



The Quality Standardization of Teachers in Malawi Government Secondary Schools

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Authors' contributions

This work was carried out in collaboration between authors OFB and HCC. Author HCC designed the study and wrote the first draft, author OFB wrote the protocol and supervised the work. Authors OFB and HCC analysed and interpreted the findings. Author HCC managed the literature searches and author OFB edited the manuscript. Both authors jointly approved the final manuscript.

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ABSTRACT

Understanding what is happening with teachers' availability, training and quality is one of the most pressing issues facing education in Africa today. Over the past decade many African countries have been reducing their investments in teacher training and recruiting nonprofessional teachers both as a cost-cutting measure and as a quick - fix solution to the teacher shortage. In countries such as Malawi, there are a lot of challenges in education particularly looking at teachers' quality standardization as much of the research has not been done to assess how they impact the performance of educational institutions. This paper therefore, aimed at assessing the impact of teachers' quality on secondary school performance in Malawi. That was based on the premise that a good quality teacher can guide the learning process of children, making learning relevant and stimulating. The study took place in the Central East Education Division in Malawi and systematically examined teachers' views on the impact of teachers' quality on school performance in Malawi. Qualitative methods were used in order to get the in-depth perceptions from teachers

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because teachers play a crucial role in implementing the educational goals of any society. The results indicate that both the under-qualification of teachers as well as other social problems contribute to low performance in educational institutions in Malawi. Therefore, the Malawi government as well as other educational stakeholders should try as much as possible to address the teachers' quality challenges as well as other challenges especially in the secondary schools.

Keywords: Quality standardization; educational policy; Malawi.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Malawi government mission of education is to provide quality and relevant education to the Malawian nation. Such education should enable people to acquire relevant knowledge, skills, expertise and competencies to perform effectively as citizens, workforce and as leaders of Malawi, thereby reducing poverty amongst the people of Malawi [1].

To realize the vision and its mission, the Malawi education sector has defined three thematic areas of intervention during the ten-year period of the current National Education Sector Plan (2008 – 2017). One of these is to improve quality and relevance of education to reduce drop-out and repetition and promote effective learning [2]. One way of improving quality in education is to have many well qualified teachers in its education system [2].

There is a widespread agreement among researchers and policymakers that teachers matter significantly in improving student learning [3]. This is so since high-quality teaching may be the most important school-based factor in increasing student achievement [4]. It is a fact that the academic qualifications, knowledge of the subject matter, competence, and skills of teaching and the commitment of the teacher have effective impact on the teaching and learning process [5]. Quality improvement in education depends upon proper training of teachers. The teachers cannot play any of the roles unless properly trained [5]. Therefore effective teachers should produce students of higher academic performance.

Hanushek [6] estimates that the difference between having a good teacher and having a bad teacher can exceed one grade-level equivalent in annual achievement growth. Likewise, [7] and [8] argue that the single most important factor affecting student achievement is teachers, and the effects of teachers on student achievement are both additive and cumulative. Further, they contend that lower achieving students are the most likely to benefit from

increases in teacher effectiveness. Taken together, these multiple sources of evidence—however different in nature—all conclude that quality teachers are a critical determinant of student achievement. In the current policy climate of standards-based reform, these findings make a strong case for gaining a better understanding of what really accounts for these effects [9].

In a growing number of bodies of research in United States of America it also shows that student achievement is more heavily influenced by teacher quality than by students' race, class, prior academic record, or school a student attends. This effect is particularly strong among students from low-income families and African American students. The benefits associated with being taught by good teachers are cumulative. Research indicates that the achievement gap widens each year between students with most effective teachers and those with least effective teachers. This suggests that the most significant gains in student achievement will likely be realized when students receive instruction from good teachers over consecutive years [10].

Rice [9] indicates four key dimensions of teacher quality:

- Content knowledge.
- Teaching experience.
- Professional certification.
- Overall academic ability.

