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Teacher training for early literacy development: An examination of the effectiveness of approaches used for training lower primary school literacy teachers in Malawi

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Compulsory Declaration

This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

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Abstract

Studies that have been carried out on literacy development in lower primary school classes in Malawi suggest that a lot of children complete the first four years of their primary education without being able to read, not only a text of their grade level, but also of lower grade level. In addition, these studies suggest that some of these children complete the first four years of primary education without even being able to write their own names. However, these studies do not mention any specific reasons why basic literacy development remains a nightmare for the majority of children in lower primary school classes. This study, therefore, seeks to investigate the effectiveness of approaches that are used for initial literacy development in lower primary school classes in this country.

Chapter one gives a brief background to the structure of education and the primary school system in Malawi and defines the problem that is being investigated. Chapter two discusses the theoretical framework and a review of literature on the concepts of literacy and literacy teaching and learning. Chapter 3 gives an outline of the research design and methodology that was used during the investigation. Chapter 4 provides details of how the data was analysed and presents the findings. Chapter 5 concludes the study and presents recommendations for considerations

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Glossary of abbreviations

FPE	Free Primary Education
JCE	Junior Certificate of Education
IEQ	Improving Education Quality Project
MANEB	Malawi National Examinations Board
MASTEP	Malawi Primary School Teachers' Education Programme
MCP	Malawi Congress Party
MIE	Malawi Institute of Education
MIITEP	Malawi Integrated In-service Teacher Education Programme
MOE	Ministry of Education
MOEST	Ministry of Education Science and Technology
MSCE	Malawi School Certificate Examinations
OAU	Organisation of African Unity
PCAR	Primary Curriculum and Assessment Reform
PIF	Policy Investment Framework
PSLCE	Primary School Leaving Certificate Examinations
MPRSP	Malawi Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper
SCF	Save the Children Federation
SPSS	Statistical Package for Social Sciences
TALULAR	Teaching and Learning Using Locally Available Resources
TTC	Teacher Training College
UN	United Nations
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Education Fund

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Teacher training for early literacy development: An examination of the effectiveness of approaches used for training lower primary school literacy teachers in Malawi

Chapter 1: Background

1.0 Introduction

Malawi is a country that is found in Southern Africa. It shares borders with Mozambique to the south and south-east, Tanzania to the north and Zambia to the west. The country has a population of about 10 million with a growth rate of 2.0 percent (National Statistical Office, 2000). About 90 percent of this population live in rural areas largely as subsistence farmers (National Statistical Office, 2000) whereas the remaining 10 percent live in urban areas especially in the cities of Blantyre, Lilongwe, Mzuzu, the municipality of Zomba and in district administrative centres, which are popularly known as *Boma*.

1.1 Literacy rates

The literacy rate in Malawi is one the lowest in Southern Africa. According to the 1998 census survey, Malawi had a combined male and female literacy rate of 58 percent (National Statistical Office, 2000). However, the majority of these were males (72.8 percent) whereas only 43.4 percent of the females reported being literate in Chichewa or English.

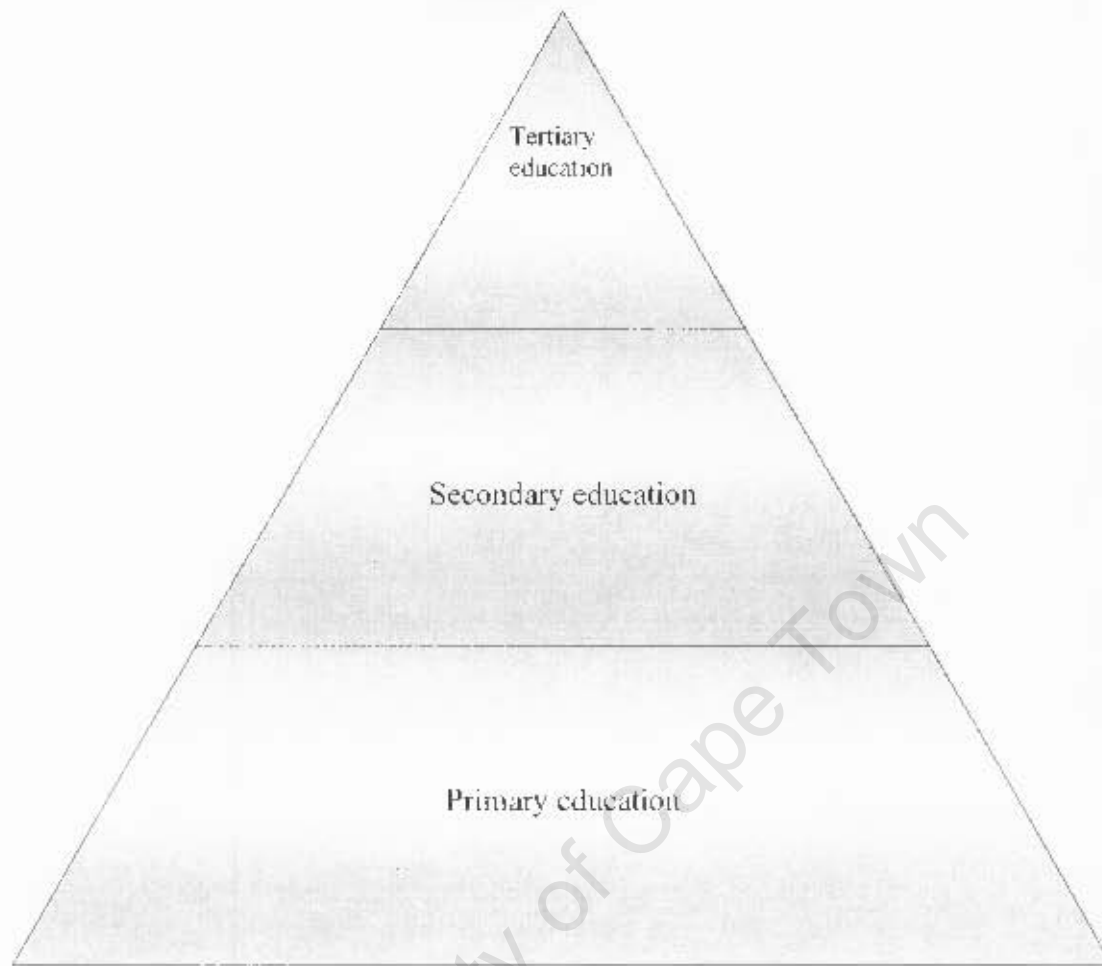
1.2 Structure of the education system in Malawi

The structure of Malawi's education system consists of three layers or levels, namely, primary education, secondary education, and tertiary education. Primary education forms the foundation and backbone of this structure and has an eight-year cycle. These eight years of primary education are divided into infant, (Standards 1 and 2), junior (Standards 3 and 4) and senior (Standards 5 to 8) classes (MoE, 1995: 2). Secondary education forms the second layer of this structure and lasts 4 years. The secondary school cycle is also divided into junior secondary school (Forms 1 and 2) and senior secondary school (Forms 3 and 4). On the other hand, tertiary education acts as the last layer of the structure of the

education system in Malawi. Generally tertiary education has a cycle of four years, although in some cases the duration of this cycle may extend beyond the four-year period depending on the course that one follows at tertiary level. For example, certain first degree programmes such as those in Medicine last for more than four years. What we therefore have in Malawi is largely an 8-4-4 system (Government of Malawi, 1993: 136) of education.

