

# Examining Challenges that Affect the Implementation of the National Reading Programme by Teachers: A Case of Selected Schools in Malawi

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## **Abstract**

*The Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MoEST) in Malawi introduced the National Reading Programme (NRP) in 2015 to improve early grade learners' literacy skills. However, results from the 2017 and 2018 national reading assessment for Standard 2, Standard 4 and the NRP monitoring strategy revealed that the state of reading achievement was still below average. This study therefore examined challenges that affect the implementation of NRP by teachers. The study was qualitative in nature and was guided by the Social Constructivist Theory. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews with sixteen teachers, four head teachers, two Primary Education Advisors (PEAs) and one NRP Officer. Documentary analysis and classroom observations were done to triangulate data collected through interviews.*

*The study revealed that improvements in aspects of education systems including proper training and distribution of teachers, improved school infrastructure and community involvement, etc., are certainly necessary to achieve universal literacy. The study also suggested that it is only through everyone's hard work and commitment that would ensure the realisation of the important goal of having all Malawian children be able to read and write.*

*The study is important because it provides a set of principles of learning about ideas and practices that promote learners' academic achievement in reading and writing. Another anticipated value of the study is that it aggregates previous relevant studies on the problems surrounding the language curriculum implementation and synthesise the findings of previous studies.*

**Keywords:** National Reading Programme, Implementation, Literacy, Scaffolding, Curriculum, Instruction

## **Introduction**

In March 1990, the United Nations organised a world conference which advocated for "Education for All" in Jomtien in Thailand. All countries, including Malawi were asked to start working towards achieving the goal (Wamba & Mgomezulu, 2014). In response to the conference agreement, the government of Malawi introduced Free Primary Education (FPE) in 1994. Soon after the nation attained the democratic system with an aim to provide an opportunity to all children to enroll in schools. The government realised that reducing poverty was not possible without sustained economic growth and that economic growth would not happen without investing in education (Wamba & Mgomezulu, 2014).

Although enrolment rates in schools rose markedly in recent years, globally, literacy rates were still very low. For example, UNESCO (2011) estimates that 250 million primary school-aged children, out of a total of 650 million, are failing to acquire basic reading skills (Education for All, 2014). Likewise, although the education sector in Malawi made significant gains in increasing equitable access to the primary education system, learning levels remain low as indicated in national reading assessment (2014) results.

The FPE was affected by unmeasurable hiccups that made it difficult to achieve its objectives that it was introduced for. According to Wamba and Mgomozulu (2014), the first challenge was classroom shortage which was created as a result of an instant overcrowding situation especially in primary schools that offered all class levels (from 1<sup>st</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> Grade). As fees were waived, children flooded a school system that was below capacity and lacked the physical facilities to absorb all the newcomers. Between 1994 and 1995, pupils' enrollment surged from 1.9 to 3.2 million. In some schools, pupils were forced to study outdoors under trees.

The second challenge was teacher shortage and poor teacher qualifications. The FPE policy pressured the government into recruiting large numbers of minimally qualified candidates and subjected them to crash training programmes. Out of a total of 45,075 primary school teachers, only 23,429 were qualified from official training colleges leaving almost 21,646 unqualified and under-qualified (Education Statistics, 2010). The majority of teachers in Malawian primary schools have completed secondary education with either a lower secondary Junior Certificate Examination (JCE) or a higher Secondary Malawi School Certification Examination (MSCE) (Wamba & Mgomozulu, 2014). Multiple studies also admit that lack of inadequate qualified teachers in schools affect the teaching of reading in most low-income country schools. For example, a global report by UNESCO in 2011 established that acute shortages of qualified teachers are common, especially in sub-Saharan Africa and South and West Asia, which hinder quality of teaching and learning. These challenges affected the objectives for which free education was introduced as Malawi experienced a rampant decrease in literacy rates.

To address the learners' reading challenges in schools, the Malawi Government through the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MoEST), introduced early grade intervention programmes which focussed on few districts in Malawi. For example, Read Malawi, and Strengthening Early Grade Reading in Malawi (SEGREM) were introduced in Machinga, Balaka and Mangochi because these districts experienced the lowest literacy levels of learners. However, these intervention programmes failed to achieve the intended objectives because of large classes and shortage of teachers and teaching materials (Graham & Kelly, 2018) which were influenced by the high enrolment of learners in schools following the introduction of the FPE in most countries (Wamba & Mgomozulu, 2014). Most schools in Uganda, Ghana and Tanzania and Malawi lack adequate teaching materials such as textbooks, charts and writing materials. Given the current issue

of large class sizes experienced by many schools in the sub-Saharan countries, students' learning and academic performance is under challenge (UNESCO, 2011). A scarcity of textbooks means that students are not able to practise reading and writing or increase their information base beyond classroom note taking.

