



Ushirika wa Maendeleo ya Elimu Barani Afrika  
الرابطة لأجل تطوير التربية في إفريقيا  
Association for the Development of Education in Africa  
Association pour le développement de l'éducation en Afrique  
Associação para o Desenvolvimento da Educação em África

# AFRICA LEARNING TOGETHER

## INTRODUCING UNIVERSAL DESIGN FOR LEARNING IN MALAWI

### What does inclusive education mean in Malawi ?

#### Summary

The fourth United Nations Sustainable Development Goal (SDG-4) and the Continental Education Strategy for Africa (CESA 16-25) advocate for equitable access to quality education for all children, including those with disabilities.

In this second edition of our 'Africa Learning Together' knowledge management series, ADEA focuses on inclusive education, especially the learning needs of children with disabilities in Malawi. Betty Wisiki, an inclusive education expert, shares insights about introducing Universal Design for Learning (UDL) in Malawi.



## Background

The United Nations [SDG-4 goal](#) states that all children, including those with disabilities, should have access to quality education. Equitable and inclusive access to education for all is also one of the priority areas listed in the Continental Education Strategy for Africa ([CESA 16-25](#)). Inclusive education creates opportunities for children often excluded from the education system. Malawi introduced its [National Strategy on Inclusive Education](#) to provide children with disabilities with an equal chance to be in school and benefit from available resources. The Ministry of Education is finalising an Inclusive Education policy.

Approximately three percent of learners in Malawi's primary schools have a disability. This might give the impression that the prevalence of disabilities is negligible. The reality is that disability among school-aged children is grossly underestimated because many parents choose to keep their children at home. A lot of learners are misidentified or not identified at all.

The Malawi education system categorises children with disabilities as blind or low vision, children with learning challenges/difficulties, physical disabilities, deaf, deaf-blind, and multiple disabilities. Learning disabilities cover several conditions including dyslexia and autism.

Children with disabilities in Malawi can enrol in any of the 200 mainstream schools that are equipped with a special needs resource centre for additional support.

If they are Deaf and Hard of Hearing (DHH), they can enrol in a special school. Depending on the nature of their disability, learners attending a mainstream school with a resource centre may spend part of the school day at a resource centre, where they receive specialised support, and part of the day in a mainstream classroom. Sometimes, learners with severe to profound conditions spend the entire day in the resource room. A single resource centre could accommodate all children with disabilities, usually with only one or two teachers to attend to each child's specific needs. More often than not, teachers have not been trained to support the full range of disabilities of learners in their classes.

There are also special schools for DHH learners, separate from mainstream schools. Sign language is used at special schools so that DHH children can participate in the education system.

## What does it take to become a special education teacher in Malawi?

There is a shortage of specialist teachers in Malawi, leaving some resource centres unstaffed. The demand for specialist teachers has been largely unmet, and there are currently no specialised programs to train teachers for secondary-level instruction. Until recently, Montfort Special Needs Education College (with an intake capacity of only 100 student teachers at a time) was the only government institution where specialist teachers could qualify by completing a three-year diploma

programme. To ensure that teachers within the regular teacher training curriculum are exposed to special education, the government has introduced an inclusive education module within the teacher training curriculum. While this module introduces trainee teachers to different types of disabilities, it is only basic. Teachers need additional training to support the educational needs of children with disabilities.

Specialist teachers carry tremendous responsibilities in addition to supporting learners with disabilities. Their salaries do not reflect this additional workload. A typical day for a specialist teacher involves teaching a Standard Two class, for example, and supporting learners with disabilities in resource centres after school hours.

### **What is UDL and why is it important?**

Universal Design for Learning or UDL is a teaching approach rooted in the belief that every child should have the opportunity to succeed in their education and feel safe, accepted and included in their schooling community.

Malawi introduced UDL through a USAID-funded project called Reading for All Malawi (REFAM). REFAM focused on strengthening the reading skills of Standard 1 to 4 learners with disabilities and produced training materials for teachers on ways to support learners in inclusive environments. The programme trained specialist teachers from the 200 resource centres who, in turn, trained regular teachers within their specific schools.

The training focused on identification and assessment. Learners whose

disability is not identified correctly or early enough are at greater risk of dropping out of the education system. Teachers received training in developing and applying individualised education programmes (IEPs) to track learner progress. Coaching was also covered so that trained teachers could support untrained teachers. There was also a module on family engagement. Over 80% of teachers need to learn Malawian Sign Language (MSL). So, the programme covered the basics of Deaf education and MSL to help teachers with basic communication.

### **What are some success stories from REFAM?**

REFAM worked closely with the Department of Inclusive Education in the Ministry of Education and organisations of persons with disabilities (OPDs), (Malawi National Association of the Deaf (MANAD), Malawi Union of the Blind (MUB), and Parents of Disabled Children Association of Malawi (PODCAM). Members of these organisations were among the facilitators of the training.

Betty is proud that the design of training materials and the delivery of UDL training relied on close collaboration between the Ministry of Education, district education officials, teachers, school representatives and inclusive education coordinators. Training and support continue, beyond the REFAM project.

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***It's critical to work with structures because it's sustainable in that way. Having people with disabilities as part of the process is also key. Persons with disabilities were the best facilitators during the UDL training.***

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Instead of centralising training, teachers were trained in their districts. This made it easier for Ministry officials to reach additional schools within a catchment area.

WhatsApp groups continue to be effective tools for sharing insights. Challenges can be shared with the Teachers can ask for support if needed. Group communication also means that any lingering, challenges can be shared with the Ministry in a coordinated way. The REFAM project has closed, but the government continues to support the implementation of UDL.

### ***Is there anything you would have done differently?***

Betty recommends providing additional time for teachers to practice in schools and to receive feedback on their delivery. Lack of practical training has led to difficulties when teachers are asked to share their experiences with untrained teachers. She is convinced that UDL is the best approach for inclusive education if well applied. As different stakeholders are designing UDL training, they should also consider other factors beyond UDL, such as the role of language. Even the most qualified teachers may need training in sign language, braille and strategies to support learners with learning difficulties. In the long run, UDL should be integrated into Teacher Training College (TTC) curricula so that every teacher who graduates from the TTC is well prepared.

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- ***Betty Wisiki is a Malawian educationist specializing in special and inclusive education, disability mainstreaming, Deaf education, sign language and research.***
- ***Dr Linda Zuze is a Senior Foundational Learning Specialist at the Association for the Development of Education in Africa (ADEA). She interviewed Betty to produce this piece.***



Betty Wisiki



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