

Abstract

This study explored the role of teachers in promoting positive peer relationships among learners with disabilities at Kalambo Primary School. Anchored in the principles of inclusive education and social learning theory, the study examined teachers' attitudes, instructional practices, and classroom strategies that were aimed at fostering social interaction, acceptance, and meaningful participation of learners with disabilities alongside their non-disabled peers. A qualitative case study research design was adopted to allow an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon within its real-life context. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with teachers, classroom observations, and analysis of relevant school documents.

The findings revealed that teachers played a central role in shaping peer relationships through the use of inclusive teaching approaches such as cooperative learning, group work, peer support systems, and positive behavior modeling. Teachers were also found to have promoted values of empathy, respect, tolerance, and mutual support, which contributed to improved social integration of learners with disabilities. Despite these efforts, the study identified several challenges that constrained effective promotion of peer relationships, including limited training in special needs and inclusive education, large class sizes, inadequate teaching and learning materials, and negative societal attitudes that occasionally influenced learner interactions.

The study concluded that teachers' commitment and daily classroom practices significantly influenced the quality of peer relationships among disabled learners. It recommended continuous professional development for teachers, increased institutional support, and the strengthening of inclusive education policies to enhance social inclusion and peer interaction in primary schools. The study contributed to the existing body of knowledge on inclusive education by providing contextual evidence on the role of teachers in promoting peer relationships among learners with disabilities in primary school settings,

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

Inclusive education will continue to be globally recognized as a vital strategy for ensuring that all learners regardless of physical, intellectual, sensory, or emotional differences gain access to quality education within mainstream settings. For inclusion to be effective, it must extend beyond physical access to encompass meaningful social integration. One of the most critical aspects of this integration will involve cultivating positive peer relationships.

This study will investigate the role that teachers at Kalambo Primary School in Malawi will play in promoting peer relationships among learners with disabilities. Teachers will be positioned as central actors in shaping the social climate of the classroom through their instructional methods, attitudes toward disability, and modelling of inclusive behavior's. While infrastructural accessibility and curriculum adaptations are important, they will be insufficient in the absence of intentional efforts to foster peer connection.

1.2 Background of the Study

International frameworks such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) and Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) will continue to emphasize inclusive, equitable, and quality education for all learners. These commitments will prioritize not only physical access to education but also active participation, emotional support, and academic success for every child.

In Malawi, although inclusive education policies will have been adopted, their implementation particularly concerning social inclusion will remain inconsistent. Learners with disabilities will frequently face barriers such as social exclusion, peer rejection, and emotional isolation, all of which hinder their holistic development.

Kalambo Primary School will serve as a case study due to its commitment to inclusive enrolment policies. Preliminary observations and anecdotal evidence will suggest that, while physical and curriculum inclusion will be in place, many learners with disabilities will continue to experience weak social integration. In classrooms where teachers proactively facilitate peer interaction,

learners with disabilities will likely display greater participation, confidence, and a sense of belonging. Conversely, in less supportive environments, such learners will remain marginalized or disengaged.

This study will thus be positioned at the intersection of pedagogical practice and social development, seeking to generate context-specific insights into how teachers' actions can either support or hinder inclusive peer relationships.

1.3 Problem Statement

Despite Malawi's efforts to promote inclusive education through policies such as the National Strategy on Inclusive Education (2017–2022) and the National Policy Guidelines on Special Needs Education (2007), many children with disabilities continue to face significant challenges within the school system. Evidence suggests that policy commitments have not fully translated into effective inclusive practices at the classroom level.

A study by Kuper et al. (2018) revealed that in rural areas of Malawi, children with disabilities are frequently excluded, bullied, or ignored by their peers. The study further indicated that many teachers lack adequate training to effectively support learners with disabilities or to facilitate positive peer relationships. Similarly, a World Bank report (2017) noted that across 19 developing countries, only 48% of children with disabilities complete primary education, while approximately 30% never attend school at all, highlighting the global nature of the challenge.

These challenges are evident at Kalambo Primary School in Sungwi, where teachers contend with overcrowded classrooms, limited teaching and learning materials, and insufficient training in inclusive education practices. As a result, learners with disabilities often struggle to fully participate in classroom activities and to develop meaningful peer relationships.

1.4 Research Objectives

1.4.1 Main Objective

Exploring the roles of teachers in promoting peer relationships among disabled learners at Kalambo Primary School.

1.4.2 Specific Objectives

1. Identified specific pedagogical strategies that teachers employed to encourage interaction between disabled and non-disabled learners at kalambo primary school.
2. Examined how teachers' beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions about disability and inclusion will shaped peer engagement at kalambo primary school.
3. Investigated the institutional and cultural challenges teachers will faced when attempting to build socially inclusive classrooms at kalambo primary school.
4. Evaluated the perceived and actual impacts of teacher-led interventions on the peer experiences of learners with disabilities at kalambo primary school.
5. Assessed the level and quality of professional training and support teachers received to enable them to foster inclusive peer environments at kalambo primary school.

1.5 Research Questions

The study will address the following questions:

1. What specific strategies did teachers at Kalambo Primary School use to foster peer relationships among disabled and non-disabled learners?
2. How did teachers perceive their responsibilities in facilitating inclusive peer interactions at kalambo primary school?
3. What systemic and contextual challenges did teachers face in promoting social integration at kalambo primary school?
4. What impact did teacher efforts have on the lived social experiences of learners with disabilities at kalambo primary school?
5. What forms of training or support did teachers receive to enhance inclusive peer engagement at kalambo primary school?