Due to the aforementioned challenges, Kadzamira and Rose (2003) report that Malawi faces an acute illiteracy levels of students in the lower classes of primary education. The results of the national reading assessment (2014) revealed that learners could reach standard four without acquiring the basic reading skills. Masina (2014) also observed that speaking, reading and writing in English are some of the challenges experienced by pupils in Malawi including those who have completed secondary school education. Most of the pupils move from one class to another without attaining a desirable level of literacy skills. These revelations signaled the dire need to improve reading instruction and outcomes in order to achieve the goal of universal primary education.

In an effort to improve literacy levels in schools, the Malawian government introduced the National Reading Programme (NRP) in 2015, in order to ensure that at least 50 per cent of learners that complete Standard 4 are able to read (MoEST, 2016). MoEST also took the task of strengthening teachers' skills and knowledge of how to teach language skills in Standards 1 to 4 by providing them with the training and on-going professional development through coaching. All language teachers, head teachers and Primary Education Advisors (PEAs) received training in NRP instructional methods, approaches and strategies of teaching reading, to complement the ones teachers are already using in schools. This was to ensure the fruitful implementation of NRP across all schools. For NRP to be successful, MoEST encouraged all the stakeholders such as education authorities, head teachers and their associations to hold hands to support the implementation of the reading activity in order to achieve the desired results.

### **Statement of the Research Problem**

MoEST introduced NRP in 2015 to improve early grade (Standards 1 to 4) learners' literacy skills. This programme incorporated good teaching and learning practices drawn from several literacy interventions (e.g. Read Malawi and Early Grade Reading Activity (EGRA)) that had been conducted in selected districts across Malawi over the past years in order to achieve the most desired reading outcomes. However, results from the 2017 and 2018 national reading assessment for Standards 2 and 4 and NRP monitoring revealed that the state of reading achievement was still below average. Most children in Malawi were still unable to read even after spending four years in school. This signaled that the implementation exercise was facing some difficulties. These revelations pointed to the critical need to explore challenges that impede the success of NRP implementation. Hence this study carried out an inclusive participatory investigation into options for reducing challenges that hinder the reading implementation exercise.

## **Aim of the Study**

The study aimed at examining challenges that affect the implementation of NRP by teachers in Standards 1 to 4 in Malawi.

## **Theoretical Framework**

This study adopted Vygotsky's Social Constructivist Theory. Vygotsky states that learning takes place as learners are vigorously involved in constant and continuous practice of concepts with the teacher and on their own through authentic tasks given within a meaningful context in order to promote individual learning and encourage learners to be engaged in tasks. The Social Constructivist Theory promotes the learner-centred approach to learning while at the same time encourages co-operative teaching. Learners construct meaning and make interpretations based on their prior knowledge and experience. NRP was developed based on this theory. The advocates of NRP believe that learners should be helped to construct knowledge useful in their own lives based on their prior knowledge and experience (Motitswe, 2012). Hence proper training of teachers in the use of participatory methods and appropriate teaching resources is an important requirement. With the availability of adequate teaching resources, a well-trained teacher prepares differentiated learning activities for learners in advance while bearing in mind learners' abilities. Vygotsky uses two key concepts to support his theory; the *Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)* and *scaffolding* (Stuart, Akyeampong & Croft, 2009).

The ZPD is the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of the child in collaboration with more capable peers (Vygotsky, 1980). Vygotsky indicates that if children are given appropriate and meaningful support, then their understanding can be extended far beyond that which they could reach alone (Stuart *et al.*, 2009). In this theory, learning is therefore seen as assisted performance. On the other hand, the concept of scaffolding advocates support for learners as they move from the known to the unknown. For example, cognition, language, and forms of thought are scaffolded by the culture and social history of the learner as well as by direct teaching. Vygotsky states that well trained teachers act as scientists, investigating students' thinking, and finding ways of scaffolding students in constructing their understanding and extending what they learn in ways that are appropriate to their level.

## **Literature Review**

The aim of this section is two-fold: to review early grade reading intervention projects that aimed at reducing early-grade literacy deficiencies and to examine challenges that were encountered during the implementation. It was learnt from the review that because the challenges were enormous, most of the projects were consequently discontinued.