Each of these three layers culminates in an examination before the learners move on to the next level of learning. For instance, at the end of the primary school cycle, learners take the primary school leaving certificate examination (PLCE) which acts both as an achievement and a selection examination. Similar examinations are taken at the end of the first two years (Junior Certificate of Examination) and at the end of the last two years (Malawi School Certificate Examinations) of the secondary school cycle and also at the end of the tertiary level. Each of these examinations, especially at primary and secondary school levels, creates some bottlenecks for learners' upward mobility in the education system as only a few gifted and to some extent lucky learners have a chance of moving on to the next layer of the education system. The majority of the learners are, therefore, condemned by these examinations to the harsh way of living in the community as peasant farmers and unskilled labourers while they are still in the early periods of their life. Because of this, the education system in Malawi is often described as examination oriented (Government of Malawi, 1993: 136). Also, because of the examination bottlenecks which prohibit the majority of learners from moving on to the next level of the education system at the end of each cycle, the structure of the education system in Malawi can be depicted in the form of a pyramid as shown in fig.1.1 below.

Fig 1.1: Structure of the education system in Malawi



What this pyramid depicts is that the education system in Malawi enrolls many learners in the first year of primary education. However, as the learners move up the ladder to secondary school, many drop out so that by the end of the cycle, very few learners proceed to the next level. This is partly because of examinations and the few places that are available at the secondary school level. It is also partly because of other factors that will be discussed in detail later on in this study. Similarly at the end of the secondary school cycle, very few students proceed to the tertiary level because of the same bottlenecks.

As this study is largely focusing on lower primary school classes, let us now have a brief description of the structure and cycle of primary education in Malawi.

1.3 Primary education

There is no formal preparatory school (pre-school) system in Malawi. The preparatory school education is provided informally (National Statistical Office and ORC Macro, 2003: 2) and the few pre-schools available are privately owned and are largely found in urban and semi-urban areas. Owners of these pre-schools use these institutions as their income generating entities. As a result, pre-school education is largely expensive, not only for the ordinary rural masses, but also for parents in urban areas whose incomes are low (Mchazime, 2001: 3). One consequence of this is that the majority of children in urban areas like their counter parts in the rural areas begin their primary education without any preparatory lessons from pre-schools. However, a preparatory phase, known as 'Introduction to school life and learning' (see Malawi Institute of Education, 2006) has been included in the reform of the national primary school curriculum that is currently underway. It is hoped that this phase will prepare young learners for learning at school, thereby bridging the gap that exists between home and school life.

As already alluded to, the primary education cycle in Malawi lasts eight years, beginning from standard 1 through to standard 8. Prior to 1994, primary education in Malawi was largely not free. Parents had to pay fees for their wards to attend primary school education. As if this was not enough, parents also had to buy uniform for their children at school. However, since 1994 primary education has remained free (National Statistical and ORC Macro, 2003: 3) in the sense that parents no longer pay school fees for their wards to attend school. In addition, wearing of school uniform is no longer compulsory. However, where school uniform is required, parents still have to purchase it for their children.

The official entry age into primary school is six years (Office of the President and Cabinet, 1987: 106; National Statistical Office and ORC Macro, 2003: 2). However, it is not uncommon for the underage children (Office of the President and Cabinet, 1987: 106;

Chilora, 2004) and the overage children (Chilora, 2004; Namathaka 2000; National Statistical Office and ORC Macro, 2003: 2) to be found among the new entrants into primary school. In a baseline literacy study that was carried out in the pilot as well as control schools for the breakthrough to literacy study, it was found that children as young as 4 years and as old as twelve years were found in standard 1 (Chilora, 2004). Similar revelations were made in other studies such as those that were carried out by Save the Children Federation (USA) and the Improving Educational Quality Project (IEQ) in 1999 and 2000 to 2002 respectively.

1.3.1 Purpose of primary education

Primary education in Malawi is terminal for the majority of children. For this reason, one of the 'fundamental objectives of primary education is to instill literacy and numeracy skills [...] to the majority of school leavers who are likely to enter the labour force' (Government of Malawi and United Nations, 1993: 136) essentially as farmers, carpenters, business men and women, community leaders and other service providers. The importance of developing literacy skills among the primary school graduates has, therefore, been articulated in several official documents in this country. For instance, the Constitution of Malawi states that the aim of education should be to eradicate illiteracy in Malawi (see section 13f). Also, the Policy investment framework (PIF), the Malawi Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (MPRSP), and the Vision 2020, do emphasise the need to incorporate the teaching of basic literacy and numeracy skills in the primary school curriculum. Consequently, literacy development is a core element in the curriculum at each level of the primary school cycle. Literacy is given this prominence in the primary school curriculum because of the role it is claimed to play in the psychological and social change of people in various cultural and institutional contexts (Olson and Torrance, 2001). As Olson and Torrance further point out, literacy plays an important role in 'preserving information and later in accumulating it' (p6) and passing it on to other generations. In addition, 'literacy is the key to uncovering the potential in every human being' (CODE, 2003).

1.4 Primary school curriculum

Malawi is divided into three regions or provinces, namely, the Southern region, the Central region, and the Northern region. However, for purposes of administering and managing education services in these regions effectively, the country is further divided into six education divisions. These are the Northern education division, the central east education division, the central west education division, the south east education, the south west education division and the shire highlands education division. The primary curriculum that is taught in all these education divisions is centrally planned. What this means is that all the primary schools in the six education divisions teach the same curriculum (see Malawi Institute of Education, 1991) using the same subject matrix. In addition, all primary schools use similar instructional materials (i.e. pupils' books and teacher's guides) when teaching this curriculum. What this implies, therefore, is that schools throughout the country teach the same lessons every day.

The curriculum itself is overloaded. For instance, in the infant section (standard 1 and 2) children learn nine subjects, in the junior section (standards 3 and 4) they learn ten subjects, whereas in the senior primary school section, children learn 13 subjects (see Malawi Institute of Education, 1991). However, the overload that exists in the present curriculum is being addressed in the primary school curriculum and assessment reform (PCAR) that is currently underway. According to the PCAR framework (Ministry of Education 2004: 24), pupils will now be taught a maximum of three learning areas in standard 1 which is the first year of primary education. These learning areas are literacy and languages (Chichewa and English), numeracy and mathematics, and expressive Arts. In Standard 1 children will be taught a maximum of 4 learning areas. That is, they will continue with the learning areas they started in year 1 and in addition they will be taught life skills. In Standard 2 children will also learn social and environmental sciences besides learning literacy and languages, numeracy and mathematics, expressive arts and life skills. In Standards 3 and 4 children will also be taught agriculture, science and technology in addition to the other five learning areas they were taught from standard 1 up to Standard 2. From Standard 5 up to Standard 7 the learning areas will roll out into

eight subjects, namely, Chichewa, English, mathematics, agriculture, science and technology, life skills, social and environmental science, and expressive arts.

