A case study of four rural primary schools in Malawi

Stakeholder views and participant interactions

Guðlaug Erlendsdóttir

Thesis for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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Ágrip

Í gegnum tíðina, hefur alþjóða samfélagið samþykkt og staðfest ýmsar alþjóðlegar yfirlýsingar er varða menntun og mannréttindi. Fyrsta slíka samþykktin leit dagsins ljós árið 1948 þegar Sameinuðu Þjóðirnar birtu yfirlýsingu þar sem fram kom að allir eiga rétt á menntun. Sú síðasta var kynnt árið 2015 af Sameinuðu Þjóðunum þar sem lýst er yfir að þjóðir heims skuli leitast við að tryggja öllum sama rétt til góðrar menntunar og að stuðla að möguleikum til menntunar fyrir alla. Þrátt fyrir þessar samþykktu yfirlýsingar um aðgengi allra að góðri menntun, þá hafa þau markmið ekki náðst. Hefur þetta reynst erfitt sérstaklega í ýmsum lágtekjulöndum. Það vekur spurningar um hvernig á því standi og sýnir mikilvægi þess að rannsaka stöðuna, til þess að efla skilning okkar á þeim hindrunum sem varna því að löndin nái að veita öllum jafnt aðgengi að menntun. Ítarlegar rannsóknir veita okkur tækifæri til að bera kennsl á og forgangsraða þeim þáttum í menntakerfinu sem þarf að betrumbæta svo við getum veitt öllum börnum jafnt aðgengi að góðri menntun.

Sem aðili að Sameinuðu þjóðunum hefur Malaví samþykkt þessar alþjóðlegu skuldbindingar án þess þó að hafa náð að uppfylla þær. Tilgangur þessarar rannsóknar er að öðlast þekkingu og skilning á viðhorfi fólks í dreifbýli í Malaví til menntunar og hvernig það upplifir hana, til þess að bæta þekkingu á því hvað hægt sé að gera til að bæta menntun í þeirra umhverfi. Markmið þessarar ritgerðar er að rýna í valinn hluta menntakerfisins í dreifbýli í Mangochi héraði, til þess að greina álitamál og fá dýpri skilning á þáttum sem styðja eða hindra gæðamenntun. Ég beini athygli að samskiptum kennara við hagaðila skólasamfélagsins, samskiptum heimilis og skóla, þátttöku foreldra í námi barna sinna, viðhorfum til menntunar, búsetuskilyrðum og starfsaðstöðu kennara í fjórum dreifbýlisskólum í Mangochi héraði. Aðalrannsóknarspurningarnar mínar voru: *Hvernig er upplifun og reynsla fólks af menntun í dreifbýlisskólum í Mangochi héraði í Malaví, og hvernig er samskiptum þeirra háttað? Hvaða þætti telja hagaðilar vera mikilvæga til að tryggja gæði menntunar í dreifbýlisskólum í Mangochi héraði?*

Rannsóknin er fjöltilviksrannsókn. Til að fá innsýn í hvernig menntakerfið í Malaví birtist í verki, voru fjórir grunnskólar í dreifbýli í Mangochi héraði valdir til þátttöku og gagna aflað á vettvangi þeirra. Rannsóknin varpar ljósi á þessa þætti með greiningu gagna úr þremur sjálfstæðum gagnasettum. Gögnin eru viðtöl við skólastjórnendur, kennara, grunnskólaráðgjafa og sérfræðinga úr menntamálaráðuneytinu og frá héraðsskrifstofunni í Mangochi. Þar að auki voru tekin viðtöl við rýnihópa frá hverjum skóla þar sem rætt var við héraðshöfðingja, foreldra, og meðlimi í ýmsum nefndum á vegum skólanna, ásamt vettvangsathugunum og ítarlegum vettvangsnótum. Saman, gefa þessi gagnasöfn rannsóknarinnar og greining þeirra góða yfirsýn og djúpa innsýn í

viðfangsefnið í þessum fjórum þátttökuskólum á fjölbreyttan hátt. Að auki styðja gögnin við þróun á líkani um gæði menntunar í lágtekjulöndum.

Gagnagreining fór fram með hliðsjón af félagsvistfræðikenningu Bronfenbrenners ásamt ramma um innleiðingu góðrar menntunar í lágtekjulöndum. Þessar kenningar veittu mikilvægan ramma og hugtök til að greina gögnin og til að útskýra hvernig samskiptum og samvinnu hinna ýmissa hagaðila í menntun háttar í grunnskólum í dreifbýli Malaví. Einnig veittu kenningarnar mér tækifæri til að setja hin mismunandi félagslegu kerfi skóla og nærsamfélagsins í samhengi.

Þetta verk byggir á þremur ritrýndum fræðigreinum sem hver um sig veitir innsýn í þessa þætti grunnskólamenntunar í dreifbýli í Malaví. Tvær þessara greina hafa verið birtar og þriðja hefur verið samþykkt til birtingar og er í prentun. Saman sýna þessar greinar samtengingu þessara mismunandi félagslegu þátta. Niðurstöður rannsóknarinnar benda til þess að foreldrar í dreifbýli í Mangoci meti menntun og viti hvaða gildi menntun getur haft fyrir framtíð barna sinna. Foreldrar upplifa sig velkomna í skólann og eru hvattir til að mæta í reglulegar heimsóknir til að tryggja að börnin þeirra séu í skólanum og til að fylgjast með framvindu þeirra í námi og hegðun. Hins vegar, telja kennarar að foreldrar hafi lítinn áhuga á námi barna sinna og telja að tíð skróp nemenda gefi góða mynd af því hversu lítils foreldrar meti menntun. Samkvæmt kennurum sjást foreldrar sjaldan í skólum þrátt fyrir að vera hvattir til þess af skólastjórum og kennurum. Þessi litlu samskipti milli heimilis og skóla hafa neikvæð áhrif á námsárangur nemenda. Allir þátttökukennarar lýsa áhyggjum af skorti á kennslustofum og almennum innviðum skólanna, sem meðal annars skerði möguleika þeirra á samvinnu. Búsetuskilyrði og starfsaðstæður kennara eru krefjandi, sem lýsa sér meðal annars í kennaraskorti og miklum nemendafjölda í hverjum bekk, takmarkaðri faglegri þróun og skorti á náms- og kennslugögnum og lélegum aðbúnaði. Afleiðingar slæmra vinnuskilyrða og búsetuaðstæðna eru meðal annars þær að kennarar eru tregir til þess að flytja til hinna dreifbýlu svæða landsins og setjast þar að og kenna. Sú tregða viðheldur skorti á kennurum og barnmörgum bekkjum í dreifbýli í Malaví. Byggt á niðurstöðum rannsóknarinnar tel ég að auknum gæðum menntunar megi ná með því að styrkja gagnkvæm tengsl menntastefnu, skóla, og heimila/nærsamfélags, þannig að öll félags-vistkerfin nái að vinna saman.

Gildi þessarar rannsóknar liggur í þeirri þekkingu sem aflað var um viðhorf til menntunar og aðstæður til skólastarfs í dreifbýli í Malaví, og birt í fræðigreinum, auk þeirra tengsla sem komu í ljós við gagnagreiningu og skrif þessarar kápu. Niðurstöður rannsóknarinnar má nýta til að styðja og efla opinbera umræðu um menntamál almennt og sérstaklega í Mangochi héraði. Ég kynni í ritgerðinni hagnýtt líkan, eða ramma, til að greina gæðamenntun í lágtekjulöndum, sem og hugmynd út frá því líkani um matstæki sem mætti nýta til að styðja umbætur í menntun. Sú þekking sem kynnt er hér getur vakið almennar umræður um menntamál í Malaví og hvatt stefnumótendur til að kalla eftir aðkomu allra hagaðila um menntun að borðinu og hvatt foreldra og samfélög

til þátttöku. Með þátttöku allra, þar á meðal hins óbreytta almennings er hægt að fara yfir stöðu mála eins og hún birtist í dag og mikilvægum upplýsingum komið á framfæri. Það gefur tækifæri til umræðu um, til dæmis, hvers samfélagið þarfnast bæði nærsamfélagið og hið stærra, og hvað þurfi að gera til að ná því takmarki. Með þessu móti má auka gæði og aðgengi allra barna að menntun og tryggja enn betur framtíð þeirra og rjúfa vítahring fátæktar sem oft fylgir kynslóð eftir kynslóð. Gæðamenntun fyrir alla er lykilþáttur í félagslegu réttlæti í anda skóla fyrir alla. Sem þátttakendur í alþjóðlegu samfélagi ættum við öll að láta okkur varða og vera meðvituð um að til þess að ná varanlegum breytingum þá verða breytingarnar að eiga sér stað í nærsamfélaginu. Þessi rannsókn ítrekar mikilvægi þess að taka tillit til þeirra aðstæðna sem menntun verður til í og þeirra þarfa sem nærsamfélagið telur mikilvægt að mæta, sem og að það séu virk samskipti gegnu samvinnu og samtal.

Fræðilegt framlag þessarar rannsóknar bætir við mikilvægri þekkingu um gæði menntunar í dreifbýli í Malaví og hvernig nýta má hana í mismunandi kringumstæðum til að greina gæði í menntun og setja fram raunhæf markmið til að bæta hana.

Lykilorð: félags-vistfræðikenning Bronfenbrenners, gæðamenntun í grunnskóla, dreifbýlisskóli, innleiðing gæðamenntunar í lágtekjuöndum (e. EdQual), Malaví

Abstract

The *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* introduced by the United Nations in 1948 stipulates that "everyone has a right to education." Since then, the global community has agreed upon and ratified various universal declarations on education and human rights. Most recently, in 2015 the United Nations published *Sustainable Development Goals* specifying that member states will "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all." Despite these proclamations, universal access to quality education has not been achieved, especially in many low-income countries. To understand why, we must explore the obstructions preventing low-income countries from achieving these goals. In-depth investigation will allow us to identify and prioritise which features of the education system we need to improve so that all children have access to quality education.

As a United Nations member state, Malawi has ratified the universal declarations but has not yet achieved these international goals. The purpose of this research is to understand how people in rural areas in Malawi view and experience education in order to contribute to knowledge about what could be done to improve education in these contexts. The aim was to select and explore a representative part of the education system in rural Malawi, with rural Mangochi District as an example, to identify issues and gain a deeper understanding of factors that support or hinder quality education. Data was obtained through interviews and observations, and the focus is on participants' attitudes towards education, family-school relationships, parental involvement, and teachers' working and living conditions in four rural primary schools in Mangochi District. My main research questions are: *How do stakeholders in four primary schools in rural Mangochi District perceive education in their context, and what is the nature of their interactions? What factors are perceived by stakeholders as central to achieving quality education in rural primary schools in Mangochi District?*

The main case I studied in this research was about identifying and analysing how the education system emerges and is experienced in rural areas in Malawi. A multi-case method was applied to shed light on and contextualise the main case. Four primary schools in rural Mangochi District were approached and selected for participation in my field study. Three separate datasets were collected for each school, using diverse empirical methods. These included transcripts of interviews with headteachers, teachers, primary education advisors, and senior education officers; records of focus group discussions with parents and members of the school community; notes from non-participant observations; and extensive field notes. These datasets provided a substantial overview of the conditions in the four rural primary schools and eventually

offered an opportunity for me to put forward a data-based model of the current conditions in rural primary schools and changes needed for progress towards quality education. My conceptual framework draws on selected aspects of Bronfenbrenner's socio-ecological systems theory (SEST), complemented by the framework for quality education in low-income countries (EdQual). Together, the frameworks provided concepts to frame, analyse and describe communication and collaboration in the education system in rural Malawi, with four primary schools in rural Mangochi District as exemplary cases. SEST and EdQual were applied to contextualise the interactions among the different social systems in the schools and surrounding communities.

The findings of this study have been reported in three published scientific articles, which together provide insight into different yet interconnected features of the primary education system in rural Malawi.

The main findings indicate that parents generally consider education valuable for their children's future. They feel welcome at school and are encouraged to visit regularly to observe their children's attendance, progress and behaviour. However, teachers disagree, viewing parents as having little interest in their children's education. They interpret learners' frequent truancy as indicating that many parents do not concern themselves with education, and according to teachers, few parents are seen in schools despite being prompted to come by the headteacher or teachers. This weak home-school interaction adversely affects learners' academic attainment. All teachers interviewed are concerned with the lack of classrooms and poor infrastructure, which, among other things, restricts their opportunities for collaboration and collegial support. Teachers' working and living conditions are far from ideal and are characterized by overcrowded classes, limited professional development, and a shortage of teachers, resources, and infrastructure. The findings demonstrate that the consequence of these trying conditions is that teachers are reluctant to move to rural areas to teach, perpetuating the acute problems of teacher shortage and overcrowded classes.

The value of this dissertation lies both in the knowledge reported in the three papers and in the links that have emerged from this synthesis of the study. The findings in this thesis can be used to enable supportive discussion about rural education in general and in Mangochi District in particular. I present a practical model or a framework for identifying quality education in LMICs, *Social Ecology of quality education in rural primary schools in LMIC,* built on my findings, Bronfenbrenner's SEST, and EdQual. I also derived a tool from this model that can be applied to support improvements in education: *The Talking Wall: A practical tool to build implementation towards change.*

This research contributes to knowledge and understanding of the features that support or hinder quality education in rural Malawi generally and rural Mangochi District specifically. The study makes an original scholarly contribution to understanding quality education in rural settings and adds to the increasing body of research on education in Malawi. Enhancing quality education for all is an important social justice goal. As global

citizens, we should all be actively concerned and mindful that for any lasting changes to occur, change needs to happen at the local level. This study iterates the importance of context and the experienced needs of each society, as well as active interaction through communication and collaboration. To successfully implement quality education in any society, that society must take an active role in creating that change.

It is evident from the findings that numerous quality inputs and processes in rural Malawi are needed to strengthen the interconnection of policy-, school-, and home environments. The findings give reason to encourage policymakers to strengthen the roles of community members to interact with all other stakeholders and provide support and incentives for parents and communities to participate. Fostering communication and collaboration that involves all relevant persons is an important step toward increasing the quality of education. By discussing the current situation, communities could learn from each other to identify what they want and need and how to take steps to achieve those outcomes. Public discourse involving all stakeholders including the general public at a grassroots level is one way to convey important information to all concerned. It could increase access to quality education for rural children and accelerate the pursuit of *education for all*. Providing children with tools to create better futures for themselves allows them to participate in society on equal grounding as other citizens in the spirit of social justice. Hence, enhancing quality education for all is crucial to social justice.

The scholarly contribution of this study is to add valuable information to our current knowledge about quality education in rural settings in Malawi and how this knowledge can be used in different contexts to identify quality, set realistic goals and take action to improve education.

Keywords: Bronfenbrenner’s socio-ecological systems theory, EdQual, Malawi, quality education, rural primary education

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Figure 1: An autumn sunset in Mangochi District. (Photo, G. Erlendsdóttir, 2016)

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List of Abbreviations and Acronyms

CPD: Continuous Professional Development
DEM: District Education Manager
DMC: Disproportionate Minority Contact
EFA: Education for all
EMIS: Education Management Information System
FGD: Focus Group Discussion
FPE: Free Primary Education
GERM: Global Educational Reform Movement
HCA: Human Capital Approaches
HDI: Human Development Index
HRA: Human Rights Approaches
ICT: Information and Communication Technologies
IEE: Innovation and Entrepreneurial Education
IPTE: Initial Primary Teacher Education
LMIC: Low- and middle-income country
MDG: Millennium Development Goals
MIITEP: Malawi Integrated In-service Teacher Education Programme
MSCE: Malawi School Certificate of Education
MSE: Micro- and Small-scale Enterprises
MoEST: Ministry of Education, Science and Technology
MSG: Mother Support Group
NESIP: National Education Sector Investment Plan
NESP: National Education Sector Plan
OECD: Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development
PEA: Primary Education Advisor
PIRLs: Progress in International Reading Literacy Study
PISA: Programme for International Student Assessment
PSLCE: Primary School Leaving Certificate Examination
PTA: Parent Teacher Association
SACMEQ: Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality
SADC: Southern African Development Community
SDGs: Sustainable Development Goals
SEST: The Socio-Ecological Systems Theory
SMC: School Management Committee
SSA: Sub-Saharan Africa
TA: Thematic Analysis
TLM: Teaching and Learning Materials
TTC: Teacher Training College
UDHR: Universal Declaration on Human Rights
UN: United Nations
UNDP: United Nations Development Programme
UNESCO: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNICEF: United Nations Children's Fund
UPE: Universal Primary Education

List of articles in this PhD thesis

I. Erlendsdóttir, G., Macdonald, M. A., Jónsdóttir, S. R., and Mtika, P. (2022). Parental involvement in children's primary education: A case study from a rural district in Malawi. *South African Journal of Education, 42*(3). https://doi.org/10.15700/saje.v42n3a2133

II. Erlendsdóttir, G., and Mtika. P. (2023). Perceived realities of rural primary school teachers in Malawi: Applying Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory. In C. Mafaldo (Ed), *Education Applications & Developments VIII* (pp. 544-557). https://insciencepress.org/education-applications-developments-viii/

III. Erlendsdóttir, G., Mtika, P., Jónsdóttir, S. R., and Macdonald, A. (2023). Factors affecting quality of education in rural primary schools in Malawi. *Malawi Journal of Education and Development*. https://www.unima.ac.mw/announcements/malawi-journal-of-education-and-development-vol-ume-8-2023-25-09-2024

Declaration of Contribution

The original planning of this research was conducted in collaboration with Dr Allyson Macdonald. Later, Dr Svanborg R. Jónsdóttir, and Dr Peter Mtika came aboard and assisted with the planning. As the field researcher, I gathered all data, conducted the analysis, created all tables and figures, and wrote the text in this dissertation, as I did in each article. However, all three of them were consulted in all stages of writing, giving advice and suggesting changes throughout the process.

All four of us collaborated on the first Article; Peter Mtika was my co-author for Article II; and Article III was a collaboration between the four of us. Towards the end of my PhD journey, Dr Ólafur Páll Jónsson joined my doctoral committee.

This research is independent and has not been funded by any donor organisation or otherwise. I have not received a grant from any organisation, company, or other except doctoral travel grants to attend conferences from the University of Iceland.

Prologue

I vividly recall my first visit to a rural primary school in Mangochi District in 2012. It was a clear summer's day, and upon arrival, I noticed many young children crowding into the shade of a big tree on the school grounds. It turned out that these were learners in standard 1 (S1), and this was their "open-air classroom." I remember feeling a bit unsure of myself as I watched them, not knowing how I would be accepted at the school. It turned out that there was no need for me to feel anxious, as I was welcomed warmly by smiling children and adults who greeted me as I approached. It was quite evident that the school faced numerous difficulties regarding infrastructure and resources; with 1,539 learners enrolled and 12 teachers, the teacher/learner ratio was 1:128. Enrolment varied greatly between the grades, with about 26% (400 learners) enrolled in S1, the first year of school, and only 1.9% (29 learners) enrolled in S8, the last grade of primary school, suggesting a high attrition rate. Despite these challenges, the children and teachers I met that day appeared happy to be at school, and the teachers seemed determined to teach the children.

As I began my research, each morning I found myself manoeuvring my car with difficulty around paths and along dirt roads, sharing the "road" with goats and cattle, often driving where there was no observable road, but somehow always ending up at the right school. With time, I began to feel more optimistic and self-assured. During fieldwork, I would leave my home and family in Lilongwe every Sunday afternoon and travel along a winding mountainous road for up to four hours until I arrived at my accommodation for the week, which served as my home base throughout my field research. I left early each morning, driving to school and going back "home" in the evening.

After spending long hours in the field in the hot Malawian sun, I clearly remember the pure joy and relief I felt each afternoon when driving home and coming upon "my" tree, which had become my friend in the field and can be seen in **Figure 2**. This particular tree was my landmark for knowing where to turn off the main road onto the path which led to my base. Reaching this landmark was a great comfort because I knew I was almost home and had persevered another day in the field. Then, on Friday afternoons, I would drive back to Lilongwe to spend time with family and friends before leaving the following Sunday again to continue my fieldwork. This went on for a few months, and during that time, I met countless people who were willing to assist me in any way they could, whether to direct me to a school, help me with my research, or just talk. Thinking back to this time fills me with appreciation, pride, and joy.

Figure 2: My friend in the field. (Photo, G. Erlendsdóttir, 2016)

Life in rural Malawi can be challenging. The warm heart of Africa (a common epithet for Malawi) battles to provide its citizens with basic necessities. One participant appropriately expressed this: "Where to kickstart the drastic changes we need?" I shared this battle with the schools and teachers for a few months, and I find it reassuring that I did not detect any hint of defeat, only resilience.

1 Introduction

At both the international and national level, providing quality education for *all* individuals and societies is regarded as highly important (UNESCO, 2015b; MoEST, 2018). The Malawian education policy declaring *Education for All* and the many universal declarations that have been agreed upon through the years (e.g. UN, 1948; UNESCO, 2015b; 2020; UNICEF, 1989) speak to this. I believe that for societies to achieve universal primary education, ensuring equitable and inclusive access is a top priority, as education can provide us with an opportunity to better our lives and provide us with tools to achieve our capabilities and make the most of what we have as individuals so that we may reach our potential. According to research (e.g. Chiwaula et al., 2021; Okeowhor et al., 2019; Sosu et al., 2019), there are numerous and complex aspects that need to be in place for education to be fruitful, such as infrastructure, resources, collaboration among stakeholders, parental involvement and attitude towards education.

My experience as a teacher and a mother living and raising my children in low- and middle-income countries [LMIC] (Malawi, Mozambique and Namibia) caused me to question how accessible primary education was in reality, especially in rural areas. I wished to examine these various features of primary education. Therefore, in this study, I seek to gain insights into the primary education system in four rural primary schools in Mangochi District in Malawi by exploring the interactions and collaboration among teachers, parents, and communities surrounding four primary schools. I examine the challenges and strengths experienced in providing learners with 'quality' education. I firmly believe that education is a human right, and for that reason, all children should have equal and equitable access to education. The push for equitable access to education will enable learners, irrespective of their circumstances, to access and participate in education as a human right, which may enable them to exercise other rights and opportunities.

This is a dissertation by publication. Three peer-reviewed articles have been published.

1.1 My journey begins

This remarkable journey began many years ago. I have been interested in education for as long as I can remember. As a child in Iceland, I loved going to school, learning and doing my homework, and discovering new things. When I was ten years old, I taught a younger friend of mine how to read and decided there and then that I wanted to become a teacher when I grew up. I never wavered in this conviction, and eventually, it came to fruition. Many years later, I moved to Namibia with my husband and children

and became interested in what education was like in Namibia. I got involved with charity organisations supporting children and education projects. This interest persisted when we moved to Malawi a few years later, where I continued my associations with charity organisations supporting children, mothers, and schools. This volunteer work gave me many opportunities to visit primary schools, both rural and urban.

At the beginning of my doctoral journey, parental involvement featured prominently in my thought processes and planning of my research. In my M.Ed research (Erlendsdóttir, 2010), which was a qualitative case study I conducted in Namibia, I endeavoured to establish how parental involvement affected the academic achievement of seven students at a private secondary school in Windhoek. During that research process, I came to know Joyce L. Epstein, amongst other researchers, and her authority on the subject. I applied Epstein's (2009) framework to my study. Epstein's framework is based on expansive research and concerns six types of family involvement in their children's education. Those six types are parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision-making, and collaborating with the community. I concluded from my findings that all the parents I interviewed were highly involved with their child's education in various ways. Through the M.Ed research process, I gained a deeper knowledge and appreciation of the importance of parental involvement and the diverse effects it can have, and I wanted to inquire about that aspect of education in Malawi. Therefore, countless questions arose on the subject during my visits to the schools, such as what kind of a relationship is there between the schools and the homes? How do parents view education? Do parents and teachers meet regularly?

As my journey progressed and I gained more knowledge about the situation in rural Mangochi District, my focus expanded, and other important aspects of education developed and shaped the focus of my research, such as rural teachers' working and living conditions. When visiting the various primary schools in Namibia and Malawi through my volunteer work, I was struck by the contrast between the visible shortage of resources and the cheerful nature of the teachers and their apparent positive attitude. This generated numerous questions for me, being a teacher myself. Why had the teachers chosen their profession, knowing the struggles associated with the education sector beforehand? What did the teachers consider to be the best aspects and the most challenging aspects of being a teacher? As I realised how rural some of the schools were and how scarce housing for teachers on school grounds was, I became interested in learning about their accommodation arrangements. Do they have far to commute to work?

Further, coming from a country that believes in the benefits of teachers cooperating and working with each other as part of our professional development, I wanted to know whether that was also the case in Malawi. While teaching is viewed as a collaborative endeavour in theory, are teachers expected and required to work together, and could they collaborate in rural schools with limited resources, such as office spaces and

classrooms? Towards the latter part of my journey, the question of *quality* education became a more prominent question, along with the effect that the overall educational environment had on quality.

I am a white, educated, middle-aged woman, born and raised in Iceland, who has been privileged with the opportunity to live and work in both low- and high-income countries. Throughout my professional life, whether I was living in Iceland, Malawi, Namibia, or Mozambique, it became more and more apparent to me that "education for all," a policy stance adopted internationally, faces numerous challenges, especially in LMICs.

At the time of my PhD data collection, my family and I had spent nine years in Namibia and five years in Malawi. During that time, my own children had been enrolled in well-resourced international schools. At the same time, I volunteered with non-governmental organisations supporting children and education, visiting primary schools, and getting to know many aspects of the education system quite well. Many resources taken for granted in countries like Iceland are in short supply elsewhere, such as teaching and learning materials (TLMs), human resources (e.g., teachers) and infrastructure, including electricity, clean water, and sanitation facilities. These would inevitably affect one's understanding of inputs associated with providing quality education.

Official statistics in Malawi (MoEST, 2022) regarding primary education point to a high teacher/learner ratio (1:62), high dropout rate (4.73%), high repetition rate (25%), low completion rate (56%), and low transition rate (42.5%) from primary to secondary school. I wondered about the links between the resource challenges and the prevalent poor academic attainment in connection with the provision of education, which I believe is crucial to examine. Even though the dropout rate does not appear to be high to some, it is significant in the context of education for all. These statistics clearly undermine the Malawi Government's policy agenda of education for all and raise questions about the actual impacts of policy at the school level.

Through my visits to the schools, my admiration grew steadily for the teachers, who maintained positive attitudes and motivation in the face of constant difficulties. I felt I had to explore their situations in a formal and structured manner. I became more determined to undertake this research after each visit. When I was accepted to the doctoral programme at the School of Education at the University of Iceland, I had no real idea about the remarkable journey of personal and educational discovery ahead. I began to appreciate the significance of this journey as my fieldwork took on a firmer, systematic shape.

When reflecting on what this journey has meant to me on an educational level, it is as if a new dimension of life opened up for me in Malawi. Not only did I learn firsthand about the challenges facing rural schools, teachers, and education authorities in improving the situation and prioritising all the demands, but I also learned about life itself on this planet of ours, human rights, social conditions, and education.

Without the willing participation of the four schools participating in this research, including teachers, parents, and administrators, my journey would have been blocked by boundaries, both invisible and official. I would never have found the right schools nor been granted a space to look at the challenges facing teachers. For that, I am deeply grateful.

1.2 Universal declarations and human rights

The United Nations (UN) have made several universally agreed-upon education declarations since 1948, when the UN introduced the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (UDHR), which stipulated that "everyone has a right to education" (UN, 1948, Article 26). In 1989, children were singled out when the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (UNCRC) reiterated the declaration from 1948: "Every child has a right to education" (UNICEF, 1989, Article 28). UNESCO´s Jomtien Proclamation expanded the convention in 1990 with a statement in the document *World Declaration on Education for All* (EFA) (UNESCO, 1990), claiming that every child should be able to benefit from educational opportunities to meet their basic learning needs. At about the same time universal education was being promoted, economic development became the focus of attention.

In the 1994 *Salamanca Statement* (UNESCO, 2020), governments were asked to prioritise special needs education and adopt the principles of inclusive education. The *Millennium Development Goals* (MDGs) were formulated in 2000 and were to be achieved by 2015 (UN, 2015). The MDGs emphasised Universal Primary Education (UPE), which would "ensure that, by 2015, children everywhere, boys and girls alike, will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling." The emphasis on education and training in EFA and MDGs was based on the idea that education is a human right and should be accessible to all. Further, education and training would, in turn, support technological and economic progress, among other benefits. In 2015, quality education for all was reinforced through the *Sustainable Development Goals* (SDGs) to: "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all" (UN, 2018, SDG 4). The focus on quality education in SDG #4 is significant as it is complex. Globally, quality education is considered to be a human right and the potential basis for economic progress. Education can equip individuals with skills to exercise their human rights and expand their capabilities (Sen, 1999); it increases their employability and enables them to better adapt to social and cultural changes (Idrees & Siddiqy, 2013; Mellesse & Molla, 2018).

The global effort to reach universal access to quality education has made much progress, albeit unequally across nations. Globally, there has been a significant increase in the enrolment of learners in primary schools since the implementation of EFA and MDGs (UNESCO, 2019b). However, high enrolment alone does not represent optimal quality education, especially since approximately 390 million learners

worldwide are not achieving optimal numeracy and literacy proficiency levels at the end of the primary school cycle (UNESCO, 2017a; World Bank, 2018). Further, in 2018, approximately 59 million children, representing about 8% of the total population of children of primary school age (6–11 years old), were still out of school at the primary level, with 87% of those children coming from low-income or lower-middle-income countries (UNESCO, 2019a). Additionally, the shortage of teachers is a universal problem rather than a regional one. For instance, countries' projections show that to achieve universal primary education by the year 2030, 24.4 million primary school teachers are needed (UNESCO, 2016). However, this is unlikely to be achieved, and in most low-income countries like Malawi, whose education systems are heavily affected by poor funding, teacher shortage is persistent. In most LMICs, teacher shortage is more evident in rural schools.

1.3 Rationale and significance

To identify issues and gain a deeper understanding of factors influencing the provision of primary education, this study explores how the education system in Malawi functions in four rural primary schools in Mangochi District and how education moves from centralised policy to rural and decentralised practice. To understand the system and look behind the numbers, it is critical to identify potential factors that may facilitate or support education, on the one hand, or constrain or hinder it, on the other. Considering how important diverse stakeholders are for education and academic achievement, it is of great significance to examine stakeholders' views, their cooperation, and participation in education. These stakeholders, such as headteachers, teachers, and parents, will likely influence school practices and enrolment. They would also be influenced by the school and community realities. Therefore, I felt the need to learn more about their cooperation and collaboration.

Much needs to be done to remedy the situation in education, which manifests in poor statistical outcomes, as has been mentioned. Additionally, research findings show that children from rural communities are disadvantaged regarding access to education and educational attainment (e.g., Okeowhor et al., 2019; Shikalepo, 2020; Sumida & Kawata, 2021). This undermines the pursuit of education for all as a human right. Epstein (1995) and Epstein and Salinas (2004) have argued for the need to develop and maintain cooperation and collaboration between schools, families, and communities to improve and increase learners' academic achievement. Working from that stance and being aware of the fragility of the education system in rural Malawi, I was especially interested in exploring how the school-home partnership manifested itself in rural primary schools. I embarked upon this research in the four rural primary schools in Mangochi District, Malawi, to examine and portray this.

1.4 Originality and value

In this study, I identify and explore factors considered conducive to quality education; I look at how teachers in rural primary schools in Mangochi District enact their practice, how they cooperate and collaborate, and how they are supported in their mission to provide education to their learners. This study provides an understanding of the current interactions between home and school and the form and level of parental involvement. It establishes the kind of interactions teachers and parents have, whether they are mainly disciplinary actions; that is, whether most contacts with parents occur when their child misbehaves in school, or whether they are more learning-oriented.

Another important feature of the education system explored in this study is the community's views or attitudes towards education. Do the communities believe in education and consider it valuable to send children to school? This study also examines teachers' living and working conditions. Are teachers supplied with what they need to provide and sustain the provision of education?

To supplement the qualitative data and better understand the context, the study also uses official statistics to discern site-specific factors that may cause a disparity in the provision of resources, such as the deployment of teachers to rural schools compared to urban schools.

Since the factors mentioned above - family-school relationships, parental involvement, the community/parental attitudes towards education and teachers' accommodation and work situations - have been shown to have implications for the quality of education, I wanted to establish how they are experienced and manifest in four rural primary schools in one district in Malawi. Within this research, the current provision of primary education situation is assessed through these four cases. As official Malawian statistics, such as high teacher/learner ratio, high dropout and repetition rates, and lack of infrastructure and resources (e.g., MoEST, 2018; 2021) have shown, the quality of education needs to be raised so that all eligible learners have the opportunity to access and complete primary education, which is a human right, and in the spirit of education for all. General participation and increased quality of education can potentially improve the social and economic conditions of the learners and the country. More importantly, it will provide the learners with the opportunity to participate in society in equal standing with their fellow citizens, whether this participation is in the context of cultural traditions or civil discussion on societal matters. Education provides us with tools to determine our own future. Therefore, this research may be considered valuable to learners, their families, educational authorities at the local and national levels, and society as a whole.

To scrutinise the local factors and the different distal and social influences, and to draw a holistic picture of the nature of these interactions, I apply Bronfenbrenner's socio-ecological system theory (SEST) to understand my findings. SEST is a theoretical framework that identifies social interactions as nested structures from micro, meso, exo

to macro systems that make up conditions and influence individuals and societies. I also adapt and use the Quality Education Framework (EdQual), which provides a structure and important elements to explore inputs and processes within rural primary schools and beyond that are needed to provide quality education. The EdQual framework was developed to contextually implement quality education in LMICs (Tikly, 2011; Tikly & Barrett, 2007). The EdQual framework adds significance to the factors and processes needed to provide quality education. Applying SEST in combination with EdQual allowed me to map the situation and generate an overview of the education system as it is experienced in the four participating rural primary schools in Mangochi District.

The value of my research is at least fourfold. (1). It contributes to knowledge about what supports and constrains quality education in resource-constrained rural contexts. (2). It identifies what factors may be instrumental in improving learners' school experiences and educational attainment. (3). It gives valuable insight into the everyday school life in the rural school community of the four participating primary schools. (4). It provides an emergent practical framework for identifying essential features of quality education in rural settings in low-income contexts. The emergent framework can provide insights which can be drawn upon to support improvements in education. This study contributes to knowledge in the field of primary education in general and the understanding of quality primary education in rural Malawi specifically. It adds to the steadily growing body of research on educational systems in rural and resource-constrained contexts in Malawi and similar contexts in other SSA countries.

1.5 Purpose, aim and objectives

The main purpose of this research is to contribute to knowledge about education in rural Africa by exploring how people in rural Malawi view and experience primary education in their contexts. In this thesis, I aim to gain a deeper understanding of factors that support or hinder the provision of education in Mangochi District in Malawi. Using qualitative methods, the objective is to explore selected parts of the education system in rural Malawi, specifically rural Mangochi District. Data are elicited from reports, interviews and observations. I focus on participants' attitudes towards education, family-school relationships, parental involvement, and teachers' working and living conditions in four primary schools in rural Mangochi District.

The main research questions underpinning this study are:

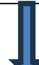
> *How do stakeholders in four primary schools in rural Mangochi District perceive education in their context, and what is the nature of their interactions?*
>
> *What factors are perceived by stakeholders as central to achieving quality education in rural primary schools in Mangochi District?*

I explore the interactions and cooperation among teachers, schools, parents, and community members in and around four rural primary schools in Mangochi District in

Malawi, along with official officers, who are all stakeholders in education. I analyse these interactions and their significance for teachers' work and quality education as the focal point. In **Figure 3**, I present my understanding of the connection between the purpose (my guiding light), the aim, the objectives and the main research questions, from aspirational ideals to research operations.

PURPOSE - WHY?
The purpose of this research is to contribute to knowledge about education in rural Africa, by exploring how people in rural Malawi view and experience primary education in their context.

AIM - WHAT?
The aim is to gain a deeper understanding of factors that support or hinder the provision of education in Mangochi District in Malawi.



OBJECTIVES - HOW?
Using qualitative methods, the objective is to explore selected parts of the education system in rural Malawi, specifically in rural Mangochi District. Data are elicited from reports, interviews and observations. I focus on participants' attitudes towards education, family-school relationships, parental involvement, and teachers' working and living conditions in four rural primary schools in Mangochi District.

MAIN RESEARCH QUESTIONS
How do stakeholders in four primary schools in rural Mangochi District perceive education in their context, and what is the nature of their interactions?
What factors are perceived by stakeholders as central to achieving quality education in rural primary schools in Mangochi District?

Figure 3: Connection between purpose and research questions.

I formulated three research-specific objectives to attempt to answer the main research questions. I worked towards them by focusing on parental involvement, teachers' working and living conditions and site-specific factors influencing the provision and quality of education. This work is presented in three peer-reviewed papers that align with the requirements for a PhD by publication. Each paper attempts to answer specific research questions that were developed to contribute to the overall purpose of the research:

Article I: "Parental involvement in children's primary education: A case study from a rural district in Malawi." In this article, I examined the nature of parents' involvement in their children's education in the four rural primary schools.

a. How do parents in rural Malawi participate in their children's education?
b. How do four rural primary schools involve parents in their children's education?

Article II: "Perceived realities of rural primary school teachers in Malawi: Applying Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory." In this article, I explored the living and working conditions of teachers from the four rural primary schools and the effect of these conditions on the quality of teaching.

c. How do teachers in four rural primary schools in Malawi experience their working and living conditions?
d. How do teachers in four rural primary schools in Malawi perceive their profession, its challenges, and support?

Article III: "Factors affecting quality of education in rural primary schools in Malawi." In this article, I analysed site-specific factors that may affect the quality of education in the four rural primary schools in Malawi.

e. What factors affect quality education in four rural primary schools in Mangochi District in Malawi?

In all three articles, I used a qualitative research approach. The main focus of the data gathering and analysis was on the teachers, their actions, and their position in the system. I considered their interactions with each other and in the school, their perceived working and living conditions, and home-school relationships. The focus was also on parents and their role in their children's education, how they view education, and their level of involvement.

The thesis builds on two main theoretical foundations. To begin with, I applied Bronfenbrenner's socio-ecological systems theory (SEST), which postulates that individuals are influenced and develop through interactions within and between social systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1995). Bronfenbrenner (2005) theorised that what steers the individual's growth is the interconnection between the personal level and environmental factors. The context for personal growth and development is the crux of SEST, and due to how complex and multifaceted my research is, I considered SEST appropriate for guiding my data collection and interpreting the findings.

SEST gave me better control of the data analysis, and I could visualise how the different aspects of the education system worked together and affected one another. For instance, it was very useful to me to assign the various collaborators or agents to their

appropriate systems, especially since some agents were assigned to two systems depending on their capacity. For instance, "other teachers at school" belonged to the microsystem, whereas "teachers' collegiality" was assigned to the mesosystem. The same applies to parents; their direct interactions with their child's teachers were conceptualised as part of the mesosystem, whereas parents' attitudes towards education are part of the exosystem. Teachers' working and living conditions form part of the exosystem. However, the provision of teachers' housing and teaching resources belongs to the macrosystem. Due to this complexity, I felt Bronfenbrenner's SEST guided and helped me contain and understand the data.

As I got more entrenched in my research, the question of the quality of education inevitably arose. For instance, in a classroom with more than 200 learners and one teacher, as I witnessed during my fieldwork, I wondered whether one teacher could provide and maintain a quality education in that situation. Are the authorities putting quality at the forefront of education, either by providing teaching resources or through policies? These and more questions on the quality of education led me to a framework for Quality Education (EdQual) (Tikly, 2011), which I later added to my research process and data analysis work. According to the EdQual framework, when implementing quality education in low-income countries, we must look at the interconnection between policy, the school, and the home/society in the learner's context.

The concept of *quality education* is complex, with varied definitions, including what it entails and how it is measured. For instance, according to Concern Worldwide (2023), a humanitarian NGO that operates in the world's poorest countries, quality education should build relevant skills for financial success, be inclusive, provide universal literacy and numeracy, and provide a safe environment for learners with qualified teachers. According to SDG #4 (UN, 2018), quality education ensures all learners free and equitable access to education. These are all desirable goals that most countries aspire to reach. However, the more I have learned about education and the situation in rural areas in LMICs, the more I believe it will be close to unattainable for many countries to reach quality education according to these ambitious definitions. I believe context has to play a big role in how countries reach quality education, as their access to resources, whether human or capital, is not equitable. Therefore, it is unfair and nearly unachievable for many countries, for instance, to simply proclaim that all teachers are qualified, and we know that the availability of resources is not the same between countries. Therefore, my definition of quality education aligns more with how the EdQual framework defines the concept. According to EdQual, quality education allows learners to realise their capabilities and the learning outcomes are gained through curricula that vary according to the needs and values of society (Tikly, 2011). This echoes place-based education, which I like as it emphasises reconnecting the process of education, enculturation and human development through learning skills and qualities needed to sustain communities (Gruenewald & Smith, 2010). Instead of all

schools fulfilling the same mandated curriculum, place-based education stresses that schools use the relevant experiences of the learners and their communities; curricula are context-based (Smith, 2002). This approach draws on local phenomena as the source of children's learning experiences. In my view, each country needs to set its own criteria for quality education based on its capabilities to provide resources and infrastructure founded on what that country needs and values. But at the same time governments need to prioritise education as much as they can given their resource constraints. Therefore, I find the EdQual definition to be a more just, friendly, and attainable definition of quality education than other definitions I have encountered.

In the context of my research, SEST and EdQual complement each other perfectly. Both frameworks emphasise context and, thus, allowed me to contextually identify ecological features that manifested in education provision among the four participating rural primary schools. Combining the two frameworks allowed me to systematically position participants and their interactions, cooperation, collaboration and the provision of resources—all with the aim of construing and interpreting learners' access to quality education in rural schools in Mangochi District. Furthermore, by applying them together, I was able to establish which inputs and processes are in place and which need to be expanded to implement quality education in a low-income country such as Malawi.

I believe that posing my research questions and seeking answers by applying relevant theories, in this case, the SEST and EdQual frameworks, can deepen our understanding of the Malawian education system, especially in rural areas.

1.6 The structure of the thesis

The thesis consists of seven chapters and a postscript. In the first chapter I begin with a brief prelude describing my PhD journey and my reasons for choosing my research topic. Thereafter, I give an overview of universal human rights and education declarations that have been put forward over the years follows. I then introduce the rationale and significance of my research and its originality and value. I then state the research's purpose, aim, and objective, along with the main research questions, and I introduce the sub-questions developed for each of the three journal articles.

Chapter two reviews the literature on education in Sub-Saharan Africa and the numerous challenges facing learners, resulting in poor education attainment. I also provide the context for my research by providing demographic information and discussion on the Malawian primary education system. I explore some inherent challenges hampering equitable access to quality education in Malawi and Mangochi District, where my research was conducted.

In Chapter three, I elaborate further on factors impacting the provision of education and the various aspects of primary school education in Malawi. I focus on

infrastructure, resources, teachers, and primary school advisors. I conclude the chapter by discussing parental involvement and its benefits for children's academic attainment.

Chapter four presents the study's theoretical foundation: Bronfenbrenner's socio-ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 2005) and EdQual, a framework for quality education in low-income countries (Tikly, 2011). I present, in detail, the theories and concepts that guided the study and other empirical studies that have leaned on SEST in previous years. I explain my reasoning for selecting SEST and the EdQual framework for my research and conclude the chapter by discussing the frameworks in the context of my research.

In Chapter five, I provide a detailed account of the research design and methods used. I thoroughly recount my chosen venue for the study and explain the selection criteria for the four rural primary schools that participated in the study. A detailed introduction of each school follows along with a thorough description of the participants. In this chapter, I also account for the limitations and delimitations of the study. I include a presentation of the different datasets, data analysis, ethical considerations, personal positionality, and translational issues. It concludes with a discussion about quality criteria when conducting qualitative research.

Chapter six provides an overview of the findings of the three articles comprising this thesis, which explicate different yet interconnected aspects of the primary education system in the four rural primary schools in Mangochi District. I discuss the findings in the context of the theoretical frameworks and how they contribute to the overarching aim of the research. I present my contribution to the field in the form of an analytical model and a practical tool for the implementation of changes.

In Chapter seven I explore the implications and considerations related to the findings. A brief Postscript follows Chapter seven, which concludes the synopsis.

2 Context of the research

To understand how people in rural areas in Malawi view and experience education in their specific contexts, I focus on how interactions, collaboration and cooperation among teachers, parents and communities surrounding four rural primary schools in Mangochi District emerge in this study. This chapter is divided into three sections. In the first section, I review the literature on systemic issues affecting education in Sub-Saharan Africa[a]. In the second section, I examine the apparent disparity between rural and urban areas of education provision and academic attainment in Sub-Saharan Africa. In the third and final section, I introduce the context for my research, exploring the education system in Malawi and Mangochi District.

2.1 Education in Sub-Saharan Africa

This study focuses on rural primary education in one district in Malawi, which is within Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). Compared to other regions in the world, SSA has the lowest completion rate for primary school children (UNESCO, 2019b), and progress to ensure that all children complete the primary school level has been slow (UN, 2021). While the global primary school completion rate rose from 82% to 85% between 2010 and 2019, in SSA, the primary school completion rate modestly increased from 57% to 64% (UN, 2021). This means, effectively, that approximately one in three children enrolled in primary school in SSA do not complete the full cycle of primary education. This undermines the right to education for all, highlighted earlier.

2.1.1 Completion rates and attainment in SSA

There are several reasons for low primary school completion rates in SSA countries, such as poverty and conflicts (UNESCO, 2015b). Nevertheless, primary school enrolment has increased significantly in SSA, rising from 59% in 1999 to 79% in 2012 (UNESCO, 2015a). Regardless, in 2018, slightly over 32 million (19%) primary school-age children in SSA were not enrolled in primary school, which is slightly more than half of the global number of out-of-school children of primary school age (UNESCO, 2019a).

Furthermore, SSA is facing serious educational attainment challenges; only about 12% of children have been reported to have achieved a minimum proficiency level in

[a] Sub-Saharan Africa consists of the countries that lie south of the Saharan Desert, excluding Sudan.

reading by the time they complete primary education, while only 16% achieved minimum proficiency in mathematics (UNESCO, 2017b). In comparison, 42% of children worldwide achieved a minimum proficiency level in reading by the time they completed primary education, and 44% of children worldwide had reached a minimum proficiency level in mathematics by the time they completed their primary education (UNESCO, 2017b). This discrepancy demonstrates the challenges low-income countries face concerning quality education.

Grade repetition is one of the reasons for the late or slow progression of learners through primary schooling in SSA. The Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality[b] (SACMEQ) conducted a survey (SACMEQ IV) in 2013, showing that grade repetition was significant among Grade 6 learners in the SACMEQ member states, which are all within SSA. According to the SACMEQ IV survey, on average, around 33% of learners in Grade 6 had repeated a grade at least once before promotion to Grade 6. In a few outlier countries, more than half of learners in Grade 6 had repeated at least once: 69% in Malawi, 54% in Swaziland, and 53% in Kenya (Awich, 2021). It is worth noting that grade repetition is both an outcome of and contributor to poor quality education provision. It can be attributed to internal weaknesses of the education system, such as lack of textbooks, poor school infrastructure, and shortage of qualified teachers leading to classroom overcrowding (Majgaard and Mingat, 2012). These numbers give some overview of the outcomes of educational provision and quality in SAA.

2.1.2 Qualified teachers in SSA

School input factors such as sufficient availability of qualified teachers are critical to achieving quality education and improving learning outcomes. The shortage of qualified primary school teachers in the SSA region is an acute problem, with about 80% of countries facing teacher shortages (UNESCO, 2024). With around 65% of qualified primary teachers, SSA has the lowest percentage of qualified teachers in primary schools worldwide. Their proportion has dwindled in recent years compared to the global rate of 81% of qualified teachers in primary schools (UNESCO, 2019c). The number of qualified teachers needed at the primary school level to reach universal quality education in SSA by 2030 and cover new teaching posts and replacements for attrition is 15 million additional teachers (UNESCO, 2024). These statistics indicate that

[b] SACMEQ conducts large-scale cross-national studies of the conditions of schooling and the quality of education in literacy, numeracy, and health knowledge of Grade 6 learners in Southern and Eastern Africa. Member states are: Botswana, Kenya, Lesotho, Malawi, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, Seychelles, South Africa, Swaziland, Tanzania (Mainland and Zanzibar), Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

primary schools in SSA face an uphill battle regarding the availability of qualified teachers to ensure quality education.

Furthermore, research has shown low salaries and poor working and living conditions in SSA affect teacher motivation (Bennell, 2023). Thus, education authorities in SSA face considerable difficulties recruiting and deploying qualified teachers. Due to these complex circumstances, authorities must focus on improving teachers' poor working and living conditions to try and keep their motivation up so that the teaching profession becomes valuable and sought after. Therefore, increasing the number of qualified teachers, lowering the teacher/learner ratio, and thereby improving the quality of education provided, will assist in the quest for quality education for all, as accepted in the MDGs and SDG #4.

In addition to a shortage of teachers, the education systems in SSA struggle with various other quality-related challenges, such as dilapidated infrastructure and poor provision of teaching and learning materials (TLM) and other resources, without which educational achievement is unlikely to improve. Ironically, while in some cases textbooks may be physically present in schools, they are not necessarily available to learners; schools may lock up available textbooks instead of distributing them to learners because replacing them is costly and challenging (World Bank, 2015). According to the World Bank (2015), many teachers copy text from textbooks onto the blackboard instead of distributing the books to the learners. Numerous research findings (e.g., Smart & Jagannathan, 2018; UNESCO, 2023; Mwadzaangati, 2023) demonstrate that making textbooks readily available to learners is important and among the most cost-effective ways to enhance quality education and learning outcomes (Haulle & Kabelege, 2020; World Bank, 2015). As textbooks are such an important learning aid, for learners not to have access to them contradicts the notion of quality education. Therefore, if we aim for quality education for all, ensuring learners have access to learning material must be a priority. Providing low-quality education may cause learners to become disinterested from school and learning and eventually drop out. For the learners who persist and stay in school, however, low-quality primary education results in higher grade repetition rates and inhibits learners' ability to develop appropriate literacy and mathematical proficiency by the time they complete primary school (Pisani & Dowd, 2022; World Bank, 2015). Those learners who are in school but are not learning have been referred to as being 'silently excluded', (Akyeampong, 2022), which challenges education for all.

Quality education is a human right, and its importance cannot be overstated for individuals to reach their potential and in the quest to eradicate and prevent intergenerational poverty. According to the numerous universally agreed-upon declarations about human rights and education and the ideal that all children should have access to quality education, we need to ensure that quality education is available to all learners globally. Necessary efforts must be made to address any systemic

features of poor-quality education. As part of the global community, every individual needs to be aware of how other countries are progressing in implementing access to quality education. People in the global north need to look further than their own country or the countries that are geographically close, as global access to quality education potentially affects the whole world in terms of development, economic stability, peace, and well-being. As global citizens, all of us should be concerned about education around the globe.

To ensure optimal learning outcomes, providing quality education is critical, and education must be considered a top priority, not least in low-income countries such as Malawi and other countries within SSA. However, as I gather from literature and having lived in Malawi, this is not a simple one-sided endeavour. According to a framework for enhancing the quality of education in a low-income context, three entities must work together: policy, school, and the home and community (Tikly & Barrett, 2010). In this framework, context matters, which means that education policy in one country may not necessarily work in another, as countries have different requirements, cultures, needs, and priorities. Context can not only be a resource for education but being aware of and understanding local conditions also provides the basis for improving them. Therefore, the context must be considered when education policy is developed as countries within SSA attempt to improve their education systems.

2.1.3 Education in rural and urban areas in SSA

The differences in education between rural and urban areas within SSA provide insights into how these different contexts influence educational practice. It is worth noting that some of the educational experiences in these two contexts may be similar. Ndofirepi and Masinire (2020) give a comprehensive overview of the numerous challenges, inequities, and injustices rural areas in SSA face in contrast to education in urban areas. Factors such as distance to school, lack of resources, and dilapidated infrastructure obstruct education in rural areas, making rural school-aged children the most disadvantaged regarding access to quality education (Okeowhor et al., 2019; Sosu et al., 2019). Many rural children have to travel long distances to reach their schools, and these trips can become hazardous during the rainy season. While inequalities also exist in some urban areas, rural areas tend to experience them disproportionately. Poor households in urban areas may struggle to meet some of the costs associated with education even though primary education is free. Similarly, rural communities are more affected by the burden of school costs (Williams et al., 2015).

A shortage of qualified teachers makes for overcrowded classrooms, which diminishes the instructional time each learner receives. It is worth noting that overcrowded classrooms affect both rural and urban areas. Lack of teaching and learning materials means learners must share textbooks, and the teacher may lack such basic things as chalk for the blackboard. Neglected school buildings and lack of classrooms are other

factors which undermine children's access to education in rural areas. Sosu et al. (2019, p. 3) use the term "multidimensional poverty" to describe the educational conditions among learners in certain schools in central Malawi, referring to school resource poverty, household poverty, and accessibility poverty. This multidimensional poverty directly impacts the educational outcomes of learners at the primary school level.