### ***Previous Early Grade Interventions***

In recent years, several Early Grade Reading (EGR) intervention projects have sought to address early-grade literacy deficiencies. Graham and Kelly (2018) state that EGR intervention projects were initiated in most of the low- and middle-income regions such as Sub-Saharan African countries (e.g. Uganda, South Africa, Congo, Tanzania and Malawi). Some of the reading intervention projects that took place in Malawi include Read Malawi, SEGREM, Language Across the Country (LAC) and Malawi Break Through to Literacy (MBTL). Early grade programmes aimed at developing letter sound recognition (LSR) and letter name recognition (LNR), which measure the basic reading skill of the alphabetic principle, as well as oral reading fluency (ORF) and reading comprehension (RC), which assess fluency and comprehension (Graham & Kelly, 2018).

Through these programmes, teachers were trained to teach reading using simplified instructional techniques and evidence-based curricula. The programmes also aimed at providing the following four potential components: instructional guidelines, in-school coaching and monitoring for teachers, supplementary instructional and reading materials, and tools and training for student assessment. Each of these components has theoretical evidence on important aspects that enhance literacy skills in learners, as described below.

#### **(a) Training Teachers to Teach Literacy with Simplified Instruction and Evidence-Based Curricula (The Core Component)**

Almost all successful instructional interventions include at least a minimal attempt to develop teachers' capacity to deliver effective classroom instruction (The World Bank Development Report, 2018). According to the World Bank Development Report on education, teacher trainings are most effective when they teach practical skills, are specific to a subject, and occur continuously as recommended by most EGR intervention programmes (The World Bank Development Report, 2018). While these reviews did not explicitly study literacy, the broader education literature clearly agrees that training teachers on evidence-based pedagogies is largely effective.

#### **(b) Providing Instructional Guidelines**

Where teacher capacities are low, teachers may need clear instructional guidelines in addition to trainings. These guidelines should allow teachers to develop simple literacy-instruction routines (Abadzi, 2016). The ideal guide should provide step-by-step instructions without too many words or complex procedures (Allan & Horn, 2013). The guidelines may even have interactive content. The best guidelines should also give scripted lessons for every instructional day of the semester. Regardless of the format, teachers should receive training before implementing them (Kim, Boyle, Zuilkowski & Nakamura, 2016).

### **(c) Following up with Coaching and Monitoring**

To compound the effectiveness of teacher trainings, EGR interventions can provide ongoing monitoring, feedback, and in-classroom coaching to teachers. Such measures ensure that teachers correctly apply what they have learned from the training (Kim *et al.*, 2016).

### **(d) Providing Supplementary Instructional Materials**

Ensuring that classrooms have reading materials is a key component in teaching students how to read (Kim *et al.*, 2016). However, most schools in sub-Saharan countries lack adequate books; hence the need for intervention because reading materials are fundamental to teaching reading instruction (Allan & Horn, 2013).

### **(e) Providing Tools and Training for Student Assessment**

Teachers need to understand what their students do not know in order to adjust instruction. Assessments are therefore a critical part of effective literacy instruction (Kim *et al.*, 2016). Effective EGR interventions should train teachers and give them the tools to conduct assessments, analyse results, and modify their instruction. Primarily, assessment of students' progress in reading skills presents an opportunity to strengthen accountability. If teachers properly explain assessment results, parents and school administrators will understand students' progression and respond accordingly.

## **Outcomes of Previous Early Grade Interventions**

Although most literacy interventions followed the afore-described elements in conducting the programs, evaluations have proven that the interventions failed to yield their objectives because they were challenged with external shocks such as increased class sizes that disrupted implementation (The World Bank Development Report, 2018). In the Democratic Republic of Congo, for example, challenges arose due to a lack of buy-in from teachers. In Tanzania, negative results from the evaluation may have been partially due to a lack of a sound comparison group. Similarly, EGRA in Malawi was not successful because teachers lacked special skills of handling early grade learners (MoEST, 2016). Early grade children needed explicit instruction and well-scaffolded opportunities to practise and apply learning.

## **Methodology**

This section outlines the methodology that was followed in terms of some of the study design, population of study, sample size and method of data analysis.

### ***Study Design***

This study used constructivist paradigm because data was collected in natural settings from which useful interpretations were obtained (Creswell, 2002). The study utilised qualitative approaches with leanings towards case study methodologies because it focused on four primary schools from Blantyre rural in Malawi.