In this context, it should be noted that both Chichewa, which is the national language, and English are the mandatory subjects in all the primary school grades. This means that children throughout the country begin to learn Chichewa and English as subjects on the first day they begin school.

1.5 Teacher training

Training of teachers for primary school teaching is currently being carried out at six teacher training colleges. These are Karonga teachers' college in the northern region, Kasungu, Lilongwe, and St Joseph's teachers' colleges in the central region and Blantyre and Montfort teachers' colleges in the southern region. In all these colleges, students are trained to teach all the 13 subjects that are included in the primary school curriculum.

1.5.1 Teacher training programme

The basic qualification for entry into the teacher training programme is a senior secondary school certificate of education (i.e. four years of secondary school education). Over the past two decades, the duration for training primary school teachers has varied quite significantly from time to time. For instance, some teachers who are still in the service went through a two-year teacher training programme, whereas others went through a one-year training programme (see Malawi Institute of Education, 1990). The focus of training in these programmes was also different. The two-year programme gave teachers both the academic content and the methodology to use when teaching in the primary school. On the other hand, the one-year programme focused largely on the methodology that teachers require when teaching. Both programmes were residential.

Besides these residential programmes, there have also been other programmes which were part residential and part distance. One of these programmes was the Malawi primary school teachers' programme (MASTEP). This was a three-year teacher training programme in which students attended residential courses during vacations only for a

period ranging from two to six weeks. During the term (that is the three months students were teaching in their schools), these students were given materials to read on their own as they taught in their schools. This programme was run concurrently with the other programmes, that is the two years as well as the one year programmes. In the MASTEP programme the focus of training was on both the content and the methodology that students require when teaching in primary schools. Also, in this programme students were trained to teach all subjects in the primary school curriculum.

Another part residential and part distance mode of teacher training that was introduced and which is still in existence was the Malawi integrated in-service teacher education programme (MIITEP). This programme was instituted in 1996 in order to train thousands of untrained teachers who were recruited following the introduction of free primary education (FPE) in 1994. This programme replaced other teacher training programmes (i.e. the two-year, the one-year and MASTEP). In this programme, students who are already serving as untrained teachers attend an initial two-week orientation course at a teacher training college before being given a class to teach. Then they come back to college for a residential training which lasts three months. Thereafter, they go back to teach at their schools for five terms before they come back to college to take their final examinations. In this programme the focus is on the methodology that teachers require when teaching in their classes.

1.5.2 Languages for training primary teachers

While at college student teachers study all the subjects that children learn at primary school. These subjects include agriculture, Chichewa, creative arts, English, home economics (including needle craft and house craft), mathematics, music, physical education, religious and moral education, science and health education, and social studies. In addition, all students take foundation studies as another subject. All the training handbooks for tutors and students are in English except those of Chichewa. Similarly, the actual training of teachers is done through English in all the subjects except Chichewa. All student teachers are trained to teach Chichewa through Chichewa.

1.5.3 Certification of primary school teachers

At the end of each teacher training course students take examinations which are administered by the Malawi National Examination Board (MANEB). These examinations are both theoretical and practical. The theory examinations are taken in English, Chichewa, mathematics, social studies, foundation studies and science and health education. The practical examinations involve assessing students as they do their practice teaching in primary schools. Students have to pass both the theory and practical examinations for them to be given a teaching certificate. Two types of certificates are given at the end of the course in each training programme. These are the T2 teachers' certificates for students with a Malawi school certificate of education (MSCE), that is four years of secondary education, or a T3 teachers' certificate for students with a junior certificate of education (JCE), that is, two years of secondary school education.

The current primary school system thus, has teachers who went through various modes training. These teachers were equipped with different skills during their training at college. Some were equipped both with the content to teach and the methodology for teaching the content, whereas others were given the methodology only. At the same time, there are still a lot of teachers who are untrained in the education system (Chilora and Harris, 2001). These are, therefore, some of teachers who are now charged with the responsibility of teaching lower primary school learners literacy skills.

1.6 Language distribution in Malawi

Malawi is a plurilingual and therefore a multicultural country. There are over 15 local languages that are spoken in Malawi (Mchazime, 1996; Kathewera, 1999). These languages are spoken in different parts of the country. Some are spoken by a relatively small number of people, whereas others are spoken by a fairly large number of people in this country. Statistics from the 1998 census, for instance, give the following as percentages of speakers of some major languages in this country:

Chichewa	57 percent
Chinyanja	13 percent ¹
Ciyao	10 percent
Citumbuka	9 percent

(Source: Commissioner for Census, 1998)

However, in the case of primary school learners' home language speakers, the 1999 education basic statistics give the following as the percentages of learners who speak some major languages in Malawi at home:

Chichewa	57.8 percent
Citumbuka	18.7 percent
Ciyao	9.6 percent
Chilomwe	3.6 percent
Chitonga	3.0 percent
Chisena	2.6 percent
Other	4.6 percent

(Ministry of Education Science and Technology, 1999)

Besides these local languages, English is also spoken in Malawi. However, unlike the local languages that are widely used as regional lingua franca, English is widely used for communication by the minority educated elite in urban areas. The use of English as a language of wider communication among the educated elite is attributed to the colonial historical background of this country. Before Malawi got her independence in 1964, it was a colony of Britain. Therefore when it became an independent state it retained English as the language of wider communication in government, judiciary, and commerce.

¹ Chichewa and Chinyanja are just dialects of the same language

1.7 The current language in education policy

Before we discuss Malawi's current language in education policy, it is right and proper that we all understand what we mean when we use the term language policy. Bussman cited in Dzama (2000) defines language policy as a measure that is aimed at introducing, implementing and defining the use of language in a country or province. Therefore when we talk about language in education policy, we are as a matter of fact talking about deliberate decisions by government or a political party on how some languages should be used in different spheres of people's day to day lives as opposed to the use of other languages.

In Malawi the language policy that is being followed is that English is the official language whereas Chichewa is the national language (Kamwendo, 2000). As an official language, English is taught as a subject from standard 1 through to University and it takes over from Chichewa as a medium of instruction from standard 5. On the other hand, as a national language, Chichewa is also taught as a subject from standard 1 to tertiary level and it is also used as a medium of instruction from standard 1 through to 4 in all public primary schools including those that are in areas where children speak local languages at home other than Chichewa.

1.7.1 Background to the current language in education policy in Malawi

The current language in education policy can be traced back to 1964. At an annual political convention, the Malawi Congress Party (MCP) which was then the only political party in the country, resolved to elevate Chichewa to the status of the national language and English was declared the official language of Malawi (see Malawi Congress Party resolution No.4: undated; Banda, 1982: 96). At this convention, it was further resolved that the use of other local languages in Malawi should be continued, but only in private every day to day lives in areas where such languages are widely spoken. It was further resolved that Chichewa and English should, with immediate effect, be used as media of instruction from standard 1 to 4 and 5 to tertiary level respectively.

