

## Chapter # 44

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

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#### ABSTRACT

The ability of teachers to enhance the quality of education depends on the teachers' knowledge, skills, motivation and conducive working environment. This study examines teachers' experiences in four rural primary schools in Malawi, focusing on the impact of their working and living conditions on the quality of education. The study followed a qualitative research approach, collecting data through semi-structured interviews. Data were obtained from 24 teachers, four headteachers 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*, their interactions comprise the *mesosystem*, their working and living conditions are represented in the *exosystem*, and the *macrosystem* consists of the customs and laws of society. The findings show that the microsystem, which involves teachers, headteachers and PEAs, appears somewhat active; teachers teach despite numerous challenges. However, interactions between units within that system are weak, resulting in limited mesosystemic interaction. Implications of the findings are discussed later in this chapter.

*Keywords:* ecological systems theory, rural teachers, rural primary schools, quality primary education, Malawi.

#### 1. INTRODUCTION

The importance of quality education as one of the factors critical to escaping poverty is asserted in the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) number 4 – Quality education for all, promoting “lifelong learning opportunities for all” (United Nations [UN], 2015). Quality education improves the individual's employability and health, increases earning power and addresses poverty (United Nations, 2018). In addition, quality education provides society with skills and innovations and fuels economic growth (Idrees & Siddiqi, 2013; Ismail, 2015; UN, 2018; World Bank, 2018). Research has suggested that ensuring every child's access to quality education and job skills may increase low-income countries' gross domestic product (GDP) (Chikhungu, Kadzamira, Chiwaula, & Meke, 2020). Primary education is arguably a stepping stone for human capital development, enhanced by secondary and higher education (Winters, 2011). This supports the case for making the needed investment in quality primary education. However, doing so remains challenging in many low-income countries, such as those in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), including Malawi. While Malawi has seen an expansion of primary education provision in recent years, the quality has remained poor, as signified by the large numbers of learners who complete primary education without developing basic proficiency in numeracy and literacy (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2017; World Bank, 2018).

The teachers' role and the nature of the working environment are vital in promoting quality primary education. In rural areas, structural factors such as poverty often hinder creating and sustaining a primary school environment conducive to quality education. Poor and dilapidated primary school infrastructure in rural areas is too common, with many schools lacking the necessary infrastructure to function efficiently (du Plessis & Mestry, 2019). Many teachers consider rural working conditions unfavourable and are reluctant to work in remote regions, mainly due to poor working and living conditions and limited opportunities for professional development (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2016). Rural teachers' concerns include inadequate classrooms and library facilities or a total lack thereof. In addition, teachers are put off teaching in rural schools due to a lack of teaching and learning materials, such as chalkboards and chalk (Chakanika, Sichula, Sumbwa, & Nduna, 2012). A shortage of textbooks is another factor which affects quality teaching. Even when textbooks are available at schools, they may not be freely available to learners, as school authorities often keep them locked and inaccessible due to the cost and logistical challenges of replacing them (World Bank, 2015).

Rural schools' challenges have resulted in an imbalance in teacher distribution, with rural primary schools experiencing a disproportionate shortage of teachers compared with urban schools (Adedeji & Olaniyan, 2011; Asim, Chimombo, Chugunov, & Gera, 2019; Mulkeen & Chen, 2008). The acute shortage of qualified teachers is a significant problem for the education system in SSA, where only 65% of teachers in primary schools are qualified, compared to 81% globally (United Nations, 2021). In Malawi, the shortage of primary school teachers is reflected in highly qualified teacher/learner ratios of up to 1:95 (Ministry of Education, Science and Technology [MoEST], 2019). Projections indicate that if we are to reach the goal of universal quality education by 2030, 6.3 million primary school teachers will be needed in SSA to cover new teaching posts and counteract attrition (UNESCO, 2016).

Due to poor infrastructure and a lack of qualified teachers in rural areas, a widening inequality related to the knowledge gap exists between rural and urban schools, with children from rural areas falling behind in what they learn and know compared to children from urban areas (Adedeji & Olaniyan, 2011). As du Plessis (2019) points out, learners in rural communities are denied the same opportunity for quality education as learners in urban and less disadvantaged communities. In Malawi, since 84% of the population lives in rural areas (National Statistics Office, 2019), it is imperative to address rural schools' challenges to bridge that learning and attainment gap.

