

# **Does My Child's Educational Success Depend on Me? A Qualitative Analysis of Parents and Teachers Addressing Barriers to Education Throughout Malawi**

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## **Abstract**

Understanding barriers in a child's education can be vital in the performance of a child throughout their educational pursuits. Malawi is a country in sub-Saharan Africa, and in 1994 passed a law saying that primary education would be free for the public. However, it is not mandatory for children to go to school. While children do not have to go to school there are extenuating circumstances that prohibits a child from attending primary school. Less than half of children in Malawi finish primary school. In a qualitative study conducted in Malawi over 30 parents and over 30 teachers were randomly selected through different villages and districts throughout Malawi. They were interviewed about their beliefs and attitudes on their children's education, and the barriers that hindered their children from receiving an education. These parents were also asked questions about their own educational journey, such as if their parents helped them with education and what either prohibited or facilitated their success as a student. Along with parents, teachers, were interviewed about parental involvement in education as well as the barriers children face in coming attending school. These teachers were asked about what they observe about parents in their child's education, as well as what they believe is important in a student's academic performance. Through analysis of the data collected one can accurately see roles that parents, and teachers believe that parents play in their child's education, and the barriers to their child completing their education.

**Keywords: Malawi, Parents, Education**

## **1. Introduction**

Malawi, an economically developing country in Sub-Saharan Africa, is one of the poorest countries in the world<sup>1</sup>. Currently 50.7% of Malawi's population lives in poverty<sup>2</sup>. Free primary education was not introduced to the citizens of Malawi until 1994<sup>3</sup>. However, despite the free primary education in Malawi, many students do not graduate. There are many reasons that scholars speculate that there is such a high incompleteness rate of schooling in Malawi. Scholars have considered that familial employment opportunities, illnesses, large classes, and more could be some of the major reasons that school-aged children do not complete their education<sup>4</sup>. One of the many reasons that students do not graduate is that the costs for sending a child to school are prohibitive. Normal school fees for uniforms, writing materials, and textbooks cost between 25 USD to 30 USD per child<sup>5</sup>, which accounts for an average of 1/10 of a Malawian family's annual income<sup>6</sup>. However, it is unclear whether school fees in Malawi are the sole reason that only of the 4.6 million students enrolled in schools throughout Malawi 35% of children who enter primary school will complete it<sup>2</sup>, and, only 8% will go on to complete a secondary education<sup>2</sup>. There is a dearth of research surrounding Malawi's educational pursuits, especially research that specifically focuses on the barriers that locals see within the

education system. This research will focus on the barriers to education as seen by both parents and teachers, to better identify the main components of the low completion rate of education in Malawi.

Parental involvement—defined as the involvement of parental figures in the instruction of a child both in the classroom and in a home environment<sup>7</sup> is one of the most important aspects of a child's achievement and overall happiness in school<sup>8</sup>. Parental involvement in education can be greatly influenced by the personal educational level of the parent<sup>9</sup>. Typically, the more education a parent has, the more likely the parent will be to motivate and encourage learning in and outside of the home<sup>7</sup>. As individuals gain more education, they will advocate for their children to do the same, thus becoming more involved in shaping their child's academic performance<sup>10</sup> and potentially creating generational cycles of families that gain higher education, and generational cycles of families that are unable to receive a higher education<sup>11</sup>. The literature shows that when economic resources of a family are low, the likeliness of a parent to expect long-term educational success from a child also lowers<sup>11</sup>. Previous research concludes that teachers are more likely than not to perceive parental involvement in a child's education as one of the most beneficial components of the child's academic success<sup>12</sup>. A plethora of preceding studies concludes that this type of involvement from the parents is seen as vital for the academic achievement of the child from many different individuals<sup>6</sup>. However, the extent to which a parent is involved in their child's education can vary both across cultures, times, and educational status<sup>1</sup>. While parental involvement is important, this cannot be the only problem contributing to the low primary completion rate in Malawi. Although research suggests that parental involvement is one of the most important factors in a child's education<sup>8</sup>, there is little research surrounding a parent's involvement in education in Malawi, and specifically why parents can participate in their child's education or why they are not able to participate. Rather than suggesting that parental involvement, or lack of parental involvement, is the reason educational completion rates are low among school-aged children, this study provides a holistic view of barriers impeding a child's educational endeavor in Malawi by interviewing both parents and teachers to find commonalities among what they believe to be the barriers in education.