Researchers have investigated the role of teacher preservice coursework as a foundation of high-quality instruction, placing a particular emphasis on the impact of the courses teachers have taken on the achievement of their students. Syntheses of the literature on this topic found that coursework in the specific academic content areas a teacher is assigned to teach can promote teacher quality and student achievement in some subjects and grade levels. Beyond that general conclusion, though, key research questions have centred on efforts to pinpoint the academic subjects where coursework makes a clear difference, to

understand the influence of the grade level taught, and to examine how the effects of coursework in pedagogy differ from those of courses in an academic content area [9].

However, advanced degrees in general—degrees that are not in the subject matter being taught—have not been found to be associated with higher student achievement. Research is not yet clear about the magnitude of the effect of teachers' content knowledge relative to other important teacher attributes [10].

Furthermore, while a number of studies indicate that coursework contributes to teacher quality, the impact varies across academic subjects and grade levels. The most consistent cross-study finding from the research on teacher coursework is a positive connection between student achievement in mathematics and teachers' coursework in that subject. Some studies support the view that teacher coursework in science contributes to student performance on science tests, but findings have been less consistent than for mathematics [11]. Definitive results linking coursework in subjects other than mathematics and science to student achievement have not been produced. Just as academic subject taught plays an important role in the impact of teacher coursework, grade level taught appears to influence research results on this topic. The findings on mathematics and science coursework are strongest at the secondary level [11].

Most of the countries ensure that teachers join education institutions when they are certified. A certified teacher is a teacher who has earned credentials from an authoritative source, such as the government, a higher education institution or a private source. This teacher qualification gives a teacher authorization to teach and grade in pre-schools, primary or secondary education in countries, schools, content areas or curricula where authorization is required. While many authorizing entities require student teaching before earning teacher certification, routes vary from country to country. A teaching qualification is one of a number of academic and professional degrees that enables a person to become a registered teacher. Examples of teaching qualifications include the Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE), the Professional Graduate Diploma in Education (PGDE) and the Bachelor of Education [6]. Over the years, researchers have evaluated the impact of various types of certification. Studies have examined the effects of alternative-route, emergency, and

subject-specific certification on student performance [12].

Some studies demonstrate that students with certified teachers perform better than students with teachers who have no certification or emergency certification. Similarly, studies show that teachers who have professional education training, or "pedagogy," produce higher student achievement than those who enter the profession and lack this background. Some studies find that the effects of teacher certification are even greater than those of teacher experience. However, other researchers urge caution about making generalizations regarding the effect of certification because not all studies support these findings and certification requirements vary considerably by states in United States of America [10].

Researchers also agree that teaching experience is positively correlated with higher student achievement even though findings about its meaning vary. For example, some studies find that years of teaching experience are a consistent predictor of higher test scores Others document a negative effect when a high proportion of inexperienced teachers are present in a school in terms of higher dropout rates and lower student achievement [13]. Nevertheless, some research studies suggest that the effect of teacher experience is small relative to the effects of the other three desirable teacher characteristics: teachers' content knowledge, credentials, and overall academic ability [13].

Research also indicates that teachers with greater academic ability tend to have students who perform better. The findings hold up regardless of which indicator researchers use to represent teachers' academic skills: SAT or ACT scores, grade point average, or selectivity of college attended. However, because of the different measures, it is difficult to generalize about the magnitude of the effect on student performance [12].

Another way of ensuring teachers' quality in many countries has been professional development. Professional development focuses on improving the ongoing practice of teaching and learning for those already serving in the schools. A basic theory of action drives professional development activities. In order to impact student learning, professional development must first enhance teacher knowledge and skills, then create improved classroom teaching, which finally raises student

achievement. Professional development can potentially serve a variety of purposes such as remediating weaknesses in the skills and knowledge of incoming teachers, keeping teachers up to date on emerging developments in the field, or addressing the needs of such specific student populations as English-language-learners or special education students [14].

Systematic reviews exploring the effects of professional development on student achievement have produced some additional insights. For example, a review of professional development programs in math and science found that programs focused mainly on teacher behaviours demonstrated smaller influences on student learning than did programs concerned primarily with teachers' knowledge of the subject, the curriculum, or how students learn the subject [15].