Lewin and Sabates (2012) explored access to primary education in six SAA countries: Kenya, Malawi, Nigeria, Tanzania, Uganda, and Zambia. Their findings concur with other research regarding increased enrolment in primary school. However, there is a difference between rural and urban access to education. In Malawi, for example, it is 25% more likely for children in rural areas to be out of school than children in urban areas (Lewin & Sabates, 2012). Children from rural areas in the six participating countries were more likely to have entered primary school older than the typical age and thus miss out on being in school when they were most receptive to learning basic skills. Children, especially girls, who start school as overage learners are likely to drop out at the onset of puberty due to pressure on them to enter early marriages (Diamond, 2022). Girl learners in rural areas are especially prone to experiencing discriminatory rigid gender norms, such as early marriage or pregnancy, which affects their access to education (Chikhungu et al., 2020). This goes against the global agenda of education for all and perpetuates poverty among women, as is demonstrated by Nigeria, where 60% of out-of-school children are girls (Diamond, 2022).

The disparity in education provision between rural and urban schools was apparent in SACMEQ IV (Awich, 2021). The proportion of rural learners in Grade 6 who had repeated at least one grade was 38% compared to about 29% of urban learners. Malawi had the highest number of repeaters (about 72%) among rural learners in Grade 6 who had repeated at least once before, compared to approximately 61% of urban learners (Awich, 2021). Systemic factors obstructing access to quality education in rural areas - e.g., shortage of qualified teachers, overcrowded classes, lack of TLM, dilapidated infrastructure and long distance to school - hinder rural learners from receiving quality education proportionally compared to urban learners, which makes rural learners more prone to repeat a grade.

Like the grade repetition trend, the SACMEQ IV findings further indicated that more urban than rural learners had reached acceptable reading and mathematics competency levels (Awich, 2021). On average, among the SACMEQ member states, 70.6% of rural learners had reached an acceptable reading skill compared to 84% in urban areas. As recounted above, the systemic factors affecting grade repetition in rural areas contribute to this discrepancy in achieving competency in reading and mathematics between rural and urban learners. The fact that rural learners have higher repetition rates and reach lower levels of competency in reading and mathematics than urban learners does give credence to the term of being silently excluded

(Akyeampong, 2022). If we are to reach education for all, this must be addressed, and efforts must be put in place to drastically change rural learners' access to education.

2.2 Primary education in the Malawian context

In this section I discuss the Malawian education system at the primary school level, focusing on Mangochi District, where this study was conducted.

2.2.1 Demographics in Malawi

Malawi is a landlocked country in southeast Africa that gained independence in 1964 after 73 years of British Colonial rule (Phiri, 2010). The present formal education system in Malawi was born in the 19th Century, mainly due to the influx of Christian missionaries. The first school was opened in 1875 in Cape Maclear in Southern Malawi by the Free Church of Scotland (Mtika, 2008). Other missionaries soon followed suit and opened more schools (Phiri, 2010). The purpose of the schools set up by the Christian missionaries was to teach local people literacy skills so that they could read the bible (Mtika, 2008).

The population of Malawi is growing rapidly. According to the 2018 census, it reached 17.5 million, an increase of 35% from the census ten years prior. With this annual growth rate of 2.9%, the population is projected to double by 2042 (National Statistics Office, 2019). Malawi's population is predominantly young, with about 52% of the population under the age of 18 years. Most Malawians (84%) live in rural areas as subsistence or smallholder farmers (National Statistics Office, 2019). About 89% of primary schools in Malawi are in rural areas (MoEST, 2018). A majority of people in rural areas are categorised as poor. There is a high incidence of multidimensional poverty in rural areas (70%) in Malawi (National Statistics Office, 2021b). This affects the quality of life and education of people living in rural areas.

Malawi is a low-income country. In 2021, it was ranked 169th on the Human Development Index (HDI), with a life expectancy at birth of 62.9 years, 19.6 years longer than in 1990 (UNDP, 2022). The national literacy rate is 68.6% (National Statistics Office, 2021a), which is on par with other SSA countries (UNESCO, 2017b). Slightly more men (71.6%) are literate than women (65.9%). However, there is an urban-rural disparity in the literacy rates, with the urban literacy rate being 84.4% compared to 61.9% in rural areas (National Statistics Office, 2020; 2021a). Through the years, Malawi has been affected by HIV/AIDS, which can have a detrimental effect on children's school attendance, as Moleni (2008) found in her study. Children, especially girls, may have to care for ill parents or relocate with their parents to obtain better medical care. It is worth noting that HIV/AIDS had previously had a devastating effect on teachers. A study showed that teachers were a 'high-risk' group and that 'one in seven teachers was predicted to die in one year (2002) alone (Bennell and Kadzamira, 2003). In 2005, the estimated prevalence of HIV/AIDS in adults aged 15-

49 years was declining; it was 14% (Moleni, 2008) and 9.6% in 2017. In 2023, it was estimated that 6.7% of adults aged 15-49 years in Malawi were living with HIV/AIDS (Unaids, 2023).

Providing basic infrastructure such as electricity is important for quality primary education. However, not everyone in Malawi has access to electricity. In 2020, only 12% of Malawian households had electricity as their lighting source, and only 1.8% had access to electricity for cooking and heating (National Statistics Office, 2019; 2021a). Further, there is a significant variance in access to electricity between rural and urban areas, with about 50% of urban households having electricity versus 4% of rural households (National Statistics Office, 2021a). Lack of electricity in rural areas may impose other burdens on households, especially on women and female children, who are already disproportionally overburdened by household chores, such as fetching firewood for cooking at home (Chikhungu et al., 2020; Chisamya et al., 2012). This prioritisation of household chores will likely affect their education.

In terms of safe water, 85% of the population has access to improved sources of drinking water during the rainy season, including piped water (10.3%), community standpipes (8.1%), protected wells (5.2%) and boreholes (61.7%). Access to water pumps is limited to only 1.9% of urban and 0.6% of rural households (National Statistics Office, 2019; 2021a). Additionally, only about 3% of the Malawian population has access to flush toilets, with nearly half of the population using pit latrines (National Statistics Office, 2019). Lack of provision of and access to safe water and sanitation can have a detrimental effect on education in rural areas by jeopardising teachers' and learners' health, and the lack of sanitation can affect learners' school attendance, especially among girls. Similarly, social norms in most rural areas in Malawi mean that the burden of fetching water from boreholes or rivers affects girls more, and this can affect the amount of time they spend on education, such as completing homework or studying at home (Chikhungu et al., 2020; Chisamya et al., 2012).

Lack of access to electricity affects education provision in rural areas; only about 30% of primary schools in Malawi have access to electricity (National Statistics Office, 2019). For instance, teachers' houses and classrooms have no lighting, which limits, for example, teachers' and learners' opportunities to study or use computers for learning. This was a critical issue during the COVID-19 pandemic when teaching and learning were via radio-based instruction only (Chiwaula et al., 2021). As most radios use batteries or electricity, affordability becomes an issue, given the high poverty levels among rural dwellers. Lack of electricity has been recognised as one of the determinants of teachers' and headteachers' unwillingness to be deployed to rural areas (Asim et al., 2019; Zubairi, 2020). I suspect that many, if not most people, in the Western part of the world do not fully realise that such basic resources are not generally available to many people in countries such as Malawi.

2.2.2 Primary education in Malawi

The formal education system in Malawi follows an 8-4-4 structure comprising three levels (MoEST, 2020). The primary level comprises eight years and runs from Standard 1 to Standard 8. The primary level is divided into three sections: the infant section consists of S1 and 2; the junior section comprises S3, 4 and 5; and the senior section consists of S6, 7 and 8. The primary school's official enrollment and completion age is 6 to 13 years. In Malawi, primary education is compulsory, and one of the government's priorities is encouraging all children to complete eight years of primary education (MoEST, 2008). However, enforcement of compulsory primary education is weak.

The language of instruction in the first four years of primary school is supposed to be the learners' mother tongue and, thereafter, English. At the end of the eight years of primary school, learners sit for the Primary School Leaving Certificate Examination [PSLCE], determining their eligibility for secondary school entry (MoEST, 2016). Due to a shortage of secondary school places, not all learners who pass the PSLCE are selected for secondary school. Secondary selection is highly competitive and accounts for the high repetition and dropout rates in standard 8. Secondary school runs for four years and is divided into a lower- and upper-secondary cycle, with the Malawi School Certificate Examinations (MSCE) at the end of year four. Lastly, the tertiary level includes university, technical, and vocational education and teacher education.

In Malawi, education has long been considered one of the crucial factors in improving the population's living standards, as described in numerous education policy reviews (e.g., MoEST, 2021a; Mzuza et al., 2014). The Malawian Government's mission is to provide quality education to all (MoEST, 2022). However, the primary education sector has weak internal efficiency and poor quality (Jere, 2012). To achieve the official mission of providing quality education for all, there is a pressing need for adequate infrastructure, provision of teaching and learning materials, better working conditions for teachers, and adequately qualified teachers. All these factors play a significant role in providing quality education, and according to the EdQual framework (Tikly & Barrett, 2010), they all need to be in place to reinforce and enhance quality education. Qualified and competent teachers may, in fact, be the most important school-based factor in increasing academic achievement (Beytekin & Chipala, 2015). However, distal processes in the exosystem and the macrosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 2005) significantly affect teachers' living and working conditions, and the provision of housing and TLMs directly impact teachers. For teachers to be effective, they need authorities to provide constant and stable TLMs. Without acceptable working conditions and TLMs, even qualified teachers' effectiveness is undermined.

Malawi was one of the first sub-Saharan African countries to respond to the Jomtien World Conference on Education in 1990, which emphasised increasing primary school enrolment and called for *Education for All* (EFA) (Chimombo, 2005). Subsequent to the

first multi-party national election in 1994, Malawi answered this call by introducing Free Primary Education (FPE) in 1994 and, by doing so, widening access to education. Within one school year, 1994-95, enrolment of primary school learners in Malawi rose from 1.9 million to 2.9 million out of about 3.6 million primary-school-age children (Chimombo, 2005; Mtika, 2008). This increase in enrolment created a need to provide primary school teachers, which added pressure on the already fragile education system, as will be examined in detail in Chapter 3. The government introduced a less costly teacher training program, the Malawi Integrated In-service Teacher Education Programme (MIITEP), as trained teachers were not readily available to fill this need. MIITEP replaced the pre-career full-time teacher education system (Kunje, 2002). Through the MIITEP, numerous secondary school graduates were recruited to become primary school teachers, most of whom were offered a two-week training course before being dispersed to primary schools throughout the country.

Malawi also signed up for MDG 2 (universal primary education) in 2000 and SDG #4 (quality education) in 2015. In recent years, primary school enrolment has continued to increase, and official statistics indicate that 2018 enrolment has grown by 11.1% in five years (MoEST, 2018). Net primary school enrolment today is estimated at 88% (MoEST, 2022). However, increased primary school enrolment does not mean that the country provides quality education to its school-going population. Chisamya et al. (2012) even state that the poor quality of education is the direct result of the poorly planned expansion of access to primary education, as the government did not have the financial ability to expand the education budget to keep up with growing enrolment.

In 2008, Malawi developed a National Education Sector Plan (NESP) for 2008-2017 (MoEST, 2008). This was the government's fourth educational plan since independence in 1964. NESP reflected the government's goal to improve access, equality, quality, relevance, governance, and management of the country's education system (MoEST, 2008). In addition, the Malawian government formulated policies such as the National Education Sector Investment Plan 2020-2030 (NESIP) to facilitate quality education (MoEST, 2020). The NESIP 2020–2030 foreword states, "The impact of prioritised investment in the education sector can therefore not be over-emphasised" (MoEST, 2020, p. vi). However, inherent problems have hindered the successful implementation of quality education for all. The trend over the NESP shows continued challenges with the quality of education, as evidenced by the poor quality of teaching and learning, resulting from high teacher/learner ratio, wastage through high repetition and dropout rates, and inefficient primary to secondary transition (Mtika & Gondwe, 2023). Before introducing the FPE, the education sector was already experiencing problems compounded by the rapid increase in primary school enrollment due to FPE. It made it impossible for education authorities to keep up with the added pressure and demand for more qualified teachers, infrastructure and TLM. Official statistics verify this trend.

2.2.3 Demographics in Mangochi District

This research took place in the lakeshore district of Mangochi, the largest district in Southern Malawi. In 2018, the population in Mangochi District had increased from 800,000 in 2008 to 1,150,000, with an annual growth rate of 3.6%, slightly higher than the national population growth rate of 2.6% (National Statistics Office, 2019). In Mangochi District, 94% of the population lives in rural areas. As elsewhere in Malawi, most people in Mangochi District (about 90%) are engaged in agricultural activities, slightly more than the national average of 84.7% (National Statistics Office, 2019; 2021a). The population in the district is young, with 48% being 14 years or younger (National Statistics Office, 2019).

Mangochi District relies heavily on agriculture, the fishing sector and tourism (Hyde et al., 1996), with most households that are involved in agriculture producing food or cash crops such as sugar, maise, rice, cassava, cotton, groundnuts, and tobacco (Mangochi District Assembly, 2014). The fishing sector is also essential for the district, providing direct employment and various derivative jobs, such as building boats, constructing fishing gear, and trading. This is in addition to the many who depend on Lake Malawi and the Malombe and Shire Rivers for their livelihoods (Mangochi District Council, 2010). The landscape in Mangochi District is beautiful, with picturesque beaches along Lake Malawi which attract tourists. Today, there are several lodges, hotels, and museums, all of which employ local people; tourism in the district contributes substantially to the local and national economy (Hyde et al., 1996.; Mangochi District Council, 2010).

Most people in the trade and industry in Mangochi District are self-employed in micro and small-scale enterprises (MSEs). About 65% of people in MSEs are in rural areas, with women constituting one-third (Mangochi District Council, 2010). Young men from the district have traditionally left for South Africa to gain employment or to purchase merchandise to sell in Malawi. They typically send money home to their families or bring it with them upon their return (Mangochi District Council, 2010). These low-skill entrepreneurial activities may impact the perceptions of the importance of education in the district. One teacher told me he was exasperated by these activities of young men who drop out of school early and leave for South Africa, then bring various commodities back to the villages, such as cell phones. According to the teacher, this affects how other children view education; they would rather quit school and go to South Africa to earn money. The desire to leave school early and start earning money puts pressure on young people's focus on education. In his view, this made being a teacher look bad.

Mangochi District is facing some serious social and developmental problems. At the most recent national census, the adult literacy rate in Mangochi District was 53%, the lowest in Malawi (National Statistics Office, 2019). Only 40% of women in the district are literate (MoEST, 2014). Traditionally, female participation in education has been

below average in the country (Hyde et al., 1996). The district has the highest percentage of teenage mothers, with 48% of women beginning their childbearing as teenagers (Stuart, 2011).

About 75% of people in the district have access to improved drinking water through piped water, wells, springs or boreholes. Only 17% of the population live in houses with improved sanitation facilities, and those with no facilities account for 16% of households in rural areas and 2% of households in urban areas (Mangochi District Council, 2010). About 6.5% of households in Mangochi District have access to electricity for lighting, and 0.5% have electricity for cooking and heating. Twenty-seven percent of households own a radio, and 2.4% of households in Mangochi District own a computer, laptop, or tablet (National Statistics Office, 2019). Rural areas in the district remain largely unelectrified. This impedes the provision of quality education in the district, as poor infrastructure and quality of life factors decrease teachers' willingness to be deployed to rural areas and help perpetutate the district's overcrowded classes and high teacher/learner ratio.

Figure 4: Busy life in and around Mangochi town. (Photo, G. Erlendsdóttir, 2015)

Photos taken in and around Mangochi town provide a visual context for the locations where I stayed during my fieldwork. Both photos portray local people going about their daily lives without being identifiable to preserve their anonymity (see **Figure 4**). The ladies in the photo to the right gave their consent for me to take a photo and publish it.

2.2.4 Primary education in Mangochi District

Mangochi District is subdivided into 17 education zones, with each zone being supported and supervised by a primary education advisor [PEA], who looks after an average of 15 primary schools. The district has 268 public primary schools (Mangochi District Assembly, 2014). Many schools become unreachable by road during the rainy

season (October to April) (MoEST, 2018), which affects the provision and delivery of teaching and learning materials. It also prevents the PEAs from upholding their regular supervision and mandatory visits to primary schools, reducing teachers' opportunities for in-service training and professional development.

Primary education in Mangochi District faces considerable challenges, resulting in poor education (Iceida, 2012). Contributing factors are a shortage of teachers, poor infrastructure, absenteeism, early marriages, long distances to school, lack of resources, and lack of interest (Iceida, 2012; Hyde et al., 1996; Zubairi, 2020). The consequences are poor education attainment. In the annual school census of 2022, the qualified teacher/learner ratio in Mangochi District was among the lowest reported in Malawi, 1:70, only surpassed by Nsanje and Chikwawa districts, which measured at 1:75 and 1:72, respectively (MoEST, 2022). During the school year 2017-18, 74% of public primary schools in Mangochi District had some need or high need for teachers to meet the official teacher:learner ratio target of 1/60 (Zubairi, 2021). The district's learner-to-permanent–classroom ratio was also among the highest reported in Malawi, 133:1, surpassed only by Phalombe and Machinga districts, which measured 147:1 and 134:1, respectively (MoEST, 2022).

School infrastructure in the district is poor, with dilapidated and inadequate buildings. In 2018, Mangochi District had the second-highest number of 'open-air' classrooms, only surpassed by Mulanje District (MoEST, 2018). The shortage of staff housing is reportedly one of the main problems in the failure to attract qualified teachers to rural schools in the district (Iceida, 2012; Mangochi District Assembly, 2014). During the school year 2017-18, only about 19% of teachers in Mangochi District were provided with accommodation on school grounds, compared to 23% nationwide (MoEST, 2018). This is significant because, as research findings have indicated, teachers living near the school have less absenteeism and are more contented than teachers living far away (MoEST, 2022; Ravishankar et al., 2016).

Primary education in the district is plagued by high repetition, high dropout rates, and many out-of-school children. Before the introduction of FPE, 51% of school-age children in the district were out of school (Iceida, 2012; Hyde et al., 1996). To give an idea of the severity of the problem, at one of the primary schools in the district it is expected that only 30 learners out of the original cohort of 140 will finish S1, and a mere four will reach S8 (Stuart, 2011). It should be noted that this is an extreme example, but nevertheless, the situation is dire, as official statistics attest. In 2022, the average repetition rate was 28%, compared to 25% nationwide. Mangochi District had the highest dropout rate in the country by far: 12.03% compared to the 4.73% rate nationwide (MoEST, 2022). Only Dedza District in central Malawi had a comparable dropout rate of 11.58%. The overall pass rate from S8 examinations was 64% in 2012, but it increased to 73% in 2019 (MoEST, 2020). However, only around 30% of those who qualified transitioned to public secondary schools (Mangochi District Assembly,

2014) due to a shortage of secondary places available in Mangochi District, as well as nationally. These numbers make me wonder how the people themselves in such locations view and experience education in their contexts.

It is worth highlighting that cultural norms and the Yao Cinamwali and Jando initiation practices for girls and boys, respectively, disrupt school attendance and subsequently contribute to dropout through early marriages (Banda & Kunkeyani, 2015). These high repetition and dropout rates experienced in Mangochi District speak directly to the inefficiency of the education system, the pressure and tension for young people between education and earning money, and the effects of cultural practices on education.

The discussion herein mainly highlights, using statistics, the context in which this study was carried out. It demonstrates the complex challenges primary education in Mangochi District experiences and the nearly insurmountable challenges education authorities face in providing quality education to all learners. This study examines, assesses, and analyses the education situation by talking and listening to the selected participants from four rural areas in the district using a qualitative approach.

2.3 Conclusion

In this chapter, I explored the primary school education in SSA, including the numerous challenges facing learners, which lead to poor educational attainment and low primary completion in the region. As discussed, various factors can have detrimental effects on providing quality education and show the complexity of the social reality that provides the foundation for education. I have presented relevant demographic information and the primary education system in both Malawi and Mangochi District to give context to my research. The Malawian Government has issued numerous education plans, putting an ambitious agenda for what needs to be done to ensure that all Malawian children have access to education. However, various systemic factors still hamper the provision of quality education. This further justifies the importance of this research. It will add to the growing body of knowledge on the conditions of the education system and the call for contextual understanding of the education stakeholders in four areas in Mangochi District.

In Chapter 3, I continue exploring the Malawian context and give a fuller account of the situation in the education sector. I consider some factors influencing the provision and attributes of primary education in Malawi, focusing on infrastructure, resources, teachers, PEAs, and parents, which, according to research, are all important factors in access to, and attainment of, quality education.

3 Factors influencing provision and attributes of primary school education in Malawi

In this chapter, I offer a brief account of the current status of primary school education in Malawi, focusing on infrastructure, resources, teachers, and primary education advisors. This account is based on official statistics along with previous research. I explore how these factors influence learners' achievement, grade repetition, and dropout rates. I conclude the chapter with a discussion of parental involvement. As a parent, teacher, primary school administrator, and researcher, I firmly believe in the power of parental involvement as an important resource. Therefore, I find it important to thoroughly examine the matter and how it can positively affect children's education acquisition.

3.1 Infrastructure and resources

School infrastructure directly affects access, quality, and efficiency of education. According to the 2015-16 school census, an addition of more than 28,000 classrooms was required for the primary school sector in Malawi (MoEST, 2016). For context, the total number of classrooms, whether permanent, temporary, or under rehabilitation, was around 58,000. This indicates the high learner/classroom ratio and the proportion of learners in 'open-air' classrooms, which had been a great challenge long before the introduction of FPE. Open-air classrooms must be considered unsuitable for teaching and learning and are not in congruence with a learning-friendly environment. Numerous challenges accompany open-air classrooms, such as not providing shelter from the elements (presented in article II, Erlendsdóttir & Mtika, 2023). Furthermore, for learners in overcrowded open-air classrooms, lacking TLM can lead to boredom, which tends to increase the dropouts (Chikhungu et al., 2020).

With the emergence of FPE, the already difficult situation with the lack of classrooms was exacerbated. However, from 2018 to 2022, there has been a slight (4%) annual increase in permanent classrooms in primary schools (MoEST, 2022). However, providing sufficient permanent classrooms for primary learners will likely take many years at this rate. This may continue to affect quality education due to overcrowding and unsafe learning spaces such as "learning under trees" or "open-air" classrooms. This fact interferes with Malawi's pursuit of quality education for all. I see it as one of the fundamental parts of the infrastructure that must be established to provide education properly.

Another notable challenge prevalent in Malawian primary schools is a shortage of textbooks. For example, in S1, the learner/textbook ratio in English and Chichewa (one of the local languages) is 3:1. In Mathematics, it is 4:1. In S4, it is 2:1 for English and Chichewa and 4:1 in Mathematics. In S7, the ratio is 6:1 in all three subjects, and in S8, it is 4:1 in all three subjects (MoEST, 2021a). This shortage of textbooks directly affects the quality of learning, since the availability of teaching and learning materials is one of the determining factors in academic performance and outcomes (Majgaard & Mingat, 2012). Research findings presented in article I (Erlendsdóttir et al., 2022) demonstrate the teachers' concern with the obvious problem of limited teaching resources and the lack of textbooks. They further discussed the difficulties they experienced teaching a subject without having access to any teaching and learning aids; in some subjects, they were able to improvise, but not in all. For instance, they had no computer access when teaching ICT. As a teacher, I find it difficult to fathom teaching a subject without the necessary tools, i.e., textbooks or other TLM in an overcrowded class. Understandably, this affects the quality of teaching and, therefore, the learning attainment of students. Since we know the importance of textbooks and the challenges associated with overcrowded and/or open-air classes, education authorities in Malawi must address these challenges and try to remedy them; otherwise, there is little hope of achieving quality EFA. I realise this is not easy, nor can it be achieved instantly, but acknowledging these issues is necessary, followed by informed decision-making.

3.2 Dropout, repetition, survival, and completion rates

According to official statistics, dropout and repetition rates in primary schools are high and have remained so for many years. Malawi experiences the highest dropout rate in Southern Africa (Chikhungu et al., 2020); thus, one of the priorities of the education authorities in Malawi is to continue to address this issue and move closer to universal education (MoEST, 2021a). The average dropout rate in Malawian primary schools was 4.73% in 2022, with the official target being 2% by 2025 (MoEST, 2021a; 2022). Dropouts at the primary school level indicate inefficiency and wastage in the education system, undermining the quest for education for all. It also reflects the lack of a mechanism to enforce compulsory primary education. The high dropout rate experienced in primary education may also indicate the inadequacy of the education provided, or that it does not meet the needs of learners or their families (Majgaard & Mingar, 2012). Various situational factors within the Malawian context affect school attendance of primary school children. These include poor facilities, sickness, violence at school, and verbal, physical, or sexual abuse at the hands of the teachers or fellow learners (Pridmore & Jere, 2011; Streuli & Moleni, 2008).

Abusive and discriminatory behaviour aimed at girls appears to be common in Malawi, according to Chisamya et al. (2012). Girls in Malawi often feel unsafe in several areas at school, such as the learners' toilets, teachers' houses, the school's office, the classroom, and the boys' playground (Leach et al., 2003). They feared being attacked,

verbally and/or sexually harassed by boys, teachers, and men from the community. The boys stated that they felt unsafe as well (Leach et al., 2003). In Sankhulani's (2007) research, which she conducted in rural Malawi, parents were found to be concerned for their daughters' safety. They worried they might be abducted or sexually assaulted on their way to or from school. As such, it may be surmised that feeling unsafe at school adversely affects the dropout rate, especially among girls (Chikhungu et al., 2020) and blatantly contradicts education for all, which Malawi strives for. To ensure that girls feel safe at school, the whole community must step in and take action to secure their welfare and safety. The needed actions concern people in the learners' microenvironment, such as parents, neighbours, community members, teachers, and headteachers. This differs from the actions needed for authorities to provide enough textbooks, recruit qualified teachers, or build new classrooms; in this instance, the onus is on the community to step up and take action. We must make girls feel safe at school if Malawi is to achieve total gender parity concerning equitable access to education.

The average primary school repetition rate was 25% in 2022, which leaves much to do to achieve the official target of 14% by 2025, as declared in the NESIP 2020–2030 (MoEST, 2021a; 2022). When comparing repetition rates between standards through the years, the highest repetition is continually in S1, measuring 34% in 2022, compared to 17% in S8. Repetition rates are generally higher in poorly funded rural schools. When statistics are compared, for example, between Mangochi District and Lilongwe City, the repetition rate is 28% in the former and 15% in the latter (MoEST, 2022). This may suggest that, apart from other factors unique to Mangochi, there is not enough funding in rural schools to support quality learning by providing TLMs, qualified teachers, and adequate infrastructure. Repeating a class does not necessarily lead to better academic achievement; rather, it adversely affects the teacher/learner ratio, increases the number of overage learners, and increases dropout risk (MoEST, 2022). Moreover, repeating a grade is costly for poor households in terms of providing for their children.

Poverty is an underlying factor that explains the high dropout and repetition rates and low completion rates in Malawian primary schools. According to the 2022 school census, 22.9% of female and 20.7% of male learners dropped out of school because of poverty. However, according to research, poverty is not the only factor excluding children from attending school (Moleni, 2008; Pridmore & Jere, 2011; Streuli & Moleni, 2008). Research has indicated that the countries most affected by HIV/AIDS have the lowest enrolment rates after controlling for economic status (Pridmore & Jere, 2011). Many children in Malawi have been affected by HIV/AIDS either directly or indirectly, and the psychosocial consequences have impacted their schooling. Orphaned learners in Malawi are more likely to be absent from school. Already overwhelmed with overcrowded classes and limited resources, teachers could not give the vulnerable children much-needed support (Streuli & Moleni, 2008). Many of the affected children either temporarily withdrew from school, or their attendance and

participation were irregular, leading to poor performance and potential permanent dropout (Moleni, 2008). However, the situation has improved over the years with the wide availability of antiretroviral (ARV) drugs for HIV.

Materially, the cost of school uniforms kept many children out of school. There is gender inequality in this, in that while a worn-out or torn and dirty skirt is considered inappropriate for a girl to wear to school, a boy can wear worn-out or dirty shorts to school (Pridmore & Jere, 2011). Girls are also more likely to be expected to care for their siblings or parents/relatives than boys, which can affect their school attendance and performance (Chikhungu et al., 2020; Pridmore & Jere, 2011; Sankhulani, 2007). In a study investigating the abuse of girls in four African countries (Leach et al., 2003), many learners in Malawi were found to be absent from school because they had caregiving responsibilities for their siblings or sick parents and relatives. Traditionally, rural girls in Malawi have more domestic chores, which they must attend to daily before and after school (Leach et al., 2003).

Ten years before Leach et al.'s (2003) research, Davison and Kanyuka (1992) found that parents in rural areas were hesitant to give up the benefits of their daughters' domestic duties, which affected girls' educational opportunities. In addition to the daily domestic duties, girls are often expected to perform chores around school, such as sweeping the grounds and classrooms before classes commence in the mornings and cleaning the blackboard (Leach et al., 2003). This may well affect their concentration level at school and thus put them at a disadvantage, as Leach et al. (2003) stated. Despite the disadvantages girls face in education, Malawi has had some successes in pursuing gender parity in access to education through the EFA, but there are still persistent gender inequities (Chisamya et al., 2012) as reported above. Not only are the girls missing out on education but the society near and remote is also missing out on the valuable potentials that educated females could bring to fruition.

A high survival rate indicates how efficient the education system is; the higher the rate, the higher the quality of education. In the Malawian education authorities' quest for quality EFA, a high survival rate is crucial, as it speaks to a low level of dropout and high rates of retention, and thus a more sufficient education sector. The survival rate of S5 and S8 learners in Malawian primary schools has remained relatively constant in recent years (MoEST, 2022). In 2014, the survival rate of learners who finished their first cycle in primary school and proceeded to S5 was 64.5% compared to 62% in 2022. However, the survival rate of learners who completed the second cycle of their primary education and proceeded to S8 was 31.5% in 2014 and increased to 39% in 2022 (MoEST, 2018; 2022). The primary school completion rate had remained relatively constant for years and was measured at 52% in 2018 and 50% in 2021. However, in 2022, the completion rate had increased to 56% (MoEST, 2022). An underlying factor for a low survival rate is repetition. If learners need to repeat a grade,

it decreases the likelihood of that child staying in school and completing their education (Majgaard & Mingat, 2012).

Overall, Grade 6 learner achievement in reading and mathematics among the SACMEQ IV member states has consistently improved (Awich, 2021). Nevertheless, 24.4% of Grade 6 learners have not achieved acceptable reading proficiency. The scores in Malawi are noticeably higher, at 54.8%, which means that slightly more than half of Grade 6 learners in Malawi have yet to reach an acceptable level of reading proficiency. The Grade 6 learners' mean score has also improved in mathematics. Standardised test scores in the SACMEQ region were 543.1 and 541.1 for males and females, respectively. In Malawi, on the other hand, the scores were well below average - 488.9 and 468.8 for males and females, respectively (Awich, 2021). These statistics demonstrate that there is still much to do in Malawi to strengthen the education sector to achieve quality education for all, which must be addressed through the underlying systemic factors affecting the survival and completion rates, such as inadequate infrastructure and lack of resources.

3.3 Primary school teachers

As discussed, the steady increase in enrolment in Malawian primary schools since the introduction of FPE in 1994 has exacerbated existing problems and created new ones. One is the recruitment and deployment of qualified teachers, which is one of the top educational priorities of the Malawian Government. Overcrowded classes reduce teachers' opportunities to provide their learners with individual support. Providing enough qualified teachers is a priority for improving the quality of education, as qualified teachers are a critical factor in learners' academic achievement (Beytekin & Chipala, 2015). As stated in the NESIP 2020–2030 Report, the official goal in Malawi is to increase the number of qualified primary school teachers (MoEST, 2020). The average qualified teacher/learner ratio in primary schools is 1:62 in urban schools and 1:70 in rural schools (MoEST, 2021b). This ratio is too high to enable high-quality teaching, especially when compounded by the lack of TLMs and poor school infrastructure in rural areas.

Approximately 40,000 primary school teachers have been recruited in the last ten years to improve further the qualified teacher/learner ratio (MoEST, 2019). However, due to budgetary constraints, Malawi continues to face a teacher crisis, evidenced by large class sizes and the government's failure to recruit and deploy over 5,000 recently qualified primary teachers (Zodiak Radio, 2023).

Not only does Malawi experience a shortage of teachers, but there has also been a persistent problem with the distribution of primary school teachers between and within schools. Primary schools experiencing acute teacher shortages co-exist with other primary schools with a surplus of teachers (Zubairi, 2021). According to Zubairi (2021), this indicates structural problems with teacher deployment and contributes to

the shortage of teachers. Zubairi (2021) also discusses the teacher/learner ratio variation between grades within the same schools. Official statistics demonstrate that the early grades (standard 1 and 2) tend to have more learners than the older ones; however, these grades usually only have one teacher teaching all subjects, whereas the senior sections tend to have subject teachers (Zubairi, 2021). This is problematic, as we know children are the most susceptible to learning at a young age. Therefore, ensuring a learning-friendly environment for the youngest learners is especially important as they build their knowledge and skills to understand and learn what is being taught in the next grade, etc.

In 2003, the Malawi Integrated In-service Teacher Education Programme (see 2.2.2) was abolished, and a new programme, the Initial Primary Teachers Education Programme [IPTE] was established in 2006 (Zubairi, 2020). IPTE is a two-year course, leading to a primary school teaching certificate. Teacher trainees alternate their time between coursework at the Teacher Training College [TTC] and supervised teaching practice in the field. By 2019, primary school teacher trainees had increased by 40% compared to five years prior (MoEST, 2019), aiming to reach a teacher/learner ratio of 1:60 (MoEST, 2022). In 2021, the sector missed the NESIP target for gender parity index [GPI] for teacher trainees enrolled in TTCs. The GPI of 1.3 was too much in favour of girls compared to the NESIP target of 1.13 for 2025 (MoEST, 2021b). The current situation in Malawi reflects the over-representation of women in the primary teaching profession. This situation is also noted in many high-income countries where primary school teaching is predominantly a female profession.

The governance and management of teacher education in Malawi still face some challenges affecting the quality of education. These include ineffective implementation of continuous professional development (CPD), inadequate advisory and inspection capability, underqualified TTC tutors, lack of review of the teacher training curriculum, dilapidated TTC infrastructure, inadequate TLMs at the TTCs, and inadequate preparation of teacher trainees for the complex realities of teaching, such as teaching overcrowded classes with limited resources (MoEST, 2021a).

Teacher absence and attrition have obvious effects on the quality of teaching. There are numerous reasons for teachers' absenteeism, such as personal illness, caring for a sick relative, attending funerals, difficulty getting to school, lack of promotion opportunities, low and delayed salaries, and lack of knowledge about specific subjects they have to teach, which may cause them to avoid the classroom (Moleni & Ndalama, 2004; Tudor-Craig, 2002). During the school year 2020–2021, death accounted for 2% of attrition, prolonged illness around 1%, retirement 4,8%, with 25% being due to "other" reasons (MoEST, 2021b). It would be interesting to investigate these "other" reasons and how they might be addressed since they affect the overall provision of education. It might be interesting to find out whether those who leave the profession are predominantly from

rural schools in case they account for disproportionate teacher attrition in rural schools, thereby further undermining the provision of quality education.

Teacher motivation is also important for the quality of teaching and vital for learners' learning experiences and attainment (Iqbal et al., 2020). In Malawi, various factors affect teachers' job satisfaction and motivation (Kadzamira, 2006). These include teaching in remote areas, the lack of availability of appropriate housing, long distances to trading centres, lack of facilities such as running water and electricity, and the lack of opportunities for continuous professional development (Kadzamira, 2006; Ravishankar et al., 2016; Zubairi, 2020). This echoes the research findings presented in article II (Erlendsdóttir & Mtika, 2023), which showed that teachers were concerned with their working and living conditions and restricted opportunities for continuous professional development. To address teacher motivation, the Malawi Government attempted to develop a comprehensive strategy to improve teacher motivation by making teacher promotion more transparent (Ravishankar et al., 2016). Teacher motivation was of great interest to me as I started on my research journey.

Despite what appears to be an increase in their public expenditure on education (MoEST, 2021a), the government has been unable to keep up with the steady learners' enrolment growth. According to teachers' spokespersons, there are enough trained and qualified teachers in Malawi, but many have yet to be recruited and employed by the government (Nyirenda, 2021). Many trained teachers from the Initial Primary Teacher Education (IPTE) cohorts are still unemployed due to budgetary pressure (UNESCO, 2024). This highlights the incongruence between the government's commitment to employing more teachers and the obvious shortage of teachers, especially in rural areas.

It would appear that the current practice of focusing only on increasing the number of trained teachers without employing them is counterproductive. It represents wastage when the trained teachers are not being recruited to help solve the teacher shortage and resultant overcrowding, thereby hampering quality education. To improve the quality of education in Malawi, the government must ensure that enough qualified teachers are recruited and deployed in both rural and urban schools.

The importance of teachers in the classrooms cannot be underestimated, as they play a critical role in influencing learners' academic motivation (Davison & Kanyuka, 1992). According to one framework for implementing quality education in low-income countries (Tikly & Barrett, 2010), the policy environment is essential. It is not enough to train new teachers if they are not employed once they are qualified, as this process does not lower the teacher/learner ratio and is a waste of resources. The policy of providing quality education is firmly stated in the Malawian education policies, for example, in the NESIP 2020–2030 (MoEST, 2020, p.4). Qualified teachers represent a significant component of the quality of education as it emerges in school practice (Tikly & Barrett, 2010).

3.4 Primary education advisors

To enhance efficiency, certain aspects and functions of the Malawian education system were decentralised in 2013, ceding some powers and decision-making functions to the zone and/or school level. In part, this decentralisation resulted in direct funding to all public schools, as well as the decentralisation of the collection of statistics and deployment of teachers (MoEST, 2018; 2019). It also led to the division of districts in Malawi into 447 education zones (MoEST, 2020). A Primary Education Advisor (PEA) presides over each zone, covering 15 primary schools on average. The PEAs are crucial components of education and learning, as they act as liaison between schools and district education managers (DEMs). The PEAs' primary responsibilities include providing pedagogical support to headteachers and teachers, collecting and keeping statistical data for their schools, and offering teachers in-service training.

PEAs are expected to visit their schools regularly to evaluate any improvements made by the schools in between visits, such as the quality of teaching, how well learners learn, and how teachers assess their learners. However, these visits are few and far between, as the PEAs have no regular means of transportation to visit their schools due to a lack of funding. In the 2017-18 school census, 20% of primary schools had received no visits from their PEA during the first school term. Twenty-three percent of primary schools did not receive a visit during the second term, and 27% did not receive a visit during the third term. Around 40% of primary schools received a visit from their respective PEA once per term, with only around 8% having a visit three times a term (MoEST, 2018). This was also a problem for the PEAs in my research, as presented in article II (Erlendsdóttir & Mtika, 2023), as a lack of funding rendered them unable to visit their schools according to the official requirement of one visit per term. However, my observations during fieldwork indicate that the significance of PEAs contribution and their importance is indisputable.

The sporadic visits by PEAs to primary schools must be considered a serious hindrance for the PEAs to uphold their responsibilities and duties, especially considering how important in-service training is for teachers and their learners for quality education provision. Through in-service training, teachers acquire knowledge and new pedagogical skills, enabling them to perform better in the classroom (Iqbal et al., 2020; Nzarirwehi & Atuhumuze, 2019). In my research (article II, Erlendsdóttir & Mtika, 2023), I found that teachers value the importance of the in-service training provided by the PEAs when they are learning new teaching methods or being introduced to a new syllabus. However, only half of the participating teachers in the current study had ever been offered an opportunity for such professional development during their careers.

Research findings have indicated that in-service teacher training impacts teachers' performance and professionalism and advances their career prospects (Nzarirwehi & Atuhumuze, 2019). Nzarirweni and Atuhumuze (2019) further found that to realise the

benefits of in-service training, it needs to be regular, carefully planned, and evaluated after implementation. The limited opportunities for in-service training available for teachers in rural Mangochi, as the current research findings indicate, adversely affected teachers' efficiency, and therefore learners' education attainment.

3.5 Parental involvement

One social factor concerning education that may not be obvious, as it is situated outside the school, is parents' involvement in their children's education. Parental involvement in education is generally defined as parents' work with schools and with their children to benefit their children's educational outcomes and lay the groundwork for future success (Hill et al., 2004). Research on parental involvement and children's academic achievement shows that parental involvement influences children´s education and school achievement (Close, 2001; Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003; Erlendsdóttir, 2010; Erlendsdóttir et al., 2022; Wei & Ni, 2023).

A distinction is made between home- and school settings, where home settings involve parents helping their children with homework, engaging in educational activities at home, and providing them with educational materials. It can also involve communication between parents and their children about school. School settings, on the other hand, involve parents visiting the school and attending school events, PTA meetings, and parent-teacher meetings (Dahie et al., 2018; Dearing et al., 2006; Hill & Tyson, 2009; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). Parental involvement in the school setting will likely strengthen students' positive attitudes towards education and increase students' self-efficacy (Dearing et al., 2006). This positive attitude may, in turn, affect how students perceive and evaluate their learning skills. All this culminates in benefitting learners and their academic achievement (Dahie et al., 2018; Epstein, 1995; 2011; Lara & Saracostti, 2019; Lumadi, 2019). Researchers have recognised that "the closer the parent is to the education of the child, the greater the impact of child development and educational achievement" (Fullan, 2007, p. 189). Parents can thus be seen as a valuable resource for increasing the quality of the education their children receive, even when the conditions are not ideal.

Research shows that inviting parents to be involved in their children's education is the key motivating factor for parental involvement (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005; Shajith & Erchul, 2014). However, parents must feel that the school welcomes them and encourages their involvement (Adedeji & Olaniyan, 2011; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). In addition to a welcoming, nurturing school climate, a direct invitation from the teacher is also important. A teacher has a variety of ways to invite parents to become involved. It can be a specific invitation to attend activities at school, implementing workshops for parents, or via homework assistance (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). The children themselves can also invite their parents to participate. This may be the child requesting parental help with homework or with a specific situation at school. It may

even be that the child wants the parent to participate in a school event (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005; Shajith & Erchul, 2014).

Related to parental involvement is community involvement; however, there is limited research on what form parent/community school involvement takes in LMICs, as most of the research is conducted in high-income countries (Balikoowa et al., 2023). It is important to note that community involvement in schools is not unproblematic; even so, it positively influences learners' attendance and motivation for learning. However, the learners must perceive this participation as positive (Balikoowa et al., 2023). In rural Uganda, the form of community involvement that learners valued most was emotional and material support, such as when community members provided food to learners at school, helped resolve conflicts, or counselled and supported them through sickness (Balikoowa et al., 2023).

Rose (2003) distinguished between pseudo- and genuine participation, with pseudo-participation referring to when community members are informed of already agreed-upon development programmes at school and are expected to contribute resources, funding, or labour. On the other hand, genuine participation allows community members to be part of the decision-making processes. However, it has been found that many communities may have limited experience and skills in school management, which is a cause for concern when communities become participants in the decision-making process at school (Kwaah & Nishimuko, 2023). This may account for pseudo-participation. Kwaah and Nishimuko (2023) argue for much-needed support for communities to empower them to become more involved, genuine participants (Rose 2003).

It does appear that parental involvement in LMICs is generally based on pseudo-participation, where parents participate by contributing resources to the schools rather than being involved in the school's decision-making process. Kimu (2012) stated that historically, in Kenya, parents were seldom involved in children's education. Parents came to school to meet with teachers about disciplinary issues or low performance; otherwise, they were not contacted. These findings are in accordance with Marphatia et al.'s (2010) findings from Burundi, Malawi, Senegal and Uganda. According to Kimu (2012), traditionally, parents in Kenya saw their role as helping to raise school funds for the development of the school rather than participating in the learning process and education itself. This aligns with pseudo-participation. Various underlying factors deterred parental involvement in Kenyan primary schools, such as school climates that discouraged parental involvement, parents' lack of interest in assisting, and parents' discomfort with home-school relationships. Lastly, parents felt that teachers deliberately kept them uninformed about their children's education (Kimu, 2012). It is interesting to realise these salient but influencing social factors that can restrict or enhance the quality and outcomes of education.

Interestingly, in Chansa-Kabali's (2016) research on parental involvement in Lusaka, Zambia, most parents rated poorly on the parental involvement scale, both through self-report and according to the teachers' reports. Parents had some grievances towards the schools about lack of communication, and most (78%) did not feel that the school involved them in their children's education. This resonated with the teachers' reporting on how often they reached out to parents, with only 58% of the teachers communicating with parents via letters, calendars, and newsletters once a year and 11% never sending any information home to their learners. These findings highlight the importance of schools welcoming parents and openly embracing parental involvement, and that parents are aware of that and experience it first-hand.

Children must acquire reading skills early in life, as literacy becomes the foundation of learners' academic achievement and attainment (Chansa-Kabali, 2016). Studies appear to have focused more on the direct association between parental involvement and literacy skills in the broader sense; however, specific parenting activities, such as shared reading, may influence and impact children's emergent literacy skills (Gest et al., 2004). These findings are consistent with other research findings in that shared reading is strongly associated with language comprehension. According to Close (2001), reading activities at home significantly influence children's reading achievement and attitudes towards reading. Those children whose parents read to them at an early age tend to have a greater interest in reading as they age. Reading stories to children at home influences children's language comprehension and skills. When parents create a nurturing learning environment in the home with books and have conversations with their children about books they have read, it is linked to higher reading comprehension and academic achievement in children. Chansa-Kabali (2016) conducted a study on parental involvement and children's reading skills acquisition in Lusaka, Zambia, among first graders in nine public schools in a low-income area. The findings indicated that children of highly or moderately involved parents outperformed other children in reading skills.

Active parental involvement must be encouraged due to its importance in a society. Research has indicated that it is a significant factor at all levels in our children's learning context, such as literacy development and academic achievement. As Berkowitz et al. (2021) state, it is also vital in building high-quality home-school relationships.

3.6 Parental involvement and Malawi

The Malawian Government acknowledges the importance of parental involvement and agrees with the plethora of research findings indicating its positive effect on children's academic achievement (National Statistics Office, 2021a). Malawian communities have traditionally had an important role in providing education, mainly by providing labour, materials, or funding to build and maintain schools (Rose, 2003). However, this can

burden the poorest communities, which already suffer from scarcity of resources. In Malawi, according to Marphatia et al. (2010), parents' motivation and frequency in visiting their children's schools depends on how welcoming parents perceive the school to be and how good the school-community relationship is. In cases where parents perceive the relationship as good and the school encourages community participation, parents feel more at ease in discussing school matters with the teachers. It is crucial for parents to feel that the school is welcoming and that they are encouraged to be involved with their child's education.

Marphatia et al. (2010) studied parental involvement in four selected countries: Burundi, Malawi, Senegal, and Uganda. Their findings indicated that it was rare for parents to participate or be involved in either a home or a school setting. In the home setting, parents generally did not monitor their children's performance or participate in dialogue with their children about teaching and learning strategies. They also found that parents rarely visited their children's schools. When they visited, these visits were usually linked to honouring/paying a financial contribution to the school or obtaining their child's exam results rather than attending events or meeting teachers. The explanation from parents about why they did not visit the school was either that they did not have time or that they considered education to be the teachers' and schools' responsibility, so they saw no reason to visit the school (Marphatia et al., 2010). Rarely did parents initiate contact or visit the school to follow up on their child's educational progress or to have conversations with the teacher about their child's progress. Usually, the school initiates contact with parents and then asks for their presence at school to discuss disciplinary issues. This indicates that parents may be an undervalued and overlooked resource in education.

Global statistics indicate that many parents are illiterate, and these parents cannot read with their children or assist with homework. However, this does not have to become an obstacle to parental involvement. This is important in the rural Malawian context and even more so in the context of Mangochi District. Official statistics indicate a low literacy rate of 61.9% in rural areas and 53% in Mangochi District (National Statistics Office, 2019; 2020). However, research conducted in Ghana shows that parents do not necessarily let their illiteracy interfere with their children's education (Ghanney, 2018). Ghanney (2018) shows that illiterate parents who want their children to have an education to better their lives and improve their prospects rely on extended family members to assist their children with reading and homework instead of allowing the obstacle of illiteracy to affect their children's literary skills and academic achievement adversely.

According to a meta-analytic study on the effect of a home literacy environment on academic achievement, a strong positive correlation exists between children's reading comprehension, parents' literacy expectations, and parental literacy involvement (Dong et al., 2020). Interestingly, this aligns with Hill and Tyson's (2009) research findings

that academic socialisation was the strongest positive relationship between parental involvement and academic achievement. Thus, even illiterate parents with few home literacy resources can help their children develop their reading comprehension by encouraging them, asking them questions, and giving them verbal feedback on their literacy learning performance. It appears that parents' expectations for their children's literacy acquisition have the strongest positive effect on their children's reading comprehension, along with parental literacy involvement at home.

My research appears to align with other research in LMICs that parental involvement in the four participating schools is pseudo-participation. For instance, during fieldwork, I noticed women preparing porridge in the mornings and serving children at three of the four sampled schools. These were mainly mothers from surrounding villages who could take a turn coming to school and preparing the porridge. This form of parental involvement aligns with pseudo-participation (Rose, 2003). Parents appeared not to be part of any school decision-making. Therefore, their participation can not be considered genuine participation (Rose, 2003) even though it shows apparently good will towards the school practice. However, parents engage in academic socialisation with their children, discussing the importance of education and their expectations for their children which is a clear form of parental involvement (as presented in article I, Erlendsóttir et al., 2022).

3.7 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have presented the current situation regarding primary education in Malawi. I explored the impact of poor infrastructure, lack of resources, teacher shortage, and restricted opportunities for in-service training teachers can have on educational attainment. I concluded the chapter by exploring the importance of parental involvement and how it can potentially affect learners' academic achievement. Painting as rich a picture as possible will strengthen my rationale for conducting this research, demonstrate its value, and elucidate my reasoning for choosing this locale. The various issues and entangled social factors that can support or impede the provision of quality education, introduced in this and the previous chapter, call for applying theories and models to help set the findings in a comprehensive and explicatory context, which is where I will turn next.

In Chapter 4, I will introduce and discuss Bronfenbrenner's (1979; 2005) socio-ecological systems theory and explain how I applied his theoretical model to answer my main research questions:

- *How do stakeholders in four primary schools in rural Mangochi District perceive education in their context, and what is the nature of their interactions?*
- *What factors are perceived by stakeholders as central to achieving quality education in rural primary schools in Mangochi District?*

Furthermore, I also expound on an emergent framework for quality education, EdQual (Tikly, 2011), that emphasises three priorities that low-income countries like Malawi need to identify as they form the foundation of quality education.

4 Conceptual framework: Socio-ecological systems theory and education quality framework

To better frame and understand the issues and entangled social factors that can support or impede quality education, Bronfenbrenner's (1979; 2005) socio-ecological systems theory and quality education (EdQual) framework (Tikly, 2011) were adopted in this study. These are explored at length in this chapter, which is divided into eight sections. In the first section, I present the work of Bronfenbrenner (1979) and his socio-ecological systems theory (SEST), which is the foundation of the first two articles of this dissertation. The second section explores some of the previous scholarly research that applied SEST. In the third section, I describe how my research employs SEST. The fourth section provides an overview of the Education Quality (EdQual) framework (Tikly & Barrett, 2010), which, along with SEST, is the foundation of the third article of this dissertation. The EdQual framework, along with Bronfenfrenner's SEST, forms the theoretical framework for this study. In the fourth section, I provide a rationale for selecting the EdQual framework as part of my study. In the fifth section, I briefly look at some previous research that applied the EdQual framework. In the sixth and seventh sections, I demonstrate how I applied the EdQual framework to my research and how I merged SEST with elements of the EdQual, which together comprise my theoretical "lenses." In the eighth and last section, I summarise the main points of this chapter.

4.1 Bronfenbrenner's socio-ecological systems theory

The purpose of this research is to contribute to knowledge about education in rural Africa by exploring how people in rural Malawi view and experience primary education in their context. The aim is to gain a deeper understanding of factors that support or hinder the provision of education in Mangochi District. Using qualitative methods, I sought to explore selected parts of the education system in rural Malawi, specifically in rural Mangochi District. Data are drawn from reports, interviews and observations, and I focus on participants' attitudes towards education, family-school relationships, parental involvement, and teachers' working and living conditions in four primary schools in rural Mangochi District.

Coming from a vastly different educational experience and context from the one I was researching in Malawi, rural Mangochi in particular, there were many things I did not fully understand or know. For me to acquire a deeper and richer understanding, I needed to ask questions such as how local people view education and the meaning they attached to it, the role education has in their communities, parental involvement,

and how teachers view their profession. After I visited rural primary schools in Malawi, I came to appreciate the fact that different contextual aspects affect the provision of education, such as how successful districts were in recruiting teachers, providing resources and the schools' accessibility. So, it was clear that *context* was a big influencing factor in these rural areas. When I first "met" and learned about Bronfenbrenner and his SEST, his emphasis on how contextual environmental factors play together with and affect individuals' growth spoke to me. I became intrigued with his socio-ecological systems theory. Moreover, I felt that how he identified and assigned the various factors and social structures to the different systems, depending on whether they were classified as proximal or distal processes, was particularly practical for my research.

Applying SEST to analyse participants' interactions helps me identify different social structures and interactions and display them in conjunction with each other, thereby answering my research questions. I identify social components deemed instrumental for quality education—for instance, family-school relationships, parental involvement, and teachers' working and living conditions—and assess whether they are active elements in providing quality education in rural Malawi.