In short, this study argues that there are multiple barriers in child's education in Malawi. This research identifies many of the barriers as described by parents and teachers that hinder their child's schooling, as well as also analyzes the discrepancy of views of educational importance between Malawian teachers and Malawian parents. This study helps clearly address the barriers to education as identified by parents and teachers in Malawi.

## **2. Methodology**

### **2.1 Data**

The data was collected through interviews with over 30 parents and 30 teachers throughout different villages and districts in Malawi. Parents had at least one child who was currently participating in primary and or secondary school. Teachers were currently teaching at the primary and or secondary school levels. Both parents and teachers were interviewed in the official language of Malawi, Chichewa, with the assistance of a translator. All interviews conducted were semi-structured and open-ended. With the permission from the respondent, interviews were recorded for later transcription. Parents were asked a series of questions pertaining to their personal educational activities, as well as their involvement and views on the importance of education for their children. Such as are there challenges with your child going to school? Did you go to school? If no what stopped, you from going? Do believe that education is beneficial to your child? Are there things that you like or dislike about the schooling of your children? Half of the parents interviewed identified as female and the other half as male. Their ages ranged from 20-40. Most of the parents that were interviewed finished their own primary education, however, did not continue to secondary or tertiary education. Interviews last from 30 minutes to an hour, depending on the responses of the interviewee.

Teachers were asked a similar series of questions concerning their beliefs on parental involvement in their students' education, as well as what common barriers they see their learners experience in education endeavors. They were asked questions such as if what grades they taught, how long they have been teaching, patterns they've noticed in students, class size, parental involvement in their student's learning etc. Of the thirty teachers interviewed 29 identified as men, and 1 identified as a woman. They ranged in all ages, and as well as in how long they had been teaching. These interviews were normally conducted near the end of the school day, or during their lunch period for anywhere between half an hour to an hour.

## 2.2 Analysis

After interviews were conducted, they were transcribed. Upon transcription of the interviews they were then analyzed for themes. Responses were coded and sorted into overarching categories meant to capture the general idea of the responses. The amount of responses in each overarching category were then used to calculate percentages of comparable answers among respondents to gain a better understanding of patterns among parents in teachers in Malawi.

## 3. Findings

Among the teachers that were interviewed, most of the teachers were disappointed in the dearth of involvement from parents in their pupil's education. While PTA meetings are held every term in nearly all schools across Malawi, teachers described that most parents do not attend these meetings and have little to no contact with the schools in which their children attend. Teachers expressed explicit concern of not knowing or having a relationship with the parents of their students. All teachers that were interviewed insisted that that education and attendance in school are the most important factors in the success of the learner. Most of the instructors, during the interviews, suggested that parents be instructed on the importance and long-term effect education can have on a family.

However, in interviews, parents differ from teachers' perceptions of what their role is in their child's schooling. In these interviews' parents described their perceptions surrounding education, including the challenges they personally faced in obtaining an education. In an interview with a father from the district of Mzimba<sup>15</sup>, he noted, "I did not complete my primary education because my parents were not supportive of my education, because they did not have money or materials needed to send me to school." Similarly, a mother from the district of Lilongwe<sup>16</sup> expressed sadness of not being able to finish her own education due to a lack of material needs and stated, "My parents died because of lack of food when I was a child. I depended on my aunts and uncles for school fees until they could no longer support me." As seen, most parents faced challenges in acquiring the materials they needed in order to go to school, thus deterring many of these parents from completing their own education.