### ***Population of Study and Sample Size***

The participants in this study were Primary Education Advisors (PEAs), National Reading Programme (NRP) officer, teachers and head teachers of the participating schools. The study specifically engaged sixteen teachers, four head teachers, two PEAs and one NRP officer, making a total of 23 participants, all of whom were purposely sampled. All participants had a direct bearing on the implementation and managing of the reading programme in lower classes (1 to 4) of primary schools.

### ***Data Collection and Analysis Methods***

This study used three data collection methods: semi-structured interviews, document review and classroom lesson observations. Data was analysed using thematic analysis method; the interviews and class observation data were coded to develop themes related to the study's aim.

### ***Ethical Consideration***

Ethical clearance and authorisation regarding data collection was sought from the following: Dean of Faculty of Education (Mzuzu University), District Education Manager and head teachers of the participating schools. All participants were briefed regarding the study's purpose, informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity and voluntary matters in research. Regarding the latter, participants were informed that they could withdraw their participation at any time and that the information sought would only serve to achieve the objectives of the study and nothing else.

### ***Findings and Discussion***

This section presents and discusses the findings of this study. Highlighted in this section are challenges that teachers experience in the implementation of the reading programme in relation to teaching materials, teachers, learners, infrastructure and other basic services and, supervision and support.

#### **(a) Challenges in Relation to Teaching Materials**

Challenges in relation to teaching materials include the following: the size of pictures in learners' books, shortage of textbooks and lack of chart papers, large number of lesson activities in the Teacher's Guide (TG) and difficulties in following scripted lesson plans in the TG.

### **(i) The Size of Pictures in Learners' Books**

Teachers complained that learners' books, especially those of Standard 1 have pictures that are small in size. It is difficult for learners to identify and point at the right picture for a particular lesson concept. It takes the effort of the teacher to move around and show learners the picture being referred to in the lesson. Kasmaienezhadford, Pourrajab and Rabbani (2015) explain that students often focus on pictures before reading the text; pictures therefore enhance the power of imagination and influence the learning process. With large and clear images in learning materials, pupils make perceptions about their experiences since they are considered as attractive and cheerful factors of reading. When pictures complement print, they fulfil what is stipulated in Vygotsky's 'Zone of Proximal Development'. Using pictures, early grade learners can therefore solve some tasks which are difficult to grasp on their own through help from their teachers and peers.

### **(ii) Shortage of Textbooks and Lack of Chart Papers**

Teachers in this study pointed out that learners' books were inadequate. Most of the books were lost, and the few that were remaining were in bad shape. In most classes, one book was shared by not less than ten learners. For example, in Standard 3 of School C, only thirteen out of ninety-three learners had books. In School L, Teacher 11 put 10 learners in one group because there were only six English books against sixty-two learners who were present. Similar observations were made by PEA 1 as follows:

*So, you can just imagine that this time around, more especially in Standards 1 and 2 there are no books in most schools. If anything, then it means the teacher is going to use 1 or 2 books with a lot of learners.*

Teaching and learning materials are indispensable to education. A scarcity of textbooks means that learners are not able to practise reading and writing, and increase their information base beyond classroom note taking. Roskos, Strickland, Haase and Maliki (2009) explain that children thrive in learning to read when the environment contains ample books and other printed materials. However, Allan and Horn (2013) are of the view that reading materials are fundamental to instruction once teachers are trained to use them in reading instruction.

Participants also indicated that most schools lacked supplementary books, charts, exercise books and writing materials. The success of NRP depends on making the classroom environment print rich so that learners should continue reading on their own in their free time. The findings reveal that much as teachers are able to develop and prepare teaching and learning materials by themselves, they cannot afford to purchase all the materials that they require, and sometimes typical materials that they need in their classrooms are not readily available in the market. As a solution, Kadzamira and Rose (2003) argue that the Malawi Government should meet its obligation of providing sufficient resources in schools.