4.1.1 Interconnections of social aspects: A social ecology

The cornerstone of this study is Bronfenbrenner's socio-ecological systems theory. Uri Bronfenbrenner was a Russian-born American psychologist (1917—2005) best known for having developed the human ecology theory, which views individuals as maturing and developing not in isolation, but rather through interactions and relationships with others in the context of the individual's environment. To provide a holistic theory of human development, Bronfenbrenner incorporated diverse disciplinary fields such as anthropology, sociology, economics, education, and developmental psychology (Blignaut & Els, 2010). His theory has been applied in a variety of ways, such as research on learners' performance in middle school (Oliveira et al., 2013), social justice leadership in education (Berkovich, 2014), and for developing a framework for policy on child and adolescent mental health (Atilola, 2014), as will be explored later in this chapter.

In SEST, Bronfenbrenner (2005) looks at interconnections in the environment and how they directly affect an individual's growth and development. Bronfenbrenner defined development "... as a lasting change in the way in which a person perceives and deals with (their) environment" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 3). At an individual level, there are personal attributes and factors such as subject knowledge, efficacy, and motivation (Lewthwaite, 2006). However, environmental factors, whether physical, social, or cultural, also affect the person's development. Thus, human development occurs in the context of the person's surroundings, which Bronfenbrenner aptly called "development-in-context" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 12). This relationship between individual and

environment is reciprocal; interconnections between systems and influential surroundings also exist in the extended environment.

Bronfenbrenner differentiated between *proximal* and *distal* processes that shape development. The term "proximal process" describes how the development process occurs in the immediate context:

> Human development takes place through processes of progressively more complex reciprocal interaction between an active, evolving biopsychological human organism and the persons, objects, and symbols in its immediate external environment. (Tudge et al., 2009, p. 200)

In contrast, distal processes involve events in which the developing individual does not directly participate, but which nevertheless affect the individual indirectly.

Bronfenbrenner's original socio-ecological theory comprised four systems: the micro-, meso-, exo- and macrosystems. He later added a fifth, the chronosystem, to account for the temporal context (Bronfenbrenner, 1995). Each system is embedded in the next one, described as a "nested structure" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). At the core of his nested structure is the developing individual, a dynamic, growing being who moves and has diverse personal attributes that may affect their development. The developing individual is surrounded by concentric symbolic "circles," or systems, with widening proximity to the individual at the centre.

4.1.2 The nested structure

The five systems, or the nested structure, comprising SEST are further examined in this section, and is based on Bronfenbrenner (1979; 2005); **Figure 5** gives a symbolic, summarised overview of four of the five systems.

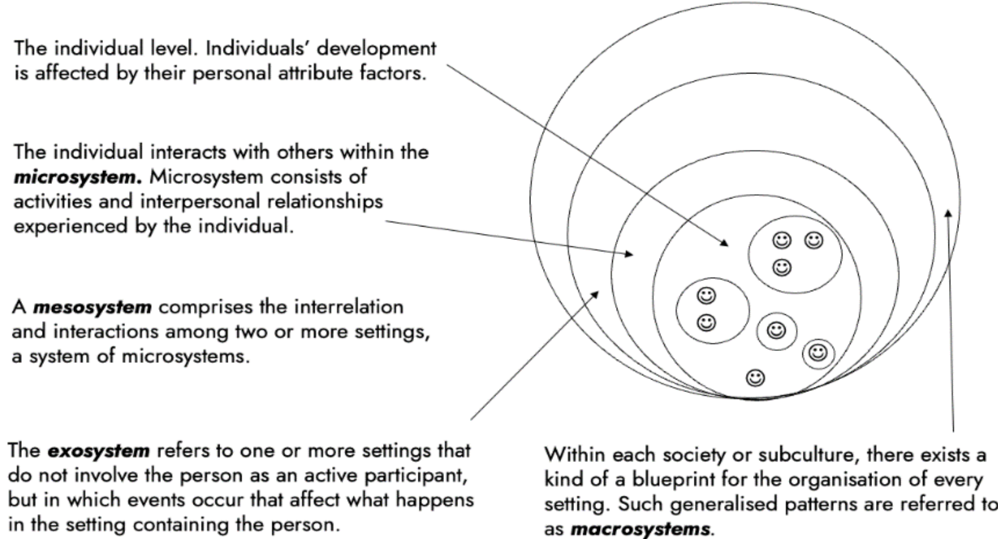


Figure 5: The nested structure of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) socio-ecological systems theory.

Nested around the developing individual is the *microsystem*, which involves processes and structures in the individual's nearest surroundings (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This system contains individuals and groups directly affecting the individual's development and with whom they have direct contact. It contains the immediate environment of the developing individual, where direct face-to-face communication is possible, such as a home or a classroom. This system is the closest to the personal level and thus has the most decisive influence and impact on the individual, who actively participates within this system (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). In this research, the individual can be either the child attending school or the practising teacher.

The second level of the ecological environment is the *mesosystem*, a system of microsystems (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). The developing individual actively participates in this system, which comprises the interrelations among two or more settings in the microsystem. For example, the relationships between the home and school and group of friends, or between family and work. The third level is the *exosystem*, in which the individual does not actively participate. Nevertheless, events occurring within this system profoundly affect the individual – for example, in the home-school relationship. The next level is the *macrosystem*, which comprises cultural values, customs, ideology, belief systems, and laws in the developing individual's context. The macrosystem influences the individual and the micro-, meso, and exosystems (Bronfenbrenner, 2005).

In 1995, Bronfenbrenner added a fifth system to his theory, which he named the *chronosystem*, to account for the element of time (Bronfenbrenner 2005). This system is

relevant to the developing individual throughout their life, in both the short and long term. It describes how prior events and experiences affect the subsequent development of the individual. These experiences may relate to the individual's internal or external environment.

Due to the complexity of educational systems and different layers with multidirectional linkages (Johnson, 2008), Bronfenbrenner's socio-ecological systems theory and its emphasis on the effects of environmental factors in human development helped me identify and analyse the various social factors at play. I was drawn to SEST by the interconnection between personal attributes and environmental factors and the reciprocal interaction between different systems. My assumption is that social environmental factors, such as working conditions and personal interactions, have extensive influence and affect the development of teachers and learners. Individuals do not develop in isolation but through the interplay of their personal characteristics, interactions with others, and environmental factors. By mapping different impacting factors of the education system in rural Malawi, both close and remote, we can discover which factors facilitate the provision of quality education and which impede that provision. Applying the understanding of SEST and the nested systems, I used empirical data to identify, analyse, and clarify the circumstances in the four rural primary schools participating in this research.

4.2 Previous research – SEST in practice

SEST has been applied in various educational research studies. In this section, I employ it to demonstrate the versatility of SEST as an analytic tool in educational research. I introduce how other scholars have been inspired by Bronfenbrenner's socio-ecological system theory of human development and how the theory has been used to understand educational practices.

4.2.1 Applying of SEST to understand different social influences

In scrutinising whether and how quality education is practised, an integrating and holistic research view is needed to identify and understand the different influences. In a study of eighth-graders' science performance in public middle schools in New York (Oliveira et al., 2013), SEST was used holistically, rather than assuming a direct causal relationship between student achievement and classroom practices. Skills and knowledge developed through participation in activities within the nested social structure systems were considered. In addition to contextual processes encouraging and supporting performance in science in the microsystem (the classroom), exosystems (middle schools), and macrosystems (the district), the authors examined the interaction between the systems and how it affected learners' performance and achievement. Findings showed that more effective proximal processes, such as the hands-on approach and providing learners with opportunities for collaboration, were observed

more in the higher-performing schools. At the exo- and macrosystem levels, the authors marked distal processes that took place outside the classroom but impacted learners, such as teachers believing in their learners' potential, teachers collaborating and sharing content information, and teachers' professional development. These positive effects of distal processes were observed more in the higher-performing schools than in the average-performing schools (Oliveira et al., 2013).

Berkovich (2014) applied SEST in a meta-analysis examining social justice leadership in education in the context of intra-institutional and extra-institutional activism. A socio-ecological approach to social justice efforts in education has the potential to expand the focus on school leadership actions and open an opportunity to view leadership actions in a broader social context (Berkovich, 2014). Applying SEST may show a change in processes within the microsystem, where learners' lives undergo a change, to systems further out and reach the school culture, and even contribute to socio-cultural changes beyond the school and reach the community and society at the macrosystem level (Berkovich, 2014).

To identify proximal and distal elements influencing part-time learners in higher education in the UK, McLinden (2017) applied SEST. Various proximal processes affecting the part-time learners were identified, such as learning activities, access to specific resources, and the virtual learning environment. Distal processes influencing part-time learners included budget allocation, institutional priorities, and considerations towards part-time learners.

Henderson and Baffour (2015) used SEST to analyse contributing factors to disproportionate minority contact (DMC) in North Carolina, USA. Through SEST, the researchers identified individual (microsystem) and structural (macrosystem) factors connected to DMC, such as racism. Racism on the microsystem level, for instance, was reflected in individuals' beliefs that certain minorities were more prone to criminal activities. At the macrosystem level, institutional racism manifested itself in how minority groups were portrayed in the media, for example, or in how minority youth received harsher punishment in the court system.

Bronfenbrenner's SEST theory initially focused on the child as the developing individual nested in the central system. However, scholars have conducted research inspired by Bronfenbrenner's model on different subjects, such as assessing an individual's professional development. Lewthwaite (2006), Jónsdóttir (2011), and Jónsdóttir and Macdonald (2019) have all applied Bronfenbrenner's theory to the ecology of human development, with the teacher as the professionally developing individual. Lewthwaite (2006) explored personal characteristics and environmental factors that assist or hinder the development of science teacher-leaders in primary schools in New Zealand. Teachers reported various factors that positively influenced their development as science teacher-leaders, such as positive self-concepts or the support and

encouragement of colleagues. Other factors impeded their development, such as lack of commitment or disagreements with administrators.

In her doctoral thesis, Jónsdóttir (2011) drew upon SEST to examine innovation and entrepreneurial education (IEE) in three compulsory schools in Iceland, aiming to locate them within the pedagogic discourse. Through SEST, Jónsdóttir (2011) pinpointed the complex and convoluted settings influencing IEE and described their interaction. Jónsdóttir and Macdonald (2019) have also constructed a rubric to evaluate the feasibility of implementing IEE in middle schools in Iceland. The value of the rubric is that it is descriptive, allowing the schools to develop their own criteria. Jónsdóttir's and Macdonald's (2019) findings demonstrated that to implement IEE successfully, its development must receive support from neighbouring systems. In this instance, the weakest connection appeared in the exosystem, as society's view on IEE and its implementation was not distinctly supportive.

The rationale for the above discussion is to show the different prior applications of Bronfenbrenner's socio-ecological systems theory, which speaks to its versatility and flexibility. Moreover, applying SEST is not restricted to European, Oceania, and North American research. Researchers have drawn on Bronfenbrenner and his socio-ecological systems theory elsewhere, such as in Africa, as I will examine in the next section.

4.2.2 Applying SEST in the African context

Moving closer to the context of my research, various studies have been conducted in SSA drawing on SEST. For instance, Atilola (2014) applied SEST to develop a framework to address SSA's scarcity of child and adolescent mental health policy. At the time of the research, more than 50% of the population in the region was young children and adolescents, of whom approximately 20% suffered from mental health problems. Atilola (2014) proposed an adapted version of the SEST model to identify the proximal, intermediate, and distal factors affecting children's care environment. He then prioritised identifiable intervention points and appropriate strategies, which served as a blueprint for developing a tentative child and adolescent mental health policy for SSA.

Blignaut and Els (2010) investigated practical or achievable research frameworks on how best to use information and communication technologies (ICT) in the SSA region, given that a majority of the population in SSA Africa has no or very limited access to ICT. They used Bronfenbrenner's SEST to develop a framework for implementing and validating goals for socially transformative ICT for teacher education at the North-West University in South Africa.

In their research review, Ungar et al. (2013) used Bronfenbrenner's model in the context of resilience studies in different cultural contexts. They concluded that SEST

could help conceptualise children's social and physical systems from different microsystems to predict the successful development of a child living in hardship.

This review shows how Bronfenbrenner's socio-ecological system theory can be applied successfully in different socio-economic and cultural contexts, whether to develop policies or frameworks to address challenges in education, leadership, mental health care, or teacher education. It helps to identify both local elements and to place findings in a larger context.

4.3 SEST in the context of my research

In my current research, the teacher is placed in the centre of the nested systems. The relative position of the various participants and their interactions and collaboration in the context of primary education is observed and explored through Bronfenbrenner's SEST. **Table 1** gives an overview of where each collaborator is positioned and different aspects of their environment in a relevant system.

Table 1: Bronfenbrenner's socio-ecological systems theory in the context of my research.

The individual, the teacher	Nested in the centre of the systems, the teacher – the developing professional individual.
Microsystem (school level)	Other teachers at the school, the headteacher, and the primary education advisor (PEA), with each agent representing autonomous microsystems.
Mesosystem (community/zone)	Teachers' collegiality and support from the PEA, parents, and the interactions of parents with their children's teachers, are conceptualised as part of the mesosystem.
Exosystem (district level)	Parents' and the community's attitudes towards education, the teachers' living and working conditions, the District Education Manager (DEM).
Macrosystem (national and cultural level and globalisaton)	Educational authorities in Malawi, provision of teachers' housing and education resources, Malawi's ratification of the UN declaration.

In the school context, agents within which the microsystem is located include other teachers in the school, the headteacher, and the primary education advisor (PEA). These are the agents with whom the developing teachers have the closest proximal connection at the school level and who directly influence their development (see **Table 1**).

For the purpose of this research, the school system in a community/zone is understood as a part of the *mesosystem,* along with other actors who can affect the individual in this system (see **Table 1**). The mesosystem contains processes and interactions between two or more settings from the microsystem. Mesosystemic factors for this research could be parents, who feature in the mesosystem through their children at school and their direct

interaction with the teacher. However, parents' attitudes towards education are featured in the exosystem. Other mesosystemic factors may include the teacher-home relationship, teachers' collaborations and interactions, and the experienced collaboration. They could also include the support the developing teacher receives from the PEA, who, like parents, can move between two systems as they work closely with teachers in the microsystem. However, the PEA also works at the mesosystem's community/zone level.

In this research, the *exosystem* is positioned at the district level (see **Table 1**). It contains distal processes that influence and affect the development of the teacher, but the teacher is not an active participant in those processes. These distal processes include parental attitudes towards education and what they do to influence their children's learning and opportunities. It can be the home (family)-school relationship; I call it the home-school relationship because, at the exosystem level, the home initiates the interaction between parents and the school. In the mesosystem, the teacher initiates the interaction between the school and home, hence the teacher-home relationship. Other factors in the exosystem are the community and the priority the community puts on education, the district education manager (DEM), the living and working conditions of the developing teacher and provision of teachers' housing on school grounds, and the school environment and infrastructure. All these distal processes directly and indirectly influence the teacher.

The fourth system, the *macrosystem,* is positioned at the national and cultural level and consists of the broader societal context influencing the teacher (see **Table 1**). Macrosystemic factors include the government's provision of educational resources and recruitment of qualified teachers. The cultural context could be the accepted school practices, the official school curriculum, expectations for success, values, standards, educational authorities, discourse on education, and globalisation and its influence on policy.

In **Figure 6,** I have outlined the nested structure of Bronfenbrenner's socio-ecological systems theory in the context of my research. At a national level, the macrosystem emphasises the quality of learning, management, and governance. Such objectives and proposed outcomes are not unique to Malawi, but can be found in education systems worldwide. Thus, the macrosystem in this research includes both the national and global levels. Like many other countries, Malawi feels the effect of the Global Educational Reform Movement (GERM), which draws its strength from international achievement studies such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLs). The effects of educational surveys carried out by organisations like OECD and UNESCO and education policies in the home country of significant donors are also felt in Malawi. For example, in recent decades, national education policies have been affected by global trends, such as the increase in refugees and migrants entering schools in their host

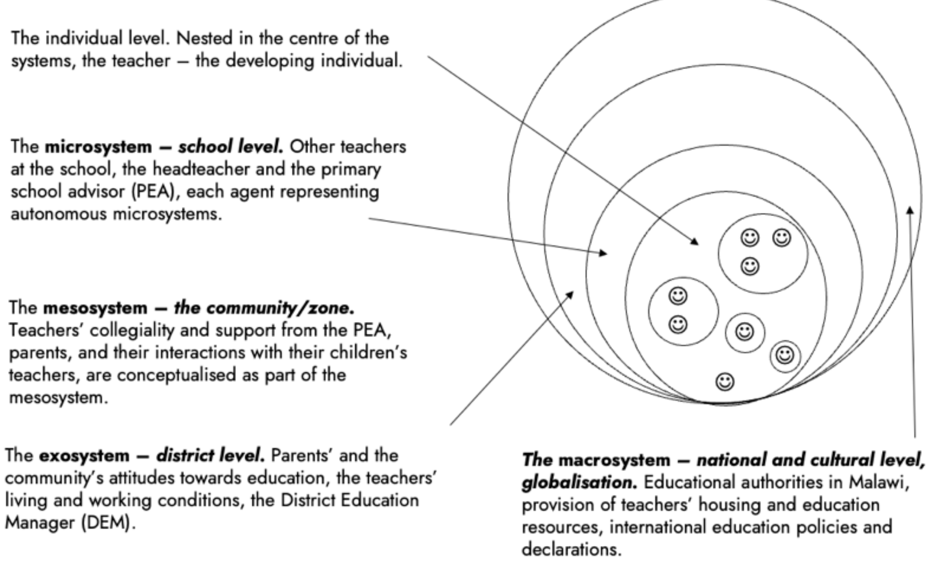


Figure 6: Bronfenbrenner's SEST in the context of my research**.**

countries. This increased diversity in schools has prompted a response from organisations such as OECD and UNESCO, whose research and policy-making activities affect individual countries (Lingard & Sellar, 2013).

OECD educational work - for example, the PISA study - has had an effect not only on OECD member states, but also on non-members, much like SACMEQ IV has had in southern and eastern Africa (Awich, 2021). This work has affected both curriculum and governance, and has precipitated the emergence of global educational governance (Mzhavanadze, 2014). Educational quality indicators developed by international

organisations like the OECD and UNESCO have affected national education policy (Engel & Rutkowski, 2014) and curricula development in schools and universities (Lozano & Lozano, 2014). However, not all academics wholly approve of certain elements of GERM, such as efficiency and accountability. For example, Sahlberg (2012) maintains that Finland's strong performance in PISA is due to other factors, such as teacher professionalisation and an equitable school system, rather than market-based reform. While GERM is outside the scope of this research, I wanted to explain its place in the macrosystem briefly.

While certainly relevant, Bronfenbrenner's chronosystem is also outside the scope of this research. Within the chronosystem, personal development occurs over a specific period during the person's life and the environment (Jónsdóttir, 2011). As Tudge et al. (2009) state, to incorporate the chronosystem in one's research, "the study should be longitudinal to evaluate the influence of the proximal process on the developmental outcomes of interest" (p. 202). Thus, I did not deem it fitting to include the chronosystem, as I am not comparing findings across time. However, history, especially the history of colonisation and decolonisation, has enormous significance as an explanation for the poverty in rural Malawi and different influences on education. Also, the history of the drive for education for all, starting in 1948 and further echoed in 2015 through SDG #4, matters in this work. However, that global aspect of the chronosystem is beyond the scope of this study.

In this section, I discussed Bronfenbrenner's socio-ecological systems theory (SEST). I reviewed previous research that has applied SEST to demonstrate and justify why I selected this theory for my research. I have explained the nested structure of the theory, its suitability for my study, and the system in which each stakeholder is positioned. I will now move to an emergent framework, EdQual, developed to implement quality education, specifically with low-income countries in mind.

4.4 A framework to identify quality in education

When I set out to conduct this research and began collecting data, I selected Bronfenbrenner's SEST as the best fit for my research since it allowed me to go beyond statistical and numerical information and set the findings from local experiences forward as social interacting elements, comprehensively and in depth. Towards the end of the research process, when I began writing, I encountered an emergent framework, EdQual, for understanding education quality based on research, mainly in low-income contexts, such as most SSA countries. Having absorbed the results from the first years of my study and gained a good understanding of the provision of education through SEST, I found myself in a better position to ask questions about the quality of education. After studying the EdQual framework, it became clear to me that it would suit my research well, especially since it harmonises well with Bronfenbrenner's versatile SEST. Applying SEST in combination with the EdQual framework allowed me to better

understand the various factors affecting quality education, the reciprocity among and between them, and how each system and environment worked together or interacted. The SEST allows me to ask questions about the reality of education in practice, and the EdQual framework helps me better understand the SEST results and probe into the quality of education. So, while SEST makes the EdQual work possible, the EdQual work deepens the SEST work. This section illustrates the EdQual framework and how it helps elucidate my research findings.

I did consider other frameworks, such as a *unified conceptual framework* for the quality of education based on the systems theory of education (Garira, 2020). This innovative framework examines the multidirectional relationships among inputs, processes and outputs at all levels of education, namely from the pre-school to the tertiary level, and how they contribute to the overall quality of education. It provides a similar way of thinking as the SEST. EdQual is specifically focused on what quality education means in the context of LMIC countries. Applying SEST with the EdQual framework gave me suitable overlapping theoretical lenses to look at the interconnectedness of different influencing factors of primary education in the pursuit of providing quality education focusing on primary school context in a LMIC. In the Malawian context, only about 28% of children between the ages of 3 and 5 attend preschool, 35% enrol in secondary schools, and 3% attend tertiary education (MoEST, 2018). Therefore, applying the EdQual framework with SEST, focusing solely on one school level, was appropriate for my study. However, the importance of studying the quality of preschool or early childhood education and secondary and tertiary education is also pertinent.

4.4.1 EdQual framework

The EdQual framework was developed to research and implement quality education in low-income countries as part of a research programme (Tikly, 2011). The framework grew from research conducted by the EdQual Research Programme Consortium, funded by the UK Department for International Development, along with other relevant literature (Tikly & Barrett, 2010). The key concept at the heart of the framework is "good quality education" (Tikly, 2011), with the basic aim of reducing poverty (Tikly & Barrett, 2007). The core is the perceived importance of developing a contextualised understanding of what exactly education quality entails in different settings and for different groups of learners. EdQual brings this objective together with teaching and learning processes with the aim of improving outcomes, particularly for underprivileged groups (Tikly & Barrett, 2007).

Two perspectives on educational quality have been dominant: the human capital approach (HCA), which has grounded the work of OECD, for instance; and the human rights approach (HRA), which has been used by UNICEF (Tikly & Barrett, 2011). Both offer a significant understanding of education; however, according to Tikly and Barrett (2011), many researchers deem them both inadequate when addressing essential

features of the education quality debate. The HCA emphasises economic growth, while the HRA stresses the state's role in ensuring fundamental human rights. The HCA focuses on how investing in education contributes to the development of individuals as an economic resource, which requires the provision of quality education, which can in turn lead to economic growth (Sayed & Ahmed, 2015; Tikly & Barrett, 2011). This approach views education through an economic lens, whether at the individual, societal, or global level. Proponents of the HCA have suggested that good quality education could be measured through standardised test scores, focusing on literacy and numeracy as fundamental capacities underpinning employability and leading to economic growth and return on investment in education (Sayed & Ahmed, 2015; Tikly & Barrett, 2010).

Conversely, HRA promotes a rights-based approach entailing economic, political, and cultural dimensions connected to the fulfilment of peace, security, and environmental sustainability (Tikly & Barrett, 2011). The HRA views quality education through the attainment of fundamental human rights as opposed to economic growth (Sayed & Ahmed, 2015; Tikly & Barrett, 2013). HRA emphasises the importance of ensuring that every individual has a right to a good quality education, irrespective of personal circumstances, and advocates for education as a tool in achieving social cohesion, peace, and human rights (Sayed & Ahmed, 2015). This focus puts the onus on governments worldwide, as duty bearers, to make good quality education available to all their citizens as a right.

In my view, both the HCA and the HRA approaches to education are insufficient on their own. The HCA approach is unjust because measuring good quality education by standardised test scores is, in my opinion, fundamentally biased. Having witnessed the difference in infrastructure, available resources, and teacher/learner ratio between rural and urban primary schools makes standardised tests unfair. How are children in remote, rural schools to compete with their counterparts in more affluent urban schools? Children in rural schools may not have access to textbooks and must share their teacher with a higher number of other learners. Their classrooms may be out in the open, unshielded from the elements. They are unlikely to have access to computers, or even electricity. Similarly, I question the practicality of the HRA approach when it comes to education as it is problematic to have a one-size-fits-all approach.

Furthermore, investing in education in Malawi has not, so far, resulted in affluence in rural areas, or even urban areas for that matter, as demonstrated in the country's censuses. The economic growth model focuses on countries' GDP, and is driven by capitalism, which distributes wealth inequitably. I believe that we must first ensure social justice through access to quality education by focusing on education as a human right and ensuring that individuals are provided with the tools that empower them to participate in society on equal footing with other citizens, thereby bettering their lives and future prospects. Striving for a sustainable development model will address various issues reflected in the SDGs. I believe we can secure peace and security and work

towards environmental sustainability through education as are the goals of the SDGs. Peace and security will enable education to flourish, and as a result, more people will be able to access schools as a means of empowerment and livelihood. Then, we can aim for economic growth and probably also alongside the general empowerment through quality education. Therefore, we need a combination of approaches for each society to provide good quality education and achieve social justice, peace, security, sustainability, and economic growth.

The social justice approach expands greatly on the human capital and human rights approaches by emphasising factors such as equity, prioritising, diversity, inclusive practices, participation, learning-conducive environments, and challenges to discrimination (Sayed & Ahmed, 2015). The EdQual framework draws on features of both the HCA and the HRA, along with aspects of the social justice approach, which offers more comprehensive reasoning for education quality policy than either HCA and HRA do separately (Tikly & Barrett, 2011). Social justice approaches favour moral philosophy over international prescription as their cornerstone (Tikly & Barrett, 2013). In their definition of good quality education, the social justice approach focuses on participation and giving people a voice, which resonates well with the emphasis the research programme consortium put on the experiences of marginalised groups in Africa (Tikly, 2011).

EdQual is concerned with three important dimensions of the social justice approach: inclusion, relevance, and democracy (Tikly & Barrett, 2010; 2011). Inclusion relates to ensuring that all learners have the opportunity to achieve learning outcomes. Relevance is associated with meaningful learning outcomes for all learners and being valued by their communities. The democratic dimension concerns learning outcomes and whether they are determined through public debate and ensured through accountability processes (Tikly & Barrett, 2010, p. 2). Additionally, the EdQual framework draws on aspects of the capabilities approach (Sen, 1999), which maintains that capabilities are located within social and geographic contexts. Accordingly, the quality of education can only be assessed in specific contexts (Tikly & Barrett, 2013, p. 15).

These aspects of the EdQual framework are highly relevant in Malawian society, and thus fit well with my research, complementing Bronfenbrenner's SEST to understand and interpret the findings. It emphasises the necessity of ensuring that all learners have the same opportunity when it comes to education and that the learning outcomes are relevant and valuable to society and thus the learners themselves. It also stresses the importance of context, which I believe is inescapable for societies to implement quality education. Quality will depend on what various societies deem important and valuable.

The concept of *education quality* is both contested and complex (Dembélé & Oviawe, 2007; Sayed & Ahmed, 2015; Tikly & Barrett, 2013), and there is no globally accepted definition (Dembélé & Oviawe, 2007; Tikly, 2011). Generally, the inputs, processes and outcomes of education are used to analyse the quality of education (Fomba et al., 2022; Garira, 2020). Universal indicators that governments and international agencies

repeatedly use as measures of education quality include completion rates, survival rates, and standardised test scores. However, these only offer attenuated aspects of quality, which are not sensitive to the diverse outcomes learners require in different areas of the globe (Tikly, 2011). The following suggestion has influenced the construction and development of the EdQual framework:

> A good quality education is one that enables all learners to realise the capabilities they require to become economically productive, develop sustainable livelihoods, contribute to peaceful and democratic societies and enhance well-being. The learning outcomes that are required vary according to context, but at the end of the basic education cycle must include threshold levels of literacy and numeracy and life skills, including awareness and prevention of disease. (Tikly, 2011, pp. 10—11)

Inherent in this description of an approach, and what a measure of quality education must be sensitive to, is the significance of context, as different societies may have different priorities and different definitions of quality education. This explanation of what good quality education entails appeals to me and my views on education and bolstered my rationale for applying the EdQual framework to my work. The global community is not a homogenous group of nations, and after having lived in various countries on three continents, I experienced and observed this first-hand. Countries vary in population, culture, income, and education; some countries may be experiencing armed conflicts, while others may be highly affected by migration. Nations also differ in levels of industrialisation; some emphasise the high-end value-added production industries, while others prioritise the service sector (Tikly & Barrett, 2007). This variance between countries indicating different social ecologies, means that a universal "one-size-fits-all" assessment of quality in education is not fair or constructive for all countries. Each nation's educational needs differ from those of other nations, depending on countless contextual factors.

EdQual views education quality in the broader historical, socio-economic, political, and cultural context. The EdQual framework is grounded in the local realities and perspectives of learners, practitioners, and communities, focusing on teaching and learning processes and how they affect the learning outcomes of different groups of learners. Having studied and analysed rural education in Mangochi according to the SEST model, I came to understand how important it is to evaluate the quality of education in terms of the lived realities of the local people. The EdQual framework indicates that quality assessment must be sensitive to context. Due to my own experience and observations through my research, I believe that, especially in rural areas, education needs to mirror local needs rather than only fulfil requirements imposed by far-removed agents who may not even have visited the area, in line with the place-based approach mentioned earlier. I conclude it is important to seek information and learn how local communities view education and what stakeholders xperience and require in order to provide relevant, quality education to the learners. EdQual seeks to

understand the local conditions for realising change and to empower policymakers, educators, learners and other stakeholders (Tikly & Barrett, 2007, p. 7). Instead of a fixed or rigid and closed framework, EdQual is open-ended and continuously developing (Tikly, 2011). The contextual aspect of the EdQual framework appeals strongly to me, and how I believe quality education needs to be assessed when provision is studied; therefore, I consider EdQual, in conjunction with SEST, highly important to my research. To get the teachers' perspectives and the communities' views on education and to learn what form parental involvement takes in the four participating rural primary schools is what I set out to do in my research and what has driven me all these years.

For authorities to effectively influence quality education, the most important areas are monitoring, accountability, teacher recruitment and training, and providing resources and policy implementation (Fomba et al., 2022; Garira, 2020). To implement successful policies, policymaking needs to build on dialogue and debate at the governmental level and between the government and stakeholders such as teachers, teacher unions, and community organisations representing parents (Tikly, 2010).

4.4.2 The three levels of the EdQual environment

According to the EdQual framework, education quality can be determined by three identifiable and interacting levels of environment: the *policy environment*, the *school environment*, and the *home/community environment* (Tikly & Barrett, 2011; 2013). I saw how these align well with the thinking behind SEST. The policy environment acts at the national level to train teachers, prescribe the official curriculum, and regulate and monitor quality. This is a process that I have placed in the macrosystem of SEST. The school environment implements and puts the educational policy into action, impacting the person through the micro- and mesosystems (accordingto SEST). The home/community environment governs children's learning opportunities by (ideally) creating an enabling and supportive home learning environment (including the person and the micro-, meso-, and exosystems according to SEST).

Figure 7 depicts a simple view of the context-led reciprocal environments of the EdQual framework for quality education.

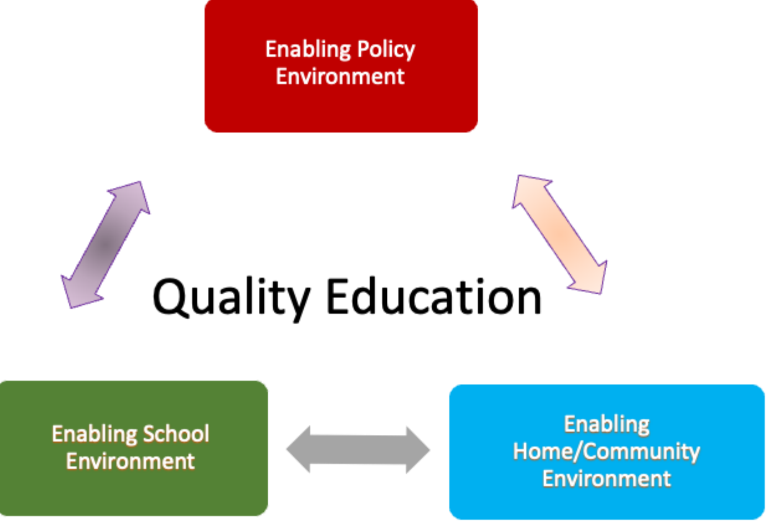


Figure 7: Three reciprocal environments of the EdQual framework for quality education.

The framework helps to clarify how the interaction and interconnection of the three overlapping environments work in a given situation (Tikly & Barrett, 2010; Tikly, 2011). To overcome what has been referred to as the "implementation gap" between national policy and school-level practice, policymakers need to bring teachers aboard and ensure that teacher education and professional development are compatible and congruent with the national curricula (Tikly & Barrett, 2010). In addition, it is crucial to support the schools when implementing changes and monitoring quality. Listening and taking notice of stakeholders' views, for instance, through a national debate on the curriculum, is essential in closing the potential gap in expectations between the outcomes of education and what parents and communities expect to be the outcome. Schools need to establish accountability and transparency regarding the quality of their education. The schools can do that by ensuring that parents and communities receive all relevant information on how the schools measure quality and by making sure that parents understand that information. Lastly, concentrating on children's health and well-being and working with parents to establish a home environment conducive to learning addresses the gap between what children learn in the school environment and what they learn in the home/community environment (Tikly & Barrett, 2010). Good quality education results from the interaction of the three environments, and creating such enabling environments demands the right combination of inputs into each environment, with accompanying processes.

4.4.3 Quality inputs and quality processes

The three environments (policy, school, and home/community) each require several inputs to facilitate an operational and enabling environment for quality education. However, to ensure that the inputs transform into desired outcomes, the inputs in each

environment must be accompanied by appropriate processes (Tikly, 2011). The process of establishing quality education involves observing the interaction between the environments and making sure that no gaps exist between them. This ensures that the mix of inputs and processes interact consistently, logically, and coherently (Tikly, 2011).

EdQual's proposition on quality inputs and processes is based on research performed in SSA with the objective of achieving education quality. Tikly and Barrett (2010) emphasise that these suggestions must be analysed and contextualised to ensure the best fit. Quality inputs include motivated and suitably trained teachers and headteachers; appropriate textbooks and learning materials, infrastructure and resources; adequate school meals and child healthcare; and early childhood care and education (Tikly, 2011; Tikly & Barrett, 2010). As a plethora of research has shown (e.g., Ndofirepi & Masinire, 2020; Smart & Jagannathan, 2018; Sosu et al., 2019), these factors affect the quality of education. According to research findings (e.g. Akyeampong, 2022; Mwadzaangati, 2023), they are in short supply in many SSA countries, including Malawi. Nevertheless, according to the EdQual framework, necessary quality processes must be in place in each of the three environments to convert these inputs into desired outcomes. These processes include a national debate on education quality; accountability and community voice; assessment, monitoring, and evaluation; relevant and inclusive curriculum and pedagogy; and links between school, home, and community (Tikly & Barrett, 2010, p. 3).

A prerequisite for constructing an education policy is the process of communication, deliberation, and consultation between the government and the various education stakeholders, such as parents and teachers. This process must be in place before implementing a good quality education (Tikly, 2011). Such processes may help close any potential gaps between the contexts of the national education policy, what actually occurs in the school, and parents' expectations (Tikly & Barrett, 2010). To improve the quality of education for disadvantaged learners, processes to increase accountability in the education system need to be put in place (Tikly, 2011).

Perhaps the most important of such processes is making collected data on school evaluations and learners' performance available to parents with constructive explanations. By doing this - and by making sure parents understand the data, feel empowered to interpret it, and have their voices heard - the school and the education system become accountable to parents and communities. However it may not be simple or easy to really hear their voices but it is highly important.

It is worth considering "the quality gap" in education within a country when developing a national education policy (Tikly, 2011). The processes of assessment, monitoring, and evaluation become crucial. National and regional data, such as the Education Management Information System (EMIS) and SACMEQ, respectively, are valuable for the education system. The government can assist schools in collecting and interpreting such data for school self-evaluation to assess the quality of education. The relevant and

inclusive curriculum processes are also vital for good quality education. Teachers need to receive training that is congruous with the national curricula. This training may include how to approach inclusiveness, how to use ICT, strategies for multilingual settings, structured pedagogy such as lesson plans and the lesson structure, and setting out learning objectives (Tikly & Barrett, 2010; Tikly, 2011).

The home and community context are important for learning outcomes and are integral to the quality of education. An enabling home environment is essential for reaching the intended outcome (Tikly & Barrett, 2010). Essential aspects of quality education include parents' views on education, parental support for learning, parents ensuring their child has a place to study, and parent-school cooperation. These aspects are also featured in Bronfenbrenner's socio-ecological systems theory, where proximal processes, such as teacher-parent interaction are characteristics of the mesosystem. Distal processes in the exosystem also have impacts, such as parental and community attitudes and views on education.

Broader economic, cultural, and political disparities are frequently repeated within the home and communities. Economic disparity concerns unequal wealth distribution. Political disparity refers to differences in political influence, power and participation among various groups. Cultural disparity involves differences in cultural beliefs, values, norms, and practices (Tikly, 2010). Even though the education system and the school itself cannot resolve these matters, they can and should educate and empower families in how they might assist their children's learning and participate in their education; they can also provide adults with basic education to improve literacy and numeracy and support development in the community (Tikly & Barrett, 2010).

4.5 Previous research – EdQual in practice

EdQual has been applied in numerous studies in LMICs. In this section, I will briefly recount some of the previous research that used the EdQual framework. This will help clarify my rationale for applying both EdQual and SEST in my research involving stakeholders in rural primary schools in Malawi.

Morchid (2020) drew on EdQual as one of his frameworks when he reviewed and assessed the educational reforms implemented in Morocco from 1999 to 2019, as it offered him a multi-level framework in his attempt to understand and conceptualise quality education when evaluating four reform initiatives. He found that some progress had been made through education. For instance, the unemployment rate had decreased, and primary school enrollment had reached 100%. However, there was still room for improvement, especially to increase adult basic literacy, which was a cause for concern.

Typically, in LMICs, there are minimum quality standards for education, and the extent to which these are implemented and reached at the school level is dictated by the

country's level of development (Ahmed, 2019). In his efforts to summarise the literature on evidence of the effectiveness of minimum quality standards in acquiring quality basic education in various LMICs, Ahmed (2019) drew on the EdQual framework and other frameworks in his search for literature supporting his study. The literature he examined covered Vietnam, Indonesia, Pakistan, Uganda, Rwanda, Nepal, and Haiti. His review demonstrated some commonalities in the countries' education policies, such as school governance, teachers and teacher quality, school infrastructure, resources, curriculum, assessment, certification, and learning outcomes. The common aims were to ensure a child-friendly environment conducive to learning, implement standardisation, promote education equity, and facilitate policies for opening new schools and closing schools that failed to meet minimum quality standards.

Aikman et al. (2011) applied the EdQual framework when re-conceptualising gender equality with regard to education quality. They identified four dominant approaches in the literature to how gender equality had been conceptualised in education: the human capital theory, the human rights and power perspective, postcolonial critiques, and the view of development as social action. The authors found that how gender equality is conceptualised does not address the gendered needs of learners, teachers, and researchers in LMICs. They applied EdQual to re-conceptualise gender equality as a component of education quality in LMICs and concluded that EdQual highlighted the need for continuous reflection and analysis of gendered aspects across projects.

This brief discussion indicates the flexibility with which researchers can apply the EdQual framework when conducting research in LMICs. The framework is visual, and the concepts are adaptable and amenable to use. They can be used to explore what good quality education may subjectively entail and which inputs and processes need to be in place in each environment to improve education and the reciprocity of the environments. I find the framework especially helpful when reflecting on different aspects of education and determining how to identify them within different social systems, in this case rural primary schools in Mangochi District in Malawi.

4.6 The EdQual framework in the context of my research

Having acquainted myself with the EdQual framework, it became clear to me that it, along with Bronfenbrenner's SEST, would work well in a supportive and complementary way to help me answer my main research questions: *How do stakeholders in four primary schools in rural Mangochi District perceive education in their context, and what is the nature of their interactions? What factors are perceived by stakeholders as central to achieving quality education in rural primary schools in Mangochi District?*

In my research, I aimed to look at different contexts and inputs in the three environments: policy, school, and home/community at four rural primary schools. At the policy level, I aimed to explore inputs into the education sector such as the

recruitment and deployment of teachers and the procurement and distribution of TLM. At the school environment level, I hoped to investigate the opportunities and barriers for school-based professional development, school infrastructure, and school-home interaction and observe the usage of textbooks. Lastly, at the home/community level, I wanted to investigate parental involvement. I examined the processes that, according to the EdQual framework (Tikly & Barrett, 2010), are needed to transform the quality inputs into a desired outcome. These processes include national and school accountability and transparency, parental and community voices, and the school-home/community-school connection. **Table 2** lists the quality inputs and processes I examined in the context of my research. The last column depicts the corresponding system within SEST to show where the items are located in the social ecology.

Table 2: Environments, inputs and processes examined.

Environments (EdQual)	Quality processes	Quality inputs	Systems (SEST)
Policy environment	Accountability. National assessment, monitoring, and evaluation systems.	Recruiting, training, and employing teachers. Procuring textbooks and efficient distribution.	The macrosystem
School environment	School-home links help to build an enabling home-learning environment.	Appropriate TLM. Resources used. School-based professional development and in-service training. School-home links, such as contact with parents, assisting parents, and giving parents a platform to voice their concerns or questions of education. Infrastructure and resources.	The autonomous microsystems. Direct interaction between the teacher and any other settings in the microsystem is conceptualised in the mesosystem. Inputs and processes in the home and community and school contexts are located in the exosystem, as the teacher is not actively or directly involved in these contexts..
Home/community environment	An enabling home learning environment.	Home-school links, such as parents' contact with teachers/schools, parents' support for learning, assistance with homework, and parents' and communties' views on education.	The autonomous microsystems. Inputs and processes in the home, community and school contexts are located in the exosystem.

The reciprocity between the different environments and between the systems in the SEST leads to various effects on the teacher through all three EdQual environments and systems, whether through proximal or distal processes. For instance, the policy environment affects the teacher through distal processes in the macrosystem, such as policies regarding teacher education, training, and employment. The policy environment affects the teacher by determining what funding is directed towards the education sector for infrastructure and resources and how efficiently education authorities procure and distribute textbooks to all districts. Policy also affects the teacher through distal processes at the exosystemic level in the school environment. For instance, because teachers' working and living conditions can adversely affect the quality of teaching and learning, inadequate infrastructure and lack of TLM in rural schools makes it more difficult to deploy teachers to rural areas.

The shortage of teachers in rural areas impedes the national target of reaching the teacher/learner ratio of 1:60. Teachers and PEAs also benefit when education authorities provide funding for in-service training and professional development, and are negatively impacted when they do not. Proximal processes affecting the teacher in the school environment at the mesosystemic level include, for instance, whether PEAs are adequately funded so they can uphold their duty to visit their schools and have direct interaction with teachers.

Within the home-school environment, education policy may affect the teacher through proximal processes, such as interactions within microsystems. For instance, the official standing on parental involvement may encourage parents to have direct interaction with their children's teachers. These factors are important when it comes to maintaining and strengthening teachers' motivation, which in turn impacts learners' educational experiences and achievement (Bennell, 2023; Iqbal et al., 2020).

4.7 SEST and EdQual as complementary frameworks

After looking at my data separately through SEST and the EdQual framework, I merged the two. I analysed the three reciprocal environments according to the EdQual framework in relation to the SEST's nested systems. The home/community and the school context represent autonomous microsystems. Direct interaction between the teacher as the developing individual and any other settings in the microsystem is conceptualised in the mesosystem. However, quality inputs and processes in the home community and school contexts are located in the exosystem, as the teacher is not actively or directly involved in these contexts. The policy environment is located in the macrosystem. Inputs and processes such as the school collecting and interpreting data on the quality of education are also seen as a part of the macrosystem.

Table 3 gives an overview of the EdQual (Tikly & Barrett, 2010) environments and various inputs and processes within SEST (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). It presents my theoretical lenses in this research context.

Table 3: SEST and the EdQual framework in the context of my research

The individual, the teacher	Nested in the centre of the systems, the teacher – the developing professional (individual). Teacher education, training and motivation (Tikly & Barrett, 2010).
Microsystem (school level)	Other teachers at the school, the headteacher, and the primary education advisor (PEA), with each agent representing autonomous microsystems. The Home/community environment, along with the school environment (Tikly & Barrett, 2010), represent autonomous microsystems. These are the agents with whom the developing teacher has the closest proximal connection and who have the most direct influence on the teacher.
Mesosystem (community/zone)	What Bronfenbrenner terms as proximal processes take place in the mesosystem and consist of direct interaction between the developing individual with any agent in the microsystem. Both teachers' collegiality and support from the PEA and the interactions between parents and their children's teachers, are conceputalised as part of the mesosystem. Parent-teacher interaction as a quality process of the home/community environment (Tikly & Barrett, 2010) is positioned in the mesosystem as well.
Exosystem (district level)	Parents' and the community's attitudes towards education, the teachers' living and working conditions, and the DEM. Quality inputs and processes in the home/community environment and the school environment (Tikly & Barrett, 2010). Distal processes occur in this system, influencing the development of the teacher without their direct involvement. Examples include quality inputs and processes such as infrastructure, appropriate TLM, and school-home links where the school provides parents with a platform to voice their concerns (Tikly & Barrett, 2010).
Macrosystem (national and cultural level and globalisaton)	Educational authorities in Malawi at the national and district level, provision of teachers' housing and education resources, and the policy environment (Tikly & Barrett, 2010) are positioned in the macrosystem. Distal processes occur in this system, influencing the development of the teacher without their direct involvement. Quality inputs and processes such as recruiting, training, and employing teachers (Tikly & Barrett, 2010) are examples of distal processes taking place in the macrosystem.

For each country to enhance quality education, it is necessary to consider context and to know precisely what that country needs to reach its goals as stipulated in its education policy. Having reviewed the literature, I felt the need to look holistically at the circumstances and the situation in the education system in rural Malawi to obtain a contextualised and comprehensive view of the provision of quality education in the four participating primary schools. Social aspects specified in the ecological systems theory and the framework for quality education are well-suited to provide a framework for investigating and scrutinising education features in Malawi, as both highlight the

importance of contextual interaction between different features and systems and how they work together. Mapping out the conditions in the sampled schools has given me a clearer view of the strengths and weaknesses of the education system and what needs to be done to increase rural learners' access to quality education. For instance, when looking at parental involvement, these frameworks allowed me to ask questions such as: Which processes are in place in the schools to create an enabling home/community environment, as suggested by the EdQual framework (Tikly & Barrett, 2010)? The same applies to the working conditions and professional development of the rural primary school teacher: What processes are in place to generate an enabling school environment and keep the teacher motivated? Again, when looking at the recruitment and deployment of teachers to rural primary schools and the provision of textbooks, I asked: What quality processes are established to shape an enabling policy environment (Tikly & Barrett, 2010)? My synthesised SEST and EdQual framework guided me through this research process, giving my research findings added credibility, as it has allowed me to view the condition of the rural education system holistically while also building on local views and experiences and looking at how the different systems work together.

4.8 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have given a detailed account of Bronfenbrenner's socio-ecological systems theory and EdQual, which guided me throughout the research process. I introduced the nested systems and how the different social aspects are positioned in each system, along with explaining proximal and distal processes and where they occur within the different systems. I explored how other scholars have been influenced and inspired by SEST and how they drew on his theory in their research, especially in SSA and in LMICs. This was followed by a thorough discussion and explanation of how I applied SEST in the context of my research and where I positioned different features of the education system within the socio-ecological systems. Then, I analysed the EdQual framework, which was developed specifically with low-income countries in mind for implementing and improving quality education. I introduced the three environments of the EdQual framework – policy, school, and home/community – and the various quality inputs and processes that must be in place and interact with one another for successful quality education implementation.

Having examined both the SEST and the EdQual frameworks, I looked at whether I could reconcile them, and after much deliberation, I merged the two and applied both to my research. The flexibility of both frameworks, along with their emphasis on context, appealed to me and was the deciding factor in merging the two frameworks and applying them to my study. Applying both frameworks provided me with an added opportunity to develop a comprehensive overview of the education system in rural Malawi. They equipped me with a tool to map out the system's different components and examine which sub-systems work together, all while keeping a good overview of

this complex venture. I provided relevant tables and figures to demonstrate how I merged the frameworks and where I positioned the different social aspects, along with the quality inputs and processes I examined.

Exploring any education system is a complex undertaking, but having Bronfenbrenner and the EdQual framework guiding me made the process more manageable. They helped me identify issues and to analyse complex social factors and understand their complexity, which is important for planning improvements in education. I now move on from the theoretical framework and proceed to the methodology and methods I employed while preparing, conducting, and analysing my research.

5 Methodology and research design

I begin this chapter by exploring the philosophical reasoning underpinning the qualitative research approach I have adopted. This includes a detailed description of the research design and methods, explaining why I decided on Mangochi District as my research site, as well as an explanation of how I gained access to the field and the selection criteria I followed when selecting the four participating primary schools. I then give a thorough description of each of the four schools. A recount of the limitations and delimitations of my research follows this. I recount how I chose my participants, and I address the interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs) and non-participant observations that form the basis of the three journal articles for this dissertation. I explain why I selected the tools I did for data gathering and how I applied them. I present my analytical journey and give an overview of the datasets and how they relate to the aim of my research. I also present the main research questions:

- *How do stakeholders in four primary schools in rural Mangochi District perceive education in their context, and what is the nature of their interactions?*
- *What factors are perceived by stakeholders as central to achieving quality education in rural primary schools in Mangochi District?*

I conclude this chapter by exploring ethical issues, my positionality, translational matters, and how I ensured the credibility of my findings.

5.1 The philosophical reasoning of qualitative research

The primary purpose of qualitative research is to describe, analyse and understand human experiences and circumstances. Therefore, qualitative researchers must have experience and understanding of what is being studied (Lichtman, 2013). Their role in the research process is essential; they are the ones who decide what is to be studied and who will be participating in the study. They are the channel for data collection, the analytical process, and the interpretation and presentation of findings. Thus, they become part of the entire research process through their values and ethics, and as their role is critical, they must be aware of these values and ethics.

Ontological and epistemological viewpoints impact how we view and understand the social world. Ontology refers to the nature of social phenomena and addresses what can be known about reality; that is, whether it is external to social actors or shaped by them (Bryman, 2012; Olafson et al., 2020). Our ontological worldviews allude to our individual combined beliefs comprising our personal ontology. These beliefs can be

either tacit or explicit, in part or whole (Jónsdóttir, 2011). Do we believe the social world exists as something external to individuals, or is it shaped by interactions? Ontological objectivism holds the view that social phenomena are external to us and our influence. In contrast, ontological subjectivism views social phenomena as the result of interactions between and among social actors and is shaped by our influence (Bryman, 2012).

Epistemology refers to our beliefs and views about acquiring knowledge and conducting research (Bryman, 2012; Olafson et al., 2010). Epistemology invites us to reflect on how to study the social world and which stance to adopt (Bryman, 2012). Our epistemological worldview specifies our accumulated beliefs in how we obtain knowledge (Jónsdóttir, 2011). The epistemological philosophy of positivism advocates the application of the rules of natural sciences. It focuses on the view that the social world is an external reality that is separate from us and our influence (Bryman, 2012). Epistemological interpretivism, on the other hand, emphasises understanding the social world by analysing participants' interpretations. These different viewpoints about the nature of social phenomena impact researchers regarding the type of research they conduct and the research process they adopt (Bryman, 2012).

At the one end are researchers who ontologically presume that the social world has an objective reality. These researchers view the social world as something external to social actors, who have no control over it. It is simply "out there," impacting their values, beliefs and behaviour (Bryman, 2012, p. 380). They believe they can perform research objectively and without bias, as all social phenomena are independent (Mtika, 2008). Such an epistemological perspective is often described as positivism (Lichtman, 2013). Positivist researchers conduct quantitative research, which presumes an objective reality (Mtika, 2008).

Researchers at the other end of the spectrum view the social the social world as a process of constant changes via social interactions (Bryman, 2012). Researchers who take this viewpoint believe that social phenomena do not exist independently, but are constructed through interactions among individuals as social actors. Therefore, participants and researchers construct the social phenomena under investigation. This epistemological perspective is referred to as constructivism, and researchers subscribing to constructivism are more inclined to conduct qualitative research that presumes reality is subjective and should be analysed through holistic observation (Mtika, 2008).

Education occurs in multiple and varying social contexts, and Bronfenbrenner's socio-ecological perspectives, as well as the EdQual framework, take the different contexts into account (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Tikly, 2011). I believe that we, as individuals, develop through a multitude of contextual socio-cultural activities between and among the reciprocal individual and social systems. That is, we are affected by our interaction with individuals and our environment and the reciprocity of these interactions. Our

knowledge, experiences and how we understand the world are based on our environment and the context in which we live. The social ontology that affected me as a researcher and therefore my research as a whole and the research process, is subjectivism. My epistemological perspective, which I follow, is the constructivist approach. I believe that social actors construct social phenomena. I regard our understanding of the social world as based on interactions among individuals and our subjective view of our circumstances. This led to the decision to apply a qualitative approach to my research. From my epistemological perspective, I attempted to convey the subjective experiences of my participants, their interpretation of their realities, to identify potential elements of primary education in rural Malawi and gain a deeper understanding of quality education, which is the aim of my research. I was interested in my participants' interactions with others in their immediate environment and their views on education and parental involvement.

