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## Inclusive communication in social work: A Malawi practitioner's perspective on sign language and braille

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### ABSTRACT

Communication is the backbone of a very profession, so it is in social work. Effective communication is at the very heart of the social work profession. It is the key to building trust, understanding, and strong rapport with clients. It can be verbal, nonverbal or any way a client can convey information. A social worker has no right to choose a client to work with because they are there to serve people. Social work must be an important profession; it needs a huge jump of flexibility and adaptation each time. Social work education and practice in Malawi have neglected the importance of Sign language and Braille communication skills, resulting in a significant gap in service delivery. Privacy is also the center for social work, but social workers involve a third party when working with clients with hearing and visual impairments in the form of interpreters. On the other hand, it intimidates the ethical privacy and confidentiality that a client and social worker deserves. This article is about the importance of acquiring sign language and braille skills as social workers in order to fully serve a community of people with hearing and visual impairments without a third-party interpreter who intimidates the social worker and client privacy. This is personal experiences of a Malawian social worker and special education expert who has worked in general social work practice including social welfare practice, special needs and hospital social work practice. This is purely personal reflections based on work experience working in hospital and social welfare service provision settings.

**KEY TERMS:** braille, Malawi, Sign language, social work practice, social work curriculum,

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## INTRODUCTION

Social work is multifaceted, operating in different settings of policy making, research, disability, gerontology, health care, early childhood development, education, counselling, human rights, law and other aspects. In Malawi, social work experiences are undocumented, which makes the practice silent and unrecognized. Just as how diverse social work is, the clients are diverse too it means clients with special needs are attended too. A question may be, how do social workers in Malawi handle a case that involves a client who has hearing or visual impairments? Obviously a third party in the form of an interpreter will be involved. But will it not interfere with privacy and confidentiality of social work values? This area has been normalized but it needs attention. This brief is based on the writer's personal experiences who worked with persons living with disabilities in Hospital and social welfare settings in Malawi.

## HISTORY OF SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION IN MALAWI

Social work education in Malawi dates back to 1964 when Magomero College, a training institution under the then Ministry of Local Government, introduced a certificate program in community development mainly targeting Malawi Young Pioneers to effectively implement community development projects. The Young Pioneers were an elite wing of the League of Malawi Youth, a nationalist movement of the then ruling Malawi Congress Party (MCP) (Phiri, 2000). In 1966 the government established the Ministry of Community and Social Development that inherited Magomero College and the certificate course. The growing need for social welfare services within the communities led to the incorporation of more social work modules into the curriculum and in 1978, the College introduced a fully-fledged certificate program in social welfare that produced Social Welfare Assistants (SWAs). During this period, the professional cadre of social welfare officers were drawn from sociology and other social sciences and sent for professional training at Swansea University in Wales. In 2006, the Catholic University of Malawi introduced a four-year bachelor's degree program in social work. This was followed by DMI-Saint-John of God the Baptist University's (DMI-SJGBU) opening of a school of social work with three bachelors' degree programs, namely Community Development, Human Resource Management and Social Work, in 2010. However, the Ministry of Gender, Children, Disability and Social Welfare (MoGCDSW) had little said on the curriculum, these being private universities. The Ministry, therefore collaborated with the University of Malawi, United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and United States of America Aid (USAID) to introduce a social work degree program at Chancellor College, the first intake of which was in 2013. Apart from these programs, there are also some colleges that offer rural and community development courses examined by United Kingdom-based bodies. Some private universities including Blantyre International University, share world Open University and Exploits University have also introduced four-year bachelor's degree programs in rural and community development.

In Malawi, social work practice has been largely influenced by Western approaches, neglecting the unique cultural context and needs of the African population (Wa Thiongo, 1986). The absence of an indigenous knowledge base and the wholesale adaptation of Western values, knowledge, and philosophy have created a lack of goodness of fit between social work practice and the needs of the people (Kambala, 2024). Due to western approaches, social work education curriculums have also staggered to incorporate concepts that can fully address the needs of people. For example, concepts of special skills in sign language and Braille.