1.6 Significance of the Study

For teachers, the study provided evidence-based strategies that can be applied to create more inclusive classroom environments. By engaging with the findings, teachers will develop a deeper understanding of how their attitudes, behaviors, and instructional practices influence the social experiences and peer relationships of learners with disabilities. This increased awareness will enable teachers to adopt more intentional approaches that promote acceptance, collaboration, and positive interaction among all learners.

At the school administration level, the study assisted in identifying gaps in existing professional development initiatives and institutional practices related to inclusive education. The findings guided school leaders in designing and implementing policies, support systems, and training programmers that foster inclusive peer cultures. By addressing structural and organizational barriers, school administrations will be better positioned to create environments that support both academic and social inclusion.

For educational policymakers, the study contributed to national and regional discussions on inclusive education by drawing attention to the often-overlooked dimension of social integration. While many policies emphasize access and physical inclusion, the results of this research may inform future policy development by underscoring the importance of emotional well-being, peer acceptance, and social support for learners with disabilities. This may lead to more comprehensive policies that promote holistic inclusion within schools.

Learners with disabilities and their families also stand to benefit from the study. By highlighting factors that influence inclusive peer relationships, the research aims to improve the overall school experience of learners with disabilities. Families will gain a clearer understanding of the conditions that contribute to a supportive and nurturing educational environment, enabling them to better advocate for their children's social and emotional needs.

Finally, the study will be valuable to future researchers by providing a strong foundation for further inquiry. It will offer insights that can support comparative and longitudinal studies across different educational contexts. Additionally, the research will open new avenues for exploring the intersection of pedagogy, disability studies, and social development, thereby enriching the broader body of knowledge on inclusive education.

1.7 Structure of the Report

1. Chapter One: Introduces the study, including background, problem statement, objectives, and significance.
2. Chapter Two: Reviews relevant literature and presents the theoretical framework.
3. Chapter Three: Outlines the methodology, research design, data collection, and ethical considerations.
4. Chapter Four: Presents and analyses data collected from teachers and students.

5. Chapter Five: Summarizes key findings, offers conclusions, and presents actionable recommendations.

1.8 Chapter Summary

This chapter has outlined the rationale and scope of the study, emphasizing the importance of teacher roles in promoting peer relationships among learners with disabilities. It has provided context, articulated the research problem, and introduced the main and specific objectives along with key research questions. The next chapter will present a detailed review of literature and theoretical perspectives that will frame the study

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

This chapter has presented a comprehensive review of existing literature related to the role of teachers in fostering peer relationships among disabled learners in inclusive primary school settings. The review focused on the conceptual understanding of inclusive education, peer relations, disability, and the teacher's role. It has also included an expanded empirical review of international and African-based studies identify challenges that teachers are likely to encounter, and summarized effective teacher-led interventions. Furthermore, it has outlined key theoretical frameworks that will inform the study's analytical lens. This review will serve to ground the research problem in academic discourse and justify the relevance of the study within the Malawian context, particularly at Kalambo Primary School. It will help to identify knowledge gaps that the study will seek to address.

2.2 Definition of Terms

2.2.1 Inclusive Education

Inclusive education refers to the practice of integrating learners with disabilities into mainstream classrooms, ensuring they have equitable access to the same educational opportunities as their peers. It will go beyond physical access to encompass full participation in social, emotional, and academic activities. UNESCO (2020) will emphasize that inclusion should be proactive, aiming to remove all barriers to learning and participation.

2.2.2 Peer Relations

Peer relations describes the quality and nature of interactions between learners, encompassing friendships, collaboration, support, conflict, and exclusion. In the context of inclusion, positive peer relationships will be viewed as vital for building a sense of belonging and engagement, particularly for learners with disabilities, who may otherwise experience isolation.

2.2.3 Disability

Disability will be defined as a condition resulting from the interaction between impairments and various environmental barriers. As articulated by the World Health Organization (2011), disability will not be seen purely as a medical issue but as a social construct, where the extent of exclusion often depends more on attitudes and institutional responses than on the impairment itself.

2.2.4 Teacher Role

Within inclusive education, the teacher's role has extend to being a facilitator of social relationships, a mediator of inclusive interactions, and a role model for acceptance and cooperation. Teachers will influence not only academic outcomes but also the social climate of the classroom, thereby affecting how learners relate to each other (Florian, 2011).

2.3 Empirical Review

2.3.1 Teacher Strategies for Fostering Inclusive Peer Relationships

A substantial body of literature highlights the central role teacher's play in shaping peer relationships in inclusive classrooms. Teachers are not merely facilitators of academic content but are key social architects who influence learners' attitudes, interactions, and acceptance of diversity (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002). Studies indicate that deliberate instructional strategies such as cooperative learning, peer tutoring, group work, and inclusive play activities promote positive interactions between learners with and without disabilities (Johnson & Johnson, 2009).

Cooperative learning has been widely identified as an effective strategy for fostering peer acceptance. When learners work in mixed-ability groups with clearly defined roles, opportunities for meaningful interaction increase, reducing stigma and social isolation of learners with disabilities (Gillies, 2016). Teachers who intentionally structure group tasks encourage interdependence, empathy, and mutual respect among learners. Similarly, peer-mediated

interventions have been shown to enhance social competence and friendship formation for learners with disabilities (Carter et al., 2015).

