

Rural Communities-Education Relationship in Developing Countries: The Case of Malawi

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The purpose of this research study was to find out how primary education is related to rural communities in Malawi as one of the developing countries in Africa. The study followed a qualitative design with a phenomenological approach. The population of interest were rural primary school graduates, teachers, students and craftsmen. Data were collected through interviews, focus group discussions and class observations. Data were analysed by coding them into themes and categories that were organised into analytic memos. The major findings were: that there is lack of school involvement in the communities though the communities are greatly involved in the school development activities; that there is a mismatch between some elements of the curriculum and rural environment; that subjects that are earmarked as important for the rural development are ignored in schools and teachers lack skills in these subjects in addition to lacking of teaching and learning materials in the subjects. Hence the relationship between education and rural communities in Malawi needs to be improved.

Rural community, rural development, developing countries, curriculum, Malawi, Africa

BACKGROUND AND STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The problem of primary education in Africa has been a historical phenomenon. African countries have for a long time faced problems of increasing educational quality, equity, access and relevance. Most of them, when they achieved independence, inherited the system of education from their colonial masters. According to Bude (1985), in the 1950s and 1960s, education was seen as a key to political, social and economic development in these newly independent nations. As a result, the education system inherited from the colonial powers was expanded to achieve the goal of mass education and also to train nationals to replace the colonial specialists (Bude, 1985). However, as reported by Bude, little time was devoted to assess if the knowledge taught in schools was relevant to the needs of these nations.

In 1961, African Ministers met at a conference for education in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, where they agreed to provide all children between 6 and 14 years of age with access to education in their nations. However, despite the efforts made by the nationals and donor community to expand the capacity of the formal education sector, by 1970 it was clear that reaching the intended goals was not possible (Bude, 1985). Later on in 1990, delegates from 155 countries met in Jomtien, Thailand, where they adopted the world declaration on Education for All (Malawi Ministry of Education and UNICEF, 1998). The framework of action that was adopted at this conference to address the needs of all children aged 0 to 18 years covered areas like early childhood care, universal access to and completion of primary education, improvement in learning achievement, reduction of adult illiteracy, expansion of basic education and training for youth and adults, and increased acquisition of knowledge, skills and values held by individuals and families that were required for better living (Malawi Ministry of Education and UNICEF, 1998). With the expansion

of education, the number of those who were educated but not employed also grew. Moreover, the knowledge and skills offered at school had little relevance on the immediate environment (Bude, 1985).

As in other African countries, formal education in Malawi, then Nyasaland, was started by British missionaries in 1875. The major aim of missionary education was to make African children literate so that they could read the Bible and spread the word of God and the benefits of civilised western life (Cameron and Hurst, 1983). However, since the Christian missionaries believed that "idleness leads to vice," they trained some Malawians to become agriculturalists and craftsmen for them to have a steady occupation (Banda, 1982, p.42).

According to Kadzamira and Chibwana (1999, p.7), following the Phelps Stokes Commission's recommendation that there should be co-ordination and supervision of the missions' education efforts and the need to redesign the curriculum that was overloaded with evangelism, the colonial government established the Department of Education to oversee education in the country in 1926. Nevertheless, the major curricular changes in primary education in Malawi occurred when the colonial government began to be actively involved in education and the introduction of secondary education in 1940. As observed by Banda (1982), since education in England had begun to take a different shape during and after the World War, there was pressure from the colonial office in London to redesign the type of education offered in their colonies. This development made education in Malawi reflect that of the British system, far removed from the needs of the local communities. Furthermore, the establishment of secondary education policy influenced other changes in the primary education system. Since there was an urgent need to establish criteria for selecting students from primary school to secondary school, Kadzamira and Chibwana (1999, p.7) observed that the colonial government established a "centrally organised examination system" and "set standards for curriculum content so that all pupils could have equal chances of competing in final examinations at primary level," hence making it more academic, selective and examination oriented. In the same vein, Banda (1982, p.90) reported that it was during this period that the industrial curriculum that influenced mission schools began changing its direction and, by 1950, the industrial part of training was phased out.

In 1964, when the Malawi government became independent, there was a great need to educate Malawians in order to promote social and economic development. Consequently, the Malawi government increased the number of primary schools to enable more children access to education (Lumphenzi-Banda, 1990). However, Hauya (1991) pointed out that in 1964 Malawi still inherited a foreign type of education that was not suitable to the local needs. He further emphasised that the adopted system was alien, selective and elitist.

Since 1964, there has been a great deal of progress in the primary education sector in Malawi. Policies to improve access, quality and equity have been introduced and the process of reforming curriculum to meet the socio-economic needs of the country has been initiated.

One such policy introduced in 1994 by the Malawi government, was free primary education. The aims of the policy were to increase access, eliminate inequalities and build a strong socio-economic base, enhance civic education and increase the social and economic benefits of education at the community level (Malawi Ministry of Education and UNICEF, 1998). The implementation of this policy resulted into an enrolment increase of 2.9 million children in 1994/95 academic year from 1.9 million in 1993/94 (Malawi Ministry of Education and UNICEF, 1998). However, these children could not be accommodated in the available places in secondary schools eight years later since, according to the report from the morning news bulletin on the Malawi Broadcasting Corporation (MBC) radio 1 on June 27, 2002, there were 300,000 pupils in Standard 8 who were competing for 70,000 secondary school places in Malawi in that year. This translated to only 23 per cent of the Standard 8 students who were assured of going to secondary

school. One wonders then what had befallen the remaining 77 per cent and who was accountable for them? What skills did they have for them to survive in their communities?

These questions have led to the need to conduct this study in order to inform policy makers and educators on how primary education is serving rural communities in Malawi and also help them rethink how rural primary education should be reformed in order for it to be related to the needs of the rural communities. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to find out how primary education is related to rural communities in Malawi as one of the developing countries in Africa.

Research Questions

This study was designed to answer two main research questions.

1. How is primary education related to rural communities in Malawi?
2. What are teachers', students', primary school graduates', and craftspersons' perspectives on the appropriateness of primary education to the rural primary graduates' economic development and survival?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is guided by theories related to the interactive paradigm. In this paradigm, knowledge is viewed as socially constructed and educational policy is viewed as continuous processes of negotiations among stakeholders (Reimers and McGinn, 1997). According to Hartwell (1994, p.4), this paradigm describes the process of "participation, dialogue, and negotiations which lead to properly supported political decisions about education". In Hartwell's view, (1994, p.5) "an interactive, rather than simply a rational and technical approach, is essential when changes are sought in such areas as curriculum, the role of the teachers, ... and above all, examination and selection procedures". Furthermore, Coombs (1970) stipulated that the core of the interactive model is the notion that the world in which individuals live is created by themselves, and any understanding of the society, its institutions and social processes depend on the point of view of the participants in that society. Based on the assumption that knowledge is socially constructed, it is believed that through interaction of different stakeholders in education, knowledge about education can be developed, acquired and shared. Therefore this study focused on the views of participants in order to understand how primary education is related to the rural communities in Malawi. Their views were solicited through interviews and focus group discussions in order to get information that was grounded in the participants' experiences. This information was supplemented by classroom observations that were done in the participants' natural social setting.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This study is significant in a number of ways. To begin with, as the government of Malawi is talking of reforming the current primary education curriculum, the results of this study may shed light on the areas that the curriculum designers should consider as they plan for the new curriculum. Secondly, the study may help the government to review the policy of examinable and non-examinable subjects in primary schools and the effects the policy has on these subjects. Thirdly, the study may reveal the educational needs of the rural community and help the Malawi government to formulate policies that will augur well with the needs of the rural communities. Finally, this study may help other educators in developing countries to learn from the experiences of Malawi as they develop and reform their education.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

The overall approach that guided this study was a qualitative phenomenological design. This design was used to explore deeply into the experiences of teachers, students, primary graduates

and craftsmen about primary education and its relation to the needs of the students and communities in the rural areas. According to Rossman and Rallis (2003, p.97), in a phenomenological study, “the researcher seeks to understand the deep meaning of a person’s experiences and how she articulates these experiences”. The study therefore inquired into the participants’ understanding of their experiences with primary education as it relates to rural areas where the participants live. As said by Rossman and Rallis (2003, p.97), “those engaged in phenomenological research focus in-depth on the meaning of a particular aspect of experience, assuming that through dialogue and reflection the quintessential meaning of the experience will be revealed”. Even Merriam (1988, p.19) observed that “qualitative researchers are interested in meaning – how people make sense of their lives, what they experience, how they interpret these experiences, how they structure their social world”.