Social work education curricula in Malawi do not incorporate the essence of learning the actual sign language or braille to work with these groups of special needs, it only has a theorized course. Which makes it harder for social workers to communicate with clients with special needs. Mupedziswa (2020), Spitzer and Twikirize (2014) agree with these notions that the absence of an indigenous knowledge base and the wholesale adaptation of western values, knowledge and philosophy have created a drift in social work practice and the needs of the people. Most literature prescribed in schools of social work is foreign, emanating from Europe, America, Australia and other countries in the developed world. There is a misguided notion that knowledge from the West is transferable and suitable for problem-solving in developing societies without adaptation to their own cultures and reality. This shows Malawi does not have a stand-alone social work indigenous curriculum.

Currently, only the Catholic university of Malawi, which is the first university to offer a social work bachelor's degree in 2006, has a social work education curriculum with few slots for students to harness special needs skills for social workers. Catholic University also extended sign language opportunity to nursing program, which shows it value in inclusive effective communication in different disciplines. University of Malawi (chancellor college), DMI, and other universities that offer social work education have concepts of special needs theory with no actual skills of sign language and braille learnt in their curriculums that has resulted in communication barriers in social work in practice

## METHODOLOGY

In this article, I have shared my lived experience of being a social worker who is fluent in sign language and

braille followed by my reflections and concluded with history of social work in Malawi, the significance of special needs skills, challenges faced and recommendations for social work curriculums in Malawi. In writing this article, I asked myself these questions: What is my lived experience practicing social work in relation to special needs? How can sign language and braille enhance social work practice? What are the challenges faced due to lack of sign language skills? To answer these questions, I provided a detailed narrative of my lived experience. I had time to analyze my narratives and reflect on them. This autoethnographic approach has been preferred to demonstrate my standpoint as insider and to acknowledge the role of experiential knowledge in social work in relation to acquiring special needs skills such as sign language and Braille. As Nabudere (2005, p. 3) said, “An African philosophy of life that guides the thinking and actions of Africans must therefore be found in their lived historical experiences and not from philosophical abstractions that have very little meaning in actual life”. The method also allows anecdotal information to be used to understand social issues especially where data collection is not possible because of financial or time constraints (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). However, I acknowledge that autoethnography has a potential for personal bias as noted by Holman (2005). I have addressed this shortcoming by providing history of social work education in Malawi before presenting my lived experiences. While autoethnography provides an opportunity to use one’s experience to contribute to literature, it also exposes the individual’s personal and sometimes private life. As an author, I took a lot of time to revise my lived experiences to ensure that I shared what was useful for this article and what I was comfortable with. I am conscious that my work will be useful for readers in Malawi, Africa and globally.

### **Lived experiences of social work in relation to special needs**

I was born and raised in Malawi. With little or no career mentorship path, Thyolo secondary school gave me my career aspirations. The first day of secondary school shaped my life’s path. My desk mate was deaf, and although I couldn’t communicate with him initially, his warmth and resilience inspired me to learn sign language. At just 12 years old, I led the school’s sign language club, promoting inclusion and understanding among students. However, I soon realized that beyond my school’s efforts, the broader education system in Malawi lacked the resources, policies, and teacher training necessary to support students with disabilities effectively. This gap in inclusive education sparked my passion for advocating for systemic change to ensure every child, regardless of ability, has access to quality education. With this conviction, I pursued a bachelor’s in social work minor special needs education. I dedicated each holiday for internships in different social work and special education organizations. I have worked with street connected children, primary schools with mixed ability students, sign language interpretation at Queen Elizabeth central hospital audiology department and part time interpretations, pediatric oncology social worker and I am also a co-founder of Anzathu charity initiative for the deaf where we focus on providing hearing wellness through provision of hearing aids and awareness and also empowering deaf youths through vocational trainings. Anzathu means a friend in Chichewa language (Malawian native language). we collaborated with Queen Elizabeth central hospital audiology department and Cambridge global health partnerships. Working in hospitals has shown me how much communication break down between medical personnel and patients who are deaf negatively affects service delivery. As a social worker I noted a need for many professionals, not just social workers to acquire these skills in order to fully create an inclusive environment for all. An interpreter may be a third part in a room where privacy for two was supposed to be utilized. With my passion for social work and special education, I won the prestigious US government undergraduate exchange program where I was equipped with international social work practice and American sign language at west liberty university in west Virginia state. One of the best experiences I loved about their social work curriculum is the flexibility to get courses of your choice. Students in social work are allowed to minor in any course of their choice unlike how other universities are limited in Malawi. This flexibility convinced me to return for my Master of Education which I am currently pursuing.