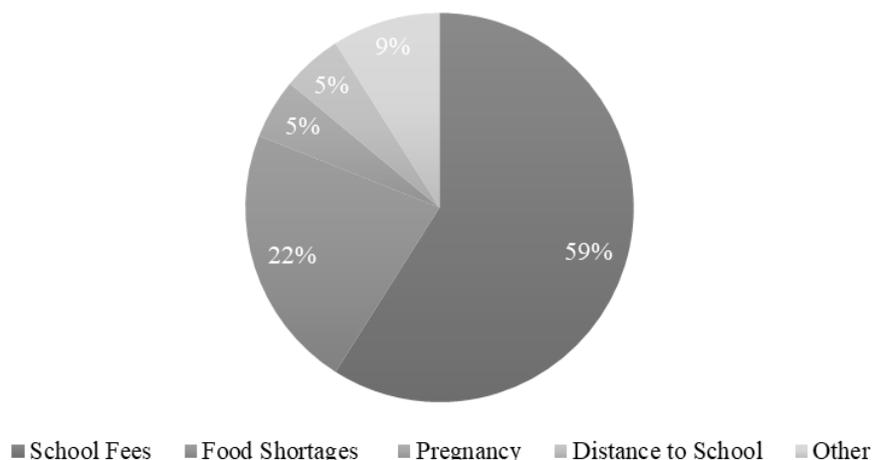


Figure 1. Why parents did not finish their own education.

As depicted in Figure 1, 59% of the parents interviewed cited school fees and money shortages were among the main reasons that they did not complete their own education. Other obstacles included shortages of food (22%), pregnancy (5%), and distance to the school (5%).

In discussing further with parental figures about the challenges facing their child's educational efforts a mother from Lilongwe<sup>17</sup> stated in an interview, "My children do not perform well at school, because class sizes are so large, and I often cannot send them to school because we were unable to feed them breakfast or buy them the uniforms they need

for school.” A father from Ntchisi<sup>18</sup> expressed frustration saying, “We don’t have money to buy school bags for their books, they are unable to go to school during the wet season without ruining all of their writing materials, so many times they just do not go.” As seen parents faced similar challenges in their own education as their children are now facing, these challenges mainly revolve around the lack of money needed to provide them with the essentials that are needed in order to participate in school.

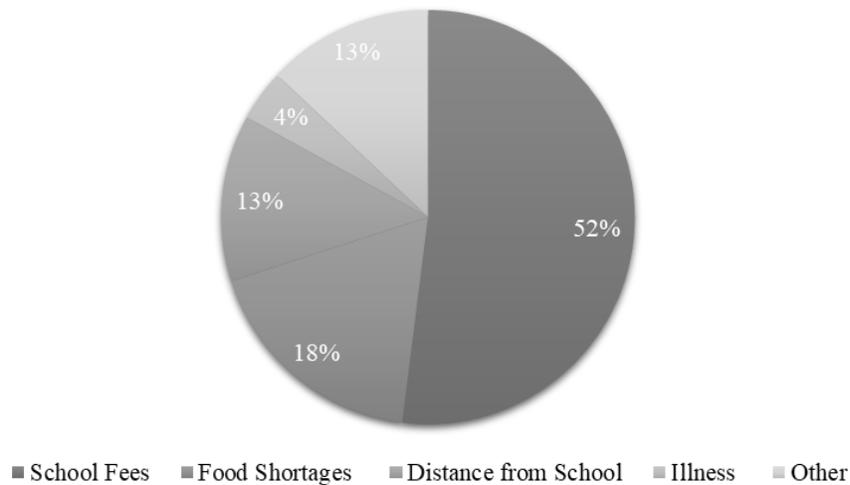


Figure 2. Parent’s main preventative in allowing their children to go to school.

As seen in Figure 2, 52% of the parents described money for school fees, uniforms, and writing materials as obstacles to their child’s schooling. Other hindrances include food shortages (18%), distance to school (13%), illnesses (4%).