Population of Interest

The population of interest in the study consisted of rural primary school teachers, rural primary school students and graduates, and rural craftsmen. Note that because of lack of resources, the researcher could not access craftswomen who lived far away from where the researcher lived. However, the selected participants were studied in their schools and communities as their natural settings. They were purposively selected for the study. As put by Merriam (1988, p.48), purposive sampling entails the selection of a sample “from which one can learn the most to gain understanding and insight”. In addition, Stake (1995, p.4) asserted that one should select a sample “that can maximize what we can learn”.

The schools chosen were of similar characteristics in the sense that both were located in the rural areas, they were full primary schools (full primary schools in Malawi have classes from Standard 1 to Standard 8), were coeducational, were public schools and both used the same national curriculum. The only differences between the schools were that one was in a more remote rural area and also they were in different districts: one in Zomba and the other in Mangochi. However, the primary graduates who were selected were those who lived in the rural area and had gone through the curriculum that the students and teachers in school were using. Furthermore, the craftsmen that were chosen were all in the rural areas and had knowledge of the schools that were around them. I chose different participants with common attributes so that the results should be applicable to other rural schools and communities in Malawi and perhaps other developing countries though not strictly generalisable. According to Kennedy (1979, p.666), it is possible for a researcher to “describe several ‘common’ features of his (her) sample” if he or she wants the findings to apply to other situations.

The participants and classes selected in the schools were those from Standards 6, 7, and 8. I chose these classes because they were the most senior classes in primary schools where some of the skills obtained from the school were beginning to significantly emerge.

Data Collection

Data collection in this study was done through three qualitative methods: class observations, one to one interviews, and focus group interviews.

Observations

Class observation was the first qualitative method I used in order to have an overall impression of the setting and have some questions to be followed up in interviews. As observed by Emerson, Fretz and Shaw (1995, p.26), initial impressions “may include those things available to senses the tastes, smells, and sounds of the physical environment, the look and feel of the locale and people in it”. I observed 14 class lessons of 35 minutes each. According to Merriam (1988, p.88),

observations are important because “the observer gets to see things first hand and use his or her own knowledge and expertise in interpreting what is observed”. In addition, Rossman and Rallis (2003, p.194) support that “observation takes you inside the setting; it helps you discover complexity in social settings by being there”.

Field notes were taken in each class observation, and I had some time between the observations to reflect on and reorganise my field notes. As observed by Emerson, Fretz and Shaw (1995, p.19-20):

In some instances, the field researcher makes a brief written record of ... impressions by jotting down key words and phrases. Jottings translate to-be-remembered observations into writing on paper as quickly rendered scribbles about actions and dialogue. A word or two written at the moment or soon afterwards will jog the memory later in the day and enable the field worker to catch significant actions and to construct evocative descriptions of the scene.

It was through writing field notes that I turned my observations into data. Even Rossman and Rallis (2003, p.195) mentioned that as an observer you “need to turn what you see and hear (and perhaps smell and taste) into data ... you do this by writing field notes”. Furthermore, I was able to chat with teachers during break time to hear their sentiments on different issues that emerged during ‘general talk’. This ‘general talk’ enriched my interpretation of the data I gathered.

Interviews

The next data collection technique was conducting interviews. As considered by Rossman and Rallis (2003, p.180), interviews are “the hallmark of qualitative research”. According to them, in-depth interviewing takes the researcher into the participants’ worlds. In the Zomba district school, six teachers from Standards 6, 7 and 8 were interviewed (two from each class). Four were male and two female. In Malawi most of the primary teachers who teach senior classes are predominantly male so I could not get an equal number of female and male teachers for interviews. In the Mangochi district school, two teachers were interviewed and both were male. Since there were only three teachers at the school and one of them had gone home, I had no choice but to interview those who were available. These teachers in Mangochi had no specific class but taught all classes interchangeably. So in total eight teachers were interviewed and each interview took about one hour.

In addition to teachers, primary school graduates who lived in the rural area in Zomba were interviewed. I interviewed eight primary school graduates (four male and four female) and the interviews took about 40 to 60 minutes each depending on how much information the graduates were able to give. Moreover, two craftsmen were also interviewed. Craftsmen’s interviews took also about one hour each. They were interviewed on two separate days. Both lived in rural areas in Zomba district.

Focus Group

The third data collection technique was focus group interviewing. Focus groups were conducted with students. I chose to conduct focus group interviews with students rather than one to one interview because schools in Malawi are examination oriented and sometimes when you conduct one to one interview with students or administer a questionnaire to them, they think it is an examination and they become tensed up. I had similar experiences when I was assisting in collecting data for a doctoral student in Malawi and we had to emphasise to students over and over again that the process was not an examination. The other reason, which the headmaster of Zomba school also concurred with, was that primary students, especially girls, tend to be shy when conducting a one to one interview with a male researcher. So focus group was an

appropriate method that allowed students to speak freely and allow the interviewer to get reliable information.

I held three focus group discussions of four students each. In the Zomba school, I conducted two focus groups, which had two boys and two girls in each group. In Managochi, I conducted one focus group with three boys and one girl. I also conducted one focus group interview with a group of 10 craftsmen. Though I planned to interview them one by one, I could not because they worked in groups and they preferred to hold discussions as a group while they were working. I had to yield to their needs in order to get reliable data.

Before the interviews and focus groups took place, I had to prepare for them. Since I already had research questions, I prepared in advance open-ended structured questions for the interviews and focus group discussions. According to Fontana and Frey (1994, p.363), in structured questions, "all respondents receive the same set of questions". Even though my questions were structured, I allowed a lot of flexibility for more follow-up questions that would emerge and also I was prepared to modify my questions during the interview and group discussion process.

The language of discussions and interviews was mixed. Though the interviews and discussions took place primarily in Chichewa language, which is the local language of both the researcher and participants, there was a mixture of English and Chichewa in them. Most educated people in Malawi mix English and Chichewa when speaking in Chichewa. I therefore allowed the interviewees and discussants to express themselves freely in these two languages, so that they could say what they wanted to say without any hindrances.

Furthermore, I had a notebook that I used to write follow-up questions and areas to concentrate on in my subsequent interviews and discussions. According to Rossman and Rallis (2003, p.185), in follow-up questions, "you ask for more details, hoping to discover the deeper meanings and more concrete examples". So I used follow-up questions to ask for further elaborations and clarifications and also to suggest the focus of the next interviews and focus groups.

