

Challenges and Opportunities in Malawian Education: Focusing on Teacher Training¹

Csaba Szeremley²

Abstract:

The primary education system in Malawi experienced significant changes, especially since the abolition of school fees in 1994, which resulted in an instant surge in enrolments. However, access improvements have not translated into substantial gains in educational quality. The primary education sector in Malawi is still under constant pressure and facing numerous challenges. The most important factors that need attention are the inadequate infrastructure, high pupil-teacher ratios and the lack of trained teachers. Financial constraints, such as allocating budgets to teacher salaries and inefficiencies in using School Improvement Grants (SIGs), further hinder progress. Systematic challenges are related to expenditure allocations, educational outcomes and service deliveries. Despite these challenges, there are opportunities to improve educational outcomes through targeted interventions. In-service training programs, like the Primary School Improvement Program (PSIP) and Technology-Assisted Learning (TAL), have demonstrated some positive impacts, especially in enhancing teacher practices and learning environments. Practical teacher training and ICT integration catalyse change in a resource-constrained environment. This paper also discusses recommendations for policy reforms, including better allocation of SIGs, optimising teacher deployment, and enhancing community involvement in school decision-making processes to evoke and strengthen ownership and responsibility outside of the school walls. Addressing the comprehensive inefficiencies requires a multifaceted approach that includes greater accountability in resource use, enhanced teacher support, and more equitable resource distribution across urban and rural schools. Recognising and addressing the unique challenges of the different schools in different areas is crucial. Focusing on cost-effective strategies and leveraging partnerships with international donors can also significantly reshape Malawi's education system. Ultimately, improving teacher quality and ensuring effective service delivery is essential for enhancing learning outcomes and addressing the persistent issues in the education sector in Malawi.

Keywords:

Teacher training; Malawi; rural education; primary education; school improvement.

¹ DOI: <https://doi.org/10.12700/jceas.2024.4.3-4.303>

² PhD-student, Doctoral School on Safety and Security Sciences, University of Óbuda, Budapest; ORCID: 0000-0002-1819-243X; szeremley.csaba@uni-obuda.hu.



List of Acronyms

EGRA - Early Grade Reading Activity

ICT - Information and Communication Technology

NESP - National Education Sector Plan

PSIP - Primary School Improvement Program

PTR - Pupil-to-Teacher Ratio

SIG - School Improvement Grant

TAL - Technology-Assisted Learning

UPE - Universal Primary Education

UN - United Nations

UNESCO - United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

UNICEF - United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund

Introduction

This paper seeks to delve into the intricate challenges faced by Malawi's primary education system, specifically focusing on teacher training. The history of education in Malawi is shaped by significant policy decisions to expand access to all segments of society, particularly following the country's transition to a democratic government in the early 1990s. The abolition of school fees in 1994 was perhaps the most notable of these reforms, leading to an unprecedented increase in enrolment. This expansion reflected a national commitment to education as a fundamental right and as a critical element of development. Access to education is considered a fundamental right in very few African countries. One such country is Western Sahara, which exists de jure, but most of its part is under Moroccan occupation. So, most of the Sahrawis live as refugees in Algeria. Education is mandatory for all children in the refugee camps in Tindouf, Algeria. As a result, illiteracy has now been eradicated among the Sahrawis (Besenyo, Miletics, 2017; Besenyo, 2010). Yet, while enrolment numbers increased in Malawi, the quality of education available to most Malawians did not see a commensurate improvement (MoEST, 2008; Mtika, Gondwe, 2023). Despite a consistently high proportion of the government's budget being allocated to education, youth in Malawi are failing to progress to secondary school in large numbers and consistently do poorly compared to other similar countries assessed on literacy and math skills (Sharra et al., n.d.). Like many developing nations, Malawi has been caught in the dichotomy between expanding access and ensuring quality. The rapid growth in student numbers has led to overburdened teachers, deteriorating school infrastructure, and an acute shortage of resources. The absence of adequate planning for such an expansion created a ripple effect that is still felt today—manifesting in the form of overcrowded classrooms, poorly trained teachers, and significant resource disparities between urban and rural schools (World Bank, 2016). Teacher quality is widely recognised as one of the most crucial determinants of student success, and as such, investing in teachers—through comprehensive pre-service and in-service training programs—can provide the needed

transformative change. Additionally, exploring the integration of ICT into the educational landscape presents new opportunities to bridge gaps in quality and access, especially in remote areas where traditional educational resources are scarce (Gondwe, 2021).