In African contexts, inclusive strategies are often influenced by large class sizes and limited resources. However, research suggests that even in low-resource settings, teachers who model inclusive behavior, use positive reinforcement, and address discriminatory language can significantly improve peer relationships (Miles & Singal, 2010). In Malawi, inclusive education policies emphasize learner participation and peer support as key components of social inclusion, placing teachers at the center of implementation (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2017).

2.3.2 Teachers' Perceptions of Their Responsibilities in Inclusive Peer Interactions

Teachers' perceptions and beliefs about inclusion strongly influence their classroom practices and the quality of peer relationships among learners. According to Bandura's social cognitive theory, teachers' self-efficacy affects their willingness to implement inclusive strategies and manage diverse classrooms (Bandura, 1997). Teachers who view inclusion as part of their professional responsibility are more likely to actively facilitate peer interactions and intervene in cases of exclusion or bullying.

Research shows that some teachers perceive social integration as secondary to academic instruction, resulting in limited attention to peer dynamics (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). Conversely, teachers who adopt a holistic understanding of education recognize social inclusion as essential to learners' overall development and well-being. Avramidis and Kalyva (2007) found that positive teacher attitudes toward disability were associated with greater peer acceptance of learners with disabilities.

In Malawi, teachers' perceptions are shaped by training, cultural beliefs, and policy awareness. While national inclusive education frameworks promote social participation, studies indicate that some teachers feel inadequately prepared to manage social inclusion due to limited professional development (Chavuta et al., 2021). This gap between policy expectations and classroom realities affects how teachers perceive and enact their responsibilities in facilitating inclusive peer interactions.

2.3.3 Systemic and Contextual Challenges in Promoting Social Integration

Despite policy commitments to inclusive education, teachers face numerous systemic and contextual challenges that hinder effective social integration. Common barriers identified in the literature include overcrowded classrooms, lack of teaching and learning materials, limited specialist support, and insufficient time to address individual learner needs (UNESCO, 2020).

In low-income countries, inclusive education often operates within constrained systems where teachers are expected to manage diverse needs without adequate resources or support structures (Singal, 2014). These challenges limit teachers' ability to monitor peer interactions closely and intervene effectively when exclusion occurs. Additionally, societal attitudes toward disability can influence peer behavior, making it more difficult for teachers to foster acceptance within the classroom (World Health Organization [WHO], 2011).

In the Malawian context, inclusive education implementation is further affected by shortages of trained special needs educators and limited collaboration between schools and support services (MoE, 2017). Teachers may also experience role strain as they balance curriculum demands with the social and emotional needs of learners with disabilities. These systemic challenges highlight the need for institutional support to complement individual teacher efforts.

2.3.4 Impact of Teacher Efforts on Learners' Lived Social Experiences

The lived social experiences of learners with disabilities are closely linked to teacher practices and classroom climate. Research consistently shows that inclusive environments where teachers actively promote respect and collaboration lead to improved self-esteem, sense of belonging, and peer acceptance among learners with disabilities (Kester 2009).

Teachers who establish clear norms against discrimination and model inclusive language create safe spaces where learners feel valued. Such environments reduce instances of bullying and social exclusion while encouraging positive peer interactions (Slee, 2018). Moreover, learners without disabilities benefit from inclusive classrooms through the development of empathy, social responsibility, and interpersonal skills (Peetsma, 2009).

Studies conducted in sub-Saharan Africa suggest that inclusive teacher practices positively influence learners' social participation, even where material resources are limited (Miles & Singal, 2010). In Malawi, learners with disabilities who experience supportive peer relationships are more

likely to attend school regularly and participate actively in classroom activities, underscoring the social importance of teacher-led inclusion efforts (Chavuta et al., 2021).

2.3.5 Teacher Training and Support for Enhancing Inclusive Peer Engagement

Teacher training and ongoing professional support are critical for strengthening inclusive peer engagement. Pre-service and in-service training programs that focus on inclusive pedagogy, disability awareness, and classroom management equip teachers with the skills needed to facilitate positive peer relationships (Forlin, 2010).

Research indicates that teachers who receive targeted training in inclusive education demonstrate greater confidence and effectiveness in managing diverse classrooms (Sharma et al., 2018). Professional development programs that include practical strategies, peer collaboration, and mentorship are particularly effective in supporting teachers' inclusive practices

In Malawi, while inclusive education is embedded in national policy, implementation gaps remain due to limited access to continuous professional development (MoE, 2017). Teachers often rely on informal support networks or short workshops, which may not sufficiently address the complexities of social inclusion. Strengthening institutional support through regular training, supervision, and collaboration with special needs professionals is therefore essential for enhancing inclusive peer engagement in primary schools.

2.7 Summary of the Literature Review

The reviewed literature demonstrates that teachers play a pivotal role in fostering inclusive peer relationships through deliberate strategies, positive attitudes, and supportive classroom environments. However, their efforts are shaped by systemic, contextual, and training-related factors. While inclusive education policies provide a strong foundation, effective social integration requires sustained teacher support and institutional commitment. This study builds on existing literature by exploring how these dynamics manifest within a specific primary school context, thereby contributing context-specific insights to inclusive education practice.