The use of Chichewa as a medium of instruction during the first four years of primary education was strengthened in 1989 when government approved that all pupils' books for standards 1 to 4 except those of English should be in Chichewa (Mchazime, 1996). The accompanying teachers' books were written in English. This was done, as Chilora (2000) points out, in order to give those teachers whose knowledge of Chichewa was not good enough, information for teaching in a language (i.e. English) which they easily understand. What is not known is whether non-Chichewa home language speaking teachers correctly translate information that is presented in English in the teacher's book into the Chichewa medium.

However, prior to this policy, that is, before Malawi attained independence in 1964, vernacular languages were widely used as media of instruction in lower primary school in various parts of this country (Education Department, 1931: 2; Banda, 1982: 68). For example, Citumbuka was largely used as a medium of instruction in the Northern region whereas Chinyanja (now Chichewa) was used as a medium of instruction in the Central region and parts of the Southern region. This was the time when education was largely in the hands of missionaries whose main goal was essentially to teach the indigenous people of Malawi to read the bible and transmit the word of God in their own languages.

1.8 Statement of the problem

The various studies that have been carried out on literacy development in lower primary school in Malawi (Namathaka, et al, 2000; Chilora and Harris, 2001; Chilora and Mchazime, 2003), suggest that over 50 percent of children complete the first four years of their primary education without being able to read, not only a text of their grade level, but also of lower grade level. In addition, these studies suggest that some of these children complete the first four years of primary education without even being able to write their own names. The results of other research findings (see SACMEQ, 2001) further suggest that a lot more children go as far as Standard 6 before they have acquired basic literacy skills.

On the other hand, some studies done on repetition and dropout rates in primary school suggest that the majority of children drop out of school between grades 1 and 4 (Kadzamira and Chibwana, 1998, cited in Mchazime, 2001). These findings on pupils' repetition and dropout rates are confirmed by Basic Education Statistics (MOEST, 2000: p.6-7 & p.25) which also reveal massive repetition and dropout rates between grades 1 and 4. What these findings on repetition rates, dropout rates and literacy achievements, therefore seem to suggest is that a lot of children may be repeating classes and eventually dropping out of school before they have acquired the basic literacy skills that they need for them to function and make some meaningful socio-economic contributions in their communities.

It is in light of this problem that I would like to examine how teachers are trained in their initial teacher training programmes in Malawi for literacy skills development in lower primary schools.

1.9 Hypothesis

My hypothesis in this study is that the low level of literacy skills development attained in lower primary school in Malawi is to a significant extent a result of inappropriate approaches to literacy teaching and learning that are used during the first three to four years of primary education.

1.10 Rationale of the study

Educators agree generally on the notion that the first four years of schooling are crucial in a person's life. This is because this is the period that children acquire basic literacy skills (Mchazime, 2001) that serve as the four corner stones for their further education and meaningful participation in the development of their societies. Literacy, which is basically understood as a process of making meaning with the printed symbols (Stubbs, 1980; Williams, 1993; Cooper, 2000, Tompkins; 2003) is important in our society for many reasons. Besides the fact that it is taken by many educators as one of the indicators of the levels of competence that is required for academic success at school, (Williams, 1998; Mchazime, 2001; Boothby, 2002 cited in UNESCO, 2003) literacy also influences

our lives in many other ways. As Chilora and Mchazime (2003) argue, the ability to read and write becomes our teacher, companion, entertainer, and I add, comforter, and inspirer during our day to day encounters in our societies. Literacy is a key to socio-economic development of communities (Dombey, 2004) and a useful tool for empowering people (Freire, 1985, cited in Mchazime, 2001). In short, literacy is an important catalyst both for individual and societal development.

On the global scene, literacy also plays some very vital roles. Monwa (1999) summarizes some of the roles that literacy plays in our global village. He says:

Literacy is [...] an enormous power. It cuts across time and space, enabling us to share the minds and experiences of people long gone and people in distant places. It liberates our minds and our wills by granting us access to the collective wisdom of mankind, and allowing us to make choices of what we want to know. Reading expands our mental horizons, shapes our world views, questions prejudice and promotes tolerance, while at the same time it offers the rewards of enjoyment and reflection (Monwa cited in Mchazime, 1999).

On the other hand, illiteracy, that is the inability to read and write, is viewed by many educators as a recipe for individual and societal poverty, ill-health, instability, large family sizes, and underdevelopment that is prevalent in many parts of our global village.

The government of Malawi has joined other nations world-wide in bringing into reality the UN Charter on the child (see UNESCO, 2004) which guarantees the right of the child to basic education of quality (MOEST, 2000). Besides providing free primary education and improving access to it through construction of classroom blocks, the government of Malawi has prioritized the development of literacy skills as one of its policy objectives for the basic education sector (Muluzi, 1994: 15; MOEST, 2000). One of the steps that government has taken towards this step is to make primary education free for all. By freeing primary education, government has, in a way increased access to school for

thousands of Malawian children who were unable to attend school and learn literacy skills because of school fees. However, to realize this policy objective successfully, there is still a need for both government and educators to have some insights on the effectiveness of approaches that are currently being used for developing initial literacy skills at classroom level in lower primary schools. Williams (1993) shares our view on the importance of using appropriate approaches in the development of initial literacy skills. In one of his recommendations for improving low levels of literacy skills in English in Malawi, Williams argues that

A more appropriate methodology seems crucial for Malawi's classrooms. In my view more important than the new books or smaller classes for these can be undermined if a teacher insists on unsuitable methods (Williams, 1993: 3).

It is against this background that this study is being carried out. The study focuses on the approaches that are used for training early childhood literacy teachers in their initial teacher training programmes in Malawi. It is hoped that the results of this study will be beneficial to government, teacher trainers and primary school classroom practitioners in their efforts of getting the children to learn to read and write.

1.11 Research questions

This study explores the following question in detail:

How do early childhood literacy teachers translate theoretical and practical elements of their training in respect of teaching reading and writing from the initial teacher training programme at St Joseph' teachers' College to their practice in schools country wide?

In particular the study will examine the following specific questions:

What approaches for early childhood literacy development are introduced in initial teacher training programmes?

How do teachers use these approaches in their grade 1 and 2 literacy classes?

Why do both Chichewa speaking children and those children who speak other Malawian languages fail to read and write in Chichewa even after completing three or four years of primary education?

1.12. Limitations and assumptions of the study

There are six colleges that prepare teachers for primary school training in this country. A study of this nature should ideally have investigated how graduates of all the six colleges are translating the theoretical and practical elements of their training with regard to teaching reading and writing in lower primary school classes from their initial teacher training programmes. However, this study will only focus on the training that goes on at one of these colleges, St Joseph Teachers' training college, and a few of its graduates. My assumption in the study is that this college and the few teachers that I will select will be representative of the other colleges and the many other teachers who have graduated from St Joseph's College and the other five Colleges.