### **Author’s reflections**

As I reflect on my experiences as a social worker and special needs expert in Malawi, I acknowledge the diversity of interests within the field. Some may not focus on special needs, and I respect that. I firmly believe that incorporating these skills into our curricula and practice is essential for the growth of social work in Malawi. I am still eager to see Malawian social work thriving by recognizing the need to include these skills in our curricula as well as in practice. Some people did not recognize the need during school period until they met people who needed this service during practice, yet in other countries such as America, west liberty university, the flexibility of the curricula is open enough to let social workers pursue what they will happily practice. in addition, they have lessons on other special skills a social worker must have to serve specific people. Such lessons bring about awareness of such areas that are less attended in social work. Being a new profession in Malawi, there is a need to improve starting from education curricula up to practice, research and beyond as it is still evolving. With my short experience in social work and special education, I have learnt the interconnectedness of social work with many

disciplines such as medicine, education, leadership and many more. Therefore, if you choose to become a social worker, you must be open enough to equip yourself with skills that will serve a diverse need of people with or without disabilities.

As a social worker proficient in sign language and Braille, I've witnessed the transformative power of trust and rapport in working with individuals with disabilities. Social work's success relies heavily on trust, and I'm committed to contributing to the growth of this profession in Malawi. Upon completing my master's studies in the USA, I plan to return to Malawi and join the academia sector, focusing on social work education, special needs education, and research. While I recognize that I cannot single-handedly bring about change, with collaboration I'm confident that my contributions will positively impact someone's experience in social work practice positively.

This article has been documented based on personal experiences of a Malawian social worker and special education expert who has worked in general social work practice including social welfare practice and hospital social work practice. This is purely personal reflections based on professional experience working in special needs, hospital and social welfare service provision settings. To come up with this paper, the author has documented her experiences working in social work practice in reference to other Malawian and global social work authors. Social work curriculums from different universities in Malawi were consulted. This article was submitted to African journal of social work for publication.

## **Strengths of sign language & braille skills in social work**

### **Enhanced communication**

A client is the most important person in a room and must be heard. A social worker will never exist without a client. Therefore, a social worker needs to be fully equipped with special needs skills like sign language and braille in order to fully communicate when the client needs the service. By being able to communicate effectively through sign language, social workers can build stronger relationships with their clients who have hearing or visual impairments. This can lead to better understanding of the individual's needs, preferences, and goals, ultimately resulting in more personalized and effective support. Sign language is not just a means of communication; it's a cultural identity and a symbol of inclusivity. Social workers with sign language skills can build stronger relationships with their clients.

### **Respect to ethical privacy**

Globally, many social workers do not have skills in sign language or Braille which makes it a need to have an interpreter whenever a client with impairments needs attention. An interpreter who does not possess social work skills acts as a third party there by intimidating the privacy of the clients and affecting the whole case process. Social work functions in micro, mezzo and macro levels (Abur, 2021). Regardless of the level, clients with hearing or visual impairments will feel more respected if the service provider understands their mode of communication. It brings a sense of security.

### **Increased accessibility**

Uniqueness is also the cornerstone of the social work profession. Being different is also what brings about diversity in the profession. Just like how each case is treated with uniqueness regardless of the similarities, so does a client with hearing impairments be helped with the unique sign language. Having skills in sign language increases the accessibility of social work services for individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing. This allows them to receive the assistance and support they need without barriers or communication challenges, ultimately promoting inclusion and equality.

### **Cultural competency**

Inclusive practice is the understanding of special needs that a client needs to ensure success in social work practice. Proficiency in sign language and Braille demonstrates a commitment to cultural competency and respect for diverse communication styles. Social workers who are able to communicate in sign language and braille show their dedication to inclusive practices and understanding the unique needs of individuals with hearing and visual impairments. This is in line with Earls Larrison, and Korr (2013) who recognizes the need for cultural and indigenous practice in social work.