2.4 Theoretical Framework

2.4.1 Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977)

Social Learning Theory will suggest that learners acquire behaviors through observation, imitation, and reinforcement. In inclusive settings, teachers will function as primary models of behaviors. When they model respect, cooperation, and positive reinforcement for inclusive actions, peers will observe and likely emulate those behaviors. The concept of vicarious reinforcement where inclusive behaviors by one student is rewarded and witnessed by others will further support peer inclusion.

2.4.2 Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979)

Bronfenbrenner's theory will assert that multiple layers of environmental systems influence child development, from immediate (microsystem) to societal (macro system). In this context, the classroom will represent a critical microsystem, and the teacher will act as a key influencer within it. However, teachers will also be shaped by broader factors such as educational policy, cultural attitudes, and institutional norms. This framework will help explain how peer inclusion must be understood holistically shaped not just by individual teacher behaviors but also by systemic and cultural forces.

2.5 Chapter Summary

This chapter has critically reviewed literature on the essential role teachers will play in fostering peer relationships among disabled learners in inclusive primary schools. It will have introduced definitions for key terms, examined empirical findings from various global and regional contexts, and identified both effective interventions and enduring barriers. Studies will have shown that peer relationships, though natural in some settings, often require intentional facilitation, particularly where disabilities and social stigma are involved.

CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

This chapter presented the methodological framework that guided the study titled “The Role of

Teachers in Promoting Peer Relationships among Disabled Learners at Kalambo Primary School.” It outlined and justified the research design, approach, study site, target population, sampling techniques, data collection methods, instruments, procedures, data analysis strategy, trustworthiness measures, and ethical safeguards. The chapter also addressed the study's limitations and delimitations, ensuring transparency and academic integrity. The chosen methodology aimed to yield credible, context-rich insights into how teachers influenced peer interactions in inclusive educational environments.

3.2 Research Design

The study adopted a qualitative case study design. This design was appropriate for exploring a bounded, real-life phenomenon namely, the role of teachers in fostering peer relationships among disabled learners. The case study approach allowed for an in-depth examination of complex social processes as they naturally occurred within a specific context (Yin, 2014). It enabled the researcher to investigate not only teacher actions but also their underlying beliefs, institutional conditions, and the outcomes experienced by learners. The use of a single case Kalambo Primary School allowed for detailed documentation of contextual nuances that broader studies might overlook.

3.3 Research Approach

A qualitative research approach was employed because the study aimed to explore lived experiences, subjective perceptions, and socially constructed realities. Rather than seeking to quantify variables, the study focused on understanding how and why teachers acted in particular ways when facilitating peer interactions. This approach allowed for the collection of rich, narrative data that offered insights into teacher behavior's, learner experiences, and institutional culture. It was especially suitable for uncovering meanings behind inclusive practices and the subtle dynamics of social relationships within the classroom.

3.4 Research Setting

The research was conducted at Kalambo Primary School, located in the Southern Region of Malawi. This school was selected due to its established participation in Malawi's inclusive education policy. It enrolled learners with diverse disabilities physical, sensory, and cognitive within mainstream classrooms, making it a relevant site for investigating how inclusion was enacted beyond policy into practice.

Additionally, Kalambo teaching staff included both general and special needs educators, which enabled a comparative understanding of different teaching strategies. The school's reputation for inclusive efforts made it an ideal model for exploring both successes and challenges associated with promoting peer relationships among diverse learners.

3.5 Study Population

The target population consisted of individuals directly involved in or affected by the process of inclusive education and peer interaction. These included:

1. Teachers assigned to inclusive classrooms, as they served as the primary facilitators of peer engagement.
2. Learners with disabilities enrolled in inclusive classes (particularly upper primary), who offered first-hand perspectives on their social experiences.
3. School administrators, such as the Head Teacher and Special Needs Education (SNE) Coordinator, who provided institutional and policy-level viewpoints.

3.6 Sampling Techniques

Sampling is a method used in research and statistics to select a subset from a larger population so that conclusions about the population can be made efficiently and accurately. The researcher used a purposive sampling technique to select participants with rich knowledge relevant to the research problem.

Sample Size

1. 10 teachers with different levels of experience in inclusive education, ensuring a diversity of pedagogical styles and beliefs;
2. 5 learners with disabilities from Standard 5 to 8, selected based on their ability to communicate their experiences and observations;
3. 2 administrators, including the Head Teacher and the SNE Coordinator, to gain a leadership and policy implementation perspective.

3.7 Data Collection Methods

Multiple data collection methods were employed to ensure methodological triangulation, which enhanced the credibility and richness of the findings.

1. Semi-Structured Interviews

These were conducted with teachers and administrators to explore their understanding of inclusive education, specific strategies used to promote peer relationships, and challenges faced. The semistructured format allowed flexibility for follow-up questions based on emerging themes.

This triangulated approach ensured a more complete picture of the phenomena under investigation.

2. Focus group discussion

This was a structured discussion with the purpose of stimulating conversation around a specific topic. A facilitator who posed questions led focus group discussions and the participants gave their thoughts and options. The advantage of focus groups was that they gave the possibility to cross check one individual's opinion gathered. A well-organized and facilitated FDG was more than a question and answer session. In a group, situation members tended to be more open and the dynamics within the group and the interactions enriched the quality of information needed.