To address some of the challenges of poor education provision in rural areas, in some countries, housing has been provided as an incentive to encourage teachers to move to rural areas (ILO, 2016). Housing provision is critical in ensuring teacher retention in rural schools (Mulkeen & Chen, 2008). The perceived low status of the teaching profession is another factor that may cause teachers to be reluctant to accept a teaching position in rural areas. For some individual teachers, becoming a teacher is often seen as a last resort (Adedeji & Olaniyan, 2011); however, for others, teaching represents the "most attractive profession" (Mtika & Gates, 2011, p. 425).

Using Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, this study explores teachers' working and living conditions in rural primary schools in Malawi and their perceptions of the teaching profession.

### 1.1. Theoretical Framework: Ecological Systems Theory

To understand the experiences of rural primary school teachers, it is essential to listen to them talk about their lives and learn about their working and living conditions. Teachers can talk about ecological factors such as their housing situation, their interactions with colleagues, and opportunities for professional development. They can also talk about their perceptions of the teaching profession. We applied Bronfenbrenner's ecological system theory (EST) to identify the various social elements and influences that impact teachers' experiences and to view them as a holistic social ecology.

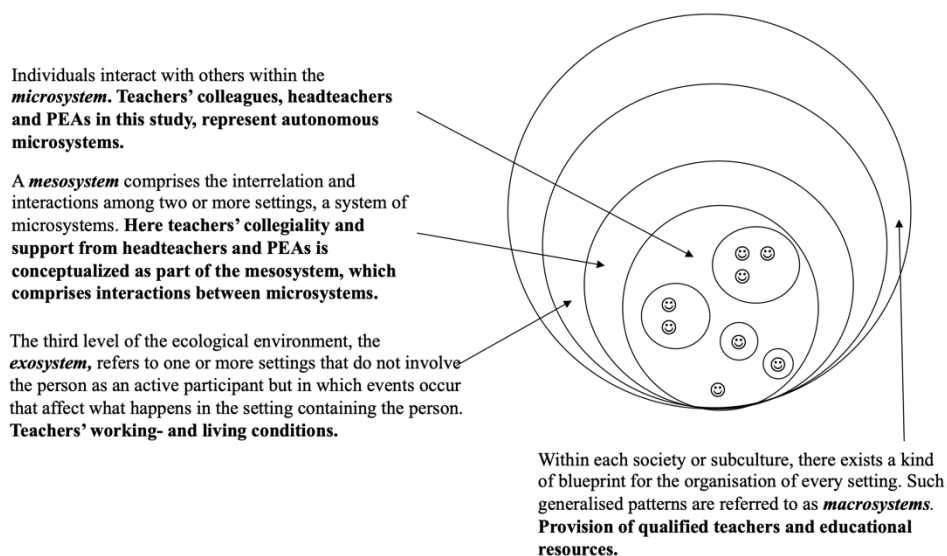
Bronfenbrenner (1979) formulated EST to understand human development in the context of social systems of reciprocal interactions and relationships within a person's environment. EST comprises four interacting nested systems which can both affect and be affected by the individual's development. The four nested systems are *microsystem*, *mesosystem*, *exosystem* and *macrosystem*. Later, Bronfenbrenner added a fifth system, the time element, and labelled it the chronosystem, which does not concern the current study.

At the core of these systems is the developing individual nested in the microsystem, which involves roles, activities and interpersonal relationships in the individual's immediate surroundings. The mesosystem comprises bi-directional linkages between the microsystems. The exosystem represents the social system, which affects the individual without that person having an active role. The macrosystem consists of cultural values and customs, belief systems and laws within the context of the developing individual. We opted to adapt EST as best suited for this study and use it as a framework to understand better the complex interconnections between stakeholders and how different systems affect the individual.

EST has been applied to various research topics ranging from individual development to complex organisational systems such as school districts or individual schools. Seginer (2006) applied Bronfenbrenner's EST in her home- and school-based parental involvement research. Her analysis indicated that while parental involvement through home-school-based activities is positively linked to educational outcomes, the exosystem and macrosystem aspects need additional examination, namely parents' culture and ethnicity. Mthiyane and Chiororo (2020) applied EST to examine school decline in two secondary schools in Zimbabwe. The results indicate that the schools' decline was caused by a set of complex, conflicting mesosystemic, exosystemic and macrosystemic factors, such as the interaction between teachers and headteachers, educational policies and cultural-, social- and economic climate.