Interpretivism refers to the understanding of human behaviour, while the positivist approach is about explaining human behaviour. Interpretivism requires social scientists to understand the subjective meaning of social action (Bryman, 2012). Qualitative research builds on data that has been collected in the field – that is, in the natural setting – using various techniques. It is up to the researcher to interpret this data and give the reader a description with rich details from the field (Bryman, 2012).

As I wanted to get to the core of my participants' lived experiences and how they subjectively understood them, I applied a hermeneutical approach to look at diverse data and interpretations. Hermeneutics is grounded in the epistemology of social-cultural construction (Jónsdóttir, 2011). The hermeneutic approach was initially used as a technique of detailed data analysis of transcripts and textual material, enabling people to see the deeper meanings within a written text (Lichtman, 2013). This approach has been expanded as a method in the interpretive social sciences for developing a deeper understanding of events in the social world (Neuman, 2003; Patton, 2002). By applying hermeneutic interpretation as an analytical process, I aimed to excavate an understanding of particular experiences, emphasising the relation of parts to wholes and wholes to parts (Patton, 2002). The hermeneutic analysis aimed to develop a holistic picture of how my participants view and experience education and their interactions, communication, collaborations, and cooperation in the settings of my research. The hermeneutic act of interpreting my participants' subjective experiences implies that I make sense of and communicate what I observed in an understanding and comprehensive way (Jónsdóttir, 2011).

5.2 The qualitative approach

One of two broad categories of research methodologies in education is the qualitative approach. It is concerned with settings and context. The purpose of this study is to contribute to knowledge about education in rural Africa, by exploring how people in

rural Malawi view and experience primary education in their context. It aims to gain a deeper understanding of factors that support or hinder the provision of education in Mangochi District in Malawi. To achieve this, I chose the qualitative approach. The qualitative researcher believes that the meaning and understanding of an object under research can best be understood in the context of its settings (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Creswell, 2012). The main ontological object of my qualitative research is to convey an in-depth understanding and description of human experience and interactions, how individuals see the world, and the meanings they derive from it (Creswell, 2012; Lichtman, 2013). Through qualitative research, individual participants' perspectives and voices are privileged (Creswell, 2012). It is an exploratory method where the researcher is responsible for, and the dominant factor in, describing and interpreting the reality of participants.

Qualitative research is concerned with 'how' and 'why' questions. It encompasses comprehensive data collection, which can include personal documents, memos, field notes, photographs, video recordings, public records, or transcribed interviews (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Lichtman, 2013). To achieve practical aims, I combined fieldwork and desk research. This suits my research well as I aim to answer 'how' questions, such as how participants interact and collaborate, along with 'why' questions, such as why the low education attainment in rural Malawi is so persistent.

Qualitative research is a holistic approach to conducting research and demands that we study a situation in its entirety rather than examining one specific aspect in isolation (Lichtman, 2013). In my study, I explored primary education in four rural settings in Mangochi District in Malawi. I was concerned with many of its aspects rather than just one specific detail. I looked at parental involvement and the working and living conditions of the rural teachers, as well as examining some site-specific factors affecting the provision of quality education. Through these varied investigations, I collected data which, through analysis and interpretation, gave me "a holistic picture" of my participants and their lived experiences relating to education in a rural setting. Qualitative researchers move from the concrete to the abstract. Thus, I began with data, through which I acquired an understanding of the situation and the experiences of my participants (Lichtman, 2013).

Qualitative research provides rich information on the topic being studied. However, it has some weaknesses, such as being considered subjective, challenging to replicate and generalise from, and lacking transparency (Bryman, 2012). Consequently, qualitative researchers must do everything possible to mitigate these weaknesses in their choice of data, analysis, and writing. According to Hart (2012), researchers can take several steps to minimise grounds for criticism, such as collecting the right kind of data to answer the research question, collecting enough data, using the correct tools when collecting the data, and providing clear and transparent interpretation.

To maximise the quality of my research, I took various precautionary measures during the research process. For instance, to answer my research question relevant to parental involvement, I gathered data from parents to understand their experience with and level of participation in their children's education. To get a fuller picture of this part of my study and to determine whether the school agreed with parents about their involvement, I also collected data from the teachers and headteachers on this subject. The same applied when seeking answers to the research question concerned with how the schools involve parents in their children's education. Interviewing both parents and school personnel allowed me to compare their answers and see whether their replies were similar. Similarly, to get a comprehensive and holistic view of the site-specific factors affecting the quality of education in the rural setting, such as teachers' working conditions, I interviewed teachers, headteachers, primary education advisors, and senior education officers at the district and national levels, along with taking pictures and comprehensive notes on my field observations. I deemed these methods to be the appropriate tools for collecting enough and relevant kinds of data.

In the next section, I present the steps I took to assess the quality of my research and enhance the credibility of my findings.

5.3 Research design and methods

The underlying phenomenon being investigated in this research is education in rural Malawi in practice, with the main research questions being: *How do stakeholders in four primary schools in rural Mangochi District perceive education in their context, and what is the nature of their interactions? What factors are perceived by stakeholders as central to achieving quality education in rural primary schools in Mangochi District?* As I wanted to gain insight into the firsthand experiences of stakeholders in rural primary schools, the emphasis was on eliciting the participants' views, as given in interviews on-site, to shed light on and contextualise the educational practice. A case study approach was applied to four rural primary schools in Mangochi District as chosen illuminative cases (Patton, 2002).

5.3.1 Selection of the research sites

While in Malawi, I lived in the capital city, Lilongwe District, in the central region. Before commencing my research, I visited Mangochi District on several occasions and had the opportunity to visit some primary schools in the district. Mangochi is a vibrant lakeshore district with many locals working in semi-formal and informal trade. Throughout the district, Lake Malawi provides countless families with their livelihood through fishing and other fishing-related jobs and agriculture, where people grow subsistence and cash crops on their smallholdings.

After several visits to Mangochi, I felt at home there and knew my way around the town. I knew people who lived there and had been offered a small office space if needed. As

discussed earlier (see sections 2.2.3 and 2.2.4), Mangochi offers an interesting and unique context for this study. For example, there is tension between the cultural practices of initiation for girls and boys, and tensions between getting into informal entrepreneurship and attending school. I felt safe and secure in Mangochi, which influenced my decision to conduct my research there, as I would mostly be on my own during fieldwork. Thus, when I requested permission to conduct my research, I had already decided on Mangochi District.

In February 2015, I contacted the office of the Secretary for Education at the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology in Malawi to set up a meeting to introduce myself and my prospective doctoral research. At this meeting, I met with a senior personnel at this office. I described to her my background, why I lived in Malawi, what I had been doing while living there, and why I wanted to conduct my research in rural Malawi, and Mangochi District specifically. She seemed very interested in what I had to say and promised to personally relay my information and request to the Secretary. She further asked me to send a request letter to the Ministry. At the end of February 2015, I sent an introduction letter requesting permission to conduct my research. In this letter (Appendix C), I further explained how and in which district I planned to conduct my research. In March 2015, I received authorisation for my research from the Secretary on behalf of the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (Appendix D).

In June 2015, I visited the office of the District Education Manager (DEM) in Mangochi District to introduce myself to him. I explained my precise reason for being in his office and informed him of my research plan. I told him that I had been granted authorisation from the MoEST to conduct my research in Mangochi District, and I was now asking his approval and permission, which he granted. According to the DEM, I could select any primary school I saw fit, and he permitted me to visit them as needed. As a courtesy to him and his office, I had planned to notify him when I arrived in Mangochi District to do relevant research work, but he saw no reason for me to do so. He told me I could come and go as I pleased.

I was aware of a certain international development agency working in four different zones in Mangochi District, with 12 primary schools participating in a development project. The four education zones were the Chimbende, Chimwala, Koche, and St. Joseph. I was acquainted with the project manager, a local professional from Mangochi District who lives and works there, and he kindly agreed to meet with me. At that meeting, we discussed my research and the possibility of me selecting four schools amongst those 12 participating in his project, one from each of the four zones. He saw no reason to object to my proposition, so I began collecting information on those schools. I believed it would be easier for me to gain access to the sites if I were introduced to the schools by a local person rather than walking in off the street alone and introducing myself. Thus, the selection of a district and zones was done for pragmatic reasons, as explained. However, when it came time to select potential

primary schools from the four zones to participate in my study, I required some assistance, as I needed to learn my way around the district better. I knew from experience that finding some of the rural schools would be very difficult. In sub-section 5.3.3, I describe the selection process for the four participating primary schools in detail.

In this form of qualitative education research, gatekeepers provide access to the site through either their official or unofficial role on the site. They assist with finding participants for the research. They may be a teacher or a headteacher, but they are always someone with an "insider" status on site (Creswell, 2012, p. 211). I identified the Secretary of Education at the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology as my overall gatekeeper for my research. I needed his approval to access the district. At the district level, the District Education Manager was my gatekeeper to the schools and the PEAs. Having gained access to the district and the schools, I now needed to turn to the schools themselves and gain access to potential participants at each site.

5.3.2 Case studies

Case study research is a qualitative approach in which the researcher explores a real-life system (case) or multiple systems (cases) through detailed, in-depth data collection comprised of multiple sources of information taken from a relatively small number of situations, problems, or individuals (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Zach, 2006). The sites I selected were purposefully chosen because they offered information-rich cases with potential "depth and detail to understand and illuminate" (Patton, 2002, p. 563) how stakeholders experience education in rural Malawi in their context. My choices were also informed by local advisors and practical and illustrative potential, as I expand on below.

Much research has indicated that the case study approach effectively explores the social reality beneath the surface for rich data and provides an understanding of the case being studied (Zach, 2006). I deemed the case study an appropriate design for my research because I wanted to look beneath the educational statistics, gain a deep understanding, and ask "how" and "why" questions that focus on contemporary real-life experiences and events without the requirement of controlling behavioural events (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2009). The strength of the case study design is its ability to cope with a wide variety of data, whether interviews, observations, artefacts, or documents (Yin, 2009). However, case study research does not allow for scientific generalisation; the researcher must put a lot of effort into reporting all evidence impartially. Case studies can also take a long time, resulting in a massive amount of data (Yin, 2009, pp. 14–15).

Multiple case studies allow the researcher to examine similarities or differences between cases (Baxter & Jack, 2008) and offer opportunities to gather rich data meant to reveal and understand a specific phenomenon. Visiting the four communities

allowed me to attain deep insight into the realities of school practice and find similarities across the cases (Patton, 2002). I focused on eliciting commonalities concerning education practice in the four cases and looked for what characterised the participants' views and experiences and built themes and patterns across the cases (Patton, 2002). I consider my approach to be explanatory (explaining why and how) and descriptive (shedding light on the specific topic of understanding schools) (Baxter & Jack, 2008).

My study questions were designed to suit the "how and why" question format. One part of my research was understanding how parents are involved with their children's education and how they interact with their children's teachers. In the parents' FGDs, one part of my study was about how they are involved, with the involvement being a unit of analysis. Another component was how parents interact with their children's teachers; the parent-teacher interaction was a unit of analysis. Accordingly, I collected all the information I could from the parents on how they were involved and how they interacted with the teachers.

In the local leaders' FGDs, one topic of discussion was whether they ever visited the schools in their official capacity as local leaders, and, if so, what were the reasons for their visits. In this instance, the local leaders' interaction with school personnel was the unit of analysis. One topic of discussion in the parent-teacher association (PTA) FGDs was how the PTA works with the school, and the unit of analysis was the PTA-school interaction. The elements and units of analysis were the same for the mother support groups (MSGs) and the school management committees (SMCs) FGDs. The units of analysis in these cases were the MSG-School interaction and the SMC-School interaction, respectively. I applied thematic analysis to link data to the proposition and the interpretation of findings; I explore this later in the chapter.

Table 4 provides a timeframe for data collection at the four participating schools.

Table 4: Timeline for data collection.

TIME FRAME	March 2015	April 2016	May 2016	May 2016	June 2016	July 2016
Schools		Hillside Primary School	Chambo Primary School	Baobab Primary School	Lupetele Primary School	Any out-standing data collection
Individual semi-structured interviews	A senior education officer from the MoEST	Head teachers, PEA	Head teachers, PEA	Head teachers, PEA	Head teachers, PEA	A senior education officer from the DEM's office
Pair semi-structured interviews		Three pairs of teachers	Three pairs of teachers	Three pairs of teachers	Three pairs of teachers	
Focus group discuss-ions		Parents, members of various groups, Local leaders	Parents, members of various groups, Local leaders	Parents, members of various groups, Local leaders	Parents, members of various groups, Local leaders	
Non-participant observat-ions		Standard 1, 4 and 8	Standard 1, 4 and 8	Standard 1, 4, and 7	Standard 1, 4 and 7	
Secondary data: official statistics	Office for statistics in Mangochi; Ministry of Education, Science and Technology					

5.3.3 Criteria for a final selection of the four rural schools in Mangochi

When selecting the schools for my research, I considered the potential research contribution of each of the schools, along with practical considerations. I used purposeful selection and established criteria related to location, accessibility, previous visits, teacher/learner ratio, pass rate, and repetition rates. Because I was doing the research at my own cost, it was necessary to ensure that the data collection was cost-effective in terms of both money and time. My selection of schools was an example of hybrid sampling of practical and purposeful criteria.

Thus, I excluded any schools I had previously visited but had not studied in any detail and those that were too remote or could not be accessed by car. I also had to factor in

the time element and did not include schools that were more than two hours away. I would be driving there in the morning and back to my accommodation in the afternoon. I did not want to drive in the dark for safety reasons, in accordance with the University of Iceland's researcher risk assessment for international research.

It is worth reflecting on whether those schools I eliminated initially due to their remoteness might be in a worse situation than those I selected for participation, as I had no means of approaching them. However, according to official statistics (i.e. MoEST, 2020; 2022), the statistics for rural primary schools in Mangochi District were all relatively similar regardless of specific location. My sampling was mainly purposeful, as I chose the schools and the composition of the groups of people based on who I considered likely to provide answers to my research questions (Bryman, 2012; Neuman, 2003).

I divided the remaining schools into four groups, one for each education zone. I looked at various criteria, such as the teacher/learner ratio, learner/classroom ratio, teachers' housing on school grounds, learner/latrine ratio, pass rate, dropout rate, and repetition rate. I decided to select one school from each of the four zones participating in the development project. I carefully studied official statistics for those schools concerning the criteria I had been looking at. I then selected the school with the poorest combined statistics from each education zone.

Therefore, the working criteria for the final selection of schools within rural Mangochi District were:

- Schools on the edge* (that I could access)
- Schools I had not visited before (fresh start)
- Accessibility and safety
- Time and budget constraints
- Education zone (one school from each)

*Poor statistics combined: teacher/learner ratio, learner/classroom ratio, teachers' housing on school grounds, learner/latrine ratio, learners' pass rate, dropout rate, and repetition rates.

The selection process left me with my four schools: Hillside Primary School in the Chimbende zone, Chambo Primary School in the Chimwala zone, Baobab Primary School in the Koche zone, and Lakeview Primary School in the St. Joseph zone (all school names are pseudonyms). The selected schools were not exceptional in any way; they all were ordinary schools. They lacked resources and had a steady increase in enrolment and an accompanying shortage of teachers. Nonetheless, I found that all four primary schools had their distinctive charm and appeal. The landscape around each school was beautiful, and the atmosphere was friendly. However, all four schools are located in communities plagued with poverty and, as such, can be viewed as marginalised if we apply the Western understanding of having limited access to resources and power. Such marginalisation is, for instance, linked to the lack of access

to basic resources such as education, employment and healthcare (Varghese & Kumar, 2022). All four participating primary schools had access to portable water through boreholes or water pumps, and Hillside taught their learners how to grow and maintain a school vegetable garden. Baobab Primary School was planting a few trees on their school ground for future shade, although the local goats were quick to eat the leaves as soon as they started to grow.

I began each morning by driving from my rented accommodation to Mangochi town, where I picked up my two research assistants and drove to the schools. My research assistants, Mphatso and Angel (pseudonyms), are locals from Mangochi town. Due to language barrier, I recruited them to assist with the FGDs. On my first day at each school, personnel from the development project drove ahead to show me the way. After that, I was on my own. Baobab Primary School was the closest, and it only took about 20 minutes to drive there on a good road. Since Lakeview Primary School was the least accessible, I left it for last. As I progressed with my studies, I felt my approach was working. I felt welcome at each school, and my experience and interpretation was that everyone was willing to talk to me, whether being interviewed, observed, or just chatting during my walks around the school grounds. A complete list of participants from the four participating schools, including gender, can be found in Appendix B.

5.3.4 The final four

Table 5 provides an overview of basic information about the four participating schools, followed by a detailed description of each school. **Table 6, Table 7, Table 8** and **Table 9** provide further information about the research participants, their gender, and their professional experience and positions. In the school descriptions below, I share a photo taken at each site to provide a more visual context and in-depth feeling for each school.

Table 5: The four participating schools.

	Hillside[3] Primary School	Chambo Primary School	Baobab Primary School	Lakeview Primary School
Number of learners	1529	1711	3554	1065
Teachers	38 (of which 30 were qualified)	22 (of which 20 were qualified)	54 (of which 49 were qualified)	12 (of which 6 were qualified)
Number of teachers' housing units on school grounds	7	5	5	7
Staff room	No	No	No	No
Teacher/learner ratio Infant section (S 1–2) Junior section (S 3–5) Senior section (S 6–8)	 1:117 1:80 1:66	 1:227 1:121 1:29	 1:145 1:109 1:113	 1:121 1:121 1:31
Outdoor classes (due to lack of infrastructure)	8 (18 total classes)	2 (12 total classes)	17 (30 total classes)	0 (11 total classes)
Pass rate	45%	36%	57%	30%
Electricity	No	No	Partial	No
Porridge making for learners in school	Yes	Yes	Yes	No

5.3.4.1 Hillside Primary School

My initial journey to Hillside Primary School took a little under an hour on a reasonably well-paved road. However, I had to pay close attention to where I was driving and be prepared to swerve around substantial potholes on my way. Arriving at the school, I noticed a big sign where the name of the school had once been painted, but due to wear and tear, the paint had peeled, and I could not read the sign. Another much smaller sign with a legible name had been erected next to it. I drove my car through the school grounds, an oblong square with big trees, classrooms, and teachers' houses lining three sides. On my right side was a water pump and a vegetable patch, and on my left side were some assorted buildings which housed, among other things, the PEA for that zone. I noticed some massive pots standing slightly raised from the floor in one of the buildings. I later counted 11 of them. This is where the porridge was being prepared for the learners. I drove up to the building at the furthest end, which I correctly assumed housed the headteacher's office, and parked my car. The deputy headteacher greeted me as I came out of my car, and after some pleasantries, took me to the headteacher's office.

[3] The names of the schools are pseudonyms.

The headteacher, Anna (a pseudonym), had been a headteacher at Hillside for two years. This was her first headteacher experience after working as a teacher for 17 years. At the beginning of the school year, 1,529 learners enrolled in her school with 38 teachers, of which 30 had qualified as teachers; the rest were still trainees. The school is surrounded by six villages where the learners live. Eight classes were taught outside, and these open-air classes were at the far end of the school grounds, between some classrooms and the hills behind. The PEA who supervised Hillside had been in this zone for five years, but this was his eighth year as a PEA.

The visual context for Hillside Primary School is a photo taken on school grounds (**Figure 8**). On the right, part of the surrounding hills are visible, which inspired me when I picked the pseudonym for the school.

Figure 8: Hillside, school grounds. (Photo, G. Erlendsdóttir, 2016)

5.3.4.2 Chambo Primary School

Driving to Chambo Primary School took me about 45 minutes, and navigating my way there was not easy. Each day I drove to school, I was unsure whether I had taken the correct dirt road. I had to use the car's odometer to know where to turn off the path. I wrote down in my journal how far it was between turns and how many km I should keep on the main path, and I used this method for the remainder of my fieldwork at Chambo Primary School. It amazed me each morning and afternoon that I had found my way to school and back to my base. The school was situated on a large grassy field the size of a football field, with buildings on either side. As I drove up to the school, I parked my car on the left as there were more classrooms on that side, and I correctly assumed that the headteacher's office was there as well. At the end of the field were four latrines for learners, and next to them was a massive sign with the school's name painted on it. At the farthest end, on the right-hand side of the field, were one teacher's house and a larger building which housed nine large pots where the porridge for learners was being made. Next came two classrooms and some more teachers' houses and latrines.

This was Lev's (a pseudonym) first time as a headteacher, and he had been at Chambo for 2 ½ years. Before that, he had been a deputy headteacher at another school. He taught for 18 years before becoming a deputy headteacher. He had worked his whole career in Mangochi District. In addition to being the headteacher at Chambo, he taught mathematics in S4 and S5. At the beginning of the school year, 1,711 learners from nine surrounding villages were enrolled in Chambo. Of the 22 teachers, 20 were qualified, while the other two were still trainees. Two of the 12 classes at Chambo Primary School were open-air and were taught outside the teachers' houses. The PEA for the school had taught for 17 years before becoming a PEA 10 years previously. Her career has always been in Mangochi District.

The field between the two rows of classrooms was perfect for grazing cattle, and the school had complained about this to the local villages. However, according to Lev, the local leaders did not act on it. So there was not much the school could do about the disruption the cattle caused at school.

Figure 9: Porridge-making at Chambo Primary School. (Photo, G. Erlendsdóttir, 2016)

For Chambo Primary School, I have chosen a photo of the porridge-making process as the visual context (**Figure 9**). Three of the four participating schools provide their learners with porridge in the morning.

5.3.4.3 Baobab Primary School

It was easy to find my way to Baobab Primary School. It only took me about 15 minutes to drive there on a tarmac road before turning off onto a dirt road. I drove up to the first building on my left and parked my car there. Straight in front of my car, at the end of the second building, were some teachers' houses, behind which was a hill with huge trees at the bottom. To my right was a big sandy field, which the children used as a football pitch. On the other side of the pitch was a village. Behind the classrooms on my left was another row of classrooms; behind the second row were latrines, and

further afield were more villages. There were many big baobab trees on the school grounds, which led to the name I selected for this school.

This was Milko's (a pseudonym) first time as a headteacher; he had been at Baobab for three years. He had previously taught for seven years in the district. As a headteacher, Milko taught one subject in S8. At the beginning of the school year, 3,554 learners from eight surrounding villages were enrolled. The school had 54 teachers, of whom 49 were qualified, with the remaining five still training to become teachers. There were 30 classes at Baobab, with 17 being taught outside. The open-air classrooms for the youngest learners, S1 and S2, were close to the main classrooms in the shade of massive baobab trees. The older children who were taught outside were located farther from the school, at the foot of a hill surrounding one side of the school grounds. The

Figure 10: Water pump at Baobab Primary School. (Photo, G. Erlendsdóttir, 2016)**.**

PEA for Baobab Primary School had only been on the job for two months at the time of data collection. Before being appointed PEA, she had been a headteacher for three years at another school, and before that, she had taught for 19 years. Her working career had always been in Mangochi District.

My visual context for Baobab Primary School is a photo of the water pump on the school grounds (**Figure 10**)). This pump services the surrounding villages as well as the school. In the mornings, I would often see women from the villages doing their laundry around the water pump.

5.3.4.4 Lakeview Primary School

It took me a long time to drive to Lakeview Primary School, approximately 1 hour and 45 minutes, on a paved road for about an hour and then on a dirt road for about 45 minutes. I had been told my car could not get there, as the school was only accessible

by a 4x4. So, I arranged to rent a 4x4 to get myself to school. After driving for about an hour, I began worrying that I had lost my way, especially since it had only taken about an hour the day before when I was driven there by a local person. However, after about an hour, no school or any other building was in sight, and my car would undoubtedly have made it that far on the paved road. Then I came to a bridge, which I had not noticed the day before, and my own car would not have had the clearance to cross the bridge. I was very relieved that I was driving a 4x4. After another 40 minutes, I finally saw the school building on my right.

I knew from the day before that the school was located on both sides of the main road, so I continued further before turning off the road to my left. This part of the school had five buildings with classrooms on three sides, and on the fourth side was a village. The school grounds had four teachers' houses and some latrines behind the classrooms on the left. Standards 1 to 5 were taught in these classrooms. On the other side of the main road were two buildings containing four classrooms, three teachers' houses, and five latrines. Standards 6–8 were taught here. There was a bit of distance between the two school grounds; it took about 10 minutes to walk between them, and the terrain was such that you could not see one school ground from the other. When I walked on the main road between the school grounds, I could make out Malawi Lake in the distance, so I chose the name Lakeview as a pseudonym for this school.

This was Josef's (a pseudonym) first time as a headteacher, and he had been at Lakeview for nine years. Before coming to Lakeview, he was a deputy headteacher at another school for three years. Before that, he had taught for eight years. His career had always been in Mangochi District. As a headteacher at Lakeview, he himself taught for the first eight years due to a teacher shortage. There had only been six teachers (including him) at Lakeview until this semester, when six teacher trainees were sent to his school. At the time of data collection, he taught only as a substitute. At the beginning of the school year, 1,065 learners from five surrounding villages were enrolled at Lakeview. There were no open-air classes at Lakeview. The PEA for Lakeview had spent his whole career in Mangochi District. He had been a PEA for five years. Before becoming the PEA, he taught and was a headteacher for 23 years in another education zone.

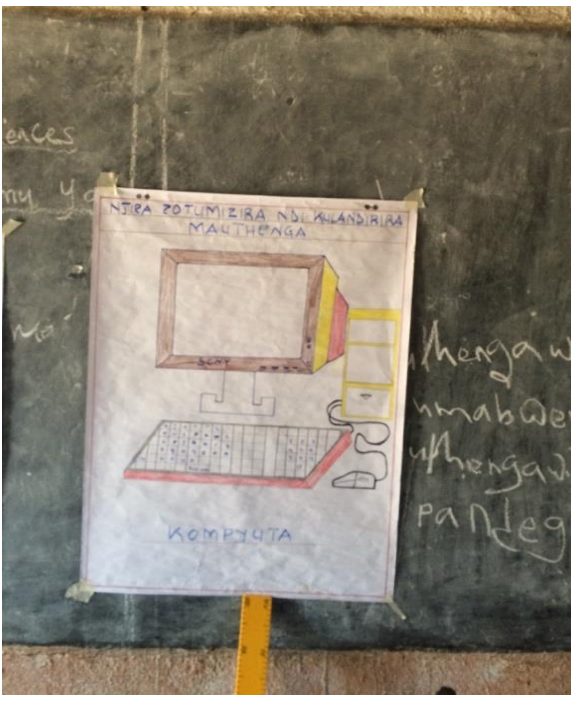


Figure 11: ICT lesson at Lakeview Primary School. (Photo, G. Erlendsdóttir, 2016)

The visual context for Lakeview Primary School is a photo from an ICT class I observed. The teacher was teaching his learners about computers and designed this poster in lieu of a computer, as the school has no electricity (except for the HT's office) and no computers (**Figure 11**).

5.4 Limitations and delimitations

The purpose of my study was to contribute knowledge about education in rural Africa by exploring how people in rural Malawi view and experience primary education in their context. The aim was to gain a deeper understanding of factors that support or hinder the provision of education in Mangochi District in Malawi. Using qualitative methods, the objective was to explore parts of the education system in rural Malawi, specifically in rural Mangochi District. Data were elicited from reports, interviews and observations. I focused on participants' attitudes towards education, family-school relationships, parental involvement, and teachers' working and living conditions in four primary schools in rural Mangochi. These guided and scoped my attempt to answer the main research questions: *How do stakeholders in four primary schools in rural Mangochi District perceive education in their context, and what is the nature of their interactions? What factors are perceived by stakeholders as central to achieving quality education in rural primary schools in Mangochi District?*

As in any research, certain conditions have limiting or delimiting effects. The difference between "limitations" and "delimitations" in research (Miles & Scott, 2017) is that limitations are connected to the researcher's choice of methodology and research design. In contrast, delimitations are related to the scope or boundaries of the study. Limitations can result from flaws in the design or a potential weaknesses in the methodology (Miles & Scott, 2017). However using the term *delimitation,* allows researchers to point out how they confined or narrowed the study to focus solely on specific aspects. Delimitations indicate the choices I, the researcher, intentionally make in what I will or will not try to achieve with my research.

5.4.1 Limitations of the study design

Certain circumstances limited my study. I have identified four key limitations: the sample size, potential selection bias, financial resources, and time constraints.

Limitation 1: As I have mentioned before, the key limitation is that only four schools were selected for this study. This suggests that the findings from the study are not generalisable to all rural primary schools in Malawi. However, the study does provide an in-depth understanding and an overview of the education system through the eyes of my participants as it emerges in the four participating primary schools. The inference may be that the findings may be relevant to other rural primary schools in Malawi experiencing challenges similar to those of the sampled schools.

Limitation 2: Another key limitation is the potential selection bias. The selected primary schools were all from poverty-stricken communities and failed to provide an adequate education, but only those accessible by car (as explained previously) were included. However, after scrutinising official statistics for rural primary schools in the district, it was evident that all rural schools show similarly poor educational outcomes, such as high teacher/learner ratios, high dropout rates, etc.

Limitation 3: Lack of financial resources also limited my research. As I have stated before, I did not receive any financial assistance during my research process other than a travel grant from the University of Iceland so that I could attend international conferences and present my research findings. My expenses during the research process included paying the company that handled all translations. Due to the language barrier, I hired two research assistants to help me with the FGDs. I needed to rent accommodations around Mangochi town during fieldwork; finally, I had to rent a 4x4 to get to one of the participating shools. I paid these expenses myself, and this did limit the scope and duration of my research.

Limitation 4: Another key limitation was time constraints. For the fieldwork, I only had about two months available to conduct all the interviews and observations. At the end of those two months, I had to go home and pack up our house as we were relocating to Mozambique. It might have been more beneficial to have had more time in Malawi as it

would have allowed me to go back into the field and collect additional data or probe further into certain aspects if the need had arisen. For instance, I would have liked to interview the senior education officer from the MoEST again after having conducted all the interviews in the field.

5.4.2 Delimitations of the study

I focused specifically on collaboration and communication between stakeholders, mainly parents and teachers and the value stakeholders put on education. This was the first delimitation or boundary that I identified in my research. There are untold issues that are relevant in school practice that I do not specifically incorporate in my study, such as gender issues, exclusionary school costs, school discipline, and violence. While I acknowledge the importance of these other issues to the field of education, gaining insight into those who provide and support education is as important as other social issues. To improve education, we need to understand the collaboration of different stakeholders in the wider school community. Thus, how teachers and parents work together, whether parents participate in their children's education, and teachers' working and living conditions are all significant factors affecting the provision of education and educational outcomes and are as important as other social aspects. Of course, school discipline, violence against girls, and exclusionary school costs are also essential in the broader understanding of primary education.

The second delimitating factor I identified is that I focused specifically on the parental side of participation in the various school committees (such as the mother-support groups, the PTAs, and the school management committees). I chose to focus on parental participation and their views on education rather than the school's side (e.g., whether they have any say in how the schools are run or on the curricula, etc.). Therefore, I intentionally excluded the institutional perspective in order to focus on the parental side of the committee participation.

By defining the delimitations of my research, I maintained focus on the study's main purpose and aim, which is to understand how people in rural Malawi view and experience education in their context by selecting and exploring parts of the education system to identify supportive and preventive factors. Thus, I intentionally narrowed the study's scope to focus on specific aspects of education in rural Mangochi District and, by so doing, excluded other important features. Narrowing the focus allowed me to dive deeply into the topic of my research investigation.

5.5 Participants

To fulfil my plan to elicit a rich picture of how my participants viewed and experienced the provision of education, I chose the following participants to interview for each school: headteachers, teachers, PEAs, parents, local leaders, members of the mother support groups, school management committees, and parent-teacher associations. In

addition, I interviewed senior education officers. All my participants were stakeholders in education, so it is crucial to acquire their viewpoints and knowledge. I also conducted six non-participant observations in each school, twice each in standards 1, 4, and 8. **Table 6** summarises my participants, their genders, and in what capacity they participated. As can be seen, there were more male participants, as almost all local leaders were men, and more male teachers participated than female teachers. However, 68% of parent participants and 62% of the various committee members were female.

Table 6: Summary of participants in the research.

Participants	female	male	Total
Primary Education Advisors - PEAs	2	2	4
Headteachers	1	3	4
Teachers	10	14	24
Parents	13	6	19
Local leaders	2	19	21
Various school committee members (as parents)	31	19	50
Senior education officer from the MoEST		1	1
Senior education officer from the office of the DEM		1	1
Total number of participants	59	65	124

As I have discussed before, parents were important participants in my research, as I sought to investigate whether or not and how they participated in their children's education. At each school, a group of parents was interviewed and demarcated as such. Participants from various school committees - the mother support groups, parent-teacher associations and the school management committees – were also interviewed. I wanted to learn whether they were also parents with a child at the school and, thus, whether participating in the committee was part of their parental involvement. **Table 7** depicts the various groups parents were part of and interviewed as such. Only parents in the demarcated groups "Parents" at each school were asked about their education; as seen in Table 7, parents' education varied from having finished S1 and S8.

Table 7: Participating parents in various school committees.

Participants from various school committees	Parent at school	Grand-parent	Total	Education
Hillside Primary School				
Parents	4		4	All finished S8
Mother support group	4	1	5	
PTA	3	1	4	
SMC	2	1	3	
Chambo Primary School				
Parents	5		5	Finished S1 – S8
Mother support group	3		3	
PTA	5		5	
SMC	5		5	
Baobab Primary School				
Parents	5		5	Finished S2 – S7
Mother support group	1	4	5	
PTA	4		4	
SMC	2	1	3	
Lakeview Primary School				
Parents	5		5	Finished S4 – S8
Mother support group	4		4	
PTA	2	2	4	
SMC	5		5	

As **Table 8** indicates, 69 parents participated in the research. Of those 69, 10 were actually grandparents of learners at the schools.

Table 8: Participating parents.

Parents participating	
Parents	19
Mother support groups	17
Parent-teacher association	17
School management committee	16
Total number of parents from the various school committees	69

Having gained access to the district and the schools, I quickly identified the headteachers as potential gatekeepers for their respective sites and for potential participants – the teachers and various members of the surrounding communities. I approached the headteachers with this idea, and all willingly accepted the gatekeeper role. As Bryman (2012) states, the gatekeeper must know the researcher's motives, a timeline for the fieldwork due to any possible loss of staff time, and any potential risks of participating in the research. Creswell (2012) emphasises the importance of informing the gatekeeper of how the researcher will use the data collected and how she will report it. On my first day at each primary school, I began by introducing myself and presenting the headteachers with my letter of introduction, along with the letter of authorisation from the MoEST. I informed them that the DEM had granted me permission to conduct my study in his district. I gave detailed information about the purpose of my research and how I intended to collect data, and we discussed potential ways for me to report my findings. Then, I asked for their consent to be at their school and requested their voluntary participation. My letter of introduction to the headteachers is in Appendix E. I presented my fieldwork task schedule (Appendix F), which listed all the tasks I needed to do at the school, and together, the headteachers and I developed the schedule further according to what was most suitable for the school.

Following the schedule, the gatekeepers at each primary school contacted potential participants for my research and kindly asked them to be at school at a given time. I interviewed headteachers, teachers, PEAs, and senior education officers at the national and district levels to answer the research questions. In addition, numerous focus group discussions were conducted at each school with parents, local leaders, and other members of various groups connected to the schools, such as the parent-teacher association and the school management committee. All interviews and FGDs were conducted on-site except those with the PEAs and the senior education officers from the MoEST and the DEM's office. The PEAs and the education officer from the MoEST were interviewed in their respective offices, while the education officer from the DEM's

office was interviewed in Lilongwe, the capital city of Malawi, where he was on a work-related trip. He preferred to meet me there for convenience. In total, 124 participants participated in this research through 22 interviews and 20 focus group discussions.

As **Table 9** indicates, the professional experience of my school participants was quite varied. Two of the four headteachers had been headteachers for two years, the third had been on the job for three years, and the fourth was in his ninth year as a head teacher. The teacher with the most teaching experience had been teaching for 22 years, and the teacher with the shortest experience had only been teaching for two months. Ten teachers had taught for ten years or more, 11 teachers had taught between two and nine years, and three teachers were teaching their first term. The longest-tenured PEA had ten years of experience, and the newest PEA had only been on the job for two months at the time of data collection.

Table 9: Participants' professional experience and positions.

	Hillside			Chambo			Baobab			Lakeview		
HT	2 yrs	F	Q	2 yrs	M	Q	3 yrs	M	Q	9 yrs	M	Q
T 1	22 yrs	F	Q	2 yrs	M	Q	20 yrs	M	Q	2 yrs	M	Q
T 2	20 yrs	M	Q	2 yrs	M	Q	15 yrs	F	Q	2 yrs	M	Q
T 3	17 yrs	F	Q	5 yrs	M	Q	20 yrs	F	Q	2 m	F	Q
T 4	4 yrs	M	Q	2 yrs	F	Q	20 yrs	M	Q	2 m	M	Q
T 5	13 yrs	M	Q	2 yrs	M	Q	13 yrs	F	Q	10 yrs	F	Q
T 6	15 yrs	F	Q	3 yrs	M	Q	1st yr	F	TT	2 yrs	M	Q
PEA	8 yrs	M	Q	10 yrs	F	Q	2 m	F	Q	5 yrs	M	Q

As **Table 9** demonstrates, most of the teachers (23 out of 24) who participated in my study had qualified as teachers (Q). The 24th teacher, a woman, was still a teacher trainee (TT) at the time of data collection. Overall, my study included more male teachers (M, 14) than female (F, 10).

5.5.1 Semi-Structured Interviews

The most common method to apply when conducting qualitative research is the interview, because it is flexible, and using direct quotes adds authenticity and quality (Bryman, 2012). I applied the semi-structured interview, in which the researcher asks listed questions on a fairly specific topic. This type of interview allows the researcher to change the order of questions and ask probing questions if needed. It even allows the researcher to ask questions that are not on the list of questions (Bryman, 2012; Creswell, 2012).

Having carried out qualitative research before, I was quite conversant with conducting interviews as a data-gathering method. The potential benefit I recognised was the liberty in how to ask the questions. In this study, I chose semi-structured interviews as the most

appropriate means to explore the topic of investigation. It allowed me the freedom to jump between questions depending on the direction of the conversation, thus maintaining the flow of the conversation instead of adhering stringently to the list. This was invaluable. One of the reasons I chose this data collection method was its flexibility and availability to add direct quotes from my participants while building on a core set of questions that were the same across interviews. Direct quotes elevate any research findings, adding authenticity, depth, and trustworthiness. Since I conducted qualitative research to explore, analyse, and interpret my participants' experiences contextually, it adds credence to include their own "voices" directly as part of my findings.

Unexpected situations can happen during qualitative interviews, and the researcher has to be prepared for them (Bryman, 2012). These often include unexpected environmental distractions, such as noise. During some of my interviews, children were playing directly outside the office where I conducted the interviews, and I knew all this noise would be part of the recordings and make transcription difficult. I also realised there was little I could do about it; there was, for example, no use closing the window, as there was no glass in the window pane. The only thing I could do was not to allow it to affect me unduly during the interviews.

Another issue that may crop up during an interview is the researcher's biases and expectations (Bryman, 2012). During the interview process, I continually reflected on my response and how I asked the questions to try and minimise this potential intrusion as much as possible. I did not want to steer participants in one specific direction. I wanted to hear their views and experiences without inadvertently adding my own. Each evening at my base, I would continue reflecting on the interviews I conducted that day to determine whether I needed to change anything the next time, such as how I asked the questions.

When preparing for qualitative interviews, researchers can take action to increase the quality of the interviews. For example, a good icebreaker may be needed to start communication between the researcher and participants (Creswell, 2012). After introducing myself, I began each interview by "self-disclosing" personal information (Lichtman, 2013, p. 194). Frequently, this would develop into a good conversation that sometimes continued after the interview ended. For example, I would tell my interviewees that I was a teacher and that it had been a dream of mine since I was a child. Almost all those I interviewed personally were either currently teaching or had taught in the past. Therefore, this was a good conversation starter, as they would invariably ask me questions about the teaching profession in my home country. Such rapport-building established a connection between my participants and me. It also seemed to put them at ease, and I know it eased my mind and made me more relaxed before commencing the interview.

Creswell (2012) also suggests that the researcher should not talk too much, and allow for silence. I knew from experience that silence could be a good thing during

interviews. In previous research, I felt compelled to fill in the silence whenever an interviewee would stop talking. Later I learned that by doing so, I potentially robbed them of an opportunity to tell me something interesting or important. So in this research, I made sure to allow for some silence and to keep reminding myself that I did not need to start talking as soon as my participants stopped. Instead, I allowed the silence to continue for a little bit in case they were collecting their thoughts or deciding what to say. This was one of many important lessons I learned from my previous research.

Maintaining focus when asking questions is another issue Bryman (2012) and Creswell (2012) refer to. It can become draining to conduct many interviews in a day and stay focused all the time. It is necessary to keep your attention and remain alert to seize the opportunity to ask a probing or clarifying question. My interviews were conducted during the autumn in Malawi, and it would get scorchingly hot as soon as the sun came up in the morning. Most of the interviews were conducted in an office with a roof made from corrugated iron, which meant it was scalding. As I wanted to take advantage of every opportunity to ask questions, whether for clarification or to get a more in-depth answer, I made sure that I drank plenty of water and stood up and walked about in between interviews. This is how I maintained my focus and alertness during interviews. The small things often have significant consequences, because I knew I would not get another opportunity to meet with any of my participants to clarify any response.

As part of my preparation before entering the field and conducting interviews, I had to arrange some logistical issues, such as making a checklist - one of Lichtman's (2013) suggestions. I had decided on some discussion topics for icebreakers; I made sure I left early in the morning to give myself enough time in case something happened, either with the car or my navigation. I ensured that my recording device had batteries and brought some extra, just in case. I got my journal, notebooks, and a few extra pencils. I had a bottle of water and some snacks with me because I knew there were no markets near any of the schools. Lastly, I ensured my phone was fully charged because I used it to take on-site photos.

I conducted 22 semi-structured individual or pair interviews for this research with 34 headteachers, teachers, PEAs, and senior education officers (see Appendix G for interview questions). The focus of the interviews correlated with the aim of the thesis and formed the basis for the journal articles comprising this dissertation. The interviews with teachers were conducted in pairs, while the others were individual interviews. The majority of the interviews were rich and detailed, providing a myriad of information on parental involvement, teachers' working and living conditions, participants' attitudes towards education, and site-specific aspects that may affect the quality of education in the four rural primary schools. All participants consented to have their interviews audio recorded; the interviews varied in length from 30 minutes to an hour.

5.5.2 Focus group discussions

In addition to interviews, FGDs were used as a data collection method in the study. As a research method, FGD can be applied in various circumstances in the social sciences to provide an understanding and knowledge of a situation, whether individual, group, or social phenomena (Yin, 2009). An FGD is fundamentally a group interview (Lichtman, 2013). Most FGDs are undertaken within qualitative research traditions when the researcher is interested in revealing how the group participants view the issues being studied (Bryman, 2012). A researcher can apply the case study method when attempting to answer 'how' and 'why' questions focusing on contemporary events, and the researcher does not require any control of behavioural events (Yin, 2009). A focus group discussion can yield a multitude of information on the studied topic. Like other qualitative interviews, FGDs can take many forms and varying degrees of structure (Lichtman, 2013). I determined that FGDs were appropriate when collecting data from parents, local leaders, and members of various school groups because presumably they are more vulnerable than the teachers, headteachers, and PEAs who participated in their professional capacity. As I knew from official statistics, the education level in the rural setting was low. Therefore, parents might feel more empowered as a group than in individual interviews.

No matter the level of structure, some specific aspects of FGD are generally agreed upon. A focus group usually comprises about 6 to 12 people who come together for about one hour to discuss some specific topic (Lichtman, 2013). FGDs rely on group interaction and discussion, and one of the advantages of this data collection method is that group interaction may prompt ideas or thoughts among other group members (Lichtman, 2013). Reading through the transcripts from my FGDs, it was evident that good group discussions occurred several times. One group member would begin responding to a question that triggered a response in another member, who then joined in the conversation, resulting in rich data. Admittedly, I would have preferred that to occur more often. However, overall, I collected rich data, especially from the parents and local leaders. Another advantage of FGDs is the time element (Lichtman, 2013). One focus group discussion can yield data from 6 to 12 people in one hour, whereas it would take 12 hours to conduct 12 individual interviews. Only two of the 20 FGDs in my study lasted 60 minutes or more; the shortest FGD lasted only 18 minutes; and the average was 26 minutes per group.

Focus group discussions are run by a moderator or facilitator, who plays a vital part in the process (Lichtman, 2013). They must have a good understanding of the subject being studied, be flexible and adapt quickly to unforeseen situations, avoid bias, and be a good listener. The moderator can take on different roles; they can be very direct in their instructions when leading the group or be very indirect, allowing the group to take the lead (Lichtman, 2013). I recruited two research assistants who took on the role of moderators in the FGDs in my research. I decided it would be beneficial to have two

moderators in each FG, as it is easier for two people to have a good overview of who actively participates and who may need a bit of a nudge. Initially, I decided to be present at each FGD to observe the interaction between group members and how they engaged in the discussions. However, as I was not going to conduct the FGDs myself, I was advised to absent myself by two research specialists (one from Manghochi District and the other from Lilongwe) on two separate occasions. According to them, my presence might create unfulfilled expectations, such as bringing something of monetary value to the schools or the surrounding communities.

Before entering the field, I held training sessions with the moderators in which we discussed, amongst other things, the importance of an introduction at the beginning of each session and explaining in detail to participants the aim of the research and the reason for the focus group. Equally important is to end the FGDs by thanking all group members for their participation and briefly explaining what will happen to the data collected (Bryman, 2012). In addition, I impressed upon the moderators that they should finish each FGD by inviting questions from the FG. The moderators had a list of questions I had conducted before going into the field, which we studied together. As these were semi-structured FGDs, the moderators did not have to follow the list in a strict sequence. They could allow the discussion to flow and lead the FG to the next question. One of the moderators was also responsible for keeping detailed field notes during and after each session.

At the training sessions, we discussed how crucial it was for the moderators to restate to participants that participation was voluntary and ensure everyone fully understood that they could stop participating and leave at any time. Also, the moderators were directed to get explicit permission from participants to record the meeting. The FGD moderators were alert to the possibility of one group member overshadowing other members and dominating the discussions. To avoid this, all members of each FGD were encouraged to participate in the discussions and respond to questions. Those who were less talkative or outgoing were gently asked whether they had something they wanted to add to the conversation. I also reiterated to the moderators the importance of comprehensive note-taking during focus group discussions. I found this especially important since I was not present during the FGDs and found it necessary to "see" how individuals participated when reading the field notes. Their field notes were quite comprehensive. While reading them, I could easily visualise the participants participating in the discussions.

There are some matters the researcher needs to bear in mind while preparing and conducting FGDs, such as trying to stay within the suggestion of 6 to 12 people per group (Lichtman, 2013). If there are more than 12, the session will take too long; conversely, the group interaction may be affected if there are fewer than six people. Only one of my FGDs numbered more than five people; that was the group of local leaders at Baobab Primary School, who were seven. The other groups numbered from

three to five, averaging four to five per group. Initially, six to eight individuals had been invited and accepted to participate in each FGD. Unfortunately, not everyone could keep to that commitment due to unforeseen circumstances or events. Since the groups were relatively small, there was a risk that the group interaction might be affected. It is difficult for me to know what the effects of having such small groups were. There were instances when good active discussion did take place. At the same time, there were instances where there was not much active, flowing discussion within the group, but rather one member at a time responding to each question.

Other issues of the case study that need to be kept in mind are deciding on the number of groups and how to choose participants for each group (Lichtman, 2013). As this research is not concerned with generalisation, there was no need to conduct many FGDs. In each of the four primary schools participating in the research, I established five FGDs. As I wanted to collect information from parents, local leaders, and members of the various school groups on parental involvement, the interaction and communication among the wider school community and the schools, and the communities' attitudes towards education, I composed the groups of people from each of those categories – that is, parents, local leaders, members of the PTA, the mother support group, and the school management committee. This FGD composition provided me with a wide range of participants from the school community.

Collectively, 20 focus group discussions were conducted, five at each of the four participating schools, with three to seven participants in each group session. All focus group discussions, which varied in length, were audio recorded with the explicit verbal agreement of all participants. The focus group discussions provided me with the opportunity to listen to local leaders, parents, and members of the various groups to find out their observations and experiences on diverse aspects of education, such as their experience with parental involvement in their children's education and how they perceived the home-school relationship, as well as their attitudes towards education. These data were an integral part of article I, which constitutes a part of my PhD research.

5.5.3 Non-participant observations

To explore conditions, experience the atmosphere, and get a better idea of the work in the school, I carried out non-participant observations during the data collection phase, where I collected open-ended primary data by observing teachers in their classrooms. During non-participant observation, I was an outsider who observed and recorded in detail the phenomenon I was studying (Bryman, 2012; Creswell, 2012; Lichtman, 2013). This approach removed me as the researcher from my participants' experiences, whereas in participant observations I merged myself into the setting I was studying and took on the role of an insider (Creswell, 2012). During the non-participant observations, I wrote descriptions of the interaction between the teachers and their learners in my

field notebook, paying attention to how teachers appeared to manage their classes and time on task. I sketched the classroom in my field book, including all furniture, the seating arrangement, and what was hanging on the walls. I also took photos of the insides of the empty classrooms, and the teaching materials teachers used. I explore this in more detail in section 5.5.4 Field Notes.

Conducting non-participant observations allowed me to learn firsthand how teachers handled their in-class management, including teacher-learner interactions, whether learners are active or passive in class, and teachers' time-on-task. Finally, it allowed me to observe the usage of teaching materials and textbooks and the condition of the classrooms. For this, I deemed non-participant observation appropriate, as I did not want to be part of the class but instead a "fly on the wall", an outsider who intruded as little as possible. However, it was important for me to remember that as much as I tried to stay out of sight and remain unnoticed, my presence may have affected the teacher's behaviour and that of the learners. As Lichtman (2013) points out, the person being observed may behave differently with the observer present than she would otherwise.

I conducted observations in Standards 1, 4, and 8 at each of the four schools, twice in each class. Each observation lasted for the duration of one teaching lesson, 40 minutes. Before entering the classes, I spoke with each teacher to introduce myself and my research and asked their permission to observe the lesson. All teachers welcomed me into their classes and appeared pleased to have me; some even seemed to take pride in the fact that I wanted to observe their classes. As the lesson was about to begin, I sneaked to the back of the class, trying my best to go unnoticed by the learners, with little success. However, as the lessons started, it appeared that the children quickly forgot that I was there, as hardly any of them even looked in my direction. After each observation, I spoke to the teachers to ask how that lesson went compared to others and to schedule the next observation. During the observations, I sketched the classroom, counted learners, and jotted my observations and thoughts in my field book. After the visit, I wrote a detailed description of the observation.

I thoroughly enjoyed the observations; they showed me the classroom conditions and how the teachers interacted with their learners. For instance, the teacher in S1 at Hillside Primary School appeared to use singing as her in-class management tool. Learners arrived at class throughout the lesson, and as the classroom filled with learners, they became very loud. Then she began singing, and most, if not all, children stopped talking and sang with her. This would go on for a little while, until she appeared to feel she had regained control of the class. The learners shared desks and chairs and became very excited when the teacher began distributing the textbooks, even though not everyone got a copy. At the end of the lesson, I counted 104 learners showing up to class that morning.

The S1 teacher I observed at Chambo Primary School applied singing and dancing as her control mechanism for in-class management. She began and ended lessons by

having all the children stand up and sing and dance, and whenever she felt her class getting restless, she would have the children sing a few sentences. She even used singing as her teaching method; as she was teaching them letters of the alphabet, she would sing about that particular letter. She appeared to have reasonable control of her class; the children were quiet and well-behaved, and she had all her learners sit in straight, even rows. There were no desks or chairs in this classroom. She told me there were 360 learners enrolled in her S1 class, with a daily attendance of 180–220 learners; however, today, many were missing, and I counted "only" 131 learners in her class.

During my observation in S4 at Baobab Primary School, I got to experience an open-air class. This "classroom" was at the foot of a hill in the shade of an enormous tree with a blackboard leaned against it. The only piece of furniture was the teacher's chair and a desk. Some large boulders had rolled down the hill long ago, and some learners used these as chairs. The ground was not even, which made it difficult for me to see all the learners, but I counted 65; the teacher later told me 70 were present out of around 90 enrolled in her class. This was one of the few days during my fieldwork when the sun was not shining; on the morning of the observation it was windy and chilly. The children had difficulty writing in their notebooks due to the wind, as did the teacher. The blackboard was dancing against the tree. I could hear some noise from a nearby village that travelled with the wind. It appeared that this fazed neither the learners nor the teacher; they just continued the lesson. **Table 10** summarises the tools I used to collect data from my participants. It indicates that I conducted ten individual interviews, 12 interviews in pairs, 20 FGDs, and 24 non-participant observations.