Chapter 2 Review of Related Literature

2.0 Conceptual framework

As already alluded to in the preceding paragraphs, this study examines the approaches that are used for training early literacy teachers in Malawi during their initial teacher training programmes. However, in order for us to get some insights into early childhood literacy approaches, there are certain abstractions that we need to clearly understand right from the outset. These are the concepts of ‘approaches’, ‘literacy’, and ‘early childhood’.

2.1 Understanding the concept of approach

A useful framework for understanding the concept of ‘approaches’ is, perhaps the one that is provided by Anthony, cited in Richards and Rodgers (1986). In trying to define this concept, with regard to language teaching and learning, Anthony uses a three-tier model that differentiates an ‘approach’ from a ‘method’ and from a ‘technique’. With regard to approach, he says:

[...] An approach is a set of correlatives dealing with the nature of language teaching and learning. [...]. It describes the nature of the subject matter to be learned (Anthony, 1963, cited in Richards and Rodgers, 1986: 15).

In the case of a method, he defines it as

[...] an overall plan for orderly presentation of language material, no part of which contradicts and all of which is based on the selected approach (Anthony, 1963, cited in Richards and Rodgers, 1986: 15).

On the other hand, Anthony says that

[...] A technique is implementational – that which actually takes place in a classroom. It is a particular trick, stratagem, or contrivance used to accomplish an immediate objective. Techniques must be consistent

with a method and therefore in harmony with an approach
as well (Anthony, 1963, cited in Richards and Rodgers, 1986: 15).

What we therefore see in this model is that Anthony conceives of an approach as being broadest, most inclusive concept. According to him, an approach determines the methods and techniques that are eventually used to specifically achieve certain predetermined aims and objectives at classroom level. Although Anthony's three-tier model of conceptualizing an 'approach' was criticized, (Richards and Rodgers, 1986: 16), it does provide us with a useful framework for understanding the concept of 'approach' in early childhood literacy teaching and learning. This framework consists of the assumptions and beliefs that teacher trainers and teachers have about the nature of literacy and literacy teaching and learning. We will examine this framework a little later in this chapter.

Using Anthony's model as a benchmark, other applied linguists, (Richards and Rodgers, 1986; Bell, 1981) have elaborated the meaning of the concept of approach in language learning further. Richards and Rodgers (1986), for example, define 'approach' in language learning as a concept that refers to theories about the nature of languages and language learning. Bell (1981) further argues that the key questions that are answered when trying to understand this concept are: 'What is language? How do people learn languages?' (p75). A variety of views have been put forward as answers to these questions. As an answer to Bell's first question, for example, some scholars have attributed the nature of language either to structural, functional, or interactional views (Richards and Rodgers, 1986: 16-17). These views have eventually informed the approaches and methods that are now being advocated and used in language teaching. In other words, Bell's second question has been answered by the view that scholars have about the nature of language. For instance, the proponents of the structural view of language, contend that language is a system of structurally related elements for the coding of meaning (Richards and Rodgers, 1986: 17). The approach for learning a language that these scholars advocate is essentially that of

[...] mastery of elements of this system, which are generally defined in terms of phonological units (e.g., phonemes), grammatical units (e.g., clauses, phrases, sentences), grammatical operations (e.g., adding, shifting, joining, or transforming elements) and lexical words (e.g., function words and structure words (Richards and Rodgers, 1986: 17).

Advocates of the audio-lingual approach subscribe to this approach of language teaching and learning.

On the other hand advocates of the functional view of language contend that language should be seen as a vehicle for conveying messages and functional meaning in various social contexts. One dimension that advocates of this view bring to the debate about language teaching and learning is that of viewing language as a vehicle for achieving its semantic and communicative characteristics rather than merely its grammatical characteristics. This view has led to the communicative approach in language teaching and learning (see Littlewood, 1981; Munby, 1978) which categorizes content of language teaching in terms of meaning and function rather than in terms of elements of structure and grammar as is done by the advocates of the structural view of language (Richards and Rodgers, 1986).

Proponents of the interactive view of language, however, contend that language is ‘a vehicle for the realization of interpersonal relations and for the performance of social transactions between individuals’ (Richards and Rodgers, 1986). Richards and Rodgers (1986: 17) further argue that advocates of this view look at language as means for creating and maintaining social relations between individuals. Therefore, the approach that these scholars essentially recommend for language teaching is that of specifying and organizing the content for language teaching and learning by patterns of exchange and interaction (Richards and Rodgers, 1986).

Views about the nature of language such as these have, consequently, influenced the approaches, methods and techniques that different applied linguists have propagated as being suitable for language learning. This has given rise to different schools of thought

on language teaching and learning, each with its own assumptions and beliefs about the nature of language and language learning.

2.2 Understanding the concept of literacy

Like in language teaching and learning, in the field of literacy, there have also been groups of applied linguists and other scholars who have risen at different periods (Baker, 2000; Hannon, 2000; Cooper, 2000; Tompkins, 2003) and dominated and influenced the phenomenon of literacy teaching and learning over the past years. The assumptions and beliefs about literacy and literacy teaching and learning that these scholars have put forward have had a substantial impact on the manner in which people now view the concept of literacy and the approaches that should be adopted in the early years of developing literacy skills at primary school.

Among these schools of thought are those that view literacy as a discrete body of knowledge. These contend that children need to master parts of the language such as letters, syllables, and words before they master the whole language. One of the prominent contemporary advocates of this approach is Dianne McGuinness (1998). McGuinness argues that

Reading is a skilled behaviour and like, all skills, it has to be taught from the bottom-up, from simple parts to the complex whole. No one would dream of asking a novice diver to attempt a difficult dive like a jackknife. No one would like to teach a beginning piano student to use all the ten fingers at the first lesson. All skilled learning builds piece by piece until the skills are integrated (McGuinness, 1998, cited in Hannon, 2000: 63).

McGuinness's concept of the nature of literacy is that all skilled learning, like literacy learning, is composed of discrete parts that have to be learned and mastered separately before an attempt is made to use them as a complete package. The assumption that the

proponents of the skills-based approach have with regard to literacy teaching and learning, according to Vacca et al (2003: 23) is that

[...] the process of transplanting print to meaning begins with print. The process is initiated by decoding graphic symbols into sounds. The reader first identifies features of letters. links these features together to recognize letters: combines letters to recognize spelling patterns: links spelling patterns together to recognize words and then proceeds to sentences, paragraphs and text level processing.

This view of literacy learning and teaching is derived from the behaviourist theory of learning which for a long time influenced the manner in which teachers taught learners how to read and write in the past (Tompkins, 2003: 4; Garton and Pratt, 1998: 17). One belief that the behaviourists had was that all behaviour is learned. They also believed that language is learned behaviour (Garton and Pratt, 1998) and that the approaches for learning a given form of behaviour could also be used for learning a language. One of the major advocates of this learning theory was Skinner (cited in Tompkins, 2003 and Garton and Pratt, 1998). According to Garton and Pratt (1998:17), Skinner believed that

[...] behaviour, once reinforced, would continue, particularly after further reinforcement. Desirable behaviour could be extinguished through the removal of reinforcement. Such changes in behaviour constituted learning.