The current study focuses on teachers in a rural setting. Within Bronfenbrenner's ecological framework, the teachers' colleagues, headteachers, and PEAs represent autonomous microsystems. Their interactions and relationships are conceptualised as part of the mesosystem, comprising interactions between microsystems. The exosystem incorporates the teacher's working and living conditions, which affect the individual, but over which the person has no control. Lastly, located in the macrosystem are issues such as the provision of qualified teachers and educational resources. Figure 1 depicts each system's different systems and elements as represented in this study.

Figure 1.  
An adaptation of Bronfenbrenner's ecology systems of education of four Malawian primary schools, inspired by Bronfenbrenner's EST and Jónsdóttir's (2012) work.



This study aims to explore teachers' working and living conditions in rural primary schools in Malawi and their perceptions of the teaching profession. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory underpins the research questions, which are:

1. How do teachers in four rural primary schools in Malawi experience their working and living conditions?
2. How do teachers in four rural primary schools in Malawi perceive their profession, its challenges and support?

The findings from this study will add to the growing understanding and research on teachers' experiences in rural areas in Malawi. Such in-depth understanding is essential and will increase our knowledge of rural schools and teachers' challenges. It may also provide insights on how to address these challenges in the hope of improving teachers' working and living conditions and the overall quality of education.

## 2. CONTEXT OF THE RESEARCH

This study was carried out in rural Malawi. In Malawi, primary school runs from Standard 1 to 8, with the official entry age of six years. On average, learners receive 4.5 years of education (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2018). Primary school enrolment has increased significantly in recent decades; currently, an estimated 85% of primary school-age children are enrolled in school (MoEST, 2019). About 89% of primary schools in Malawi are situated in rural areas. Each district in Malawi is divided into education zones. A Primary Education Advisor (PEA) presides over each zone, supervising 15 primary schools on average. PEAs' responsibilities typically involve providing pedagogic support and in-service training for teachers. In addition, they collect and keep all statistical data for their schools and are the contact person between schools/zones and the district education office (MoEST, 2018).

The government of Malawi has been unable to keep up with the sharp increase in primary school enrolment in recent years. Existing problems such as fragile infrastructure, a lack of resources and teacher shortages have increased. This is evident in the high teacher/learner ratio and relatively low primary completion rate (MoEST, 2018). In addition, drop-out and repetition rates both indicate poor education quality and represent wastage. Based on these statistics, it is unlikely that the link between education and poverty will be easily broken.

This study was conducted in Mangochi District in the Southern Region of Malawi. Mangochi has a literacy rate of 53%, compared to the national rate of 69% (National Statistical Office, 2019). The average qualified teacher/learner ratio is 1:79 compared to 1:70 nationally. The average dropout and repetition rates for the school year 2017-2018 were 6.1% and 29%, respectively, compared to the national rates of 3.2% and 24.5%, respectively. The national primary completion rate of 52% has remained relatively unchanged in recent years (MoEST, 2018).

Improving the overall quality of education in rural schools, such as those in Mangochi District, may ensure that rural children benefit equally from their education as urban children. The children and young people would have a realistic opportunity to develop relevant skills and capabilities and progress to secondary and higher education for enhanced human capital. This emphasises the importance of this study.

This qualitative study explored teachers' experiences in four rural primary schools in Mangochi District.

### **3. METHODOLOGY AND METHOD**

This qualitative study focuses on rural primary school teachers. A semi-structured interview approach was applied to collect data. The study's objective is to assess teachers' subjective experiences in Mangochi District related to their working and living conditions and their perceptions of the teaching profession. Teachers, headteachers and PEAs were interviewed to answer the following research questions: *1. How do teachers in four rural primary schools in Malawi experience their working and living conditions? 2. How do teachers in four rural primary schools in Malawi perceive their profession, its challenges and support?*

#### **3.1. Research Participants and Data Collection**

Four rural primary schools were selected for participation: Baobab Primary School, Lakeview Primary School, Chambo Primary School and Hillside Primary School (pseudonyms). Participant selection was purposive and based on participants' lived experience of working in or with rural schools, availability and willingness to participate. Headteachers, teachers and primary education advisors (PEAs) were informed of the purpose of the study, motivation and goal. A schedule for data collection was developed with their cooperation.