Some research also suggests that, compared with teachers, individual and family characteristics may have four to eight times the impact on student achievement [10]. But policy discussions focus on teachers because it is arguably easier for public policy to improve teaching than to change students' personal characteristics or family circumstances. Effective teaching has the potential to help level the playing field.

However, the findings from above studies in relating to Malawian situation are limited because most of these studies took place in developed countries and somehow they may prove us wrong if we try to generalize them to the developing countries such as Malawi because there are many differences between developed countries and developing countries. That was why another study was carried out in Malawi to determine teachers' quality and school performance.

2. RATIONALE OF THE STUDY

It was hoped that the findings would contribute to the current international and national debates around teachers' qualification levels and training programmes and, most importantly, what policies are required to ensure teachers are prepared and equipped to offer good quality education to children. In the context of Malawi this study was necessary as it is trying all the means to move out from poverty situation. We believe high quality of education can be one of the means to move the population out of poverty. Therefore,

research can be a better tool for achieving high quality education since we believe Malawi would be informed of the proper directions to follow based on our findings.

2.1 Research Question

In conducting this study we sought to answer the following question:

What are the criteria for teachers' quality standardization in Malawian Government secondary schools?

2.2 Research Strategy

This study used qualitative methods. The main reason for choosing a qualitative approach was that we wanted to explore the views of teachers with regard to how they perceived teachers' quality standardization in relation to their work performance. Also, a qualitative approach was considered the best for this study due to its theoretical underpinnings as it regards the difference in individual perceptions and uniqueness in interpreting the phenomena [16]. Qualitative research which is exploratory in nature enabled us to enter the field with an open mind [17]. It is holistic and it provides a contextual understanding of the lived experience from the participants [18]. Moreover, it is more convincing and appealing than statistical power, generalised and replicated findings [17].

2.3 Sampling

Teachers from three types of public secondary schools in the Central East Educational Division were purposively chosen to participate in the study. Those teachers were selected on the basis that they had been teaching for more than five years and, subsequently, have the necessary knowledge and experience in the teaching field. The study comprised of ten teachers from district secondary schools of which 40% were males and 60% were females, ten teachers from the conventional secondary schools of which 70% were males and 30% were females and ten teachers from community day secondary schools of which 80% were males and 20% were females.

2.4 Data Collection and Analysis

Data were obtained through in-depth interviews in order to get accurate data with the speakers. In addition, data were also obtained through analysis of documents, (i.e., documents relating

to school performance in Malawi). Then we conducted an in-depth qualitative analysis for the data we had obtained. The findings were presented by descriptive analysis.

2.5 Ethical Considerations

Participation should be voluntary at all times and no one should be forced to participate [19]. Participation in this study was voluntary and participants were given the option to withdraw at any time if they no longer wanted to participate. The researcher assured the participants that they would remain anonymous. According to [19], information given anonymously guarantees the privacy of subjects. This implies that the researcher will not release or publish the names of the participants. According to [20], written informed consent for participation in interviews has become a necessity rather than a luxury or an impediment. All the participants signed a consent form containing detailed information of the study and its intended purpose.

2.6 Findings and Comments

Teachers' competence standardization aims to improve the quality of teachers, in order to handle their job professionally [21]. That is why in our research we mainly focussed on determining teachers' qualification in government secondary schools in Malawi with the assumption that highly qualified teachers can positively contribute to high education performance for any educational institution. It should be noted that Malawian public secondary schools are categorized as district secondary Schools, conventional secondary schools as well as community day secondary schools.

The results of the research objectives are presented in the Table 1 below.