3.8 Research Instruments

1. Interview Guide

This guide included open-ended questions organized around major themes teaching practices, beliefs about inclusion, peer facilitation, and institutional support. It was a face-to-face interview that was conducted during the study and this helped to get first-hand information and provided the chance to respondents where there was a need to clarify with follow up questions.

2. Focus group Protocol

This included participatory prompts such as drawings, scenarios, or picture cards to make it accessible for learners with varying communication abilities. All instruments were pre-tested at a similar inclusive school to refine content, language, and structure for clarity and appropriateness.

3.9 Data Collection Procedures

The data collection process unfolded over a period of four weeks. The researcher began by securing necessary approvals from the Ministry of Education and local school authorities. Written consent was obtained from adult participants, and assent was secured from learners, with parental or guardian approval.

The researcher then scheduled interviews and FGDs at mutually convenient times. Interviews and FGDs were audio-recorded with consent and later transcribed and translated into English where needed. Observations were conducted unobtrusively to minimize the Hawthorne effect, and observational notes were triangulated with verbal data for richer analysis.

3.10 Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, a systematic method of identifying patterns across qualitative datasets. The following steps were followed:

1. Familiarization: The researcher read all transcripts thoroughly to gain a broad sense of the content.
2. Theme Generation: Codes were grouped into broader themes such as teacher modelling, peer support strategies, and institutional constraints.
3. Interpretation: Themes were interpreted in connection with the research questions and conceptual frameworks (Bandura's Social Learning Theory and Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory).

3.11 Trustworthiness of the Study

To ensure the rigor and credibility of the findings, the study employed multiple strategies:

1. Triangulation: Use of interviews, FGDs, and observations to validate data across methods.
2. Member Checking: Participants were invited to review preliminary interpretations to confirm accuracy.
3. Peer Debriefing: Discussions with academic supervisors and peers helped identify researcher bias.
4. Audit Trail: A detailed record of research decisions and processes enhanced transparency.
5. Thick Description: Context-rich explanations supported transferability to other inclusive educational settings.

3.12 Ethical Considerations

Ethical integrity was a central priority throughout the study. The following measures were put in place:

1. Informed Consent and Assent: Participants were briefed about the study's purpose, procedures, and their rights.
2. Confidentiality: Pseudonyms were used, and all data were stored securely.
3. Voluntary Participation: All involvement was non-coercive, with participants free to withdraw at any time.
4. Child Protection: FGDs with learners were conducted in safe spaces, with the presence of a trusted adult.
5. Approval and Clearance: Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant educational and research ethics boards in Malawi.

3.13 Limitations of the Study

1. While the study was designed to ensure methodological rigor, it was subject to the following limitations:
2. Context-Specific Findings: Results from Kalambo Primary School were not generalizable to all schools in Malawi.
3. Time Constraints: Limited time restricted the frequency and depth of classroom observations.
4. Cultural and Linguistic Barriers: Differences in language and cultural norms affected the depth of data shared by participants.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents a detailed analysis and discussion of the findings of the study on the role of teachers in promoting peer relationships among learners with disabilities at Kalambo Primary School. The findings are drawn from qualitative data collected through semi-structured interviews with teachers and administrators, focus group discussions with learners with disabilities, and classroom observations.

4.2 Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Understanding the demographic characteristics of respondents is essential, as age and gender influence social interaction, classroom dynamics, and peer relationship formation. The section below presents background information on learners with disabilities who participated in the study.

4.2.1 Number of Learners with Disabilities Involved in the Study

The study purposively selected learners with disabilities from upper primary classes (Standards 5–8), as these learners were considered mature enough to articulate their experiences and perceptions regarding peer relationships.

Table 1: Number of Learners with Disabilities Participating in the Study

Category of respondents	Number
Learners with disabilities	5
Teachers	10
School administrator's	2
Total Respondents	17

The table shows that learners with disabilities formed a significant focus group, supported by teachers and administrators who provided professional and institutional perspectives. This triangulation strengthened the credibility of the findings by capturing multiple viewpoints on the same phenomenon

4.2.2 Age Distribution of Learners with Disabilities

Age plays a critical role in peer interaction, as older learners tend to be more socially aware and sensitive to inclusion and exclusion. The learners involved in the study ranged between 11 and 15 years.

Table 2: Age Distribution of Learners with Disabilities

AGE RANGE	NUMBER OF LEARNERS
11-12	2
13-14	2
15 Above	1

The findings indicate that most learners were in early to mid-adolescence, a stage characterized by heightened peer influence and a strong desire for acceptance. This age group is particularly vulnerable to social exclusion but also highly responsive to teacher-led interventions that promote cooperation and empathy.

4.2.3 Gender Distribution of Learners with Disabilities

Gender differences may influence how learners experience inclusion, peer support, and discrimination. The study ensured representation of both male and female learners.