Six teachers and one headteacher from each of the four schools were interviewed. Four PEAs were also interviewed, each representing a different zone. All four primary schools were located in impoverished communities, with shortages of qualified teachers, overcrowded classrooms, poor teaching and learning material provision, and a lack of classroom infrastructure and teacher housing.

The field researcher (first author) spent, on average, five days at each school during data collection from May to July 2016. Teachers were interviewed in pairs and asked, for instance, whether becoming a teacher was their first choice, the biggest challenges they

faced in their job, their living situation, and their views on the teaching profession. Headteachers and PEAs were interviewed individually and asked, for instance, how they support their teachers and what opportunities teachers have for professional development in rural areas. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' permission and lasted between 35-50 minutes.

### 3.2. Data Analysis

Interviews were transcribed verbatim and then thematically analysed (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Clarke & Braun, 2017). Transcripts were read thoroughly to gain a more comprehensive understanding of and insight into the data, in line with what Creswell (2012, p. 243) termed 'preliminary exploratory analysis'. All points of interest related to the research questions were highlighted. After that, all transcribed interviews were summarised. The next step was to use the emergent codes relating to the interview questions and relevant literature. These codes were further categorised into six sub-themes: *infrastructure, resources, professional development, teachers' housing, teaching as a first-choice career, and whether teachers are valued*. Finally, these sub-themes were reorganised under three main themes: *working conditions, living conditions and the teaching profession*. When presenting findings, the participant's identifier and school (all pseudonyms) are provided at the end of each quote. 'T' indicates teachers, 'HT' is used for headteachers, and 'PEA' is used for the primary education advisors. Thus 'T1 Baobab' represents a quote from teacher 1 from Baobab primary school.

In terms of limitations, the findings in this study encompass teachers' experiences in four rural primary schools in one district in Malawi. Consequently, these findings will only provide information about teachers' working and living conditions in those schools. Nevertheless, the findings may demonstrate common teachers' experiences in other primary schools with similar conditions and may be transferable to other areas.

### 3.3. Ethical Considerations

Ethical requirements were strictly adhered to throughout the research process. The main ethical rule of "do no harm" (Madge, 1997, p. 114) guided this study. All participants participated in the study voluntarily after being approached by the field researcher. The field researcher informed participants about the study and whether they were willing to participate. Their informed consent was obtained. Participants were assured of anonymity and confidentiality. At the beginning of each interview, the field researcher opted to make a brief personal disclosure (Braun & Clark, 2013) to build rapport. It was important to inform participants that the field researcher is a teacher by profession and had lived with her family in SSA for many years, including five years in Malawi. During her stay in Malawi, she set out to get to know the school system. Five consecutive days were spent at each school for data collection, during which time the field researcher was greeted with what she interpreted as friendliness and congeniality. Additionally, the field researcher observed an atmosphere of amicability among teachers, as well as between teachers and headteachers.

## 4. FINDINGS

The aim of this study was to explore teachers' working and living conditions in rural primary schools in Malawi and to investigate their perceptions of the teaching profession. We interviewed teachers, headteachers and primary education advisors in four rural primary schools in an attempt to answer the following research questions: 1. *How do teachers in four rural primary schools in Malawi experience their working and living conditions?* 2. *How do*

*teachers in four rural primary schools in Malawi perceive their profession, its challenges and support?* This section presents the main findings, supported by direct quotes from participants. Sub-themes from the three main themes *working conditions*, *living conditions* and *the teaching profession*, are identified and discussed.

#### **4.1. Working Conditions**

Within this main theme, three sub-themes were identified: infrastructure, such as outside classrooms; school resources, such as shortage of teachers and teaching and learning material; and teachers' opportunities for professional development.

##### **4.1.1. Infrastructure**

According to the teachers, poor infrastructure, such as the lack of classrooms, was of great concern, along with the numerous challenges that teaching in an outside classroom brings. For instance, when a teacher is preparing and writing lesson plans: *"Sometimes there is heavy wind, so when you are writing the lesson plans, the papers fly all over"* (T5 Baobab). During the rainy season, outside classes are often combined with inside classes, leading to overcrowded classrooms: *"Yes, we can squeeze into one classroom, but it is very difficult to teach"* (T1 Chambo).

Participants were aware that a staffroom would allow them to collaborate when preparing their lessons, grading papers or discussing how to teach a particular subject. However, none of the schools had a staffroom. *"We could help each other. What can we do with this lesson? Can I teach it this way?"* (T2 Baobab).