## **CHALLENGES**

### **Lack of special needs concept in social work education curriculums**

In Malawi, only the Catholic university of Malawi offers special needs education where sign language and braille courses are delivered. Mind you, it is only available in the faculty of education. Recently, social work program at the Catholic University of Malawi permitted social workers to minor in special education optionally. It means very minimal slots are available to accommodate social work students who minor in special educational needs. If Malawian social work institutions could recognize this importance. The story for social work practice in Malawi will become more of inclusive practice.

### **Limited research in social work practice experiences**

Malawian social workers' voices and practice stories have largely remained undocumented and untold. The many good works and things that social workers are doing in enhancing lives of citizens, communities and society remains largely unknown and unrecognized. To address the silence, engaging in research on areas that need further attention in the practice will increase visibility of social workers in Malawi. In every profession, research is what keeps a profession updated. Research brings about change, restructuring of strategies and permanent dismissal of other programs. With the sense of limited literature of social work practice experiences, lack of effective communication towards clients with special needs hasn't been documented. A problem not documented; it does not exist (Kambala, 2024). This has negatively affected Malawian social work inclusive practice experiences.

### **Prioritizing other skills**

Social workers prioritize other skills or training over sign language or braille skills by considering it less essential. Just like how each person has the right to choose skills or career to obtain according to interest, sign language is taken to be a stressing course there by being abandoned (Ngwira, 2016). Besides that, sign language and braille are taken to be areas of expertise for special education teachers.

### **Limited awareness on significance of special needs skills in social work practice**

Sign language and Braille courses are assumed to be a portion for teachers with an idea that teachers are the ones to encounter one on one interactions in classrooms. Yet those hard of hearing or visually impaired students will need a platform to perform their professional and intellectual skills in industry settings. They end up being in offices where none of the institution members is competent in sign language or braille. Worse still, the institutions have no inclusion policies. They end up being dysfunctional regardless of having skills (Soni & Ngwira, 2022). There is a lack of awareness and understanding of the importance of sign language and Braille in social work practice.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **Incorporating special needs skills in social work academic curriculums**

Only the Catholic university of Malawi has sign language and braille courses in its curriculum, but it is optional (CUNIMA, 2016). Only those minoring in special needs education can take sign language and braille. But if sign language is to be included in all social work academic curriculums in Malawi, social workers will be proficient. Like any language, sign language proficiency requires regular practice to maintain and improve skills. Social workers can practice signing with colleagues, friends, or individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing to enhance their communication abilities.

### **Research and documenting social work experiences**

Research and publication in social work will help to unveil unrecorded challenges and voices for social workers thereby addressing needs and improving the profession (Muridzo & Muchinako, 2015). Research helps in several areas such as providing evidence-based interventions that improves service quality and client outcomes, unveiling gaps in knowledge of special needs in social work practice, and building the profession's body of knowledge by advancing the field. It also plays a crucial role in advocacy. In this case, sign language and braille gaps in social work practice can inform policy and advocacy efforts supporting social justice and change.

### **Seek training opportunities**

Social workers can also seek out training opportunities specific to working with individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing. This could include workshops, conferences, or training that focus on deaf culture and communication

strategies. For example, in Malawi, Malawi national association for the deaf (MANAD), sign language for inclusive development (SLID), and living waters church bible college offers special sign language interpretation classes and certificates.

## CONCLUSION

Social work training in Malawi has evolved from community development courses started in 1962 at Magomero community development college to social work degrees started in 2006 at the Catholic university of Malawi. Till today, social work in Malawi has not fully professionalized. This shows the ongoing evolution of social work education that aims to incorporate all needs of the communities served in future. This paper will serve as a voice and a call for consideration for a gap that needs attention. Having special skills such as sign language and Braille is essential for social workers to effectively communicate and provide support to individuals who are deaf and those with visual impairments. By enhancing their communication abilities through sign language and Braille proficiency, social workers can improve accessibility, cultural competency, and relationship building with these populations. It is important for social workers to continuously educate themselves and seek out opportunities to enhance their special skills in order to serve better individuals in need.

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