

Why Teachers Are Leaving Their Jobs: An Analysis of Attrition of Teachers in Malawi

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ABSTRACT--In Malawi, on average, there is 1 teacher for every 70 learners. On top of this, teachers are leaving their jobs at their schools in search of better opportunities. This constant attrition is therefore a major challenge of the education sector, which is struggling as it is to provide quality education. This paper analyses the reasons why teachers are leaving their jobs in an attempt to understand the core problems at the heart of this phenomena. It consolidates key findings of several studies to identify six major reasons for teacher attrition. These are the “placeholder” status of teaching; teachers following their spouses; low salaries and incentives; poor living and working conditions; lack of promotions and; the HIV and AIDS pandemic. A major gap is the lack of a detailed retention strategy to keep teachers from leaving schools. It recommends greater stakeholder collaboration to support teachers by improving working conditions, improving the public perception of the teaching profession and providing more opportunities for career advancement.

Key Words--Teachers, education, human resource management, attrition, turnover

I. INTRODUCTION

Teachers are possibly the most fundamental human resource in the education sector. Their work is that which allows a nation to achieve its educational goals. Human resource management thus has a vital role to play in *attracting* and *selecting* the best teachers to provide education within schools. However, there is another factor in this process, known as *attrition*. Attrition can be defined as a reduction in the number of employees through retirement, resignation or death.

In Malawi, attrition of teachers has been a major challenge in the education sector. Though education has become far more accessible in the last 20 years, one of the major struggles has been supplying enough qualified teachers to meet the large number of learners. Average teacher-learner ratios are around 1:70 which means that there is a great shortage of teachers. On top of that, teachers are constantly leaving their schools in search of better working conditions or better jobs in other sectors. This puts a strain on a situation which is already problematic. This paper will therefore explore the reasons why teachers in Malawi are leaving their jobs. These include reasons for transfer to other schools, resignations and even death. It will also give context to the Malawian education system through some historical background. Six major reasons will be discussed in detail and these have been consolidated from research that has taken place in Malawi.

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II. THE EDUCATION SYSTEM IN MALAWI

Since attaining independence in 1964, the Malawian education sector has strived to provide quality and relevant education to the Malawian nation. This is crucial to meet the socio-economic development goals of the country, which is one of the poorest and least developed in the world. To this end, the education sector employs 60% of Malawi's total workforce and was allocated 11% (approximately 4.2 billion Rupees) of the national development budget in the 2018 – 2019 Financial Year. This ranks it in the top three funded sectors in the country.

Education in Malawi is led by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MoEST) and is organized in an 8 – 4 – 4 system where Primary School lasts for 8 years, Secondary School for 4 years and Tertiary Education for 4 years. In 1994, the country introduced Free Primary Education in an effort to meet Education For All (EFA) goals. As such, primary schools have a high net enrolment ratio of 86%. However, this falls drastically at secondary level (where gross enrolment ratio is 17%) and tertiary level (where gross enrolment level is less than 1%). This shows that the country has very limited access to education, particularly at higher levels. In addition to this, the education sector also struggles with issues of quality and funding.

Children typically start primary school between the ages of 5 – 7 years of age and their first class is Standard 1. After 8 years, they write the Primary School Leavers Certificate of Education (PLSCE) examinations which is a national standardised achievement test. If they are successful, they are awarded the PLSCE Certificate which is the standard of basic education in Malawi and makes them eligible for secondary education. The best candidates are selected to go to various government secondary schools throughout the country, many of which are boarding schools. The rest must opt for private schools which may or may not require their own separate entrance examinations. Less than 20% of eligible candidates go to secondary school.

Secondary school starts with Form 1 class and ends with Form 4 class at which point the candidates sit for another national standardized test, the Malawi School Certificate of Education (MSCE) Examinations. If they pass, they become eligible for higher education in colleges and universities. However, acceptance into an institution of higher learning requires passing various entrance aptitude tests such as the University Entrance Examinations and the TEVET Entrance Examinations. According to the National Council for Higher Education (NCHE), there are 21 registered Public Higher Learning Institutions and 13 registered Private Higher Learning Institutions. However, Ng'ambi (2011) notes that less than 1% of eligible candidates have access to these institutions because they lack the capacity to cope with the demand in terms of infrastructure, teaching and learning materials and qualified staff. Against this background, Malawi has made several strides in the last 3 decades. Most notable of these is the introduction of Free Primary Education in 1994, a move which doubled the number of learners who had access to education. It has also taken strides to make primary education more learner-centered through the introduction of Outcome Based Education in Primary schools. Finally, it has steadily improved its infrastructure by building more schools as well as building the capacity of teachers and other educators who work in the sector.

