was exclusively granted to the researcher and her supervisors. It's worth noting that data collection will be preserved for five years, after which it will be deleted from the data storage to maintain participants' confidentiality and comply with data protection guidelines.

3.8 Data analysis

In this study, data from both the in-depth interviews and FGDs underwent distinct analysis procedures employing Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis method (2006). The generated data were transcribed and translated verbatim, and thematic analysis was applied. This systematic process aimed to reveal conceptual insights by organizing, discovering, and identifying patterns within the dataset (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). The analysis adhered to the six key steps outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006).

3.8.1. Familiarisation with the data

The first step necessitated an immersive engagement with the content, involving repeated, in-depth readings of the collected data (Braun & Clarke 2006). This intensive process extended to translating the data from Chichewa into English. While this transcription and translation were time-consuming, they were crucial for achieving familiarity with the data. Special care was taken during translation to ensure the

faithful preservation of the original text's meaning, as the interpretations applied could impact the data. To ensure translation accuracy, a Chichewa-English dictionary was consulted.

3.8.2. Generating initial codes

The second step entailed the creation of initial codes using data derived from the in-depth interviews and FGD. Following Braun and Clarke (2012), this phase involved a detailed focus on analysis, with information categorized and codes assigned to different elements. This enabled the identification of patterns within the dataset by pinpointing similarities and differences.

3.8.3. Generation of themes

The third step involved the search for thematic elements within the dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Patterns and themes were extracted from codes and categories present in the dataset, subsequently forming broader themes and patterns.

3.8.4. Review and development of themes

Step 4 entailed a thorough examination of all the themes identified in the previous step, comparing them across the entire dataset. This involved the identification of themes relevant to the research question, while irrelevant themes were discarded.

3.8.5. Refinement, definition, and naming of themes

The researcher further refined and explicitly defined the themes, delving into a detailed analysis of each theme to comprehend their significance. Concise and informative names were assigned to each theme for clarity.

3.8.6. The written analysis

The final step, Step 6, necessitated the creation of an analysis report summarizing all pertinent themes related to the research question.

The data were analyzed inductively, enabling a detailed organization and description of the dataset. The language barrier posed a challenge during the analysis as the data were collected in Chichewa, while the dissertation was in English. Transcription from Chichewa to English required meticulous attention to detail to ensure precise interpretation, considering Chichewa expressions and phrases that lack direct English equivalents. A Chichewa-English dictionary was occasionally consulted to enhance understanding and interpretation.

3.9 The scientific rigour of the research

Ensuring scientific rigour in qualitative research revolves around establishing trustworthiness and credibility in research findings. In this study, the trustworthiness and credibility of research are closely tied to the rigor of employed methods, and the credibility of data analysis and interpretation, echoing Creswell and Poth's emphasis (2018). In qualitative research, prioritizing trustworthiness is crucial for evaluating the research process and the credibility of findings (Bless et al., 2016; Cope, 2014). Lincoln and Guba (2013) propose four key criteria for trustworthiness in interpretive paradigm research: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. In the following sections, we explore these criteria and their relevance to this study.

Credibility pertains to how accurately the researcher represents the original meanings derived from participants' data (Lincoln & Guba, 2013; Moon et al., 2016; Cope, 2014). It is established when participants agree with the researcher's interpretation of their views (Moon et al., 2016; Cope, 2014). To achieve credibility, the study employed triangulation and member checking, cross-referencing data from in-depth interviews and focus group discussions to validate findings. While this approach provided valuable qualitative insights, it is acknowledged that relying solely on these methods may not fully capture the depth and breadth required for comprehensive data validation. To address this limitation, the study carefully implemented several strategies to enhance the reliability and validity of the qualitative data collected. Participant validation was employed to enhance the credibility of collected data, following recommendations from Bless et al. (2016) and Creswell (2014). This process rectified any miscommunication and provided an opportunity for additional information.

Additionally, methodological transparency was ensured through detailed documentation of the data collection and analysis procedures, promoting transparency and reproducibility. Furthermore, the credibility of the data was further strengthened by collecting information from multiple sources, including teachers, principals, community members, parents, education zone officials, community leaders, and school committee members. This approach ensured that the research findings were grounded in diverse perspectives and sources, contributing to the overall trustworthiness of the study.

Transferability refers to the degree to which the study's findings can be applied or generalised to other contexts or groups (Ary, Jacobs, & Sorensen, 2010; Cope, 2014). To establish transferability, following advice from Bless et al. (2016), the researcher provided rich, detailed, and context-specific descriptions of the research context and sample. This approach enables other researchers or readers to draw comparisons and assess the relevance and similarities of the findings in different settings.

Dependability concerns the consistency of research findings when the study is replicated with the same participants in the same context (Moon et al., 2016; Cope, 2014). One crucial criterion for enhancing trustworthiness involved the implementation of an audit trail, and carefully monitoring data sources during the analysis process. This audit trail played a pivotal role in validating that the study adhered to its original research design and plan, thereby fortifying the research's reliability and validity. Extensive utilization of notes and audio recordings from interviews ensured a consistent tracking of research activities, providing a substantial boost to the overall trustworthiness of the study. In addition, the researcher evaluated her subjectivity and worked to minimize it by seeking clarification through additional questions when the researcher's perspective was unclear during interviews and by actively addressing misinterpretations of participants' views and biases through feedback and discussion.

Confirmability pertains to the degree to which research findings can be verified by others (Creswell, 2009). To minimize potential bias in data analysis, the researcher utilized triangulation and member checks, as previously detailed. This approach guarantees that research findings accurately reflect participants' experiences and remain uninfluenced by the researcher's biases (Moon et al., 2016; Cope, 2014).

3.10 Ethical research issues in research

Qualitative researchers encounter a multitude of ethical considerations during data collection, analysis, and the dissemination of research findings (Strydom, 2011; McMillan & Schumacher, 2010; Bryman, 2016;

Marshall & Rossman, 2014; Glaser & Strauss, 2017; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Creswell & Poth, 2017). Consequently, ensuring the rights of participants and conducting research ethically is of utmost importance (Miles & Huberman, 1994). In this study, the researcher followed ethical principles regarding human experimentation and research, aligning with the Declaration of Helsinki. These principles encompass key facets such as obtaining permission, informed consent, confidentiality, privacy, anonymity, risk mitigation, autonomy, beneficence, equity, fairness, and cost reimbursement.

3.10.1 Permission to conduct the study

Approval for the ethical aspects of this research was obtained from the Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) of the University of Cape Town in April 2022 (see Appendix A & B for documentation). Following this, the researcher obtained official permission from the Ministry of Education in Malawi to conduct the study in the Elementary School community, situated in the Kasungu district of Malawi (refer to details in Appendix C). The study's initiation was preceded by obtaining permission from relevant education stakeholders and community leaders in Kasungu, including the District Educational Manager, Senior Chief, and Primary Educational Advisor of the Elementary school community.

3.10.2 Informed consent

This written consent form serves as the foundation of an individual's readiness to take part in a study. Informed consent is signed to ensure that individuals willingly choose to participate (Department of Health, 2015, p.1). The ethical principle of informed and voluntary consent entails that research participants comprehend the research's objectives, their right to decline participation, and their option to withdraw at any point (World Medical Association, 2001). Every participant provided verbal and written informed consent to participate in this study. In-depth interviews and FGDs were carried out with participants' informed consent (see Appendix F & G), providing access and permission to obtain, utilize, and reference the generated data (Maree, 2016). Participants received an invitation letter (see Appendix E) outlining the study's objectives and data collection procedures during the consent negotiations. Following this, participants signed as an indication of their readiness to take part in the study. For illiterate participants, the researcher employed verbal translation and enlisted a neutral third party to facilitate the process of obtaining informed consent. The informed consent form was translated into the local language (Chichewa), and it was read aloud to the participants. Afterwards, the participants confirmed their understanding of the information and expressed their agreement to participate in the study.

3.10.3 Confidentiality and privacy

Ethical research demands a steadfast commitment to confidentiality and privacy, which extend to safeguarding both the identifying information of participants and the data itself, as well as the secure handling of consent forms and records (Leedy & Ormrod, 2013). To protect individuals' privacy, meticulous measures were taken, including selecting discreet and quiet locations for FGDs and conducting in-depth interviews within the privacy of participants' homes. The assurance of participant privacy and confidentiality was upheld throughout the study and beyond the completion of research results. Participants were notified about the researcher's plan to discuss and share the data with their supervisor.

3.10.4 Anonymity

Preserving anonymity is a powerful assurance of confidentiality because it protects the identity of participants during research (Leedy & Ormrod, 2013). In this study, pseudonyms were employed in place of actual names to shield participants from public exposure. Notably, participants' names were never disclosed in written materials, thereby ensuring their confidentiality during data matching. Recorded interviews were securely stored on encrypted disks and in a protected Dropbox during and after the study. Emphasizing the commitment to anonymity and privacy, it is crucial to note that all data will be systematically erased five years after the submission of this dissertation.

3.10.5 Risk mitigation

Acknowledging potential risks is an integral part of ethical research. Risks encompassed pain, stress, exposure to COVID-19, emotional distress, embarrassment, and moral or cultural violations. This study recognized the potential risks, including exposure to COVID-19 and potential income loss (Creswell, 2014). Proactive steps were taken to mitigate these risks, including the option to skip questions or halt interviews if participants felt uncomfortable. Appointments and locations were thoughtfully selected for participant convenience and minimal distractions. Sensitive questions were handled with care during interviews. Additionally, rigorous adherence to COVID-19 standard operating procedures and contact tracing registers were maintained for safety. Electronic records and documents were securely stored with password protection and backed up to prevent data loss or corruption.

3.10.6 Autonomy in participation in this study

In this study, participants had the autonomy to engage voluntarily, receiving an informed consent form with a detailed study description (See Appendix F & G) (Creswell, 2013). Clear communication was ensured through in-depth interviews and FGDs conducted in Chichewa, a language familiar to the participants.

3.10.7 Benefits

Although study participants did not experience direct benefits, the primary recipients of this research are the children with special educational needs and disabilities in the Elementary School community. The study aims to raise awareness of IE among education stakeholders in the community, fostering a shift towards inclusion and effective inclusive practices. Ultimately, the study contributes to the overarching goal of sustainable development (SDG 4) by promoting IE. The benefits of this research extend to families of children with special educational needs and disabilities, encompassing the broader community.

3.10.8 Equity and fairness

Equity and fairness were steadfastly championed throughout the research process. Participants were never coerced into taking part in the study. The researcher demonstrated patience and respect by providing participants with the opportunity to contact Professor Marc Blockman of the UCT FHS Human Research Ethics Committee in case any concerns about the study's conduct emerged.

3.10.9 Reimbursement

No financial reimbursement was provided to participants. However, participants who travelled substantial distances to partake in focus group discussions had their travel expenses covered (Creswell, 2013). Low-cost communication channels, such as phone calls and WhatsApp messages, facilitated ongoing

communication between participants and researchers. Although financial incentives were not offered, heartfelt gratitude was extended to participants for their invaluable contributions to this study.

3.11 Chapter summary

In conclusion, this chapter extensively examined the research methodology, encompassing the approach, paradigm, design, and the rationale behind their selection. It explored the population, sample, and sampling procedures, along with detailing the research instruments and the data collection methods it employed. The emphasis was on upholding ethical principles, particularly concerning confidentiality, privacy, and risk mitigation. Furthermore, the study's commitment to participant autonomy, benefits, equity, fairness, and responsible dissemination of results was clarified, underscoring the comprehensive ethical framework guiding this research. The subsequent section presents the results of the study.

CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH FINDINGS

4.1 Introduction

This chapter unveils the study's results, drawing on the methodological procedures outlined in Chapter 3. The initial section briefly outlines the study participants, while the subsequent part delves into the findings structured around the Knowledge, Attitudes, and Practices (KAP) framework. These results were extracted through a thematic analysis rooted in the KAP thematic areas. Consequently, the primary themes investigated in this study encompass education stakeholders' understanding of Inclusive Education (IE), their attitudes towards it, and their practices concerning IE. The ensuing section offers an intricate analysis of these themes and subthemes, aiming to provide a comprehensive grasp of the study's findings.

4.2 Description of participants

This study involved ten participants who engaged in in-depth interviews. The participants consisted of five women and five men, all residing in the Elementary School community. Among them, four were educational professionals, comprising two teachers (one of whom had a child with disabilities), one principal, and one primary education advisor. The remaining six participants were community stakeholders, including a traditional leader, a religious leader, a parent with a child with disabilities, a parent without a child with disabilities, a member of the Parent-Teacher Association, and a member of the Mothers' Group Committee, who also cared for children with intellectual and visual disabilities. The same participants also participated in the focus group discussions. However, during the FGDs, only eight of the original ten participants who participated in in-depth interviews were available, as two had dropped out. Pseudonyms were used in presenting the results. Table 1 provides a brief description of the participants.

Table 1: Description of Participants

| GENDER | AGE RANGE | OCCUPATION | Pseudonym |
|---------------|------------------|------------------------------------|------------------|
| Male | 56-65 | Village head | Es10 |
| Female | 56-65 | Primary education advisor | Es9 |
| Male | 46-55 | Head Teacher | Es8 |
| Male | 35-45 | Teachers | Es7 |
| Female | 35-45 | Parents with children with SEND | Es6 |
| Female | 35-45 | Parents without children with SEND | Es5 |
| Male | 46-55 | Parent teacher association | Es4 |
| Female | 35-45 | Mother group | Es3 |
| Female | 46-55 | Teacher/parent of child with SEND | Es2 |
| Male | 35-45 | Religious leader | Es1 |

4.3 Introduction to themes

This study utilized the Knowledge, Attitude, and Practice (KAP) model to investigate the knowledge, attitudes, and practices of educational stakeholders in IE within the Elementary School community. The primary themes explored encompassed education stakeholders' knowledge of IE, their attitudes towards it, and their practices concerning IE. The subthemes were identified through a thematic analysis based on the KAP thematic areas. The following section provide a detailed analysis of these themes and subthemes to provide a comprehensive understanding of the results. The themes convey the impact of these KAP variables on IE and reflect the lived experiences of education stakeholders with IE.

4.4 KAP Thematic area 1: Education stakeholder's knowledge of Inclusive Education

This section describes the participants' understanding of IE. The following section provides a detailed analysis of the sub-themes that emerged from this study.

4.4.1 The understanding of the educational stakeholders regarding the concept of IE

In this study education stakeholders were asked to define the concept of IE from their perspective. The results showed that education stakeholders have differing conceptual understandings of IE. Three educational stakeholders appeared to have received some training on IE during their college training or through a workshop and seemed to be familiar with the concept. Their familiarity was evident in the way they conceptualized IE. They demonstrated their understanding of inclusion by providing a comprehensive conceptualization of IE. From their perspective, IE was regarded as a means to realize the right to education for all children. The following excerpt represents a participant's response on this issue:

"IE means that learners with different abilities (with and without disabilities) learn together in a classroom using different resources to meet their needs" (Es9).

On the other hand, a member of the Parent Teacher's Association (PTA) who attended a workshop that talked about IE defined the concept of IE from another point of view. He perceived IE as a means to combat discrimination as reflected in the following quote:

"IE is an educational program that addresses the needs of all learners without discriminating against them based on their different abilities" (Es4).

In contrast, the other half of the participants had a narrow understanding of IE. They perceived IE as primarily involving the integration of children with SEND into regular classes. Their definition placed more emphasis on a child's ability or disability and gender when talking about IE. The following excerpts show the participants' narrow understanding of IE:

One participant defined inclusion as *"a system that integrates children with special education needs into regular classrooms" (Es6).*

Similarly, a member of the mothers' group added that *"IE is an educational initiative that provides educational opportunities for children with disabilities and socially disadvantaged children in mainstream classes" (Es2).*

" IE is an educational approach that targets girls 7 years and older" (Es3).

Two education stakeholders who participated in this study during the focus group discussion had no idea about the IE. They complained that this was the first time they had heard about it and therefore had no knowledge of its concept. The following quotes reflect their lack of understanding:

"I do not know; this is the first time I have heard about it" (Es10).

"The truth is that I have no idea what is meant by IE. I never attended a workshop on IE and the school board never informed us about IE either" (Es1).

The study found that no awareness campaigns on IE had been conducted in the Elementary School community. As a result, many grassroots stakeholders such as parents, traditional leaders, and community members who participated, lack an understanding of IE as reflected in the above excerpts.

In summary, participants exhibit a lack of consensus on the concept of IE, as can be seen from the excerpts presented. Their diverse interpretations are reflected in how they conceptualize IE. Notably, many education stakeholders demonstrated a limited understanding of IE. Despite differing levels of familiarity with the concept, a universally shared understanding of IE was lacking. This absence of a common understanding carries significant implications for supporting learners with SEND.

4.4.2 Educational stakeholders knowledge of the National Strategy for Inclusive Education (NSIE)

To understand education stakeholders' knowledge of IE, their understanding and awareness of the NSIE that guides the implementation of IE in Malawi was explored. The NSIE outlines eight key areas crucial for achieving IE in the country, with one priority being capacity building. Specifically, the NSIE emphasizes the orientation of teachers, caregivers, teacher educators, education managers, inspectors, advisors, Primary Education Advisors, community members, and learners towards IE. However, the findings from in-depth interviews revealed that most teachers were not informed about IE. Additionally, for those informed, the orientation was often ineffective in enabling them to implement IE successfully. The following excerpt from the in-depth interview reflects what participants had to say about this issue:

"All teachers at the School had not been informed about inclusive education". When asked if he had attended an inclusive workshop, he responded as follows: *"The training I received was too short. I do not think I know much about inclusive education" (Es9).*

In terms of the NSIE document, many grassroots stakeholders, including parents, religious leaders, and traditional leaders, lacked awareness of the NSIE guiding the implementation of IE in Malawi. They mentioned that the government had not organized any workshops in their area to disseminate information about the policy. The ensuing statements illustrate participants' comprehension of the NSIE policy.

"This strategy you just mentioned is new to me, and I am not sure we have those documents at this school" (Es2).

"I have never heard of the NSIE strategy, and I do not know what it is about" (Es5).

Similarly, several education stakeholders during the FGDs indicated that they were not aware of the NSIE, which guides the implementation of IE in Malawi. However, some education stakeholders reported that they had heard about the strategy; the following is an excerpt from their responses:

"I have heard about this strategy through radio and television, but I do not know what it entails" (Es8).

A deeper analysis revealed that although some education staff indicated that they had heard about the policy through the media, they were only partially aware of the content of the NSIE. In addition, some education stakeholders expressed concerns regarding the medium for disseminating information. This medium of disseminating information proved to be ineffective as it did not reach the grassroots audience due to their social economic condition.

"We have not been informed about the strategy nor have we received any training on how to implement it" (ES4).

"at this school, we do not have copies of NSIE. The truth is that we have only heard about IE from the media platform, but lack information on the strategy" (Es7).

"I do not know what you are talking about. The government must consider us, who are poor and illiterate when disseminating this information. Why are they being so picky? It would have been better if they had disseminated this information in the same way as Covid-19" (Es10).