##### **4.1.2. Resources**

The shortage of teachers was another problem, and as a result, large classes and complex in-class management were the reality for many of the teachers: *"We have a large number of learners in one class, so to control learner misbehaviour in that class becomes a problem"* (T5 Chambo).

Limited teaching resources were another concern. A teacher noted: *"Sometimes we may have only six textbooks for the whole class"* (T3 Hillside). The teachers also spoke of the difficulty of teaching a subject without the actual teaching aids to demonstrate, and for the most part, they tried to improvise. However, that was not always possible:

*We told the learners about computers, but we do not have any. But we explain to learners the little knowledge we have from just reading books. A teacher can't improvise everything* (T6 Hillside).

Teachers were forced to be resourceful in finding suitable teaching and learning materials and reach out to other teachers for assistance. A teacher stated:

*That is why we do interact with them [other teachers], so we find help with what will be an appropriate resource for this subject* (T4 Baobab).

Lack of teaching and learning materials affects teachers' pedagogical practices and undermines the quality of teaching. This affects the overall quality of primary education.

##### **4.1.3. Professional Development**

Primary education advisors (PEAs) are required to visit each school at least once per term to ensure that schools are upholding standards and quality, but they are hampered by a lack of funding. A PEA noted: *"This year, I failed to manage that [visit to each school] because of funds"* (PEA Chambo). However, a headteacher noted that they meet with PEAs monthly: *"We do meet and discuss issues concerning our schools"* (HT Chambo).

Primary school advisors are expected to provide teachers with in-service training, such as workshops or refresher courses. However, they were impeded, again due to funding issues: *“We do call some teachers to come for refresher courses, but because of the [lack of] funds this year, we could not”* (PEA Lakeview).

The importance of in-service training was acknowledged by teachers, as one teacher noted:

*We learn a lot of new methods of teaching. For example, I left teacher training college in 1996, and the syllabus has been changing now and again. So, I benefitted a lot from in-service training* (T2 Hillside).

However, only about half of the teachers had been invited to attend a workshop or a refresher course during their careers.

In the absence of PEA-led workshops, all headteachers encouraged their teachers to work together and collaborate. A headteacher noted: *“They plan separately, but sometimes they do share ideas or views on a particular lesson. This is what I told them to do”* (HT Chambo). Teachers agreed and stated that they collaborate with colleagues when the need arises: *“Even myself, if I don’t know a certain subject, I can require that somebody who knows better that part can come and help me”* (T6 Hillside). Most teachers, however, prepared lessons alone without the benefit of any in-service support.

When asked whether they expressed approval or praised their teachers for a job well done, the headteachers agreed that they did, as noted: *“Yes, I do that because I appreciate they are doing good work”* (HT Lakeview). Some teachers concurred and felt it important that their headteacher recognised their good work. A teacher stated: *“Especially our headteacher, it is very important. Because as soon as he does that, you feel like on top of the world”* (T1 Chambo).

## **4.2. Living Conditions**

This main theme relates to teachers’ accommodations and what, if any, effects it has on the teachers.

Shortage of teachers’ accommodation is one of the challenges rural areas face when recruiting teachers. If teachers are not provided housing, they must rent accommodation from a nearby village, often far from the school. This was the reality for the majority of the teachers in this study. Specifically, 21 out of the 24 rented far from the school premises. For most of them, it took about 30 minutes to walk to school since they had no other way of commuting: *“Some of us are travelling a long distance, on foot. Sometimes we arrive at school and meet the classes while we are tired and sweating”* (T3 Baobab). A tired teacher is less likely to be effective, and the reality that the school does not have accommodation near the premises can make teachers feel unimportant. This can affect their attitudes and dedication to quality teaching.

## **4.3. Teaching Profession**

This main theme covers two sub-themes: whether becoming a teacher was their first choice; and whether teachers feel their profession is valued by society.

### **4.3.1. Teaching as a First Choice**

Of the 24 teachers interviewed, 23 were already qualified. They had varying teaching experiences, from two months to 22 years. However, only 13 wanted to become a teacher as their first choice career. One of them noted: *“I was to become a teacher because my mother is also a teacher. So, it was like in the blood”* (T6 Baobab).