Figure 1: Gender Distribution of Learners with Disabilities

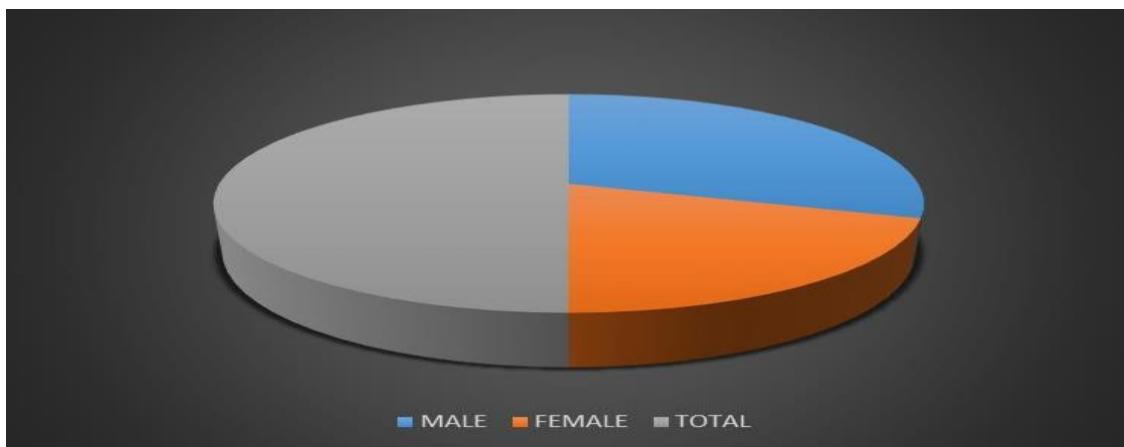


Figure 1 Gender Distribution of Learners with Disabilities

The relatively balanced gender representation allowed the study to capture diverse experiences. Teachers noted that boys were more likely to experience overt teasing, while girls were more prone to subtle forms of social exclusion, such as being ignored during group activities.

4.3 Presentation of Research Findings

Teacher Strategies for Promoting Peer Relationships

One of the central findings of this study is that teachers play a deliberate and active role in shaping peer relationships within inclusive classrooms. Their strategies directly influence whether learners with disabilities feel accepted, valued, or marginalized. Effective teacher practices can reduce social isolation, foster empathy, and promote a sense of belonging, which are critical for both academic success and emotional well-being. The findings revealed that teachers implement

multiple, interconnected strategies to encourage positive interactions among learners, highlighting their central role in promoting an inclusive classroom culture.

Use of Cooperative Learning and Group Work

Teachers widely reported using group work as a primary strategy to encourage interaction between learners with and without disabilities. Group activities were intentionally structured to mix learners of different abilities, ensuring that learners with disabilities were not segregated or left out. The deliberate assignment of diverse roles within groups, such as timekeeper, reader, or group leader, enabled learners to contribute meaningfully according to their strengths, thereby increasing confidence and engagement. A teacher explained: "When learners work in groups, they learn to help each other. I make sure every child has a role, so no one feels useless."

Classroom observations confirmed that structured group work helped learners with disabilities participate actively, and in some cases, these learners demonstrated leadership or problem-solving skills that had previously been overlooked. This approach aligns with Johnson and Johnson's cooperative learning principles, which emphasize positive interdependence, individual accountability, and shared responsibility. By structuring interactions carefully, teachers created opportunities for learners to develop both social and cognitive skills while reducing social stigma associated with disability.

Peer Tutoring and Buddy Systems

Another common strategy was the use of peer tutoring and buddy systems. Teachers paired learners with disabilities with peers who demonstrated patience, empathy, and cooperative behavior. This pairing was designed to support academic learning while also fostering social connections. By interacting regularly with a supportive peer, learners with disabilities were able to build trust, feel socially included, and develop friendships that extended beyond formal lessons,

An administrator noted: "The buddy system helps learners with disabilities feel supported, especially during lessons and break time."

Learners reported that these arrangements provided not only academic assistance but also a sense of belonging and safety. From a theoretical perspective, this practice aligns with Bandura's Social Learning Theory, which posits that individuals learn behaviors and social norms by observing and modeling others. By witnessing inclusive behavior from their peers, learners were more likely to

replicate kindness, patience, and cooperation in other contexts, fostering a more inclusive classroom climate.

Promotion of Social-Emotional Learning (SEL)

Teachers also integrated social-emotional learning into daily classroom routines to enhance empathy, respect, and collaboration. Activities included discussions on kindness, teamwork, and handling differences, as well as storytelling and moral lessons that directly addressed stigma and discriminatory behavior. These interventions aimed to cultivate emotional intelligence, improve conflict resolution skills, and support pro-social behavior among all learners. One teacher remarked: "We talk about differences and remind learners that everyone deserves respect."

Learners confirmed that these discussions helped reduce teasing, bullying, and social exclusion. SEL activities were especially impactful because they encouraged reflection on personal attitudes and behaviors, equipping learners with tools to navigate complex social dynamics. The integration of SEL illustrates how teacher-facilitated interventions can create emotionally safe environments that enhance both social integration and academic participation.

Teachers' Perceptions and Attitudes toward Inclusion

The study also explored teachers' perceptions and attitudes toward inclusive education. Most teachers expressed positive attitudes, recognizing that peer relationships are essential for holistic learner development and long-term social integration. They acknowledged that positive peer interactions support not only academic outcomes but also emotional well-being, self-esteem, and social competence. However, some teachers expressed uncertainty due to limited training in inclusive practices: "I believe in inclusion, but sometimes I don't know the best way to manage peer interactions."

Teachers who had received professional development in inclusive education were more confident and proactive in facilitating peer relationships. They were able to implement structured strategies, manage classroom dynamics effectively, and respond to challenges in real time. These findings highlight the importance of ongoing teacher training and capacity building to ensure that inclusion is both meaningful and effective. Continuous professional development can equip teachers with

the skills, knowledge, and confidence needed to foster inclusive classroom environments where all learners feel valued and supported.