The interviews and discussions were tape recorded and transcribed verbatim without changing anything and later on translated into English. So most of the quotations that appear in this paper are translated from Chichewa.

Data Analysis

Data analysis in my study was a continuous activity that took place throughout the study; that is, from the time I started field work and wrote field notes, conducted interviews and focus group discussions, I became engaged in transcribing and translating the interviews and discussions. Throughout the process I had themes and insights emerging, which I recorded, and later, wrote small analytic memos. Rossman and Rallis (2003, p.271) argue that analysis is an ongoing operation, and that, "throughout a study you are describing, analysing, and interpreting data, although different activities may be more focused and instrumental at various times".

However, after I had finished translating the interview and discussion transcripts into English and had reorganised all my data, I read them over and over again and listened again to the tapes in order to familiarise myself with the data. As I was doing this, new insights, categories and themes were emerging which helped me to look critically at and revise my previous ideas. As stated by Rossman and Rallis (2003, p.281), this process of rereading and re-listening "enables you to become familiar in intimate ways with what you have learned".

At the end of re-reading and re-listening I had a number of themes, categories and insights that I was just writing down as they came. Then I started looking at them again to see if some themes and categories could be condensed and expressed as one major category or theme that could be

developed using the available data. This process helped me to come up with themes and categories that were encompassing and grounded in the available data.

After the categories and themes had been generated, I used them to code the data. The coding was done by hand on a hard copy. The interview and observation data were written in such a way that a wide margin was left at the far right end of the page where codes were written in line with the data on the page. As illustrated by Rossman and Rallis (2003, p.286), “in coding the data you will have to be clear about what words or phrases illustrate and elaborate each concept”. Each code for a theme or category had an arrow pointing at the supporting data on the page. Where there was a category, there was also a theme that went together with that particular category. Most of the categories in the analysis were indigenous though some were analyst-constructed. According to Rossman and Rallis (2003, p.282-83), “indigenous categories are those expressed by participants; the researcher discovers them through analysis” and “analyst-constructed categories” are those coming from the researcher which are identified through his or her experience with the topic or reading of related literature.

When all the data were organised either in the form of a concept map or in a table, I started telling a story, in a form of analytic memos, to see what each category said and how that was related to the whole theme and the research questions. These memos were shared with my colleagues for their comments. The comments opened more avenues for further interpretations. The story telling or narration was supported by the data and my own comments in order to interpret the meaning contained within them. As Patton (2002, p.480) stated, “interpretation means attaching significance to what was found, making sense of findings, offering explanations, drawing conclusions, extrapolating lessons, making inferences, considering meanings, and otherwise imposing order”.

Other Methodological Issues

There were also other methodological issues I considered to make sure that the study was well thought-out, ethical and strong. The first issue was the use of critical friends. Rossman and Rallis (2003) call them “communities of practice”. These were “small groups of peers working together to test out ideas, critique one another’s work, offer alternative conceptualisations, and provide both emotional and intellectual support” (Rossman and Rallis, 2003, p.xvi, preface). I learnt a lot from these critical friends and their comments strengthened and shaped the direction of the study.

The second issue was about triangulation. According to Rossman and Rallis (2003, p.66), triangulation entails drawing “from several data sources, methods, investigators or theories to inform the same question or issue”. In this study, data were collected from many sources using three qualitative research methods: interviews, focus group discussions and observations.

The third issue was gaining informed consent of the participants in my study. According to Punch (1994, p.90), participants in research have “the right to be informed that they are being researched and also about the nature of the research”. In my study I found that it was mandatory to gain informed consent from all my participants.

The fourth issue was about confidentiality. For the participants to provide valid information, they had to be assured of confidentiality. According to Rossman and Rallis (2003, p.74), confidentiality has “two elements: protecting their privacy (identities, names and specific roles) and holding in confidence what they share with you (not sharing with others using their names)”. Bulmer (1982, p.225) also argued that to protect privacy and identity of research participants, “identities, locations of individuals and places are concealed in published results, data collected are held in anonymised form and all data kept securely and confidential”.

The fifth issue was deception. As Punch (1994, p.91) put it, “although one may disguise identity to a certain extent, one should not break promises made to people”. So whatever I told the participants was honest and I avoided making false promises.

However, I should admit that the results of this study might have been influenced by my own values and beliefs that emanated from my position as a teacher, teacher trainer and rural community member in Malawi. As observed by Peshkin (1988, p.18) “subjectivity can be seen as virtuous, for it is the basis of researchers’ making a distinctive contribution, one that results from the unique configuration of their personal qualities joined to the data they have collected”. However, I had to monitor myself that I did not change the meaning of what I studied. As Peshkin (1988, p.18) experienced, “... to identify my subjectivity, I had to monitor myself to sense how I was feeling”.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to find out how primary education is related to the rural communities in Malawi. Does primary education help children to acquire skills for them to be functional and survive in their rural communities? The study sought to answer two research questions: (a) how is primary education related to the rural community in Malawi? and (b) what are teachers’, students’, primary graduates’ and craftsmen’s perspectives on the appropriateness of primary education to the rural primary graduates’ economic development and survival? Therefore, the aim of this section is to present and discuss results.

School-Rural Community Relationship

In this part, I present participants’ perspectives on the issue of school-rural community relationship. Three sub-issues were identified and examined: (a) contribution of primary school to the community, (b) contribution of the community to primary school, and (c) the relationship between the rural environment and the formal school curriculum.

Contribution of Primary School to the Community

On the contribution of primary school to the community, the study has found that the school’s involvement in the community has been very minimal. For instance, when the teachers were asked to say how their schools became involved in the community, one of them was quick to say, “The school is not involved in many things”. Another also emphasised that the school was not involved much in what happens in the villages except “when there is a funeral near the school, it’s when we go with our students to participate in the funeral ceremony”. Even when students make things like brooms, hoe handles from their Creative Arts class; many teachers said that these products are rarely sold to the community. Instead, they were either kept in the storeroom or “displayed in the classroom at a science corner for children to see what they did”. Similarly, when students were asked to say how the community knew what they did at school, one of them said, “the community knows because we do our Creative Arts activities outside the school under the tree and when people are passing by, they see that we are doing something”. This response does not actually show the school’s active involvement in the community. Other students stated that their parents knew what they did at school because they took some of what they did home to show to parents. However, this was done on an individual basis and the products were shown to parents before they were finished. Once they were finished, the products were stored at school, hence denying the community access to them.

There were also three other reasons that teachers gave for not selling children’s products from Creative Arts to the community. The first reason was that the products were not durable because they used cheap materials to make them. The second one was that the products were not skilfully

made because students did not have enough skills to make them. This indicated that students did not acquire enough skills after school for them to survive and compete in the rural economy. The final reason, as said by one teacher, was that “when children make these things, we put them on display so that when school inspectors and advisors come, they should see that we are working”. It is only in Agriculture, however, that one student indicated that the community came to buy vegetables they grew at school. These scenarios show that the rural community does not benefit much from what children do at school and, as such, it is difficult for them to appreciate the contribution of the school to the rural community.

In addition, teachers indicated that they sometimes had ‘open days’ to display what they did at school to the community. However, when I asked the teachers how frequently they did this, they said that these events were not frequently done. For example, the interviews were conducted towards the end of the academic year but one of the teachers said, “this year we have not had any open day yet but we were supposed to have it”. Primary school graduates and craftsmen also indicated that they only had contact with the schools at the end of academic year “when schools display what they have been doing over the year for people to see”. However, one of them said, “sometimes schools do not hold these events so they do not show us what they do by the end of the year”.