Those who indicated that teaching was not their first career choice ended up becoming teachers because they could not pursue their original dream career due to different circumstances, whether financial or job opportunities. The two excerpts below illustrate this:

*My first choice was nursing, but because of lack of financial support... (T3 Lakeview).*

*I qualified as a mechanic, but it was due to a lack of job opportunities (T3 (Baobab)).*

The findings show that different factors influenced individuals' decisions to join the teaching profession. These factors, coupled with working and living conditions, can affect the quality of teaching and learning, rural teacher retention and attrition.

#### 4.3.2. Status of Teachers

Of the 23 teachers who answered the question in this study about whether Malawian society values the teaching profession, 13 thought it did not. For example, one teacher noted:

*Honestly, I can say that teachers are not valued very much because teachers face many challenges in Malawi. They receive a small salary, and working conditions are not good at all (T5 Chambo).*

Consequently, regardless of their feelings about the quality of their teaching, teachers believe they are not good role models for the younger generations because teaching is a low-status profession: "*People look at me and see low status, so we are not their role models*" (T6 Lakeview). Learners emulate such views: "*So a learner says, I won't be a teacher*" (T2 Hillside). However, ten of the 23 participating teachers believed that the teaching profession is valued in Malawi. One of the teachers stated, "*I think they value teachers because we are the ones who are moving the nation*" (T2 Chambo).

Interestingly, whether becoming a teacher was their first choice or whether they felt the teaching profession was valued did not seem to matter, they all enjoyed teaching. This was encapsulated by a comment by one of the teachers: "*With time, I have come to love teaching*" (T4 Chambo). The common reply they gave to the question "what is the best part of being a teacher?" was their interaction with their learners and when they noticed their students were learning from their teaching. This was best noted by two teachers who stated:

*I enjoy most the interaction with the learners (T6 Baobab).*

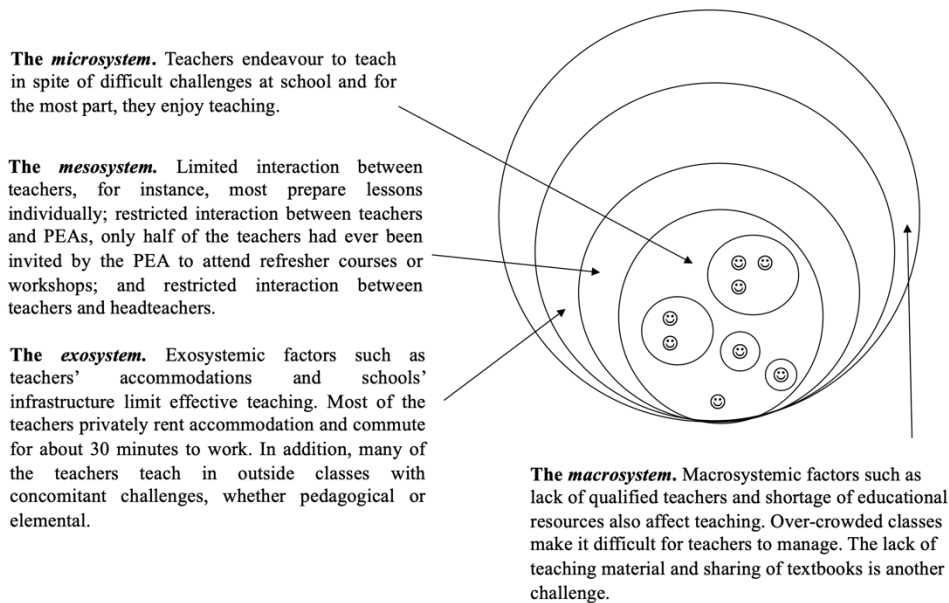
*What I enjoy most is when I see my learners doing well (T1 Lakeview).*

It was evident that all teachers in this study had come to enjoy teaching and appeared to get internal rewards that helped to counteract their profession's challenging conditions and perceived low status.

## 5. DISCUSSION

This study provides insights into teachers' experiences in four rural primary schools in Malawi. The study sought to understand the working and living conditions of the teachers and their perceptions of the teaching profession through the lenses of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory. Bronfenbrenner (1979) stated that humans develop through reciprocal interactions and relationships within the community and broader society. A summary of the main findings in the ecological systems is depicted in Figure 2.

Figure 2.  
Ecological systems of education of four Malawian primary schools.  
Summary of main findings.