Olson and Torrance (2001: 8) further point out that the behaviourist theory of learning to read saw a text as a map to be decoded. 'Learning to read and write was a matter of teaching a code. letters and sounds by means of which one could consider first syllables, then words and finally utterances [...]. Only then could one be concerned with meanings'. The essence of this theory is that learners should 'learn to read and write a series of discrete sequenced skills' (Skinner, 1968, cited in Tompkins, 2003) that is learning phonemic awareness, and phoneme- grapheme correspondences first before anything else (Hannon, 2000). The major influence that this theory had on teaching was

that teachers resorted to drilling their learners on the discrete skills (Tompkins, 2003: 4) of reading and writing.

However, a potential weakness of viewing learning skills like this, with regard to literacy teaching and learning, is that it is retrogressive. This is because learners come to school after they have already mastered the whole language in its oral form. When they speak they do not do so in parts, that is, in letters or syllables. Instead they speak the whole language using appropriate social and cultural contexts. Even when they learn the oral form of the language they speak at home, their mothers do not teach them in bits and pieces, that is, sounds first then syllables, words and sentences. Children are taught the whole language, that is, whole words and sentences using social and cultural contexts that are appropriate for using that particular language. This, the mothers do even when the child does not understand what they are saying. Listening and speaking, like reading and writing are also skills. Contenders of the skills-based approach to literacy teaching and learning do not explain why mothers should teach their children to speak the whole language and not begin from phonemes of a language first before moving to the complex language. Therefore, it is retrogressive and confusing for children who have already mastered the basic skills of listening and speaking the whole language by the time they start school, for them to begin learning the writing and reading skills of the same language in bits and pieces that do not carry any meaning and that are often outside the social and cultural contexts in which the language is used.

2.3 Literacy learning theories

It is perhaps within this context that some educators have advanced other learning theories that contest the behaviourist theory of language and literacy learning. These theories include the constructivist, interactive, sociolinguistic and reader-response learning theories (Tompkins, 2003: 4). According to the constructivist theorists, learning is a 'modification of students' cognitive structures or schemata as they interact with and adapt to their environment' (Piaget, 1969 cited in Tompkins, 2003). What this paradigm shift in the theories of learning implies is that when children come to a new environment, such as a classroom, they bring with them some prior knowledge which they have

accumulated from their previous interaction with other environments. They are not completely blank. Therefore, as they are interacting with the present environment, children relate the new information they receive to their previous knowledge (Tompkins, 2003) in order to understand and use it properly. As children do this, they organize the new knowledge they acquire and build it on to their previous one in the form of a scheme.

In literacy learning what this implies is that when children come to school (i.e. their new environment) they bring with them a language that they have learned and which they speak at home. They are not coming to school without any knowledge at all of a language. Therefore, as they interact with the school environment children will relate their new language experiences in the school environment with the form of language experiences they acquired before coming to school and in which they are already proficient.

The constructivist learning theorists also contend that children are active and motivated thinkers and learners (Piaget cited in Tompkins, 2003). They are neither passive, nor empty vessels. This view on learning is, however, in sharp contrast with the belief that advocates of the behaviourist theory often have on language and literacy teaching in which teachers are taken as fountains of knowledge, part of which is poured into the minds of the learner. In constructivist theory, contrary to this way of thinking, teachers are expected to engage their learners with experiences so that, according to Tompkins (2003) 'they modify their schemata and construct their own knowledge' (p4). What this implies is that teachers should no longer take themselves as fountains, or as Tompkins puts it, 'dispensers' of knowledge. Instead they need to take themselves as facilitators of learning whose main responsibility is to help learners to draw from their experiences in order to construct new knowledge.

Another learning theory that has also been advocated by other scholars is the interactive model (Tompkins, 2003: 18). A key question that advocates of this learning theory raise is on what readers do when they read. These scholars argue that when people read, their focus is on making meaning of the symbols that are used to represent the spoken form of

the language (Williams, 1998: 2; Cooper, 2000; Johns and Lenski, 2001). These educators point out that, readers do this using a 'combination of text-based information [...] and reader-based information' (Tompkins, 2003: 4). According to Tompkins text-based information is the information that the reader gets from the text that he or she is reading. This is the writer's information. On the other hand, reader-based information is the prior knowledge (Williams, 1984; Tompkins 2003), that is, information that comes from the reader's background knowledge or schemata already alluded to earlier.

Like the constructivist learning theory, the interactive model of learning literacy also has implications for the approach that has to be used for literacy teaching and learning. Proponents of this learning theory advocate the use of the whole language approach in the teaching of literacy in the early years of primary schooling. They argue that children are seekers (Holt, 1983: 155) and makers of meaning (Wells, 1987) and knowledge (Farrant, 1964) in the early stages of their development. Therefore, they advocate an approach to literacy teaching and learning in which children use or look at the printed symbols for a meaningful purpose (Stubbs, 1980). Other scholars, such as Raban (1997: 24) further argue that

Literacy is a multifaceted skill [...]. Children learn to read and write at all levels at once. They do not learn one thing first and then another in any additive sense.

A third learning theory that educators advocate is the sociolinguistic learning theory. Advocates of this learning theory bring a cultural dimension to the process of learning to read and write (Bernhardt, 1991; Burton, 1994; Street, 2000; Olson and Torrance, 2001; Bloch, 2002; Tompkins, 2003: 6; Vacca et al 2003: 466). According to Tompkins (2003: 6), these scholars 'view reading and writing as social activities that reflect the culture in which students live'. Bloome and Green cited in Bernhardt (1991: 9) argue that as a social activity, 'reading is used to establish, structure, and maintain social relationships between and among people'. The two scholars further argue that literacy in general is 'part of the processes of cultural transformation, enculturation and socialization'. Street (2000: 23) further argues that

[...] approaching literacy as a social practice provides a way of making sense of variations in the uses and meanings of literacy in such contexts rather than reliance on the barren notions of literacy skills, rates, and, levels that dominate contemporary discourse about literacy.

This paradigm shift in the theory of literacy and language learning helps learners to understand that literacy is part and parcel of 'people's daily social and cultural practices' (Bloch, 2002). Hannon (2000: 8) further argues that as a social practice, literacy 'varies according to the purposes of people in different social contexts [...]'. These purposes may include the need to record and preserve experiences, accumulate information (Olson and Torrance 2001: 5), inform and make requests or complaints not only to their peers, but to others as well. These theorists see the development of a child as a result of the interplay of the cultural/social processes that he or she undergoes and his or her psychological processes (Hannon, 2000).