Table 10: Summary of data collection tools for participants.

Participants	Interview	FGD	non-participant observation
Headteachers	six interviews in total		
Teachers	in pairs, 12 interviews in total		
PEAs	Four interviews in total		
Parents		One FGD at each school, four in total	
Local leaders		One FGD at each school, four in total	
MSG (parents or grandparents)		One FGD at each school, four in total	
PTA (parents or grandparents)		One FGD at each school, four in total	
SMC (parents or grandparents)		One FGD at each school, four in total	
Senior education officer from the MoEST	One interview		
Senior education officer from the office of the DEM	One interview		
S1, 4 and 8			24 non-participant observations in total

5.5.4 Field notes

Before, during, and after fieldwork, I kept extensive notes, both descriptive and reflective in nature. Extensive, accurate and detailed field notes are essential for successful qualitative research. When the researcher returns from an interview or observations, she generally writes what occurred during that research session. She describes places, events, activities, behaviour, conversations, and people (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Bryman, 2012). I took notes on preparing for the field and on reading, coding, and transcribing the collected data, plus personal reflections, all differing in detail. These notes became part of the main data for the research.

Researchers must take their time writing their field notes (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). The more time that elapses between observation and writing, the less detailed our field notes will be. After each visit, I wrote detailed descriptions of the day in my journal or field book. I described all participants, how we interacted with one another, how freely the party in question appeared to participate, and how willingly and thoroughly they

answered my questions. I described where the interviews were conducted and the ambience during the interview. These descriptive field notes are like a canvas upon which the researcher uses words to paint the details of what happened in the field. This contrasts with reflective field notes, which capture the researcher's ideas and frame of mind or any ideas or feelings that emerged, along with her initial reflections (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). In my reflective field notes, I detailed how I felt during the interview or observation and described any issues that emerged that I needed to inquire about to get a fuller picture.

During fieldwork, I spent time walking around the school grounds, sketching the school buildings and the surrounding area, and talking with whomever I met on the school grounds. On my last day at Hillside Primary School, I met the headteacher while sketching. She came to me, and we sat together and talked for quite a while. She told me about her life experiences, and we swapped life stories. As it turned out, we shared the same birthday, which cemented our affinity for each other. She ended up offering me a teacher's position at her school, and to make her proposition more attractive, she offered me one of the teachers' houses on the school grounds. I thanked her for a generous offer, however, regretfully I had to decline as I was relocating to Mozambique with my family.

In addition to drawing classrooms in my field book, I took many photos on-site, which were uploaded directly onto my computer and put in folders assigned to each school. I added a detailed description to each photo, along with notes from the non-participant observations and the sketches I made at the schools, which formed part of my field notes and were analysed as such.

Despite field notes usually containing harmless information, the researcher may find herself taking notes about delicate matters. Due to the potentially sensitive nature of field notes, Bogdan and Biklen (2003) advise researchers to take special precautions with their field notes, such as making sure they are not misplaced and using pseudonyms for people and schools. In my research, I gave all participating individuals and schools pseudonyms and made sure to write my notes in such a way that others would be unable to decipher what or whom I was talking about.

My field notes are the written account of my experiences, what I heard and saw, and my thoughts and reflections during my research process. They contain rich data, with detailed descriptions and conversations relevant to the setting and providing contextual information (Bogdan and Biklen, 2003). Reading them takes me right back to the field. I can visualise and remember specific days when certain data was collected and how I felt during the interview or observation. I can feel the heat emanating from the corrugated iron roof in the headteacher's office at Lakeview Primary School; I can hear the cattle grazing outside the classrooms at Chambo Primary School; I can see the women from surrounding villages doing their laundry on school grounds at Baobab Primary school, and the baboons roaming around the open-air classes. I can see the

vegetable patch being tended by one of the teachers at Hillside Primary School, where he is teaching his learners about vegetable seeds, fertiliser, and tools. When I read through my notes, I recall the difficulties I had transcribing some of the Chambo Primary School interviews since there was so much outside noise (magnified by the tape recorder) due to children playing directly outside the headteacher's office, and then the ease with which I transcribed the interview with the PEA at Hillside Primary School. Entering memory lane has been my great advantage when writing the journal articles that encompass the core of my dissertation; it places my frame of mind directly in the settings where I did my fieldwork.

5.5.5 Overview of data collection

Transcribed interviews, focus group discussions, and field notes comprise more than 1100 pages. Additionally, I have handwritten notebooks, sketches, photos and secondary data in the form of official statistics. **Table 11** provides a summary of data-gathering tools and data sources.

Table 11: Overview of fieldwork and tools applied for collecting field data.

Type of fieldwork and tools applied	Number
Interviews, individual or pair interviews.	22
Focus group discussions.	20, five at each primary school.
Transcribed pages from interviews and focus group discussions.	910 pages.
Observations in three grades in each school, Standards 1, 4 and 8. Two observations were carried out in each of the three grades.	24 observations, six at each primary school.
Field notes, notes on observation, transcribing, reading, and coding, along with personal notes.	130 pages, three handwritten notebooks and sketches.
Other data collected by desk work, such as official statistics related to the research and statistical data collected at each participating school.	

5.6 Data analysis – the analytical journey

In this section, I present my analytical journey and describe thematic analysis (TA), which I applied in my research. TA provides a useful method for analysing different datasets, whether interviews, focus group discussions, field notes, or observations. As I have discussed, TA is well-suited for the case study design of this research, as is allows the analysis of numerous datasets and enables the researcher's perspective to be brought forward. Applying TA, I identified, analysed, and reported patterns and themes within the data and described them in rich detail (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Data

produced during the analytical process included thematic maps, preliminary codes, final codes, preliminary themes, final themes, and notes. **Table 12** is an example of a preliminary code emerging as a final code.

Table 12: An example of a preliminary and a final code.

Quote	Preliminary code	Final code
R: Can you tell me how the school encourages you to visit the school? P Hillside: I can remember there was a certain meeting where he advised us to visit the school so we could also know our children's performance (Parents Hillside, Verified – Pos. 71)	This parent is encouraged by his child's HT to visit the school.	Schools encourage parental involvement.
R: What do you consider the biggest challenge facing teachers at Lakeview? PEA: Enrolment of learners against the number of teachers. That is the problem (PEA Lupetele, Verified – Pos. 126).	Too many learners in each class. Makes teaching, in-class management difficult.	High teacher/learner ratio.

The main phases in my analytical journey were collecting data, keeping field notes, and the initial ongoing analysis; these were followed by coding and thematic analysis. This process was not linear, as I moved back and forth between the datasets, the codes I was analysing, and the data I was building. Through my research, I wanted to explore, analyse, and report my participants' subjective lived experiences, meanings, and realities (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I identified and analysed codes and patterns within the data inductively (Braun & Clarke, 2006), which is the process where the researcher does not try to fit the codes into a pre-existing coding frame, nor drive the research according to a specific theoretical framework. Instead, it is data-driven. After reviewing the data multiple times and conducting an inductive analysis, I began interpreting the findings using the theory and framework introduced in Chapter 4 and guided by my research questions. Thus, I moved from analysing my data inductively to a more deductive analytical process by presenting and applying theoretical concepts.

TA is typically independent of any specific theory or epistemology. It is applicable across a wide range of theoretical approaches and is well suited to extensive research interests. TA's flexibility as a research tool is precisely due to its theoretical freedom; it potentially provides rich, detailed, and complex stories from the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Clarke and Braun (2013) describe several advantages of TA that are relevant to this study. It is accessible for researchers new to qualitative research, it is a relatively easy method to learn, it is suitable for analysing different types of data (whether data-driven or theory-driven), and it is flexible. I employed TA when analysing my diverse data, whether collected through interviews, FGDs, observations, or field notes. I experienced first-hand its accessibility and how easy it is to apply. I had a sense that TA

provided me with a visual overview of the patterns that emerged. Because of that, I felt at ease with the amount of data I had at my disposal, which prevented me from feeling overloaded with data. Even though I am not new to qualitative research, I do appreciate that I need more experience, and I looked at TA as a companion throughout my analytical journey. Therefore, I felt TA was well suited not only to my research, but also for me as a researcher. In the next section, I describe how I applied TA to my data. Later in the chapter, I describe how themes emerged through the analytical process.

5.6.1 Analysing interviews, focus group discussions, and field notes

In analysing generated data from the interviews, FGDs, and my field notes, I followed Clarke and Braun's (2013) phases of thematic analysis. I transcribed all data verbatim and conducted the first reading to familiarise myself with my data; this is what Creswell (2012) calls 'preliminary exploratory analysis' (p. 243). As I read the data on my computer, I added my own remarks or question marks and underlined words or phrases that I thought were of special interest. During my first reading, I would ask questions such as "How does this answer my research question?" or "How is this relevant to my research?" I then printed all the documents. Each dataset had its own cover page with the schools' pseudonyms, and each participant was given an acronym correlating to their position. For example, T Lakeview is a teacher at the Lakeview Primary School. PEABaobab is the primary education advisor at Baobab Primary School, and Pers1MoEST and Pers2DEM are the senior personnel from the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology and from the office of the District Education Manager, respectively.

Before beginning data analysis, I had the FGD translated into English, as they were conducted in one of two local languages. The translation process is explained in detail in section 5.8. During data analysis, I followed the six phases of TA as Clarke and Braun (2013) have described them. Those six steps are familiarisation with the data, coding, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and writing up. After printing all the data, I was ready to begin the actual analytical process. I read all the printed data carefully several times and summarised each dataset; I immersed myself in the data. In total, I had four readings of all data, all the while continuing to add exploratory comments or question marks or underlining interesting words, concepts, and phrases. Similarly, I continued questioning how certain words or phrases were relevant to the research question. I looked for any messages in the text that were relevant to my research, whether implicit or explicit. This was a part of the familiarisation process. I began identifying codes in the text and generated short labels for these important features that were relevant to the research question. I continued in this manner through the third and fourth readings or until I had completed all coding in each dataset. I then started looking for similarities in the data, what Clarke and Braun (2013) call "coding the codes." I grouped all similar codes and assigned each the same colour; for example, "open-air classes" were assigned the colour blue.

I looked inductively for meaningful themes or patterns across the data that were relevant to the research questions. I completed this phase by collating all related codes together in a theme. I further developed the themes by reviewing, defining, and analysing them to ensure they 'worked' and were relevant. It became apparent that many of them might partly answer the research questions, such as 'infrastructure' or 'resources' related to the quality of education in rural primary schools, and I named the themes accordingly. **Table 13** illustrates some examples of the major themes and corresponding sub-themes.

Table 13: An example of major themes and corresponding sub-themes and selected quotes.

Major themes				
School Resources	Teachers' working conditions	Teachers' living conditions	Teaching profession	Parental involvement
Sub-themes				
Teacher shortage. Lack of teaching and learning materials.	Opportunity for professional development. Access to resources.	Teachers' housing on school grounds. Teachers rented accommodations in the villages. Long commute to school.	Teaching as a first choice. Status of the teacher in society.	Assisting with homework. Read with their children. Make sure their children attend school.
Quotes from selected sub-themes				
HT Lakeview: Ah the problem is, eh, most of the teachers they don't like this place here, it is too far, it is too remote. Yeah, so they don't like the place.			T2 Chambo: Initially it was second option. Because first I want to work in healthcare because I was go there to see how people were affected. So I wanted to take part in assisting such people.	T2 Baobab: Yes because he tells me to help where he is having problems. As we read together, I ask him why he doesn't ask the teacher. „Ahh when we knock off I was just rushing for home."

5.6.2 Research datasets – the foundation for each journal article

As indicated earlier, this dissertation is created around three published journal articles to show how they are connected and make a whole picture of the overall research. The main research questions were: *How do stakeholders in four primary schools in rural Mangochi District perceive education in their context, and what is the nature of their interactions? What factors are perceived by stakeholders as central to achieving quality education in rural primary schools in Mangochi District?* Further sub-questions were developed in relation to each of the journal articles and they are:

a. How do parents in rural Malawi participate in their children's education?

b. How do four rural primary schools involve parents in their children's education?

c. How do teachers in four rural primary schools in Malawi experience their working and living conditions?

d. How do teachers in four rural primary schools in Malawi perceive their profession, its challenges, and support?

e. What factors affect quality education in four rural primary schools in Mangochi District in Malawi?

In total, I conducted 22 semi-structured interviews and 20 FGDs, which together laid the foundation for the three journal articles of my PhD research.

The first journal article, "Parental Involvement in children's primary education: A case study from a rural district in Malawi," is based on interviews with teachers and headteachers along with FGDs with parents, analysing the level of parental involvement and how the participating primary schools involve parents. The second article, "Perceived realities of rural primary school teachers in Malawi: Applying Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory," details the working and living conditions of rural primary school teachers. The article is based on the interviews I conducted with the teachers, headteachers, and PEAs, where I delved into the conditions teachers experience both on their job and in their accommodations. The focus of the interviews I conducted with headteachers, teachers, PEAs, the senior education officers from the MoEST, and the DEM's office is the core of the third journal article, "Factors affecting quality of education in rural primary schools in Malawi," in which I explored some site-specific factors that affect the provision of quality education in a rural setting in Malawi. **Table 14** gives an overview of the datasets, which are the foundation for each journal article comprising my PhD dissertation.

Table 14: An overview of datasets used for each journal article.

Title of article and focus	Dataset
Article I - Parental Involvement in children's primary education: A case study from a rural district in Malawi. To gain an understanding of how parents in rural Malawi participate in their children's education, how schools involve parents, and the home-school-home interaction.	16 interviews, pair and individual (28 participants). Headteachers and teachers.
	Four FGDs (19 participants). Parents.
Article II - Perceived realities of rural primary school teachers in Malawi: Applying Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory. To explore teachers' working and living conditions in rural primary schools and their perceptions of the teaching profession.	20 interviews, pair and individual (32 participants in total). Headteachers, teachers, and primary education advisors (PEA).
Article III - Factors affecting quality of education in rural primary schools in Malawi. To examine site-specific factors affecting the provision of quality education in four rural primary schools. Additionally, to gain firsthand knowledge on teacher's in-class management, teacher's time-on-task, and the availability of TLM.	22 interviews (34 participants in total). Headteachers, teachers, PEAs, and senior education officers from the office of the District Education Manager and the ministry (MoEST). Non-participant observation (24 in total).

I collected all the data described above and conducted the data analysis. I had the leading role in writing the articles, with my co-authors serving as critical friends, sometimes pointing to additional relevant literature, taking part in editing, providing language, and sharing their insights into the writing process.

5.7 Ethical considerations

Various ethical issues must be considered and applied throughout the research process, from the preparation stage, through data collection and analysis, to the writing and presenting of research findings (Lichtman, 2013). The ethical framework of the University of Iceland was respected and upheld, acting as the foundation when commencing this research, along with the acknowledged ethical rules in educational research. The basic rules of research, informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity, safety, not doing harm, and potential benefit were embraced and espoused. All necessary and relevant permissions were obtained, either verbally or in writing, from the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology in Malawi, educational authorities in Mangochi District, PEAs, Headteachers, teachers, parents, local leaders, and members

of the various school committees that participated in the research. The Code of Ethics of the University of Iceland (Háskóli Íslands, 2019) and the Research Ethics of the University of Iceland (Háskóli Íslands, 2014), accompanied by the writings of Braun and Clarke (2013), Bryman (2012), and Lichtman (2013) structured the ethical framework for this research.

The Code of Ethics of the University of Iceland (Háskóli Íslands, 2019) and the Research Ethics of the University of Iceland (Háskóli Íslands, 2014) address the principal responsibilities of the researcher towards the research field and the research participant. The researcher's responsibility is to obtain knowledge that is valuable to individuals and societies. She has to do her utmost to protect participants and ensure their well-being.

The cornerstone of ethical research is the caveat of protecting participants from harm (Lichtman, 2013). I took this responsibility seriously, ensuring that I was "*doing no harm*" (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p. 63) by minimising any potential risks towards them, including avoiding the use of deception. I treated my participants respectfully and maintained their privacy, confidentiality, and anonymity.

5.7.1 Anonymity, confidentiality, and informed consent

Research participants should be able to expect to have their privacy assured, and therefore, no identifying information will be disclosed. The researcher must ensure that the reader cannot identify any participants by removing any identifying details from the records (Lichtman, 2013). The names of participants were not recorded, nor did I collect any personal or identifiable information. At the beginning of each interview and FGD, participants were guaranteed that their anonymity would be safeguarded and that each would be assigned a pseudonym that would be used for direct quotations. Research participants should be able to expect that any information they convey to the researcher will be treated confidentially and not revealed to others. The researcher is responsible for ensuring the participants' confidentiality (Lichtman, 2013). Throughout my research process, I safeguarded all confidential information. I made sure that no one had access to my data, whether it was the recordings, field notes, or transcribed data.

As stated earlier, gatekeepers provided me access to the field, which may cause possible ethical dilemmas. For instance, the headteachers contacted potential participants for the FGDs, and by doing so, they had knowledge of who agreed to participate, at least initially. This goes against maintaining anonymity (Licthman, 2013), as discussed above. However, the headteachers had no way of knowing who actually showed up to the FGDs or who, if anyone, decided to opt out.

Research participants should understand that their participation is voluntary. It is the researcher's responsibility to obtain their informed consent and to advise them that it is

their decision whether to participate or not and that they can withdraw from participation at any time without any harm coming to them (Lichtman, 2013). I obtained participants' informed consent, both written and verbal. Written consent was obtained from the Secretary for primary education at the MoEST, the PEAs, the headteachers and the teachers. Verbal consent was obtained from members of the FGDs. Before all interviews and FGDs began, I assured them that participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw from participation at any time during the process or after it concluded without causing them harm or stress.

Seeking access to participants from gatekeepers is an additional ethical issue I had to consider. As mentioned, I depended on the headteachers to gain access to participants. Before they contacted potential participants, we discussed the importance of informed consent. So, the headteachers conducted the initial discussion with participants on the issue. I cannot guarantee that this affected their decision to participate one way or the other. At the beginning of each interview, this matter was raised again, it was reiterated that they were not obliged to participate, and everyone was assured that they could withdraw at any time they saw fit without consequence.

Furthermore, when obtaining informed consent, participants must be informed and understand the purpose and aim of the research, the essence of their participation and the duration, and what will happen to the data (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Bryman, 2012). Before beginning the interviews or FGDs, the purpose of the research was reported to all participants. They were informed about why I wanted to study the education system in rural Malawi; they were all given background information about me. They were told what their part of the research entailed and what I would do with the data I collected.

While conducting this research, I followed the general principles of ethical research (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p. 63). I was honest and accurate in ensuring the integrity of the data and preventing misrepresentation or plagiarising other's work by maintaining the standard of authorship. By adhering to these core principles, I maintained my ethos as an ethical researcher.

5.7.2 Researcher's positionality

I must discuss my personal and professional background concerning this study to help put the study into proper perspective. I am a white, middle-aged Icelandic woman, born and raised in Iceland, who has had the opportunity to live and work in numerous low- to high-income countries throughout my adult life. I hold an MA degree in Sociology and an M.Ed in Educational Administration, both obtained from the University of Iceland. Before conducting the research on which this reflective work is based, I taught in primary schools in Iceland for five years. During the 16 years I lived in Africa, I lived in Namibia, Malawi, and Mozambique. During my stay in Namibia, I was a substitute teacher at a private secondary school; I also did substitute teaching at

private primary schools in Malawi and Mozambique. I have prior experience conducting qualitative education studies in Africa; while living in Namibia, I finished my M.Ed degree by conducting a case study on parental involvement in Namibia.

Throughout my time in Namibia and Malawi, I volunteered with non-profit organisations, and I want to give the reader some information about what my voluntary work entailed. Mostly, it was fundraising work for already established projects and schools. We used the funding to provide necessities for playschools and primary schools, such as the meal for porridge-making, furniture, notebooks, and clothing; we procured textbooks and notebooks for secondary schools; we provided bedding for a rural secondary boarding school; and we paid school fees for secondary school students who excelled in school, but who would be expelled due to non-payment. This is a partial list, but it gives a fair idea of my volunteer work. When the organisation I was volunteering with agreed to assist with any project, playschool, primary school, or secondary school, we stipulated that it would have to be accessible by car because we made a point of regularly visiting all schools we assisted.

Conducting my master's research in Namibia had given me the confidence to conduct research in Malawi. Through my voluntary work and those visits, I knew beforehand some of the challenges the education sectors in Namibia and Malawi faced. I wanted to understand further the implications these might have on education, the teachers, and schools in rural areas. I think it is an enormous privilege to conduct fieldwork and get to hear people's views and thoughts on various matters and to be involved with them, albeit for a short time. This privilege, however, comes with a great responsibility lasting throughout the whole research process, and the researcher must reflect on her values for the duration. Such a reflexive stance is crucial in qualitative research (Lichtman, 2013, p. 325).

It may be challenging to get to know people of different cultural backgrounds and gain their trust due in part to different rules regarding communications and interactions (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). For example, in some cultures, talking about personal matters or expressing opinions to strangers may be considered inappropriate. During my research process, I did not encounter any problems due to my and my participants' different cultural backgrounds. I cannot speak to whether my participants experienced difficulties talking to me. I can, however, state that I did not encounter any hesitation or unwillingness on their part. As I stated before, I had lived in Malawi for many years. As far as I know, I was accustomed to the accepted social behaviour and was polite, discreet, courteous, and grateful, just as I would be in any social circumstance. To obtain quality fieldwork, establishing relationships with my participants is crucial (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). I sought to do this by emphasising equality, closeness, and informality as opposed to authority and formality.

There is substantial literature on the ethical and methodological aspects that arise when the researcher enters the field; this is often called insider-outsider research. According

to Merriam et al. (2001), positionality, power, and representation are the three themes that frame the insider-outsider discourse. The researcher's positionality is shaped by their position concerning "the other." The dialogue on the imbalance in the power relationship between the researcher and the researched has gained momentum in recent decades. Such power inequality can be in the context of education, gender, or seniority, or other factors, such as race wealth, country of origin etc. Every researcher strives to represent the truth of their findings (Merriam et al., 2001). In section 5.9, I present the preventive measures I undertook to ensure that I have represented my findings in a credible and trustworthy way.

Before entering the field, I considered myself an outsider in nearly every sense of the word. I am not a Malawian citizen, nor did I live in Mangochi District or in rural areas. I am a teacher who had lived in two low-income countries for years and had visited countless rural primary schools in Malawi. However, I was aware that one way to minimise this ethical consideration was by explaining my background to my participants during my introduction, which I did. The question "Who needs an outsider?" was put forward by Court and Abbas (2022, p. 21) when pondering whether it might be best if insiders stayed within their own culture to conduct studies. However, they concluded that it was not the best solution. An outsider may have the advantage of noticing aspects of behaviours and traditions which may go unquestioned by an insider who is too "close," and may therefore, go unnoticed. Another consideration when going into the field is language. The outsider may not be fully embedded in the cultural context and its subtleties, which may be aggravated when she does not speak the local language. All participants I personally interviewed and everyone I encountered and talked to on my walks around school grounds spoke fluent English. So, I did not experience any linguistic problems. However, due to my inability to speak the local languages, the FGDs were conducted by my two research assistants, and as stated, I was not present during those discussions. So, I personally did not encounter any problems related to language.

Throughout the research process, I was aware of my positionality as an outsider, and I experienced, as Merriam et al. (2001) discuss, the convenience of being an outsider. I could ask probing questions on issues that an insider might be expected to realise – for instance, when asking the teachers whether they felt they were treated as part of the community. If I were an insider living in the communities, I might have been expected to know whether people from the villages treat teachers as one of their own and whether teachers were part of the community. However, as the data-collection phase began to gather momentum, I experienced that my positionality as an outsider had shifted somewhat, as Merriam et al. (2001) assert can happen.

During my interviews with the headteachers, teachers, and PEAs, my experience was one of collegiality. We were all qualified teachers or in the process of becoming teachers. On numerous occasions, our interviews would lead to discussions on

adversities and success stories that we had experienced during our professional lives as teachers. I would relate stories from Iceland about teachers and issues important to Icelandic teachers. They would respond by recounting stories from their profession in Malawi.

Regarding seniority, about half of my teacher participants, all the headteachers, and the PEAs had substantially more teaching experience than I did. This suggests a relatively balanced power relation between the interviewer and the interviewee regarding education and seniority, which forms part of the insider-outsider discourse (Merriam et al., 2001). Within the positionality theory, it is assumed that individuals have numerous and diverse overlapping identities (Bourke, 2014). I felt myself wearing numerous hats during this period. I was a researcher (outsider), a teacher (insider), a parent (insider), a colleague (insider) and a confidant (outsider-insider). During our interviews, participants sometimes wanted to discuss matters unrelated to my study. I gladly lent a sympathetic ear because we understood each other, and I could empathise with them and their worries or complaints.

Throughout the preparation process for my research, my position as a white, educated woman studying quality education and the living and working conditions of teachers in rural Malawian primary schools never left my thoughts. According to Bourke (2014), examining the research process in the context of my positionality can, at least partly, be described as reflexivity. Reflexivity implies that the researcher needs to continually self-reflect and be aware of the relationship between the researcher and the "other." Reflecting on my research experience, it becomes clear that I embraced all positions, whether insider, outsider or confidant. My experience aligns with Bourke's (2014) experience; I do not view my positionality as a limitation but instead welcome it.

5.8 Translational matters

The local languages spoken in Mangochi District, where this research was conducted, are Chiyao and Chichewa. Since I spoke neither language, I recruited two local research assistants as moderators to facilitate the FGDs, Mphatso and Angel (pseudonyms), who were both fluent in Chiyao, Chichewa and English. An essential issue for consideration relevant to the credibility of my findings is the need for translation. When any research tool is translated into another language and adapted between cultures, many things must be considered to maintain the credibility of the study's findings and conclusions (Kristjansson et al., 2003). For instance, more than a word-for-word dictionary translation is required to keep the conceptual meaning of the word through translation. There can be a range of meanings for every word based on its familiarity and emotional attachment to it.

For the FGDs, I developed a list of semi-structured questions correlated to the aim of the research. When the list was ready, I found an institution in Lilongwe which specialised in documental translations, and I had the questions translated from English

to Chiyao and Chichewa. To minimise the potential problems, which Kristjansson et al. (2003) suggested and mentioned above, and to ensure the translations were situationally relevant and semantically and conceptually equivalent to the original questions, I arranged for the translations to be locally and independently validated and verified. This meant that after the list of questions had been translated into Chiyao and Chichewa, I recruited a local, independent specialist to ensure that the translations were relevant to Mangochi District and that the meaning and concepts were logical to the site. Mphatso and Angel transcribed all FGDs and the field notes they had taken, after which they translated their transcriptions into English. Finally, I recruited the same local independent specialist to validate and verify the translations to ensure their accuracy and relevance. These were the quality control measures I implemented to ensure linguistic data integrity.

5.9 Quality Criteria

Qualitative researchers employ numerous tools to ensure the credibility of their findings. Yardley (2000) suggested open and flexible criteria that qualitative researchers can apply to assess the quality of their research. Those criteria include four principles: sensitivity to context, commitment and rigour, transparency and coherence, and impact and importance. How each study will apply these principles, and which principles they apply, will vary. In this section, I present what measures I took, following Yardley, to ensure the quality and credibility of my research findings.

Commitment and rigour. One affirmation of rigour is related to data selection. My dissertation is grounded in various types of primary data, including interviews, FGDs, non-participant observation, field notes, and secondary data in the form of official statistics. This diversity of data demonstrates my commitment and rigour to the research, as it allowed me to analyse the research topic from a variety of viewpoints.

Transparency and coherence. In this dissertation, I have sought to report carefully, clearly and transparently what I did to achieve my results. I describe in detail the procedures I followed throughout the research process. I report on what was investigated, why, who participated, and how I collected and analysed data. In Chapter six, where I discuss my overall conclusions, I address the coherence of this dissertation. Each of the three journal articles that form the backbone of my dissertation is an independent, reasoned study. This dissertation, however, establishes the coherence of the thesis in its entirety.

Impact and importance. The ultimate measure of the quality of any research study is its impact and usefulness. The potential impact I hope to attain through my research is to add to the growing knowledge about the education system in rural Malawi. It is important that we identify and understand what factors are at play when it comes to the provision of quality education. For any changes to occur in the future, we must have a good understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the current education system.

When I had an opportunity to meet with the Secretary at the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology in Malawi, when I was introducing myself and my research and requesting permission, he commented on how good it was that I was conducting my research in Malawi. The more research is conducted, he stated, the better it will be for the education system in the country. I was highly appreciative of his words because they left me feeling that conducting this research in Malawi would have reciprocal benefits. Not only would I gain my doctoral degree, but it would also benefit education authorities in Malawi by providing further, potentially actionable information on the provision of quality education in rural primary schools in Malawi. In Chapter 1, I presented my research's significance, originality, and value in detail.

Other tools I applied in my research to enhance the quality and credibility of my findings include reducing bias by adhering to objectivity, using peer review, and employing trustworthiness criteria.

Biases. Qualitative researchers must be objective and transparent throughout the research process and always keep their potential biases in check (Bryman, 2012). At the same time, they must be mindful that biases can be unconscious. As a researcher, teacher, and primary school administrator, I do my best to be aware of my potential biases, whether they are towards the schools, education authorities, teachers, or headteachers. Throughout the research process, I kept reminding myself of the importance of staying unbiased or being aware of my bias. I wrote detailed reflective field notes to further guard against my biases and maintain objectivity (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). I believe that maintaining mindfulness of potential biases helps with the objectivity one has to keep while conducting research.

Peer review. I attended numerous international conferences and seminars during the data analysis and interpretation process. At these conferences, I presented emerging findings in partnership with my supervisors and received feedback from academic peers and professionals in my field. I have had a close and collaborative relationship with my supervisors throughout the process. An overview of my presentations can be found in Appendix A.

Trustworthiness. The principle of trustworthiness contains a set of criteria many qualitative researchers employ to assess and evaluate the quality of their research (Bryman, 2012). For qualitative researchers to ensure the credibility of their findings, they need to conduct their research according to guidelines of good practice and introduce their research findings to the social milieu that was studied. I worked to follow good practice procedures throughout my research, such as ensuring participants' anonymity and confidentiality and obtaining participants' informed consent, which I recount later in this chapter. I have also presented my findings to members of the social world I studied, for instance, at conferences in Malawi and South Africa. Journal article I was published in the *South African Journal of Education*, and journal article III was published in the *Malawi Journal of Education and Development*.

5.10 Methods summary

In this chapter, I have detailed the methods used in this research and the research design. I explored the characteristics of the qualitative research approach and located my epistemological and ontological stance as a researcher. I deliberated on how I gained access to the field and the role of gatekeepers. I introduced my participants and portrayed each primary school that forms part of this research. I explored the different data collection methods and described why I selected the tools I used and how I applied them in my research. I recounted the data analysis and my analytical journey. I delineated ethical issues I needed to consider for my research and which measures I applied throughout my research process. I considered my positionality in my research and placed myself and my background in the context of my research. I presented the translational matters that I encountered. Finally, I reported the precautionary methods I applied to enhance my research's authenticity, quality, credibility, and findings.

Some of the methodology and my findings have been detailed in published papers and presented and discussed with groups of interested people at conferences. It is a privilege and honour to have had the opportunity to disseminate my work in peer-reviewed papers. I will now turn to the summary of the main findings of each of the three published papers before proceeding to the discussion chapter, where I examine and deliberate the overall findings of my research.

6 Research findings: Critical discussion

The purpose of this research is to contribute to knowledge about education in rural Africa by exploring how people in rural Malawi view and experience primary education in their context. My aim is to gain a deeper understanding of factors that support or hinder the provision of education in Mangochi District. By applying qualitative methods, the objective is to explore selected parts of the education system in rural Malawi, specifically in rural Mangochi District. Data were collected from reports, interviews, and observations, and were focused on participants' attitudes towards education, family-school relationships, parental involvement, and teachers' working and living conditions in four rural primary schools in Mangochi District. I applied Bronfenbrenner's socio-ecological systems theory and the EdQual framework to analyse and make sense of the data. The main research questions for the study are: *How do stakeholders in four primary schools in rural Mangochi District perceive education in their context, and what is the nature of their interactions? What factors are perceived by stakeholders as central to achieving quality education in rural primary schools in Mangochi District?* While responding to these questions, I also formed sub-questions to help answer the research questions. The sub-questions are:

a) How do parents in rural Malawi participate in their children's education?

b) How do four rural primary schools involve parents in their children's education?

c) How do teachers in four rural primary schools in Malawi experience their working and living conditions?

d) How do teachers in four rural primary schools in Malawi perceive their profession, its challenges, and support?

e) What factors affect quality education in four rural primary schools in Mangochi District in Malawi?

In the following four sections, I discuss my findings, beginning by highlighting some of my published articles' common threads. In the second section, I consider the main arguments the study makes about the provision of quality education in the four schools in light of previous research, literature, and theory. The third section features some of the main supportive elements currently at work in rural Malawi in the provision of quality education. Finally, I focus on the scholarly insights and contributions I bring to the field of research on rural primary schools in low-income countries.

6.1 Publications from the research: Connecting the findings

This doctoral project consists of published research articles and a synopsis of the research. I set out to explore how stakeholders view and experience the provision of education in rural primary schools in Mangochi District, Malawi. Further connected questions were developed and answered in each of the three peer-reviewed articles constituting this dissertation. Three articles have been published, two in a peer-reviewed international journals and another in a peer-reviewed book as a book chapter. Together, the three articles shed light on the different yet interconnected aspects of the primary education system in the four rural primary schools in Malawi.

As presented before, I gathered all data, conducted initial analysis and led the writing of the articles with my supervisors as critical friends, writing advisors and co-authors. Articles I and II draw exclusively on Bronfenbrenner's socio-ecological systems theory, with article I focusing on parental involvement and home-school relationships. In article I, I analysed the proximal processes between primary school teachers and other autonomous microsystems and the distal processes in the exosystem and macrosystem which affect the teachers. Article II centres around rural primary school teachers' working and living conditions, analysing proximal processes in the mesosystem between the teachers and other agents in the microsystem, as well as distal processes in the exosystem and the macrosystem which affected the teachers. Article III draws upon a framework for quality education in low-income countries. In this article, I analysed site-specific features that shape education quality (EdQual) in rural primary schools within the interconnecting policy, school, and home/community contexts.

In this section, I present a summary of the main results and arguments presented in each article.

6.1.1 Article I. Parental involvement in children's primary education: A case study from a rural district in Malawi

The first article, "Parental involvement in children's primary education: A case study from a rural district in Malawi," was published in the *South African Journal of Education* in August 2022. All three of my supervisors, Allyson Macdonald, Svanborg R. Jónsdóttir, and Peter Mtika, co-authored the article.

Figure 12 gives a brief overview of the main findings of article I.

Article I: "Parental involvement in children's primary education: A case study from a rural district in Malawi." The research questions that were attempted to answer in article I were:

i) How do parents in rural Malawi participate in their children's education?

ii) How do four rural primary schools involve parents in their children's education?

There is a clear dissonance between parents' and teachers' perceptions of parents' attitudes and involvement in their child's education.

Parents have a positive attitude towards education. They believe in its value and encourage their children to attend school. They ensure their children do their homework. Parents agree that teachers and HT invite them to come to school, and they feel welcome there. They visit the school to observe their child's attendance and progress.

Teachers don't see parents at school and declare them to be apathetic towards education. This, coupled with parents' illiteracy, is why teachers do not assign homework. Teachers mainly see parents when they are called to school because their children are in trouble.

Figure 12: Summary of findings of article I "Parental involvement in children's primary education: A case study from a rural district in Malawi."

The article focused on how parents in rural Mangochi District participated in their children's education and how the schools connected with the parents. Interview data from four headteachers and 24 teachers, along with focus group discussions with 19 parents from four rural primary schools, were analysed by drawing on Bronfenbrenner's socio-ecological systems theory. The main findings show that parents appeared to believe in the importance and benefits of education. They expressed that with education, their children would become independent and able to provide for themselves and even their parents. The findings showed that the parents encouraged their children to attend school and made sure their children did their homework (if they had any). The parents did, however, state that teachers rarely gave children homework. Truancy was a problem in the schools, and parents asserted that they visited the schools regularly to ensure that their children were actually at school and/or to observe their behaviour or progress. Parents felt welcome at school. They were encouraged by teachers and headteachers to come to school to observe their children and were invited to attend school events.

In contrast to the findings from parents, teachers and headteachers claimed that parents did not find education important, nor did they encourage their children to attend school. The teachers felt that children's frequent tardiness and absenteeism suggested that the parents had a dismissive attitude towards education. The teachers indicated that they found it futile to assign homework to the children, as their parents were either illiterate or showed no interest in their children's education. Teachers and headteachers agreed on the importance of parents visiting the school. They indicated that they invited them to come to school to observe their children and attend school events. Despite

these invitations, the teachers and headteachers claimed that parents hardly ever came to school unless they had been specifically asked by the school to attend a disciplinary meeting.

On the whole, the article I findings indicate that there is a disconnection between parents and school personnel. Parents viewed themselves as co-participants in their children's education; they professed to value education and saw its importance for their children's future. Teachers and headteachers, however, claimed that parents placed little value on education and expected more from the parents. Such contradictory perspectives need to be acknowledged and addressed. The main message of article I is that parents and schools need to reinforce their communication and collaboration, as strong relationships and cooperation comprise an important aspect of quality education. To become effective participants, parents and communities need support and encouragement (Rose, 2003). After examining parents' perspectives on education and their participation in their children's education, the importance of investigating teachers' working and living conditions in rural primary schools became more evident.

6.1.2 Article II. Perceived realities of rural primary school teachers in Malawi: Applying Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory

The second article, "Perceived realities of rural primary school teachers in Malawi: Applying Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory," was published as a book chapter in *Education, Applications & Developments VIII* in June 2023. I co-authored the article with Peter Mtika, one of my supervisors.

Figure 13 gives a brief summary of the main findings of article II.

Figure 13: Summary of findings in article II "Perceived realities of rural primary school teachers in Malawi: applying Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory."

Article II: „Perceived realities of rural primary school teachers in Malawi: Applying Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory." The research questions that article II sought to answer were:

i) How do teachers in four rural primary schools in Malawi experience their working and living conditions?
ii) How do teachers in four rural primary schools in Malawi perceive their profession, its challenges, and support?

Teachers had numerous concerns regarding their working and living conditions, including school infrastructure, a shortage of teachers and other resources, and limited opportunities for professional development. About half of the teachers had been invited to attend a workshop or refresher course during their teaching careers. The teachers were also unhappy about their living conditions, as most rented accommodation was far from the schools.

About half of the teachers believed the teaching profession is not valued by society. In spite of the challenges faced by schools and teachers, they all enjoyed teaching, especially interacting with their learners.

The aim of this article was to examine the subjective living and working conditions of rural primary school teachers in Mangochi District, as this, along with teachers' views of the teaching profession, is a significant contributor to quality education. This aim was achieved by analysing interviews with 24 teachers, four headteachers, and four primary education advisors, applying Bronfenbrenner's SEST. The main findings of this article were that the teachers' primary complaint was poor infrastructure, including classrooms, staffrooms, and teachers' houses on school grounds. For instance, the lack of a shared staffroom caused teachers to miss out on opportunities to collaborate with their fellow teachers, which may have limited the creation of a professional learning community and hindered informal professional development. Lack of resources was another major complaint, with the shortage of teachers and lack of teaching and learning materials being the main ones.

Living and working in rural areas restricted teachers' access to professional development considerably. The PEAs are expected to visit schools regularly to provide teachers with in-service training and workshops, but due to a lack of funding, PEAs had trouble travelling to the schools and meeting with the teachers.

Despite the numerous challenges and obstacles rural teachers faced, approximately half the teachers participating in this study had teaching as their first choice career option. Those who did not initially want to become teachers came to love teaching. When asked what the best part of teaching was, the most common answer was interacting with their learners. Sadly, more than half the teachers did not believe that society valued teachers.

The findings in article II show that rural primary school teachers face countless difficulties, which makes the recruitment, deployment, and retention of rural teachers challenging for education authorities. All these elements represent quality education features and affect the overall provision of quality education. In addition to the need for education authorities to supply adequate infrastructure and resources, teacher collaboration must be prioritised as part of teacher professional development. Due to limited funding for PEAs to visit schools, PEAs and headteachers need to cooperate and combine efforts so that headteachers can step in for PEAs and provide their teachers with in-service training.

Considering the main findings of articles I and II, it is essential to examine specific on-site factors in the four participating schools that can affect the quality of education, which is the focus of article III.

6.1.3 Article III. Factors affecting quality of education in rural primary schools in Malawi

The third article, "Factors affecting quality of education in rural primary schools in Malawi," was published in the *Malawi Journal of Education and Development* in September 2023. I co-authored this article with my supervisors, Peter Mtika, Svanborg R. Jónsdóttir, and Allyson Macdonald.

Figure 14 gives a summary of the main findings of article III .

Article III: „Factors affecting quality of education in rural primary schools in Malawi." The research question that was addressed in article III was:

i) What factors affect quality education in four rural primary schools in Mangochi District in Malawi?

The four rural primary schools participating in this study, experienced similar site-specific challenges affecting quality of education. The most challenging aspects were poor infrastructure, shortage of teachers, and teaching resources.

Figure 14: Summary of findings in article III "Factors affecting quality of education in rural primary schools in Malawi."

The article investigates site-specific factors affecting the provision of quality primary education in four rural primary schools in Malawi. Interviews with 24 teachers, four headteachers, four PEAs, and two senior education officers from the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology and the office of the District Education Manager in Mangochi District were analysed through the lens of a framework for implementing quality education (EduQual) in low-income countries (Tikly & Barrett, 2010). In summary, the four participating rural primary schools experienced similar enduring obstacles, which affected the quality of education they could provide for the learners. These were a lack of teacher housing, a lack of classrooms, a shortage of teachers, and a shortage of teaching and learning materials.

The article argues that numerous improvements are needed in rural primary schools in Mangochi District in Malawi before all children are ensured quality education. Based on the findings, there are some policy recommendations that the Malawi Government may wish to consider, such as recruiting and deploying trained teachers to rural primary schools, which will address the overcrowded classes. However, for this to happen, funding for basic infrastructure at rural schools, such as teacher housing, classrooms, and resources such as TLM, must be prioritised.

6.1.4 Conclusion with regard to the articles

The three articles focus on various aspects of the education social ecosystem in rural Malawi that affect the provision and quality of education in four primary schools in Mangochi District. All three show that the four participating rural primary schools encounter challenges that affect the provision and quality of education. In the next section, I discuss and connect the overall findings of my research.

6.2 Discussion: Connecting findings

In this section, I examine the social systems and quality education in the context of the research findings. The discussion begins with which elements of the macrosystem affect quality education in the sampled schools. I then move on to other distal processes occurring in the exosystem and affecting teachers and quality education. Lastly, I discuss the findings on direct interactions, or proximal processes, in the micro- and mesosystems. By discussing the findings first from the larger social context I emphasize that it is important to acknowledge both the remote influences of policy and conditions as well as the more proximal factors to realize that the provision and quality of education can be strengthened from above and within.

6.2.1 National and international influences on quality education: Learning from the macrosystem

Quality primary education is a fundamental human right. As such, it is highly relevant to individuals and societies. Through the years, the global community has called for increased access to quality education (e.g., UN, 1948; 2015; UNESCO, 2020), and Malawi introduced free primary education and numerous education sector policies (e.g., MoEST, 2008; 2020) intended to promote quality primary education. Malawi is also a signatory to international policy imperatives on universal primary education, such as SDG #4, UNCRC 1989. However, implementing universal access to quality primary education has proven problematic for many low-income countries, including Malawi. As the findings suggest, numerous factors at the macro level influence the provision of quality rural education, including lack of teacher housing, poor infrastructure, and a shortage of teachers and teaching and learning materials (TLM). These factors, along with a multitude of others, negatively impact education and academic achievement (e.g., Okeowhor et al., 2019; Sosu et al., 2019). The continuing shortage of teachers in primary schools, especially in rural areas, limits the delivery of quality education for all. It leads to overcrowded classes, restricting instructional time and limiting teachers' time on task.

The findings indicate that most of the teachers participating in the research experience a housing shortage to live on school grounds; instead, they must rent accommodation in nearby villages. These teachers must walk to school in any weather for up to 30 minutes. Teachers were already tired when they arrived at school in the morning, often

soaking wet from the rain or sweating from the glaring sun. Kayange (2020) found that most primary school teachers in rural Malawi are more likely to rent a house in questionable conditions in surrounding villages than live on school grounds. It is easy to understand the teachers' complaints about living far from the schools, travelling on foot, and being exhausted by the time they arrive at school in the morning. It cannot be easy to stand in front of your class of up to 100 learners or even more, being physically tired but at the same time having to be mentally prepared for a long day of teaching. Understandably, this affects teachers and the quality of their teaching.

Thus, my research findings demonstrate that participants were concerned about weak infrastructure. The lack of classrooms posed challenges, as many of the teachers had to teach in an open-air class. The teachers discussed the difficulties they experienced in trying to keep the children's attention outside and the lack of shelter from the weather. They find it difficult, for instance, to prepare their lessons outside when the weather is windy or rainy. This limits effective teaching, and therefore affects educational outcomes. Poor and dilapidated infrastructure is the key factor in the dilemma of the education system many African countries are experiencing (Adedeji & Olaniyan, 2011).

The findings further indicate that all four sampled rural schools experienced a shortage of teachers, which led to a high teacher/learner ratio. Reflecting on teacher attrition and absenteeism and the potential reasons for this is interesting in this context. As was explored in Chapter 2, attrition and absenteeism negatively impact the quality of teaching. Reasons for teacher absenteeism and attrition include illness, caring for relatives, the long distance to school, and limited opportunities for promotion (Moleni & Ndalama, 2004). If education authorities were, for instance, to ensure schools had enough funding to build houses for teachers, might that decrease absenteeism and attrition? It is a fair question, as it has been shown that poor working and living conditions adversely affect teachers' willingness to be deployed to rural areas.

The issue of teacher shortage is particularly intriguing. There are already enough trained teachers; however, due to limited funding, they have not yet been recruited by the government and deployed to schools across the country (Nyirenda, 2021). This is a critical situation that needs to be resolved if Malawi is going to increase learners' access to quality education. According to the EdQual framework (Tikly & Barrett, 2010), the policy environment is an essential part of the interconnected processes of quality education, which, together with the school- and home environment, are prerequisites for implementing quality education. There is a global urgency concerning the shortage of primary school teachers in low- to high-income countries. The shortage of teachers affects educational infrastructure and teacher/learner ratios, and comprehending the seriousness of the situation is fundamental (UNESCO, 2024). In Malawi, as elsewhere, recruiting trained teachers must become a priority to achieve quality education, as stated in Malawian education policies (e.g., MoEST, 2020).

On 15th July 2024, the Ministry of Education in Malawi issued a press release stating that for the upcoming school year, 2024-2025, they will be recruiting 4,200 *Temporary Auxiliary Teachers* from the IPTE who have already qualified but have not been recruited, as discussed in **Chapter 3.3**. These auxiliary primary school teachers will be placed in various education districts throughout Malawi. Notwithstanding this positive news, the ministry reiterates that this is only for one school year, and the prospective auxiliary teachers are not to expect automatic employment at the end of the school year. However, this is a big step the education authorities are taking to reduce Malawi's high teacher/learner ratio.

It will be interesting to follow how this experiment goes and whether the government will continue by hiring these auxiliary teachers permanently. Otherwise, the continuous teacher shortage will add to the already heavy workload of teachers. It may discourage future generations from becoming teachers and joining the teaching profession (UNESCO, 2024). This will continue to affect the quality of education adversely, and the existing inequalities in education may persist.

It is worth considering whether authorities could temporarily shift their focus away from training more teachers and towards recruiting already trained teachers and deploying them throughout the schools. However, there is limited funding to pay teachers their salaries. One suggestion to resolve this might be to approach the various International Development Agencies that operate in Malawi. For example, when the government and donors collaborate on potential development projects, securing funds for teachers' salaries could be a possible strategic planning project. Perhaps a pilot project on looking for new strategies could evolve into a more concerted effort for cooperation between the MoEST and donors. Employing more teachers is an acute challenge, and meeting that challenge must be prioritised. Findings also highlight other forms of support affecting the provision of quality education in rural primary schools that must be considered, such as providing infrastructure and proper resources. Unless these challenges are addressed, deploying teachers to rural areas will not be successful in the long run, and the shortage of teachers will continue to undermine other aspects of primary education and its quality.

This shortage of teachers, coupled with a lack of TLM ranging from teaching guides to chalk to textbooks, negatively affects teachers' working conditions, making some teachers more likely to relocate away from rural areas (e.g., Chakanika et al., 2012; Sumida & Kawata, 2021). Research findings demonstrate that teachers were concerned with limited resources and the lack of textbooks for their learners, which posed additional obstacles. The teachers further talked about the difficulties they experienced when teaching a subject without any teaching and learning aids. Sometimes, they could improvise; however, when teaching certain subjects, such as ICT, they were unable to do so, as they had no access to the necessary resources (in this case, computers). This adds to the challenges experienced by teachers and learners. Teachers cannot be

expected to be effective in their teaching under these conditions, nor can learners be expected to attain optimal learning or achieve much in overcrowded, dilapidated, or open-air classrooms where they are exposed to the elements. Linking these findings to the EdQual framework, an enabling policy environment requires authorities to procure textbooks, distribute them efficiently, and target schools for financial support (Tikly & Barrett, 2010). Procuring and distributing textbooks to the districts would reduce the inherent lack of TLM in the schools, about which some of my participants complained. By securing funding for the schools, authorities would provide them with the means to strengthen their infrastructure - for instance, by building more classrooms and houses for teachers on school grounds.

To implement successful policies on quality education, dialogue and debate is needed at the governmental level and between the government and stakeholders, such as teachers, teacher unions, and community organisations representing parents (Tikly, 2010). In Malawi, there is a tradition of public discussion of primary education in civil society and communities and among and between NGOs. Additionally, educational matters are a common topic on radio and television. However, it is unclear how accessible these discussions are to stakeholders in rural areas. For instance, in rural Mangochi District, it is not common for people to own a radio or television, so they miss out on discussions through those media. Furthermore, according to the findings of this study, there does not appear to be much discussion regarding primary education and school matters between stakeholders and the schools. Parents are rarely seen at school, which indicates that they seldom discuss educational matters with teachers or headteachers. Similarly, PEAs are rarely in schools, which suggests limited discussion between teachers and PEAs. Further, members of the PTA complained that parents show up for meetings infrequently. So, according to the findings, there is seemingly not much discussion on education among stakeholders in these four rural primary schools.

Public discussion requires that all relevant stakeholders, especially at the grassroots level, participate and have a say in what quality education is; what is needed, contextually, in terms of education; and what suits their society best. This could become a united effort and lead to a sense of collective ownership, in contrast with the top-down process that appears to be dominant today. Therefore, it is important to ensure everyone's access to public discussion so it is not only a public official discussion but also a discussion among the public.

These distal conditions and processes discussed above such as lack of teacher housing, poor infrastructure, and the shortage of teachers, occur in the macrosystem and affect other systems, the mesosystem. Consequently, quality education in rural areas is compromised, as is evidenced by official statistics in terms of higher teacher/learner ratio, higher learner/classroom ratio, and higher dropout and repetition rates in Mangochi District than in most other districts in the country (Mangochi District

Assembly, 2014; MoEST, 2018; 2022). Rural learners' experiences of low-quality education can also be seen by comparing standardised tests such as SACMEQ IV, where S6 learners in rural primary schools in Malawi score considerably lower in reading and mathematics comprehension than their urban counterparts (Awich, 2021). Similarly, the yearly EMIS datasets show higher repetition and dropout rates in rural areas, including Mangochi District. However, in addition to distal processes in the macrosystem that make up the conditions affecting teachers and education, aspects of the exosystem also influence the quality of education.

6.2.2 Impacting quality education: Interactions in the exosystem

According to SEST, certain processes and conditions affect teachers and their practice even though they are not active participants in creating them. These distal processes, such as teachers' working and living conditions and the attitudes parents and communities have towards education, occur in the exosystem.

The findings in this study indicate that the teachers' working conditions were challenging and lie at the heart of the battle for improving schools. Most of the teachers either taught in overcrowded classrooms, in an open-air classroom, or both. Open-air classrooms brought pedagogic challenges, as the teachers could not display visual teaching aids, and the learners and teachers were not properly shielded from the elements. The classrooms did not have enough desks and chairs for all the learners, so some had to sit on the floor. The "open-air" classrooms do not have any furniture, for obvious reasons. The average learner/classroom ratio in Mangochi District was 165:1 in the school year 2017–2018 (MoEST, 2018), with many instances of primary classes having well over 100 learners. None of the sampled schools had a staffroom that would enable collaboration between teachers. These working conditions affect the teacher's ability to teach effectively and thus adversely affect the quality of education. Most teachers in this study rented accommodations in surrounding villages and walked to school. According to the MoEST (2018), only about 20% of teachers in Mangochi District are provided with housing on school grounds.

Participants had mixed views on the perceived status of primary teachers, with about half of the teachers in the study indicating that they did not believe Malawian society values the teaching profession. This affects their status as role models for their learners and their professional self-worth. About half of the teachers had not selected becoming a teacher as their first career choice. They became teachers for different reasons, and some mentioned that it was difficult to get another job. Some had wanted to study nursing, but decided against it since it was more costly and took longer. These perceptions are in line with other research in Malawi. Mtika and Gates (2011) found that many secondary trainee teachers only joined the teaching profession because they could not follow their chosen profession.