This study found that the microsystem appears to be somewhat active. For example, in spite of numerous challenges, teachers aspire to teach. However, the internal ties within the microsystem are weak, with limited mesosystemic interactions between teachers and headteachers, for instance. Furthermore, there is limited interaction between teachers and PEAs due to financial restrictions preventing PEAs from holding regular supervisory visits, in-service training and workshops. To improve the quality of teaching and learning, it is essential to provide teachers with opportunities for professional development (Adedeji & Olaniyan, 2011). However, only about 75% of primary schools in Malawi receive a visit by their PEA each term (MoEST, 2018).

None of the schools in this study had a staffroom, making it difficult for teachers to collaborate. Without a shared workspace or staffroom, teachers in this study were more likely to work in isolation and, thus, miss out on the opportunity for collegial support. Such a lack of professional collaboration makes it difficult for teachers to develop professionally and maximise effective teaching (Botha, 2012). This is a clear indication of how the exosystem negatively affects mesosystemic interactions.

Exosystemic factors, such as schools' infrastructure and teachers' housing, affect educational outcomes in rural areas, as they limit effective teaching. Dilapidated and fragile facilities in rural primary schools are common, with many schools lacking the necessary infrastructure to function efficiently (du Plessis & Mestry, 2019). Such poor quality of infrastructure is the primary driver of the crisis in the education system in many African countries (Adedeji & Olaniyan, 2011). In Mangochi District, for example, during the school year 2017- 2018, the learner/classroom ratio was 165:1, the highest reported in the country (MoEST, 2018).

In this study, working conditions appear to be burdensome and enervating, with many teachers teaching in outside classrooms and overcrowded classes. This reality produces

another set of challenges, such as shielding learners and classroom activities from the elements and pedagogical issues, such as displaying visual teaching aids.

Regarding teachers' living accommodations, most teachers in this study privately rented accommodations in the surrounding villages and commuted for about 30 minutes to school every day. In Mangochi District, only 19.5% of teachers are provided with accommodation on school grounds, compared to 23% nationwide (MoEST, 2018). A combination of such exosystemic factors culminates in poorer educational outcomes in rural areas (Adedeji & Olaniyan, 2011; Chakanika et al., 2012; du Plessis & Mestry, 2019). These exosystemic factors overflow into the macrosystem, amplifying problems with teacher recruitment and retention.

Macrosystemic factors such as shortages of teachers and resources make teaching in rural areas difficult and negatively affect educational outcomes. The lack of teachers results in overcrowded classes and difficulty in implementing behavioural management. This adds to teachers' workload, which is detrimental to the quality of education (Chakanika et al., 2012).

The lack of teaching resources within the macrosystem was a further challenge for the teachers in this study, and the necessity of sharing textbooks is a problem in many rural schools. In Mangochi District, for example, an average of 2.7 learners shared one textbook in mathematics in standard 5 (S5) and 1.9 in S8 (MoEST, 2018). Textbooks and other learning materials are essential for an effective education system, and their lack affects educational attainment and quality.

The perceived low status of the teaching profession matters to many teachers and in many countries. Teaching is one of the most underappreciated professions (Adedeji & Olaniyan, 2011), and only half of the teachers in this study consider teaching as their first-choice career. Evidence shows that many individuals became teachers because they could not get another job (Adedeji & Olaniyan, 2011). This may be reasonable considering the challenges they face according to the findings of this study. The results are similar to Mtika and Gates (2011) in their research focusing on secondary teachers in Malawi. When interviewing secondary trainee teachers, some stated that they had only joined the teaching profession due to their inability to follow their chosen profession.

## **6. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

By providing an in-depth understanding of rural schools and teachers' challenges, this study adds to the growing understanding and research on teachers' experiences in rural areas in Malawi. Based on the findings, teachers, headteachers and PEAs in these four primary schools need to strengthen their interactions and mutual relationships to improve the quality of teaching and learning. In the context of limited funding for in-service training, teachers can, for instance, prioritise teacher collaboration as part of their professional development. PEAs and headteachers can combine efforts by having the PEAs prepare the headteachers to give teachers much-needed in-service training. This could lessen the funding issue and increase teachers' opportunities for professional development. Lastly, education authorities must make the provision of teachers, teachers' housing, and teaching resources their prime concern. These steps can improve educational quality as all these factors interact and influence rural teachers' ecological systems.

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This study forms part of doctoral research “What is the nature of interactions between teachers and communities surrounding four selected primary schools in rural Malawi?” The core of the study concerns the nature and significance of the interactions and collaboration among teachers, parents, schools and the communities in rural Malawi.

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