A further dimension of the concept of literacy as a part and parcel of people's daily social practice is the notion of the emergent literacy approach (Bloch, 1997: 5; Cooper, 2000: 9). Both Bloch (1997: 5) and Cooper (2000) view emergent literacy as a process. For instance, according to Cooper (2000: 9), emergent literacy is

the idea that children grow into reading and writing with no real beginning or ending point, that reading and writing develop concurrently, interrelatedly, and according to no one 'right' sequence or order. [...]. Instead learners are always emerging. Moreover, this process begins long before children enter school through activities and experiences in their everyday lives and through interactions with peers and adults

Cooper (2000: 9) further says that literacy learning 'involves all elements of the communication process.' These include all the language skills of listening speaking reading and writing as well as viewing and thinking. Therefore, he argues that children

develop their ability to construct meaning by having meaningful literacy experiences with others.

Proponents of the emergent literacy approach maintain that children are not completely blank by the time they come to school for the first time. These children are already emerging speakers, readers and writers. At this stage children do not necessarily use the conventional form of adult written script. Instead, they develop their own symbols and shapes which represent certain ideas and messages they would like to share with others. Bloch (1997) shares this view. In describing the term emergent literacy, Bloch (1997: 5) says

This centres around how, in literate societies, oral language develops to include written language, and how many young children engage spontaneously with written language before school-going age.

Using, as examples, the early writings of her own daughter, Bloch (1997: 22) demonstrates how children can invent symbols and shapes to represent ideas and messages they would like to share with colleagues.

The implication of this on literacy teaching and learning is that early literacy teachers need to recognise the skills (even though they may not be the conventional ones) which children bring to the classroom from home and build on them. The teacher's task in the early literacy classroom should be to support emerging young writers and readers so that 'they begin to actively construct or build the written language system for themselves' (Bloch, 1997: 5).

Advocates of the sociolinguistic learning theory further contend that social interactions enhance learning. (Tompkins, 2003) not only when children are in the classroom with their teacher, but also when they are outside with their parents and siblings (Hannon, 2000; Olson and Torrance, 2001). This, they argue is done through scaffolding and zone approximations (Dixon-Kraus, 1996 cited in Tompkins, 2003). According to Tompkins (2003: 6), scaffolding 'is a support mechanism that teachers and parents use to assist

students' to learn. This is done when teachers help their learners to read a book or write a story which they were unable to do on their own before. In the case of parent scaffolding their children, Hannon (2000: 54) says that

In the early years parents can provide vital learning opportunities by resourcing vital children's drawings, or scribbling activities; by encouraging their socio-dramatic play, by exposing them to and helping them interpret environmental print; by teaching them nursery rhymes which aid speech segmentation and phonological awareness; by sharing story books and other writing materials and by enabling children to participate in visits, trips or holidays which provide literacy demands and opportunities.

Olson and Torrance (2001: 10) share the view that parents play an important role in the process of literacy acquisition by their children. They too say that

An important factor of a child's acquisition of literacy is the literate practices of the parents, a factor which has led to many attempts to persuade parents to read to their children, perhaps as bed time stories. The school, though important is not sufficient to guarantee literate competence; a literate environment is an important contributing factor. Part of the significance of adult literacy is the important role that adult literates can play in the literate development of their children: and indeed that provides the motivation for many adults to learn to read to their children.

Another dimension to the practice of scaffolding is the one that Vygotsky cited in Tompkins (2003) puts forward. According to Tompkins, Vygotsky's argument is that children learn very little when they perform tasks that they do independently. He therefore recommends the zone approximation, the range of tasks between students' actual developmental level and their potential development. Vygotsky further contends that challenging tasks that children do with the assistance of teachers are more conducive to learning. He further recommends that as learners master the tasks teachers need to

gradually withdraw their support so that they can eventually perform the tasks on their own.

What the sociolinguistic learning theory brings to the debate on the approaches for literacy teaching and learning is an understanding of the fact that learners like all adults, use language for social purposes, that is, to communicate and share experiences with their colleagues. This understanding also helps teachers to plan their lessons so as to include a social function of the language.

An additional literacy learning theory that scholars advocate is the reader response theory. According to Tompkins (2003: 6), advocates of this learning theory contend that learners construct meaning on their own as they read. What these theorists mean by this contention is that children are active learners. They do not just try to look for the author's meaning in the text that they read. Instead, they negotiate or create a meaning that makes sense based on their own background knowledge

The views of the reader response theorists are also shared by Hannon (2000), and Olson and Torrance (2001). Hannon (2000: 50) for instance, argues that when the literacy learner is reading, he or she 'is regarded as trying to make sense of his or her encounters with the written language rather than just being the passive recipient of external influence'. On the other hand Olson and Torrance (2001: 8) further argue that during the process of reading, the literacy learner 'brings his or her own meanings, understanding, perceptions, and knowledge to the encounters'. The learner therefore uses this to construct meaning of the new text that he or she reads. What we therefore see is that the reader response theory does extend the arguments that the constructivist theorists advocate about learners relating the new information they get to prior knowledge as they construct on their own the meaning of the text that they read.

An additional dimension that the reader response theorists bring to the debate on approaches for literacy teaching and learning is that readers do not read all texts in the same way and for the same purpose. For example, when learners read a text for

information, they read it intensively because they want to remember the information. This is, however, a far cry from when the same learner reads a text for enjoyment or pleasure. Rosenblat (1991) cited in Tompkins (2003) says that when learners read a text for pleasure, for example, when they read a novel, they assume an aesthetic stance. That is the learner is concerned with such things as beauty, style, pleasure, and things like setting and plot of the story in the novel. What this also implies is that learners are encouraged to take an active part in the story when they are reading for pleasure. For instance, they may associate themselves with one of the characters in the story or they may re-live the story. Tompkins (2003: 6) says that

This conflicts with more traditional approaches in which the teacher asks students to recall specific information from the story, thus forcing students to read efferently, to take away information. Reader-response theory suggests that when students read efferently rather than aesthetically, they do not learn to love reading and may not become lifelong readers.

2.4 Learning theories and the approaches to literacy teaching and learning

These four learning theories: constructivist, interactive, sociolinguistic and reader response theories have influenced a departure from the behaviourist perception which some scholars had on the nature of language and literacy and the approaches that should be used for teaching literacy skills to the learners. Scholars now contend that the approaches to literacy learning need to be related to the way children learn. Holt (1983: 155), for instance, argues that children do not learn as behaviourist theorists believed, in what seems to be a logical sequence to us, which is learning easy things first and difficult things later. Instead, children may first want to learn things that are interesting and also difficult before moving on to learning easy things that do not mean anything to them. This view is also shared and supported by Raban (1997: 24). In his contribution to the debate on approaches which teachers should use when teaching children initial literacy skills, Raban argues that

To imply that literacy learning moves from parts to whole at the level of letters, or words or word parts is misleading. Children do not learn what they do not understand and they do not learn the conventions of print

without having them pointed out.