III. ATTRITION OF TEACHERS IN MALAWI

In Malawi, the education sector employs around 60% of the whole labour force. This makes it the largest workforce in the country. However, attrition rate (percentage of teachers leaving their jobs within one year) is around 6%. This has negatively affected the quality of education in the country by reducing the number of qualified

teachers working in the country. Teacher-Learner ratios are 1:70 which is already extreme and the constant loss of teachers from school only worsens the situation. In addition to that, there is no national strategy to retain teachers in the profession.

Two types of attrition are considered in this paper. The first is when individuals completely leave teaching for another sector of employment. This could be due to resignation, retirement or death. The second is when teachers are transferred to other schools for various reasons. This is known as *loss within service* since a school loses a teacher thereby creating a vacancy which must be filled. Transfers are the number one cause of teachers leaving a school, accounting for over 65% of all cases. This is followed by death which accounts for around 17% of all cases. The following reasons for attrition are discussed below:

1. “Placeholder” Status of the Teaching Profession
2. Teachers following their spouses
3. Low Salaries and Lack of Incentives
4. Poor Living and Working Conditions
5. Lack of Promotions
6. The HIV and AIDS Pandemic

IV. “PLACEHOLDER” STATUS OF THE TEACHING PROFESSION

There is a massive demand for qualified teachers in Malawi as evidenced by average teacher to student ratio of 1:70 as of 2015. As such, individuals without a professional teaching qualification are frequently recruited as teachers so as to manage the relatively high enrolment. These include individuals with PLSCE, MSCE as well as those with diplomas and degrees in fields other than education. Though this has reduced the ratio, somewhat, these individuals are more likely to leave the teaching profession because it is just a placeholder for them. They become teachers while searching for other employment opportunities and are likely to quit teaching because they feel like they do not belong within the education sector.

In addition to this, there is another trend that must be mentioned. In a study on attrition of secondary school teachers, Maxwell, Ungapembe & Furukawa (2017) found that 41% of teachers did not choose an educational course when applying for college. The explanation for this is that there are less applications for educational courses in higher learning institutions. However, due to high overall demand for tertiary education, eligible candidates who cannot be accommodated in their desired programs are frequently redirected to educational programs. For instance, someone who wants to study business might not find a place in that course and may be offered a place in an educational course instead. As a result, they enter the teaching profession with little interest for the job with up to 38% of them intending to leave.

V. FEMALE TEACHERS FOLLOWING THEIR SPOUSES

Another major reason for attrition was that married teachers would leave their schools to be closer to their spouses who were working in other areas. This was the most common reason for transfers of female teachers as noted by Moleni and Ndalama (2004) where they studied teacher attrition and absence in 4 districts of Malawi. Over 25% of transfer cases of female teachers were because of this. Despite greater gender equity and awareness,

the male is still viewed as the dominant provider of the family and as such, female teachers are more likely to follow their husbands to other areas rather than the reverse.

VI. LOW SALARIES AND LACK OF INCENTIVES

Moleni and Ndalama (2004) note that low pay was a prevalent cause of resignations of teachers from schools. Salaries and incentives for teachers are relatively low and this makes it difficult for them to sustain good living conditions, particularly in rural areas. This means that the few qualified teachers are even less motivated to work in the education sector, leading to many teachers leaving the teaching profession. In addition to this, there have been country-wide cases of teachers' salaries being delayed for months on end due to lack of funding and mismanagement of pay-roll. This results in dissatisfaction and even industrial action by teachers.

Teachers are also not given attractive incentives for excellent performance due to funding challenges in most schools. Other than the salaries, teachers have no other source of income and there is no formal policy for rewarding good performance. Incentives are especially poor for those working in rural areas. Therefore, teachers are demotivated to stay in the profession, let alone strive for excellence in their work.

The turnover is even worse for teachers without a teaching qualification. These individuals frequently quit teaching because they don't receive certain benefits like promotions, loans and Continued Professional Development (CPD). They are less motivated to make a long-term investment to teaching because they feel that being a teacher is temporary. As such, they are constantly looking for other opportunities for employment.