### **(iii) Large Number of Lesson Activities in the Teacher's Guide (TG)**

This study has revealed that Teacher's Guides have too many activities which cannot be completed in the stipulated time of thirty minutes for infant classes and thirty-five minutes for junior classes. For example, teachers mentioned that dialogues are too long and difficult to teach because each step has to be practised rigorously before coming to the next one. With most learners having no pre-school background, it is not easy for them to learn many activities within a short time. For example, out of the four English lessons that were observed in Standards 1 and 3 respectively, only Teacher 1 finished her lesson on time because she only extracted two steps from the scripted lesson plan in TG. Abadzi (2016) remarks that educators frequently allocate insufficient school time to language teaching. As a result, children learn little reading or language in the early school years. Thus, they cannot gain more complex knowledge through reading. With regards to this concern, the head teacher of school K said:

*The main problem that teachers face with scripted lesson plan is that each lesson is overloaded with activities which do not match with time allocated on the time table. With the poor background of children in rural schools, it takes more time to come up with a positive result in a lesson.*

The challenge of overloaded curriculum will always affect its implementation in varying degrees, especially when faced with disadvantaged children. For example, time is never enough to teach all prescribed teaching content in each lesson and for teachers to give individual assistance to learners. Therefore, what the head teacher of school K explained is a common problem which was also raised by Graham and Kelly (2018) who complain that due to a heavy curriculum in the content area and pressure to have students do well on standardised tests, teachers fail to teach the basics and essentials in their schools. Campbell (2014) concurs that not only do teachers have to contend with the problem of an overloaded curriculum, the constant demands to change teaching practices and adapt to new and apparently improved forms of pedagogy, and so forth, mean that there is a growing sense of frustration with constant change in many schools. Graham and Kelly (2018) add that in school environments that are disadvantaged, poorly resourced and poorly staffed, the effects of an overloaded curriculum and the desire to keep up with latest techniques in pedagogy or technology may lead to genuine crisis. Graham and Kelly (2018) further complain that when the curriculum becomes overloaded education becomes the first casualty.

### **(iv) Difficulties in Following Scripted Lesson Plans in the Teacher's Guide (TG)**

It was further observed that most teachers were just reading the scripted lesson plans in the TG while teaching. For example, Teacher 7 of school L was simply reading the TG when teaching an English lesson in Standard 3. This contradicts

with Vygotsky's theory which demands that learners should be actively involved in varied lesson activities through differentiated teaching strategies which are planned in advance in order to achieve the intended purpose for learners. Advance planning helps teachers to identify relevant teaching resources and strategies to be used in the lesson. The following remarks from Teacher 14 complement the observation:

*After all, we teach what we are asked to do and not what we know is good, right for our learners. We are strictly advised to follow all the scripted steps in the teachers' guide, and each step attracts many rigorous sub-steps that the teacher has to undergo before the learner understands the concept.*

While it is believed that the scripted lesson plan has reduced teachers' work, it has partly changed the role of the teacher in the classroom from expertise to mere receivers of knowledge. This is because teachers can no longer suggest teaching methods and materials on their own according to the ability of their learners. Moreover, this move from teacher-led to scripted instruction has left teachers feeling powerless and overcome. Teachers are often caught between what they are asked to do instead of planning what they know is right for their learners. It is even more problematic for teachers to help learners with special educational needs when they are obliged to follow the scripted lesson plan because it is difficult to modify any part of the lesson in order to assist the learner with special needs. Moreover, by simply reading from teachers' guide, learners' different styles of learning are not considered, and most of them learn little or nothing by the end of the teaching period. Subsequently, most learners move from one class to another without attaining reading skills, which make it hard for them to learn other subjects. Therefore, the concern raised by Teacher 14 is genuine and needs a serious overhauling.

### **(b) Challenges in Relation to Teachers**

Some of the challenges that derail the implementation of NRP include the following: inadequate training of teachers for NRP implementation, lack of skills to assist learners with special educational needs (SEN), shortage of teachers, absenteeism of teachers and teachers' lack of proficiency in English language

#### **(i) Inadequate Training of Teachers for NRP Implementation**

Teachers admitted having been trained through Cascade Model, a system of delivering training messages from trainers at the central level to trainees at the local level through several layers (McDevitt, 1998). Teachers were the last to get trained. Moreover, teachers who participated in this study complained that the training itself was inadequate for the reading curriculum because during the training, most of the basic foundation skills were not properly demonstrated by the facilitators. One thing worthy noting is that important information must have been distorted in the process of being passed down through different levels of personnel. For example, some of

the teachers in this study, especially those in the junior section (Standards 3 and 4), confessed having not mastered how to use NRP approach and its strategies in the reading instruction. During lesson observation, almost all the teachers in Standard 3 used old methods and strategies of teaching. In view of this, head teacher for school N said:

*Most teachers are not able to apply the teaching strategies accordingly because they lack proper demonstration of strategies by NRP facilitators.*

The complaint raised by the head teacher of school N was also observed by Klapwijk and Van der Walt (2011) and Klapwijk (2012), when they found that despite evidence of the benefits of reading instruction, teachers seldom used reading strategies explicitly in South African schools, thereby depriving learners of the strategies they need. According to Cekiso (2012), lack of adequate training and excessive work load are some of the reasons for the ‘non-uptake’ of strategy instruction. This is a cause for concern as teachers’ awareness and application of a wide range of reading strategies is important. Klapwijk (2012) agrees that teaching students using a repertoire of reading comprehension strategies increases their comprehension of text.