"It's a shame that information about the strategy did not reach us because we do not have a phone, radio or television. The government needs to use the strategies used in COVID-19 to disseminate information in a way that reaches all stakeholders" (Es1).

In summary, this study explored education stakeholders' awareness and understanding of the NSIE in Malawi. The results indicated that educational stakeholders, including teachers, parents, and community members, have limited knowledge about IE and the NSIE. This limited awareness is exacerbated by a lack of accessible and reliable information which undermines their ability to embrace the principles of IE and promote an inclusive learning environment.

4.4.3 Education stakeholders' knowledge regarding their role in inclusive education

The NSIE identifies stakeholders and outlines their roles in IE. In addition, the strategy presents strategic outcomes, strategies, and activities to steer the implementation of IE in Malawi. This study explored education stakeholders' understanding of their roles and responsibilities in IE as outlined in the NSIE document. Participants showed limited knowledge and awareness, particularly regarding the responsibilities of external stakeholders. One participant, a Primary Education Advisor, acknowledged a lack of knowledge and expressed difficulty in guiding the implementation of IE. The following excerpt reflects her response:

"I have not conducted in-service training for teachers on IE because I do not have sufficient knowledge in this area so it's difficult to guide the principal and school management committee on the implementation of IE." (Es9).

On the other hand, Principals, and School Management Committees are required to manage the implementation of IE in in collaboration with key stakeholders, adhering to their designated roles and responsibilities in IE. Concerning their knowledge of managing the implementation of IE, the results

indicated that they were not aware of this role and had not been adequately equipped with the knowledge in this area. The following quotes reflect participants' perspectives:

"How can we execute this role when we have not been oriented on how to use this guide?" (Es8) "We lack knowledge in this area it's unfair to expect us to manage the implementation of something we lack knowledge of" (Es4).

Regarding teachers' knowledge of the NSIE, the results revealed that they had not been adequately equipped with the knowledge described in the strategy to identify and teach learners according to their roles and responsibilities in IE. The following quote reflects their statement:

"We have not been adequately oriented on IE as a result we fail to effectively identify and accommodate learners with severe and profound disabilities", (Es7).

The researcher inquired whether community stakeholders had been trained on IE:

"We only know teachers, principals, and PEA, but we have no idea about the other stakeholders and their roles. It is the teachers' job to teach the children and the parent's job to make sure their children are in school every day. The role of a village leader is to encourage his subjects to send their children to school. The role of political leaders is to promote community development and obtain scholarships from the government for underprivileged students. PEA supervises school principals and provides them with professional advice on educational issues" (Es5).

The study explored traditional and religious leaders' roles in IE. According to the NSIE, these leaders are expected to mobilize the community for school development, enforce laws supporting IE, and raise parental awareness. However, findings revealed a lack of awareness among these leaders about their roles in IE, hindering their ability to fulfil these responsibilities. They expressed that even if informed, their unfamiliarity with IE prevented them from effectively executing their designated roles, emphasizing the need for orientation on IE. The following statement reflects their perspective on this issue:

"There is a lack of awareness and sensitization about IE in this community. Moreover, as traditional and religious leaders we do not know how to sensitize parents about IE " (Es10 & Es1).

Participants in the focus group discussion gave a similar response and were silent when asked if they were aware of the role of external stakeholders such as disability and psychosocial service providers. Thus, the results of the study suggest that participants have limited knowledge of the role of educational stakeholders in IE. Educational stakeholders expressed concern that IE is not prioritized in their community due to limited knowledge:

" IE is not a high priority in the Elementary School community because many stakeholders do not know its value. As a result, children who drop out of school are not followed up because they lack skills, resources, and knowledge about IE. People give up easily and do not believe in the abilities of children with disabilities" (Es9).

In summary, this study found that education stakeholders, encompassing primary education advisors, principals, school management committees, and teachers, exhibit limited understanding of their roles in

IE as defined by the NSIE document. They encounter challenges in guiding IE implementation, citing insufficient knowledge. Traditional and religious leaders were also found to be unaware of their roles in IE, lacking necessary awareness and sensitization. The overall lack of knowledge among educational stakeholders presents obstacles to effective IE implementation in schools.

4.4.4 Education stakeholders' knowledge of specialized support services in inclusive education

To enhance the effectiveness of IE, specific support services are crucial to accommodate children with SEND. In this regard, education stakeholders were asked to identify the support services needed to accommodate learners with SEND. The results showed that education stakeholders had partial awareness of support services in IE. This situation was exacerbated by the unavailability of most of the specialized services required to address the specific needs of individual students and help them overcome barriers to learning. The following quotes reflect their knowledge about support services:

"We do not have assistive devices such as wheelchairs, glasses, and hearing aids to support children with disabilities. The only support that we can give is dependent on our abilities to overcome the lack, especially for orphans and children from poor families. For people with disabilities, we are incapacitated" (Es7).

"We have no support staff, no resource centre, and the nearest one is 85 km away from our area. Therefore, we lack resources to meet the needs of students with SEND. Also, many resource centres focus only on learners with visual impairments. So, we lack a resource centre that is equipped with all the resources to support all learners in the region" (Es8). "The only help we get in this community is medical support from the local clinic, which is not much help because there are no social workers, physical therapists, occupational and speech therapists in this clinic. So, we do not know where to look for help in terms of counselling and accessing services that can address some of the issues our children have with SEND " (Es9).

One teacher said that health staff in the local clinic are not well trained to assess or support families with a child with disabilities and that this negatively affects the services they receive:

"We do not have specialized teachers and resource centres to help us address the needs of children with SEND. We only have one nurse in this community clinic, and she is not well-trained to help children with disabilities. Even when we try to bring our children to the clinic, we do not get professional support. Most of the time we are told to go to the central hospital, which is very far away, and we cannot afford the cost" (Es2).

"Most of our school stakeholders do not have a comprehensive knowledge of the nature of the different disabilities, the developmental characteristics of children with these disabilities and the associated difficulties or disorders that require attention thereby making it difficult to know what support they need" (Es9).

"We can only identify them and put their needs in a book, but because we lack knowledge of support services, we cannot identify the required support needed to address their needs. As a result, children come to school but do not participate. We can only help those who have lower support needs, but for those with sensory disabilities, it is difficult to find a viable solution to support these students because there is a lack of knowledge" (Es7).

FGD responses also indicate that many children from the Elementary School community are excluded from school due to a lack of knowledge about support services for children with SEND. The following excerpt reflects this view.

"We have seen that many students stay at home because they do not know where to get assistive devices such as wheelchairs, hearing aids, and glasses so that they can be accommodated in school" (Es8).

In agreement one respondent said "I do not know of any service that can support our children with disabilities in this area, and this affects the access of learners with SEND to education,' participants stated. For example, in our village, we have a girl with a speech disability. She was enrolled in school a few years ago and dropped out in the third grade because she was not receiving support. Her parents just accepted that she could not go to school and kept her at home" (Es10).

In summary, the presence of support services for children with SEND is pivotal for the success of IE. However, the study reveals that education stakeholders exhibit limited awareness of these services, leading to a scarcity of specialized resources crucial for addressing students' specific needs and overcoming learning barriers. Stakeholders' quotes underscore the inadequate availability of assistive devices, support staff, resource centres, and trained healthcare professionals. Consequently, many children with SEND face exclusion from school due to a lack of awareness in their families and communities about accessing essential support services. This deficiency in knowledge and resources significantly impedes the accessibility of education for learners with disabilities, impacting their learning and hindering them from realizing their full potential.

In conclusion with the issues around knowledge, this study reveals varied conceptual understandings of IE among education stakeholders in the Elementary School community. While some stakeholders grasp inclusion as a means to provide equal educational opportunities for all children, others hold a narrower perspective, focusing primarily on integrating children with special needs into regular classrooms. Furthermore, there is insufficient knowledge and awareness among stakeholders regarding the NSIE and their roles and responsibilities in implementing IE. This lack of awareness and knowledge also extends to specialized support services for learners with special needs and disabilities. Overall, the limited understanding and awareness among education stakeholders present significant challenges to the effective implementation of IE in the community.

4.5 KAP Thematic area 2: Educational stakeholder's attitudes regarding Inclusive Education

Achieving IE requires that all stakeholders promote the adoption of inclusive practices. It is important to examine these stakeholders' perspectives on disability and IE. In this study, the researcher embarked on this journey to examine the attitudes of educational stakeholders toward IE. In terms of the educational actors' attitudes toward IE, the researcher found that the participants had differing attitudes towards IE which ranged from positive to mixed to negative, and these subthemes are explored in the following sections.

4.5.1 Sub-theme: Education stakeholders' positive attitudes towards IE

The effective execution of IE requires a culture in which diversity is affirmed and encouraged. This necessitates stakeholders to harbour positive attitudes toward IE and collaborate to ensure universal access to quality education. Most of the respondents displayed a favourable outlook on inclusion, grounded in the perceived academic and social advantages for children with disabilities. They viewed inclusion not only as advantageous for the school but also as a positive influence on the broader community. Education stakeholders demonstrated a sound understanding of the social function of inclusion, emphasizing that students in mainstream classrooms, whether disabled or not, learn acceptance and understanding of those who differ from them through shared learning experiences.

"Dalitso, a double orphan, appeared mentally disturbed when he started school due to the loss of his parents. This caused many students to follow him, but after some time he became stable and mingled with his fellow students, feeling that he belonged" (Es8).

This study revealed that many caregivers support their child's educational efforts and firmly believe that education serves as the pathway to a brighter future, enabling them to "acquire knowledge" and secure "better job opportunities." The following excerpt reflects participants' perspectives:

"I have a mentally disabled child that I bring to school every day because I teach here, and I take full responsibility for him. A lot of people discourage me because they think I am just wasting time. They think my child is incapable. They always advise me to seek medical help, but I do not get discouraged. I have seen people with disabilities in higher positions, and that encourages me. I know my son is capable, and my only desire is to raise him so that he can stand on his own two feet" (Es2).

"You know, I am struggling to make ends meet because I have not gone far in school. So, if my child gets an education, he or she will have a better chance of getting a better job. I want my children to support me in my old age, and that's only possible if they have an education" (Es3)

During FGDs, certain participants expressed the belief that their current socioeconomic challenges stemmed from a lack of education. Consequently, they expressed a desire for a different future for their children, emphasizing the importance of education in improving their circumstances:

"You know that the most common occupation in our community is farming which requires manual labour, so it is difficult for children with disabilities, especially those with mobility limitations from our community to cope, so their education can lead to better opportunities in terms of job prospects" (Es10).

In summary, certain participants exhibited a favourable outlook on the inclusion of learners with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) in mainstream schools. This positive attitude was grounded in the perceived academic and social advantages of inclusion. Participants believed that placing learners with SEND in mainstream schools would afford them equal opportunities as their non-disabled counterparts, potentially leading to improved job prospects and greater independence. Additionally, they anticipated social inclusion benefits, fostering a sense of belonging among learners with SEND.

4.5.2 Education stakeholders' mixed attitudes due to the school and human inability to implement Inclusive Education

Education stakeholders held varied perspectives on IE, largely influenced by insufficient school and human resources for its implementation. Notably, the predominant concern among education stakeholders was the lack of capacity for teachers in IE. Participants highlighted that children with special educational needs often face barriers to their right to education, as teachers lack the necessary skills due to insufficient training. While stakeholders generally support the concept of inclusion, many teachers feel ill-equipped to instruct learners with special needs, having received limited exposure to practical aspects during their teacher training. Consequently, numerous children either remain at home or, if integrated into classrooms, tend to drop out after two years due to academic challenges hindering their progression to the next grade:

"We love the idea of making our school inclusive, but due to our teachers' lack of skills, these children are better off in a special education school [...]. We have tried in the past to accommodate these students in our school, but they do not benefit academically, so they stay in the same class for 2-3 years until they get tired and leave. So, with our school capacity, inclusion will not work unless the government intervenes" (Es8).

"We lack expertise in inclusive education. The government only tells us to support children with disabilities, but it has never provided in-service training in inclusive education. Even in college for teachers, we were not adequately prepared to teach students with different needs" (Es7).

Focus group participants expressed the same concern and added that there is only one college that specializes in special education and disabilities. Once these teachers graduate, they are placed in special schools, as the following excerpt illustrates:

"The problem is that we only have one college that specializes in special education and disabilities, but once these teachers graduate, they are placed in special schools, which means that there are not enough specialized teachers in regular schools who have the knowledge of IE to deal with students with SEND. Some teachers who are willing to pursue training in IE are looking for greener pastures after graduation due to lack of incentives" (Es9).

The mixed attitudes among teachers toward IE were partially attributed to the school's challenges in implementing it. Teachers at the elementary school cited issues like overcrowded classrooms, inaccessible environments, large class sizes, lack of resources, and absence of support services as factors influencing their views on IE. The quotes below capture participants' perspectives gathered through in-depth interviews and FGDs on the school's struggles with implementing IE:

"It is very difficult to provide individual attention for learners with severe disabilities in an overcrowded classroom as we must meet instructional goals. As such they need to be sent to special schools where they can get the required attention they deserve." (Es8).

"At our school, we lack resources and rely on our abilities, especially for orphans and underprivileged children. Some children with disabilities need assistive devices which we do not have nearby resource centre and lack support services to accommodate their needs" (Es9).

"Inclusion is a good initiative on paper but challenging in our context due to inaccessible classrooms and a lack of resources like sign language teachers for hearing-impaired students. Our school lacks accessible infrastructure, including ramps and accessible restrooms, and this affects the participation of students with disabilities" (Es7).

In summary, some educational stakeholders have mixed attitudes toward IE. While their responses indicate that they are aware of the value of teaching all children in the mainstream school in the community, their positive response came with a caveat due to the school's inability to implement IE. This has huge implications for the practice of IE, as teachers are not prepared to implement the inclusive agenda, leading to their mixed attitudes towards IE.

4.5.3 Negative attitudes towards inclusion based on the severity of disability

Education stakeholders' attitudes toward inclusion were shaped by the severity of disabilities. Some believed IE was appropriate for mild conditions like partial visual or hearing impairments and mild learning disabilities, expressing support for the inclusion of such individuals. Conversely, a negative stance was observed regarding the inclusion of those with severe disabilities. In-depth interviews and focus group discussions indicated that participants generally endorsed mainstream education for learners with mild physical disabilities or challenging socio-economic backgrounds. On the other hand, they advocated for special schools for those with severe disabilities, such as hearing or communication disorders and intellectual disabilities.

The following quotes reflect their respective attitudes toward IE:

"In 2017, we had Hamida, a girl with physical disabilities. She was a brilliant student with good handwriting, although she needed two hands to hold the pen when writing. This girl excelled in class and did not need much support from us. So she was not a burden. But those with severe disabilities are a problem, we only keep those who are not disruptive, and we are patient and merciful with them because they have no academic benefit" (Es8).

"I do not see any benefit in teaching these children because unemployment is very high in our country. So, if those who do not have special needs are vegetating in poverty at home with their certificates, what are the chances of those with disabilities finding a job? It's a shame they cannot do manual labour, otherwise it would be a waste of time and resources to invest in their education. I would rather save the money than pay tuition for my disabled children" (Es6)

Similarly, FGD participants said that learners with SEND are perceived negatively. The following statements reflect their views.

"It is difficult to give individual attention to a large class of 120-160 students. We work with a time limit of 30 minutes in which we must achieve the lesson objectives. As you know, students with severe disabilities learn slowly and take a long time to grasp a concept, and spending more time with them would prevent them from meeting the objectives. At least these students can be better accommodated in a special school because the class size is not as large as ours in this elementary school" (Es7).

Several caregivers felt that enrolment of a child with disabilities would be a burden on teachers and classmates. This statement was highlighted about students with behavioural problems.

"We had a student with an emotional behaviour disorder who came to school a few years ago, but we did not know how to handle him. Fortunately, he had a younger brother in the same class who supported him in everything he did in class but could not benefit academically because we lacked strategies to accommodate him in class. This affected the younger brother's performance because instead of focusing on the class, he was busy taking care of his brother" (Es5).

Some teachers and school staff recommended, or in some cases insisted, that children with disabilities should attend a special school rather than a mainstream one as evidenced in the following excerpt.

"It is useless to approach teachers, especially if you have a severely disabled child because they will tell you to enrol your child in a special school because they are not able to admit the child in the mainstream school, even though they know that we cannot afford to admit our children in a special school (Es6).

"The students, especially the mentally handicapped, are very disruptive, and if you put them in a class with normal students, you jeopardise their safety. You know, madam, there was a student who was crazy. We tried to include him in the school to integrate him socially, but sometimes he beat up other students and made toilets everywhere. To ensure the safety and hygiene of the other students, we advised the parents to keep him at home while he was undergoing treatment" (Es8).

"We enrolled a child with intellectual disabilities. He was a burden to us because he was disruptive. He still comes to school because his mother is a teacher and takes full responsibility for him, but if he were a normal member, he would not be enrolled in this school because of the severity of his disability. The biggest challenge is that the resource centre for the mentally disabled is in the northern region, which is very far from our community, so it is difficult to deal with such students because we are not able to provide IE" (Es7).

The FGDs results showed that many stakeholders in the Elementary School community still perceive learners with SEND negatively:

In our community, many children with SEND stay in their parent's homes because other children do not want to play with them when they go outside. Even parents tell their normal children not to play with their children because they are disabled (Es2).

"It is difficult to actively engage when many people do not support inclusion because they have negative attitudes towards learners with SEND. Therefore, many parents do not disclose their children's disabilities when they enrol in school because they fear being discriminated against by the community due to negative perceptions, which makes it difficult to support these learners" (Es8).

In summary, the attitudes of education stakeholders towards inclusion in education are influenced by the severity of disability. Stakeholders are more supportive of including children with mild disabilities, such as partial visual and hearing impairments and mild learning disabilities, in mainstream schools. However, they show a negative attitude towards the inclusion of children with severe disabilities, believing that they should be taught in special schools. These negative attitudes are reflected in statements from

stakeholders, who express concerns about limited resources, the potential burden on teachers and classmates, and the belief that students with severe disabilities have little academic benefit. These negative attitudes also extend to the wider community, where parents discourage their children from playing with children with disabilities. As a result, many parents do not disclose their children's disabilities out of fear of discrimination.

In conclusion, when it comes to attitudes, the results of this study indicated that educational stakeholders had different attitudes towards IE. While some stakeholders show a positive attitude towards inclusion, recognizing the academic and social benefits for students with disabilities, others have mixed attitudes due to the lack of capacity in schools and teachers to implement IE. Additionally, stakeholders' attitudes towards inclusion are influenced by the severity of disability, with more support for including children with mild disabilities and negative attitudes towards including children with severe disabilities. These negative attitudes also extend to the wider community, creating barriers to IE.

4.6 KAP Thematic area 3: Educational stakeholders practices towards Inclusive Education

Another theme that emerged in this study is the education stakeholders' practices regarding the concept of IE among education stakeholders in the Elementary School community. In this study, the researcher wanted to investigate the practices of educational stakeholders about IE. These subthemes are explored in the following sections.