2. Educational Context in Malawi

2.1 Historical Background and Reforms

The education system in Malawi has evolved through a series of reforms aimed at broadening access and enhancing quality. The 1994 abolition of school fees marked a pivotal moment in the country's educational history. This policy intended to make education accessible to all children, regardless of socio-economic status. It was largely inspired by international frameworks such as the Universal Primary Education (UPE) initiative and the Sustainable Development Goals (UN, 2015). Following the abolition of fees, student enrolment surged, and by 2014, more than 4.5 million children were enrolled in primary schools—a substantial increase from the 1.8 million reported in 1993 (World Bank, 2016; Ravishankar et al., 2016). However, this rapid increase also put immense pressure on an ill-prepared education system to accommodate such numbers. The increase in enrolment was not accompanied by a proportional increase in infrastructure, teaching materials, or trained teachers, leading to significant challenges that persist to this day. The National Education Sector Plan (NESP) from 2008-2017 sought to address some of these challenges by focusing on improving quality, promoting equity, and enhancing governance within the education sector (Ministry of Education, 2008). Despite these efforts, many structural issues remain unaddressed, particularly those related to resource allocation. The bulk of educational funding continues to be absorbed by recurrent expenditures, primarily teacher salaries, leaving little for the capital investments needed to improve infrastructure and learning materials (World Bank, 2016; Ravishankar et al., 2016).

2.2 Current Educational Statistics and Challenges

Educational outcomes in Malawi remain low, with significant barriers affecting both the quality of learning and retention rates. According to the World Bank (2016), only about one-third of students manage to complete the eight-year primary cycle without repetition or dropping out. Repetition rates are particularly high in the lower grades, often resulting from insufficient teachers and insufficient learning materials. Dropout rates are also a major concern, with socio-cultural factors such as early marriage and economic hardship forcing many students, particularly girls, to leave school prematurely (UNICEF, 2022). These challenges are compounded by regional disparities, with rural schools experiencing more severe shortages of resources compared to urban centres. For instance, the pupil-to-teacher ratio (PTR) in some rural areas can reach as high as 100:1, making it nearly impossible for teachers to provide the individualised attention necessary for effective learning (Mkandawire et al., 2018). The shortage of female



teachers in rural areas further exacerbates gender inequalities, as many girls lack role models and feel unsupported in their educational pursuits. Modernising the hygiene of schools could also help (Tampu & Juhász, 2022).

3. Challenges in Malawian Education

3.1 Financial and Infrastructure Deficiencies

The inadequacy of financial resources and the inefficient allocation of existing funds are among the most pressing challenges in Malawi's education system. The World Bank's 2016 report revealed that over 84% of the education budget is dedicated to teacher salaries, severely limiting the funds available for other critical expenditures, such as infrastructure development, learning materials, and teacher training programs. This financial imbalance directly impacts the quality of education, as schools cannot provide students with the resources they need for effective learning. Infrastructure challenges are particularly pronounced in rural areas, where schools often lack basic amenities such as electricity, desks, and classrooms. Many classes are held outdoors, under trees, with students sitting on the ground—a situation far from conducive to learning, especially during adverse weather conditions. Ravishankar et al. (2016) highlight that these infrastructure gaps are exacerbated by poor financial management practices and inefficiencies in budget execution, which prevents the timely allocation of funds needed to address these pressing issues. This lack of infrastructure affects the quality of education and discourages students from attending school, thus contributing to high dropout rates (Mtika, Gondwe, 2023).

School Improvement Grants (SIGs) were introduced as part of the Primary School Improvement Program (PSIP) to address some of these infrastructure gaps by providing schools with funds to make necessary improvements. However, delays in the disbursement of these grants, coupled with a lack of capacity among school management committees to manage the funds properly, have limited their effectiveness. As a result, many schools continue to operate in substandard conditions, with little hope for immediate improvement (World Bank, 2016, Ravishankar et al., 2016).

