

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

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Abstract

The importance of teachers in quality education is undisputed and effective teaching depends largely on the knowledge, skills and motivation of the teachers. However, creating and promoting primary school environment conducive to quality education is often hindered by structural factors, such as poverty in rural areas. Teachers are reluctant to be deployed to remote areas mainly due to inadequate living and working conditions and limited opportunities for professional development. Housing provision and perceived low status of the teaching profession also factor in some teachers' reluctance to accept a teaching position in a less developed area. For some teachers, becoming a teacher is often seen as a last resort but for others, teaching may represent the most attractive profession.

In this study, we examined the experiences of teachers in four rural primary schools in Malawi, focusing on the quality of education. The objectives of the study are to shed some light on teachers' living and working condition and their perception of the teaching profession. We followed a qualitative research approach and data were collected through semi-structured interviews. Data was obtained from 24 teachers, six from each school, four headteachers representing the schools and four primary education advisors (PEA). Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory was applied to interpret data. The teachers, headteachers and PEAs are represented in the microsystem whereas their interactions comprise the mesosystem. Teachers' living and working conditions are represented in the exosystem, and lastly the macrosystem consists of customs and laws of society.

Main findings indicate that the microsystem appears to be somewhat active but interactions between units within that system are weak resulting in limited mesosystemic interaction. Teachers, headteachers and PEAs in these four schools can strengthen their interaction in order to improve the quality of education. Exosystemic and macrosystemic factors also need to be strengthened by improving both working and living conditions of rural teachers.

The purpose of examining teachers' living and working conditions in rural Malawi will provide us with important insight into what may partially or potentially cause the low educational attainment which is the case in rural Malawi as well as in other rural areas in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Keywords: *Ecological systems theory, Malawi, rural primary schools, teachers' living and working conditions.*