Irrespective of the findings relating to perceived negative attitudes towards teachers by society or the teachers themselves, all the teachers in the study eventually came to love teaching. Education authorities need to harness this to ensure that teachers continue to enjoy their jobs and stay motivated. Most of my participants stated that they received little encouragement from their HT or PEA, which affected their motivation. As previously stated, a motivated teaching force is necessary for quality teaching and learners' educational attainment and performance (Iqbal et al., 2020). Improving teachers' working and living conditions might improve and sustain their motivation (Bennell, 2023), elevate their perceived social status, and increase their self-worth as teachers. As some of the teachers stated, they look poor because they live in questionable rented accommodation, and this adversely affects their social status.

Another contributor to teacher self-worth, motivation, and quality teaching is the opportunity for professional development – for instance, through in-service training providing teachers with new pedagogic skills, improving their performance professionalism and upgrading their qualifications (Iqbal et al., 2020; Nzarirwehi & Atuhumuze, 2019). As stipulated in official education plans in Malawi, part of the duties of a PEA is to visit their assigned schools and provide teachers with pedagogic support and in-service training. According to the PEAs who participated in my study, they could not conduct enough of these visits due to a lack of funding. Therefore, teachers received limited opportunities for professional development. Only about half of the teachers interviewed had ever been invited by their PEA to attend workshops or refresher courses throughout their teaching career. The findings further indicated that the teachers value their interactions with the PEA. During observation at one of the four schools, I noticed an empty chair at the back of the class with a note with the word "PEA" written on it. No one sat in the chair despite the very limited seating for learners. I interpreted it as a clear sign of respect and anticipation they have for the PEA's visit, as the chair is always ready and available. The lack of a staffroom at the sampled schools further hinders teacher collaboration and the opportunity to progress and develop professionally. This lack of opportunity for professional development may reduce teachers' motivation and impede the quality of education in rural areas.

The findings indicate that parents were involved with their children's learning in various ways, either by helping with homework, visiting schools, or discussing education with their children. This echoes the findings from other studies (e.g., Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003; Hoglund et al., 2015; Wei & Ni, 2023). Parental involvement takes various forms; it can be assisting with homework, talking to their child about homework, making sure their child goes to school, or reading with the child. The value parents place on education and the interest they express in it is a crucial part of children's learning attainment (Hill & Tyson, 2009). The findings in the study establish that parents value education and try to stay involved - for example, by discussing education with their children and expressing their expectations in that regard. They were dedicated to their children's education, making sure they did their homework,

and many visited school regularly to observe their child's progress or to ensure they were actually at school. This is similar to other research findings, such as those of Watkins and Ashforth (2019), who found that parents in Malawi were generally committed to their children's education.

Another layer of parental involvement is participation in various school committees, such as the Mother Support Groups (MSGs), the School Management Committees (SMCs), and the Parent Teacher Associations (PTAs). In Malawi, the importance of school committees has been evident in education policy since the 1990s, when schools began creating them to make improvements through communities' active participation (Rose, 2003). I interviewed members of the various committees to ascertain their involvement as parents, grandparents, or community members rather than to analyse specific roles of the committees within the education system. Members mainly joined these school committees because they wanted to help improve education. Three of the four participating schools were part of "Mary's Meals school feeding Programme," which is an international non-governmental organisation that provides the schools with meals. The women from the surrounding communities prepared and cooked the porridge for the children in the morning at school. This clearly demonstrates the diverse forms parental involvement can take. All these activities are conceptualised as parental involvement, and these distal processes are contextualised in the exosystem as supporting the implementation of quality education. Parents' and committee members' positive attitude towards education and their involvement is significant and needs to be fostered. Considering the importance of parental involvement, the schools must support parents in their endeavour to ensure their children's education progresses well.

Drawing on the EdQual framework, there are numerous quality inputs and processes the school may implement and carry out to assist parents in building an enabling home-learning environment for their children. These inputs and processes are vital to successfully enhancing the quality of education. The various school-home links could be strengthened and developed as platforms for parents to voice their concerns about their children's progress and education in general. Active school-home links reflecting different interests and needs would support the schools' effectiveness.

The schools can also make efforts to ensure that teachers send realistic and relevant homework home with children. As the findings show, parents look at homework positively and encourage their children to do it, but say that they rarely have any homework. This last point is substantiated by the teachers themselves, who say that they see little reason to send homework home with the children, as they think parents are "illiterate" and show little interest in school-related matters. However, homework can play a big role in parental involvement. It allows parents to know what their child is learning at school; it allows parents to discuss school matters with their children; and not least, it allows parents and teachers to discuss education (Walker et al., 2004). This

could also be a part of the public discussion or dialogue necessary to implement quality education (Tikly & Barrett, 2010).

Furthermore, the school could be encouraged to contact parents and invite them to school more often. Interestingly, parents and teachers in the study agreed that the school invited parents to come to school, and parents stated that they did visit. However, according to the teachers, parents were seldom seen at school and hardly ever initiated contact, which is in accordance with other research (Marphatia et al., 2010; National Statistics Office, 2021a). It is up to the teachers to persist with efforts in communicating with parents. Building and maintaining stronger relationships between home and school is like getting a garden to bloom; it takes time and cultivation.

It is interesting to view the different perspectives among teachers and parents regarding parents visiting the school. As the parents stated, they visited the schools regularly to observe their child's attendance or progress, but teachers claimed not to meet parents at school. Reflecting on this incongruity, I wonder, for instance, whether a teacher teaching close to 100 learners in an open-air classroom would notice the parents who come to school. The same can be said about the teacher in an overcrowded classroom; does he get to meet with the parents when they visit? Are parents going to enter the classroom and interrupt the teaching? As there is no staffroom at the schools, there is no suitable location for parents and teachers to meet and have a discussion at school. However, parents might meet other parents at school, which would be an important factor in community involvement and is worth future research. This lack of opportunity may well explain the difference in their answers; there is no or limited occasion for parents and teachers to meet at school. This affects the teacher through distal processes at the exosystemic level through parents' attitudes towards education. However, at the micro- or mesolevel, there are few proximal processes through direct interaction.

Teachers and schools could benefit from a clearer official stance from education authorities on parental and community involvement. As discussed above, according to the findings, there does not appear to be much discussion on primary education between stakeholders, the general public, in the four rural primary schools. Even though authorities proclaim the importance of parental involvement in their education policies, this does not automatically mean that parents and community members in rural areas are aware of this official recognition, especially considering the low literacy rate in rural areas. Active parental and community involvement in primary education, either through genuine participation, pseudo-participation, or a mix thereof (Rose, 2003), may provide an opportunity to build a sense of collective community ownership of the schools. This might bring local priorities into the foreground, providing the context that is one of the main preconditions for improving quality education according to the EdQual framework (Tikly & Barrett, 2010).

The Malawian Government recognises the importance of parental involvement in children's education, which is present in education policies (National Statistics Office, 2021a). Therefore, it becomes even more important that the school-home links evolve into a collaborative platform for sharing and distributing information to and from parents. The school can work with families on how to assist their children's learning and participate in their children's education. There is a need for focused discussion between schools and parents to generate a mutual understanding of the importance of school-parental involvement in children's education and what it entails. It is important that the school makes parents feel welcome at school and that the school encourages them to visit.

To become more accountable to parents, the schools might consider making evaluations and learners' performance data more accessible to parents. According to the National Statistics Office (2021a), in the school year 2019–2020 in Malawi, only 74% of primary school learners had an adult household member receive a report card for their child. This emphasises how important it is for the school to strengthen the school-home link and to nurture interactions and cooperation, as parents are a crucial link in the education system. Strong school-home links are likely to maintain parents' positive attitudes towards education. This may, in turn, help children obtain an education.

The combination of these exosystemic factors limits effective teaching. As seen from the previous discussion, there is a crossover of distal processes between the macrosystem and exosystem, which blurs the boundaries. However, the teacher feels the effects in both systems, and therefore it impacts the quality of education. Even though teachers are usually not instrumental in influencing these conditions, teachers and parents could be asked to reach across the ecological boundaries to policy and take part in demanding better conditions to improve the quality of education in rural Malawi. There is also the question of whether the interactions and influences between the systems can be deliberatively enhanced in a positive way, informed by this and other research.

6.2.3 Direct interactions affecting the teachers: Proximal processes in the meso- and microsystems

As the discussion moves closer to the teachers themselves, more direct influences could be detected among them and their practice. As previously explained, the mesosystem is the interaction between two or more settings in the microsystem where the developing individual (in this study, the teacher) is an active participant (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Direct interaction between the teachers and any other settings in the microsystem is conceptualised in the mesosystem. In the context of this research, this relates to the teachers' collaboration and collegiality, interaction with the PEA and headteacher, and direct interaction with parents. These proximal processes directly affect teachers and their professional development. Parent-teacher interaction as a

quality process of the home environment is also positioned within the mesosystem. The microsystem, however, is a pattern of activities between other agents in the microsystem that the developing individual experiences in a particular setting (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). For this study, other teachers at the school, the headteachers, and the PEAs are all conceptualised as autonomous agents in the microsystem, as is the school environment. The teacher experiences the closest proximal connection to these agents in the microsystem. I have decided to combine the discussion of the meso- and microsystem, as they often overlap.

The findings in this study indicate weak mesosystemic interactions within all four participating schools, demonstrated by limited interaction between teachers, headteachers, PEAs, and parents. This indicates promising spaces for improvement.

The lack of staffrooms at participating schools limited opportunities for teacher collaboration. All the teachers in this study said they prepared their teaching privately, missing out on an important opportunity for collegial support, which hinders their professional development (Botha, 2012). All the headteachers said they encouraged their teachers to collaborate and prepare lessons for their classes together. The teachers said that on occasion, they will ask another teacher for assistance when they are unsure of how to teach a specific topic or to assist with creating a poster to display on the "talking wall." According to the teachers, all classrooms should have a talking wall to display teaching aids for their learners. **Figure 15** is an example of a talking wall in S8 at Lakeview Primary School. However, not all the teachers felt confident enough in their artistic abilities to make their posters, so they sometimes asked a colleague for help. In my interviews, there was no other mention of teacher collaboration.

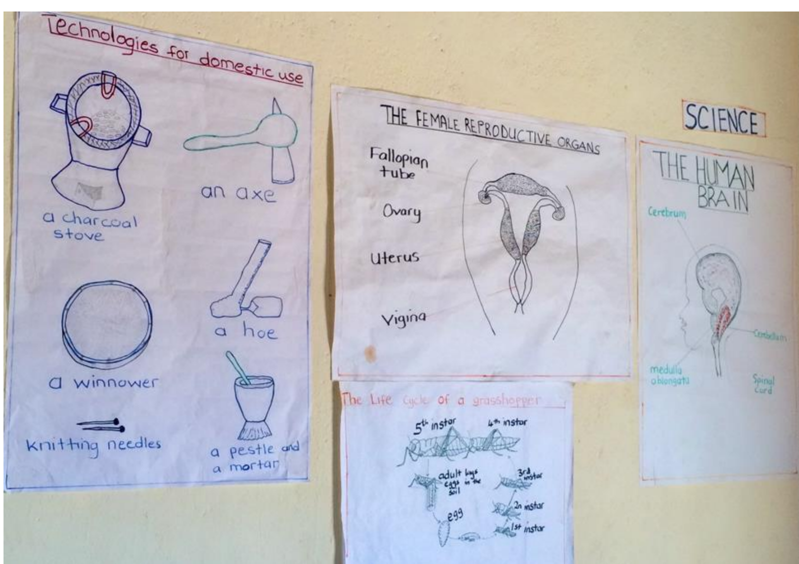


Figure 15: A talking wall. (Photo: G. Erlendsdóttir, 2016)

To improve the quality of teaching and learning, it is crucial to provide teachers with opportunities for professional development (Adedeji & Olaniyan, 2011). Working conditions in rural areas limit such opportunities. Financial restrictions mean that the PEAs have difficulties performing their duty of providing teachers with in-service training or offering them workshops. The PEAs are unable to travel regularly to the schools in their zones for supervision and to have professional dialogues with the teachers. This is a widespread challenge in Malawi, as only about 40% of primary schools in the country were found to receive a visit each term from their PEA (MoEST, 2018). This clearly affects the teachers' "professional renewal" and contributes to their reluctance to relocate to rural areas. As a teacher, I understand the importance of sharing ideas with colleagues, validating each other's ideas and expanding them, experiencing reciprocal support, and having good discussions about various aspects of our job. Limited professional development through direct interaction affects teachers' and schools' abiliy to provide quality education. Regular visits from the PEAs could improve this, as teachers would receive consistent in-service training and follow-up, which would allow them to grow professionally. This might also help sustain teachers' motivation and joy in teaching.

The EdQual framework suggests some necessary quality inputs and processes that need to be put in place to establish a strong enabling school environment for rural teachers, such as school-based professional development and teacher-parent interaction (Tikly & Barrett, 2010). As previously discussed, interaction between teachers and PEAs is limited, and PEAs cannot support the teachers satisfactorily. For this reason, the schools and PEAs could explore other cost-effective and creative ways of providing the teachers with professional development, such as in-service training or workshops. Even though the PEAs could not travel to the schools they supervised throughout their zone, they called the headteachers to their offices for monthly meetings. At those meetings, they discussed, amongst other things, the challenges the schools face at any given time, and they tried to come up with working solutions. During these meetings, the PEAs could explore various approaches with the headteachers and some points and directions on how to assist teachers. Headteachers could then provide the teachers within their respective schools with in-service training and/or workshops.

Teachers are expected to arrive at school about 30 minutes before teaching commences each morning. During that time, teachers hand in their lesson plans for the day, and if the headteacher has any information or particulars the teachers need to know, this time in the morning is used for that. However, the headteacher could use this brief time in the morning to give teachers some practical coaching from the PEA. This could be done in a structured and systematic way on matters relevant to the teachers. It is widely accepted that headteachers play a key role in creating a safe school environment conducive to learning (Smith et al., 2010). By ensuring their teachers receive in-service training, as explained above, the headteachers are exercising their leadership role.

Another necessary quality input, according to EdQual, is establishing and maintaining a strong, constructive teacher-parent relationship. Previous research has indicated that for parents to become involved in their child's education, an invitation is a motivating factor (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005) - in this instance, a direct invitation from the teacher. Teachers and parents in the sampled schools had very limited direct interaction. Contrary to what parents said, the teachers stated that they hardly ever met parents at school unless they came to discuss a child's behavioural problems. This does not appear to have changed much in recent years. In the school year 2019–2020, only 31% of parents were reported to have met with their children's teacher to discuss their progress (National Statistics Office, 2021a). Even though the findings indicate that parents and teachers agree that parents are invited to come to school to observe their children, the invitation should not become less frequent or cease altogether because parents do not show up, as is the case according to the teachers. Teachers must continue to invite parents and engage with them.

As discussed above, strong, well-established interactions, school-based professional development, and a nurturing relationship between parents and teachers are examples of context-based proximal processes taking place in the mesosystem that can be enhanced. These proximal processes are likely to strengthen the teachers in their profession, which is essential for quality education.

6.3 Provision of quality education: The case of rural Malawi

At the policy level, the Government of Malawi is committed to providing quality education to all; this is affirmed in official documents, policies, and reports (e.g., MoEST, 2008; 2020). Having explored some areas of the rural primary education system and identified some features which need to be improved to implement quality education successfully, I find it equally important to recognise and emphasise the resilience of the schools I visited. One of the strengths of the current education system is primary school enrolment. Since 1994, primary school enrolment has increased significantly and has continued to increase in recent years. In 2018, enrolment was estimated to be 88% (MoEST, 2022). However, this positive quantitative trend has been overshadowed by poor quality education.

Another positive finding is that all the interviewed teachers enjoyed teaching even though only about half of them had selected the teaching profession as their first career choice. This is unquestionably a substantial strength of the current education system in the sampled schools. Regardless of the many challenges facing rural teachers, those who took part in the study value their profession and enjoy it. That needs to be maintained and nurtured.

Many parents appeared to be willing to participate in their children's education. There may not be a consensus among stakeholders as to what parental involvement entails, and that needs to be clarified across the field, especially given the discrepancy

between the parents' and teachers' accounts of parent participation. The findings suggest that many parents want to participate in their children's education. This additional strength can be harnessed and nurtured to enhance the quality of primary education in rural schools. In this context, "illiterate" parents are also able to assist their children by either ensuring that children are given time to study at home, reducing household chores; reaching out to literate family or community members, and seeking their assistance for their child; or by academic socialisation, as research has shown (Dong et al., 2020; Ghanney, 2018). This could impact children in Mangochi District, since official statistics indicate that the adult literacy rate in the district is 53% (National Statistics Office, 2019). This does not preclude parents from participating and ensuring that their children develop literacy abilities. As the SACMEQ IV findings showed (Awich, 2021), Malawian children score very low in reading, and to help them stay in school, there is an urgent need to work on their reading comprehension and to work with their parents to help their children.

6.4 Scholarly insights: Contributions to the field

The aim of this study was to explore a selected part of the education system in rural Malawi, specifically Mangochi District, to identify and gain a deeper understanding of factors that support or hinder quality education. Through this research, I sought to study the current primary school education situation and its different aspects. I wanted to explore proximal and distal features of the rural education system that have been shown to affect quality education (e.g., Botha, 2012; Dahie et al., 2018). I examined the living and working conditions of rural primary school teachers and their perceptions of the profession. I analysed parental involvement, the home-school link, attitudes towards education, and which site-specific factors affect the provision of quality education in four participating rural primary schools in Mangochi District. The findings of this study potentially have a constructive impact on the primary education system in rural settings. The study identifies the areas where there is a need to improve the quality inputs and processes so that all the socio-ecological systems interact, talk together and work in partnership to provide quality education. Strengthening education in rural Malawi is not a simple linear process; it must take into account the different social influences at play. Efforts within all the social systems to strengthen quality education will support overall and sustained success.

6.4.1 The originality of the study

The study revealed the complexity of the education system and how various social systems and environments need to work together to improve the quality of education in four rural primary schools in Malawi. The rich data I collected from various stakeholders through interviews, FGDs, non-participant observations, and field notes allowed me to analyse the interaction and collaboration between teachers and other participants. This research provides further knowledge concerning the realities of primary education

provision in connection with quality education in rural areas in resource-constrained contexts in Malawi and potentially other low-income contexts in SSA. The variety of participants, from senior education officers from the MoEST and the DEM´s office to teachers, headteachers, PEAs, parents, local leaders, and other members of the surrounding communities, is one of the research strengths of the study. Including such a diverse group of participants, which aligns with the EdQual framework, provides extensive knowledge and new perspectives on the current situation regarding the quality of education in rural Mangochi District.

Another original and noteworthy point of my research is the application of an eclectic framework consisting of two complementary theoretical perspectives (Bronfenbrenner's SEST and EdQual), providing critical analytical tools that enable me to produce a holistic picture of a complex social ecology of education and identifying quality indicators. I began with Bronfenbrenner and his socio-ecological systems theory, which allowed me to position all relevant research participants and their interaction and collaboration into their perspective system. Mapping out of the rural education system provided me with a picture of this ecosystem. Later, I merged Bronfenbrenner's SEST with EdQual. These frameworks have worked well together, as the SEST allowed me to map the system, while the EdQual framework helped me determine which quality inputs and processes must be considered when attempting to understand the provision of quality education in rural Malawi. Blending these frameworks demonstrates the study's originality.

6.4.2 The essence: An emerging model and practical tool

My scholarly contribution to the field of research on quality education in rural primary schools in Malawi and other similar low-income countries is noteworthy. First, this study gives the wider school community a voice. Parents and other community members expressed their views on education and the value they put on education. Teachers spoke about the challenges they face at school regarding their working and living conditions, their views on the teaching profession, and the joy of being a teacher and interacting with their learners. Headteachers, PEAs, and official education officers voiced their concerns about the difficulties the rural primary schools face. Second, I developed an emergent model of 'social ecology of quality education in rural primary schools' in LMICs by merging Bronfenbrenner's SEST and the EdQual framework to analyse and interpret the data.

The SEST and EdQual frameworks, along with my findings, allowed me to construct a model which could be applied to identify quality education in the context of different LMICs (). The model, presented as a table, provides a foundation that can be used to identify which factors are in place and, subsequently, which need to be cultivated and strengthened to effectively provide quality education. The table can be used flexibly to assess where minimal conditions are met and, secondly, to discuss and decide where

improvement is needed. Following such assessments, conclusions can be drawn about which actions could facilitate improvement. Then, decisions can be made to implement change for the provision of quality education. In due time, assessment would be needed to see how or whether improvements in learning have been achieved, along with other improvements such as learners' educational attainment and teacher retention in rural areas. Ensuring access to quality primary education is a fundamental right, and it provides individuals with tools to improve their lives, reach their potential, and achieve emancipation from poverty. This model can be used as a step towards *education for all* on the road to increasing social justice through inclusion, collaboration, relevance, and democracy (Tikly & Barrett, 2010). Interactions and collaboration across systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Rogan, 2007; Rogan & Grayson, 2003) can provide the key to improving and sustaining quality education, which lies in the potential social interactions. The bottom line is that many people in various roles need to talk together and collaborate.

Table 15: Social ecology of quality education in rural primary schools in LMIC.

Social elements and systems	**Elements/aspects of quality education** (descriptors of elements and qualities based on research findings and EdQual)	Featured in
The individual, the teacher Nested in the centre of the systems, the teacher -- the developing professional.	Teachers who • are educated, resourceful, engaged and motivated • engage in professional development • collaborate with other teachers • instigate and cultivate constructive interactions with parents.	Article II Article III EdQual
Microsystem (school level) Other teachers at the school, the headteacher, and the PEA; each agent represents autonomous microsystems. The home/community environment, along with the school environment. These are the agents to which the teacher has the closest proximal connection and which have the most direct influence on him/her.	A safe school environment conducive to learning. • An adequate school infrastructure with good working conditions which encourages teacher motivation and collaboration. • Classrooms with furniture, blackboards, chalks and visual aids • A staffroom where teachers can prepare lessons, collaborate, or take a break. • Latrines for learners and for staff – secure facilities for girls. • A talking wall – a teaching aid for the learners, a sign of good practice, visible school practice, motivating for teachers and learners. • A space where teachers and parents meet. Teachers • invite parents regularly to school for events, celebrations, or meetings • share with parents the progress of their child's learning and positive behaviour (e.g. helpfulness or resourcefulness) • share ideas and good practices. Headteachers • constantly look for ways to communicate and collaborate with parents to build, maintain, and develop relationships between home and school • make collaboration between teachers in the school the norm • provide teachers with practical coaching from the PEA • ensure their teachers receive in-service training • encourage participation in professional development and collaboration • seek ways to inspire and motivate teachers • exercise leadership role to develop and sustain a positive school culture.	Article I Article II Article III EdQual
Mesosystem (community/zone) Proximal processes,consist of direct interaction between the individual (here the teacher as a professional) and any agent in the microsystem.	A culture of parental and community involvement. Parents feel welcome at school and show interest in school matters. The PEA provides teachers with pedagogic support, offers them workshops on a regular basis, and visits the school frequently. The PEA has strong direct interaction with teachers. Teachers are expected to participate in PD offerings, and their attitudes are generally willing.	Article I Article II EdQual
Exosystem (district level) Distal processes and conditions influencing educational practice. Parents' and the community's attitudes towards education, the teachers' living and working conditions, and the DEM. Distal processes occur in this system, influencing the professional development of the teacher without their direct involvement.	Provision of accommodation for teachers on school grounds and of permanent classrooms shielded from the elements. Collaboration between teachers within schools and between schools is expected and supported by the community. Regular professional development training is considered the norm. Parents • value education • discuss education with their children and express expectations • are willing to support their children´s homework and school attendance • assist with homework, talk to their child about homework and or read with the child • show interest in school matters and are expected to visit the school regularly • build a home-learning environment • take part in school committees and are eager to help improve education. Constructive homework collaboration between parents and school (realistic, relevant, and with clearly shared goals) is in place. The DEM oversees effective delivery of education services in the district and distributes teachers among the schools according to need. A platform is in place where parents can voice their concerns or interest in their children´s progress in school/education. The community expects parents and teachers to collaborate on improving the conditions for school practice to improve the quality of education. Collaboration with organisations offering school support is welcomed in the community.	Article I Article II Article III EdQual
Macrosystem National and international influences. Educational authorities at the national and district level, national policy for education and school practice. Distal processes occur in this system, influencing the development of the teacher.	The global community promotes access for all to quality education. National policies promote access for all to quality education. Primary education is free for all. Provision of teacher housing on school grounds is secured in national policies. National policies prioritise the recruitment and deployment of educated teachers. National laws and policies commit to providing teaching guides and TLM to all areas. National policies emphasise providing permanent classrooms for all areas/communities. Funding for PEAs is secured to enable regular schools visits. Focused official national endeavours to enhance cooperation between the MoEST and donors exist. National educational authorities encourage general participaton on public discussion about education. Nation policies (and actions) promote parental and community involvement in education. Different stakeholders are asked what is needed in their context and what suits their society best in terms of education. Stakeholder consultation is taken into account to construct a united effort leading to a sense of collective ownership. Place-based education, context, becomes the norm.	Article II Article III EdQual

The model () appears unwieldy for practical use in school communities. I wanted to show how the findings concentrated in Table 15 could be used to design a tool that might be applied to assess the situation and to promote discussion. Thus, I extended my model and designed a potential tool to better understand the complexity of the social systems (according to Bronfenbrenner´s theories), along with the requirements of quality education (according to EdQual) in light of my experiences and research. I call it *The Talking Wall* (see). It is practical in nature, and encourages schools and teachers to identify and discuss issues that affect the ways in which improvements can be made. Therefore, I felt the name *Talking Wall* for this tool was an appropriate reference to the talking walls expected in each classroom, discussed in 6.2.3 and displayed in **Figure 15**.

The Talking Wall, the tool, came about as I selected and used the findings in Table 15 and relocated in the Talking Wall to identify, display and analyse needs for improvements. The *Talking Wall, a practical tool to build implementation towards change,* was inspired by my findings (as analysed with SEST), my earlier life in Malawi, graduate studies, my rich experiences as an assistant headmaster in Iceland and my interactions with two of my supervisors who had both worked with factors of reform possibilities in education. The tool was inspired by *How good is our school?* (HMIe, 2007) and Rogan´s (2007) profile of change, and also guided by EdQual. The issues, tasks and roles I put forward in Table 16 are indicators of the complexity of different educational influences and can be used to identify whether they are well-aligned. They are not exhaustive and might include other issues of different social systems, such as school costs, violence, discipline, and gender issues.

The indicators of quality education in the Talking Wall tool are described as potential stages of progression from 1 to 4 (see) arising from my field study findings and guided by the questions: what is needed in your context and what suits your society best in terms of education? The Table presents indicators of quality education (descriptors of elements and qualities derived from my findings and EdQual). The composition of the outcomes of the ranking can be used in planning, implementation, and assessment to improve education. The indicators are based on an analysis of the main findings in connection with SEST, and are ranked according to increasing quality from minimal to improvements achieved. The interpretation is such that the higher the rank, the closer the school is to providing quality education.

This emergent tool, *The Talking Wall,* could be a way to return data to schools. Some explanations of their potential use follow.

Table 16: The talking wall: A practical tool to build implementation towards change.

	Minimal conditions	Goal-oriented actions facilitating change	Decisions taken to implement change	Improvements achieved
Head teacher MICRO	The headteacher finds ways to inspire and motivate teachers	The headteacher encourages the participation of teachers in professional development and collaboration	The headteacher ensures their teachers receive in-service training	The headteacher gives teachers practical coaching from the PEA
School Professional Development MICRO MESO	The headteacher gives teachers practical coaching	The teacher takes part in collaboration with other teachers. Teachers share ideas and good practices	Teachers instigate and cultivate constructive interaction with parents	Teachers and headteachers constantly look for ways to communicate with parents
PEA MICRO-MESO	Funding for PEAs is secured to enable them to visit schools regularly	The PEA provides teachers with pedagogic support and advice	PEA offers workshops on a regular basis and visits the school frequently	The PEA has direct interaction with teachers
Infrastructure MICRO – MESO -EXO – MACRO	Hygiene • Latrines for learners and for staff – secure facilities for girls • Basic classroom furniture • Chalks and visual aids • Electricity	School buildings • Adequate classrooms • Classrooms with furniture, blackboards • Electricity • Teaching and learning visual aids	Provision of permanent classrooms shielding teachers and students from the elements	National policies on education emphasise providing permanent classrooms for all areas/communities
Working and living conditions MICRO MESO MACRO	Provision of accommodation for teachers on school grounds	Staffroom where teachers can prepare lessons, collaborate or take a break	Provision of teacher housing on school grounds is secured in national policies	Teachers have designated places to share ideas and good practices
School – parent –teacher – community - school MESO	Parents feel welcome at school and show interest in school matters	Teachers share with parents the progress of their children's learning and positive behaviour (e.g., helpfulness or resourcefulness)	Teachers, and headteachers collaborate with parents to build, maintain and develop relationships between home and school	With the teacher headteachers instigate and cultivate constructive interaction with parents as a group or as individuals
Role of parents in different settings MESO-EXO	Parents assist with homework, talk to their children about homework, and/or read with the child	National policies (and actions) promote and encourage parental involvement in education	Parents take part in school committees and are eager to help improve education	Teachers and headteachers collaborate with parents
Community and communication MESO-EXO	Organisations offering school support are welcomed in the community	National policies (and actions) promote and encourage community involvement in education	Collaboration between teachers in the school is the norm. • A culture of parental and community involvement	The community expects parents and teachers to collaborate to improve the conditions for school practice for improving the quality of education
Parental role EXO	Parents are willing to support their children´s homework and school attendance	Parents value education. Parents discuss education with their children and set expectations	Teachers maintain and develop relationships between home and school	**National education authorities encourage general participation at grassroots level in public discussion on education**
Recruitment EXO-MACRO	The DEM distributes teachers to the schools in the district according to need	The DEM oversees effective delivery of education services in the district	National policies prioritise recruiting/deploying qualified teachers	Official teacher/learner target is reached
All stakeholders MACRO-EXO	A platform is in place where parents can voice their concerns	Different stakeholders are consulted on what suits them best in terms of education	Stakeholder consultation is taken into account to construct a united effort leading to collective ownership	National laws and policies commit to procuring and providing teaching guides and TLM to all areas. Place-based education, context, is the norm.
The bottom line : National policies promote access for all to quality education MACRO	Primary education is free for all and is a basic human right	National policies on education prioritise the recruitment and deployment of qualified teachers	Interactions and consultations creating understandings of what is needed	The global community promotes access for all to quality education

Research knowledge has both a use value and an exchange value. I have benefitted from the exchange value of doing a research project, and by creating a device that could be of use not only for the educational field broadly construed but also directly for the schools (use value), I return something of value to the people who made my research possible and others in a similar situation. I set out to gather knowledge that might be used to develop methods to encourage and guide school development and improve the quality of education. Such changes usually happen in small steps rather than one gigantic leap (Rogan, 2007), and the Talking Wall can guide some such steps.

The rationale for such a tool builds on my knowledge of school development and evaluation projects. The result I present is a matrix that can perhaps be used as a catalyst or a tool for providing quality education. When staff engages in self-reflection, institutional development is promoted, and the primary task is to strengthen the conditions needed for quality education. What, indeed, is quality education? How do we know that it is happening – or that it exists? Here, I envision meetings in which some of the categories are debated, rearranged, or rejected. Depending on context, the choice of activities, roles, or issues might be guided by a headteacher, the PEA, parents or the teachers themselves.

Interview data can be represented in diverse ways. The representation of the Talking Wall is intended to be well-aligned with my research goal, which was to understand what education is like, according to my participants, at the primary level in rural Malawi. I put together a first draft of categories from the data collected and then arranged them into stages of development through which each school should progress. The data collected from my investigations fit with the SEST approach rather well. The matrix consists of pieces of data taken from the findings that were analysed and interpreted through the spectrum of social ecology and EdQual (presented in Chapter 5 and distilled in). The innovation is that they are allocated a place in stages 1-4, where Stage 1 is an indicator that minimal conditions have been met. The novelty may be that the Talking Wall format reveals the complexity of making changes in education. The varied activities of a school pass through stages or levels that usually happen gradually (Rogan, 2007; Rogan and Grayson, 2003; Jónsdóttir, 2011; Jónsdóttir and Macdonald, 2019). Participants in the school system activities need to prioritise their contributions and find ways to make them complement each other.

I suggest that a tabular form of presentation is user-friendly and can facilitate debate among diverse stakeholders working for social justice through education. The Talking Wall supports decision-making for stakeholders or their representatives in the communities who will need to work hard to improve rural schools. What the reader should see is a juxtaposition of the findings, as displayed in Table 12 model, which provides guidance through theory and findings. The same data can be assigned to different formats, each introducing its own possibilities for discussing quality in education and adding complexity to the interpretation of the data collected.

Both Tables 15 (the Social ecology of quality education in rural primary schools in LMIC) and Table 16 (the Talking Wall) can be seen as a synopsis in which I synthesise my research and my findings, which I have presented in the three publications. They bring together the essence of what I discovered and present the value of potential uses of the knowledge I gathered. It is my hope that they and the understanding from my overall research can contribute to the provision and development of quality education for all children.

The doctoral project as a whole adds to the increasing body of research knowledge on education in Malawi with theoretical and practical contributions. As previously stated, education is vital to any society, and context forms a valuable part of education. Context forms part of both the SEST and EdQual framework, where SEST relates context to the development of the individual. The EdQual framework goes directly towards the relevance of education for each society. Both can contribute to identifying quality education and analysing what needs to be done in those places where improvement is needed.

7 Conclusion and recommendations

As my research journey of many years comes to a close, numerous thoughts spring to mind. This study has demonstrated how complex and multifaceted the education system is and that many different social systems need to work together to produce quality education. This research contributes to knowledge and understanding of the features that support or hinder quality education in rural Malawi generally, and Mangochi District specifically. The study makes an original scholarly contribution to understanding quality education in rural settings and adds to the increasing body of research on education in Malawi. The main findings were published in three peer-reviewed papers described in Chapter 6.

Applying Bronfenbrenner's SEST to my research allowed me to investigate the interactions between and amongst different social systems in four rural primary schools in Mangochi District. Through SEST, I was able to ascertain which features might strengthen or impede quality education in the sampled schools. At the same time, the EdQual framework afforded an opportunity to explore the inputs and processes that are needed to provide quality education. Merging the SEST and EdQual frameworks and applying this to the study provided me with the means to acquire an in-depth understanding and overview of the current situation in my exploration of quality education in rural Malawi. I constructed a descriptive model the *Social ecology of quality education in rural primary schools in LMIC*, by distilling the findings I had analysed and presented in the three papers. I further extended my model and designed a potential tool *The Talking Wall,* infused it with additional important elements from EdQual to show at a glance the main contributions of my study. The model and the tool could be used to identify relevant issues influencing quality education, which may be applicable to rural contexts in different LMICs, especially within SSA.

7.1 Recommendations

I will now discuss some suggestions or recommendations for policy and practice through four main points of consideration. These quality inputs and processes need to be in place to facilitate the provision of quality education:

- recruitment and employment of qualified teachers;
- improvement of working conditions and infrastructure;
- parental involvement;
- public dialogue at the grassroots level.

One of the main suggestions of this study involves the recruitment of trained and qualified teachers. As I discussed earlier, there appear to be many trained, unemployed primary school teachers in Malawi. This is concerning, given the continuous teacher shortage in primary schools. This inefficieny needs to change if the official target of a 1:60 teacher/learner ratio is to be achieved. As this research has indicated, rural areas are especially far from meeting this target. As teachers are the primary agents of change towards quality in the school setting, one realistic and influential option is prioritising the recruitment of trained teachers throughout Malawi. However, it is evident that the government is currently experiencing funding challenges, evidenced by the situation in Mangochi District, which understandably affects teacher recruitment. These problems may potentially be solved with cooperation and collaboration with donors, as previously discussed. I believe it is imperative to lessen the load of the rural teacher; having one hundred, two hundred, or even more learners in one class is difficult to fathom. How do teachers uphold their professional standards under these conditions? Not only do they teach in grossly overcrowded classes; it may even be in open-air "classroom", which adds other challenges, as discussed. Additionally, they cannot access necessary resources, whether TLM, professional development opportunities, or collaboration with colleagues.

The second suggestion concerns improving working conditions and infrastructure in rural primary schools, which go hand-in-hand with recruiting teachers. Good working and living conditions are the best incentive for teachers to relocate to rural areas. It is easy to understand the reluctance of teachers to relocate to rural areas in Malawi as services are limited and amenities are in short supply. Teachers should have the opportunity to live on school grounds, a good supply of TLM, and access to regular professional development. Communities might be approached on a larger scale and commissioned to make bricks with which to build classrooms. This would help solve the lack of classrooms and staffrooms, improve working conditions, and provide teachers with opportunities for collaboration and support from their colleagues. Collaborating with colleagues is invaluable for teachers and fundamental to their development, as is having access to resources. So, this is something that education authorities must take seriously. Working conditions are one of the key factors attracting people to the profession, and poor working conditions may dissuade people from becoming teachers (UNESCO, 2024).

The third suggestion concerns parental involvement and the importance of establishing strong collaborative partnerships between teachers and parents in enabling a home-learning environment. Based on the findings, the importance of enhancing school-parent relationships is clear. If parents become more involved, all stakeholders might learn to recognise the importance of parental involvement in children's education. Everyone should know that even though parents may be "illiterate," they can still be active agents in their children's education. Moreover these parents could help them acquire a degree of literacy through academic socialisation by simply talking to their

children about education and expressing their expectations. Research has shown the need to establish a strong collaborative partnership between teachers and parents to build enabling home-learning environments (e.g., Dong et al., 2020; Ghanney, 2018; Hill & Tyson, 2009).

I wish to emphasise the importance parents can play in their children's education. Through personal experience, I have found that knowing the parents of the children I teach is invaluable. It not only benefits me as the teacher, but also benefits the children to know that their parents and teachers have regular conversations about their school progress and behaviour. Knowing this appears to give the child some sense of comfort, which helps with their confidence in class and their trust towards me, their teacher, which in turn gives me added confidence as a teacher. Throughout my career, I have found that the parents I know and correspond with are more likely to work with me in their child's education than those with whom I have a more distant relationship, for whatever reason.

The fourth suggestion based on the findings of this study concerns the need for a general public discussion on quality education, as explained and discussed in Chapter 6.2.1. A national debate is vital to achieving quality education (Tikly & Barrett, 2010). Having general public discussions on the matter may allow stakeholders to exchange information and ideas. A public discussion that starts at the local/grassroots level may put quality education for rural Malawi into context, as local people will be discussing what quality education means to them and their community. It must be ensured that everyone has access to participate in such public dialogue. Having all stakeholders participate will give everyone a stake in education; it will become a collective ownership. The collaborative, collective, tangible product that might emerge could potentially close the gap between the national policy on education, what takes place in schools, and parents' expectations (Tikly & Barrett, 2010). In my experience as a parent whose children have attended primary schools in various countries, I want to stress how important it is to be informed and aware of general public discussions on education and, through such discourse, be provided a means to participate. It offers parents an "inside" view of what value society puts on education and empowers parents to become active participants in their child's education, which, as has been discussed before, is one of the key factors in implementing quality education.

So, to answer my participant who raised the question I introduced in Chapter 1, *Where to kickstart the drastic changes we need?* I believe the above discussion on suggestions I put forward is where to start. Primary schools that exhibit these factors – -enough teachers working in good conditions, strong interactive school-home links, and an active school society – are likely to provide their learners with quality education.

The essence of the various universal declarations made in the last few decades and introduced in Chapter 1.2, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and the MDGs and SDGs, are meant to advance

social justice by, for instance, proclaiming children's right to education and that they are to be ensured equal access to educational opportunities (UN, 1948; UNICEF, 1989; UN, 2015; 2018). To achieve and maintain social justice through equitable access to quality education, people are provided the opportunity to reach their potential and better their lives, thus breaking the cycle of poverty. This is what each society should and must aim for. Teachers are crucial to quality education, and there is a wide variety of knowledge expected of teachers. They are expected to have knowledge of and teach life skills, peace education, moral and ethical education, human rights, child protection, skills for sustainable livelihoods; they are also expected to identify and challenge gender inequalities (Sayed & Ahmed, 2015). Therefore, it is necessary to concentrate on teacher pedagogy and ensure teachers are well-equipped to deliver on those expectations. As Sayed and Ahmed (2015) state, it is not enough to increase the number of teachers, as that in itself will not promote effective teaching and learning; we must also pay attention to teacher pedagogy. As education paves the way for changes, whether for the individual, the locality, the region, or the nation, we must promote effective learning and ensure children have equal opportunity and access to resources and quality education.

Despite the progress being made in improving access to education and the increased primary school enrolment in Sub-Saharan Africa, learning outcomes remain poor, especially among learners from low socio-economic backgrounds, minorities, girls, and children from rural areas (Tikly, 2020). This is no different in Malawi. Regardless of having made recent strides in increasing learner enrolment in primary schools, the poor educational outcomes, according to national and international standards, as evidenced by the MoEST and SACMEQ IV, are worrisome. These outcomes hinder children in acquiring adequate basic skills, further limiting their opportunities for advancement to higher levels of education and training. This perpetuates the cycle of injustice and inequity, compounding the learning crisis (Tikly, 2020). Teachers and headteachers must understand the importance of a learner-friendly environment where children's well-being and rights are protected. We must ensure that schools support learners, especially girls, as girls in Malawi are more disadvantaged in education because they are more likely to care for siblings or parents and do chores (Chikhungu et al., 2020; Leach et al., 2003; Pridmore & Jere, 2011).

SDG #4 stipulates that countries must ensure inclusive and equitable education for all, which is central to all the other SDGs (Tikly, 2020). Therefore, education must come first for societies to reach all 17 SDGs, which highlights education's global importance. In 2015, the African Union issued *Agenda 2063*, a regional framework for transforming Africa into a united, inclusive, self-determining, progressive, and prosperous region (African Union, 2015). This Framework or blueprint is Africa's regional answer to achieving the SDGs (Tikly, 2020). It will be especially interesting to see whether African countries will better accomplish their educational, development, and progress goals by relying on a regional plan based on context rather than a globally issued agenda.

According to Sayed and Ahmed (2015), there is an ongoing debate on the future of global development in the shadows of increased global inequality, global conflict, and climate change. Despite this, the emphasis on education as a priority has not diminished; there appears to be a universal agreement on the importance of education, with equitable and quality education as the essence. As part of the global community agreeing to various universal declarations, and due to the importance we assign to education, I believe that all nations must concern themselves with how each other is progressing towards implementing these declarations, especially regarding education. This research is part of that converstaion, and exploring how Malawi has progressed in implementing universal declarations to which it is a signatory, including SDG #4 and national policies, justifies and validates this study.

Based on the findings presented in the three published peer-reviewed papers and this dissertation, it can be argued that the current education system in rural Malawi is experiencing some daunting practical challenges. Goals of education policies and declarations, both national and international, have not been achieved. This policy-practice gap is evident in the inability to provide universal access to quality education due to the unmanageable teacher/learner ratio. Rural teachers experience poor working and living conditions and limited professional development. Moreover, it may be argued that interaction between education stakeholders, such as teacher-home interaction, teacher collaboration, and teacher-PEA interaction, seem to be generally limited. These weak distal processes in the macro- and exosystems and fragile proximal processes in the meso- and microsystems adversely affect the provision of quality education in rural Malawi. Therefore, it may be surmised that the findings further indicate that Malawi must do more to achieve social justice. Its children do not have equal access to education and, therefore, opportunities to better their lives and reach their potential.

7.2 Future research

After conducting this research, analysing and writing up my findings, and connecting them, many questions arise regarding future research on primary education in Malawi. The following are my suggestions.

- First, conducting research on how so-called “illiterate parents” in Malawi are involved with their children’s education would provide invaluable information. Such research findings might have far-reaching results as they may expand all stakeholders’ understanding of how “illiterate” parents can exercise agency and become involved in their children’s education. I believe that parents must be active agents in their children’s education and collaborate with the school to provide quality education.
- Another interesting topic for future research is whether parental involvement impacts whether the child finishes primary school or transitions into secondary

school. If parental involvement increases the likelihood, it would be yet another reason for schools to work with parents to build enabling home-learning environments.

- Gender issues were outside the scope of this research, but that is unquestionably an area that needs further study. Specifically, researchers need to study girls' access to school as they age and reach puberty, as Baily and Holmarsdottir (2015) discussed in their research. To address gender parity, we must understand the current situation and the factors that adversely affect girls' education.
- There are numerous evident inequalities concerning access to education in rural Malawi which need further research. These include violence against learners at school, school discipline, and discrimination and exclusion, whether based on gender or ethnicity.
- Another important issue to examine concerning quality education in rural areas is whether female teachers experience the rural teacher life differently than male teachers and whether they are treated equitably in schools, for instance when it comes to promotions.
- Lastly, it would be interesting to explore whether collaboration between primary school teachers in urban schools is more pronounced than in rural schools. Collaboration, support, and discussion can be an important part of teachers' professional development, so this needs to be looked into.

All the above factors affect children's access to quality education, and if Malawi is to achieve education for all, these need further research. However, this is not an exhaustive list of suggested future research.

7.3 Looking back

Before embarking on my research, I had visited numerous rural primary schools in Malawi. I was impressed with the teachers, who seemed "so happy" at work and appeared to enjoy what they were doing despite the many difficulties their working conditions presented. In fact, this was one of the reasons I decided to begin my PhD journey. That feeling did not diminish over time. If anything, it intensified, and my admiration for rural teachers grew as I got to know them a little through their participation. I saw examples of dedicated, resourceful, and caring teachers committed to their work.

Looking back at this journey, I have learned many things I did not know before commencing the research. One key example is how many of the working teachers had not selected the teaching profession as their first choice career option. Irrespective of whether it was their first choice, they had all come to love teaching, which is a feeling I empathise with. I find this particularly interesting after learning about rural teachers' challenging working and living conditions.

I also learned through conducting this research, that parents at the four participating schools view education positively and place a lot of value on it. They wanted their children to attend school and get an education, and they believed that with education, their children could have a better future and become self-reliant. They made sure their children did their homework, but at the same time, they complained that teachers did not assign homework very often.

I am certain that the methods I used for collecting data were the relevant ones, and I especially think that I collected good in-depth information during the interviews and from my field notes, both descriptive and reflective. I also developed a good sense of the teachers' work in class during my non-participant observations. I was not present during the FGD, as I adhered to the advice that my presence might create unrealistic expectations. Consequently, I feel the least connected to those data. They yielded good information, especially from the parents. Still, I did not connect to that data in the same way as I did to the data I collected personally, even though my research assistants kept detailed field notes. This does not diminish the FGD data in any way, but it affects how I connect to it.

I believe that I succeeded in achieving the aim of this study as I set it out in the beginning, as well as in answering the research questions. I identified relevant issues and elicited deep knowledge and understanding of the education system in rural Malawi and how the various social systems depicted by the SEST interact with each other and influence the quality of education. I learned about the nature of the parents´ participation in their children's education and their relationships with teachers. I acquired knowledge of the living and working conditions of the rural teachers and how it affects them in providing quality education. I identified the various factors that influence quality education in rural Malawi. Finally, I learned which quality inputs and processes, according to the EdQual framework, are in place, and where improvement is needed.

Having accomplished what I set out to do, the questions I now ask myself are, "So what?" What does the knowledge I gained matter, and to whom? Where do we go from here? According to the social justice approach, the focus needs to be on providing people with a voice and seeking and accepting their participation. That is how we acquire high quality education (Tikly & Barrett, 2010). This is particularly pertinent among marginalised communities that may be dealing with different issues than in other communities. Participants in my research may be considered marginalised; they live in impoverished communities with limited amenities and resources, as I have detailed in previous chapters. Inclusion, relevance, and democracy are the three cornerstones of the social justice approach on which the EdQual framework is built (Tikly & Barrett, 2010; 2011). These principles are important to me as I examined children's access to quality education as a human right, whether

communities value education, and whether public discussion occurs regarding learning outcomes and education. As my findings indicated, there is room for improvement before we can claim that all children in rural areas have access to quality education.

Part of achieving social justice is ensuring everyone has equal access. To achieve social justice, societies must dismantle institutionalised obstacles, such as access to education, that prevent some people from engaging on equal ground with others as full partners in social interaction (Tikly, 2020). Enhancing quality education for all is an important social justice goal. As global citizens, we should all be actively concerned and mindful that for any lasting changes to occur, change needs to happen at the local level (Fullan & Gallagher, 2020). This aligns with both Bronfenbrenner's SEST and the EdQual framework. Both emphasise the importance of context and the needs experienced in each society, as well as active interaction through communication and collaboration. To successfully implement quality education in any society, that society must take an active role in creating that change.

8 Postscript

As I was completing my dissertation, my professional life was catapulted into chaos and uncertainty due to catastrophic circumstances. However, these devastating affairs reinforced my belief in the importance of collaboration and the coming together of various agents in providing education. In November 2023, during my seventh year as Vice Principal at a primary school in Grindavík - a small town on the southern peninsula of Iceland - the whole town was evacuated due to seismic activities and ensuing volcanic eruptions, several of them in the following months. As it turned out, we were not allowed to return to Grindavík and had to devise a solution for our primary school of about 550 students and around 100 staff. Due to a lack of available accommodations for that many students and staff, we ended up being dispersed to four different locations in Reykjavík, the capital city, where we proudly opened our school ten days after the evacuation. These locations included two primary schools where we were allocated two or three classrooms in each school, an office building, and an office space at a sports arena. About half of our students ended up attending 63 different primary schools throughout Iceland, and school administrations and teachers from those schools collaborated with us in the aftermath to provide care and support to "our" students.

For us to keep our school operating and provide a relatively good education for our students, the whole school community needed to come together and collaborate, which we did. Students, parents, teachers, staff, our school administrative staff, local and national administrations and educational authorities worked together to make the best of our challenging situation. Through this collaboration, we found physical space for our school, albeit in four different locations; we were provided with furniture for our students and teachers; and local sports authorities worked with us to provide avenues for activities for our students as per our curricula. Our students, their parents, and our teachers demonstrated exceptional patience and resourcefulness, as we could not provide our children with adequate outside play areas, the teachers with acceptable working space, or anyone the standard of available resources to which they were accustomed. Nor were we able to fulfil all mandated classes and teaching as expected. However, through collaboration, we did our best under these challenging circumstances and managed this for seven months, ending by graduating our senior class in early June 2024. Sadly, though, our school will not re-open in the foreseeable future.

This experience has reaffirmed my belief in the importance of each level of the whole school community working together and collaborating and the need to analyse each

factor affecting us, which, in turn, collectively affects us as education providers. It must be said that the school community coming together like this not only allowed us to provide our students with education but also allowed for support and healing, as our community was, in fact, being dismantled due to environmental factors beyond our control.

To say that these were challenging times would be an understatement. However, what I take away from this experience is how solution-oriented, resourceful, and inventive everyone was; no challenge was too big for us to take on; and that we could work together to resolve our problems. It became clear to me that without collaboration and cooperation of the different systems - the microsystem, meso-, exo- and macrosystem, as Bronfenbrenner teaches us - our school would not have functioned post-evacuation and, therefore, we would not have been able to provide our students with education.

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Original Publications

Paper I: Parental involvement in children's primary education: A case study from a rural district in Malawi

Paper I

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Parental involvement in children's primary education: A case study from a rural district in Malawi

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In the study reported on here, we analysed parents' involvement in their children's primary education in 4 primary schools in rural Malawi, focusing on the home and the school. Through interviews and focus-group discussions, information was obtained from 19 parents, 24 teachers (6 from each school), and 4 head teachers. Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory was used to design the study and to interpret the data, focusing mainly on the micro- and mesosystem elements. The home and school settings represent the autonomous microsystem, whereas parental involvement is part of the mesosystem. The microsystem appeared to be active both with learner-parent and learner-teacher actions; however, mesosystemic interactions were limited. We found that parents and teachers needed to develop stronger mutual relationships and interactions to support learners better. Schools also need to communicate positive aspects of children's learning to the parents. Enhancing positive reinforcement could enhance parental involvement.

Keywords: ecological systems theory; home settings; Malawi; parental involvement; parent-teacher communication; primary school education; rural schools

Introduction

Education is considered a fundamental human right and is regarded as a key factor in developing human capital (Lumadi, 2019). In many sub-Saharan African (SSA) countries, including Malawi, education is recognised as a means for expanding human capabilities and choices (Sen, 1999). For the individual, quality education teaches employability skills, provides employment opportunities, increases earnings, and improves health. For society in general, quality education stimulates innovation, strengthens institutions, and improves social cohesion (United Nations [UN], 2018; World Bank, 2018). The importance of education is encapsulated in Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) number 4 – Quality education for all – which includes lifelong learning in inclusive settings (UN, 2015).

While many developing countries have primary school enrolment of above 90%, more than 600 million young people worldwide still fall short of basic literacy and numeracy skills – even after completing primary education (UN, 2018). As of 2017, about 90% (202 million) of school-aged children and adolescents in SSA were not achieving minimum proficiency levels in reading and mathematics (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2017). A major challenge facing education systems in SSA is that children in the early grades come to school poorly prepared, reading materials are in short supply, and attendance is irregular. This results in poor school experiences, low educational attainment, low pass rates, and high drop-out rates as children fail to transition into secondary schools.