Challenges Faced by Teachers in Promoting Peer Relationships

Teachers expressed concern about their limited preparation in handling social inclusion, particularly peer interactions involving learners with disabilities. “We were trained on how to teach subjects, but not really on how to manage relationships among learners with disabilities.

Sometimes you see a child being isolated, but you are not sure what strategy to use.” (Teacher 3).

Another teacher highlighted the gap between theory and practice: “Inclusive education was mentioned during training, but it was mostly theory. In class, managing group work with learners who have disabilities is challenging because we were not shown practical ways of doing it.”(Teacher 1). These responses illustrated those inadequate training limited teachers’ confidence and effectiveness in facilitating inclusive peer relationships.

Teachers reported that large class sizes constrained their ability to closely monitor peer interactions and address social exclusion. “With more than sixty learners in one class, it becomes difficult to notice when a learner with a disability is being left out during group work.”(Teacher 5) Another participant added: “Sometimes you only realize a child is isolated when it is too late, because your attention is divided between teaching, discipline, and marking.”(Teacher 2)

Cultural Beliefs and Stigma

The study revealed that negative cultural beliefs about disability influenced peer relationships within the school environment. “Some learners come from homes where disability is seen as a curse. They bring those beliefs to school, and it affects how they treat their friends.”(Teacher 4). A learner with a disability shared a personal experience: “Others laugh at me and say I am not normal. Sometimes I just sit alone because I feel ashamed.”(Learner with Disability)

4.7 Discussion of Findings

The findings demonstrated that teachers acted as critical social facilitators within inclusive classroom environments. Beyond their instructional role, teachers actively shaped peer relationships by intentionally structuring learning activities that required cooperation, interaction, and shared responsibility among learners of different abilities. With group work, peer tutoring, and

buddy systems, teachers created social spaces where learners with disabilities were not only physically present but meaningfully engaged in peer interaction. These structured activities reduced social distance, challenged stereotypes, and encouraged learners to recognize the abilities and contributions of their peers with disabilities.

Furthermore, teachers influenced peer relationships through consistent modelling of inclusive behavior. By demonstrating respect, patience, fairness, and acceptance toward learners with disabilities, teachers set clear behavioural expectations for the entire class. Learners observed these behaviors and replicated them in their interactions with peers. This process of observational learning confirmed the relevance of Social Learning Theory, as learners adopted inclusive behaviors not through direct instruction alone but through imitation of teacher actions. Positive reinforcement of inclusive behavior further strengthened this learning process, leading to sustained peer acceptance and cooperation.

In addition to structured activities and modelling, teachers provided emotional guidance that supported positive peer interactions. Teachers addressed discriminatory behavior, facilitated discussions on empathy and respect, and created safe classroom environments where learners felt emotionally secure. This emotional guidance helped learners develop social awareness and interpersonal skills necessary for healthy peer relationships. Learners with disabilities benefited from this supportive environment by gaining confidence, self-esteem, and a sense of belonging, which in turn encouraged active participation in classroom and social activities.

The interaction between teacher practices, learner behavior, and the broader institutional context strongly supported Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory. At the microsystem level, daily interactions between teachers and learners directly influenced peer relationships. At the mesosystem level, the relationship between classroom practices and school leadership support affected the consistency of inclusive strategies. At the ecosystem and macro system levels, factors such as school resources, teacher training opportunities, educational policies, and cultural beliefs about disability shaped the effectiveness of teacher interventions. This interconnectedness demonstrated that peer inclusion was not solely dependent on individual teacher effort but was influenced by multiple environmental systems.

Overall, the findings confirmed that inclusive peer relationships were the result of deliberate teacher action within supportive institutional structures. Teachers acted as bridges between policy and practice, translating inclusive education principles into everyday social experiences for learners. When institutional support was limited, teachers' efforts were constrained, reinforcing the importance of systemic investment in inclusive education. The combined application of Social Learning Theory and Ecological Systems Theory provided a comprehensive framework for understanding how teacher behavior, learner interaction, and environmental context collectively shaped peer relationships among learners with disabilities.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the conclusions and recommendations of the study on the role of teachers in promoting peer relationships among learners with disabilities at Kalambo Primary School. The chapter was developed based on the findings discussed in Chapter Four and aligned with the study objectives and research questions. It also outlines recommendations for teachers, school administrators, policymakers, and other stakeholders, as well as suggestions for future research.

5.2 Summary of Findings Based on the Research Objectives

5.2.1 Strategies Used by Teachers to Promote Peer Relationships

The study found that teachers at Kalambo Primary School employed deliberate and structured strategies to promote peer relationships among learners with disabilities. These strategies included cooperative learning, group work, peer tutoring, and the use of buddy systems. Teachers intentionally grouped learners of different abilities to create opportunities for interaction, cooperation, and mutual support.

The findings showed that cooperative learning enabled learners with disabilities to actively participate in classroom activities. When teacher's assigned specific roles during group tasks, learners with disabilities felt valued and capable, which improved peer acceptance. Peer tutoring and buddy systems further strengthened social interaction by fostering one-on-one support and

friendship formation. Overall, the findings demonstrated that peer relationships developed more effectively when teachers intentionally facilitated inclusive interactions.