Furthermore, some teachers indicated that they involved children in spreading messages about HIV/AIDS to the community through their “AIDS *Toto*” clubs. The word “*Toto*” is a Chichewa word, which means ‘rejection’ or ‘no’. As with other school contributions to the community, this activity also was not in operation at the school at present. For instance when one teacher was asked what the school contributed to the community, her response was, “this school to the local community, in the past it was involved in those AIDS *Toto* clubs”. The teacher’s response indicated that the school was no longer involved in the AIDS *Toto* club activities. This position was confirmed by another teacher who also said, “in the past there was a white man who was working at the Central Hospital who used to come here and we could meet in that church and share information about AIDS in the AIDS *Toto* club”. Craftsmen indicated that they heard much of the AIDS messages from the radio and also from the President of Malawi on political campaigns, but not from schools.

Finally, if the involvement of the school in the community was minimal, it was difficult for the school to know and identify what was needed in the community so that the school could incorporate these needs in the curriculum in order to make it relevant to the community. And again, as observed from the interviews, none of them mentioned that the school was involved in development activities in the community, for instance, identifying problems in the community and developing projects to address those problems while students learn from them. As such, the school was not fully involved in bringing development to the rural community.

Contribution of the Community to Primary School

The second issue is about the contribution of the community to primary school. Most interviewees said that the community was largely involved in the development work at the school. For instance, one teacher emphasised that:

There is a strong relationship between the school and the community. As you can see at this school there is a school block constructed out of grass. For this grassy school block to be here, it’s because of the community. Since we have too many children at this school, we asked parents to help us build this block. This grassy school block is from Standards 1 to 6. The community also comes to help us construct pit latrines. So the relationship is there and it is strong.

Other teachers also asserted that the community contributes to the development activities at the schools. For example, they indicated that the community moulded bricks, provided sand and water for construction, and provided labour in the actual construction of school blocks. Students also agreed that their parents contributed to the school activities by doing what the PTAs (Parents and Teachers Associations) and the school committees asked them to do for the school. For instance one student proudly said, “my parents are part of this school because they helped to build that school block by bringing in sand and water. They also tell me to take care of this building because they suffered when erecting it”. Another stated that her parents agreed with other parents and teachers during PTA meetings to build toilets for the school and she had seen them many times going to school to work on that project. Primary graduates also indicated that the community was involved “in terms of school development. Parents help to construct school buildings”. Some of the craftsmen interviewed were also parents who indicated that they had been involved in providing labour to construct school buildings.

One teacher further stated, “the people who are around this school act as the eyes of this school. They provide security to this school”. The teacher indicated that if people saw strangers around the school, they reported either to the headmaster or the village headman. In so doing, they acted as security people to protect the school. However, many interviewees iterated that the community’s contribution to the school was never in cash because most of the people in the rural area were poor.

In addition, many interviewees said that the community was involved through Parents and Teachers Associations (PTAs) and the school committee to solve problems created by students. As one teacher stated, “if we see that we have problem children, we convene a PTA meeting to discuss with parents what we can do with such children”. And another said, “the school and parents meet frequently through PTA and school committee to discuss the problems that teachers and students meet, especially late coming of students to school”. Some teachers expressed the feeling that without involving the community where children come from, they cannot manage to mould the character of children they teach. As one of the teachers stated, “children live with their parents and it’s their parents who understand them better. So if we do not involve them when children are troublesome, we are fighting a losing game”. However, none of the students mentioned this role of the community through PTAs, maybe because these meetings were held in private in order to discuss them. Similarly, none of the craftsmen was either a member of a PTA or school committee so they said nothing on this issue.

Apart from solving children’s problems, teachers said that the school committee and PTAs were involved in encouraging children to continue with school and also spread messages about HIV/AIDS. For instance, in answering the question on how the school was related to the local community, one teacher stated, “many times the local community comes here to do something, for example to tell children not to leave school or about AIDS”. One of the graduates also expressed that the community became involved in school affairs “because they encourage their children to go to school”. Therefore, through PTAs and school committees, the community became involved in many activities in the school.

Furthermore, the school used resource persons from the community to teach students topics that were found both in the curriculum and the community. This was mainly done in Agriculture where students had field trips to the community to learn about a topic in the curriculum. As put by one teacher, “for example in Standard 8, there is a topic known as fishpond. Sometimes we take children on a field trip to see a fishpond. The community is involved because the children are able to ask the owner of the fishpond questions”. Students also stated that teachers sometimes involved resource persons from the community to teach them. They said, “Sometimes we go to the farmers to teach us how they raise their animals and grow their crops in their farms”. However, the

community resource person only taught what was prescribed in the curriculum, nothing outside it. For instance the teacher said, “sometimes there might be a topic that I am not conversant with in the curriculum, so you take a person from the community who knows the topic as a resource person and bring him/her to teach children that topic”. Even though teachers and students mentioned that they used resource persons, none of the craftsmen had indicated that he had ever been invited to share his skills with students.

Teachers also expressed that children taught their friends and other teachers what they learnt at home from their parents, especially in the practical subjects. For instance one teacher stated, “there are some children who teach teachers because they learned these skills at home. So the connection is that what they have seen at home is not difficult to implement here”. Some students also indicated that they taught their friends some skills during creative arts. When asked where they learned these skills, it was interesting to note that most of them said they learned from their grandparents, not their parents. For instance one of them said, “for example, I know how to make clay pots. I learned this skill because I usually go to my grandmother during holidays. She makes clay pots so I learn from her”. Another said, “my grandmother makes clay pots so when she keeps her clay, I steal some and make a small pot. This is how I learned how to make pots”. So the question of why grandparents were involved more in some practical work like pottery than parents would need further investigation. However, the teachers indicated that there were only a few children who had skills to contribute to others in school so it was mandatory for a teacher to be well versed in the skills that should be imparted to children.

Interpreting what the interviewees had said, it is clear that there is more community involvement in the school than involvement of the school in the community.

However, even though the community strongly participates in school affairs, it does not influence the formal school curriculum. As one teacher put it, “the community does not take part in Agriculture. If they take part, maybe because we ask children to bring materials to use in this subject. But the community does not come to see what we do”. When students were asked how the community participated in what they learnt, they gave similar responses. One of them said, “for example my parents allow me to take things like hoes to use at school and in so doing they participate in what we learn”. The students, however, did not indicate if their parents did have a say in what they learnt. Although the rural community was agriculturally based, teachers felt that the community could not influence what was taught because the curriculum was already fixed. As emphasised by another teacher, “teaching is just for teachers, not for the community because the curriculum is already outlined”. If teachers had to involve a resource person from the community, they had to see to it that he or she was covering what was outlined in the syllabus. And according to teachers, they only involved a resource person from the community if they felt they did not have sufficient expertise in the topic as found in the curriculum. However, not all rural communities were the same in Malawi. So if the teachers’ aim was to only teach what was in the curriculum, it meant that the school might not address pertinent issues that were found in the community since they were not in the curriculum.