Based on the Table 1 above, it shows that most of the teachers who teach in the community day secondary schools have low qualifications. The table indicates that (60%) of the respondents from the community day secondary schools had only the Malawi School Certificate of Education (MSCE) as their highest level of educational qualifications. The table also shows that (50%) of the teachers interviewed from conventional secondary schools were qualified to diploma level, (30%) were qualified to bachelor degree level and (10%) were qualified to Malawi School Certificate of Education level. On the other hand, the data collected from respondents from district secondary schools indicate that almost all the teachers who teach at government district

secondary schools are qualified as 80% of the teachers interviewed from those schools had attained degree level and the least had diploma level. None of those teachers was unqualified. This shows that government uses some standards in determining who should teach at those schools; for example interviewee K had this to say:

I believe there are some teachers' quality standardization measures in our country but they are hidden, even though I have never read any criteria since I joined teaching profession. I believe criteria are there but are unpublished. This can be seen when we compare government district secondary schools and community day secondary schools. You can see that all of us here are qualified teachers. All of us have degrees and we have been teaching in the government for more than ten years. On the other hand if you go to community day secondary schools you will be shocked as most of the teachers there have just the Malawi School Certificate of Education as their highest qualification. I think this is done deliberately by the government. You have to know that all of us are on government payroll.

Adding to that respondent MM had said that:

Now there is teachers' quality standardisation in our country, all the teachers that are hired by the government are qualified to the degree level from 2008. Moreover, the government is trying as much as possible to deploy the under-qualified teachers to primary schools and it urban areas. It started long time ago.

However, another respondent said that there is no criterion for determining teachers' quality standards in Malawi. For example the interviewee A had these to say:

Believe me there is no criterion for measuring teachers' quality standards in our country. In many government schools, many teachers have degrees or diplomas not related to education. They just employ anyhow here. If you want to talk about quality standards go to developed countries .Thus where you can find a certified teacher not our Nyasaland brothers. Can a person holding Malawi school certificate of education as the highest education qualification teach in countries like Britain?

Table 1. Respondents' gender information and educational level

Respondents' category	Sex/Gender		Educational level		
	Male	Female	Malawi School certificate (MSCE)	Diploma	Degree
Conventional secondary school teacher	7(70%)	3(30%)	1(10%)	5(50%)	3(30%)
Community day secondary school teacher	8(80%)	2(20%)	6(60%)	3(30%)	1(10%)
District education secondary school teacher	4(40%)	6(60%)	-	2(20%)	8(80%)

Source: Field data

Moreover, respondent P said that:

There is no clear teachers' quality standardization in our countries. Many secondary schools in the rural areas are dominated by teachers of which many have no degree qualification. This is also contributing to low performance to such schools.

As can be observed from the remarks from the interviewees it shows that most developing countries such as Malawi struggle so much in implementing teachers' quality standardization.

This can be so because to train a teacher to the degree level it's so expensive to the developing countries. Perhaps this is why there is no clear criterion in determining teachers' quality standardization in Malawi. The government does what it may manage depending on financial status.

The table also shows that there is gender imbalance in terms of teacher distribution in Malawi. As seen from the above, most female teachers prefer to teach in the district secondary schools perhaps because those schools are situated in towns or else there might be other reasons. This can agree with what respondent D had to say:

I cannot teach in community day secondary schools as most of the schools are in the rural areas where it is very difficult to access social amenities. I am educated so when shall I enjoy if I plant myself in those remote areas.

With such gender imbalance in teachers' distributions, it can be seen that girls from the rural schools struggle a lot in finding the females to act as their role models as well as to help them in issues that may be effectively dealt by the female teachers.

The second objective of our research was to determine the results because we were working on the assumption that the teachers' quality standard in a country may also be evaluated by looking at the results of national examinations or other examinations. So in this category we checked the results of the national examinations from 2010 to 2014 in Malawi. We analysed for both junior secondary school examination results as well as the senior secondary school of education examinations results (see Table 2 and Table 3).