4.6.1 Education stakeholders' collaborative practices on Inclusive Education activities

Effective inclusive practices are one of the ways to promote IE. Collaboration is considered a key component of inclusive practices because it provides a platform for knowledge and sharing among team members. In this study education stakeholders' collaborative practices in IE were explored. The results indicated that collaboration between different educational stakeholders who could support teachers and students in implementing inclusive practices was poor. The following quotes reflect the participant's perspective:

"As a school, we have collaborated with various stakeholders on school development projects. For example, we worked with Nesip and Build on the programme on a re-enrolment initiative and construction of new classrooms. This project worked well, but due to the learners' lack of interest in education and lack of support, they dropped out of school" (Es4).

"We also worked with the Youth Development Committee, setting up education centres in all villages to offer part-time classes to all learners, but due to lack of time and busy schedules, we did not pursue this...we worked with community leaders when discrimination was rampant in the community, especially against people with albinism, and we intervened until we put an end to this bad behaviour" (Es8).

Similar results were achieved during the FGD, however, some participants expressed their concerns, regarding poor collaboration in supporting learners with severe and profound disabilities.

"Collaboration with community members in supporting learners with severe to profound visual impairments is poor, but the Ministry of Education has helped us with enlarged print materials for students with mild visual impairments. We also advise teachers to put them in front of the classroom so they can see better" (Es9).

Regarding educators' collaborative experience related to co-teaching between general and special education teachers, the findings indicate that there is a lack of collaboration between regular teachers and special educators due to the absence of specialist teachers at the Mainstream School. The following quote reflects the participant's perspective.

"We lack knowledge of co-teaching strategies as we did not go through training in this area. Unfortunately, we do not have specialist teachers at this school to collaborate and share information needed to meet the needs of students with SEND" (Es2).

Another collaborative practice explored in IE was collaboration with paraprofessional parents and teachers, as key stakeholders in IE collaboration include not only education staff but also health professionals and parents. Collaborative partnerships can be between two or more teachers or involve psychologists, speech pathologists, occupational therapists, school nurses, and others. Participants' collaborative experience with allied health professionals was explored and participants had this to say:

"We have never collaborated with therapeutic service providers because we do not have such services in our school and community" (Es7).

In agreement, a teacher who was also a parent to a child with intellectual disabilities from FGD added that "such services are scarce and this is a country-wide problem as there are no state-appointed therapists in most government schools. As such we must go outside of the province for such services which are very costly and most of us cannot afford them" (Es2).

Teachers were not satisfied with the level of collaboration with parents. They felt that parents do not cooperate enough, especially in matters of IE. The following statement reflects the participant's perspective:

"Many parents do not attend meetings or help their children with homework. Some parents are not interested at all in the education of their disabled children, they see it as a waste of time and resources. Some do not consider it their duty to help their children with their schoolwork, they leave everything for teachers, and this frustrates our collaborative effort" (Es7).

On the other hand, parents complained that their ideas are undermined by the school. This following quote reflects their perspective: *Most of our input in meetings is not considered because the voice that is valued is that of those who have a social standing in our community, so we do not see the need to engage in a place where our ideas are overlooked.*

For effective collaboration, open and regular communication among stakeholders is essential to achieve a common goal. Education stakeholders were asked about their communication strategies during their collaborative practices. Participants expressed their concerns about poor communication and collaboration between the school and parents. School representatives complained of disrupted communication due to parents' lack of interest in their children's education. Participants indicated that they held monthly face-to-face meetings with parents on school development projects, but never used this platform to inform them about IE. Regarding the school ethos on IE, participants indicated that the school does not have an ethos on IE.

"We usually communicate through letters, telephonic messages, and word of mouth during our monthly meetings but sometimes our communication strategies are not effective due to network issues and low literacy levels. This is exacerbated by lack of interest among community stakeholders and lack of direct communication and collaboration to discuss our challenges with professionals" (Es4).

"Collaboration between the school and other stakeholders is influenced by the level of education. Most parents do not come to school unless their children are sent back to bring their parents to school, then they come. Unemployment makes cooperation between schools and parents seem useless because it diminishes the value of education." (Es8).

The school is not committed to inclusion as you have noticed that it does not have an ethos for IE posted on the bulletin board. " (Es4).

In summary, the findings reveal positive collaboration between the Mainstream School and non-governmental organizations NESIP and Build On, which provided support to underprivileged children through uniforms, stationery, and the construction of an accessible school block. However, there was a lack of collaboration between teachers and parents, and no interaction between teachers and specialist educators or medical professionals. This deficiency affected IE practices, as it hindered direct communication and collaboration between students, teachers, and professionals, impeding the development of targeted plans and the implementation of necessary strategies for diverse learners.

4.6.2 Gaps in teacher training and professional development

This study investigated the extent of training and professional development in IE for teachers at the Elementary School. The findings highlighted shortcomings in these areas. In-depth interviews uncovered that teachers lacked adequate preparation to handle classroom diversity during their college training, focusing more on theoretical aspects of inclusion rather than practical aspects. Consequently, teachers faced dilemmas when confronted with diverse learners in the classroom, inadvertently excluding them from their right to education. The following quote reflects participants' perspectives on this challenge:

"During our college training, we were not adequately trained to teach learners with different needs. We only learned theoretically, and our lectures focused only on visual and hearing impairments. We never had the opportunity to teach learners with different abilities during our teaching practice. Now that we are placed in a regular school, we encounter learners with developmental disabilities, and we are not able to teach them in our classroom" (Es7).

Similar results were obtained during FGD as participants lamented that, *"At the College of Education we only learn the theoretical part, but we were never sent to the school to practice how to help such students. The little knowledge we have about IE we got through media platforms, but we do not know how to implement it in the classroom. Therefore, we lack practical experience in inclusive education" (Es4).*

The researcher probed further to find out if the principals and PEA of the Primary School have organized and conducted an orientation program for teachers and community stakeholders on IE. The results indicated that the PEA has never organized nor conducted any orientation program on IE. The following verbatim quotes reflect participants' views on whether they participated in professional development in IE to gain new skills.

"In the 8 years I have been at this school, there has never been a workshop on inclusive education. Ask the PEA of this school and she will confirm it. IE is just a buzzword, but in practice, it is not implemented (Es7).

When asked the reason for the lack of in-service training, the PEA replied, "It's unfair for the government to expect that I conduct in-service training for teachers on IE because I have not been equipped with knowledge in this area" (Es9).

FGD findings also indicated that many educators at the mainstream school in this community did not feel able to implement IE because they had not received adequate professional training in IE. The limited knowledge and understanding of IE among teachers lead to resistance or a low sense of support for inclusive practice, as the following quote shows:

"We once had a student with intellectual disabilities who repeated Grade 1 three times. The fact is that he was able to attend school but was unable to benefit academically due to teacher incompetence. As a result, he dropped out of school. He was probably tired of staying in the same class while his classmates moved up to another class" (Es4).

The following quotes reflect the interviewee's perspective on the lack of orientation training in IE.

"We have not received orientation training on IE so that we can give better advice to our teachers in the schools. For example, my teachers do not know sign language, and I do not know it either. What advice can I give them in this case?" (Es9).

"Two years ago, we had a student with disabilities. The teachers did not know how to deal with him, so I advised the teachers not to chase him if he did not cause problems in class. We did not want to send him home because of his disability, but we knew that in time he would leave school" (Es8).

In summary, the findings show that educational stakeholders in the Elementary School community have not been adequately exposed to the theoretical and practical aspects of inclusion in both their initial and continuing education. An in-depth analysis of the participants' responses revealed deficiencies in their teaching practices. Thus, the study found that most stakeholders at the Primary School did not know about IE because they had not received orientation training on IE. In addition, the study found that the PEA and the principal had not received orientation training on IE, which affected their effectiveness in advising their teachers on how to implement IE in the Primary School. As a result, they lack the orientation, knowledge, and skills to effectively implement inclusive practices inside and outside the classroom.

4.6.3 Orientation of education stakeholders in early identification, case management, and referral of learners with SEND

The researcher sought to find out whether the primary education consultant, principal, teachers, SMC, PTA, mothers' group committees and parents in the Elementary School community had received orientation on early identification case management and referral of learners with SEND. The study found that education stakeholders have not been oriented in early identification, case management and referral of learners with SEND as such they are not able to identify learners with SEND early enough and get the support required to improve their participation in the learning environment. The following quotes give evidence to this perspective:

"It would be nice if I knew something about this because I lack knowledge in this area. I can only identify visible disabilities but I am not able to know what they can and cannot do, and what strategies need to be applied to ensure their inclusion in mainstream schooling in the Elementary School community". (Es2)

"Our school is not able to identify students with disabilities early because we do not have specialist teachers who can do this. Even the community members do not participate in identifying and referring students because they do not know how to identify these students. The school only accepts orphans, children from poor households, and children with mild disabilities because it is difficult to accommodate children with severe disabilities" (Es8).

Participants lamented that this affects the accessibility and participation of learners with SEND in the school setting. The following quote reflects their concerns:

"We are only able to identify visible disabilities, but for those with hidden disabilities, we lack the expertise to identify them. This situation frustrates us because we unintentionally exclude these learners from education because of these challenges" (Es7).

Similarly, when educational stakeholders were asked about their ability to identify and support learners with SEND, the FGD findings revealed the following statement:

"We are only able to identify visible needs and mild disabilities but are unable to provide appropriate support due to a lack of knowledge and resources. Therefore, even when learners with severe disabilities are identified, they do not receive the assistance they need to ensure their access to and participation in school" (Es2).

In summary, the study revealed that most education stakeholders are not trained in early identification, case management, and referral of learners with SEND. It was evident from participants perspectives that they know very little about the various disabilities, the developmental characteristics of children with these disabilities, and the associated difficulties or disorders that require attention, making it difficult to identify these learners, manage their cases, and refer them to appropriate services to help meet their needs. This is exacerbated by the lack of specialised teachers who are skilled in identifying different needs that cannot be easily identified and presented by regular teachers which result in the exclusion of these learners.

4.6.4 Education stakeholders' involvement in inclusive education

This study explored the state of participation of educational stakeholders in IE. Participants indicated that the educational level of educational stakeholders influences their level of participation in education. Participants believed that educational stakeholders who recognise the value of education are more likely to actively participate than those who are illiterate. Participants gave examples of parents who actively participated in their children's education. The following statement reflects their perspective:

"I think it depends on how much parents are aware of the importance of education. Some parents are actively involved in their children's education. For example, we had the parents of Hamida who took their child to school because she had limited mobility so that she could access education. They carried their daughter every day, and the good thing was that Hamida was intelligent" (Es8).

The researcher sought to determine the extent to which educational stakeholders such as community leaders, civil society organisations, and disability and mental health service providers were involved in promoting inclusion in the Elementary School community. Findings suggest that these stakeholders were only actively involved in community development projects, but not in inclusion issues, as their enrolment initiative did not include children with severe and profound disabilities. The results also suggest that service providers for people with disabilities and mental illness were not available in their community or district and that they had to travel to another province to access these services, which was costly. The following quote reflects the participants' responses:

"We have a child enrolled with intellectual disabilities. He still goes to school because his mother is a teacher and takes full responsibility for him, even though he does not benefit academically. We still have such students in our community who stay at home because they are very disruptive and we cannot deal with them. The biggest challenge is that the resource centre for the mentally retarded is located in the northern region, which is very far from our community, so it is difficult to deal with such students because we do not have the expertise and resources to accommodate them in our school" (Es7).

The study also found that offices in the education zone are expected to provide supervision, counselling, and guidance services to IE. In addition, they are expected to provide guidance to other stakeholders in the zone regarding IE and to assist principals in identifying students with diverse needs. Regarding these tasks, PEA commented as follows:

"I have not received any training or orientation on inclusive education. My knowledge from a NESIP workshop is inadequate. Then how can you expect me to perform these tasks?" (Es9).

In terms of monitoring teaching and learning, most caregivers complained that it was difficult to provide this support because they had not been trained. They emphasized that it was the responsibility of educators to provide this service to learners. Teachers lamented that many parents are not interested in their children's education. They pointed out that many parents do not come when invited to teacher-parent meetings, even when it is about their children unless the child is sent back to get them. With this in mind, participants in this study reported that some parents were not cooperative because they believed that their children's education was the sole responsibility of the teachers, as shown in the following statement:

Parents are not cooperative in fulfilling their role in their children's education. Many parents do not care about their children's future, they just accept their child's condition and believe that nothing tangible can come out of the child. Parents drop their children away without resources " (Es8).

In their defence, parents stated that *"we do not know how to deal with learners with SEND"*. Some stakeholders expressed frustration, *"I used to be involved in school issues, but my nephew was denied access because of his disability. This demotivated me because I had already bought the school materials. (Es5).*

FGD findings suggest that the involvement of parents and communities in their children's educational affairs was low. This is due to parents' and community's limited knowledge and awareness about IE. The following quotes reflect participants' views:

"Many parents and community members lack knowledge and awareness about IE because they have not been informed about inclusive education, and this limits their participation in inclusion" (Es1).

In-depth interviews and FGDs revealed a unanimous agreement that poverty stands as a significant obstacle to educational stakeholders' engagement in including learners with SEND in the community. Participants expressed their inability to afford necessities for their children, further exacerbated by elevated unemployment rates and a steep cost of living. This economic challenge directly impacts the implementation of IE, as indicated by the perspectives shared by the participants.

"Our children do not come to school in January and February because we cannot provide for basic needs like food. The high cost of goods and unemployment make our lives unbearable, resulting in low participation in inclusive educational initiatives" (Es5).

"Most parents from this area cannot afford to take their children to a school that is not near them because of their social and economic status. Would not it be possible to ask the government to build a resource centre in our community so that all children can exercise their right to education" (Es10)?

In summary, the findings about education stakeholders' KAP on IE indicated that education stakeholders in the Elementary School community are not actively involved in implementing inclusion. Several factors such as lack of knowledge, awareness, poverty, and high unemployment rates were identified as barriers to stakeholders' involvement. The study also highlighted the lack of involvement from community leaders, civil society organizations, and disability and mental health service providers in promoting inclusion. The education zone offices also lacked training and orientation on IE, hindering their ability to provide support. The study concluded that education stakeholders in the Elementary School community were not actively involved in implementing inclusion, which had implications for the achievement of IE in the community.

4.7 Conclusion

This study investigated the knowledge, attitudes, and practices of educational stakeholders regarding IE in the Elementary School community. The findings indicate that these stakeholders generally possess limited knowledge and less favourable attitudes towards IE, impacting the actual implementation negatively. Issues such as inadequate collaborative practices, gaps in teacher training, and a lack of orientation in early identification and case management further impede the progress of IE. These challenges are closely intertwined with stakeholder awareness and school capacity, forming significant barriers to effective implementation. Key issues encompass poor collaboration among stakeholders, insufficient training and awareness in IE, a limited understanding of disabilities, and prevailing negative attitudes towards inclusion.

4.8 Chapter summary

This chapter presented critical study findings illuminating disparities in knowledge and attitudes among education stakeholders regarding IE. The results expose varying levels of understanding, with some stakeholders comprehending inclusion to provide equal educational opportunities, while others focus narrowly on integrating children with special needs. A lack of awareness about the National Strategy for Inclusive Education (NSIE) impedes effective implementation. Inadequate specialized support services further hinder accessibility for children with special educational needs and disabilities.

Educational stakeholders' attitudes toward IE vary, with some expressing positivity and recognizing its benefits for children with disabilities. Others hold mixed attitudes, expressing concerns about school capacity and teacher training. Negative attitudes are observed, particularly toward children with severe disabilities, often tied to doubts about academic benefits, extending to impact social inclusion in the wider community.

The study also examined the practices of education stakeholders in the Elementary School community concerning IE. Inadequate collaborative practices, especially in supporting teachers and students, are revealed. Gaps in teacher training and professional development contribute to difficulties in addressing diverse student needs. The absence of orientation in early identification, case management, and referral of learners with special educational needs results in unintentional exclusions. Education stakeholder involvement in IE varies based on factors such as awareness and socio-economic conditions. This chapter emphasizes the crucial need to address these challenges and foster increased stakeholder involvement for the successful implementation of IE in the Elementary School community.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

5.1 Introduction

This chapter critically discusses the findings related to knowledge, attitudes, and practices of education stakeholders in the Elementary School community towards Inclusive Education (IE). The discussion utilizes the KAP framework to present various sub-themes inductively. Under the 'Knowledge' category, sub-themes include a lack of shared understanding of IE, limited awareness of the national strategy, limited awareness of stakeholders' roles and responsibilities and inadequate knowledge of specialized services. In the 'Attitude' category, different sentiments towards IE are revealed, including education stakeholders' recognition of the positive impact of IE, mixed attitudes from educational stakeholders, and attitudes towards inclusion based on the severity of disabilities. The 'Practice' category highlights operational challenges among education stakeholders, such as poor collaboration and communication, noticeable gaps in teacher training and professional development, lack of adequate early identification and case management orientation, and limited engagement of parents and community stakeholders. By connecting these themes with the research framework and relevant literature, we gain a comprehensive understanding of IE in this context.

The following section provides a tabulation of the themes and sub-themes that emerged from this study.

Table 2: Themes and sub-themes of the study

| KAP thematic area | Sub-themes |
|--|---|
| 5.2 KAP Thematic area 1: Education stakeholder's knowledge of IE | 5.2.1 Educational stakeholder's lack of Shared Understanding of IE |
| | 5.2.2 Educational stakeholders' limited knowledge of the National Strategy for Inclusive Education (NSIE) |
| | 5.2.3 Education stakeholders' limited knowledge regarding their role in IE |
| | 5.2.4 Education stakeholders' limited knowledge of specialized support services in IE |

| | |
|--|--|
| 5.3 KAP Thematic area 2: Education stakeholder's attitude towards Inclusive Education | 5.3.1 Education stakeholders' recognition of the positive impact of inclusion |
| | 5.3.2 Education stakeholder's conflicting attitudes towards Inclusive Education due to the school and human inability to implement Inclusive Education |
| | 5.3.3 Negative attitudes towards inclusion based on the severity of disability |
| 5.4 KAP Thematic area 3: Practices of education stakeholders regarding Inclusive Education | 5.4.1 Poor collaboration and communication between stakeholders regarding Inclusive Education activities |
| | 5.4.2 Low parental and community involvement in Inclusive Education. |
| | 5.4.3 Gaps in teacher training and professional development |
| | 5.4.4 Lack of orientation of education stakeholders on early identification, case management, and referral of learners with SEND. |

5.2 KAP Thematic area 1: Education stakeholder's knowledge of IE

This section explores the participants' knowledge and understanding of IE, encompassing their conceptualization of it, awareness of the National Strategy for IE (NSIE), and its strategic guidelines. The aim is to offer a comprehensive analysis of the study's emerging themes and provide a nuanced perspective on the challenges and opportunities in promoting inclusivity in education in the Elementary School community.