However, Kissau and Hiller (2013) argue that an integrated approach requires that teachers have a thorough understanding of a range of effective strategies, as well as knowing when, how and why to apply them. Responding to the concern, Wall (2014) suggests that strategies and techniques should be limited so that teachers gain increasing competence and independence while using these strategies.

## **(ii) Lack of Skills to Assist Learners with Special Educational Needs (SEN)**

In order to ensure full participation of all learners including learners with diverse needs, teachers are expected to use multisensory methods throughout instruction. This includes activities that involve two or more senses to gain new information such as seeing, hearing, speaking and moving. However, it was observed that teachers do not assist learners with special educational needs adequately. For example, in Standard 1 of School K, one learner could not participate in lesson activities because of hearing challenges. In view of the challenges, PEA 1 commented as follows:

*There are numerous challenges and hurdles to effective inclusion of learners with special educational needs into the mainstream of ordinary public schools. There is a perceived lack of skills and competence as well as large classes and insufficient resources in our schools. Building structures in most schools are not friendly; we have a lot to do for schools.*

The lack of proper services remains a challenge to reaching out to learners with special educational needs. In a positive and accommodative environment, a teacher is supposed to help learners by providing tactile means of exploring ways or sourcing

assistive devices to enable the learners to read with their friends. However, most teachers have not been prepared in sufficient depth to teach learners with learning disabilities. Much as most teachers often have trouble in developing appropriate support mechanisms for special needs early grade second language learners, Buli-Holmberg and Jeyaprabhan (2016) strongly recommend teachers to observe the best practices of teaching English language skills in an early grade inclusive class by developing a plan within the curriculum that suits all the children and their diverse needs.

### **(iii) Shortage of Teachers**

Participants complained about high shortage of teachers in rural primary schools which does not correspond with the large enrolments of learners. The ratio of 60 learners to a teacher, which the Malawian policy advocates for, is far from the deal. Table 1 provides details of the extent of the shortage of teachers being experienced in the schools that were engaged in this study.

**Table 1: Shortage of Teachers in the Participating Schools**

<b>School</b>	<b>School Enrolment</b>	<b>Teachers required</b>	<b>Teachers available</b>	<b>Shortage</b>
<b>C</b>	841	14	9	5
<b>K</b>	253	4	2	2
<b>L</b>	2,982	50	32	18
<b>N</b>	2,028	34	21	13

It was observed that most teachers taught about 78 to 150 learners in lower classes. The following remarks were made by the head teacher of school K:

*We have teacher shortages. Moreover, some teachers who have NRP knowledge are transferred to other schools, so we have challenges in allocating other teachers to infant and junior classes.*

The concern raised by the head teacher of school K corresponds with what has been stipulated by the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (2011) that the allocation of teachers in primary schools is not equally distributed across sub-Saharan African and west Asian countries. For example, acute shortages of trained teachers are common in countries such as Nigeria, Rwanda, and Malawi, a factor which hinders quality of teaching and learning. Mulkeen (2010) adds that the distribution of better qualified teachers often favours urban areas, and efforts to place teachers in rural and isolated areas, where they are needed the most, have had limited success. However, Grauwe (2007) argues that teaching in rural areas is not motivating because rural areas lack most of the delivery services such as electricity,

piped water, modern markets, which are found in towns. Rural areas are further characterised by poor working conditions such as temporally grass shelters which prevail in most rural primary schools (Education Statistics, 2016-2017).

#### **(iv) Absenteeism of Teachers**

The findings of this study reveal that there is frequent absenteeism of teachers in rural schools. According to 'time book' records from the participating schools, about 3-4 teachers were absent from work every day. Absenteeism needs to be discouraged at all costs because it affects the implementation of reading in schools. Absenteeism has serious consequences on instructional time and student achievement. Furthermore, absenteeism takes a toll on student learning by reducing the number of hours that learners are actually taught. UNESCO (2010) and, Singh and Sarkar (2015) observe that absenteeism of teachers is rampant in most countries because of professional frustrations. Low salaries and limited professional opportunities discourage teachers and inhibit their performance.