Similarly, students indicated that the community was not involved in matters pertaining to the curriculum. However, they had mixed feelings as to whether the community should have a say in what they learnt. For example one of them said, “the community should not have a say because what we do here is for our education and it’s none of their concern”. Other students felt that because most of the people in the rural area were not educated, they should not have a say in what they learnt. To them, uneducated people “are ignorant of what should be taught at school and if they are asked to contribute, their contribution will lower standards of our education”. Nevertheless, some students had different feelings about the community’s involvement in what they learnt. For example, one student said, “yes, the community must have a say in what we learn

because these people do not just stay at home but are also involved in the activities like agriculture and they do also have knowledge. They know some things that they can help us to know". Another student said that the community should be allowed to have a say in what they learnt because "they might have some ideas that can help us". When the primary graduates were asked whether the community should have a say in what is taught at school, they all agreed that they should. They gave different reasons for their stand. One of them said that if the community was involved in what the children learnt, "they will know what knowledge their children are getting and they will be able to help the children at home". The other graduate stated, "there are some things parents want the school to teach their children so if they are involved they will be able to tell the teachers what they want their children to learn". Another graduate said that the community should be involved because "if there are some things that do not work well, the community will be free to contribute their ideas". All craftsmen also indicated that they wanted to participate in what was taught in schools because their skills would gain recognition in schools. "If we participate we will pressurise teachers to teach these skills to children so that we are known both in schools and the country" explained one of them. These mixed feelings show the need for students, teachers and the community to understand clearly the importance of community participation in education.

However, even though the community participates in the school development activities, lack of community involvement in the curriculum entails failure to tap into the local knowledge that could be used to enrich the school curriculum and make it more meaningful to the students.

Rural Environment and the Formal School Curriculum

The third issue is the relationship between the rural environment and the formal school curriculum. According to the interviewees, subjects that are in the primary school curriculum from Standards 1 to 8 are: Agriculture, Chichewa, Social Studies, Mathematics, English, Science, Creative Arts, Needle Craft, Music, Home Economics, Physical Education, Life Skills and Religious Education. These subjects are divided into two major categories: academic (consisting of the first six) and practical (consisting of the last six and Agriculture, except Religious Education and Life Skills which interviewees failed to find their place in the two categories). It should be noted that Agriculture falls into both categories. Teachers use syllabuses and teachers' guides that were prepared in advance for them to teach these subjects.

When the interviewees were asked to name the subjects that they thought were very important for children to function and survive in the rural area, they all agreed that those that fell into the practical category were the most important. The first subject to be mentioned was Agriculture. Agriculture is categorised as being both academic and practical. The participants said that in Agriculture children could learn how to grow different crops for food and sale to earn money and also how to take care of animals and their environment. They also said that in Agriculture, children learnt budgeting that could help them do business. For instance one of the teachers stated, "Here in the village, the subject that can help a child to survive is Agriculture. If a child stops at Standard 8, he or she can go to the 'dambo' land and grow some vegetables like cabbage and sell". Students also echoed the same sentiments. For instance, one of them stated, "I myself see that Agriculture is very helpful because if I am not selected (to secondary school) I can go home and grow vegetables by following what I have learnt here and make money". Another also said, "Agriculture can help me to know many things and even if I fail to go to secondary school I can get money and support myself through selling farm products".

The importance of Agriculture was also seen in the graduates' interviews. When asked what they were doing having finished primary school, they all indicated that they were farming. However, they differed in their perceptions of farming as work. Most of them felt farming was not work because everybody in the village did it whether they wanted to or not and, as they learnt this from parents, they did not see the role of education in it. For example one of them said, "even if I did

not go to school, I would be able to do what I am doing because anybody, even those who have never gone to school, can do gardening". When asked what work they did, another graduate said, "I am just staying. I am not doing anything". However, when asked if he had a garden, he indicated, "I only do farming in my garden but I do not work". The other graduate said, after being asked what work she was doing, "I do not work, I am just staying. I just go to my garden". So most of the graduates indicated that they did not work even though they did farming in their gardens.

I think it is important that the school should help children realise that farming is one type of self-employment. In addition, the school needs to see to it that they inculcate effective agricultural skills in the students so that when they go home they should be able to make a difference.

Nevertheless, some few graduates that were interviewed indicated that they worked because they did farming in their gardens. For instance one of them said, "I work as a local farmer". He also indicated that what he did in his garden was related to what he had learnt at school. Another graduate also said that she worked as a farmer, growing tomatoes, cabbage and onions. Like the previous graduate, she indicated that what she did in her garden was related to what she learnt at school. She said that before she went to school, she did not know how to apply fertiliser to her vegetables. "I used to spread fertiliser on my turnips and most of them were drying up. But, I learned to dig holes besides my plants and apply fertiliser. My vegetables do not dry any more," she proudly explained.

In Creative Arts, interviewees said there were many things children could do in this subject that would help them stand on their own even if they failed to go to secondary school. According to one of the teachers, "in Creative Arts, a child can weave baskets, mats, brooms, make mortars, pestles, that are greatly needed and used in the villages and sell them to make money". Some teachers and students talked of painting, carpentry, making cane furniture, pottery and making woodcarvings as important skills in the villages, which were also part of Creative Arts. Surprisingly, none of the graduates who were interviewed indicated that they were involved in any of the Creative Arts skills as a result of going to school. Of the craftsmen I interviewed, none of them indicated that they learned their skills from school. How Creative Arts is being taught in schools is therefore questionable.

In Needle Craft, interviewees said that in the villages people were poor and they did not throw away clothes because they were torn. They always needed a tailor to mend their clothes. "It is cheaper for people in the village to get their clothes mended than buy new ones," one of the teachers argued. So Needle Craft would help children become tailors and get money by mending clothes for the people in the village. Students also said Needle Craft could help them make clothes to sell to the community. Among the graduates and craftsmen I interviewed, no one was a tailor so it is not known if there are some who are using skills learned in Needle Craft at school. This question can be followed up in further investigations.

Referring to the music business that is developing in Malawi, some participants indicated that the subject of Music could also help children to be self-employed. One of the teachers said, "there is a lot of money in the music business now. Many people now a days like Malawian music regardless of whether one is in the village or not. So this subject can give children a fertile ground for making money". Students also mentioned some of the great musicians in Malawi who were making a lot of money. They mentioned that if they knew music, it could make them rich.

Turning to Home Economics, some participants said that during famine they saw many people buying doughnuts and other homemade foods to eat. So if children learnt Home Economics, they could know how to provide and prepare nutritious food economically for their families and for sale. "Even here at school, you will see that the people who sell cooked food that our students buy come from the surrounding villages. If they learnt Home Economics, they would be preparing

healthy and nutritious food for our children here,” said one of the teachers. Another teacher also felt that, “these practical subjects are very important for children if they fail to go to secondary school. They can survive in the villages by learning these subjects instead of these academic ones”. So practical subjects were generally earmarked as most important for the functioning and survival of those rural children who could not make it to secondary school. Nevertheless, it should be noted that, by saying practical subjects were most important for rural living, participants did not imply that academic subjects were totally useless. For instance they also mentioned mathematics as important for those who would be selling their products because they would “be able to give proper change to the customers”. So academic subjects are like supporting subjects to those with rural skills who do not go to secondary school.

Having identified subjects in the curriculum and earmarked those that are most important for the rural community, there are some flaws that have been observed. For instance, teachers were concerned that the way the topics in the curriculum were ordered, there was a mismatch between what was taught and the season in which it was supposed to be taught. For instance in Agriculture, some topics that were supposed to be taught in a certain season, such as the rainy season, were taught in the dry season. One teacher complained:

According to me, since the change of the school calendar and that first term should now be beginning in January, I think there is no agreement between the seasons and the order the topics are taught in the syllabus. Take for example in Agriculture, sometimes we teach things after their seasons have already gone. In the past when schools were closing in July for a long holiday, topics were matching with the seasons.