Table 2. Pupils' performance at junior certificate level (2010-2014)

Year	Entered	Passed	% Passed
2010	118,576	71,950	60.68
2011	120,668	80,157	66.43
2012	118,448	79,194	66.43
2013	127,098	91,510	72.00
2014	124,999	91,539	73.23

Source: Malawi National Examination Board

Table 3. Pupils performance at Malawi school certificate of education results (2010-2014)

Year	Entered	Passed	% Passed
2010	68,642	36,621	53.35
2011	102,691	56,273	54.80
2012	111,781	57,906	51.80
2013	127,383	66,853	52.48
2014	130,293	71,486	54.87

Source: Malawi National Examination Board

As can be seen from Table 2, the pass rate for Junior Certificate of Education (JCE) results have been increasing. The pass rate moved from (60%) from 2010 to around (70%) in 2014.

From Table 3, it indicates that the results for Malawi school Certificate of Education (MSCE) have been fluctuating around 50% over the last five years. This shows that a large number of students who take the Malawi School Certificate of Education Examinations are failing to qualify.

3. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study aimed to determine the impact of teachers' quality standardization in Malawi. The study used the qualitative method to investigate this notion. The results have shown that there is a link between teacher's qualification and average student achievement. This agrees with [4] who attests that high-quality teaching may be the most important school-based factor in increasing student achievement.

Our findings are also consistent with other findings elsewhere. For example the Tennessee Department of Education's STAR project designed an experiment to evaluate the effects of smaller classes on student achievement over four years. The experiment randomly assigned students from various racial and socioeconomic backgrounds to small and regular-size classes in 79 schools across the state. STAR's reliance on randomized samples, combined with the data-tracking capacity of TVAAS, offered an important and unique opportunity to examine variations in student achievement where the only difference between classes was the teacher. Analyses of TVAAS and STAR data indicated that teachers had a substantial effect on student achievement [22]. While the Tennessee data from STAR showed achievement gains associated with smaller class sizes, a stronger achievement gain is associated with teacher quality. In addition, differences in student performance were more heavily influenced by the teacher than by student ethnicity or class, or by the school attended by the student [10].

This finding also agrees with the earlier studies of [23,24], which indicated that effective teachers produced high performing students.

However, other findings from other studies also show that the students' performance in many secondary schools in Malawi is also associated with many factors such as the presence of infrastructure, social status of the families the students are coming from, gender of the students and distribution of teachers to various secondary schools [25]. According to [25], they found that many students in CDDSS perform poorly due to poor infrastructures; low equipment for teaching and learning as well as having a large number of unqualified teachers. Moreover, many female teachers do not want to teach in those schools as a result the girl child lacks the role model hence poor results for female students [25]. Also in support of this study, [26] concluded that

teachers condemn the use of students' scores to evaluate their effectiveness and performance. [27] had identified peer influence, race, ethnicity, gender, motivation, income, intellectual aptitude of the student, personality of student, self-confidence, previous instructional quality received by the student, household environment, and parental education as student related factors that influence the academic performance of students, in further support of these views.

With these findings, caution is needed when analysing the determinants of examination pass rates, as those shortcomings may lead to biased and counterintuitive results. Yet they allow, to a certain extent, the identification of certain critical issues pertaining to education quality of the school level. Therefore, the attempts to improve the students' performance in many secondary schools especially in developing countries like Malawi need to be approached in several dimensions.

4. RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that the government of Malawi should train many teachers and deploy them to CDSSs where many teachers are unqualified.

The government should find better measures of attracting female teachers in order to work in the rural communities so that the girl students may find their role models.

There is also a need for the Malawi government as well as other Malawian developing partners to assist in the provision of good infrastructure to many schools. They should also supply learning equipment especially to CDSS. The government should also rehabilitate the existing secondary schools that are in poor condition.

In order to reduce the disparity in the learning outcome between boys and girls, the government should ensure that many schools have girls' boarding facilities. This can reduce girl abuse (i.e., overworking in household chores, sexual manipulations from the education communities, and reduced distance to schools).

In this study, we only concentrated on the teachers' diplomas which somehow are the proxy measures for teachers' quality; there were no direct measurements of teaching quality such as classroom observations or administration of questionnaires. Adding to that, we also took a

very small purposive sample of teachers and asked for their perceptions in regard to quality of teaching. Therefore, we encourage other researchers to consider these limitations for the next research similar to this one.

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COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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