5.2.1 Educational stakeholder's lack of Shared Understanding of IE

In this study, participants were tasked with defining IE. The findings underscored a disparate understanding of the term among educational stakeholders. Some, who had received training, viewed IE as more than just placing students with and without disabilities together in a classroom. To them, it was a powerful tool to ensure that every child, regardless of their background or abilities, had the right to education. They believed that IE should extend beyond the classroom and include diverse resources tailored to each

student's unique needs. As participant Es9 expressed, "*IE means that learners with different abilities (with and without disabilities) learn together in a classroom using different resources to meet their needs.*" This perspective aligns with the global consensus on IE, aiming to create an educational system that promotes equality and social cohesion (Florian, 2014; Thomas, 2013; Sturm, 2019). While this definition emphasizes the right of every student to education, it doesn't guarantee that each student would have the necessary access or support for active engagement in the academic environment. IE, as supported by UNESCO (1994), Booth (2011), and Slee (2018), advocates for the inclusion of all students at risk of segregation, regardless of their backgrounds, such as special needs, gender, ethnicity, culture, or socio-economic status. This approach aims to eliminate all sources of exclusion in both educational and societal spheres, extending beyond students with disabilities. It calls for a systemic approach to inclusion, addressing potential barriers faced by any student, including language support, cultural sensitivity, and the provision of adequate resources (ibid.).

One member of the parent-teacher association presented a distinct perspective on IE. He saw it as more than a pedagogical approach; it should function as a dedicated educational program serving all learners without discrimination based on their diverse abilities. This view positions IE as a catalyst for societal change, rectifying historical injustices and creating an equitable educational environment. It aims to level the educational playing field, ensuring that no student is left behind due to differences. As participant Es4 expressed, "*IE is an educational program that addresses the needs of all learners without discriminating against them based on their different abilities.*" This viewpoint aligns with global efforts to promote social justice and equity in education (UNESCO, 2020).

In contrast, a considerable portion of the study's participants held narrower and more categorical views of IE. For them, IE was predominantly associated with the integration of children with SEND into regular classrooms. Their definitions frequently revolved around individual abilities or disabilities, sometimes with an added focus on gender. This definition aligns with a narrower understanding of IE, emphasizing the integration of students with disabilities into mainstream classrooms, with a focus on physical accessibility and adaptive instruction (Ainscow, 2007; Florian, 2008; Miles and Singal, 2010; Thomas, 2013; Carew, Deluca, Groce, and Kett, 2019; Magumise and Sefotho, 2020; Ainscow, 2020). While this perspective emphasizes the right to education for who have been historically marginalized children with disabilities, it often overlooks the diverse cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds of learners. This constrained outlook fails to acknowledge the complex experiences and challenges faced by students with multiple and intersecting identities such as culture, race, disability, religion, and gender differences which may lead to the implementation of ineffective inclusive practices.

Some participants in the study lacked knowledge about IE. They attributed their lack of knowledge to the absence of awareness campaigns in the Elementary School community, leaving many education stakeholders such as parents, traditional leaders, and community members uninformed about its principles. This absence highlights the importance of disseminating essential information and using awareness campaigns to shape perceptions and gain support for IE. This study's findings align with other research that recognizes significant variations in understanding among educational stakeholders (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002), posing challenges in implementing inclusive practices (Bunch, 2019). The KAP model underscores knowledge as vital for positive attitudes and effective practices (Armstrong et al.,

2011). Addressing these disparities is crucial in the IE landscape, emphasizing the need to align stakeholders' understanding with the holistic vision of IE (Florian & Rouse, 2009) and highlighting knowledge's role as a catalyst for change (Booth & Ainscow, 2002). Therefore, fostering a common understanding of IE remains a central challenge and priority for educators and policymakers.

The findings highlight a significant disparity in how IE is understood among educational stakeholders in the Elementary School community, ranging from broad inclusivity to a narrower focus on students with disabilities. While integrating students with disabilities is commendable, acknowledging the complexities of intersecting identities is vital to avoid inconsistent policies and practices. Stakeholders must establish a unified understanding of IE, achievable through continuous education, effective communication, and collaborative efforts. Adopting a shared and broad understanding of IE should facilitate its effective implementation, ensuring that every student, regardless of their background, benefits from a quality and equitable education in the Elementary School community.

5.2.2 Educational stakeholders' limited knowledge of the National Strategy for Inclusive Education (NSIE)

This study also delved into the comprehension of IE among educational stakeholders, with a particular emphasis on their familiarity with the National Strategy for IE (NSIE). This pivotal document steers the policies surrounding IE, rendering a robust understanding of its tenets crucial. The NSIE emphasizes the need to provide training on IE to various stakeholders, including teachers, caregivers, education managers, inspectors, advisors, and even students (NSIE, 2016). However, the findings of this study reveal a concerning gap in teachers' knowledge about IE, even among those who have received training. Participant Es9 and Es8 narrated this perspective succinctly, stating, "*None of the teachers at this School were informed about IE.*" This stark reality was further underscored when they shared their personal experience, noting, "*The training I received was too brief. I don't believe I possess a deep understanding of IE.*" This revelation underscores the urgent need for more comprehensive teacher training programs.

Going beyond classrooms, this research explored the awareness levels among grassroots stakeholders such as parents, religious leaders, and traditional leaders, uncovering a significant knowledge gap. Many of these individuals were unfamiliar with the NSIE's vital role in shaping IE in Malawi due to the absence of government-led workshops in their communities. Participant Es2's statement vividly illustrates this gap, saying, "*This strategy you mentioned is entirely new to me, and I am uncertain whether such documents are available at our school.*" This lack of knowledge among key community figures, who play critical roles in creating IE environments, raises concerns about its broader impact on IE in Malawi. While some awareness of the NSIE exists through media channels like radio and television, the analysis of this study revealed a significant limitation. This awareness often remains superficial and does not lead to a comprehensive understanding of the policy's contents (Mbewe et al., 2021).

Furthermore, concerns exist about the effectiveness of media-based dissemination methods, especially in reaching disadvantaged or marginalized groups due to economic constraints among education stakeholders of the Elementary School community. Participant Es4's statement reflects these challenges, stating, "*At our school, we do not have copies of the NSIE. Truthfully, our knowledge about IE comes solely from media platforms, we lack insight into the strategy itself.*" This implies that many education

stakeholders have limited knowledge of the NSIE that governs the implementation of IE in Malawi. The findings of this study align with earlier research conducted by other scholars such as Mbewe et al., (2021); De Boer, Pijl, & Minnaert, (2010), and Opoku et al., (2019), all of whom have identified a widespread lack of understanding and awareness of IE policies among education stakeholders. The perspectives shared by participants in this study underscore the significance of employing various targeted and culturally sensitive communication strategies to engage diverse communities effectively in IE initiatives.

This limited awareness has important implications for the implementation of IE practices in Malawi. Without a strong understanding of the NSIE, stakeholders may struggle to fully support and implement IE policies and practices. One of the major concerns stemming from this lack of knowledge is the potential impact on learners with SEND. Learners with SEND require additional support and accommodations to fully participate in the educational system. If education stakeholders lack information about the policies and support services for these learners, it raises concerns about the support they receive. Additionally, this ignorance can perpetuate exclusionary practices and discrimination, hindering the implementation of IE policies and creating barriers to equal educational opportunities (Majoko et al., 2018).

To address this, there is a need for comprehensive awareness campaigns, including workshops, training programs, and community engagement initiatives. These efforts should focus not only on disseminating information but also on fostering a deeper understanding of IE principles. Effective policy communication is essential for successful implementation, as emphasized by the Knowledge, Attitude, and Practice (KAP) model (Schwartz, 1976; WHO, 2012; Bano et al., 2013).

5.2.3 Education stakeholders' limited knowledge regarding their role in IE

IE strives to offer equal opportunities and support for students with SEND within regular schools. However, the effective implementation of inclusive practices hinges on education stakeholders comprehending their roles in establishing an inclusive school environment. The NSIE acts as the guiding document, delineating the roles and responsibilities of various education stakeholders in the successful execution of IE practices (NSIE, 2016). This approach holds great potential in cultivating a more Inclusive Educational system, enabling students with disabilities to participate fully. Nevertheless, this study uncovers a notable challenge hindering the realization of IE's potential in Malawi. It reveals that education stakeholders, including Primary Education Advisors (PEAs), school management committees, teachers, and community members of this elementary school, encounter difficulties in understanding their roles and responsibilities within the context of IE. For instance, PEAs, crucial in monitoring and advising schools on IE, express a lack of information and inadequate training in this domain. One PEA stated, *"I haven't been able to provide in-service training for teachers on IE because I don't have enough knowledge in this area. So, it's challenging for me to guide the principal and school management committee on implementing Inclusive Education"* (Es9). This knowledge gap serves as a significant barrier, preventing them from effectively guiding school management committees in implementing IE practices.

Similarly, principals and school management committees, responsible for overseeing IE, expressed frustration at their lack of orientation on how to use the NSIE guide. This reflects a significant gap in their preparedness and emphasizes the necessity for comprehensive training programs and support structures, as illustrated by the participant's question: *"How can we execute this role when we have not been oriented*

on how to use this guide?" (Es8). The findings also showed that teachers, who are at the forefront of IE, lack knowledge and orientation concerning IE. This lack of knowledge directly hampers their capacity to identify and effectively teach students with various types of disabilities. Consequently, students with SEND may not receive the tailored support they require to succeed academically. Moreover, community stakeholders, including parents, village leaders, and political leaders, are often unaware of their roles and responsibilities in the context of IE. This lack of awareness results in a low priority being placed on IE, resulting in insufficient support for children with disabilities and a concerning rise in school dropouts (Ntombela, 2011; Potgieter-Groot et al., 2012; Engelbrecht et al., 2016). The consequences of these knowledge gaps are far-reaching. They impede the successful execution of IE policies and practices, posing substantial obstacles for parents seeking assistance for their children with disabilities. Parents often find themselves uncertain about how to contribute to their children's education because they lack a comprehensive understanding of the significance of education for children with disabilities and the effective means to support them. As noted by Deslandes and Bertrand (2005), this uncertainty and lack of knowledge can deter parents from actively participating in their children's education, perpetuating exclusionary practices.

The findings regarding education stakeholders' understanding of their roles in IE reveal that principals, school management committees, parents, primary education advisors, community members, and teachers lack awareness and knowledge of their roles outlined in the NSIE document. This knowledge gap presents significant challenges to the implementation of IE. To address these issues, focused information sessions and training programs are crucial to enlighten stakeholders about their responsibilities and the NSIE strategy. Additionally, community awareness campaigns can cultivate support and a shared understanding among diverse stakeholders. Through substantial investment in comprehensive training and awareness initiatives, education stakeholders can be empowered to effectively fulfil their roles, thereby advancing IE and ensuring equitable opportunities for all students.

5.2.4 Education stakeholders' limited knowledge of specialized support services in IE

In the pursuit of IE, which aims to provide equal learning opportunities for all students, including those with SEND in mainstream schools (De Souza 2021), specialized support services play a crucial role (Nel et al., 2016). The NSIE document is instrumental in delineating these support services essential for the inclusion of learners with SEND in mainstream schools. The awareness of this document among education stakeholders significantly influences their understanding of specialized support services within the IE framework. However, the study's results revealed limited awareness of specialized support services among education stakeholders in the Elementary School community. Participants demonstrated partial awareness, recognizing some components like assistive devices (e.g., wheelchairs, eyeglasses, and hearing aids), support staff, resource centres, and specialized teachers. However, there was a noticeable gap in acknowledging the roles of allied health professionals crucial for children with SEND. This lack of comprehensive awareness emerged as a significant barrier to effectively identifying the specific supports needed for students. This finding aligns with Nel et al.'s research, which highlighted education stakeholders' limited knowledge about these vital support services, hindering the effective implementation of IE (2016).

In addition, some educational stakeholders voiced their concerns regarding the scarcity of specialized services for inclusion in the Elementary School community, relying instead on under-resourced local clinics for psychosocial support. They emphasized the inadequacy of healthcare staff's training to assess and assist families with children with disabilities, exacerbating the challenge of providing appropriate services. Moreover, the dependence on distant central hospitals placed an additional financial burden on families, rendering access to medical support difficult. The shortage of medical assistance, coupled with the absence of rehabilitation professionals, highlighted the insufficient provision of comprehensive support for these children. The limited knowledge of education stakeholders about specialized support services not only hindered their capacity to identify necessary support but also exacerbated the difficulties faced by educators and students when implementing IE practices. This lack of awareness directly influenced inclusion practices, sometimes leading caregivers to believe that the local clinic was the sole necessary support for learners with disabilities. This perspective led to students being either confined to their homes or directed to special schools, reflecting a medical model approach rather than an inclusive one, as outlined in Swain, French & Cameron's study (2003). This exclusionary perspective deprived students with special educational needs of essential support services, including counselling, psychosocial services, and referral services, vital for quality education tailored to their diverse requirements within an inclusive and supportive framework.

The analysis conducted herein reveals the significant challenges faced by children with SEND and their families in the Elementary School community regarding awareness and accessibility of specialized support services. The lack of essential support not only limits these students' academic participation but also harms their overall well-being. Additionally, the limited awareness among education stakeholders about various disabilities and related challenges hinders their ability to identify and assist students with SEND, hampering their inclusion in the school environment. This restricted access to support services not only hinders children with disabilities from accessing education but also violates their right to an inclusive and high-quality education (UN, 2016). To address these challenges urgent action is needed, including increased investment in support services and educator training, alongside awareness-raising efforts, to bridge knowledge gaps and remove obstacles to IE in Malawi and similar contexts, ensuring equal opportunities for all students.

5.3 KAP Thematic area 2: Education stakeholder's attitude towards Inclusive Education

Berendt (2013) emphasizes the crucial role of education stakeholders as the driving force behind IE and the building of an inclusive and participatory society. Acknowledging the significant impact of educational stakeholders' attitudes on the progress of inclusivity (De Boer, 2012), this section delves into examining their perspectives towards IE.

5.3.1 Education stakeholders' recognition of the positive impact of inclusion

The effective execution of IE relies not only on policies and infrastructure but also on the prevailing attitudes of education stakeholders (Srivastava, De Boer & Pijl, 2017; Sharma et al., 2017; Opoku et al., 2021). As revealed in this study, a considerable number of respondents exhibited commendable positivity when it came to IE. This optimism appears to be rooted in the perceived benefits, both academic and social, that learners with disabilities can attain from participating in inclusive classrooms. From an academic standpoint, education stakeholders recognized the potential for children with disabilities to

thrive academically within inclusive settings. The notion that inclusion can provide learners with SEND equal opportunities to excel and access quality education was a common thread in their responses. This viewpoint is per the principles of IE, emphasizing that all students, irrespective of their abilities or disabilities, can effectively learn in regular classrooms when given suitable support and accommodations. As one participant noted, "*Dalitso, a double orphan, appeared mentally disturbed when he started school due to the loss of his parents. This caused many students to follow him, but after some time he became stable and mingled with his fellow students, feeling that he belonged*" (Es8).

Parents' attitudes toward inclusion are based on their beliefs about the impact of IE on their children (AuCoin et al., 2020; Cassimos et al., 2015; Sosu & Rydzewska 2017). This was evident in this study, as caregivers expressed an unwavering belief in the transformative power of education for their children with disabilities. They viewed education as a gateway to a brighter future, offering opportunities for knowledge acquisition and improved job prospects. This perspective underscores the pivotal role education plays in breaking the cycle of poverty and creating a path toward self-sufficiency for individuals with disabilities. As another caregiver emphasized, "*You know, I am struggling to make ends meet because I have not gone far with school. So if my child gets an education, he or she will have a better chance of getting a better job. I want my children to support me in my old age, and that's only possible if they have an education*" (Es3).

Furthermore, some participants associated their socioeconomic challenges with a lack of education and, consequently, held high aspirations for their children's education. They acknowledged that education unlocks various career opportunities, potentially mitigating obstacles encountered by learners with disabilities, particularly those with mobility limitations in a primarily agrarian community like this context. As one participant explained, "*You know that the most common occupation in our community is farming which requires manual labour, so it is difficult for children with disabilities, especially those with mobility limitations from our community to cope, so their education can lead to better opportunities in terms of job prospects*" (Es10).

Moreover, participants emphasized the wider social advantages of IE, emphasizing its contribution to fostering understanding, empathy, and acceptance among all students. The inclusion of learners with disabilities in mainstream classrooms was viewed as a chance for non-disabled students to grasp the values of embracing diversity, ultimately aiding in the establishment of an inclusive and compassionate community echoing a study by Dell'Anna et al., (2020) and Wehmeyer et al., (2021). The acknowledgement of the transformative influence of IE aligns with the broader literature, which suggests that caregivers' support and belief in their children's potential are fundamental for their educational progress (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002).

For instance, one caregiver's determination is evident in the statement, "*I bring my mentally disabled child to school every day, even though some people discourage me, thinking it's a waste of time and that my child is incapable. But I'm not discouraged. Seeing people with disabilities in higher positions inspires me. I know my son is capable, and my sole desire is to raise him so he can stand on his own two feet.*" (Es2).

This quote reflects a caregiver's unwavering determination to bring their child with intellectual disabilities to school, despite discouragement from others. It underscores their belief in their child's potential, inspired by witnessing people with disabilities in prominent roles, and their strong desire to empower their

child for independence. Moreover, the recognition of education as a catalyst for a brighter future, improved knowledge acquisition, and enhanced job prospects aligns with the educational aspirations that many parents hold for their children globally (Banks et al., 2022). This aspiration for a better future through education resonates with the broader literature on the socioeconomic benefits of education, particularly for individuals with disabilities (De Boer, 2012; Cologon, 2019; Rothe et al. 2016; Banks & Zuurmond 2015; Munthali et al. 2014; Banks et al., 2022).

Diverging from the positive attitudes unveiled in this study, existing literature frequently highlights challenges and reservations surrounding IE, particularly among parents and caregivers (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011). These challenges may include concerns about adequate support, apprehensions about the impact on non-disabled students, or doubts about the effectiveness of inclusive practices. However, the positive attitudes observed within the Elementary School community emphasize the transformative power of IE when caregivers perceive it as a pathway to brighter futures and social cohesion. The findings show that caregivers' attitudes play a significant role in influencing their informed actions and behaviours, according to the Knowledge Attitude Practice (KAP) Model. As caregivers come to appreciate the advantages of IE, they naturally become champions for their children's inclusion, creating a nurturing atmosphere that adheres to IE principles. This constructive attitude subsequently shapes their behaviours, resulting in greater involvement and dedication to IE.

The insights gained from this exploration highlight an exceptionally positive perspective deeply grounded in the multifaceted benefits of IE. These optimistic attitudes, voiced by both caregivers and education stakeholders, form a robust basis for the promotion and effective implementation of IE, closely aligning with the principles outlined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD, 2006). Furthermore, caregivers' acknowledgement of the transformative potential of IE underscores the intricate interplay between knowledge, attitude, and practice in advancing the IE agenda. This research emphasizes the critical importance of fostering positive attitudes as a fundamental prerequisite for the successful implementation of IE, cultivating a more inclusive and accepting educational environment that benefits not only learners with special needs but also society.