The teachers felt that children learnt better when they saw and experience what they learnt but if they learnt things off-season, it was difficult for them to make sense of what they learnt. As such, they failed to acquire adequate skills in the subject taught. The problem of teaching some topics off-season was a result of the inflexibility of the curriculum. Teachers were not free to teach what they felt was appropriate according to time and setting. For example, when teachers were asked if they could divert from the curriculum and teach what they felt was important for the children to survive in the rural community, one of them said, “we follow the syllabus in the way it was written and we teach everything that is in the syllabus”. Answering the same question, another teacher proceeded and said:

Aaah! The syllabus that we are using now does not allow us to use our own knowledge in relation to what the children need to survive in the rural area because we have people who inspect us. What these people want to see is what is in the syllabus. So if we divert from the syllabus we are guilty of breaking the rules. The syllabus gives us a boundary of the work we do. As such it is difficult for us to do something different because the inspectors/advisors will think that we are not using the syllabus.

The other mismatch was about the classroom method of teaching and the rural culture. The culture in the rural community in Malawi is a collective one and people live as a group but the classroom methods promote individualism. Of all the classes I observed, no teacher used collaborative methods like group work, pair work or role-play. In all the classes teachers gave students individual class exercises and discouraged them from collaborating. For example, in one of the Agriculture classes, students were given a task of drawing types of fish individually and the teacher discouraged them from talking to each other. To those who were talking, the teacher retorted, “Do you draw with your hands or mouth? Why are you talking?” And again in the Mathematics class, when the teacher gave the students an exercise, he commanded, “Answer these questions quietly. I do not want to hear any noise apart from that from the papers and breathing”.

In addition, in some classes, teachers did not make much effort to relate whatever they taught to what students experienced in their local environment. For example in one of the Health Science

classes, a teacher was teaching about HIV/AIDS but her approach was more theoretical than experiential. For instance, she did not ask students to say if they ever had a friend, a relative or somebody they knew in their community who suffered from or died of HIV/AIDS. She did not ask students to explain from their experience how, for example, a person with AIDS looked or how people took care of HIV/AIDS patients in their community. One student was curious and wanted to know if mosquitoes could spread HIV/AIDS but the teacher just said “no” without any explanation and the student looked dissatisfied. The student was concerned about mosquitoes and HIV because these were found in his community and the school was supposed to address his question adequately to deal with any fears that he had. The teacher taught this subject as if there were no people living with HIV/AIDS in the community where students came from. She glued herself to the book and read out whatever was in the book regardless of whether it was making sense to the students or not. However, towards the end of the lesson, when students were given a chance to ask questions, they asked so many questions related to the conditions in their community. This showed that in her talk, the teacher could not adequately address what students wanted to know about HIV/AIDS in order to solve their own everyday problems. Thankfully she gave them time to ask questions. The other useful thing that the teacher did at the end was to ask students to say the effects of HIV/AIDS if it attacks teachers, parents, students and so on. However, the teacher seemed to run away from addressing the issue directly. That is to say, instead of asking direct questions of what AIDS is doing in the community, the teacher asked future conditional questions like, “what will happen if ...?”

A similar problem was observed in one of the English classes. In this class, the teacher was teaching about passive voice but instead of giving students sentences that reflected what was in their own environment, he used some sentences that were far removed from the students’ experiences. For example, one of the sentences that the teacher gave for the students to change from active to passive voice was “Madalo crossed the ocean”. However, there is no ocean in the community, let alone in the country as a whole, for students to understand the verb “cross” in relation to the ocean. Even though there were so many rivers in the district, the teacher chose to use ocean because it was in the syllabus. This mismatch would not yield functional literacy in the children.

In short, the existing mismatches between the formal curriculum and the environment in the areas discussed may result into making education less meaningful to the students. As such, it is doubtful if students acquire the intended skills as articulated in the goals and objectives of the primary education plan.

Devaluing Practical and Rural Community Oriented Education

The other main issue that was identified from the interviewees was that there was a tendency to devalue practical and rural community oriented education in schools. Under this issue, there were three sub-issues that were learned: (a) examinable and non-examinable subjects, (b) teachers’ skills in practical and rural oriented subjects, and (c) lack of teaching and learning equipment and material in the practical subjects.

Examinable and Non-examinable Subjects

Even though interviewees identified subjects that belonged to the practical category as very important for children to survive in the rural area if they failed to go to secondary school, they also all agreed that teachers and students neither had interest nor worked hard in them because practical subjects were not examined in the national examinations at the end of primary level. For instance, when one teacher was asked why practical subjects were ignored in schools, he said, “Sometimes the syllabus can show practical work but teachers are not interested to follow this. Since practical subjects are not examinable, even if we work hard how will it benefit us?” This

teacher felt that if the government put a policy that practical subjects should be examined, the practical curriculum would be strengthened and teachers would work hard to impart skills to the children. He saw the problem of devaluing practical subjects as emanating from both the government and the teachers. Another teacher also said that children did not acquire real practical skills after primary school because at school:

These children are encouraged to work hard in the subjects that come in the examinations because they know, even when they are in lower classes, that there will be examinations in Standard 8. So teachers are not interested in the subjects that do not come during examinations, if they teach them, their teaching is different from those subjects that come during examinations. So children do not have enough time to develop skills in practical subjects to use at home because most of the time is spent dealing with subjects that they will write during examinations.

In support, another teacher stated that even though practical subjects were scheduled in the timetable, “We use that time to teach subjects like English so that children should pass during examinations. Children are also not interested in practical subjects because they will not write them in examinations”. The use of practical subjects’ time to teach other examinable subjects was also confirmed during my class observations. The class I observed in Standard 6, the teacher used a Needle Work period to teach English. Although I was curious to observe a Needle Work class, I ended up observing an English class. Students also indicated that teachers use class periods for practical subjects to teach subjects that would be examined at the national examinations. Nevertheless, one teacher said that if all the teachers were doing the same things and worked hard in subjects like Creative Arts and Needle Craft, children would be helped to be self reliant after school but “since the government said these subjects should not be examined, people are not interested to work hard in them”.

Interestingly, Agriculture in primary school was divided into theory and practice and it was only the theory part that was examinable while the practical part, which was also very important for rural living, was not. Consequently, interviewees observed that this practical part also suffered because, as said by one of them, “it is only the theory part that is examined. If they want to examine the practical part, they examine it like theory referring to what students had already done in the past. But the emphasis is on theory”. When asked whether primary education helped students to attain self reliant skills, one teacher said that in the past “in Agriculture, there was a special lesson for practical and the child was able to make a vegetable garden at home from these practical lessons. They were also able to prepare a garden and grow crops and take care of them but now practical work is not strengthened in Agriculture”. This was an Agriculture teacher and he emphasised that in many schools there were no vegetable gardens “because this present curriculum is not strengthened so that children should be able to do practical subjects”. This was also confirmed in the school in Mangochi. Although the school was in a remote rural area where the community depended largely on Agriculture, there was no school garden for Agriculture.

The emphasis on theory in primary school was very alarming. One of the class lessons I observed was a Standard 7 Agriculture lesson. In this lesson, the teacher was teaching about types of fish. Although there was a fish market near the school, the teacher just relied on the drawings of fish to teach this lesson instead of bringing real fish to class for children to identify and classify practically. Another class was Mathematics. The teacher was teaching about “Addition of Lengths and Width”. Though it was possible for him to teach this practically, the teaching was so theoretical. There was no tape measure or ruler for students to measure, for example, the length and breadth of their own classroom or desks and add them up so that the children would see the relevance of mathematics to their everyday practical living. The emphasis was on competition, “finish quickly and have your exercise marked”. The other class was a History class. In this class,

the teacher was teaching about the missionaries and their influences. Just in front of the school, there was a church but she never let pupils discuss this church and the influence it had in the community as one of the real examples of the influence that the missionaries had had in Malawi. In fact, for the school to be where it was, it was because of that church. The school started as a missionary school.