#### **(v) Teachers' Lack of Proficiency in English Language**

Literature has proved that language proficiency affects the teaching of a second language. For example, Mackey and Gass (2011) explain that teachers who speak good English are believed to be more competent in teaching English language in schools. The findings from this study reveal that most teachers are not proficient in English; this affects learners' progress in developing reading skills. In view of this, NRP coordinator made the following remarks:

*Most teachers cannot demonstrate good speaking skills to learners; this hamper reading implementation. Learners are misled in spellings and pronunciation of most English words*

The remark by NRP official is in line with Masina's (2014) findings which indicate that most primary school teachers are not fluent in English language. This restricts their instruction in class because they fail to articulate the right vocabulary, hence, denying the students the information they need. Similarly, Adekola (2007) bemoans that most teachers cannot teach the whole lesson in English. Most of the English lessons, as was the case in this study, are sabotaged by either wrong pronunciation of words, use of incorrect tenses or use of a local language.

According to Phiri (2016), proficiency in English is the key principle for the successful instruction in language learning. Second language acquisition theorists also recommend that learners acquire second language through exposure to comprehensible input that is within their Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotsky, 1980). However, learners' proficiency in English cannot improve because teachers mostly explain concepts in their first language. The role of the teacher is that of a learning mediator who uses language as a psychological tool to scaffold student

learning through social interaction (Vygotsky, 1980). In other words, optimal learning can be achieved when it is assisted or well-scaffolded through appropriate use of language by the teacher. Therefore, to function effectively in the classroom, English language teachers need to have an advanced level of general proficiency in English.

### **(c) Challenges in Relation to Learners**

The findings of this study have revealed that the implementation of NRP was hampered by challenges in relation to learners. Two major challenges were highlighted; large classes and frequent absenteeism of learners.

#### **(i) Large Classes**

The findings of this study reveal that most classes of the participating schools are overcrowded (Table 1). This defeats the Malawian policy of teacher-learner ratio of 1:60 learners. Teacher 9 explains the challenges that she faces due to large classes as follows:

*With such a large class, it's difficult to assess learners' progress. I am not sure how most of them are progressing but with the problem of time, I have to keep on with my topics of teaching.*

Large classes prevent teachers from applying learner-centred methods. Overcrowded classroom conditions also hinder teachers' attention to individual students. Adekola (2007) remarks that in a 30-minute-lesson, active learning takes place in the first eight minutes; the rest of the time is either unproductive or teacher monologue of the 'chalk and talk' variety with little opportunity for learner's responses. Similarly, in this study, large classes caused a few learners to be actively involved in learning for only a very small part of a lesson. Most of the times, the teacher was disciplining the learners for being noisy and disruptive. Large classes therefore do not only hinder the achievement of learning objectives and completion of learning activities but also compromise quality learning.

#### **(ii) Frequent Absenteeism of Learners**

The findings of this study reveal that there is high absenteeism of learners in schools, especially those which do not have a feeding programme. Regarding absenteeism, the head teacher of School N reported as follows:

*Almost every day, teachers teach a new set of learners, who get absent the following day. This hinders the effectiveness of the reading implementation.*

Although class registers in all the four schools indicated high absenteeism of learners on a daily basis, most learners were observed to be absent on Wednesdays and Fridays which are market days. It was indicated that most of the learners accompanied

their parents to the markets to sell their commodities. Most teachers in this study complained that absenteeism affects the effectiveness of NRP implementation; learners who are regularly absent do not make sense of lessons as they are not able to link each new lesson with the preceding ones. According to Graham and Kelly (2018), the learner is the central figure in the curriculum implementation process. Absenteeism of learners therefore defeats NRP curriculum objective of improving early grade learners' literacy skills.

Participants revealed several factors that contribute to absenteeism of learners such as poverty, long distance to schools and cost of education.

### **(i) Poverty**

It was indicated that most learners in the rural primary schools come from impoverished families who cannot afford buying clothes befitting school environment. Hence, children who live in dire poverty are likely to drop out of school. According to UNESCO (2010), poverty decreases a child's readiness for school through aspects of health, home life, schooling and neighbourhoods.