5.3.2 Education stakeholder's conflicting attitudes towards Inclusive Education due to the school and human inability to implement Inclusive Education

Analysis of educational stakeholders' attitudes toward IE revealed a mixed attitude among school principals, educational consultants, and teachers. These varied attitudes toward IE stemmed primarily from concerns about its practical implementation rather than theoretical principles or government strategies. Teachers, educational consultants, and school principals expressed doubt in their ability to effectively practice IE due to insufficient training and a lack of school capacity. This apprehension aligns with research findings emphasizing teachers' concerns about their preparedness to assist students with special needs, ultimately leading to the exclusion of many students from education (Eloff & Kgwete, 2007; Engelbrecht et al., 2016; Mitchell et al., 2008; Parey, 2023; Lee et al., 2023; Jury et al., 2021; Šegota et al., 2022; Simón et al., 2021; Muñoz Martínez et al., 2023). Additionally, participants expressed dissatisfaction with the government's advocacy for children with disabilities without offering sufficient in-service training in IE. Even during their pre-service teacher training, participants felt ill-prepared to teach students with

diverse needs, echoing broader literature emphasizing the necessity for comprehensive teacher training in IE (Ainscow & Miles, 2008).

As Es7 succinctly pointed out, "*We lack expertise in Inclusive Education. The government urges us to support children with disabilities but neglects to offer in-service training in this area.*"

The findings also shed light on the limited availability of specialized teachers with knowledge of IE. Focus group participants reported that there was only one college specializing in special education and disabilities. However, once these specialized teachers graduated, they were primarily placed in special schools, exacerbating the challenges faced in implementing IE. In addition, some teachers willing to pursue training in IE often sought employment elsewhere after graduation due to the lack of incentives. This highlights the importance of not only providing training but also creating incentives to encourage teachers to specialize in IE and work in mainstream schools.

Another significant factor contributing to the varied attitudes of teachers was the perceived inability of schools to effectively implement IE. Teachers cited various challenges, including overcrowded classrooms, inaccessible environments, large class sizes, and the unavailability of resources and support services. These challenges hindered their ability to provide individualized attention and support to students with diverse needs. The issue of overcrowded classrooms and its negative impact on IE has been highlighted in global reports (UNESCO, 2020).

Moreover, the challenges faced by teachers were further intensified by the absence of essential resources and support staff, hindering their ability to provide necessary assistive devices and support services for students with disabilities. The physical infrastructure of schools, including the absence of ramps and accessible restrooms, emerged as a significant barrier to the practice of IE. This finding aligns with studies (Alhammad, 2017; Alkhateeb et al., 2016; Muthukrishna et al., 2016; Sharma et al., 2019; Wapling, 2016) that consistently highlight the inadequacy and inaccessibility of the physical environment in schools and classrooms.

These findings have serious implications for how teachers implement inclusive practices in classrooms and schools, as teachers are unprepared to implement the inclusive agenda. The inadequate training of teachers affects the implementation of IE, denying students with SEND their right to education. As a result, some students with SEND end up staying at home, while those who are integrated into regular classrooms often drop out after a couple of years because their academic performance does not allow them to progress to the next grade. The mixed attitudes of teachers towards IE reflect their concern that these students are not benefiting academically in mainstream schools.

While participants expressed an understanding of the importance of inclusion, their positive attitudes were tempered by the perceived limitations in school and human capacity to effectively implement inclusive practices. This intricate interplay between attitudes and practical challenges is by the KAP model, indicating that knowledge shapes attitudes. To bridge the gap between these positive attitudes and effective implementation, comprehensive measures are needed. These include not only teacher training but also the creation of incentives for teachers to specialize in IE, infrastructural improvements in schools, and the allocation of resources and support services. By addressing these multifaceted challenges,

educational stakeholders of the Elementary School community can work towards fostering a more Inclusive Educational environment, aligning knowledge, attitudes, and practices within the framework of the KAP Model. This transformation holds the potential to create equitable educational opportunities for all students, ultimately advancing the mission of IE.

5.3.3 Negative attitudes towards inclusion based on the severity of disability

The findings in this segment revealed a distinct pattern in education stakeholders' attitudes toward inclusion, primarily driven by the severity of disabilities. In general, stakeholders exhibited a more favourable attitude toward the integration of children with mild disabilities, including partial visual and hearing impairments, as well as mild learning disabilities, into mainstream schools. They perceived these students as having the potential to benefit from IE and saw their presence as a valuable addition to the classroom.

As Es6 aptly expressed, *"In 2017, we had Hamida, a girl with physical disabilities. She was a brilliant student with good handwriting, although she needed two hands to hold the pen when writing. This girl excelled in class and did not need much support from us."*

In stark contrast, participants expressed a negative attitude toward the inclusion of children with severe disabilities, including hearing or communication disorders and intellectual disabilities. They believed that such students were more suited for special schools. This perspective was further emphasized by a participant's statement: *"I do not see any benefit in teaching these children because unemployment is very high in our country. So if those who do not have special needs are vegetating in poverty at home with their certificates, what are the chances of those with disabilities finding a job?"* This viewpoint aligns with studies (Alhammad, 2017; Alkhateeb et al., 2016; Muthukrishna et al., 2016; Sharma et al., 2019) that discovered negative, stereotypical, and biased attitudes among teachers, parents, and students towards students with SEND. It echoes concerns about the employability and prospects of individuals with severe disabilities.

The severity-based categorization of disability also extended to the perceptions of teachers and school staff regarding the academic benefits of inclusion. They expressed concerns that students with severe disabilities, due to their slower learning pace, would hinder the achievement of lesson objectives. Consequently, they believed that these students could be better accommodated in special schools with smaller class sizes. These concerns about the impact of students with severe disabilities on classroom dynamics align with a study by Pit-ten Cate and Krischler (2018), Parey (2023), Alkeraida (2023), Lee, Zbacnik, Hodge, & Kim (2023) and Jurkowski, Ulrich, & Müller (2023) which revealed that many education stakeholders favour inclusion of learners from poor backgrounds and recommend sending learners with severe disabilities to special schools.

In addition, some caregivers were concerned about how the presence of these children in mainstream schools would affect children without SEN (ibid). This finding contradicts Hussein's study (2019), which identified positive and improving attitudes among teachers, parents, and students towards learners with SEND. Furthermore, some education stakeholders during focus group discussions highlighted the potential burden placed on teachers and classmates when students with severe disabilities are included in mainstream schools. They shared anecdotes of disruptive behaviour and challenges in providing

individualized support, which influenced their preference for specialized educational settings. For instance, Es2 noted, *"The students, especially the mentally handicapped, are very disruptive, and if you put them in a class with normal students, you jeopardize their safety."* These concerns indicate the practical challenges associated with IE, particularly in managing classroom behaviour.

Unfortunately, these negative attitudes toward learners with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) extended beyond educational stakeholders to the broader community. Such pessimism became evident in how education stakeholders described individuals with disabilities, often resorting to derogatory terms like "crazy," "mad," "dumb," or "lame." Moreover, many parents hesitated to disclose their children's disabilities, fearing discrimination and negative community perceptions. This fear compounded the obstacles faced by students with severe disabilities in accessing IE. These attitudes posed a significant challenge because they hindered the effective implementation of IE and discouraged collaboration among stakeholders. Discrimination and social isolation were common experiences for children with disabilities, contributing to parents' reluctance to disclose their children's disabilities during school enrolment. This unfortunate social bias aligns with previous research that emphasizes the urgent need for societal shifts in how individuals with disabilities are perceived and accepted (Eide & Ingstad, 2013).

The outcome unearthed in this segment unveiled a complex landscape of attitudes towards IE within the Elementary School community, with the severity of disability playing a pivotal role in shaping these attitudes. While some stakeholders exhibit a positive attitude toward inclusion, recognizing its potential benefits, others harbour reservations due to concerns about the practical challenges associated with including students with severe disabilities in mainstream schools. These negative attitudes extend beyond educational stakeholders and impact the wider community, creating barriers to IE. To foster a truly inclusive educational environment, it is crucial to tackle these attitudes through enhancing knowledge, providing resources, and implementing community-based awareness initiatives. Policies should adhere to the principles of IE, guaranteeing that all students, irrespective of their abilities, have the chance to learn and flourish in mainstream schools.

5.4 KAP Thematic area 3: Practices of education stakeholders regarding Inclusive Education
Promoting IE and ensuring the success of all students necessitates effective inclusive practices (Moti, Merdassa, & Dessalegn, 2018). However, it is crucial to acknowledge that these practices can vary across countries (Ainscow & Sandill, 2010; Magnusson, 2019; Miles & Singal, 2009). Scholars have argued that to address barriers to participation and learning, it is imperative to identify and share inclusive educational practices (Mulholland & O'Connor, 2016; Ainscow & Sandill, 2010). Hence, this section presents a discussion on inclusive practices that emerged from this study.

5.4.1 Poor collaboration and communication between stakeholders regarding Inclusive Education activities

Effective collaboration plays a crucial role in the successful implementation of IE (Nel et al., 2014). A key strategy for realizing the objectives outlined in the NSIE involves collaboration between the school and diverse educational stakeholders (Kaunda, 2022). However, the findings revealed a notable deficiency in collaboration among various educational stakeholders in supporting teachers and students towards implementing inclusive practices.

However, a notable exception was observed in the collaboration between stakeholders at the mainstream school and Non-Government Organizations, specifically NESIP and Build On, which showcased a positive collaborative effort. These organizations supported underprivileged children by providing them with uniforms and stationery, as well as constructing an accessible school block at the Mainstream School. Such collaboration was beneficial for enhancing the inclusion of underprivileged children and creating an accessible learning environment. This emphasizes the significance of partnerships between schools and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in advancing IE and indicates a promising development towards supporting inclusive practices. This aligns with research conducted by Mariga et al. (2014), which found that the IE program in Lesotho prospered through collaboration among government schools, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and partnerships with local communities.

In contrast, the results of this section indicate a deficiency in collaborative partnerships within and between schools and communities in the Elementary School community concerning IE. Participants' perspectives are exemplified in quotes like, "*As a school, we have collaborated with various stakeholders on school development projects...*" (Es4) and "*We also worked with the Youth Development Committee, setting up education centres in all villages...*" (Es8), showed glimpses of collaborative success in specific initiatives but not on IE initiatives.

Moreover, despite the school conducting monthly face-to-face meetings with parents and community members to discuss school development projects, this platform was never utilized for IE, and the school lacked an ethos of IE. This can be attributed to a lack of awareness regarding IE. This discovery aligns with the outcomes of the following studies (Alkhateeb et al., 2016; Alhammad, 2017; Sharma et al., 2019; Muthukrishna et al., 2016), which demonstrated a low engagement of local community stakeholders.

Similarly, research conducted by Engelbrecht et al. (2016) uncovered a lack of collaboration for enhancing schools in the context of IE. The absence of collaboration concerning students with severe and profound disabilities indicates a critical gap that needs to be bridged. IE's core tenet is to embrace and support all learners, irrespective of their abilities or disabilities (UNESCO, 2020). Insights from the investigation suggest the need to extend collaborative practices to encompass the full spectrum of learners, particularly those with the most profound needs. Without this holistic approach to collaboration, IE remains incomplete and exclusionary, failing to fulfil its fundamental promise. IE demands strong collaborative endeavours (Farrell & Ainscow, 2002), and these results emphasize the need for further improvement and formalization of collaborative practices within the realm of IE.

In addition, there were concerns about teachers' collaboration with parents, as educators expressed dissatisfaction with parental involvement. For instance, teachers lamented impaired communication due to parents' lack of interest in their children's education, citing instances of non-attendance at meetings or neglecting their children's educational responsibilities, as expressed in the quote, "*Many parents do not attend meetings or help their children with homework...*" (Es7). Conversely, parents felt that their ideas were often overlooked by the school, leading to their disengagement. The tension between educators and parents regarding collaborative efforts signifies a breakdown in the partnership crucial for the success of IE. Parents play an indispensable role in supporting their children's education, and their active involvement can significantly impact students' learning outcomes (Desforges & Abouchar, 2003). These partnerships

lay the groundwork for further collaborative endeavours between teachers and key stakeholders such as parents and other education professionals (Mitchell et al., 2008; Du Toit & Forlin, 2009; Engelbrecht et al., 2016; Nel et al., 2010; Nel et al., 2014; Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003).

Conversely, the expertise of educators plays a crucial role in shaping the educational journey of students. The revealed divide among these stakeholders indicates a requirement for inclusive dialogue, mutual respect, and shared responsibility. Cultivating genuine collaboration between educators and parents is vital to establishing an IE environment that genuinely benefits students. These findings echo the well-documented challenges in parental involvement within IE contexts (Rouse & Florian, 1997), emphasizing poor socio-economic conditions that resulted in deficient communication and collaboration between the school and parents, underscoring the necessity for strategies to bolster collaborative partnerships with parents.

Collaborative teaching provides an avenue for general and special educators to combine their expertise to address the diverse needs of students (Friend & Cook, 2003). The lack of specialist teachers significantly hampers the implementation of collaborative teaching practices, denying students valuable inclusive experiences. Therefore, investing in the training and recruitment of specialist educators, along with providing resources for collaborative teaching, can enhance IE practices. In this study, collaborative teaching, as a crucial aspect of collaboration, emerged as a concern due to the absence of specialist teachers at the elementary School. Participants acknowledged their limited knowledge of collaborative teaching strategies, as exemplified in this quote, "*We lack knowledge of co-teaching strategies as we did not go through training in this area*" (Es2).

The lack of specialist teachers at Primary School worsened the situation, impeding collaboration between general and special education teachers. Effective co-teaching has been recognized as a powerful strategy in IE (Villa & Thousand, 2019; Murawski & Dieker, 2014; Jurkowski, Ulrich, & Müller, 2023), highlighting the importance of general and special educators collaborating closely (Scruggs & Mastropieri, 1996). The identified issues surrounding co-teaching shed light on the critical role of specialized training and the availability of specialist teachers in ensuring effective collaboration.

Adequate health and therapeutic support are vital for students with disabilities (Elliott & Livermore, 2002), to ensure comprehensive support for IE practices. In this study, collaboration with allied health professionals was notably absent due to the unavailability of such services within the school and community, as acknowledged in the quote, "*We have never collaborated with therapeutic service providers because we do not have such services in our school and community*" (Es7). This lack of collaboration limits the opportunities for teachers to access professional expertise and valuable insights on addressing the unique needs of diverse learners. Without the direct involvement of specialist teachers and medical professionals, teachers may face challenges in developing appropriate strategies and accommodating students with diverse needs in inclusive classrooms. While research emphasizes the necessity of collaboration among teachers, health workers, and parents (Nel et al., 2014), implementing it in this in elementary school is challenging due to the absence of support services. Malawian public schools, including this elementary school, lack government-appointed health professionals like social workers, psychologists, or therapists.

The dearth of collaboration with allied health professionals due to the unavailability of services echoes a broader societal challenge. This is supported by Hargreaves et al. who noted that access to medical expertise can unfortunately be difficult due to the low number of providers (2021), especially in locations outside of cities (National Disability Services, 2018). This may be due to the government's lack of recognition of collaboration as a more holistic approach to promoting IE. The absence of these support services reinforces exclusive practices, with education stakeholders perceiving special education as the preferred environment for accommodating learners with disabilities (Engelbrecht et al., 2015).

In addition, access to healthcare and therapeutic services for individuals with disabilities is not only a matter of educational concern but a fundamental human right (UN, 2006). Therefore, the findings of my investigation on this segment underscore the urgent need for governments and institutions to ensure that essential health and therapeutic services are accessible and affordable, particularly in underserved areas. Failure to address this issue perpetuates inequity in education and hinders the progress of inclusive practices. This underscores the need for broader access to essential therapeutic services, particularly in government schools, where such services are scarce.

Lastly, communication emerged as a critical underpinning of collaboration. Effective communication among stakeholders is paramount for successful collaboration. However, communication challenges surfaced, with disruptions attributed to parents' lack of interest and limitations in existing communication strategies, as noted in the quote, "*We usually communicate through letters, telephonic messages and word of mouth during our monthly meetings but sometimes our communication strategies are not effective due to network issues and low literacy levels...*" (Es4). The challenges encountered in communication underscore the importance of tailoring strategies to the specific needs and constraints of the community. Effective communication ensures that stakeholders are on the same page, working towards common goals (Friend & Cook, 2010). Therefore, there is a need for tailored communication approaches that consider the specific challenges and dynamics of the community.

The data obtained in this section highlight the critical role of collaboration in implementing IE. While positive collaborations were found between schools and NGOs, there was a lack of collaboration and communication between the school and other stakeholders. Additionally, collaboration between teachers, parents, and specialist teachers or medical professionals was lacking, impacting the practice of IE. This limited opportunities for accessing professional expertise and hindered the support for diverse learners.

5.4.2 Low parental and community involvement in Inclusive Education

The involvement of parents and community stakeholders is vital in promoting IE, acknowledging that education extends beyond formal learning environments and is shaped by interactions within families and communities (Iacono et al., 2020; Vlcek et al., 2020; Mann & Gilmore, 2023). However, this research showed a low level of participation among parents and community stakeholders in IE initiatives. This lack of involvement can be attributed to several intersecting factors that hinder stakeholders' ability to actively participate and contribute effectively, including educational level, poverty, and negative attitudes (Iacono et al., 2020; Vlcek et al., 2020).

The results suggest that the educational level of stakeholders was one of the contributing factors to their limited engagement in IE. Analysis of participants perspectives revealed that, educational stakeholders

who recognized the value of education were more likely to actively participate, while stakeholders with low level of education were less involved. The researcher observed that some parents were actively involved as they went to great lengths to ensure that their children with limited mobility could access education. This aligns with Vlcek et al.'s (2020) study, demonstrating that the extent of participation by educational stakeholders in IE is shaped by their level of knowledge.

Moreover, the limited knowledge and awareness about IE among parents and community members also contributed to their low involvement. Caregivers also expressed difficulties in monitoring teaching and learning due to a lack of training. The study revealed that some parents believed education was solely the responsibility of teachers, leading to a lack of cooperation. Furthermore, Poverty was identified as a significant barrier, preventing stakeholders from providing necessities and participating in IE initiatives.

Additionally, negative attitudes played a role in impeding the engagement of educational stakeholders in implementing inclusive practices. Bias against children with disabilities, coupled with the high cost of living, further hindered stakeholder participation. Participants revealed that parents of children with disabilities rarely engaged in their children's education due to community stigmatization of disabilities.

Furthermore, learners with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) continued to face negative perceptions in the Elementary School community, with their investment in education deemed worthless. Consequently, many caregivers choose to exclude their children from exercising their right to education. This finding aligns with studies (Muthukrishna et al., 2016; Alhammad, 2017; Alkhateeb et al., 2016; Sharma et al., 2019; Acar et al., 2021) indicating limited parent and community member participation in IE initiatives due to negative attitudes toward students with SEND. This can be attributed to inadequate training about IE, a lack of resources and support staff, and poor communication and collaboration between teachers, parents, and the local community.