For those teachers who mentioned that they did some practical activities in Agriculture, the common activity mentioned was the making of a vegetable garden. This was also confirmed in the students' interviews. Those who mentioned that Agriculture had helped them said they were able to make a vegetable garden. However, Malawi's staple food comes from maize but none of the teachers or students mentioned that students learned how to prepare maize gardens at school.

The teachers noted that since it was the government that stipulated that practical subjects should not be examined, it meant that the government had seen that they had no value. For example one of the teachers stated that they worked hard in examinable subjects because what they were fighting for was that children should do well in examinations. She continued to say that if Creative Arts was "examinable there would be no problem, it would be treated like these other subjects but if the government says this should not be examinable, it shows to us that the subject is useless". The teacher recommended that the government should treat those subjects that appeared to be useless as being useful. "For example, if a child fails to excel in Mathematics but he/she is good in painting, that skill must be encouraged. But how can he/she be encouraged if he/she knows that what he/she is doing is not valued?" she questioned.

While practical subjects received less emphasis in lower classes, in Standard 8, which was the last class in primary school, they were not even taught though the curriculum showed that they should be taught up to Standard 8. Students and teachers in this class busied themselves with examinable subjects in preparation for the final national primary school leaving certificate examinations. For instance, one teacher said "teaching practical subjects in Standard 8 is wasting time because children prepare for examinations and practical subjects do not come during exams. So we do not teach these in Standard 8". However, Standard 8 was a crucial year for students to acquire enough skills to survive in the rural areas. For instance one teacher said that it was in the higher classes "where we deal with complex practical skills more than in the lower classes". So if practical skills are not taught in the higher classes, students are not able to develop these complex skills for them to compete in the rural economy.

Even though practical subjects were not taught in Standard 8, students voiced their concerns about them. Students felt that they were not helped enough if they were denied practical subjects at Standard 8. According to them, practical subjects would help them survive in the future if they failed to go to secondary school. For instance one of them said, "I was thinking that, if, in the senior classes, they gave us subjects like Creative Arts, Needle Craft, Home Economics, and the like we would be helped to get money after we leave school in Standard 8". When they were asked to say what they thought would be important for them to learn up to Standard 8 so that they survived in their rural areas, most of them still indicated Agriculture and practical subjects. Therefore, ignoring practical skills at this level is giving students false hopes as if everybody will go to secondary school and later on get white-collar jobs.

In summary, by making some subjects examinable and others not, it gives an impression that it is only those subjects that are examinable that are important. This makes those who fail to go to secondary school suffer twice, that is failing to go to secondary school and at the same time failing to acquire skills for them to survive in their own communities.

Teachers' Skills in Practical and Rural Oriented Subjects

Despite the many practical subjects introduced in the curriculum and despite the fact that they were very important in the rural areas, this study has shown that most teachers did not have adequate skills to teach these subjects. When asked if teachers had enough skills to teach practical subjects like music, one teacher responded,

The problem begins in the Teacher Training Colleges (TTCs). In TTCs the teacher was not adequately taught music, he/she comes to school, he/she is given a teachers' guide, 'teach music,' example tonic solfa, do you think he/she can teach? He/she cannot teach because he/she does not know what notes are. Even at this school, there is nobody who has skills in music.

This teacher felt that if the government put interest in practical subjects and started sending teachers for either orientation or in-service training, it would be helpful for them to teach practical subjects and even children would start liking practical subjects such as music. Another teacher elaborated that when children finished primary school, they did not use the skills at home because they were not well taught in school. He said that there was a lack of interest in the teachers, government and TTCs to promote these subjects. He further said, "Even in college, tutors do not teach us well practical subjects like Creative Arts. So we come here without any skills to teach the children. As a result, we skip what we do not know". He felt that the problems that were faced in practical subjects come from far away and from the government, to the TTCs, to teachers and finally to the students. In agreement, another teacher lamented, "The government puts subjects in the syllabus that teachers should teach them but without training teachers in those subjects. We have not been trained to teach Creative Arts. Of course there are some things we can teach but we do not have skills in most of the things we are asked to teach in Creative Arts".

For those teachers who said they had some skills in practical subjects, they indicated that they learnt them at home but not in college. For example one teacher said she has skills in music because she had been singing in her church choir and their church emphasised use of tonic solfa. In that way, she learned how to read music. Another said, "I learned how to make wood carvings when I was young so I still use those skills to teach my students". These teachers stated that they sometimes asked fellow teachers to teach those skills they did not have. However, they agreed that many teachers did not have skills in practical subjects.

Therefore, even though there were practical subjects in schools, children did not adequately learn them and acquire enough skills for them to survive in the rural area because their teachers were also incompetent in practical subjects.

Lack of Teaching and Learning Equipment and Materials in Practical Subjects

Even if teachers had skills, it would still be difficult for them to teach practical subjects because of lack of teaching and learning materials in these subjects. As observed by teachers, the government did not provide learning and teaching equipment and materials for practical subjects. For example, when asked what problems they faced in teaching practical subjects, one teacher said,

We do face a lot of problems. Let's say, for example in Standard 6, they say we should make a baby blanket but we need thread to do that. I cannot manage to sponsor the whole class to buy thread. Sometimes we tell children to buy thread but they do not manage because they are poor. For example last week we told them to contribute K35 (about \$0.41) each to buy thread, but some children are failing to contribute because they do not have money.

This teacher said the problem was that children and teachers could not manage to buy materials from their own pocket for practical work. In Malawi, teachers' salaries were very low; this teacher

questioned why she was expected to buy materials for the students if she was not receiving enough herself. She said that, if the government was providing materials, it would be easy for her to teach the class, but expecting students to buy materials was not possible. As a result, teachers ended up either buying materials themselves from their low salaries, which was not a healthy situation for them, or cancel the topic altogether.

In both schools where the study was conducted, Home Economics was not being taught. When asked if Home Economics was being taught in the Zomba school, one of the teachers indicated that it was not because “the major problem is lack of equipment and teachers who teach this subject”. In the Mangochi school, the teacher was so passionate and said:

We do not teach this subject at our school. There are reasons. Our school is from Standards 1 to 8 and in Mangochi there are not enough teachers. We are failing to get teachers for our school. We are only three teachers. So for us to teach from Standards 1 to 8 and also teach in the way we were supposed to teach, it is difficult. We really need this subject at our school because it can help children to be employed as cooks. But we do not teach it because we do have a lot of work and we also do not have materials.

Even though Home Economics is very important in the villages for issues of nutrition, general home cleanliness, balanced diet and so on, the rural community is denied the opportunity to have it in their schools.

Even though the study has shown that what was taught in Agriculture related well to what children needed in the villages, some practical activities were not conducted because of lack of equipment and money. When asked if what was taught in Agriculture was related to what students needed at home, one teacher said most of the things were related but “the problem is that sometimes the syllabus shows that we should take children for a field trip but if it is far, we fail to go because we do not have money to hire transport. And again, we fail to get teaching materials for practical work”. This teacher felt that if they had materials available, children would be real agriculturalists because they would learn all the necessary skills. “But the problem is that we lack enough materials. Even for us to get fertiliser it depends on our initiative but we do not have enough money to continue doing that”. The issue of using teachers’ money to buy teaching materials is also mentioned here.