5.2.2 Teachers' Attitudes, Beliefs, and Perceptions toward Inclusion

The study revealed that most teachers held positive attitudes toward inclusive education and recognized the importance of peer relationships in the holistic development of learners with disabilities. Teachers perceived social inclusion as part of their professional responsibility and acknowledged that academic success was closely linked to positive peer interaction.

However, the findings also indicated that teachers' confidence and effectiveness varied depending on their level of training. Teachers with prior exposure to inclusive education training were more proactive in promoting peer relationships, while those with limited training expressed uncertainty.

These findings suggested that positive attitudes alone were insufficient without adequate skills and professional support.

5.2.3 Institutional and Cultural Challenges Faced by Teachers

The study established that teachers faced significant institutional and cultural challenges in promoting peer relationships. Overcrowded classrooms limited teachers' ability to monitor interactions and provide individualized support. Inadequate teaching and learning materials further constrained inclusive practices.

Cultural beliefs and negative societal attitudes toward disability contributed to stigma, teasing, and exclusion of learners with disabilities. These challenges placed additional pressure on teachers, who were required to address both classroom dynamics and broader societal perceptions. The findings demonstrated that institutional and cultural factors strongly influenced the success of teacher-led inclusion efforts.

5.2.4 Impact of Teacher-Led Interventions on Peer Experiences of Learners with Disabilities

The findings showed that teacher-led interventions had a significant positive impact on the peer experiences of learners with disabilities. Learners reported increased acceptance by peers, improved friendships, and reduced feelings of isolation.

Teachers observed that learners with disabilities became more confident, participated more actively in classroom discussions, and engaged more freely in-group activities. Improved peer relationships also contributed to better classroom behavior and emotional well-being. These findings confirmed the critical role of teachers in shaping inclusive peer environments.

5.2.5 Training and Support Available to Teachers

The study found that teachers received limited training and professional support related to inclusive education and peer relationship facilitation. Most training opportunities focused on theoretical aspects of inclusion rather than practical classroom strategies.

Teachers expressed a need for continuous professional development, mentorship, and access to special needs education specialists. The findings highlighted the importance of institutional investment in teacher capacity building to strengthen inclusive education practices.

5.2.6 Influence of Classroom Structure and Teaching Practices on Peer Interaction The study revealed that classroom structure and teaching practices significantly influenced peer interaction. Overcrowded classrooms and rigid seating arrangements limited opportunities for interaction and inclusion. Conversely, well-organized classrooms with structured group activities and inclusive lesson planning promoted positive peer engagement. Teachers who intentionally planned lessons with inclusive strategies created more opportunities for cooperation and participation among learners.

5.2.7 Influence of Peer Relationships on Academic Participation and Psychosocial Development

The findings established that positive peer relationships significantly influenced the academic participation and psychosocial development of learners with disabilities. Learners who experienced peer acceptance demonstrated increased motivation, improved classroom participation, and greater confidence. Psychosocially, positive peer relationships enhanced self-esteem, emotional well-being, and resilience. These findings confirmed that peer relationships were central to both academic and emotional development.

5.3 Conclusions of the Study

Based on the findings, the study concluded that teachers played a central role in promoting peer relationships among learners with disabilities. Their instructional strategies, attitudes, and modelling of inclusive behavior significantly shaped peer interactions.

The study further concluded that structured strategies such as cooperative learning, peer tutoring, and buddy systems were effective in fostering inclusive peer relationships. Teacher-led interventions enhanced learner confidence, social acceptance, and classroom participation.

However, the study also concluded that institutional and cultural challenges limited the effectiveness of inclusive practices. Inadequate training, overcrowded classrooms, limited resources, and societal stigma hindered teachers' efforts. These challenges highlighted the need for stronger institutional and policy support for inclusive education.

5.4 Recommendations of the Study

5.4.1 Recommendations to Teachers

Teachers should consistently implement inclusive strategies such as cooperative learning, peer tutoring, and buddy systems. They should integrate social-emotional learning into daily lessons and continue to model inclusive behavior to promote respect and acceptance.

5.4.2 Recommendations to School Administration

School administrators should organize regular professional development programs focusing on practical inclusive teaching strategies. Efforts should be made to reduce class sizes, provide inclusive learning materials, and strengthen collaboration between general and special needs educators.

5.4.3 Recommendations to the Ministry of Education and Policymakers

The Ministry of Education should strengthen inclusive education policies by providing adequate funding, teacher training, and monitoring mechanisms. Teacher education curricula should include practical training on peer relationship facilitation.

5.4.4 Recommendations to Parents and the Community

Community sensitization programs should be implemented to address negative cultural beliefs surrounding disability. Parents and community leaders should collaborate with schools to support inclusive practices.

5.5 Areas for Further Research

Future studies should be conducted in multiple schools and districts to enhance generalizability. Longitudinal studies should be undertaken to examine long-term impacts of teacher-led interventions. Mixed-method approaches could also complement qualitative findings.

5.6 Contribution of the Study

The study contributed to inclusive education literature by highlighting the critical role of teachers in promoting peer relationships among learners with disabilities in a Malawian primary school context. It emphasized that meaningful inclusion requires intentional teacher action, institutional support, and community involvement.

Chapter Summary

This chapter presented a comprehensive summary of findings, conclusions, and recommendations of the study. The findings showed that teachers played a pivotal role in promoting peer relationships among learners with disabilities. Despite existing challenges, teacher-led interventions positively influenced academic participation and psychosocial development. The chapter marked the conclusion of the research project.

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