Nevertheless, the study uncovered a lack of active involvement from key stakeholders, such as community leaders, civil society organizations, and service providers for individuals with disabilities and mental health issues, in promoting inclusion. The absence of available services in the community led to restricted support for students with severe disabilities. Additionally, education zone officers lacked training and orientation on IE, hampering their ability to offer guidance and support to stakeholders. Scrutinizing the findings reveals that the participation of education stakeholders in the Elementary School community was minimal. This aligns with UNICEF's (2012) findings, which highlighted barriers to parents' involvement in the education of children with disabilities. These obstacles encompassed limited awareness of educational alternatives, societal stigma, fear of community hostility, financial constraints, lack of information about children's rights, and limited housing options near their residences (ibid).

The analysis conducted indicates a lack of active participation from parents and community stakeholders in IE within the Elementary School community. The findings uncover various intersecting factors, including educational levels, limited services, lack of training, poverty, negative attitudes, and limited knowledge, contributing to this reduced involvement. These barriers pose significant challenges to the effective implementation of IE, leading to the exclusion of children with severe disabilities from their right to education.

5.4.3 Gaps in teacher training and professional development

The successful implementation of IE relies on adequately educating teachers, ensuring they comprehend the principles of inclusion, possess the necessary strategies for execution, and play a significant role in enhancing inclusive practices (McKenzie et al., 2023; Pit-ten Cate et al., 2018). Research reveals that many learners with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) face exclusion within the education system, often instructed by teachers lacking the training to address their specific learning needs in inclusive settings (Cassimos et al., 2015; Jury et al., 2021; Šegota et al., 2022; Muñoz Martínez et al., 2023; McKenzie et al., 2023; McCracken et al., 2023; Arvelo-Rosales et al., 2021). This study investigates the training and professional development of teachers at the elementary School within the framework of IE.

The findings revealed significant gaps in teacher training and professional development related to IE. During in-depth interviews, teachers expressed their unpreparedness to handle diverse classrooms due to the limitations of their college training. They highlighted that their education mainly covered theoretical aspects of inclusion and focused primarily on visual and hearing impairments, neglecting practical aspects. Consequently, when they encountered students with various needs in real classrooms, they struggled, unintentionally excluding them from educational opportunities. This deficiency is well illustrated by a Es5's statement: "*During our college training, we were not adequately trained to teach learners with different needs.*" Similarly, findings from focus group discussions (FGD) echoed this sentiment, emphasizing that their college education provided insufficient practical experience in IE.

This finding aligns with the outcomes of a recent evaluation study conducted by Kaunda (2022), revealing that teacher education programs in Malawi predominantly focus on special education rather than IE. Consequently, teachers in the Elementary School community appear inadequately prepared to teach effectively in inclusive educational settings, lacking exposure to comprehensive theoretical and practical aspects of IE. The responsibility for this situation lies with the government, particularly the Ministry of Education in Malawi, which has not fully integrated IE into the curricula of teacher training colleges and Montfort Special Needs College. This discovery echoes the observations of Engelbrecht et al. (2016), indicating that mainstream classroom teachers often perceive themselves as ill-equipped to instruct learners with learning disabilities, as their training primarily concentrates on "typical" students, leaving them insufficiently capable of supporting these learners. The deficiency in teacher training in Malawi also corresponds with findings from numerous prior studies (Alkhateeb et al., 2016; Muthukrishna et al., 2016; Sharma et al., 2019; Alhammad, 2017; Banks et al., 2022; Donohue & Bornman, 2015) highlighting shortcomings in teachers' professional preparation.

Despite the importance of orientation programs for teachers and community stakeholders on IE, this study found that such initiatives were non-existent. Teachers and the Primary Education Advisor (PEA) of this elementary School reported a lack of orientation programs related to IE. The PEA expressed her inability to conduct in-service training due to her lack of knowledge in this area. This lack of professional development in IE was further confirmed by teachers who had not attended workshops or training sessions. This lack of training adds to teachers' limited comprehension of IE, impeding their capacity to effectively support inclusive practices. A telling example of this was shared by a teacher who recounted the struggle of a student with intellectual disabilities who eventually dropped out due to teacher incompetence. In addition, the study found that educational stakeholders, including the PEA and the

principal, lacked orientation training in IE. This deficiency impacted their effectiveness in advising teachers on implementing IE. The PEA, for instance, believed it was unfair for the government to expect her to conduct in-service training without adequate knowledge in this area. This situation highlights the broader issue of knowledge gaps among educational leaders, potentially hindering the effective adoption of inclusive practices both inside and outside the classroom.

The findings in this segment unveil significant shortcomings in teacher training at this elementary School regarding IE. Teachers lack practical training, leading to a gap between theory and practice. The absence of orientation programs for teachers and leaders is concerning. These deficiencies jeopardize students with disabilities and hinder the goal of IE.

5.4.4 Lack of orientation of education stakeholders on early identification, case management, and referral of learners with SEND.

IE, as advocated by Ainscow (2020), seeks to integrate all students into mainstream schools. However, while it's crucial to ensure the inclusion of learners irrespective of their status, equal emphasis should be placed on acknowledging the extent of diversity and taking necessary measures to establish a supportive learning environment for every student. In this study, the researcher explored whether key stakeholders, including primary education consultants, principals, teachers, School Management Committees (SMC), Parent-Teacher Associations (PTA), mothers' group committees, and parents, received sufficient training and orientation on early identification, case management, and referral of learners with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND).

The findings of the study indicate a significant gap in the orientation and knowledge of education stakeholders when it comes to identifying, managing, and referring learners with SEND. Several quotes from participants highlight these concerns. For instance, one participant expressed their limitation, stating, *"It would be nice if I knew something about this because I lack knowledge in this area. I can only identify visible disabilities, but I am not able to know what they can and cannot do, and what strategies need to be applied to ensure their inclusion in mainstream schooling in the Elementary School community"* (Es2). This quote underscores the inadequacy of knowledge among educators in recognizing the diverse needs of students with hidden disabilities which has serious implications for the timely support and inclusion of these learners in the educational environment. This aligns with the conclusions of various researchers who observed that a significant number of education stakeholders lack the essential skills to identify, support, and accommodate learners facing barriers in the classroom (Mitchell et al., 2008; Eloff & Kgwete, 2007; Engelbrecht et al., 2006).

Compounding this issue is the absence of special education teachers at this elementary schools, further hindering the crucial role they could play in assisting teachers, parents, and school administrators in recognizing the diverse needs of learners. As one participant shared, *"Our school is not able to identify students with disabilities early because we do not have specialist teachers who can do this. Even the community members do not participate in identifying and referring students because they do not know how to identify these students"* (Es8). This quote illustrates the challenges faced by schools in identifying and supporting learners with disabilities, especially those with severe disabilities, due to a lack of specialized expertise. As a result, these learners were not receiving the necessary assistance to access and

participate in school. The results align with Sharma and Das's (2015) study, revealing that many Indian teachers feel insufficiently prepared to recognize diverse learning needs. This lack of training unintentionally excludes learners with diverse needs from education, placing them in schools lacking knowledge of diversity.

Research has consistently shown that timely recognition of students' specific needs is crucial for providing appropriate support and accommodations (Engelbrecht et al., 2016). However, the lack of orientation in early identification and support for learners with SEND has direct implications for the accessibility and participation of these students in mainstream schools. As indicated in this study, education stakeholders of the Elementary School community, are ill-equipped to recognize the various disabilities, understand developmental characteristics, and address the unique challenges faced by learners with SEND. The lack of knowledge about early identification and support for learners with SEND directly impacts stakeholders' ability to adopt inclusive practices (Romanuck Murphy, 2018). When stakeholders cannot recognize diverse needs, their attitudes toward inclusion may remain indifferent or unintentionally exclusionary. This lack of understanding not only impacts the perception of learners with SEND but also directly influences the extent of support they receive within the learning environment.

The synthesis of this section delineates critical gaps in the preparation of education stakeholders regarding early identification, case management, and referral of learners with SEND. The lack of specialized educators worsens this problem, leading to the exclusion of numerous students with disabilities from regular education. This knowledge gap significantly impacts the accessibility and participation of these learners in mainstream education.

5.5 Chapter summary

This chapter reveals a significant lack of shared understanding of IE among stakeholders, ranging from a comprehensive, rights-based approach to a narrower focus on integrating students with disabilities into regular classrooms. Moreover, many participants, including teachers, parents, and community leaders, lacked awareness of the NSIE, which guides IE policies. This knowledge gap poses significant challenges to the successful execution of IE, including the delivery of specialized support services for students with special needs and disabilities. Stakeholders often lacked awareness of their roles in IE, hindering their ability to support students effectively. To address these issues, comprehensive training, awareness campaigns, and investment in specialized support services are necessary to promote equitable educational opportunities for all students in the Elementary School community and similar contexts.

In addition, the attitudes of education stakeholders regarding IE in the Elementary School community reveal a multifaceted perspective. While some stakeholders, particularly parents and caregivers, exhibit a highly positive attitude, recognizing the transformative potential of inclusion for students with disabilities, others, such as teachers, express reservations driven by practical challenges. These challenges, particularly regarding students with severe disabilities, influence the perceived inability of schools to effectively implement inclusive practices. Furthermore, negative attitudes toward students with disabilities extend to the broader community, resulting in discrimination and reluctance to disclose disabilities. These findings underscore the need for comprehensive measures to bridge the gap between positive attitudes and effective implementation, including teacher training, incentives, infrastructural improvements, and the

alignment of policies with IE principles. Addressing these complex attitudes is vital to creating an inclusive and accepting educational environment that benefits all students and promotes the mission of IE.

Furthermore, the results of the study on inclusive practices in the elementary School and its surrounding community reveal several critical challenges. First, there is a notable lack of collaboration and communication among educational stakeholders, hindering the successful execution of IE. Parental and community involvement is also insufficient, driven by factors such as educational level, poverty, and negative attitudes, resulting in the exclusion of many students with disabilities. There are also significant deficiencies in teacher training and professional development, leaving educators ill-prepared to support diverse learners. Another crucial issue is the absence of orientation and training for education stakeholders in early identification, case management, and referral of students with SEND, which directly impacts the accessibility and participation of these students in mainstream schools.

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 Introduction

This chapter provides a synopsis of the comprehensive investigation into the Knowledge, Attitudes, and Practices (KAP) of education stakeholders concerning Inclusive Education (IE) in the Elementary School community. Within this chapter, the essence of the discoveries is refined, their implications are pondered, and concrete recommendations are presented. The journey of exploration has revealed a spectrum of perspectives within the Elementary School community, shedding light on the diverse opportunities and obstacles associated with the pursuit of IE. As the findings' summary is delved into, it becomes apparent that a critical examination of the bridge between policy aspirations and practical implementation is needed. The following sections will navigate through these findings, emphasizing their broader significance in the realm of education and outlining pathways for potential future investigations.

6.2 Study summary

This study exposes a significant and concerning lack of shared understanding of IE within the Elementary School community, with educational stakeholders exhibiting a wide range of perspectives. Some stakeholders emphasize a comprehensive, rights-based approach advocating for equal educational opportunities for all students, regardless of their backgrounds or abilities. In contrast, others adopt a narrower focus, primarily concentrating on integrating students with disabilities into regular classrooms. This diversity of viewpoints emphasizes the need for a more unified and cohesive understanding of IE principles among all stakeholders to implement IE policies and practices effectively.

Furthermore, many participants, including teachers, parents, and community leaders, lack familiarity with the National Strategy for Inclusive Education (NSIE), a pivotal document guiding and shaping IE policies within the Elementary School community. The absence of awareness about this guiding document presents a substantial barrier to the effective execution of IE, especially in terms of delivering specialized support services for students with SEND.

This study also reveals a wide-ranging spectrum of attitudes held by education stakeholders in the Elementary School community toward IE, which significantly impacts the effectiveness of IE practices. Some stakeholders, notably parents and caregivers, display highly positive attitudes and recognise the transformative potential of inclusion for students with disabilities. In contrast, some teachers express reservations, primarily stemming from practical challenges encountered during the enactment of inclusive practices, particularly when dealing with students facing severe disabilities. It identifies negative attitudes toward students with disabilities that extend beyond the school environment into the broader community, resulting in discrimination and reluctance to disclose disabilities.

The findings concerning IE practices in the Elementary School community uncover several critical challenges. Significantly, there is an observable absence of collaboration and communication among education stakeholders. This lack of cooperation hinders the effective implementation of IE practices, where cohesive efforts are essential to cater to diverse student needs. Additionally, parental and community involvement is found to be insufficient due to various factors, including varying levels of education, poverty, and deeply ingrained negative attitudes. As a result, numerous students with

disabilities experience exclusion from mainstream education, and the potential of an inclusive environment remains unrealized.

The study also identifies significant deficiencies in teacher training and professional development, leaving educators ill-prepared to support the wide array of learners they encounter in their classrooms. This lack of preparation could hinder the academic and social progress of students with disabilities. Furthermore, the absence of orientation and training for education stakeholders in early identification, case management, and referral of students with SEND directly affects the accessibility and participation of these students in mainstream schools.

6.3 Implications of the study

The results of this study hold substantial consequences for the promotion and implementation of IE in the Elementary School community and similar contexts. First and foremost, the knowledge disparities revealed among education stakeholders, ranging from broad societal transformation perspectives to narrow integration views, highlight the pressing need for a shared and comprehensive understanding of IE principles. Moreover, the limited awareness of the NSIE signifies that key policy instruments might not be optimally utilized, necessitating comprehensive awareness campaigns and targeted training to bridge these knowledge divides. Enhanced knowledge and understanding among stakeholders are crucial to facilitating more effective policy implementation and fostering a genuinely Inclusive Educational environment.

The study also illuminates disparities in attitudes towards IE, where caregivers and parents express strong support for its transformative potential, while educators, hampered by concerns about readiness and practical challenges, exhibit reservations. These findings emphasize the importance of addressing not only knowledge gaps but also the practical concerns of educators. Mitigating the impact of disability severity on attitudes and building the capacity to effectively support students with severe disabilities are essential considerations.

Furthermore, the study uncovers various practice-related implications. Improving collaboration and communication among stakeholders, particularly between teachers, parents, and specialists, is critical to developing targeted plans and support for students with diverse needs. Increased parental and community involvement in IE is imperative to overcome barriers like low educational levels, poverty, and negative attitudes. Initiatives such as parent-teacher associations and community outreach programs can create a more supportive and inclusive learning environment. Moreover, addressing the gaps in teacher training and professional development is essential to guarantee that the principles of IE are effectively translated into practice.

Finally, the lack of orientation for stakeholders in early identification and support for learners with SEND calls for comprehensive training programs and community engagement initiatives. In conclusion, the study underscores the importance of coordinated efforts to enhance collaboration, promote involvement, improve teacher training, and bridge knowledge gaps, all of which are essential for the effective advancement of IE in the Elementary School community and similar settings.

6.4. Study recommendations

This section outlines the recommendations drawn from the results of this study. The study has unearthed valuable insights that can inform policy, practice, and future research in the field of IE.

6.4.1 Comprehensive awareness campaigns

- To address the knowledge gaps among education stakeholders, it is recommended that comprehensive awareness campaigns be initiated. These campaigns should focus not only on disseminating information but also on fostering a deeper grasp of the principles of IE. This should include defining IE, its implications, and its alignment with the NSIE.
- Community engagement and sensitization programs should be initiated to change societal attitudes towards individuals with disabilities and promote inclusive values. This transformation in community attitudes is a prolonged process demanding continual engagement and educational initiatives.

6.4.2 Teacher training and professional development

- To bridge the knowledge-attitude-practice gap, there is a critical need for targeted teacher training and professional development programs. These programs should provide teachers with the theoretical and practical knowledge and skills required to effectively enact IE in diverse classroom settings.

6.4.3 Collaboration and communication

- Schools, NGOs, and other stakeholders should enhance collaboration to enable the successful enactment of IE practices. This includes sharing best practices, resources, and expertise. Schools should engage in more structured partnerships with NGOs to ensure that support services are readily available.
- Improve collaboration and communication between teachers and parents. Parent-teacher associations should be encouraged, and regular meetings between teachers and parents should be organized to discuss students' progress, challenges, and individualized support plans.
- To enhance parental and community involvement in IE, a community-based approach should be adopted. Outreach programs and community engagement initiatives should be established to raise awareness and promote participation. These initiatives should focus on addressing the barriers to parental involvement, such as educational levels and negative attitudes.

6.4.4 Early identification and support

- Educational stakeholders should establish programs for early identification and support of learners with SEND. This involves developing clear protocols for identifying students who require specialized support and ensuring that they receive timely interventions.

- Schools should recruit or train specialized educators who can provide targeted support to students with SEND. These educators should have the essential skills and knowledge to address the needs of these students, ensuring a smooth transition into the inclusive classroom.
- To address the issue of knowledge gaps in early identification, community members should be actively involved in the identification and referral processes. This can be achieved through community workshops, sensitization programs, and collaborative efforts between schools and local healthcare providers.

6.5 Recommendations for future studies

Drawing from the extensive findings of this study, numerous noteworthy recommendations for future research emerge, offering avenues to deepen the comprehension and enhance the application of IE in the Elementary School community and comparable contexts.

- There is a need to delve deeper into the factors contributing to the knowledge disparities among education stakeholders. This could involve detailed surveys or interviews to identify specific areas of misunderstanding and gaps in knowledge, to tailor training and awareness campaigns more precisely.
- Given the limited awareness of the National Strategy for Inclusive Education (NSIE), future studies could assess the effectiveness of awareness campaigns in improving stakeholders' knowledge of and engagement with NSIE. Such research can provide valuable insights into the role of policy awareness in shaping IE practices.
- There is a need for research to be conducted to test and evaluate interventions designed to promote more positive attitudes among educators. This could involve interventions that address the practical challenges they face and mitigate the impact of disability severity on their attitudes.
- Future studies should explore strategies and initiatives aimed at improving collaboration and community involvement in IE. By assessing the impact of these interventions on the development of a more inclusive learning environment, research can provide practical insights for educational policymakers and stakeholders.
- There is a need for research to be conducted on the development and evaluation of tailored teacher training programs within the context of IE. Assessing the effectiveness of such programs in bridging the knowledge gap and enhancing teachers' practical skills can guide the development of more targeted training initiatives.
- Future research can also be carried out to explore the impact of orientation programs for education stakeholders related to the early identification and support of learners with SEND. Understanding the effectiveness of such initiatives in improving the timely support and inclusion of these learners can inform policy and practice.

6.6 Strength Challenges and Limitations of the study

This study provides valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities of implementing Inclusive Education (IE) in Malawi. By involving a diverse group of stakeholders, including teachers, parents, and community leaders, the study offers a nuanced understanding of the local educational landscape. This comprehensive approach not only enriches the analysis but also enhances the applicability of the findings to inform policy and practice in Malawi. Additionally, the study's practical recommendations for improving teacher training, fostering collaboration, promoting parental involvement, and early identification of students with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) provide concrete steps for advancing IE practices in the country.