3.2 Teacher Quality and Training Deficits

The quality of teachers in Malawi is another major challenge that significantly impacts educational outcomes. Many teachers, particularly in rural areas, lack the necessary qualifications and pedagogical skills to deliver the curriculum effectively. This is partly due to inadequate pre-service training and limited opportunities for in-service training once teachers are in the field (Popova et al., 2018). The pupil-to-teacher ratio (PTR) is also a significant concern, particularly in rural schools where PTRs can be as high as 100:1. Such high ratios make it difficult for teachers to provide individualised attention to students, which is critical for effective learning. Moreover, teachers in rural areas often face difficult working conditions, including poor housing, long commutes, and a lack of basic amenities. These challenges contribute to high levels of teacher absenteeism,

further undermining education quality (NSO, 2020, Ravishankar et al., 2016). Teacher absenteeism is not merely a reflection of individual behaviour, but is often symptomatic of systemic issues within the education sector. Inadequate salaries, delayed payments, and poor working conditions all contribute to low morale and motivation among teachers, making it difficult to retain skilled educators. Addressing these systemic issues is crucial if Malawi want to improve teacher quality and, by extension, student learning outcomes.

3.3 Sociocultural Barriers and Gender Inequities

Socio-cultural factors significantly affect educational attainment in Malawi, particularly for girls. In many rural communities, cultural norms prioritise boys' education over that of girls, with the latter often being viewed primarily as future wives and mothers. As a result, girls are more likely to drop out of school due to early marriage, pregnancy, or the need to help with household chores (UNICEF, 2022). These socio-cultural practices not only limit girls' educational attainment but also perpetuate cycles of poverty and inequality. The disparity between boys' and girls' education is further exacerbated by the lack of female teachers, particularly in rural areas. Female teachers can serve as role models and mentors for young girls, encouraging them to stay in school and pursue their education. However, the shortage of female teachers in rural areas means that many girls lack this support, negatively impacting their educational outcomes. The equity framework put forth by James (2007) highlights the importance of creating opportunities for marginalized groups within the education system. Addressing these sociocultural barriers requires comprehensive community engagement initiatives that educate parents about the value of educating all children, regardless of gender. Programs that provide incentives for keeping girls in school, such as conditional cash transfers and scholarship schemes, can be particularly effective in improving retention rates for girls (UNESCO, 2019).

4. Teacher Training as a Catalyst for Improvement

4.1 Integration of ICT in Teacher Training

One of the most promising avenues for transforming the education sector in Malawi lies in the integration of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in teacher training programs. ICT offers a multifaceted solution to many of the challenges faced by teachers, including the shortage of training opportunities, limited access to updated educational resources, and the need for interactive teaching methods that engage students more effectively (Gondwe, 2021). ICT can enhance teachers' professional development by providing them with access to online training courses, webinars, and other digital resources. This is particularly valuable for teachers in rural areas, where physical access to training programs is often limited due to logistical challenges. Through the use of digital platforms, teachers can improve their subject knowledge and pedagogical skills without having to travel long distances or take extended time away



from their classrooms. However, the success of ICT integration in teacher training depends heavily on the availability of the necessary infrastructure. Many schools in rural areas lack reliable electricity, internet access, and the digital devices needed to support ICT-based learning. To overcome these barriers, the government must prioritize investments in ICT infrastructure and develop a comprehensive policy that provides clear guidelines for the integration of technology into the education sector (World Bank, 2016).