### **(ii) Long Distance to Schools**

Records of the head teachers indicated that the catchment areas of most schools consist of villages which are between three to five kilometres away from schools. Distance to school and difficult economic conditions are contributing factors for the high rates of learner absenteeism and out-of-school children (UNESCO, 2010). Since most learners in lower classes are of small age, it is challenging for them to walk to and from school every day. This affects the implementation of reading because most learners come late, and are often too tired and hungry to learn successfully.

### **(iii) Cost of Education**

It was reported in this study that learners were asked to contribute some money for the running of the school. Consequently, those who failed to contribute stopped coming to school. Patrinos (2013) observes that parents from most countries such as Ghana, Madagascar, Niger and Sierra Leone reported paying illegal accounting fees even though by law, primary schooling is free. For poorer families these costs become too much; as a result, learners drop out of school hence rendering most children illiterate. Such incidences therefore hamper the education goal of universal education for all.

### **(d) Challenges in Relation to Infrastructure and Other Basic Services**

Poor and inadequate classrooms are some of the major infrastructural challenges that were highlighted in this study. It was observed that most schools have

inadequate class rooms. For example, learners at School ‘K’ were using a church as a classroom while those at School L were using outdoor open spaces. School N, on the other hand, was utilising temporary grass shelters that were constructed to compliment the few classrooms that are available. However, such grass structures are not safe for children especially during rainy season. The head teacher of School K bemoaned the poor school environment as follows:

*We have classroom and teacher shortages, three classes are located in the church, there, others are under the trees. Only infant (Standard 1 & 2) classes are in classrooms.*

It is sad to note that most school buildings in rural primary schools are old and not fit to be used as classrooms (UNESCO, 2010). Students need a sense of physical and psychological safety for learning to occur, since fear and anxiety undermine cognitive capacity and short circuit the learning process.

Apart from poor infrastructure, most schools lacked basic services such as electricity, potable water, sanitary drains, telephone or proper ways to dispose garbage and waste in schools. According to Cekiso (2017), such poor conditions are strongly associated with violence, discrimination, and limited opportunities to learn. Therefore, investments in school infrastructure and the physical conditions for learning are not a luxury but a need.

### **(e) Challenges in Relation to Supervision and Support**

Educating a child is a shared responsibility. Rowe (2005) and MoEST (2016) propose that for children to learn to read and write effectively, it requires effort and commitment from many stakeholders including education leaders such as inspectors and, parent and teacher associations. Vygotsky’s (1980) theory also attaches great importance to cooperation with more competent parents and adults, fellow children and teachers in the process of development.

However, it was indicated that the professional boosting of teachers’ experiences, creativity and subject knowledge in using and applying proper teaching skills, strategies and approaches was not supervised adequately. In addition, education inspectors, parents and the community were not supportive in the learning of their children as expected of them. The frequent absenteeism of learners at school, though sometimes with genuine reasons, proved that most parents were not putting education of learners as an important priority in their lives. However, Dambudzo (2015) explains that the supervisory system is not fulfilling its roles partly because the inspectors themselves are not conversant with the content being taught in schools due to frequent changes of the curriculum. Campbell (2014) concurs that the constant demands to change teaching practices and adaptation to new and apparently improved forms of pedagogy, and so forth, mean that there is a growing sense of frustration with constant change in many education forms.



## **Conclusion and Implications**

Due to the challenges outlined in the discussion, the findings of this study provide evidence that constructivist teaching is not being observed; hence learning practices neither challenge students nor address their needs. When teachers are well trained, they create a constructivist classroom, where learners are actively involved, the environment is democratic, the activities are interactive and learner centred. The teacher facilitates and scaffolds the process of learning in which the students are encouraged to be responsible and autonomous. However, most schools in Malawi are deficient of the basic requirements, making learning environment unpleasant for both teachers and learners themselves.

NRP has the capacity to make significant improvements in literacy, and accelerate learning in contexts where very little learning is taking place. The study finds that for a reading curriculum to be successful, adequate and quality teachers, books, infrastructure, and monitoring should be available in schools. The availability of these factors will promote growth in reading development, extended learning opportunities that nurture positive relationships, support enrichment and mastery learning, and close achievement gaps and provide multiple systems of support to address learning barriers both in and out of the classroom based on a shared developmental framework. Accordingly, this can best be achieved when teachers' efforts are acknowledged and their professional needs are updated, supported and addressed through regular Continuing Professional Developments (CPDs) and improved through a reflective and continual monitoring of the reading implementation in schools (Kim *et al.*, 2016).

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