As observed, lack of materials and equipment to teach practical subjects is a very big problem in the rural schools. The consequence of this is that teachers and students think that the government’s message about practical subjects is that they are useless. This results in denying the rural student opportunities to function in his or her community

Participation in Curriculum Development

Another issue that emerged in the study was that teachers felt that they were not involved in curriculum development. They said the curriculum they were using was developed by authorities, higher in both academic qualifications and status, and was passed down to them to implement as gospel though they did not understand some of the issues in it. For instance one teacher said, “the problem with this syllabus is that those who developed it followed a ‘Top-Down Approach’ so it is difficult for us to divert from it. As a result, we just follow what is in it. We cannot do otherwise with it since the authorities had already prescribed it”. This teacher said, even if they followed the curriculum as prescribed, the children did not do well because some of the things did not relate well with the needs of the children. She gave an example of Standard 6 English. She said there are too many activities in Standard 6 English to be completed in a very short period of time; this did not match well with the performance of the children at this level. According to her observation, the English syllabus was developed as if the students to be taught were “native speakers of English”. She suggested that if the curriculum development followed a “Down-Up

Approach”, these problems would be eradicated because, according to her, “it is us who know the problems of these children and how different they are. So our plea is that we should be involved in the development of the curriculum because it is us who face students’ problems”. Another teacher articulated the same problem of too many activities and too little time and what he said was that “when teaching we rush through just to complete the activities regardless of whether the students have understood the materials or not”. This scenario is another manifestation of a rigid curriculum that does not allow teachers the freedom to diverge from it. And again, it manifests lack of training of teachers to assess the materials that are important to teach and those that are not important.

Similarly, students indicated that they wanted to be involved in curriculum development. As stated by one, “we want the government to ask us what we want to learn at school. Sometimes there are other things we desire to learn but they are not included in the syllabus”. Another student complained that, even when they asked their teachers to teach something they wanted to learn, the teachers told them “what you have asked to learn is not either in the syllabus or at your level. You will learn it when you go to secondary school”. I felt this to be an insult to students because it was only about 23 per cent of the Standard 8 students who went on to secondary school.

In summary, if teachers and students were not involved in the development of curriculum, it was difficult for such a curriculum to be successfully implemented and to respond to the needs of the students as has been shown by both teachers and students in this study.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The question that the study was trying to answer was how primary education was related to the rural communities in Malawi. This overall question was explored through two specific research questions: (a) how is primary education related to the rural communities in Malawi? (b) What are teachers’, students’, graduates’, and craftspersons’ perspectives on the appropriateness of primary education to rural primary graduates’ economic development and survival? The overall approach used to collect data in order to answer these questions was a qualitative phenomenological design.

There are a number of issues that the study finds that explain how primary education is related to rural communities in Malawi. To begin with, the results suggest that the schools that were studied indicated a very minimal involvement in the community. Because of this minimal involvement, it is difficult for the community to appreciate the contribution of the school to their lives since they do not benefit much from it. It is also difficult for the school to know and identify what is needed in the community so that the school can incorporate those needs in the curriculum, thereby making education relevant to the community that the school serves. As such, the school is not fully utilised to bring development to the rural community.

In addition, the study finds that the local community is strongly involved in certain school activities, which include doing development work at school, solving problems for students, and providing security to the schools. However, even though the community strongly participates in school affairs, it does not influence the formal curriculum. This is a problem because, if the community is not involved in the curriculum, the school is failing to tap the local knowledge that could be used to enrich the school curriculum and make it meaningful to the students.

Furthermore, the results have shown that there are some mismatches between the rural environment and the school curriculum. These mismatches are found both in the curriculum as stated by teachers and methodology as revealed in the class observations. These mismatches may affect how students learn and may hinder the acquisition of functional skills that are useful for the students to survive in their local communities.

Moreover, it is found that the policy of selecting some subjects to be examinable while others are not, militates against the acquisition of skills in those subjects that are not examinable. Consequently, the majority of the students who return to rural areas after completing primary education are not taught the subjects that are important for their survival in their rural communities.

Another issue that emerges is the lack of teacher and student participation in curriculum development. This has implications for curriculum implementation and relevance. If teachers are not involved in the development of the curriculum, they do not have the chance to indicate if they are able to handle its content in relation to their aptitude and the level of the children they teach. And again, if students do not participate, their needs may be overlooked in the curriculum.

Recommendations

Role of the School

Schools should increase their involvement in the community especially in the community development activities that should be connected to students' learning. Students and teachers should be able to identify activities in the community that can be incorporated in the curriculum so that as students get experiential learning, they should also develop the communities together with the members of their communities. The Malawi government, through the Ministry of Education, should take a deliberate step to facilitate this kind of involvement by turning this idea into one of the policies for rural primary schools.

Curriculum Issues

The curriculum should be revised so that instead of being prescriptive, it should be descriptive and flexible to allow teachers to be creative and venture into areas that are important for the local communities in the rural areas though those areas might not be prescribed in the curriculum.

It is also found that some teachers take the curriculum as gospel because they want to impress the inspectors and advisors that they are covering what has been prescribed. Therefore, in order to help teachers to be creative, inspectors must emphasise the need to see how the teachers adapt the curriculum to the local environment instead of checking if what they are teaching is in the curriculum. Teachers must be flexible to teach what they feel will help the children to survive in their local communities and, at the same time, acquire academic skills that may enable them to continue with education. So issues of training and supervision, if well organised, are two interrelated aspects of making a teacher more of a think-tank in curriculum implementation.

Community, teacher and student participation in defining and developing the school curriculum must always be sought in order to make the curriculum relevant, implementable and responsive to the local needs.

Teacher Training

As the class observations and interviews show, teachers lack creativity to contextualise the curriculum or modify it. They think whatever is in the curriculum must be presented as it is without reflecting on how what they teach is related to the local environment. So teachers must be trained to be creative and they must consider what is around them to be very important for the learning of the students. This means that teachers colleges and in-service programs for teachers must impart in teachers skills that can help them facilitate experiential learning.

Furthermore, teachers should be trained or oriented on how to teach practical subjects. This can take a form of in-service training for the teachers who are already in the field, whether they are already qualified or not. In addition, teachers colleges should recognise that there are practical

subjects in the primary curriculum and, as such, similar skill subjects should be included in the teachers college curriculum to address the lack of competent teachers in these subjects.

Policy Issues

The policies of examinable and non-examinable subjects need to be revised in order to avoid giving an impression that some subjects are not as important as others. For instance, instead of saying that practical subjects should not be examinable, continuous assessment may be introduced to assess practical skills through portfolios. Teachers should be trained to assess the progress of children in these subjects and their progress report be kept until they reach Standard 8. In Standard 8, an outside assessor should come in and, together with the teachers, assess the portfolios and products of students' work and arrive at grades that should be sent to Malawi National Examination Board (MANEB). These grades should be combined with the students' grades in academic subjects to determine their final grades.

Policies should be formulated that will enable skilled people in the local communities to be formally incorporated in the primary education system so that they work with teachers to impart skills that are necessary for the rural children to survive in their communities even if they fail to go on to secondary school. Through the model of school-based enterprise for example, these skilled persons, together with students and teachers, can be making some products to sell to the community so that the money realised can be used to buy more materials for the school and pay those skilled workers. The Ministry of Education can help initiate this process by funding its initial organisation and thereafter, encourage the schools to operate with little financial support from the Office of the Ministry.

Teacher Support

Teaching and learning materials must be provided in practical subjects to let those who are good in them learn as much as those who are good in academic subjects.

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