4.2 In-Service Training and Technology-Assisted Learning (TAL)

In-service training is an essential component of professional development for teachers, as it allows them to enhance their skills and stay updated with the latest educational practices. The Early Grade Reading Activity (EGRA) is an example of a successful in-service training initiative that significantly improved literacy skills among students in the early grades (Mattos, Sitabkhan, 2016). Expanding such initiatives to include other subjects, such as mathematics and science, can help improve overall educational outcomes in Malawi. Technology-assisted learning (TAL) offers additional potential for improving education quality by making learning more interactive and engaging. Tablets and digital content allow students to learn at their own pace, while teachers can use these tools to provide differentiated instruction that meets the needs of individual students. TAL has been particularly effective in improving numeracy skills, as evidenced by pilot projects in Malawi that have significantly improved student learning outcomes (Pitchford, 2015). For TAL to be effective, it is crucial that teachers receive adequate training in using technology in their classrooms. Many teachers lack the necessary skills to integrate digital tools into their teaching practices, limiting technology's potential benefits. Providing teachers with comprehensive training on the use of digital tools and ensuring that they have access to the required infrastructure is essential for maximizing the impact of TAL on education quality.

5. Cost-Benefit Analysis of Interventions

5.1 Efficiency in Resource Allocation

Effective resource allocation is critical to improving the quality of education in Malawi. The current allocation of resources, with the majority of the budget dedicated to teacher salaries, leaves little room for investments in infrastructure, learning materials, or teacher training. This imbalance has resulted in a lack of essential educational resources, which has a direct impact on student learning outcomes (World Bank, 2016). Investing in teacher training and ICT integration has been shown to yield significant returns in terms of improved learning outcomes. For example, the World Bank found that in-service teacher training interventions have a high benefit-cost ratio, making them an economically viable solution for enhancing education quality. Levesque et al. (2020) also emphasize that investing in well-structured teacher training programs offers high economic returns by enhancing teacher productivity and student achievement across

sub-Saharan Africa. The evidence from their analysis suggests that targeted investments in training teachers yield substantial improvements in learning outcomes, which is crucial for addressing Malawi's current education challenges. The rationalization of expenditures, such as reducing unnecessary travel allowances and optimizing the use of School Improvement Grants (SIGs), is necessary to ensure that funds are used efficiently and effectively (World Bank, 2016; Levesque et al., 2020, Ravishankar et al., 2016).

5.2 Classroom Infrastructure and SIG Utilization

Classroom infrastructure remains a major barrier to providing quality education in Malawi. Many schools lack basic facilities such as desks, blackboards, and permanent classrooms, which makes it difficult for teachers to provide effective instruction. The SIGs, introduced through the PSIP, were intended to address these gaps by providing schools with the funds needed to make necessary improvements. However, delays in the disbursement of these grants and the lack of capacity among school management committees to effectively manage the funds have limited their impact (World Bank, 2016).

Levesque et al. (2020) also argue that financial efficiency in allocating grants like SIGs can significantly enhance the quality of education by ensuring that schools have the necessary resources to create an effective learning environment. Their research shows that, when effectively managed, these grants can lead to improved infrastructure, better teacher retention, and ultimately, enhanced student performance. Involving support from NGOs would also be effective (Tampu & Babos, 2023).

6. Policy Implications and Recommendations

6.1 Strengthening Teacher Training Programs

Improving teacher quality through effective training programs is central to enhancing education outcomes in Malawi. Both pre-service and in-service training programs must be expanded to ensure that teachers are well-prepared and continuously supported throughout their careers. Pre-service training should provide a strong foundation in subject-specific knowledge, pedagogy, and classroom management skills, while in-service training should offer opportunities for teachers to update their skills and learn new teaching strategies (Mattos, Sitabkhan, 2016).

Levesque et al. (2020) provide substantial evidence that well-designed in-service training programs not only improve teacher performance but also offer significant economic returns. The cost-benefit analysis conducted by Levesque and colleagues indicates that teacher training is among the most cost-effective interventions for improving student outcomes in sub-Saharan Africa. By investing in high-quality in-service training, Malawi can maximize the efficiency of its education expenditures and ensure that teachers have the skills needed to provide quality instruction.

6.2 ICT Integration and Policy Development

The integration of ICT into education is an opportunity to bridge the gap between urban and rural schools, enhance teacher training, and improve student engagement. However, for ICT integration to be effective, there must be a comprehensive policy that provides clear guidelines on the use of technology in education. This policy should address infrastructure needs, training requirements for educators, and guidelines for the procurement of digital tools (Gondwe, 2021). Public-private partnerships can play an important role in providing the necessary infrastructure and training for teachers. These partnerships can help schools acquire digital devices, establish internet connectivity, and provide teachers with the training they need to use technology effectively in their classrooms. Ensuring that these resources are distributed equitably across urban and rural schools is essential to prevent further disparities in education quality.