VII. POOR LIVING AND WORKING CONDITIONS

Kayuni and Tambulasi (2007) note that poor living and working conditions are a reason for teachers to leave their profession. Some schools provide accommodation to teachers in the form of teacher's houses but these are few and far between. In addition to that, most schools with these facilities cannot provide accommodation for every single teacher employed but they prioritize the available housing based on the position of the teacher. For example, principals and HODs will be more likely to get housing within the school as opposed to recently recruited teachers. As such, teachers face challenges in travelling to school from home and this is both in rural and urban areas. As such, teachers are less motivated to work in rural areas and may transfer or completely change professions to work in towns and cities.

In rural areas, suitable housing is hard to find and often very far from the school. Transport is also difficult to find and many teachers have to use bicycles to get to their schools. This becomes particularly problematic during the rainy season when the weather is unfavourable and the dirt roads become muddy. In urban areas, housing is usually expensive for a teacher and they have to look for cheaper accommodation which may be far away from the school. Public transportation is also expensive and they have to travel by foot.

These conditions are especially difficult for fresher teachers i.e. those joining the teaching profession for the first time. New teachers are more likely to leave their schools within the first 5 years. Many of the schools do not have adequate resources for teaching and learning. There were shortages of books, classrooms, desks and even chalk. Teachers were forced to work with little resources in challenging environments while also dealing with large

classes that were difficult to control. As such, this presents a shock to the new teachers because they are faced with harsh conditions which they did not expect and they are more likely to leave their schools.

These factors contribute the low motivation of teachers on the job and therefore contributes to the desire to leave the teaching profession.

VIII. LACK OF PROMOTIONS

It takes at least three years for a teacher to become eligible for promotion according to the National Strategy for Teacher Education Development (NSTED, 2007). However, there are few opportunities for promotion to the rank of principal. Many eligible teachers serve for years without being given the opportunity for promotion. On top of this, their salary grade remains the same and the opportunities for moving to another grade are scarce. Government schools do not have an established system of performance appraisal, which would otherwise provide a basis for promotion. Meke (2013) notes that promotion is therefore neither fair nor transparent because undeserving teachers get promoted while better performers are denied.

The lack of progress and a clear career path for teachers results in demotivation and frustration of teachers. This makes them more likely to leave the teaching profession

IX. THE HIV AND AIDS PANDEMIC

HIV and AIDS has had a profound impact on Malawi, especially when it comes to the human capital that is supposed to drive the economy. In 2002, The Malawi Human Rights Commission reported that five teachers lose their lives to HIV and AIDS every day. However, Teachers are not a high-risk group in relation to HIV and AIDS. Regardless, in a study conducted in 4 of the 28 districts in Malawi, 80% of teacher deaths were likely to have been related to HIV and AIDS. Additionally, the victims of medically related attrition amongst teachers were more likely to be young than old. Teachers would leave their schools for two main reasons which were to be closer to medical support, or to be close to their families who would assist with treatment and caring for the children of HIV diagnosed individuals.

Kadzamira (2006) notes that the MoEST established a task force on HIV and AIDS to address the pandemic within the sector and teachers also established an association known as Teachers Living Positively (T'LIPO). However, teachers noted that they were given little support after being infected or affected by HIV and AIDS. For example, there are few incentives or medical support such as easier access to Anti-Retroviral Therapy (ART) or guidance and counselling. Teachers, especially in government schools, are not provided with a medical aid scheme and the high cost of ARTs is an additional barrier to them, especially when considered along with their relatively low salaries. In addition to this, teachers are reluctant to disclose their HIV status because of fear of being stigmatized and excluded from their peers and community at the workplace. Aside from death, teachers may transfer or resign from schools to be closer to better equipped medical facilities and family support. This is especially true for teachers in rural areas who may move to urban areas. Though HIV and AIDS awareness has greatly improved with time, these prevailing issues make the teaching environment one that is less supportive to those who are infected or affected by HIV and AIDS and may result in teachers leaving schools.

X. CONCLUSION

Teachers make up the backbone of the education sector in any context and in Malawi in particular. Education is seen as one of the most crucial sectors to eradicate poverty and drive socio-economic growth. However, the constant attrition of teachers due to the reasons above is severely crippling the quality of education in the country. The research has shown that there is need to improve the attraction of the profession because many go into teaching as a placeholder for other, more desirable professions. There is also the need to address the rampant transfers, particularly with regard to following of spouses. Teachers need support with their living and working conditions, and health care. Finally, there is need for attractive incentives and job development opportunities which will give teachers pride along with a clear path for career advancement. The lack of a strategy to retain teachers is also worrisome and stakeholders should collaborate on developing this and putting it into practice. If done, it will no doubt reduce the rate at which teachers are leaving their jobs.

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