When asked what the most important component is to a child’s future success 45% of parents described business and farming as the most important part of a child’s success. By contrast, only 5% of parents expressed that education was the most important thing to the success of child’s future. A father from Ntchisi in discussing during an interview<sup>18</sup> the main component to a child’s future success he stated that, “If my son does business, he will earn money to support the family, and if he farms, he will be able to feed the family.” In discussing the future success of their child with parents many stated in a similar manner as the father from Ntchisi, that it is important that the child can make money when they can, concluding that attaining an education right now often hinders a families earning potential in the present, whereas, in comparison to farming and business can earn income presently. Concordant with previous research, families that have little economic resources available often will not be as supportive of long-term educational goals, whereas they are more focused on what can be done to provide more resources to the family<sup>6</sup>. While being interviewed, many parents also expressed that their children receive little to no homework, and the parents often do not feel like they are able to help their children if they need extra assistance in understanding schoolwork as a result of their own lack of education.

When asking parents if their own parents were supportive of their educational efforts 32% stated that their own parents did not want them to attend school. However, many parents recalled that their own parents were supportive of their educational efforts, unfortunately, they stated that many extenuating circumstances prevented their parents in being fully involved in their educating. Of the roughly 2/3 of parents that were interviewed, they noted that there were extenuating circumstances preventing their parents from being fully involved in their schooling-careful attention must be paid to these circumstances, and perhaps teachers and parents can find ways to work with these circumstances to better support the child in their educational efforts.

#### 4. Discussion

This research shows that access to money often plays a large role in who participates in education throughout Malawi. Most parents that were interviewed were unable to complete their education because of a lack of money, and that pattern continues into the next generations. It is seen that money plays a key factor in the families’ decision in sending

a child to school. If a family can choose between a child working and earning money for the family and or receiving an education, often the importance in the household is placed on the child receiving an extra income for the family. With many of the parents not having completed their own education, there often is not a great importance placed on a child's completion in their education. As a result of extenuating circumstances less importance is placed on education and therefore there is less parental involvement in a child's education.

Teachers often described the long-term effects of education, whereas parents often focus on the short-term effects of schooling, and the financial ability they have to provide their child an education. Teachers described feeling frustrated because they feel in charge of the student's learning with little to no help from the parents in the child's home. These circumstances lead to a lack of educational completion; however, teachers believe that a solution to a child not completing their education would be to further increase parental involvement in their child's learning, which teachers believe will subsequently increase educational achievement completion rate among students.

Building upon what is now known about what teachers and parents believe the barriers are to education in Malawi, future research should expand on this knowledge to question in depth the extenuating circumstances that prevent children from completing their schooling. Having a further knowledge of these circumstances will allow for more sustainable interventions to be created that will allow for reform in the Malawian education system to take place that begins by acknowledging reoccurring barriers.

Teachers that were interviewed suggested that parents be taught the importance of education for their family and child. Potential future studies should perform randomized control trials to assess parents that receive classes about the importance and long-term effects of education on the family versus parents that do not receive classes discussing the importance of education, to see if this then affects their subsequent involvement in their children's education. If future research in Malawi continues to revolve around parental involvement in education, researchers will be able to identify more barriers, whether cultural or social, that prevent a child from going to school which will help provide a way to make sustainable solutions for the improvement of education in Malawi, thus permitting individuals more of an opportunity to complete their education and in return allowing for more social and economic mobilization within the country of Malawi. However, parental involvement may not be the only solution in helping children complete their education, but many solutions can be made surrounding these extenuating circumstances that prevent children from completing schooling which will also aid in the furthering of economic and social mobilization in the country of Malawi.

## **5. Conclusion**

This research has shown that there are many extenuating circumstances identified by parents and teachers that prevent children from continuing their Malawian schooling. The barriers that current school aged children face are like what their parents faced in their own education, and challenges they currently face regarding their children's school. There seems to be many barriers that impede parents from placing a large importance on education within the home, because of the prospect that if a child can earn an income to help the family, that is more of value than going to school. This study also showed that teachers want parents to be more involved in their student's educational pursuits; however, they believe that parents are often hindered by their extenuating circumstances. This research provides a starting foundation for understanding reoccurring barriers towards education in Malawi; this understanding will help education continue to develop in Malawi to better accommodate and help the individual learner complete their education.

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