6.3 Enhancing Community Engagement

Community engagement is vital to addressing some socio-cultural barriers that hinder education in Malawi, particularly for girls. The PSIP has demonstrated that involving parents and community members in school governance can lead to greater accountability and better outcomes (World Bank, 2016). Strengthening these ties through local councils, parent-teacher associations, and village-based education committees can help ensure that schools are responsive to the community's needs. Engaging local leaders, including traditional chiefs and religious leaders, can also play an important role in changing community attitudes toward education (Vajda, 2023). Community-based campaigns that highlight the importance of educating girls and challenge harmful practices such as early marriage can help reduce dropout rates and promote gender equity. Programs that provide incentives for keeping girls in school, such as scholarships or conditional cash transfers, have also proven effective in encouraging parents to prioritize their daughters' education (UNICEF, 2022).

6.4 Financial Efficiency and Accountability

Ensuring financial efficiency and accountability is crucial for improving education outcomes in Malawi. Inefficiencies in the allocation and use of education funds have been a major impediment to progress. Strengthening financial management systems at the school level and providing training for school management committees on budgeting and financial planning can help address these inefficiencies and ensure that funds are used for their intended purpose (World Bank, 2016). Community involvement in monitoring school finances can also promote greater accountability. Programs that engage parents and community members in budget tracking and reporting of financial irregularities can reduce corruption and misuse of funds, ensuring that allocated resources are used effectively to improve the learning environment.

7. Conclusion

Malawi's education sector has made significant strides in improving access since the abolition of school fees in 1994, but challenges remain in ensuring the quality of education for all. The primary obstacles include insufficient infrastructure, inadequate teacher training, financial inefficiencies, and socio-cultural barriers that particularly affect girls. Addressing these challenges requires targeted interventions that focus on teacher training, the integration of technology, and community engagement.

The analysis has underscored the importance of improving teacher quality through effective pre-service and in-service training, leveraging Technology-Assisted Learning (TAL), and optimizing the use of School Improvement Grants (SIGs). Developing a comprehensive ICT policy and strengthening community involvement in school governance are also essential for improving the quality and equity of education in Malawi.

To bring about meaningful change, a collaborative effort involving the government, international donors, local communities, and non-governmental organizations will be necessary. By focusing on strategic investments in teacher training, infrastructure, and technology, Malawi has the potential to create an education system that provides high-quality, equitable opportunities for all children, regardless of their socio-economic background or geographic location.

Conflict of interest

The authors hereby declare that no competing financial interest exists for this manuscript.

Notes on the Contributor

Csaba Szeremley graduated from the University of Pannonia in 2002 as an economist in the field of tourism. He spent his 18-month-long internship at Brookdale Living Inc. in the USA. In 2009, he obtained his MA degree in Educational Planning, Economics and International Development at the Institute of Education, University College of London. Before moving to Malawi in 2012, he worked as the general manager for Development Aid from People to People UK. In Malawi, he set up his own company in audio-visual production and worked for several big NGOs and firms, as well as running the Hungarian Trade and Cultural Centre. In 2016, he returned to Hungary and became an entrepreneur with strong ties to Malawi. He continued his participation in 13 medical missions as a coordinator. In 2021, he enrolled at the Doctoral School of Safety and Security Sciences at the University of Óbuda to do his PhD in Teacher Training in rural primary schools in Malawi, assessing the effectiveness of a unique teacher training program DNS.