This study, while yielding valuable insights, has several limitations that should be considered. Firstly, it is essential to recognize that the geographic focus of this study was limited to the Elementary School community in Kasungu, Malawi. While the findings offer valuable local insights, they may not be directly generalizable to other regions or countries, as IE dynamics can be significantly influenced by local factors and contexts. Secondly, the research predominantly utilized a qualitative approach, offering comprehensive insights into the knowledge, attitudes, and practices of IE. Nevertheless, it's crucial to acknowledge that this approach may not capture the full scope of quantitative data, which could offer more precise measurements of knowledge, attitudes, and practices of IE. Future research might consider combining both qualitative and quantitative methods to provide a more comprehensive understanding.

Moreover, the research relied on self-reported data from the participants, which can be influenced by social desirability bias. This implies that participants may have provided answers they deemed socially acceptable rather than expressing their true attitudes. Future research could explore the possibility of incorporating more objective measures where applicable to mitigate this limitation.

In addition, the scarcity of localized research and peer-reviewed literature specific to Malawi challenges the relevance and robustness of the research. One major difficulty was the lack of comprehensive data on disability prevalence and the scarcity of published research in this area. This absence of reliable statistics made it challenging to accurately assess the scope and impact of disability-related issues, identify trends, and develop evidence-based interventions. Additionally, I lacked contextual data specific to Malawi on education stakeholders practices in inclusive education and had to depend on literature from other countries, which did not always align with the local context. This reliance on non-local studies compromised the thoroughness and validity of my findings, highlighting the need for more localized, peer-reviewed research in Malawi.

Lastly, the study encountered various ethical and cultural challenges inherent in the Malawian context. The expectation of monetary compensation from study participants, compounded by the economic hardships prevalent in Malawi and exacerbated by the pandemic, posed ethical dilemmas. Balancing the need for participant recruitment with ethical considerations required careful negotiation and transparent communication to manage expectations without compromising research integrity. Furthermore, cultural factors, such as the emphasis on hierarchy and respect for authority figures, influenced access to research sites, necessitating negotiation and permission from community leaders. Establishing trust with community members was crucial for the success of the research. These limitations highlight the

complexities of conducting research in Malawi and emphasize the need to address methodological, ethical, and cultural considerations in future studies on inclusive education.

6.7 Concluding remarks

This qualitative research study delved into the multifaceted aspects of knowledge, attitudes, and practices among educational stakeholders. The primary objective of the study was to examine the impact of these factors on the practical implementation of IE in Elementary School. The core research question revolved around the comprehension of knowledge, attitudes, and practices of education stakeholders in the Elementary School community when it came to IE. In navigating this exploration, the study adopted the Knowledge, Attitudes, and Practices (KAP) model as its guiding framework. The research methodology employed involved conducting in-depth interviews with ten participants, and it was supplemented with FGDs. However, during the FGDs, only eight of the original ten participants were available, as two had dropped out. This data collection process aimed to provide a diverse range of insights, allowing for a comprehensive thematic analysis.

As a result of this rigorous examination, the findings uncovered a range of critical aspects. These revelations extended to a substantial divergence in stakeholders' understanding of IE, stretching from a holistic societal transformation perspective to a narrower focus on the integration of children with disabilities into mainstream classrooms. Moreover, a distinct lack of awareness surrounding the National Strategy for Inclusive Education (NSIE), a critical policy element, hindered effective implementation.

Additionally, the study revealed subtle variations in the attitudes of education stakeholders towards IE, indicating a multitude of perspectives. Notably, caregivers and parents held positive attitudes, emphasizing the transformative potential of IE for children with SEND and its societal benefits. However, educators, consultants, and school principals, despite recognizing these merits, expressed concerns linked to their readiness to implement inclusive practices due to inadequate training and limited school capacity. The severity of disabilities significantly shaped stakeholders' attitudes, with more favourable views toward children with mild disabilities in comparison to those with severe disabilities.

Furthermore, the study provided insights into the practices of education stakeholders within the Elementary School community related to IE. It highlighted the critical need for enhanced collaboration and communication among stakeholders, as limited collaboration was observed between teachers, parents, and specialists. The identified tensions in the collaboration between educators and parents underscore the necessity for enhanced communication and the promotion of mutual respect. The study also exposed low levels of parental and community involvement in IE, driven by factors such as varying educational levels, poverty, and negative attitudes.

Lastly, the study highlighted the lack of orientation for education stakeholders regarding the early identification and support of students with SEND, further emphasizing the need for comprehensive training programs and community engagement initiatives to enhance awareness and involvement in identification and referral processes. To bridge these gaps in attitudes and practices, the study emphasized the necessity for comprehensive measures, including teacher training, infrastructure enhancements, resource allocation, and community-based initiatives.

This study has highlighted the importance of aligning policies with IE principles, ensuring equal opportunities for all learners in mainstream schools in Malawi, regardless of their abilities. Such alignment would foster a more inclusive, equitable, and supportive educational environment for all learners in the Elementary School and similar contexts.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: UCT Ethical Approval



UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN
Faculty of Health Sciences
Human Research Ethics Committee



Room 45 E-52-E-Floor- Old Main Building
Groote Schuur Hospital
Observatory 7925
Telephone [021] 406 6492
Email: hrec-submissions@uct.ac.za
Website: www.health.uct.ac.za/fhs/research/humanethics/forms

22 April 2022

HREC REF: 128/2022

Prof J McKenzie

Division of Disability Studies
Health & Rehab Sciences-OMB
Email: Judith.mckenzie@uct.ac.za
Student: bndpri001@myuct.ac.za

Dear Prof McKenzie

PROJECT TITLE : EXPLORING KNOWLEDGE, PERCEPTION AND ATTITUDINAL, ISSUES AFFECTING STAKEHOLDERS' PARTICIPATION IN IMPLEMENTING INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN BASIC SCHOOLS OF THE MKHOTA COMMUNITY IN KASUNGU MALAWI. (MASTER'S DEGREE – MISS PRISCILLA BANDA)

Thank you for your response letter, addressing the issues raised by the Faculty of Health Sciences Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC).

It is a pleasure to inform you that the HREC has **formally approved** the above-mentioned study.

This approval is subject to strict adherence to the HREC recommendations regarding research involving human participants during COVID -19, our letter dated 02 February 2022 provides guidance found on our website:
<http://www.health.uct.ac.za/fhs/research/humanethics/forms>

Approval is granted for one year until the 30 April 2023.

Please submit a progress form, using the standardised Annual Report Form if the study continues beyond the approval period. Please submit a Standard Closure form if the study is completed within the approval period.
(Forms can be found on our website: www.health.uct.ac.za/fhs/research/humanethics/forms)

The HREC acknowledge that the student: Miss Priscilla Banda will also be involved in this study.

Please quote the HREC REF 128/2022 in all your correspondence.

Please note that the ongoing ethical conduct of the study remains the responsibility of the principal investigator.

Please note that for all studies approved by the HREC, the principal investigator **must** obtain appropriate institutional approval, where necessary, before the research may occur.

Yours sincerely


Digitally signed by M. Blockman
DN: cn=M. Blockman, ou=University of Cape Town,
c=ZA
Date: 2023.04.22 14:05:27
+0200

pp

PROFESSOR M BLOCKMAN

CHAIRPERSON, FACULTY OF HEALTH SCIENCES HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE

Federal Wide Assurance Number: FWA00001637. Institutional Review Board (IRB) number:

IRB00001938 NHREC-registration number: REC-210208-007

This serves to confirm that the University of Cape Town Human Research Ethics Committee complies to the Ethics Standards for Clinical Research with a new drug in patients, based on the Medical Research Council (MRC-SA), Food and Drug Administration (FDA-USA), International Council for Harmonisation of Technical Requirements for Pharmaceuticals for Human Use: Good Clinical Practice (ICH GCP), South African Good Clinical Practice Guidelines (DoH 2020), based on the Association of the British Pharmaceutical Industry Guidelines (ABPI), and Declaration of Helsinki (2013) guidelines. The Human Research Ethics Committee granting this approval is in compliance with the ICH Harmonised Tripartite Guidelines E6: Note for Guidance on Good Clinical Practice (CPMP/ICH/135/95) and FDA Code Federal Regulation Part 50, 56 and 312.

Appendix B: Annual Progress Approval



FHS016: Annual Progress Report / Renewal

| | | | |
|---|------------------------|----------------------------------|-------------|
| HREC office use only (FWA00001637; IRB00001938) | | | |
| This serves as notification of annual approval, including any documentation described below. | | | |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Approved | Annual progress report | Approved until/next renewal date | 30.04.2024 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Not approved | See attached comments | | |
| Signature Chairperson of the HREC/ Designee | | | Date Signed |
| | | | 13/4/2023 |

Note: Please email this form and supporting documents (if applicable) in a combined pdf-file to hrec-enquiries@uct.ac.za.
 Please clarify your plan for research-related activities during COVID-19 lockdown.
 Please use the latest form found on our website:
<http://www.health.uct.ac.za/fhs/research/humanethics/forms>

| |
|------------------------------|
| Comments to PI from the HREC |
| |

Principal Investigator to complete the following:

1. Protocol information

| | | | |
|---|--|---|-----------------------------|
| Date (when submitting this form) | 10 April 2023 | | |
| HREC REF Number | 128/2022 | Current Ethics Approval was granted until | 30 th April 2023 |
| Protocol title | EXPLORING THE KNOWLEDGE AND ATTITUDES OF EDUCATIONAL STAKEHOLDERS AND HOW THIS INFLUENCES THEIR PRACTICE IN INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN BASIC SCHOOLS OF THE MKHOTA COMMUNITY IN KASUNGU, MALAWI | | |
| Protocol number (if applicable) | | | |
| Are there any sub-studies linked to this study? | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No | |



| | |
|--|--|
| If yes, could you please provide the HREC Reference number for all sub-studies? Note: A separate FHS016 must be submitted for each sub-study. | |
| Principal Investigator | Prof. Judith McKenzie |
| Department / Office Internal Mail Address | Department of Health and Rehabilitation Sciences |

| | | |
|---|------------------------------|--|
| 1.1 Does this protocol receive US Federal funding? | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No |
| 1.2 If the study receives US Federal Funding, does the annual report require full committee approval? | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> No |
| Note: Any annual approvals for Full Committee review MUST be submitted on the monthly HREC submission dates. (Please send electronic copy for full committee review to hrec-submission@uct.ac.za) | | |

If yes in 1.2 please complete section 1.3 below for invoicing purposes

1.3 Ethics Renewal Fee

Please (tick ✓) appropriate box for billing purposes:

| <u>Submission Type</u> | <u>Description</u> | <u>New fee (Vat Incl.)</u> | <u>tick ✓</u> |
|--|---|----------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| <i>Research funded solely from UCT departmental/divisional/group budget</i> | Annual evaluation of research progress report for re-certification | R0,00 | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| <i>Non-sponsored student research for degree purposes at UCT/Other Universities & Colleges</i> | Annual evaluation of research progress report for re-certification | R0,00 | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> |
| <i>Annual re-certification / Progress report (FHS016 Form)</i> | Clinical Trial & International Grant Funded Research - Annual evaluation of research progress report for re-certification for Full Committee Approval | R7000,00 | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| <i>Annual re-certification / Progress report (FHS016 Form)</i> | Clinical Trial & International Grant Funded Research - Annual evaluation of research progress report for re-certification for Expedited review | R3 710.00 | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| <i>Annual re-certification / Progress report (FHS016 Form)</i> | National grant funded research - Annual evaluation of research progress report for re-certification for Full Committee Approval | R6000.00 | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| <i>Annual re-certification / Progress report (FHS016 Form)</i> | National Grant funded research for Annual evaluation of research progress report for re-certification for Expedited review | R1 500,00 | <input type="checkbox"/> |

NB: Protocols funded by UCT (e.g. departmental funding / student research) and by certain grant funding organizations (e.g. MRC, NRF, CANSA,) are exempt from these charges.

Please provide details for Invoicing, either complete section 1 or 2 :

1. Invoice billing – Directly to Sponsor



| | |
|-------------------------------------|--|
| Sponsor's name | |
| Billing Address of Sponsor: | |
| Vat Number: | |
| Contact person | |
| Telephone number | |
| Email Address | |
| 2. Internal Journal Billing: | |
| Fund Number: | |
| Cost Centre Number: | |
| Account Holder Name: | |
| Division of Account Holder: | |

2. List of documentation for approval

| |
|--|
| None, only an extension of time is requested |
|--|

3. Protocol status (tick ✓)

| | |
|-------------------------------------|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Open Enrolment |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Closed to enrolment (tick ✓) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Research-related activities are ongoing |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Research-related activities are complete, long-term follow-up only |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | Research-related activities are complete, data analysis only |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Main study is complete but sub-study research-related activities are ongoing |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Study is closed → Please submit a Study Closure Form (FHS010) |

4. Enrolment

| | |
|--|-----|
| Number of participants enrolled to date | 10 |
| Number of participants enrolled, since last HREC Progress report (continuing review) | N/A |



| | |
|--|-----|
| Additional number of participants still required | N/A |
|--|-----|

5. Refusals

| | |
|---|-----|
| Total number of refusals (participants invited to join the study, but refused to take part) | N/A |
|---|-----|

6. Cumulative summary of participants

| | |
|---|-----|
| Total number of participants who provided consent | 10 |
| Number of participants determined to be ineligible (i.e. after screening) | 0 |
| Number of participants currently active on the study | 10 |
| Number of participants completed study (without events leading to withdrawal) | 10 |
| Number of participants withdrawn at participants' request (i.e. changed their mind) | 0 |
| Number of participants withdrawn by PI due to toxicity or adverse events | 0 |
| Number of participants withdrawn by PI for other reasons (e.g. pregnancy, poor compliance) | N/A |
| Number of participants lost to follow-up. Please comment below on reasons for loss of follow-up. | N/A |
| | |
| Number of participants no longer taking part for reasons not listed above. Please provide reasons below: | N/A |
| | |

7. Progress of study

| |
|--|
| <p>Please provide a brief summary of the research to date including the overall progress and the progress since the last annual report as well as any relevant comments/issues you would like to report to the HREC:</p> |
| <p>This study explores the knowledge and attitudes of educational stakeholders and how this influences their practice in inclusive education in basic schools of the Mkhota community in Kasungu, Malawi. This ethical approval for this study was granted until 30th April 2023. So far, the researcher has finalized the data analysis phase and is busy with the write up of the chapters as she wait for the feedback from the supervisors. Progress on the write up and revision of the literature review and methodology chapter has been made, however the researcher requires more time to write and achieve coherence in all chapters of the dissertation.</p> |



8. Protocol violations and exceptions (tick ✓ all that apply)

| | |
|-------------------------------------|---|
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | No prior violations or exceptions have occurred since the original approval |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Prior violations or exceptions have been reported since the last review and have already been acknowledged or approved |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Unreported minor violations that have occurred since the last review, as well as significant deviations not yet reported, are attached for review |

9. Amendments (tick ✓ all that apply)

| | |
|-------------------------------------|---|
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | No Prior amendments have been made since the original approval |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Prior amendments have been reported since the last review and have already been approved |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | New protocol changes/ amendments are requested as part of this continuing review (See note below) |

Note: If new protocol changes are being requested in this review, please complete an amendment form (FHS006).

Specific changes in the amended protocol and consent/assent forms must be **bolded**, *italicised* or tracked and all changes must include a rationale.

10. Adverse events

10.1 Please provide below or attach a narrative summary of serious adverse events and/ or unanticipated problems since the last progress report. Please indicate changes made to the protocol and informed consent document(s) as a result (if not already reported to the HREC). Please comment on whether causality to any study procedure or intervention could be established.

Initially, the researcher developed a timeline for reviewing and writing each chapter in order to submit the dissertation by February 2023. However, she encountered challenges due to transportation costs from South Africa to Malawi and also experienced gate keeping issues with the ministry of education when seeking approval to conduct the study in Malawi. As a result it took time to be granted the approval and this delayed the recruitment and data collection stage. Consequently, these delays impacted my initial timeline for the write up of the chapters and submission of the dissertation. Hence why I am requesting for an extension on the initial ethical approval date of 30th April, 2023.

10.2 Have participants received appropriate treatment/ follow-up/ referral when indicated (e.g. in the case of abnormal or incidental clinical findings, distress or anxiety)?

Yes No Not applicable

If yes, please describe:

11. Summary of Monitoring and Audit Activities (tick ✓)

11.1 Was this study monitored or audited by an external agency (e.g. SAHPRA, FDA)?

Yes No Not applicable

11.2 Did a Data and Safety Monitoring Board publish a report?



| | | |
|------------------------------|-----------------------------|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> No | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Not applicable |
|------------------------------|-----------------------------|--|

| | | | | | |
|---|--|----------------------|------------------------------|-----------------------------|--|
| 11.3 If yes, please identify the agency and attach a summary of the findings. | | | | | |
| Agency Name | | Report attached | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> No | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Not applicable |
| | | DSMB report attached | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> No | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Not applicable |

| | |
|--|--|
| 11.4 Has there been any agency, institutional or other inquiry into non-compliance in this study, or any finding of non-compliance concerning a member of the research team? | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No |
| If yes, please explain: | |
| | |

12. Level of risk (tick ✓)

| | |
|---|-----------------|
| 12.1 In light of your experience of this research, please indicate whether the level of risk to participants has: | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Increased |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Decreased |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | Shown no change |
| If there has been a change, please explain: | |
| | |

| |
|---|
| 12.2 Please provide a narrative summary of recent relevant literature that may have a bearing on the level of risk. |
| N/A |



13. Insurance

| | | |
|---|-----------------------------|--|
| Please confirm that valid no fault insurance is still in place? (tick ✓) | | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> No | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Not Applicable – N/A |
| If yes, please complete the following: | | |
| Insurer's name: | | |
| Policy no. | | *Coverage Period: |
| <i>For UCT sponsored studies please liaise the Insurance office via fhs.sponsorship@uct.ac.za regarding the required documentation and information required obtain a renewed UCT No-fault Insurance Certificate.</i> | | |

14. Statement of conflict of interest

| | |
|--|--|
| Has there been any change in the conflict of interest status of this protocol since the original approval? (tick ✓) | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No |
| If yes, please explain and if necessary, attach a revised conflict of interest statement (Section #7 in the New Protocol Application Form FHS013): | |
| | |

15. Signature

| | | |
|--|---|-----------------|
| My signature certifies that the above is complete and correct. | | |
| Signature of PI | DR Richard Vergunst | Date |
| <input type="text" value="Signed by candidate"/> | on behalf of Prof Judith McKenzie (on sabbatical) | 10th April 2023 |

Appendix C: Authorization Letter, Ministry of Education, Malawi

Telegrams: MINED, Lilongwe
Telephone: (265) 01 789 422/ 01 789404
Telex: 44636
Facsimile: (265) 01 788 064



MINISTRY OF EDUCATION
PRIVATE BAG 328
CAPITAL CITY
LILONGWE 3
MALAWI

Ref. No.MoE/BED/1/10

24th August, 2022

Ms Priscilla Banda
University of Cape Town
School of Health Sciences
Cape Town
South Africa

**RE: AUTHORIZATION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH WITH EDUCATION
STAKEHOLDERS OF MKHOTA COMMUNITY IN KASUNGU DISTRICT**

I hereby write in reference to your letter on the above mentioned subject in which you are requesting the Ministry of Education for permission to carry out a study at Mkhota in Kasungu. The study focuses on ***Exploring the knowledge, perceptions, and attitudes of educational stakeholders and how this influences their participation in inclusive education in basic schools of Mkhota community in Kasungu, Malawi.***

I would like to inform you that permission has been granted from Ministry of Education for you to undertake your research. You are therefore, advised to strictly adhere to the requirements of research ethics of strictly using the data for research purpose only.