One component affecting quality education and academic achievement is parental involvement (Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003; El Nokali, Bachman & Votruba-Drzal, 2010). The purpose of studying parental involvement in rural Malawi was to acquire a deeper understanding of how parents participated in their children's education in the region. This study should expand our knowledge of the dynamics and importance of parental involvement when it comes to educational attainment. With the study we addressed the focus of SDG number 1, striving for poverty eradication through education (UN, 2015).

Parental interest and involvement in children's education are vital for academic achievement (Dahie, Mohamed & Mohamed, 2018; El Nokali et al., 2010; Lumadi, 2019). Research has established that parental-school involvement benefits children from all walks of life in their pursuit of academic achievement (Uludag, 2008). For example, Wang and Sheikh-Khali (2014) note the role that parents can play in supporting children with home-based learning activities such as homework supervision. Other studies (e.g., Wei & Ni, 2023) highlight the role that parents can play through involvement in school governance, which has the potential to contribute to improved children's learning outcomes and school efficiency. Additionally, research has shown that complex factors influence attainment. These comprise "students' personal factors, their interactions with others such as parents, teachers, and administrators, and the larger systems that surround the students such as school districts, neighbourhoods, local economy, political policy, and multicultural relations" (Bertolini, Stremmel & Thorngren, 2012:2). However, for parents to become involved, an *invitation* is considered a key motivating factor. The three most important sources of invitation are the school climate, teachers, and learners

(Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, Sandler, Whetsel, Green, Wilkins & Closson, 2005; Hornby & Lafaele, 2011). A positive school climate generates a welcoming feeling and conveys that parental involvement is supported and valued. A direct invitation to various activities from the teacher is also essential. The third source of invitation is the children themselves and their attitudes towards parental involvement.

With this study we aimed to describe how parents in rural Malawi participated in their children's education and how schools involved parents. The focus was on home and school settings as the location of parent-school interaction, which was linked to academic achievement (El Nokali et al., 2010). We applied the ecological systems theoretical framework (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) as a lens in this study to scrutinise parent-school interaction. It was within the context of the above exposition that the following research questions emerged:

1) How do parents in rural Malawi participate in their children's education?
2) How do four rural primary schools involve parents in their children's education?

School-home relationships have received much interest and are well-developed in many high-income countries in Europe, the United States of America (USA), and Australia. Within the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries, school-home issues have been addressed in several studies using the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and the Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS). However, there has been less research on parental involvement within SSA countries. Only a few studies (e.g., Marphatia, Edge, Legault & Archer, 2010) have directly explored the nature of parental involvement in rural schools in Malawi. With this study we addressed that research gap, focusing on four rural primary schools.

Parental involvement in their children's education has been defined as "parents' interactions with schools and with their children to promote academic success" (Hill, Castellino, Lansford, Nowlin, Dodge, Bates & Pettit, 2004:1491). Home-setting activities include parents discussing education with their children, showing interest in their children's education, reading to and with them, and providing homework support. Activities in the school setting include parent-teacher communication and parents attending meetings at school, among others (Dahie et al., 2018; Dearing, Kreider, Simpkins & Weiss, 2006; Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003; El Nokali et al., 2010).

The motivation for this study came from the field researcher's experience as a volunteer for many years in small non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in Namibia and Malawi. She visited many rural primary schools in both countries and observed the teachers' resilience in facing endless challenges. This left her with a lasting impression, along with an interest in examining various facets of primary education. By understanding the nature of parental involvement in rural primary schools in Malawi, steps can be taken by authorities to improve educational outcomes and thus increase children's potential.

Theoretical Background

To understand the different roles in the school and home and how they influence one another, we turned to Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (EST). This theory postulates that individuals develop through reciprocal interactions and relationships within the community and broader society (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). EST comprises four systems in a nested structure, each embedded in the next. The developing individual is at the core, nested in the microsystem, which involves processes and structures in the individual's immediate surroundings. The mesosystem is a system of microsystems and links two or more settings in the microsystem and the social setting. Events in the exosystem affect the individual without that person having an active role within that system. The macrosystem includes cultural values, customs, ideology, belief systems, and laws in the developing individual's context. It is through the interconnection of these systems that the individual develops.

EST has been applied to research children's well-being through the years. Seginer (2006) examined factors that are often overlooked but affect parental involvement, namely, culture and ethnicity. Seginer aimed to recount the relations between parents' involvement and their children's educational outcomes by applying Bronfenbrenner's EST. Seginer focused on immigrant and minority groups and home-based involvement in the microsystem. Seginer focused on interrelations between elements in the microsystems and school-based involvement. The interpersonal context where the developing individual is not an active participant belongs in the exosystem. Lastly, Seginer investigated the cultural context through the macrosystem.

Lewthwaite (2006) applied Bronfenbrenner's EST focusing on the development of science teacher leaders in primary schools in New Zealand. Teachers identified both personal and environmental factors, and their interaction either supported or hindered teachers' development as science teacher leaders. EST has proven to be suitable for understanding an individual's development and accounting for complex systems in the school and home contexts (Johnson, 2008), such as parental involvement.

In our study, the main focus was on home and school settings, which, within an ecological

framework, represent autonomous microsystems, whereas parental involvement is conceptualised as part of the mesosystem comprising interactions between microsystems. The different systems and elements for each system are presented in Figure 1.

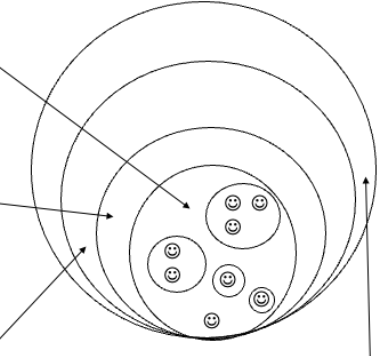

Figure 1 An adaptation of ecology systems of education, inspired by Bronfenbrenner's EST and Jónsdóttir's (2012) work

Context of the research

In 2018 the Malawian population had reached 17.5 million, of which 52% were younger than 18 years (National Statistical Office, 2019). About 87% of Malawian school-aged children were enrolled in primary schools (Ministry of Education, Science and Technology [MoEST], 2016). Primary schooling is supposedly free of charge, however, parents and guardians are responsible for various costs to ensure their children's place in school, such as contributing towards a general purpose fund (GPF) and buying school materials and uniforms for their children. At an official level, there is no mechanism to implement compulsory education from Standard 1 to 8. On average, people in Malawi receive 4.5 years of schooling (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2018), and the national literacy rate is 69% (National Statistical Office, 2019).

Teacher shortages make it difficult for education authorities to hire qualified staff for all schools. In 2018 the national learner/qualified teacher ratio was 70:1 despite the national target of 60:1 by 2017 (MoEST, 2018). In 2018, it was estimated that the national survival rates from Standard 1 to 5 and Standard 1 to 8 were 61% and 41% respectively. The primary completion rate of 52% has remained relatively unchanged in recent years. Other challenges that the public education sector faces include a poor supply of teaching and learning materials and a lack of infrastructure (MoEST, 2018). Enrolment in recent decades has increased; however, due to high drop-out and repetition rates, the increase appears only in the standards for younger learners (Chimombo, 2005).

Economic and cultural factors in Malawi influence parents' attitudes and ability to support their children's education. This is especially true in densely populated rural areas with low literacy levels and where livelihoods are based on subsistence agriculture. When school-aged children begin participating in income-generating activities, school attendance is affected by increased dropout (Chimombo, 2005). The gendered nature of parents' investment in education also undermines girls' rights to education. In some communities, parents may view sending their daughters to school as less profitable since many will become part of their husband's households after marriage (Marphatia et al., 2010; Mzuza, Yudong & Kapute, 2014).

Methodology and Method

In this qualitative study we focused on parents and their involvement in education and the interaction between parents and teachers in home and school settings in the southern district of Mangochi in Malawi. Data were collected from some teachers and head teachers. Learners were not involved in this study; we chose to focus on parents and teachers – the adults in the school community. Standard qualitative methods of data collection – interviews and focus-group discussions – were selected as the means of obtaining information,

which involved translation. The objective of the investigation was to understand the nature of parental involvement and how schools involved parents by answering the research questions mentioned earlier. We were interested in exploring the subjective meaning of the lived experiences of parents and school personnel concerning parental involvement.

A purposive approach underpinned by pragmatism was used to select participants. We recruited 19 parents whose children attended the respective schools at the time of data collection. We also considered their availability at the time and their willingness to participate. Six teachers from each of the four schools also participated in the study, with four head teachers representing the four schools. Table 1 provides a summary of the participants in this study.

Table 1 Number of participants for the study of parental involvement in rural Malawi

Schools	Hillside	Chambo	Baobab	Lakeview
Head teachers	1 (female)	1 (male)	1 (male)	1 (male)
Teachers	6 (3 female)	6 (1 female)	6 (4 female)	6 (2 female)
Mothers	3	5	2	2
Fathers	1	0	2	3
Grandmother	0	0	1	0

All four schools were situated in impoverished communities. The schools were characterised by overcrowded classrooms, a shortage of qualified teachers, poor provision of teaching and learning materials, and inadequate infrastructure. These conditions challenged effective teaching and learning. An overview of the size of the four schools is given in Table 2, with information based on data collected by the first author at each school.

Table 2 Profiles of the four participating primary schools

	Hillside	Chambo	Baobab	Lakeview
Number of learners	1,529	1,711	3,544	1,063
Teachers	38 (of whom 30 were qualified)	22 (of whom 20 were qualified)	54 (of whom 49 were qualified)	12 (of whom 6 were qualified)
Teacher-learner ratio				
Infant section (S1-2)	1:117	1:227	1:145	1:121
Junior section (S3-5)	1:80	1:121	1:109	1:121
Senior section (S6-8)	1:66	1:29	1:113	1:31
Outdoor classes (due to lack of infrastructure)	8 (18 total classes)	2 (12 total classes)	17 (30 total classes)	0 (11 total classes)
Pass rate	45%	36%	57%	30%

One focus-group discussion was conducted with parents from each school. The parents were asked about their views on education and whether they read to or with their children. Teachers were interviewed in pairs and asked their opinions about parental involvement and whether parents visited the school. Head teachers were interviewed individually and asked whether they believed that parents valued education and whether the head teachers invited parents to school events. These questions, along with others, were aimed at obtaining information from each participant on parental involvement and intended to shed light on the relationship between homes and schools and whether the schools encouraged parental involvement. The focus-group discussions and interviews were audio-recorded with participants' permission and lasted between 35 and 50 minutes. Anonymity and confidentiality were ensured, and participation was voluntary.

Data Analysis

All focus group discussions and interviews were transcribed verbatim and thematically analysed (Clarke & Braun, 2017). Transcripts were read and re-read to gain insight into the data, in line with what Creswell (2012:243) terms "preliminary exploratory analysis." All points of interest were highlighted, and all transcribed interviews were summarised. The next step was to use the emergent codes related to the interview questions and relevant literature. These codes were further categorised into three sub-themes: parents' perceptions about education; reading and homework; and parent-teacher communication. Lastly, those sub-themes were further arranged around two site-specific main themes: home-setting and school-setting activities. Identifiers for participants and schools are provided at the end of each quote. "PFG" indicates that the quote originated from a parent focus group, "HT" is used for head teachers, and "T" is used for teachers. Thus, "T1 Lakeview" represents a quote from Teacher 1 from Lakeview primary school.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical requirements were strictly adhered to throughout the research process. After acquiring

ethical approval for this study from the MoEST and Mangochi District Educational Authority, four rural primary schools in the Mangochi district were selected for data collection. Pseudonyms were assigned to each of the schools. Head teachers were informed about the purpose, motivation, and goal of the study. Their consent was obtained, and a data collection schedule was developed. The main ethical rule, "do no harm", as recognised by Madge (1997:114), guided the study. We opted for a brief personal disclosure (Braun & Clark, 2013:93) at the beginning of each interview to build collegial rapport. We considered it important to inform participants that the field researcher was a teacher by profession and had lived in SSA with her family for many years, including 5 years in Malawi. This was an attempt to reassure the participants that she was on familiar ground since she had purposefully sought to get to know the school system during her stay in Malawi. Throughout the data collection period, 5 consecutive days were spent at each school. During that time the field researcher experienced a friendly atmosphere at each school and a collegial ambience among the teachers and among the teachers and their head teachers.

Two local research assistants were recruited because the field researcher did not speak the local languages (Chiyao and Chichewa). They facilitated focus-group discussions with parents and transcribed and translated data. Focus-group questions were translated beforehand by an organisation specialising in translation and were validated by an independent and experienced local researcher. Before beginning the research, the field researcher conducted training sessions with the facilitators, which addressed research ethics, focus-group questions, the importance of note-taking and transcribing of data, and the reasoning for the debriefing sessions after each day in the field. Both facilitators originated from the Mangochi district; through this work, they acquired in-depth information on primary education in their home region. At the end of each focus-group discussion and interview, participants were invited to ask questions related directly to the research or about education in general.

The social and economic context of this study was complicated. The population of the Mangochi district is not homogenous, with the dominant religion being Islam (72%), followed by Christianity (26%) (National Statistical Office, 2019). However, the ethnicity element is beyond the scope of this study since the history of Malawi is complicated and would require a separate study.

Limitations

With this study we examined how 19 parents in four rural primary schools in one district in Malawi participated in their children's education. These parents and six teachers at each school were identified by their respective head teachers. It is important to note that they may not represent the entire set of parents at these four schools. Therefore, findings are not generalised but may give insight into how the schools in the study and other schools with similar characteristics might focus on strengthening school-home connections.

Key Findings and Discussion

In this section, research findings are presented and illustrated with direct quotes from participants. Home-setting influences were first identified in parents' perceptions of education, and reading and homework. Thereafter, school-setting influences were identified in parent-teacher communication.

Parents' Perceptions of Education

The parents participating in this study expressed belief in the importance of education, talked to their children about its value, and encouraged them to attend school. They also stated that education would improve their children's chances for a better future and becoming self-reliant:

> *It is very important for them to become leaders of tomorrow* (PFG Lakeview).
> *It is important because when educated, they can be employed and rely on themselves. Parents can rely on them as well* (PFG Chambo).

Parents reported that they wanted their children to become educated, noting that with education comes employment, enabling their children to become self-reliant and equipping them to support their parents. Some parents stated that people in the villages were more positive regarding education today: "*Compared to the past, we were behind in education, but now children understand*" (PFG Lakeview).

Over the span of just a few years, at the time of the study, enrolment had increased significantly, with many children attending school with their parents' encouragement. According to parents, this indicates the shift in attitude towards education in the communities: "*In those days, children were not coming in large numbers, but now there are more learners, and this shows they are feeling OK about education*" (PFG Baobab).

Parents also mentioned local role models in their communities such as teachers, nurses, or others with successful careers. Parents expressed their pleasure at this progress and discussed how such role models positively affected their children's education:

> *We can see a change in education because some of our children have their own living examples in the community, whereby others are teachers and nurses* (PFG Hillside).
> *Now we are happy that most government departments are also full of educated ladies from Mangochi* (PFG Hillside).

Research indicates that a role model positively affects adolescents' school outcomes and youth

resilience (Hurd & Zimmerman, 2011; Hurd, Zimmerman & Xue, 2009).

On the other hand, teachers and head teachers in this study generally agreed that neither parents nor the community considered education as important or valued its benefits. One teacher remarked: "*The community somehow fails to understand what teachers want a child to learn*" (T1 Lakeview). According to the teachers, the parents did not help them by encouraging children to attend school. Learners' lack of punctuality and frequent absences also attested to a negative attitude towards education: "[b]*ut the problem is we do not have the support from the community to encourage learners to come to school frequently*" (HT Hillside). School-community partnerships are important for students' academic achievement (Epstein, 2011:313). With changing attitudes and more school-community involvement, communities can adopt a sense of ownership about their schools. This may, in turn, make parents more involved in the school and their children's learning, thereby reinforcing positive attitudes towards education.

Reading and Homework

Parents reported encouraging their children to read books, and some described noticing the benefits in their children's reading and comprehension abilities as illustrated in the two excerpts below:

> *My Standard 2* [child] *had difficulty reading to the extent that the teacher wrote me a letter, then sent me a Standard 2 textbook so that I can read it with him. This term, there is improvement because he can read.* (PFG Chambo).
>
> *Yes, the child is happy because he tells me to help where he is having problems* (PFG Baobab).

In their longitudinal study, Dearing et al. (2006) show that parental involvement positively affected literacy development and may have long-lasting effects on children's prospects. Similarly, Sénéchal and Young (2008) established through their meta-analytical review that parental involvement was crucial in children's literacy acquisition and development. However, parents in Malawi are faced with some challenges in this regard due to the lack of books in the homes: "*Sometimes we do* [read together]*, and sometimes we don't. Most of the time, teachers advise learners to read the books while at school*" (PFG Chambo).

Parents reported that they reminded their children to do their homework and assisted if needed: "*I encourage them when they come home so that this will help them in future*" (PFG Baobab). Parents were positive about homework and were willing to monitor their children's homework. However, some parents complained that "*teachers are not giving them homework*" (PFG Chambo).

Contrary to the parents' views on homework and its importance, teachers appeared to find it futile to send homework home with the learners due to parents' lack of interest in school-related matters or their illiteracy. A teacher and a head teacher respectively noted as follows:

> *Most of the parents do not know how to read or write, so you can't send the learner home with homework* (T5 Chambo).
>
> *Of course, I think no one is monitoring that at home; they just leave them to do whatever they want* (HT Chambo).

The three main reasons why parents become involved with their children's homework are: they think their children or their children's teachers want them to be involved; they believe their involvement has a positive effect on their children's learning; and they think they should be involved (Hoover-Dempsey, Battiato, Walker, Reed, DeJong & Jones, 2001). According to this, it may be surmised that parents' views on the importance of education, as has been demonstrated in this study, play a role in their involvement with their children's homework. However, children in these schools rarely have homework, mainly due to the teachers' perception that parents were apathetic and illiterate. This is interesting since homework can be a compelling instrument for parents. For instance, they gain knowledge about the subject matter that their children are learning at school. This creates an opportunity for conversation between parents and their children on school-related matters and provides teachers and parents with an avenue to discuss education (Walker, Hoover-Dempsey, Whetsel & Green, 2004).

Parent-Teacher Communication

Parents generally agreed that when their children experienced problems at school, whether behavioural or educational, the teachers would contact them and inform them of the situation: "*If a child is a problem, we come and discuss, and we do this for the betterment of the child*" (PFG Baobab). On the other hand, when asked whether the school contacted them when their child did well at school, parents mentioned that the school was less forthcoming: "*No, we just hear during terminal examinations results*" (PFG Chambo).

Teachers and head teachers agreed that they contacted parents if learners had problems at school. Most parents appreciated being kept informed: "*Yes, they are happy, and they insist that I have to call them. So we do that, we call the parents, and we sit down and discuss. Then we solve the issue*" (HT Lakeview).

However, according to a teacher at Hillside, not all parents were interested or grateful when contacted but would instead tell the teachers to deal with the issue themselves, as it was their job: "*Some of the parents, they say it is up to you teachers to deal with the learners so that it can change*" (T5 Hillside). Nevertheless, most parents were willing to work with the school to address issues that their children may be experiencing.

Learners' absenteeism was a problem in many of the schools, and several parents stated that they visited the school regularly to either observe attendance and progress or to encourage their children:

> *I want to know their performance and how they behave in class. To be assured, he really comes to school* (PFG Hillside).
>
> *I visit school to encourage my children about school* (PFG Baobab).

Parents agreed that they felt welcome at school and that teachers and head teachers encouraged them to visit to observe their child's performance in class and to attend events at school:

> *Yes, they want us to* [visit]*, just because they tell us some problems concerning learners* (PFG Chambo).
>
> *Yes, I do* [visit], *and I can remember there was a particular meeting where he* [the head teacher] *advised us to visit this school so we can also know the performance of our children* (PFG Hillside).

This was in accordance with teachers' and head teachers' statements that they invited parents to come to school to observe their children, and they agreed on the importance of parents visiting the school: "*Yes, that is indeed important, we need to be working hand in hand with them for the betterment of the learners*" (T2 Chambo).

Teachers also felt motivated when parents came to school: "*We are encouraged by seeing the parents coming to school asking about the performance of their child*" (T3 Baobab).

Teachers and parents appeared to agree that parents were not only invited to come to school to discuss their child's behaviour but also to observe their child's progress in school. Nevertheless, teachers generally agreed that parents did not visit the schools on their own initiative, except on rare occasions, and "*those people are the ones that went to school*" (T5 Hillside) and were educated themselves. Similar findings in Burundi, Malawi, Senegal, and Uganda in 2008 show that parents generally did not visit schools unless to discuss disciplinary actions (Marphatia et al., 2010). Likewise, a study conducted in South Africa concluded that parents found the schools lacking in informing them of their child's achievement, only communicating with them if their child experienced some problems at school (Meier & Lemmer, 2015). If parents are mainly requested to visit the school when their child is experiencing problems, it may hinder parental involvement. Parents may become unwilling to enter the school to avoid receiving more negative news about their child's behaviour (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011). This emphasises the importance for schools to approach parents in more favourable circumstances, for example, by informing them when their children are doing well academically or their attendance and behaviour are commendable. Such strategic communication can act as positive reinforcement for healthy parent-teacher communication. Nevertheless, parents need to be receptive to these invitations and visit the school for such communication to occur.

Conclusion and Implications

This interview-based qualitative study provided insights into parental involvement in four rural primary schools in Malawi, investigating mainly two social systems, the microsystem and the mesosystem. With this study we sought to understand how parents connected with four primary schools, participated in their child's education and how the schools involved individual parents. We found that parents appeared to be active in the home setting. However, parents and teachers expressed different views on parental involvement.

The strongest positive relationship between parental involvement and academic achievement is "academic socialisation", which is characterised by parents communicating to their children the value of education, their expectations for their achievement, and their future aspirations (Hill & Tyson, 2009). From this study, it may be argued that academic socialisation does occur in the microsystem represented by the home setting. Even though performance data were not collected in this study, the academic socialisation observed here is likely to affect academic achievement positively. The schools acknowledged the importance of communicating with parents and tried to involve them by inviting them to come to school, for example, to observe their child's progress. A summary of the main findings in the micro- and mesosystem levels is depicted in Figure 2.

The *microsystem*. Parents discuss the value of education with their children; parents read with their children and make sure they do their homework; parents send their children to school and encourage them to attend school; parents visit school.

The *mesosystem*. Very limited interaction between parents and teachers. Parents and teachers do not agree on parents visiting the school; teachers mainly meet parents when the learner is having trouble at school; teachers expect more involvement from parents – parents, on the other hand, believe they are involved.

The *exosystem*. Lack of official disapproval of parents for not sending their children to school; low literacy level of parents in Mangochi District; community's attitude towards education.

The *macrosystem*. Lack of qualified teachers; shortage of educational resources.

Figure 2 Ecology systems of education of four Malawian schools – summary of main findings

In this study we found limited mesosystemic interaction. Humans develop through reciprocal interactions and relationships within the community and broader society (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The microsystem appears to be active, however, the mesosystemic interaction was limited, with miscommunication between teachers and parents. Teachers said that they hardly ever met parents, however, parents reported visiting the school regularly. It was evident that teachers expected more involvement from parents, but parents already considered themselves involved. This disparity in their reporting was compelling but not atypical. In a study by Dauber and Epstein (2011:213), teachers stated that parents were not involved in their children's education, whereas parents reported that they were involved. Such contrasting perspectives exposed how parents and teachers interpreted each other's views differently, and the difference needs to be acknowledged and addressed to support learning to a greater extent.

Exosystemic factors, such as the lack of official disapproval of parents who do not send their children to school, may influence parental involvement and learners' educational outcomes. Another exosystemic factor is the parents' education level. The parents' belief in their own knowledge may determine whether they will participate in their children's education (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011). The low literacy rate in the Mangochi district of 53% (National Statistical Office, 2019) indicates a low level of education among rural parents, which may negatively affect their involvement in their children's education. However, according to parents in the study, their communities were beginning to value education more. Finally, macrosystemic factors such as the national shortage of qualified teachers and school reading materials may negatively affect educational outcomes.

The importance of education for socioeconomic development is globally acknowledged. Numerous research studies have established that parental involvement is an important factor in academic achievement (e.g., Dahie et al., 2018; Lumadi, 2019). Parents and teachers in the four rural primary schools need to strengthen their mutual relationship to better support learners at the micro- and mesosystem levels. They could engage in more deliberate communication and collaboration to create a more conducive mesosystem for learning. For example, teachers could contact parents to inform them of their children's good behaviour and academic progress instead of mainly contacting when problems occur. Such communication opens up opportunities for positive reinforcement and parental involvement. Teachers can send learners home with homework to give parents an added opportunity to stay involved; homework also offers teachers and parents a common ground to discuss education. The school can invite parents to learner-led conferences, where the learners showcase their school work. The school can use many such occasions to get parents more involved. However, there will be exosystemic and macrosystemic challenges which impact individuals even though they do not have an active role within that system.

To further expand our understanding of parental involvement, it may be advisable to explore the disparity between how parents and teachers view parental involvement in Malawi. In our view, it would also be valuable to examine

whether there is a direct positive link between parental involvement and children's academic outcomes in rural Malawi.

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Authors' Contributions

GE gathered all the data, conducted the analysis and wrote the manuscript. GE also created all tables and images. SRJ, AM and PM consulted on all stages of writing and gave advice and suggested changes to the manuscript. All authors reviewed the final manuscript.

Notes

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Paper II: Perceived realities of rural primary school teachers in Malawi: Applying Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory

Paper II

Chapter # 44

PERCEIVED REALITIES OF RURAL PRIMARY SCHOOL TEACHERS IN MALAWI: APPLYING BRONFENBRENNER'S ECOLOGICAL SYSTEMS THEORY

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ABSTRACT
The ability of teachers to enhance the quality of education depends on the teachers' knowledge, skills, motivation and conducive working environment. This study examines teachers' experiences in four rural primary schools in Malawi, focusing on the impact of their working and living conditions on the quality of education. The study followed a qualitative research approach, collecting data through semi-structured interviews. Data were obtained from 24 teachers, four headteachers and four primary education advisors (PEA). Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory was applied to interpret data. The teachers, headteachers and PEAs are represented in the *microsystem*, their interactions comprise the *mesosystem*, their working and living conditions are represented in the *exosystem*, and the *macrosystem* consists of the customs and laws of society. The findings show that the microsystem, which involves teachers, headteachers and PEAs, appears somewhat active; teachers teach despite numerous challenges. However, interactions between units within that system are weak, resulting in limited mesosystemic interaction. Implications of the findings are discussed later in this chapter.

Keywords: ecological systems theory, rural teachers, rural primary schools, quality primary education, Malawi.

1. INTRODUCTION

The importance of quality education as one of the factors critical to escaping poverty is asserted in the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) number 4 – Quality education for all, promoting "lifelong learning opportunities for all" (United Nations [UN], 2015). Quality education improves the individual's employability and health, increases earning power and addresses poverty (United Nations, 2018). In addition, quality education provides society with skills and innovations and fuels economic growth (Idrees & Siddiqi, 2013; Ismail, 2015; UN, 2018; World Bank, 2018). Research has suggested that ensuring every child's access to quality education and job skills may increase low-income countries' gross domestic product (GDP) (Chikhungu, Kadzamira, Chiwaula, & Meke, 2020). Primary education is arguably a stepping stone for human capital development, enhanced by secondary and higher education (Winters, 2011). This supports the case for making the needed investment in quality primary education. However, doing so remains challenging in many low-income countries, such as those in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), including Malawi. While Malawi has seen an expansion of primary education provision in recent years, the quality has remained poor, as signified by the large numbers of learners who complete primary education without developing basic proficiency in numeracy and literacy (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2017; World Bank, 2018).

The teachers' role and the nature of the working environment are vital in promoting quality primary education. In rural areas, structural factors such as poverty often hinder creating and sustaining a primary school environment conducive to quality education. Poor and dilapidated primary school infrastructure in rural areas is too common, with many schools lacking the necessary infrastructure to function efficiently (du Plessis & Mestry, 2019). Many teachers consider rural working conditions unfavourable and are reluctant to work in remote regions, mainly due to poor working and living conditions and limited opportunities for professional development (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2016). Rural teachers' concerns include inadequate classrooms and library facilities or a total lack thereof. In addition, teachers are put off teaching in rural schools due to a lack of teaching and learning materials, such as chalkboards and chalk (Chakanika, Sichula, Sumbwa, & Nduna, 2012). A shortage of textbooks is another factor which affects quality teaching. Even when textbooks are available at schools, they may not be freely available to learners, as school authorities often keep them locked and inaccessible due to the cost and logistical challenges of replacing them (World Bank, 2015).

Rural schools' challenges have resulted in an imbalance in teacher distribution, with rural primary schools experiencing a disproportionate shortage of teachers compared with urban schools (Adedeji & Olaniyan, 2011; Asim, Chimombo, Chugunov, & Gera, 2019; Mulkeen & Chen, 2008). The acute shortage of qualified teachers is a significant problem for the education system in SSA, where only 65% of teachers in primary schools are qualified, compared to 81% globally (United Nations, 2021). In Malawi, the shortage of primary school teachers is reflected in highly qualified teacher/learner ratios of up to 1:95 (Ministry of Education, Science and Technology [MoEST], 2019). Projections indicate that if we are to reach the goal of universal quality education by 2030, 6.3 million primary school teachers will be needed in SSA to cover new teaching posts and counteract attrition (UNESCO, 2016).

Due to poor infrastructure and a lack of qualified teachers in rural areas, a widening inequality related to the knowledge gap exists between rural and urban schools, with children from rural areas falling behind in what they learn and know compared to children from urban areas (Adedeji & Olaniyan, 2011). As du Plessis (2019) points out, learners in rural communities are denied the same opportunity for quality education as learners in urban and less disadvantaged communities. In Malawi, since 84% of the population lives in rural areas (National Statistics Office, 2019), it is imperative to address rural schools' challenges to bridge that learning and attainment gap.

To address some of the challenges of poor education provision in rural areas, in some countries, housing has been provided as an incentive to encourage teachers to move to rural areas (ILO, 2016). Housing provision is critical in ensuring teacher retention in rural schools (Mulkeen & Chen, 2008). The perceived low status of the teaching profession is another factor that may cause teachers to be reluctant to accept a teaching position in rural areas. For some individual teachers, becoming a teacher is often seen as a last resort (Adedeji & Olaniyan, 2011); however, for others, teaching represents the "most attractive profession" (Mtika & Gates, 2011, p. 425).

Using Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, this study explores teachers' working and living conditions in rural primary schools in Malawi and their perceptions of the teaching profession.

1.1. Theoretical Framework: Ecological Systems Theory

To understand the experiences of rural primary school teachers, it is essential to listen to them talk about their lives and learn about their working and living conditions. Teachers can talk about ecological factors such as their housing situation, their interactions with colleagues, and opportunities for professional development. They can also talk about their perceptions of the teaching profession. We applied Bronfenbrenner's ecological system theory (EST) to identify the various social elements and influences that impact teachers' experiences and to view them as a holistic social ecology.

Bronfenbrenner (1979) formulated EST to understand human development in the context of social systems of reciprocal interactions and relationships within a person's environment. EST comprises four interacting nested systems which can both affect and be affected by the individual's development. The four nested systems are *microsystem*, *mesosystem*, *exosystem* and *macrosystem*. Later, Bronfenbrenner added a fifth system, the time element, and labelled it the chronosystem, which does not concern the current study.

At the core of these systems is the developing individual nested in the microsystem, which involves roles, activities and interpersonal relationships in the individual's immediate surroundings. The mesosystem comprises bi-directional linkages between the microsystems. The exosystem represents the social system, which affects the individual without that person having an active role. The macrosystem consists of cultural values and customs, belief systems and laws within the context of the developing individual. We opted to adapt EST as best suited for this study and use it as a framework to understand better the complex interconnections between stakeholders and how different systems affect the individual.

EST has been applied to various research topics ranging from individual development to complex organisational systems such as school districts or individual schools. Seginer (2006) applied Bronfenbrenner's EST in her home- and school-based parental involvement research. Her analysis indicated that while parental involvement through home-school-based activities is positively linked to educational outcomes, the exosystem and macrosystem aspects need additional examination, namely parents' culture and ethnicity. Mthiyane and Chiororo (2020) applied EST to examine school decline in two secondary schools in Zimbabwe. The results indicate that the schools' decline was caused by a set of complex, conflicting mesosystemic, exosystemic and macrosystemic factors, such as the interaction between teachers and headteachers, educational policies and cultural-, social- and economic climate.

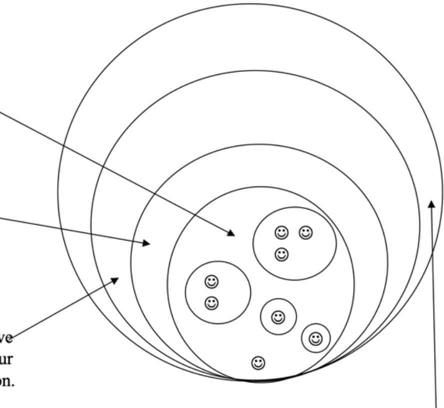
The current study focuses on teachers in a rural setting. Within Bronfenbrenner's ecological framework, the teachers' colleagues, headteachers, and PEAs represent autonomous microsystems. Their interactions and relationships are conceptualised as part of the mesosystem, comprising interactions between microsystems. The exosystem incorporates the teacher's working and living conditions, which affect the individual, but over which the person has no control. Lastly, located in the macrosystem are issues such as the provision of qualified teachers and educational resources. Figure 1 depicts each system's different systems and elements as represented in this study.

Figure 1.
An adaptation of Bronfenbrenner's ecology systems of education of four Malawian primary schools, inspired by Bronfenbrenner's EST and Jónsdóttir's (2012) work.

Individuals interact with others within the ***microsystem*. Teachers' colleagues, headteachers and PEAs in this study, represent autonomous microsystems.**

A ***mesosystem*** comprises the interrelation and interactions among two or more settings, a system of microsystems. **Here teachers' collegiality and support from headteachers and PEAs is conceptualized as part of the mesosystem, which comprises interactions between microsystems.**

The third level of the ecological environment, the ***exosystem,*** refers to one or more settings that do not involve the person as an active participant but in which events occur that affect what happens in the setting containing the person. **Teachers' working- and living conditions.**



Within each society or subculture, there exists a kind of blueprint for the organisation of every setting. Such generalised patterns are referred to as ***macrosystems*. Provision of qualified teachers and educational resources.**

This study aims to explore teachers' working and living conditions in rural primary schools in Malawi and their perceptions of the teaching profession. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory underpins the research questions, which are:

1. How do teachers in four rural primary schools in Malawi experience their working and living conditions?
2. How do teachers in four rural primary schools in Malawi perceive their profession, its challenges and support?

The findings from this study will add to the growing understanding and research on teachers' experiences in rural areas in Malawi. Such in-depth understanding is essential and will increase our knowledge of rural schools and teachers' challenges. It may also provide insights on how to address these challenges in the hope of improving teachers' working and living conditions and the overall quality of education.

2. CONTEXT OF THE RESEARCH

This study was carried out in rural Malawi. In Malawi, primary school runs from Standard 1 to 8, with the official entry age of six years. On average, learners receive 4.5 years of education (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2018). Primary school enrolment has increased significantly in recent decades; currently, an estimated 85% of primary school-age children are enrolled in school (MoEST, 2019). About 89% of primary schools in Malawi are situated in rural areas. Each district in Malawi is divided into education zones. A Primary Education Advisor (PEA) presides over each zone, supervising 15 primary schools on average. PEAs' responsibilities typically involve providing pedagogic support and in-service training for teachers. In addition, they collect and keep all statistical data for their schools and are the contact person between schools/zones and the district education office (MoEST, 2018).

The government of Malawi has been unable to keep up with the sharp increase in primary school enrolment in recent years. Existing problems such as fragile infrastructure, a lack of resources and teacher shortages have increased. This is evident in the high teacher/learner ratio and relatively low primary completion rate (MoEST, 2018). In addition, drop-out and repetition rates both indicate poor education quality and represent wastage. Based on these statistics, it is unlikely that the link between education and poverty will be easily broken.

This study was conducted in Mangochi District in the Southern Region of Malawi. Mangochi has a literacy rate of 53%, compared to the national rate of 69% (National Statistical Office, 2019). The average qualified teacher/learner ratio is 1:79 compared to 1:70 nationally. The average dropout and repetition rates for the school year 2017-2018 were 6.1% and 29%, respectively, compared to the national rates of 3.2% and 24.5%, respectively. The national primary completion rate of 52% has remained relatively unchanged in recent years (MoEST, 2018).

Improving the overall quality of education in rural schools, such as those in Mangochi District, may ensure that rural children benefit equally from their education as urban children. The children and young people would have a realistic opportunity to develop relevant skills and capabilities and progress to secondary and higher education for enhanced human capital. This emphasises the importance of this study.

This qualitative study explored teachers' experiences in four rural primary schools in Mangochi District.

3. METHODOLOGY AND METHOD

This qualitative study focuses on rural primary school teachers. A semi-structured interview approach was applied to collect data. The study's objective is to assess teachers' subjective experiences in Mangochi District related to their working and living conditions and their perceptions of the teaching profession. Teachers, headteachers and PEAs were interviewed to answer the following research questions: *1. How do teachers in four rural primary schools in Malawi experience their working and living conditions? 2. How do teachers in four rural primary schools in Malawi perceive their profession, its challenges and support?*

3.1. Research Participants and Data Collection

Four rural primary schools were selected for participation: Baobab Primary School, Lakeview Primary School, Chambo Primary School and Hillside Primary School (pseudonyms). Participant selection was purposive and based on participants' lived experience of working in or with rural schools, availability and willingness to participate. Headteachers, teachers and primary education advisors (PEAs) were informed of the purpose of the study, motivation and goal. A schedule for data collection was developed with their cooperation.

Six teachers and one headteacher from each of the four schools were interviewed. Four PEAs were also interviewed, each representing a different zone. All four primary schools were located in impoverished communities, with shortages of qualified teachers, overcrowded classrooms, poor teaching and learning material provision, and a lack of classroom infrastructure and teacher housing.

The field researcher (first author) spent, on average, five days at each school during data collection from May to July 2016. Teachers were interviewed in pairs and asked, for instance, whether becoming a teacher was their first choice, the biggest challenges they

faced in their job, their living situation, and their views on the teaching profession. Headteachers and PEAs were interviewed individually and asked, for instance, how they support their teachers and what opportunities teachers have for professional development in rural areas. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' permission and lasted between 35-50 minutes.

3.2. Data Analysis

Interviews were transcribed verbatim and then thematically analysed (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Clarke & Braun, 2017). Transcripts were read thoroughly to gain a more comprehensive understanding of and insight into the data, in line with what Creswell (2012, p. 243) termed 'preliminary exploratory analysis'. All points of interest related to the research questions were highlighted. After that, all transcribed interviews were summarised. The next step was to use the emergent codes relating to the interview questions and relevant literature. These codes were further categorised into six sub-themes: *infrastructure, resources, professional development, teachers' housing, teaching as a first-choice career,* and whether *teachers are valued.* Finally, these sub-themes were reorganised under three main themes: *working conditions, living conditions* and *the teaching profession.* When presenting findings, the participant's identifier and school (all pseudonyms) are provided at the end of each quote. 'T' indicates teachers, 'HT' is used for headteachers, and 'PEA' is used for the primary education advisors. Thus 'T1 Baobab' represents a quote from teacher 1 from Baobab primary school.

In terms of limitations, the findings in this study encompass teachers' experiences in four rural primary schools in one district in Malawi. Consequently, these findings will only provide information about teachers' working and living conditions in those schools. Nevertheless, the findings may demonstrate common teachers' experiences in other primary schools with similar conditions and may be transferable to other areas.

3.3. Ethical Considerations

Ethical requirements were strictly adhered to throughout the research process. The main ethical rule of "do no harm" (Madge, 1997, p. 114) guided this study. All participants participated in the study voluntarily after being approached by the field researcher. The field researcher informed participants about the study and whether they were willing to participate. Their informed consent was obtained. Participants were assured of anonymity and confidentiality. At the beginning of each interview, the field researcher opted to make a brief personal disclosure (Braun & Clark, 2013) to build rapport. It was important to inform participants that the field researcher is a teacher by profession and had lived with her family in SSA for many years, including five years in Malawi. During her stay in Malawi, she set out to get to know the school system. Five consecutive days were spent at each school for data collection, during which time the field researcher was greeted with what she interpreted as friendliness and congeniality. Additionally, the field researcher observed an atmosphere of amicability among teachers, as well as between teachers and headteachers.

4. FINDINGS

The aim of this study was to explore teachers' working and living conditions in rural primary schools in Malawi and to investigate their perceptions of the teaching profession. We interviewed teachers, headteachers and primary education advisors in four rural primary schools in an attempt to answer the following research questions: *1. How do teachers in four rural primary schools in Malawi experience their working and living conditions? 2. How do*

teachers in four rural primary schools in Malawi perceive their profession, its challenges and support? This section presents the main findings, supported by direct quotes from participants. Sub-themes from the three main themes *working conditions*, *living conditions* and *the teaching profession,* are identified and discussed.

4.1. Working Conditions

Within this main theme, three sub-themes were identified: infrastructure, such as outside classrooms; school resources, such as shortage of teachers and teaching and learning material; and teachers' opportunities for professional development.

4.1.1. Infrastructure

According to the teachers, poor infrastructure, such as the lack of classrooms, was of great concern, along with the numerous challenges that teaching in an outside classroom brings. For instance, when a teacher is preparing and writing lesson plans: "*Sometimes there is heavy wind, so when you are writing the lesson plans, the papers fly all over"* (T5 Baobab). During the rainy season, outside classes are often combined with inside classes, leading to overcrowded classrooms: *"Yes, we can squeeze into one classroom, but it is very difficult to teach"* (T1 Chambo).

Participants were aware that a staffroom would allow them to collaborate when preparing their lessons, grading papers or discussing how to teach a particular subject. However, none of the schools had a staffroom. *"We could help each other. 'What can we do with this lesson? Can I teach it this way?'"* (T2 Baobab).

4.1.2. Resources

The shortage of teachers was another problem, and as a result, large classes and complex in-class management were the reality for many of the teachers: *"We have a large number of learners in one class, so to control learner misbehaviour in that class becomes a problem"* (T5 Chambo).

Limited teaching resources were another concern. A teacher noted: "*Sometimes we may have only six textbooks for the whole class*" (T3 Hillside). The teachers also spoke of the difficulty of teaching a subject without the actual teaching aids to demonstrate, and for the most part, they tried to improvise. However, that was not always possible:

> *We told the learners about computers, but we do not have any. But we explain to learners the little knowledge we have from just reading books. A teacher can't improvise everything* (T6 Hillside).

Teachers were forced to be resourceful in finding suitable teaching and learning materials and reach out to other teachers for assistance. A teacher stated:

> *That is why we do interact with them [other teachers], so we find help with what will be an appropriate resource for this subject* (T4 Baobab).

Lack of teaching and learning materials affects teachers' pedagogical practices and undermines the quality of teaching. This affects the overall quality of primary education.

4.1.3. Professional Development

Primary education advisors (PEAs) are required to visit each school at least once per term to ensure that schools are upholding standards and quality, but they are hampered by a lack of funding. A PEA noted: *"This year, I failed to manage that [visit to each school] because of funds"* (PEA Chambo). However, a headteacher noted that they meet with PEAs monthly: "*We do meet and discuss issues concerning our schools"* (HT Chambo).

Primary school advisors are expected to provide teachers with in-service training, such as workshops or refresher courses. However, they were impeded, again due to funding issues: *"We do call some teachers to come for refresher courses, but because of the [lack of] funds this year, we could not"* (PEA Lakeview).

The importance of in-service training was acknowledged by teachers, as one teacher noted:

> *We learn a lot of new methods of teaching. For example, I left teacher training college in 1996, and the syllabus has been changing now and again. So, I benefitted a lot from in-service training* (T2 Hillside).

However, only about half of the teachers had been invited to attend a workshop or a refresher course during their careers.

In the absence of PEA-led workshops, all headteachers encouraged their teachers to work together and collaborate. A headteacher noted: *"They plan separately, but sometimes they do share ideas or views on a particular lesson. This is what I told them to do"* (HT Chambo). Teachers agreed and stated that they collaborate with colleagues when the need arises: *"Even myself, if I don't know a certain subject, I can require that somebody who knows better that part can come and help me"* (T6 Hillside). Most teachers, however, prepared lessons alone without the benefit of any in-service support.

When asked whether they expressed approval or praised their teachers for a job well done, the headteachers agreed that they did, as noted: *"Yes, I do that because I appreciate they are doing good work"* (HT Lakeview). Some teachers concurred and felt it important that their headteacher recognised their good work. A teacher stated: *"Especially our headteacher, it is very important. Because as soon as he does that, you feel like on top of the world"* (T1 Chambo).

4.2. Living Conditions

This main theme relates to teachers' accommodations and what, if any, effects it has on the teachers.

Shortage of teachers' accommodation is one of the challenges rural areas face when recruiting teachers. If teachers are not provided housing, they must rent accommodation from a nearby village, often far from the school. This was the reality for the majority of the teachers in this study. Specifically, 21 out of the 24 rented far from the school premises. For most of them, it took about 30 minutes to walk to school since they had no other way of commuting: "*Some of us are travelling a long distance, on foot. Sometimes we arrive at school and meet the classes while we are tired and sweating*" (T3 Baobab). A tired teacher is less likely to be effective, and the reality that the school does not have accommodation near the premises can make teachers feel unimportant. This can affect their attitudes and dedication to quality teaching.

4.3. Teaching Profession

This main theme covers two sub-themes: whether becoming a teacher was their first choice; and whether teachers feel their profession is valued by society.

4.3.1. Teaching as a First Choice

Of the 24 teachers interviewed, 23 were already qualified. They had varying teaching experiences, from two months to 22 years. However, only 13 wanted to become a teacher as their first choice career. One of them noted: "*I was to become a teacher because my mother is also a teacher. So, it was like in the blood"* (T6 Baobab).

Those who indicated that teaching was not their first career choice ended up becoming teachers because they could not pursue their original dream career due to different circumstances, whether financial or job opportunities. The two excerpts below illustrate this:

My first choice was nursing, but because of lack of financial support… (T3 Lakeview).

I qualified as a mechanic, but it was due to a lack of job opportunities (T3 (Baobab).

The findings show that different factors influenced individuals' decisions to join the teaching profession. These factors, coupled with working and living conditions, can affect the quality of teaching and learning, rural teacher retention and attrition.

4.3.2. Status of Teachers

Of the 23 teachers who answered the question in this study about whether Malawian society values the teaching profession, 13 thought it did not. For example, one teacher noted:

Honestly, I can say that teachers are not valued very much because teachers face many challenges in Malawi. They receive a small salary, and working conditions are not good at all (T5 Chambo).

Consequently, regardless of their feelings about the quality of their teaching, teachers believe they are not good role models for the younger generations because teaching is a low-status profession: "*People look at me and see low status, so we are not their role models"* (T6 Lakeview). Learners emulate such views: *"So a learner says, I won't be a teacher"* (T2 Hillside). However, ten of the 23 participating teachers believed that the teaching profession is valued in Malawi. One of the teachers stated, "*I think they value teachers because we are the ones who are moving the nation"* (T2 Chambo).

Interestingly, whether becoming a teacher was their first choice or whether they felt the teaching profession was valued did not seem to matter, they all enjoyed teaching. This was encapsulated by a comment by one of the teachers: *"With time, I have come to love teaching"* (T4 Chambo). The common reply they gave to the question "what is the best part of being a teacher?" was their interaction with their learners and when they noticed their students were learning from their teaching. This was best noted by two teachers who stated:

I enjoy most the interaction with the learners (T6 Baobab).

What I enjoy most is when I see my learners doing well (T1 Lakeview).

It was evident that all teachers in this study had come to enjoy teaching and appeared to get internal rewards that helped to counteract their profession's challenging conditions and perceived low status.

5. DISCUSSION

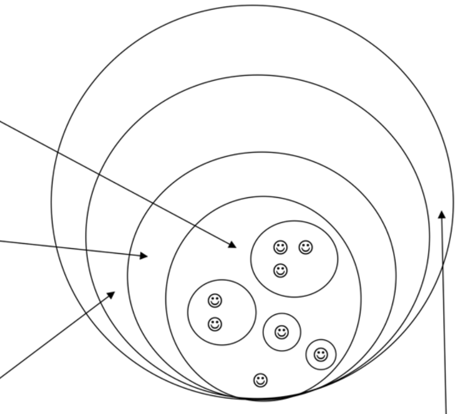
This study provides insights into teachers' experiences in four rural primary schools in Malawi. The study sought to understand the working and living conditions of the teachers and their perceptions of the teaching profession through the lenses of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory. Bronfenbrenner (1979) stated that humans develop through reciprocal interactions and relationships within the community and broader society. A summary of the main findings in the ecological systems is depicted in Figure 2.

Figure 2.
Ecological systems of education of four Malawian primary schools.
Summary of main findings.

The *microsystem*. Teachers endeavour to teach in spite of difficult challenges at school and for the most part, they enjoy teaching.

The *mesosystem*. Limited interaction between teachers, for instance, most prepare lessons individually; restricted interaction between teachers and PEAs, only half of the teachers had ever been invited by the PEA to attend refresher courses or workshops; and restricted interaction between teachers and headteachers.

The *exosystem*. Exosystemic factors such as teachers' accommodations and schools' infrastructure limit effective teaching. Most of the teachers privately rent accommodation and commute for about 30 minutes to work. In addition, many of the teachers teach in outside classes with concomitant challenges, whether pedagogical or elemental.



The *macrosystem*. Macrosystemic factors such as lack of qualified teachers and shortage of educational resources also affect teaching. Over-crowded classes make it difficult for teachers to manage. The lack of teaching material and sharing of textbooks is another challenge.

This study found that the microsystem appears to be somewhat active. For example, in spite of numerous challenges, teachers aspire to teach. However, the internal ties within the microsystem are weak, with limited mesosystemic interactions between teachers and headteachers, for instance. Furthermore, there is limited interaction between teachers and PEAs due to financial restrictions preventing PEAs from holding regular supervisory visits, in-service training and workshops. To improve the quality of teaching and learning, it is essential to provide teachers with opportunities for professional development (Adedeji & Olaniyan, 2011). However, only about 75% of primary schools in Malawi receive a visit by their PEA each term (MoEST, 2018).

None of the schools in this study had a staffroom, making it difficult for teachers to collaborate. Without a shared workspace or staffroom, teachers in this study were more likely to work in isolation and, thus, miss out on the opportunity for collegial support. Such a lack of professional collaboration makes it difficult for teachers to develop professionally and maximise effective teaching (Botha, 2012). This is a clear indication of how the exosystem negatively affects mesosystemic interactions.

Exosystemic factors, such as schools' infrastructure and teachers' housing, affect educational outcomes in rural areas, as they limit effective teaching. Dilapidated and fragile facilities in rural primary schools are common, with many schools lacking the necessary infrastructure to function efficiently (du Plessis & Mestry, 2019). Such poor quality of infrastructure is the primary driver of the crisis in the education system in many African countries (Adedeji & Olaniyan, 2011). In Mangochi District, for example, during the school year 2017- 2018, the learner/classroom ratio was 165:1, the highest reported in the country (MoEST, 2018).

In this study, working conditions appear to be burdensome and enervating, with many teachers teaching in outside classrooms and overcrowded classes. This reality produces

another set of challenges, such as shielding learners and classroom activities from the elements and pedagogical issues, such as displaying visual teaching aids.

Regarding teachers' living accommodations, most teachers in this study privately rented accommodations in the surrounding villages and commuted for about 30 minutes to school every day. In Mangochi District, only 19.5% of teachers are provided with accommodation on school grounds, compared to 23% nationwide (MoEST, 2018). A combination of such exosystemic factors culminates in poorer educational outcomes in rural areas (Adedeji & Olaniyan, 2011; Chakanika et al., 2012; du Plessis & Mestry, 2019). These exosystemic factors overflow into the macrosystem, amplifying problems with teacher recruitment and retention.

Macrosystemic factors such as shortages of teachers and resources make teaching in rural areas difficult and negatively affect educational outcomes. The lack of teachers results in overcrowded classes and difficulty in implementing behavioural management. This adds to teachers' workload, which is detrimental to the quality of education (Chakanika et al., 2012).

The lack of teaching resources within the macrosystem was a further challenge for the teachers in this study, and the necessity of sharing textbooks is a problem in many rural schools. In Mangochi District, for example, an average of 2.7 learners shared one textbook in mathematics in standard 5 (S5) and 1.9 in S8 (MoEST, 2018). Textbooks and other learning materials are essential for an effective education system, and their lack affects educational attainment and quality.

The perceived low status of the teaching profession matters to many teachers and in many countries. Teaching is one of the most underappreciated professions (Adedeji & Olaniyan, 2011), and only half of the teachers in this study consider teaching as their first-choice career. Evidence shows that many individuals became teachers because they could not get another job (Adedeji & Olaniyan, 2011). This may be reasonable considering the challenges they face according to the findings of this study. The results are similar to Mtika and Gates (2011) in their research focusing on secondary teachers in Malawi. When interviewing secondary trainee teachers, some stated that they had only joined the teaching profession due to their inability to follow their chosen profession.

6. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

By providing an in-depth understanding of rural schools and teachers' challenges, this study adds to the growing understanding and research on teachers' experiences in rural areas in Malawi. Based on the findings, teachers, headteachers and PEAs in these four primary schools need to strengthen their interactions and mutual relationships to improve the quality of teaching and learning. In the context of limited funding for in-service training, teachers can, for instance, prioritise teacher collaboration as part of their professional development. PEAs and headteachers can combine efforts by having the PEAs prepare the headteachers to give teachers much-needed in-service training. This could lessen the funding issue and increase teachers' opportunities for professional development. Lastly, education authorities must make the provision of teachers, teachers' housing, and teaching resources their prime concern. These steps can improve educational quality as all these factors interact and influence rural teachers' ecological systems.

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Paper III: Factors affecting quality of education in rural primary schools in Malawi

Paper III

Factors affecting quality of education in four rural primary schools in Mangochi district in Malawi

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Abstract

Quality primary education is a fundamental human right that is highly relevant for individuals and societal development. Despite the universal calls for increased access to quality primary education, there are clear disparities in providing quality primary education between and within regions. Four rural primary schools in Mangochi District in southern Malawi were selected for participation in an investigation of site-specific factors affecting quality education. We used an emergent framework of quality education in low-income countries, focusing on the intersecting contexts of policy, schools, the home and community. To collect data, we used semi-structured qualitative interviews involving headteachers, teachers, primary education advisors (PEA) and senior education officers at district and national levels. Research participants described their observations of factors that affect the provision of quality education and impede educational attainment in the four rural primary schools. The findings from the study indicate that the four primary schools experience weak infrastructure, teacher shortage and a lack of teaching and learning materials. We conclude by highlighting implications for practice that may help address the quality of education in rural schools in Malawi.

Keywords: Education for all, Malawi, rural primary schools, quality education

Introduction

This study is concerned with the provision and quality of primary education in rural Malawi. For many years, the international community has acknowledged the importance of education and agreed on various declarations, such as the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which asserted that "everyone has a right to education" (United Nations [UN], 1948). The 1990 Jomtien Proclamation of *Education for All* (EFA) and the 2000 *Millennium Development Goals* (MDG) both emphasize the need for increased access to universal education and training (Orodho et al., 2013). In 2015, EFA was expanded through *Sustainable Development Goal* (SDG) Number 4 (United Nations, 2018), to "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all."

In 1994, in response to EFA goals, Malawi became one of the first sub-Saharan African (SSA) countries to establish free primary education (FPE), acknowledging education as a right but also essential for the country's development and the improvement of living standards (Chimombo, 2009; Mzuza et al., 2014). This declaration was the most critical factor for the rapid increase in primary school enrolment in Malawi. From 2008-2018, primary school enrolment increased by 47.1% (Ministry of Education, Science and Technology [MoEST], 2019). However, this sharp rise in enrolment was not accompanied by increased teacher recruitment, adequate classrooms, and teaching and learning materials (TLM) (MoEST, 2021; Mzuza et al., 2014). Although a programme was established to train teachers to meet this demand, it did not achieve the desired results (Lewin et al., 2003). The number of school classrooms increased by 12% from 2004-2013 (World Bank, 2016), but this was insufficient to accommodate all learners.

To ensure that all learners are learning in purpose-built classrooms, 36,000 classrooms are needed nationwide (United Nations Children's Fund [UNICEF], 2019). A survey conducted by the MoEST (2021) indicated that in each year group, learners had to share textbooks in English, Chichewa, and Mathematics, in ratios from 2 learners per textbook up to 9 learners per textbook. In 2014 it was determined that in 43% of surveyed primary schools, no learner enrolled in Standard 5 (S5) was observed using a mathematics textbook (World Bank, 2016). It was commonly observed that the schools rationed the textbooks supplied, with only a portion of distributed textbooks used during teaching. This strategy of "hoarding" textbooks occurs because schools are not assured of a regular and prompt supply (World Bank, 2016).

There is a clear indication that despite the universal call for quality primary education, access to it differs between regions. Increased enrollment in Malawi following FPE, for example, only tells part of the story. Regarding participation and attainment, about 81% of children in SSA are enrolled in primary schools and only 63% complete primary education, compared to the global 84% primary completion rate (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, [UNESCO], 2019). Furthermore, 88% and 84% of school children in SSA do not reach the minimum proficiency level in reading and mathematics respectively, by the time they reach the primary school completion age of around 14 years (UNESCO, 2017).

Quality education not only impacts the individual's personal development and health, employability, innovation and economic growth; it also affects society by encouraging social cohesion (Idrees & Siddiqi, 2013; Ismail, 2015; UN, 2018; World Bank, 2018). This should motivate countries, especially those described as low-and lower middle-income, to allocate more funding towards the education sector to support education for all. In particular, the targeting of rural primary schools, mainly because people living in rural areas are generally less affluent (Chikhungu et al., 2020), should be a deliberate government choice.

To achieve EFA in SSA, many countries, including Malawi, have increased their public spending on education (MoEST, 2021). For example, in the 2020/2021 fiscal year, Malawian public expenditure on education reached 4.6% of the GDP, similar to other countries in the SSA region (MoEST, 2021). During this period, Malawi spent 49% of the education budget on primary education (World Bank, 2021). However, most of the budget (over 90%) for schools in Malawi goes towards recurrent expenditures, such as teachers' salaries (MoEST, 2021), leaving little to invest in infrastructure and TLMs.

To study quality education, a conceptual understanding of what it entails is necessary. Tikly (2011) proposes that quality education enables all learners to:

> …realise the capabilities they require to become economically productive, develop sustainable livelihoods, contribute to peaceful and democratic societies and enhance well-being. The learning outcomes that are required vary according to context but at the end of the basic education cycle, must include threshold levels of literacy and numeracy and life skills, including awareness and prevention of disease. (p. 10)

Within this definition, the context is essential and must be considered when studying quality education. According to Tikly (2011), good quality education results from the interaction between three contextual factors: the policy context, the school context, and the home/community context of the learner. Each factor needs enabling inputs (Tikly, 2011). The policy context entails recognising teachers' and headteachers' experiences and views in order to align professional development with the national curricula to support schools in implementing and monitoring changes and development. In the school context, to minimise the gap between education outcomes and parents' expectations, listening to parents and observing the relevance of the curriculum is important. In the home/community context, parents can create an enabling and supportive home learning environment.

This quality of education framework, also referred to as 'EdQual' (Tikly, 2011) was used in analysing the findings of this study. Our focus here is to elucidate the stakeholders' perspectives in examining the quality of education in four rural primary schools in Malawi.

Provision of primary education in rural areas

There are persistent challenges in providing quality primary education in many SSAs and other low- and lower middle-income countries (LMICs). This has led to an ongoing learning poverty. In many LMICs, rural learners consistently underperform compared to their urban peers (Sumida & Kawata, 2021). One reason for this disparity in performance is school characteristics, with rural schools reported as having more dilapidated infrastructure, fewer qualified teachers, and fewer resources, such as teaching and learning materials, compared to urban schools (Chakanika et al., 2012; Sumida & Kawata, 2021).

Adverse living and working conditions, along with a lack of basic amenities such as electricity and portable water, are constraints to deploying teachers to rural areas. For the learners, long distance and mobility challenges during rainy seasons have been found to undermine school attendance (Chakanika et al., 2012). Additionally, many teachers in rural areas feel overburdened with teaching duties in poorly funded schools. They also feel isolated, and lack access to financial, recreational, and health services. This can lead to low teacher morale and ineffective teaching (Shikalepo, 2020).

In their research, Ishii and Meke (2022) examined the impact the family, teacher, school, and community may have on reading scores in Malawi. Their findings suggest a clear rural-urban divide in the performance level of learners, where rural learners perform worse. Kayange (2020) surmised that the disparity in the learning environment between rural and urban primary schools adversely affects learners' performance. Research indicates that most teachers in rural primary schools in Malawi are less likely to live on school grounds and instead rent "questionable" accommodation (Kayange, 2020, p. 173) in nearby villages. These teachers commute to school by foot or bicycle, and often arrive tired. Teachers in Kayange's (2020) study were found to be eager to request a transfer to urban areas, and if their request was denied, many were prepared to resign. Such resignations further exacerbate the already high learner-teacher ratios in rural schools.

The purpose of this study was to shed light on the quality of primary education provision in four rural schools in one district in Malawi. We explore some site-specific factors in in rural Mangochi District to answer the following research question:

> *What factors affect quality education in four rural primary schools in Mangochi District in Malawi?*

In the next section, we will describe the context of the study.

Context of the study

Conditions of schooling in rural areas in Malawi are poor (Kayange, 2020; MoEST, 2020; Sosu et al., 2019). About 84% of Malawians live in rural areas (National Statistics Office, 2019), and 89% of primary schools are in rural areas (MoEST, 2018). In Malawi, around 26% of children in rural areas complete their primary education, compared to approximately 50% nationwide (Watkins & Ashforth, 2019). Class sizes are larger in rural primary schools with the teacher/learner ratio 1:70 compared to the national average rate of 1:62 (MoEST, 2021). This reduces individual learner participation in class discussions (Kayange, 2020).

School infrastructure in rural areas is generally of poor quality (Erlendsdóttir & Mtika, 2023; Kayange, 2020). Only 26% of Malawian primary schools have electricity, and a large proportion of these are in urban areas or cities (MoEST, 2020). Consequently, urban

city schools are more likely to have computers and printers than rural ones. Furthermore, rural primary schools are generally far from many learners' homes, meaning they must walk a long distance to get to school (Kayange, 2020). This can be unsafe for children, especially during the rainy season.

In Malawi, there are 33 educational districts subdivided into zones, with a primary education advisor (PEA) in each zone covering, on average, 15 primary schools. Providing pedagogical support to headteachers and teachers is one of the PEAs' responsibilities, along with offering in-service training for teachers. PEAs also collect statistical data for their schools and act as bridges between the schools/zone and the district education office (MoEST, 2018). The PEAs are answerable to the district education manager (DEM). The primary responsibilities of the DEMs are to oversee the delivery of education services in the district. They are responsible for development planning and the education budget, advising local education authorities on government policy and deploying teachers to schools and other related issues.

The Malawi Government policy agenda is to improve equitable access to quality learning for all children (MoEST, 2021). The country's aspiration for 'education for all' has increased the demand for educational resources to such an extent that budget allocation has been unable to keep up (UNICEF, 2019). Regardless, the qualified teacher/learner ratio in Malawian primary schools has decreased in recent years, but has not reached the official target of 1:60 (MoEST, 2022), which is still deemed too high for effective teaching and learning (Mtika & Gates, 2011). In addition to the high qualified teacher-learner ratio, there is an imbalance in the deployment of teachers, with rural schools often struggling to attract qualified teachers (Asim et al., 2019; UNICEF, 2019). The shortage of teachers' housing is a concern, with only around 23% of teachers living on school grounds (MoEST, 2019), while others rent accommodation further away from the school and commute to school on foot.

Official statistics show that educational outcomes in Malawi are persistently poor, with only one in three enrolled learners completing the eight-year primary school cycle (MoEST, 2019; World Bank, 2016). Those who complete primary school have been shown to lag behind students in other countries in the region in English, mathematics and science examinations administered by the Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SACMEQ) (Awich, 2021). It is against this backdrop that the current study was conducted.

Research design and methodology

In this study, we explore site-specific factors that affect the quality of rural primary education in four schools in Mangochi district. The objective is to gain insights into specific issues related to the provision of quality education through first-person accounts from teachers, headteachers, and other educational officials. We used qualitative semi-

structured interviews to better understand participants' experiences and perspectives. Semi-structured interviews were most apt due to their flexibility and ease with which the field researcher can ask probing questions to gain a deeper understanding of the participant's views and ideas (Bryman, 2012). Data were collected from April to July 2016.

The research question underpinning the study was: *What factors affect the quality of education in four rural primary schools in Mangochi District in Malawi?*

Participants

Four rural primary schools in Mangochi District were selected for participation, each in a different education zone. The schools were selected from 12 primary schools in four different education zones in the district. The four schools which were selected had expressed willingness to be part of the study. Participant selection was both purposive and pragmatic, based on participants' availability and willingness to participate. Six teachers from each participating school were interviewed, as were their headteachers and four PEAs from different zones representing the participating schools. Senior education officers from the office of Basic Education at the MoEST and from the office of the district education manager in Mangochi were also interviewed. The teachers were interviewed in pairs, while other participants were interviewed individually. During data collection, the field researcher spent five consecutive days at each school on average.

An overview of the four participating schools is given in Table 1. The four selected primary schools were in impoverished communities with a high teacher/learner ratio and poor infrastructure.

Table 1: Overview of the four participating schools

Number/name of the school	Hillside[1] Primary School	Chambo Primary School	Baobab Primary School	Lakeview Primary School
Number of learners	1529	1711	3554	1063
Teachers	38 (of which 30 were qualified)	22 (of which 20 were qualified)	54 (of which 49 were qualified)	12 (of which 6 were qualified)
Teachers' housing	7	5	5	4
Staff room	No	No	No	No
Teacher/learner ratio				
Infant section (S 1-2)	1:117:	1:227	1:145	1:121
Junior section (S 3-5)	1:80	1:121	1:109	1:121
Senior section (S 6-8)	1:66	1:29	1:113	1:31
Open-air classes (due to lack of infrastructure)	8 (18 total classes)	2 (12 total classes)	17 (30 total classes)	0 (11 total classes)
Electricity	No	No	Partial	No
Pass rate	45%	36%	57%	30%

The schools varied in size but all experienced a high teacher/learner ratio. The teacher/learner ratio gradually decreased. For example, at Chambo Primary School, the teacher/learner ratio decreased from 1:227 in S1-S2, down to 1:29 when learners reached S6-S8. There was limited availability of teachers' houses on school grounds and all schools, except Lakeview Primary School had open-air classrooms. None of the participating schools had electricity, except for partial electricity at Baobab Primary School, where the headteacher's office was powered by a small single solar cell. All these conditions have the potential to adversely affect the quality of education. Of the four

[1] The names of the schools are pseudonyms.

participating schools, Baobab Primary School was the only school with an overall pass rate above 50%, the other schools had an overall pass rate below 50%.

Data analysis

In this study, we aimed to answer the research question: What *factors affect the quality of education in four rural primary schools in Mangochi District in Malawi?* All interviews were transcribed verbatim and thematically analysed according to the coding framework by Braun & Clarke (2022).

Before coding began, the first author immersed herself with the data by reading, re-reading, and summarising the interviews, thus becoming intimately familiar with the data. Such "preliminary exploratory analysis" (Creswell, 2012, p. 243) gave the first author a comprehensive understanding and insight into the data. When re-reading and summarising the data, specific codes associated with the research question emerged: *teachers' housing, classrooms, teachers and teaching, teaching and learning materials,* and *family financial bearings*. The codes were then categorised into three themes, *infrastructure*, *human and school resources*, and *household's economic situation.*

In the findings section, excerpts of direct quotes from participants illustrate their perspectives and experiences. The participants' identifiers and school pseudonyms are provided with each quote. Thus, 'HT Baobab' refers to the headteacher at the Baobab Primary School, and 'PEA Lakeview' refers to the PEA in the Lakeview Primary School's zone. The education officers from the MoEST and the DEM's office are identified as Pers1MoEST and Pers2DEM, respectively.

In this study, we explored site-specific factors affecting the quality of education in four rural primary schools in Mangochi District in Malawi. As a result, the findings resulting from data analysis only relate to these four schools and the conditions there. Nonetheless, the findings may be transferable to other rural schools under similar conditions and experiencing similar challenges.

Ethical considerations

Ethical requirements were adhered to throughout the research process. The study's authorisation was obtained from the MoEST, and an approval from the DEM. After obtaining permission, the field researcher visited the participating schools, introduced herself to the headteachers, informed them of the study's objective, and obtained informed consent from participants with the complete understanding that they could terminate their participation and withdraw from this research at any given time without giving any reasons. A data collection plan was developed in cooperation with the headteachers. Each school was assigned a pseudonym, and all participants were assured anonymity and confidentiality.

To build rapport with participants, the field researcher began each interview with a brief personal disclosure, informing them that she was a teacher by profession and had lived in Malawi along with her family for several years. At each school, she was greeted with friendliness and observed a pleasant and cordial atmosphere among and between teachers and headteachers.

Presentation of findings

In this section, we will present findings pertaining to the three themes: infrastructure, human and school resources, and the household's economic situation.

Infrastructure

Participants in this study concurred that the most challenging aspect facing rural primary schools in Malawi is weak infrastructure. As stated by the Pers2DEM: "...because we do not have enough infrastructure, we do not have enough teachers' houses, we do not have enough classrooms."

Teachers' housing

The PEA at Baobab Primary School concurred, stating: "(we need) more teachers' houses." She further described the difference for everyone when teachers are provided with accommodation on school grounds rather than renting farther away in one of the villages:

> Yes, some of the teachers come from far away, so when they arrive, they are tired. Now they cannot deliver, but when the houses are there, (she points to the teachers' houses on the school ground), teachers would live locally, so they will be early for classes.

The findings showed that some teachers were unwilling to report for duty in rural areas due to the lack of teachers' houses. According to the Pers2DEM, "most of the (teachers) will not accept (to be deployed there); they do not want to go there." The shortage of teachers' houses affects the deployment of teachers and, thus, significantly affects the quality of education in rural areas.

Classrooms

Another challenge rural schools faced was the need for classrooms, meaning many children were learning outside. The Pers1MoEST declared: "…these open-air classrooms just put limitations on the (education) system." The PEA at Baobab Primary School echoed: "The biggest challenge is a shortage of classroom blocks. You can see the other learners are learning under a tree, and today is very cold and windy."

The PEA at Lakeview Primary School also discussed the difficulties regarding the shortage of classrooms:

> It is a very big challenge; in some schools, there are not even classrooms. Like at Kari Chombo (a pseudonym), there were 2500 learners against 26 teachers, with most of the learners learning outside. So, it is a very big problem around the zone.

The Per2DEM agreed and stated:

> We do not have enough classrooms; many children are learning under trees. Moreover, if they are not learning under the trees, they are just crammed in one classroom, which is quite alarming because you need fewer learners in a class for them to learn effectively.

Overcrowded classes make in-class management time-consuming and affect teachers' instructional time. This, along with teaching in an open-air classroom, compromises quality teaching and learning, which leads to poor quality education.

Human and School Resources

Lack of teachers and teaching and learning materials are additional difficulties the participating schools faced.

Teachers and Teaching

The PEA at Lakeview Primary School elaborated on the problem of excessively large class sizes due to a shortage of teachers: "For one teacher to have more than one hundred, two hundred or even more learners, how is that teacher going to manage such a class?"

The Pers2DEM discussed the Ministry's deployment of teachers. According to him, from 2000 to 2008, the government did not deploy any new teachers to the schools: "A good seven years, so there was a very big shortage of teachers." However, according to him, the deployment appeared satisfactory from 2007/2008 until 2014/2015, when deployment became irregular again. The head teachers felt that the government still did not recruit and deploy enough teachers to all districts, which was also the opinion of the PEA at Hillside Primary School. He explained:

> It is difficult to recruit qualified teachers since the Malawian government's responsibility is to deploy them. For the past two years, teachers were not sent to these schools. It is only this year that new teachers have just been deployed. A whole set of teachers who graduated in 2014 have not been employed. They just stay home.

The PEA at Lakeview Primary School blamed the lack of teachers directly on the Ministry of Education. However, the PEA was hopeful that the Ministry was serious about recruiting teachers and deploying them throughout rural schools this time, noting:

> Because of a lack of funds, allocating teachers to the schools took time. But I hope the government is very serious about it this time and will send more teachers to the schools. If they do that, I hope it will work.

Due to the teacher shortage in rural schools, teachers have various other responsibilities, which sometimes take them away from their core teaching responsibility, leading to a loss of instructional time for children. For instance, during a standard 5 (S5) observation at Baobab Primary School, the field researcher witnessed how teachers were expected to carry out other commitments at school. Instead of being in class teaching, a teacher was busy outside receiving delivery of foodstuffs and organising storage. He missed the whole lesson, and due to a teacher shortage, no other teacher could be assigned to cover for him. During another field day at Hillside Primary School, a S2 teacher was absent due to illness. With no available teacher to substitute, the field researcher witnessed that another S2 teacher was expected to combine the absent teacher's class with her class in her already overcrowded classroom.

The Pers1MoEST discussed the situation in Mangochi District, which according to him is one of four districts in the country where it is hard to deploy teachers. He stated:

> Well, there are two problems, one is for teachers to stay there. Experience has shown that when we send teachers to Mangochi, half of them will have left after a year. Then the other problem is where to send teachers in the district; some places are more rural and remote than others. Getting teachers to go to more remote rural schools is a headache.

The Pers1MoEST's assertion about teachers not wanting to move to the district is supported by the headteacher at Lakeview Primary School. He voiced his concerns about remoteness and how that affects the teachers and their professional development:

> The problem is that most teachers do not like this place. It is too far; it is too remote. So, you are isolated. How can you improve yourself in teaching because we learn through cooperation with other teachers?

This shows that the headteacher realises that the isolation of teachers and the lack of a professional community is far from appealing. The shortage of teachers means that no teachers are available to cover for a teacher in the classroom when needed, contributing to poor quality of education.

Teaching and learning materials

The four headteachers deliberated on the need for teaching and learning materials and other resources their schools required. The headteacher at Baobab Primary School declared: "As I have said before, even the teaching material is not enough." According to the headteachers, their schools do not have any equipment for teachers to teach science and related subjects. The headteacher at Chambo Primary School shared: "Of course, when you are teaching science and those subjects, we need the equipment, but we do not have (it) here."

Sometimes teachers tried to buy some teaching and learning aids to use with their learners using their own money. The headteacher at Lakeview Primary School remarked: "Yes, they buy some science materials, like bulbs and wires." The PEAs concurred and stated that the lack of teaching and learning resources was a big problem for the schools. The PEA for Hillside Primary school had this to say: "Yeah, we do not have enough textbooks in most of these schools. So, learners have to share books with five or six others, sharing one book." The findings indicate that the need for more teaching and learning materials is an ongoing problem for the participating schools.

The PEA at Lakeview Primary School also noted that the community sometimes contributed teaching and learning materials. For instance, when parents are told about the lack of materials, they send empty cartons to schools which teachers could use to make teaching and learning materials. They even brought animal hides to school to make drums for music lessons. None of the four schools had computers, and only one had (limited) electricity. Despite this, some teachers showed ingenuity and resourcefulness when responding to the demands of the national curriculum, such as was observed by the researcher when a teacher drew a diagram of computers on cardboard when teaching IT class.

These findings indicate that all four schools were experiencing a shortage of teachers and a lack of teaching and learning materials which, for obvious reasons, affected the quality of teaching and education.

Household's economic situation

The families in the rural areas where the four participating schools are located were generally perceived by senior education officers and headteachers to be poor. These participants mentioned family poverty as an issue that rural schools face and this affects the quality of education. According to Pers2DEM: "Most people in rural areas are poor, so it is difficult for them to make meaningful contributions towards the development of their schools."

The headteacher at Hillside Primary School also considered poverty to be one of the challenges of keeping children in school, as children often needed to help their families procure food. Other participants also mentioned how poverty affected education and learners' attendance, as the following statements indicate: “Because of poverty, parents try and find work for their children” (HT Chambo Primary School); “Learners drop out of school because of poverty; they look for work” (HT Baobab Primary School); “Poverty is playing its part. You have some very poor families, and as long as their child knows how to read and write, they can look for a job” (Pers2DEM).

These examples, as perceived by the education personnel, show that the fundamental needs of the families, such as having food, take precedence over sending a child to school. It could be argued that poverty is thus one of the significant factors affecting rural schools.

Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that the four participating schools experience similar persistent challenges which affect the quality of education. We are aware that our findings are similar to other previous studies and this, we consider, to be a cause for concern given that a lot of government and international agencies have invested heavily in the education system in Malawi with the view to improving the quality of education. However, the efforts appear to have not made much difference. It might be that some of the on-going efforts may not be necessarily addressing the root causes of poor-quality education especially in rural schools. For example, there is currently a policy of rural allowance (hardship allowance) to retain teachers in rural schools, which does not appear to be working. In addition, the government implemented the National Education Sector Plan (NESP) 2008 – 2017 (MoEST, 2008), which does not appear to have led to significant improvement in the quality of education both for rural and urban primary schools (MoEST, 2020).

Furthermore, despite the increased public expenditure on education, the education sector has been unable to provide quality education and to keep up with the rapid rise in enrolment (UNICEF, 2019; World Bank, 2021). The problem of infrastructure in rural primary schools is prevalent. For instance, regarding teachers' housing, 19% of teachers in Mangochi District are provided housing on school grounds compared to 23% nationwide (MoEST, 2018).

The lack of teachers' housing on school grounds affects the deployment of teachers to rural areas. Additionally, the shortage of teachers' houses on the school premises means that teachers had to rent accommodations far from the school. In such cases, teachers had to walk to get to school and arrived tired. This aligns with other research findings (e.g., Erlendsdóttir & Mtika, 2023; Kayange, 2020) findings, and it hinders teachers' ability to conduct effective lessons. Many rural teachers also leave their teaching positions due to acute accommodation problems and remoteness (Chakanika et al., 2012).

To compensate teachers in rural areas for the hardship they encounter, the government issued a policy of hardship allowance to teachers who were placed in remote areas (Asim, et al., 2019). However, due to the limited funding and low amount available for each teacher, this incentive does not seem to have worked as intended. This is an issue that requires further consideration, given that financial incentives are likely to be more effective for teachers who are generally poorly paid.

The lack of classrooms hinders the learning process in many ways. Despite the perpetual shortage of classrooms, the pupil/permanent classroom ratio (PpCR) has mostly stayed the same in recent years. For instance, in 2020, it was still measured at 116:1 (MoEST, 2020), which remains too high for quality teaching and learning. Besides, official statistics demonstrate the disparity between rural and urban areas. According to MoEST (2019), the PpCR in urban schools was 98:1 compared to 119:1 in rural schools.

Access to human and teaching resources is an integral part of quality education, which is a real challenge affecting the primary education sector in Malawi in general and rural primary schools in particular (MoEST, 2019). The persistent disparity in the deployment of teachers between rural and urban primary schools contributes significantly to poor-quality teaching due to large classes, which adversely affects educational attainment (Asim et al., 2019).

The findings of this study further indicate that overcrowded classes are a substantial problem in rural primary schools in Malawi, and they concur with official statistics, which show that the average qualified-teacher/learner ratio is 1:62 (MoEST, 2022). Large class sizes affect teachers' ability to support individual learners and reduce teacher-learner instructional time. This affects the quality of education. Despite that, as Table 1 demonstrates, there is an exceedingly higher ratio in early grades (i.e., S1 and 2) in the four participating rural schools. Such a high teacher/learner ratio is one of the reasons affecting rural learners' performance (Chakanika et al., 2012; Sumida & Kawata, 2021). The findings further expose how teachers' instructional time can be limited for different reasons, such as other responsibilities at school and the unavailability of teachers to cover classes during teachers' absences. Where a teacher has to teach a large class, very little education occurs in such circumstances, which further perpetuates the current situation.

The study's findings in relation to household economic situations are similar with other research findings regarding families' financial challenges and how this may factor into the quality of education. Financial hardship is one of the most pervasive reasons why learners drop out of school (Chikhungu et al., 2020). Poor parents have been found to require the help of their children to provide for their families. This may force them to miss school to help parents with chores to generate income. Therefore, attending school may not be a priority (Kayange, 2020). Poverty is more severe in rural areas and is coupled with poor

parental education. These two issues mean that learners may not have appropriate home support, such as the procurement of textbooks.

When looking at our findings through the lens of the emergent framework on quality education in low-income countries (Tikly, 2011; Tikly & Barrett, 2010) and the interconnecting contexts of policy, school, and home/community, it becomes evident that numerous improvements are needed before learners in rural primary schools in Malawi are assured of quality education.

To promote the national policy of education for all and realise relevant teaching and learning expectations, policymakers need to guarantee sufficient funding for basic infrastructure and textbook procurement and distribution. In the Malawian school context, for quality teaching and learning to be evident, learners should be able to access appropriate textbooks and use resources and other teaching and learning materials effectively. In the Malawian home/community context, parents need to work more closely with schools to support their children with education. However, parental education and economic status may affect this.

Based on the findings, our implications for practice for education authorities are twofold:

i) The government may consider making the recruitment and deployment of teachers to rural schools a priority. However, for this to succeed, it is necessary that appropriate accommodation is provided to incentivise would-be rural primary school teachers. This may complement the rural allowance policy. The strategic deployment would address overcrowded classes. This could enhance the quality of learning and teaching.

ii) The government may consider targeted funding for teaching and learning materials. This would enhance the effectiveness of the teacher and improve academic attainment of learners.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the importance of quality primary education cannot be underestimated, and investing in education pays off as it contributes to social cohesion and economic productivity. The scarcity of funding in the context of the Malawian education system, and the concomitant lack of infrastructure and access to resources, undermines the quality of education in rural schools and directly hinders the drive for EFA, which Malawi has embraced.

The issue of teacher/learner ratio in rural areas must be narrowed considerably, as it affects the quality of education. Ishii and Meke (2022) suggested that to improve school performance, more qualified headteachers and teachers are needed in rural areas, along with teaching and learning resources and community involvement. Better conditions of

schooling in rural areas are essential to give rural children quality education opportunities. The young population of Malawi is large and fast-growing, with around 1.3 million learners entering the school system each year (World Bank, 2021). Since 84% of the population lives in rural areas, the majority of these students enter the rural school system. The expected increase will put further pressure on the already limited educational resources in rural schools. Thus, perhaps, urgent action is necessary to address factors affecting quality education in rural primary schools in Malawi.

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Appendix A: Presentations at international conferences

2023 Canadian International Conference on Education (CICE), Toronto, Canada. A global issue in education. My presentation: *Exploring external factors adversely affecting equity and quality of primary education in rural Malawi: A case study from Mangochi District.* 26th – 28th June.

2022 Scottish Educational Research Association (SERA) Ayr, Scotland. Reconnecting educational research, policy, and practice. My two presentations:
i) *How do parents participate in their children's primary education in rural Malawi? A case study from Mangochi District.*
ii) *Living and working conditions of rural primary school teachers in Malawi and their perceived realities.* 23rd – 25th November.

2022 Menntakvika, School of Education, University of Iceland: My presentation: *Methodological challenges in a foreign culture*. 7th October 2022.

2022 International Conference on Education and New Developments (END2022) Madeira, Portugal. My two presentations:
i) *Perceived realities of rural primary school teachers in Malawi: through Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory;*
ii) *Examining parental involvement in Children's primary education in rural Malawi through ecological systems theory*. 18th- 20th June.

2021 Menntakvika, School of Education, University of Iceland: My presentation: *Parental involvement in children's primary education: a case study from a rural district in Malawi*. 15th October.

2019 International Conference on Education and New Developments (END2019) Porto, Portugal. My presentation: *Teaching under a tree, the rural reality in Malawi*. 22th - 24th June.

2018 International Conference on Education and New Developments (END 2018) Budapest, Hungary. My presentation: *Parents' and communities' views and attitudes towards teachers in rural Malawi*. 23rd – 25th June.

2017 Scottish Educational Research Association (SERA) Ayr, Scotland. My presentation: *Attitude towards primary school teachers in rural Malawi*. 22nd – 24th November.

2016 South Africa International Conference on Education, SAICEd2016. Pretoria, South Africa. Towards excellence in educational practices. My presentation: *Collective teacher efficacy in rural primary schools in Malawi*.

2015 Scottish Educational Research Association (SERA) Aberdeen, Scotland. Education as (if) the whole earth mattered. My presentation: *Is Participating in an Educational Project Beneficial for all Stakeholders: Teachers' Voices from Chimbende Primary School In Malawi*.

2015 Inaugural Conference of IAAE - International Association of African Educators - Lawrence, Kansas, USA. Erasing Invisibility: Equity, Social Justice and Educational Excellence of Africans in the Diaspora/Immigrants. My presentation: *Is Participating in an Educational Project Beneficial for all Stakeholders: Teachers' Voices from Chimbende Primary School In Malawi*.

2014 International Conference on Education and Access, held in Lilongwe, Malawi. Opening spaces for the marginalised. My presentation: *Addressing High Drop-out and Repetition Rates from a different angle*.

Appendix B: Participants at the four focus schools

Participants at Hillside Primary School

	Female	Male	Total number
Headteacher	1		1
Teachers	3	3	6
PEA		1	1
Parents	3	1	4
Local leaders	1	3	4
Mother support group	5		5
Parent-teacher association	2	2	4
School management committee	1	2	3

Participants at Chambo Primary School

	Female	Male	Total number
Headteacher		1	1
Teachers	1	5	6
PEA	1		1
Parents	5		5
Local leaders		5	5
Mother support group	3		3
Parent-teacher association	2	3	5
School management committee	1	4	5

Participants at Baobab Primary School

	Female	Male	Total number
Headteacher		1	1
Teachers	4	2	6
PEA	1		1
Parents	3	2	5
Local leaders	1	6	7
Mother support group	5		5
Parent-teacher association	3	1	4
School management committee		3	3

Participants at Lakeview Primary School

	Female	Male	Total number
Headteacher		1	1
Teachers	2	4	6
PEA		1	1
Parents	2	3	5
Local leaders		5	5
Mother support group	4		4
Parent-teacher association	2	2	4
School management committee	2	3	5

Appendix C: Letter of introduction to the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology

Lilongwe, 26th February 2015

The Secretary for Education, Science and Technology

Mrs Lonely Magreta

Dear Madam.

My name is Mrs Guðlaug (Gulla) Erlendsdóttir, and I am a PhD student at the School of Education, University of Iceland. As a teacher, I am very interested in studying some features of the education system in Malawi in detail. I have lived in Malawi with my family for a few years, and while living here, I have been fortunate to visit many rural primary schools. I now kindly request permission to conduct my doctoral research here in Malawi.

My study aims to understand the interaction, collaboration and communication among different stakeholders in the rural education setting. And to analyse whether these interactions affect the provision of quality education.

I anticipate selecting four rural primary schools in four education zones in Mangochi District. Qualitative data will be collected through semi-structured interviews with the headteachers, six teachers from each school and Primary Education Advisors in the relevant education zones. I will also collect data through Focus group discussions, where I will approach parents of students from each of the four schools, local leaders from the surrounding communities, and members from various school committees to participate. Furthermore, I plan to conduct non-participant observations in three different standards in each school.

In addition to this qualitative data collection, I will also collect secondary data in the form of official data pertaining to enrollment, drop-out and repetition rates, pass rates, survival and transition rates, and teacher/learner ratio, etc.

With this letter, I am asking for permission from the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology to undertake my research as explained.

If you wish to seek further information, please get in touch with me anytime.

My supervisor is Dr Allyson Macdonald, a Professor at the School of Education at the University of Iceland. She may be contacted at XXX.

Yours sincerely,

Guðlaug Erlendsdóttir

gue14@hi.is

099 426 3414

Appendix D: Authorisation for conducting my research

Letter of authorisation from the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology for conducting my research.

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

MINISTRY OF EDUCATION
PRIVATE BAG 328
CAPITAL CITY
LILONGWE 3
MALAWI

REF.NO. BED/1/26

4th March, 2015

Mrs Guolaug (Gulla)
University of Iceland

Dear Madam,

RE: AUTHORIZATION TO UNDERTAKE RESEARCH

With reference to the letter dated 26th February, 2015 concerning the above mentioned subject.

I would like to inform you that permission is granted from Ministry of Education, Science and Technology to undertake your research.

Yours faithfully,

Dr. J. Chimombo
For: SECRETARY FOR EDUCATION, SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

Appendix E: Letter of introduction to headteachers

Letter of introduction to headteachers and my request for their voluntary participation.

Mangochi, April 2016

The headteacher

XXX Primary School

Mangochi District

Dear Sir/Madam

My name is Gulla Erlendsdóttir, and I am a doctoral student at the University of Iceland. I am conducting research among primary schools in Mangochi District, and your school, XXX Primary School, is one of the selected schools.

I, along with my family, have lived in Malawi for many years and being a primary school teacher myself, I am very interested in primary education and how we can best accommodate our children and their educational attainment.

Through my research, I will examine the interactions among stakeholders within the school community, such as teachers, head teachers, PEAs, parents, local leaders and various members of the school community. I will investigate the level of parental involvement and try and assess how parents participate in their child's education, and I will explore the working and living conditions of teachers in a rural setting. Data collection will be done through interviews, focus group discussions and non-participant observations.

I have been granted permission for my research from the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, and I have met with the District Education Manager in Mangochi District, and he granted me permission for the research in the district.

With this letter, I am kindly requesting your permission to conduct my research at your school. Please, understand that you are under no obligation to participate in the study. If you decide against participating, rest assured that it will in no way affect you. You are also permitted to withdraw from participation at any time during the research. Your and your school's anonymity will be guaranteed, all participants will be given a pseudonym, and your answers will not be traceable.

I do appreciate your cooperation.

Thank you,

Gulla Erlendsdóttir

Doctoral student

School of Education

University of Iceland

Appendix F: List of tasks at each focus school

14 January 2016

My visit to the schools

First meeting – One session

- Introduction
- Explaining my research
- Request HT's voluntary participation
- Gatekeeper for teachers and the community

Interviews

❖	Headteacher	1 interview
❖	Teachers	3 interviews (in pairs)
❖	PEA	1 interview
❖	Parents	1 FGD
❖	Local leaders	1 FGD
❖	MSG	1 FGD
❖	SMC	1 FGD
❖	PTA	1 FGD
❖	Observation	6 (twice in each standard 1, 4 and 8)

A total of 16 data-gathering tasks are to be carried out at each school.

Make sketches of each classroom where I will conduct observations and the school grounds. It will form an important part of my field notes.

Appendix G: Interview questions

Questions for teachers

Background

1. How long have you been teaching?
2. How long at this school?
3. Did you graduate from the Teacher's College? If yes, how long ago?
4. Did you always want to become a teacher?
5. What Standard do you teach and how many learners are in your class?
6. Do you teach every subject in your class? Do you think you are equally good in each subject you teach?
7. How do you think people value teachers and their job?
8. Can you tell me what you think is the best part of being a teacher?
9. Can you tell me what you think is the most difficult part of being a teacher?
10. Has being a teacher fulfilled your expectations? If yes, can you tell me how?
11. Do you get any assistance and encouragement on the job? If so, from whom? Can you tell me what kind of assistance you get?
12. Can you tell me if you feel that your efforts to do well as a teacher, is appreciated? If so, by whom? Do you sometimes get a pat on the back for a job well done (from HT, PEA)?
13. Are there regular teachers' meetings here at school? (Teachers and the HT?) If so, how often every month? Can you tell me about these meetings?
14. Teachers who teach the same Standard level, do they meet every week (every month)? If yes, what are those meetings mostly about?
15. If you have a problem with a learner, do you talk about it with your fellow teacher/s and see if they can help you?
16. Do you collaborate, work with, other teachers at this school?
17. If so, can you tell me more about this collaboration?
18. Do you believe it is important for teachers to work together and support one another? If so, can you tell me why?

19. Do you have an opportuntiy to learn a new teaching method from another teacher at this school? If so, can you tell me about that?
20. Can you tell me if teachers at this school work well together? If so, how?
21. Do you support each another? If so, can you tell me how?
22. Are teachers at this school encouraged to work in a group, to share ideas?
23. Can you tell me when you prepare lessons and plan your teaching for your class?
24. Do you prepare lessons with other teachers? If yes, can you tell me about that?
25. Do you teach every period throughout the day? Or do you get a break between lessons? If so, are you able to use that break to prepare lessons?
26. Is there a teachers' office here at school which you can use when preparing lessons?
27. Can you tell me about resources at this school, do you have everything you need to teach?
28. Do you sometimes need to improvise when you are teaching and you don't have resources? Can you tell me about that?
29. Do you work with other teachers at other schools in this zone? If so, can you tell me about that?

PEA

30. Do you meet the PEA regularly? If so, how often do you meet?
31. Does the PEA provide you with opportunities for professional development? Can you tell me about that?
32. Does the PEA invite you to attend workshops? If so, do you attend?
33. How do you feel about those workshops?

Parental involvement

34. How do you feel about parental involvement in their child's education?
35. Can you tell me how your relationship with parents is.
36. Do you meet with them regularly? If so, how often each term?
37. If you meet with the parents, for what reason is it mostly?
38. Can you tell me if parents come to school to talk to you about their child?
39. Can you tell me if parents visit school for any reason? If they do visit, do you know why?
40. Do you invite, and encourage, parents to come to school? If so, why?

41. Can you tell me if you think it is important that parents come to visit school? Why?
42. Do parents attend parent/teacher meetings?
43. Can you tell me if you encourage parents to help their child with homework?
44. How do you think parents feel about their children's education?
45. Do you think parents expect their children to finish primary school?

Community

46. Can you tell me if members of the surrounding villages come to visit school? If so, why?
47. Are they interested in the school? And the work you do here? If so, can you tell me about that?
48. What about the village chief (local leader), does he visit school? if so, why?
49. Do you think he is interested in the school? And education? If so, can you tell me how?
50. Do you think it is important how the local leader feels about education? If so, why?
51. Do you think it is important for you and the school how the community/surrounding villages value education? Why?
52. Do you feel that you are a part of the community/village? Can you explain how?
53. Are you invited to attend village celebrations/events? Do you attend them?
54. In Mangochi District - the pass rate is low and the drop-out rate is high, is there anything you can think of that the schools can do to change this?
55. What do you think is the biggest problem this school is facing?

School community

56. How do you feel about the work the PTA does at school?
57. How do you feel about the work the SMC does at school?
58. How do you feel about the work the MSG does at school?

Questions for Headteachers

Background

1. How long have you been the HT at this school?
2. Before you came to this school, were you a HT at another school? If so, for how long?
3. Before you became a HT, for how many years did you teach?
4. Before you became a HT, were you offered any management training? If so, can you tell me about it?
5. Do you do any teaching yourself at this school?

Headteacher

6. Can you tell me if you get any support as a HT? Can you tell me about it?
7. How many teachers are at this school? How many are qualified?
8. Is there difficulty in getting trained teachers to your school? If yes, what do you consider to be the main challenge?
9. Is teachers' absenteeism a problem at this school? If so, can you elaborate?
10. How many learners are at your school?
11. What is the drop-out rate in your school? Has it changed over the last two or three years?
12. What is the pass-rate in your school? Has it changed in the last two or three years?
13. How is your school in this regard compared to the national drop-out and pass rate?
14. What do you think is the biggest reason for the high drop-out rate in primary schools in Mangochi District?
15. Can you tell me what you think is the biggest reason for the low pass-rate in primary schools in Mangochi District?
16. Can you tell me what you think the schools can do to reverse that?
17. Can you tell me if you collaborate/work with other HT in this zone?
18. If so, how often do you meet the other HT each term?
19. Can you tell me about this collaboration?
20. Do you work closely with the PEA? If so, can you tell me about your collaboration?
21. Do you meet regularly with the DEM or someone from his office?
22. If so, can you tell me how often you meet the DEM each term?

23. Can you tell me about the meetings with the DEM? (what you discuss)
16. Are there regular teacher meetings here at school? How often every week?

17. Can you tell me about these meetings?

18. Do teachers at this school collaborate, or work together? For instance teachers that teach the same standard level do they work together preparing lessons?
19. Can you tell me more about their collaboration?
20. Do they support one another? If so, can you tell me how?
21. Do you believe that you have a group of good capable teachers here at school?
22. If you are happy with the teachers, do you tell them that and praise them for the job they are doing?
23. Do you work closely with teachers at this school? If so, can you tell me about it?
24. If teachers at this school are having difficulties with a learner, do they come to you for guidance?
25. If a learner is not doing well in school, or misbehaving, do you contact the parents?
26. How do parents react?

Parents

27. How do you feel about parental involvement in their child's education?
28. Can you tell me how you think parents value education?
29. What kind of a relationship does this school have with parents?
30. Can you tell me if parents sometimes visit this school? If so, why do they visit?
31. Do you welcome and encourage parents to visit the school?
32. Can you tell me if it is important that parents visit school? If so, can you tell me why?
33. Do members of the community visit this school? If so, why?
34. Does the local leader come to visit the school? If so, how often does he visit and why?
35. Do you think it is important for the school that the local leader comes to visit? If so, why?

School

36. Can you tell me about the school buildings?
    a. How many classrooms do you have?

b. How many classes are outside?
c. Is there a library?
d. Is there a staff room?
e. Is there a storage room?
f. Does the school have electricity/running water (borehole/waterpumt)?
g. How many latrines are at this school?
h. How many houses for the teachers?
i. Does this school have any teaching material to enrich teaching and learning?
j. Is this school taking part in Mary's meals?

School community

37. What do you think of the work the PTA does here at school?
38. Do you believe the PTA is an important group at school? If so, why and for whom?
39. What do you think of the work the MSG does here at school and in the community?
40. Do yo believe the MSG does an important job? If so, for whom?
41. What do you think of the work the SMG does here at school?
42. Do you believe the school management committee is important? If so, for whom?

Questions for the PEAs

Background

1. For how long have you been a primary education advisor - PEA?
2. And for how long in this district?
3. Before you became the PEA, were you teaching? If so, for how long?
4. Before you became the PEA, were you offered any training to prepare for the job? If so, by whom and in what form was the training?
5. What is the main responsibilities of a PEA?
6. Can you tell me if the PEAs in Mangochi District meet regularly to discuss school matters in the district? Do you work together? If so, can you tell me about that?
7. Do you have regular meetings with local educational authorites about problems your schools are facing?
8. Do you work closely with the DEM's office?

9. Can you tell me about your work with the teachers at this school?
10. Do you seek ways to help teachers to further their development in teaching? To improve their knowledge or skills? If so, how?
11. Do teachers ever come to you and ask for assistance with a teaching problem?
12. Do you encourage teachers to work together and support one another? If so, can you tell me about that?
13. Do you offer teachers workshops? If so, can you tell me about that?
14. Do teachers attend these training sessions/workshops?
15. Do you invite teachers from different schools in the zone to meet with each other to share ideas? (School-school collaboration) Or for a workshop? Can you tell me about that?
16. Do you work closely with the HT at the schools in your zone? Can you tell me about that?
17. What do you consider to be the biggest challenge for teachers at this school?
18. Is it difficult to get trained teachers to come and teach at this school?If so, why do you think that is?
19. Do you believe that the teachers at this school, work well together, supporting one another, sharing ideas for different teaching methods, etc? Can you explain further?

Parental involvement

20. Can you tell me if you believe that there is a good relationships between this school and the parents? And the community? If so, can you tell me about that?
21. Do you believe a good relationship is important? If so, for whom?
22. Do you know whether parents visit this school sometimes, without being called?
23. Can you tell me if you think it is important that parents come to school for a visit? If so, can you elaborate?
24. Do you think the schools should encourage parents to come to school for a visit? Why?
25. How do you think parents feel about education?
26. How do you feel about parental involvement in their children's education?

School community

27. What can you tell me abou the work of the PTA at this school (SMC and MSG).

Community

28. Do you know whether people from surrounding villages come to visit this school?
29. Do you think they are interested in school and education?
30. Can you tell me if you think it is important how the community/surrounding villages feel about education? If so, why is it important?
31. Do the local leaders come to school for a visit?
32. Do you know whether they are interested in education? Do they find it important?
33. Do you think it is important how the local leader feels about education? Why?
34. Do you feel that you are a part of the community/village where you live?
35. Are you invited to attend village ceremonies? Do you attend them?

Mangochi

36. In Mangochi District, the pass rate is low and the drop-out rate is high. Do you have any suggestions about what can be done to reverse that situation?
37. What do you consider is the biggest problem the schools in this zone are facing?

Questions for the DEM

Background

1. How long have you been the DEM in Mangochi?
2. Before you became the DEM in Mangochi, had you been a DEM somewhere else?
3. Who appoints the DEM? (the ministry?)
4. For how long is the DEM appointed for?

DEM´s office

5. How many people work at the DEM´s office in Mangochi?
6. What is the main responsibility of a DEM?

Schools in the district

7. Can you tell me if you have an opportunity to visit rural schools in your district? Can you tell me about those visits?
8. Can you tell me if you have an opportunity to meet with teachers in your district? Can you tell me about those visits?
9. Do you meet regularly with Ht in the district?
10. If so, how often would you say you meet with them?

11. Do they come to your office, or do you go to the schools?
12. What about the PEAs, do you meet with them regularly?
13. Do they come to your office, or do you visit them?
14. Can you tell me if you or your office provide any support to teachers in the district?
15. If so, what kind of a support?
16. What about support to HT? And PEAs? What kind of a support is it?
17. What do you consider to be the biggest problem rural schools in your district face?
18. With regards to teacher recruitment, do you have problem recruiting trained teachers to rural schools in Mangochi? Can you tell me about that?
19. Has the ministry been allocating teachers regularly in the last few years (say in the last five years)?
20. Do you get as many teachers as you request from the ministry?
21. What do you think is the biggest reason for the high drop put rate in primary schools in Mangochi District?
22. What do you think is the biggest reasons for the low pass rate in primary schools in Mangochi District?
23. What do you personally consider the best way forward to increase the pass rate in the district, and to decrease the drop-out rate?
24. Do you think it is important that HT in the district collaborate and work together?
25. If so, can you tell me why? What is the benefit from such a collaboration?
26. Do you encourage HT to collaborate together?
27. Do you think it is important for PEAs in the district to collaborate or work together?
28. If so, can you tell me why? What do you beleive are the benefits from such a collaboration?
29. Do you encourage PEAs to callobarate together?
30. Can you tell me if you or your office work directly with teachers in the district?
31. Or are the HT or the PEAs the bridge between your office and the schools?
32. Can you tell me if you believe that the PEAs and HTs in the district support and encourage teachers on the job?
33. Do you think such a support and encouragement to teachers is important? If so, why?

34. What do you think of the role and work of the PTA, the SMC and MSG?
35. What was the rational behind establishing these groups at each school?
36. Do you belief these groups are important for the schools? If so, in what way?

Questions for parents

1. How many of your children are at this school and in what Standard are they?
2. Do you know your child's teacher?
3. Can you tell me if you meet your child's teacher regularly? If so, how often?
4. If your child has a problem at school, does the teacher contact you?
5. If you think your child has a problem at school, do you contact the teacher?
6. If your child is doing well at school, does the teacher contact you to let you know?
7. Can you tell me if you visit this school regularly? If so, can you tell me how often?
8. What are the main reasons for your visits?
9. Do you feel welcome at school when you visit?
10. Does your child's teacher encourage you to visit the school? Can you tell me about that?
11. Does your child's teacher invite you to attend events at school?
12. Do you attend parent-teacher meetings?
13. Do you meet with the HT regularly? If so, how often do you meet the HT?
14. Does the HT encourage you to visit the school? Can you tell me about that?
15. Do you think the teachers and the HT want parents to visit the school?
16. Can you tell me if you think it is important for your child to attend school and get an education? If so, why do you think it is important?
17. If you think it is important for your child to finish primary school, can you tell me why?
18. Do you think it is important that your child goes to secondary school? If so, why?
19. Did you have an opportunity to go to primary school when you were a child?
20. If you had an opportunity, what Standard did you finish?
21. Do you talk to your child about education and school? Can you tell me about that?

22. Do you discuss education with your child? Can you tell me about those discussions?
23. Do you make sure your child looks well after his or her school books?
24. Do you make sure your child goes to school every day?
25. Do you sometimes help your child with homework? Can you tell me about that?
26. Do you and your child read together?
27. If so, can you tell me how your child feels about that?
28. How do you feel about this school?
29. How do you feel about the teachers at this school?
30. What do you think is the biggest problem this school is facing?
31. What do you think about the work the PTA does at this school?
32. Have you ever attended PTA meetings?
33. Have you even been a member of the PTA?
34. What do you think about the work the SMC does at this school?
35. Have you ever been a member of the SMC?
36. What do you think about the work the MSG does?
37. How do you think the community feels about education?
38. Do you ever meet your child's teacher outside of school, in your community?
39. Can you tell me if your community encourages teachers from this school to participate in community events?

<u>Questions for local leaders</u>

1. Can you tell me for how long you have been the local leader in your community?
2. How often do you visit this school each term?
3. What is the main reason for your visits?
4. Do you meet the teachers at this school? If so, why? What do you discuss?
5. Do you meet the HT at this school? If so, why? What do you discuss?
6. What do you think of education?
7. Do you think it is important that children in your community go to secondary school?
8. Can you tell me if you encourage parents in your community to send their children to school?

9. Can you tell me if you sometimes meet with parents in your community where you discuss education with them? Can you tell me something about that?
10. Do you think it is important for parents in your community to know how you feel about education? If so, can you tell me why?
11. How do you feel about this school?
12. What do you think is the biggest problem this school is facing?
13. What do you think this school could do to increase the pass rate?
14. What do you think this school could do to decrease the drop-out rate?
15. Do you meet with the PEA – primary education advisor – to discuss education?
16. If so, can you tell me about these discussions?
17. How often do you meet the PEA each school term?
18. Do you meet with the DEM to discuss education?
19. If so, can you tell me about these discussions?
20. Do you talk with other local leaders about how the schools in the communites are doing? If so, can you tell me abou that?
21. What do you think about the work the MSG does?
22. What do you think about the work the SMC does?
23. What do you think about the work the PTA does?
24. Are the teachers and the HT at this school a part of your community?
25. If so, can you tell me how?