References



- Besenyő, J. (2010). Saharawi refugees in Algeria. *Academic And Applied Research In Military Science*, 9(1), 67-78.
https://real.mtak.hu/83783/1/Besenyo_saharawi_refugees_in_Algeria
- Gondwe, F. (2021). CT Integration into Teacher Education: Teacher Educators' Experiences of Policy at Two Teacher Education Institutions in Malawi. *29*, 117-128.
- James, R. (2007). *Social Equity in a Mass, Globalised Higher Education Environment: The Unresolved Issue of Widening Access to University* (Vol. Faculty Dean's Lecture Series). University of Melbourne.
- Levesque, J., Carnoy, M., Tan, S., & Channa, A. (2020). *Cost-Benefit Analysis of Teacher Training in Sub-Saharan Africa*. World Bank Working Paper.
- Mattos, M., & Sitabkhan, Y. (2016). *Early Grade Reading Activity in Malawi: Final Report*. RTI International.
- Miletics, P. (2017). *Országismertető – Marokkó és Nyugat-Szahara, Budapest.*. Honvéd Vezérkar Tudományos Kutatóhely (HVK TKH). Retrieved December 11, 2024 from <https://real.mtak.hu/83720/1/orszagismertetomarokko.pdf>
- Ministry of Education Science and Technology (MoEST). (2008). *National Education Sector Plan (2008-2017)*. Lilongwe: Malawi Government.
- Ministry of Education Science and Technology (MoEST). (2016). *National Standards for Teacher Education in Malawi, Draft Version*.
- Mkandawire, M., Phiri, P., & Chirwa, W. (2018). Teacher Deployment and Pupil-Teacher Ratios in Rural Malawi: A Case Study. *African Education Review*, 15(2), 234-248.
- Mtika, P., & Gondwe, F. (2023, February 15). *Analysis of the Provision of Primary Education in Malawi*. Comparative and International Education Society Conference, Washington DC.
- National Statistics Office (NSO). (2020). *The Fifth Integrated Household Survey (IHS) 2020 Report*. National Statistical Office. Retrieved December 11, 2024 from <http://www.nsomalawi.mw>
- Pitchford, N. J. (2015). *Unlocking Talent: Evaluation of the impact of early grade numeracy and literacy apps*. Lilongwe: Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO).
- Popova, A., Evans, D., & Arancibia, V. (2018). Training Teachers on the Job: What Works and How to Measure It. In World Bank Policy Research Working Paper (Ed.).
- Ravishankar, V., El-Kogali, S., Sankar, D., Tanaka, N., & Rakoto-Tiana, N. (2016). *Primary Education in Malawi: Expenditures, Service Delivery, and Outcomes*. Retrieved December 11, 2024 from <https://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/340961468185650405/pdf/104337-PUB-PUBLIC-education-in-malawi.pdf>

- Sharra, S., Veverka, C., Onundo, D., Kadzamira, E., Meke, E., Chudgar, A., Thawani, A., Muralidhran, K., Evans, D., & Kapanda, Y. (n.d.). Cost-benefit analysis: Improving the quality of primary school education in Malawi –. In.
- Tampu, S., & Babos, T. (2023). NGOs for Global Security (The Human Security and Health Security Role of the Hungarian Charity Service of the Order of Malta in the International Field). *Journal of Security and Sustainability Issues*, 13(1), 99-110. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47459/jssi.2023.13.10>
- Tampu, S., & Juhasz, P. G. (2022). Clean water in the slums of East Africa. *Insights into Regional Development*, 4(3), 34-47. DOI: <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.38146/BSZ.2023.3.4>
- United Nations (UN). (2015). Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. *United Nations*.
- United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). (2019). *Global Education Monitoring Report 2019: Migration, Displacement, and Education – Building Bridges, Not Walls*. UNESCO.
- United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF). (2022). Are Children Really Learning? Exploring Foundational Skills in the Midst of a Learning Crisis. *UNICEF*.
- Vajda, N. (2023). Mi közöm hozzá? - Társadalomról másként. In M. Á. Pónusz & V. Bodza (Eds.), *Szociális és egészségügyi alapismeretek: Károli Junior Akadémia* (pp. 87-94). Károli Gáspár Református Egyetem - L'Harmattan Kiadó.
- World Bank. (2016). *Primary Education in Malawi: Expenditures, Service Delivery, and Outcomes*. *World Bank Study*. World Bank. Retrieved December 11, 2024 from <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/items/c6460bfa-6c31-5557-bb3e-9c3fd20819a4>