Your cooperation on this matter is highly appreciated.

Signed by candidate

Chikondano C. Mussa
For: **SECRETARY FOR EDUCATION**

Appendix D: Letter to Gatekeeper

Dear (insert name),

I am contacting you as a leader of the _____ group to seek your help in distributing on your site an invitation to participate in a study of educational stakeholders in elementary schools of the community. The study focuses on *Exploring the knowledge, perceptions, and attitudes of educational stakeholders and how this influences their participation in inclusive education in elementary schools of the rural community in Kasungu, Malawi*. The participation of stakeholders will consist of in-depth interviews and focus groups and is strictly voluntary.

The purpose is to explore stakeholders understanding of Inclusive education and how this understanding shape their inclusion practices. Although confidentiality cannot be guaranteed due to the nature of some of the data gathering tools, every effort will be made to mask participant identity.

Thank you for your consideration of this request and informing education stakeholders of the opportunity to participate in a study.

If you have any questions related to the study kindly contact Priscilla Banda on

priscillawhitebanda877@gmail.com/ cell 0627730585 or the following Research supervisors;

Dr Richard Vergunst @ richard.vergunst@uct.ac.za

Dr Joerg Weber @ Joerg.Weber@cbm.org

Prof. Judith McKenzie @ Judith.mckenzie@uct.ac.za/+27 (0)21 406 6318

Sincerely,

Priscilla Banda

Masters in Philosophy Candidate

School of Health Sciences

University of Cape Town

Appendix E: Invitation Letter

University of Cape Town

Private Bag X3,

Rondebosch, 7701

South Africa

Dear Prospective participants,

RE: INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY

You are invited to participate in a research study entitled "*Exploring the knowledge, perceptions, and attitudes of educational stakeholders and how this influences their participation in inclusive education in elementary schools of the rural community in Kasungu, Malawi.*" This study aims to understand stakeholders' experience and explore knowledge, perception, and *attitudes* affecting the inclusion of children with diverse needs in elementary schools of rural community.

The data in this study will be collected through in-depth interviews and focus

group discussion. Your participation will be purely voluntary and anonymous as your identity will not be revealed. The research will require between 30-60 minutes for in-depth interviews and 1 hour for focus group discussion at a time and place that is suitable for you. . The interview will be audio-recorded by me with your consent to ensure accuracy and all your responses will be confidentially kept. Be aware that the study will recruit participants based on the following inclusion and exclusion criteria;

INCLUSION AND EXCLUSION CRITERIA

Inclusion criteria

Education stakeholders such as parents, educational personnel, local organizational leaders, community members, traditional and religious leaders from elementary school community who have knowledge of inclusive education or have ever participated in inclusive education activity or workshop.

Can communicate verbally in English and Chichewa which is a native language of elementary school community.

Can provide informed consent.

Are aged between 18 and 65.

Any gender type.

Exclusion criteria

Children aged 18 below.

Vulnerable participants such as adults with any form of disability.

If you are interested in participating in this study, I will provide you with the information that will explain in detail what would be expected of you in this research. These guidelines would include potential risks, benefits, and your rights as a participant.

Please note that you will be asked to sign a consent form to confirm that you understand and agree to the conditions before the in-depth and focus group interviews

Thank you for your time.

Yours Sincerely,

Priscilla Banda.

Appendix F: In-depth Interviews Consent Form

This consent form comprises of two sections:

Part 1: Information Sheet

Part 2: Certificate of Consent

Part I: Information Sheet

Introduction:

My name is Priscilla Banda. I am a Masters' student studying at the University of Cape Town. I am conducting a research as part of my degree requirements. My study seeks to understand the views and experiences that stakeholders have relating to Inclusive education and how their view point affect their participation in the implementation of the policy in elementary schools of the rural community. I would like to invite you to participate in my study.

Bear in mind that the consent form may contain words you do not understand, please feel free to ask me to explain as we go through the information and I will do so. *The data in this study will be collected through in-depth interviews and focus group discussion.*

The purpose of this study is to *Explore the knowledge, perceptions, and attitudes of educational stakeholders and how this influences their participation in inclusive education in elementary schools of the rural community in Kasungu, Malawi.*

Voluntary Participation

Know that your participation in this research is voluntary and you can withdraw at any time without giving any reason. Bear in mind that a positive response to this letter does not oblige you to take part in this research.

Duration/ Timeframe

The research will take place over two sessions for a duration of 30-60 minutes. The first session will be for in-depth interviews and the second one for focus group discussion. The timeline for this study will be until December 2022.

Risks

My research will be conducted in rural context where many people don't have access to the internet and cell phone. The research is aware of the risks associated with this study such as recall of the negative experience, exposure to Covid-19, loss of income, transportation cost. The following measures will be taken to minimize these risks such as skipping a question or stopping the interview entirely if they are not comfortable, arranging meetings at a time and place that is convenient for participants and conducting meetings at a private place with low risk of distractions. In addition, COVID-19 preventative measures will be adhered by following COVID-19 standard operating procedures such as screening, hand

hygiene, mask-wearing cough etiquette and social distancing. In-addition a COVID-19 register will be kept for potential retrospective contact tracing.

Benefits

Individual benefits

There will be no direct benefit to you but your participation in the study about inclusive education might be a positive learning experience for the participants.

Societal benefits

Reflection and discussion in this study will help in improving stakeholders understanding of inclusive education and address the knowledge, perceptions and *attitudes* that affect the successful implementation of the policy in Malawi.

Reimbursements

You will not be provided with an incentive to take part in the research.

Confidentiality and Privacy

Confidentiality and privacy in this study will be ensured by not sharing any personal and confidential information learnt in the course of data collection process unless the research participants agree and maintain confidentiality to the degree that is legal. In-addition, there would be no link between participants and data as pseudonyms will be used to ensure their anonymity. In addition, transcription of the interviews and audio recordings will only be accessed by the researcher and securely stored on a password protected computer. Hard copies of the transcript data will be stored in a locked cabinet. The collected data will be stored for five years and then destroyed. The data gathered from this study will be presented as part of a report for a Master's research study for University of Cape Town and you will not be identified in any way.

Audio-recordings

To capture everything, this study will involve making use of audio-recording of the participants with your consent. All recordings will be saved and stored on a password-protected computer to secure access. After the analysis, the recordings will be destroyed but if you refuse to be recorded this can be arranged without any consequences.

Questions

Should you have any questions or comments, please feel free to ask them and you will be answered to the best of the researcher's capabilities.

Preferred language

The interview will be conducted in Chichewa and English for ease of expression during the interviews.

Sharing the Results

Nothing that you tell us today will be shared with anyone and your participation in this study will be anonymous. In-addition participants will be informed on the progress of the research and will be

provided with written feedback following the completion of the research which will be disseminated through the gatekeepers.

Right to Refuse or Withdraw

Your participation in this research is voluntary and you can withdraw at any time. Please know that you do not have to take part in this research if you do not wish to do so.

Who to Contact

If you have any questions, you can ask them now or later. If you wish to ask questions later, you may contact any of the following;

Priscilla Banda @ priscillawhitebanda877@gmail.com or 0627730585

Dr Richard Vergunst: Principal investigator @ richard.vergunst@uct.ac.za

Dr Joerg Weber: Principal investigator @ Joerg.Weber@cbm.org

IDEA Research Unit

Room 16E48

Old Main Building

Groote Schuur

Observatory

7925

Cape Town

South Africa

Prof. Judith McKenzie: Principal Investigator

Head of Division

Disability Studies

Department of Health & Rehabilitation Sciences

Faculty of Health Sciences

University of Cape Town

Email: Judith.mckenzie@uct.ac.za

Telephone: +27 (0)21 406 6318

Fax: +27 (0)21 406 6323

Rights of the research Participants

You have a right to receive a copy of the participants information sheet and consent form.

Kindly know that you will not be waiving any legal claims, rights or remedies because of your participation in this research study. You may withdraw your consent at any time and stop participation without giving any reason to the researcher. If you have any questions regarding your rights as a research participant, contact Professor Marc Blockman of the UCT FHS Human Research Ethics Committee can be contacted on 021 406 6338 in case participants have any questions regarding their rights and welfare as research subjects on the study

Certificate of Consent

If you are willing to participate in this study please sign the consent form and send it to the researcher

Part II: Certificate of Consent

I, have been invited to take part in the exploration study on *the knowledge, perceptions, and attitudes of educational stakeholders and how this influences their participation in inclusive education in elementary schools of the elementary school community in Kasungu, Malawi.*

I confirm that I have read the above information/It has been read and explained to me in a language that I understand, and I am aware of this document's contents. I have asked all questions that I wished to ask, and they have been answered to my satisfaction. I fully understand what is expected of me during the research. All issues related to privacy and the confidentiality and use of the information I provide have been explained to my satisfaction. I understand that I may choose to leave the study at any time without any consequences. I have not been coerced in any way and I voluntarily agree to participate in the above-mentioned study. any way.

Participant's Signature Witness Date

Print Name of Participant _____

Signature of Participant _____

Date _____

Day/month/year

Statement by the researcher/person taking consent

I confirm that I have accurately read out the information sheet to the potential participant, and to the best of my ability made sure that the participant understands that the following will be done:

1. In-depth Interviews will be conducted.

I confirm that the participant has been allowed to ask questions about the study, and all the questions asked by the participant have been answered correctly and to the best of my ability. I confirm that the individual has not been coerced into giving consent, and the consent has been given freely and voluntarily.

Print Name of Researcher/person taking the consent_____

Signature of Researcher /person taking the consent_____ Date

Appendix G: Focus Group Discussion Consent Form

This consent form comprises of two sections:

Part 1: Information Sheet

Part 2: Certificate of Consent Part I: Information Sheet

Introduction:

My name is Priscilla Banda. I am a Master's student studying at the University of Cape Town. I am researching this study as part of my degree requirements. My study seeks to understand the views and experiences that stakeholders have on inclusive education and how their viewpoint affect their participation in elementary schools of rural community. I would like to invite you to participate in my study.

Bear in mind that the consent form may contain words you do not understand, please feel free to ask me to explain as we go through the information and I will do so. *The data in this study will be collected through in-depth interviews and focus group discussion.* Kindly understand that confidentiality in focus group is dependent on other participants' maintaining confidentiality. Therefore you are required to sign the focus group binding form to uphold the confidentiality of the discussion and to protect the identity of other participants.

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to explore the knowledge, perceptions, and attitudes of educational stakeholders and how this influences their participation in inclusive education in elementary schools of the rural community in Kasungu, Malawi.

Voluntary Participation

Know that your participation in this research is voluntary and you may withdraw at any time if you wish to do so. Know that a positive response to this letter does not oblige you to take part in this research.

Duration/ Timeframe

The research will take place over two sessions for a duration of 30-60 minutes. The first session will be for in-depth interviews and the second one for focus group discussion. The timeline for this study will be until December 2022.

Risks

My research will be conducted in rural context where many people don't have access to the internet and cell phone. The research is aware of the risks associated with this study such as recall of the negative experience, exposure to Covid-19, loss of income, transportation cost. The following measures will be taken to minimize these risks such as skipping a question or stopping the interview entirely if they are not comfortable, arranging meetings at a time and place that is convenient for participants and conducting meetings at a private place with low risk of distractions. In addition, COVID-19 preventative measures will be adhered by following COVID-19 standard operating procedures such as screening, hand

hygiene, mask-wearing cough etiquette and social distancing. In-addition a COVID-19 register will be kept for potential retrospective contact tracing.

Benefits

Individual benefits

There will be no direct benefit to you but your participation in the study about inclusive education might be a positive learning experience for the participants.

Societal benefits

Reflection and discussion in this study will help in improving stakeholders understanding of inclusive education and address the knowledge, perceptions and attitudes that affect the successful implementation of the policy in Malawi.

Reimbursements

You will not be provided with an incentive to take part in the research.

Confidentiality

This study will use focus groups therefore the extent to which your identity will remain confidential is dependent on the participants in the focus group maintaining confidentiality. Every effort will be made to shield your identity by using pseudonyms. Audio recordings and transcriptions of interviews will be securely stored in a password-protected computer after completion of the study and will only be accessed by the researcher. Hard copies of the transcript data will be stored in a locked cabinet. The collected data will be stored for five years and then destroyed. The data gathered from this study will be presented as part of a report for a Master's research study for University of Cape Town and you will not be identified in any way.

Audio-recordings

To capture everything, this study will involve making use of audio-recording of the participants with your consent. All recordings will be saved and stored on a password-protected computer to secure access. After the analysis, the recordings will be destroyed but if you refuse to be recorded this can be arranged without any consequences.

Questions

Should you have any questions or comments, please feel free to ask them and you will be answered to the best of the researcher's capabilities.

Preferred language

The interview was conducted in Chichewa and English for ease of expression during the interviews.

Sharing the Results

Nothing that you tell us today will be shared with anyone and your participation in this study will be anonymous. In-addition participants were informed on the progress of the research and will be provided

with written feedback following the completion of the research which will be disseminated through the gatekeepers.

Right to Refuse or Withdraw

Your participation in this research is voluntary and you can withdraw at any time. Please know that you do not have to take part in this research if you do not wish to do so.

Who to Contact

If you have any questions, you can ask them now or later. If you wish to ask questions later, you may contact any of the following;

Priscilla Banda @ priscillawhitebanda877@gmail.com or 0627730585

Dr Richard Vergunst: Principal investigator @ richard.vergunst@uct.ac.za

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Rights of the research Participants

You have a right to receive a copy of the participants information sheet and consent form.

Kindly know that you will not be waiving any legal claims, rights or remedies because of your participation in this research study. You may withdraw your consent at any time and stop participation without giving any reason to the researcher. If you have any questions regarding your rights as a research participant, contact Professor Marc Blockman of the UCT FHS Human Research Ethics Committee can be contacted on 021 406 6338 in case participants have any questions regarding their rights and welfare as research subjects on the study

If you are willing to participate in this study please sign the consent form and send it to the researcher

CERTIFICATE OF CONSENT

Part II: Certificate of Consent

I, have been invited to participate in the exploration study on *the knowledge, perceptions, and attitudes of educational stakeholders and how this influences their participation in inclusive education in elementary schools of the rural community in Kasungu, Malawi.*

I have read the above information and confirm that the above information has been explained to me in a language that I understand, and I am aware of this document's contents. I have asked all questions that I wished to ask, and these have been answered to my satisfaction. I am aware that confidentiality in focus group is dependent on other participants' maintaining confidentiality therefore requires me to sign the focus group binding form to uphold the confidentiality of the discussion and to protect the identity of other participants. I fully understand what is expected of me during the research. I have not been pressurized in any way and I voluntarily agree to participate in the above-mentioned study.

Participant's Signature Witness Date

Print Name of Participant _____

Signature of Participant _____

Date _____

Day/month/year

Statement by the researcher/person taking consent

I have accurately read out the information sheet to the potential participant, and to the best of my ability made sure that the participant understands that the following will be done:

1. Focus group discussion will be conducted

I confirm that the participant was given an opportunity to ask questions about the study, and all the questions asked by the participant have been answered correctly and to the best of my ability. I confirm

that the individual has not been coerced into giving consent, and the consent has been given freely and voluntarily

Print Name of Researcher/person taking the consent _____

Signature of Researcher /person taking the consent _____ Date _____

FOCUS GROUP BINDING FORM

UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN

Private Bag, South Africa

Cell number:

E-mail: priscillawhitebanda877@gmail.com

Focus group confidentiality binding form

Title of Research Project: *Exploring the knowledge, perceptions, and attitudes of educational stakeholders and how this influences their participation in inclusive education in elementary schools of the rural community in Kasungu, Malawi.*

The study has been described to me in language that I understand. My questions about the study have been answered. I understand what my participation will involve and I agree to participate of my own choice and free will. I understand that my identity will not be disclosed to anyone by the researchers. I understand that I may withdraw from the study at any time without giving a reason and without fear of negative consequences or loss of benefits. I understand that confidentiality is dependent on participants' in the Focus Group maintaining confidentiality.

I hereby agree to uphold the confidentiality of the discussions in the focus group by not disclosing the identity of other participants or any aspects of their contributions to members outside of the group.

Participant's name.....

Participant's signature.....

Date.....

Appendix H: In-Depth Interview Guiding Questions

A. Questions relating to knowledge of inclusive education

- 1) What is your understanding of the term "inclusive education"?
- 2) Do you think your understanding of IE has influenced your level of involvement in the inclusion of learners with SEND? Explain why?
- 3) To what extent do you think parents, governing bodies, management team, and religious and traditional leaders can benefit from inclusive education workshops?

B. Questions about attitudes toward inclusive education

- 1) Do children with special educational needs and Disabilities (SEND) attend regular schools in the this community?
- 2) If yes, what do you think about the inclusion of children with disabilities in elementary schools this community?
- 3) If no, what needs to be done to realize the right to education for children with SEND in this community?
- 4) Do you think that inclusive education is a priority in this community? Why/explain.
- 5) What is the role of parents, teachers and local leaders in ensuring the inclusion of students with SEN in elementary schools of this community?

B. Questions about the practice of inclusive education

- 1) How can you describe your experience of implementing IE?
- 2) Describe the time you spent collaborating with other stakeholders during the implementation process?
- 3) Do you think it is important to work with different stakeholders to promote inclusion of children with SEN in elementary schools of this community?
- 4) What barriers have you encountered that have hindered your participation in implementing inclusive education?
- 5) What facilitators have you experienced that have supported your participation in promoting the inclusion of learners with diverse needs in mainstream schools?
- 6) What should be done to improve stakeholder participation in the implementation of IE?
- 7) What approaches would help traditional leaders, religious leaders, and other stakeholders promote inclusive practices in this community?

Appendix I: Focus Group Discussion Interview Guiding Questions

A. Questions related to knowledge of inclusive education

- 1) What do you understand by inclusive education?

2) Do you think that parents, teachers, and stakeholders in this community have a good awareness of inclusive policies? Explain.

3) Do you think if they knew more about IE, their participation in the policy implementation process would improve? Explain

B. Questions about attitudes toward inclusive education

1) What do you think about the concept of inclusive education?

2) What do you think about the introduction of the inclusion policy in Malawi?

3) What are your major concerns about the introduction of IE? 4) What do you think about the inclusion of children with different needs in elementary schools of this community?

C. Questions related to the practice of inclusive education

1) Are parents, leaders of local organizations, and community stakeholders willing to collaborate with education staff in supporting children with diverse needs in this community?

2) What is your experience of participating in inclusive education projects?

3) Are you aware of factors that you believe may hinder or facilitate the practice of inclusive education in your area?

4) What are your thoughts on how Malawian societies such as churches, villages, and schools can become more inclusive?