Raban backs up his arguments with findings from a study on English which Edmund Huey (1908) cited in Edwards and Corson (1997) carried out. According to this scholar, Huey found out in his study that a mechanistic building block theory of reading in alphabetic system of writing such as the one in English was not only inadequate, but it was also inaccurate. This is because his research findings showed that children were able to identify words as rapidly as they can identify letters. The findings further suggested that word identification does not necessarily proceed from letter identification, as is the practice in the early years of literacy learning in primary schools in Malawi and many other countries. Children could identify whole words first and go down to letter identification within those words, especially when they are learning to sound out the symbols that make up a word (i.e. spelling).

Huey's results seem to agree with the results of a pilot study on the breakthrough to literacy in Malawi in which the present writer was involved. Breakthrough to literacy is a methodology that uses the language experience approach, that is, it starts from what the learners know, that is their spoken language and experiences and uses this to help them learn something new (Ministry of Education/ The Molteno Project, 2004). According to Tompkins (2003: 123), in this approach, learners

dictate words and sentences about their experiences, and the teacher writes down what the children say; the text they develop becomes the reading material. Because the language comes from the children themselves and because the content is based on their experiences, they are usually able to read the text easily. Reading and writing are connected, because students are actively involved in reading what they have written.

Through this approach, learners see in printed form their experiences, and those words that they use in their local language every day.

Preliminary results of this study show that after 4 months of using this approach to learn to read and write in a familiar local language children who never had any basic concept

about print prior to the study are now able to identify words and their boundaries and can read and write them without any difficulty.

Scholars who contest the skills-based approach to teaching initial literacy skills which the behaviourist theorists advocate, propose an approach that focuses on the whole language that gives meaning (Yardley, 1973: 55; Kellough and Roberts, 1994; Williams, 1998; Meek cited in Hannon, 2000; Bloch, 2000; Baker, 2000) to the learner. Whole language learning is an approach that focuses on 'seeking or creating meaning that encourages language production, risk taking, independence in producing language and use of a wide variety of print materials in authentic reading and writing situations' (Kellough and Roberts, 1994). Baker (2000) says that in the whole language teaching approach, initial literacy development should emphasize learning to read and write naturally, for communication and pleasure that goes with them. In this approach, Baker (2000: 110) argues

[...] reading and writing involve real and natural events, not artificial stories or sequences, rules of grammar, spelling, or stories that are irrelevant to student's experiences.

This view of focusing on real and natural events and not on artificial stories in literacy teaching and learning is also shared by Cooper (2000: 6). Cooper's argument against focusing on artificial stories and events is based on some empirical evidence. Citing Heath (1983), Cooper says that researchers have found out that

[...] literacy in the real world involves such things as reading signs, advertisements, and bumper stickers; writing letters; reading newspapers and magazines; and giving oral and written messages to others or leaving for oneself.

The concept of the whole language approach in literacy teaching and learning is also supported by Watts' (1944). Watt's proposition is on using the sentence method for teaching reading. Advocates of this method, as cited in Watts (1944: 93) contend that

[...] people speak, as a rule, not in single words but in words used

together to make sense and in view of this they maintain that when teaching children to read we ought to begin with the statement of simple sentences, to attend next to phrases and words, rather than before, to analyse words into sounds and learn the shapes of letters required for writing them.

However, Watts (1944: 94) further argues that if the sentence method to teaching literacy is to succeed then instruction in reading should not begin with sentences that are from their school textbooks. Instead, this instruction should begin

[...] with interesting sentences which the children have used or heard spoken naturally in the course of classroom activities and experiences. The sentences will also be such as may be usefully written by the teacher on large sheets for the children to see, and without emphasis at this stage on the necessity for reading them. The next step is for the teacher to encourage the children to read and copy the sentences for themselves.

Related to the whole language approach in the teaching and learning of initial literacy skills is the language experience approach (Richards, 1985; Vacca et al 2003; Ministry of Education/The Molteno Project, 2004). According to Richards et al (1985) the language experience approach 'is an approach to the teaching of reading in a first language that makes use of reading materials based on a child's own language' (p157). This approach involves children talking about recent events or experiences and listening to or telling stories that they are familiar with in their own language. As already stated, children dictate words and sentences to the teacher that are based on their experiences. These words and sentences are written on the chalkboard and they become the focus of the reading instruction using the sentence or whole word approach to literacy teaching and learning (Richards, et al, 1985: 157).

Another approach for early literacy development that the critics of the behaviourist learning theory advocate is collaborative learning. In supporting this approach, Hudelson

(1994) cited in Baker (1996: 316) suggests that teachers should encourage children to learn from each other besides learning from their teacher. Holt (1983: 130) also subscribes to this approach. He argues that children learn so well from each other, especially from those a little older than himself or herself because they become helpful models that are within reach and therefore can be easily accessible in time of need.

An additional approach that is also propagated in literacy teaching and learning is the balanced approach (Cooper, 2001; Tompkins, 2003; Vacca et al, 2003). Proponents of this approach contend that learners are different and therefore their learning styles are also different. Consequently, they argue that no one method for teaching literacy can cater for the needs of all learners. These theorists therefore propose that a variety of methods that are often looked at as contestants of each other such as phonic, syllabic, whole word and sentence methods (Cooper, 2001) should be carefully selected and used in a literacy lesson in order to address the needs of the learners. However, there is some caution from the other theorists on how the balance should be achieved in any literacy lesson. For instance, Dorothy Strickland (1996) cited in Vacca et al (2003: 33) warns that

Achieving balance in our literacy programs is not meant to imply that there is one specific balanced approach. Nor should it suggest a sampling method in which a little of this and a little of that are mixed to form a grouping of disparate approaches [...]

In this approach teachers are expected to make informed decisions on the selection and combination of methods that they would like to use in any literacy lesson. As Spiegel (1998) cited in Tompkins (2003) further points out, a balanced approach should be a decision-making approach through which teachers make thoughtful and purposeful decisions about how to help each learner in their class become a better reader and writer using a variety of methods for literacy teaching and learning.

Let us now turn to the concept of environment in literacy learning and teaching.

2.5 Environment for literacy learning

Another dimension of the concept of 'approach' for early literacy teaching and learning that is considered in this study is the question of the 'environment' in which the process of literacy learning takes place in lower primary school classes. When using the term environment I will be referring to the nature of the environment within and outside the classroom, that is, within the campus of the school in terms of how it can or cannot support literacy learning. According to Cooper (2000: 27) a literate environment, that is an environment that is rich in language and print in the classroom, provides part of the motivation that is needed to encourage all learners to want to construct meaning. In addition, a literate environment promotes the concept of the classroom as a community of people who are sharing experiences and learning together. Lower primary school classrooms, according to Tompkins (2003: 11), are social settings in which learners read, discuss and write about literature. Together with their teacher, they create a classroom community, and the type of community they create eventually strongly influences their learning. Tompkins (2003) further argues that effective teachers establish a classroom community in which learners are motivated to learn and are actively involved in reading and writing activities.

In this study I am contending that the school environment is an essential element of the concept of approach for early literacy teaching. This is because there now seems to be some agreement among scholars that literacy skills development cannot take place in a vacuum. This is because for children to learn to read they have to read. So too with writing and speaking. There is, therefore, a need for an environment that is conducive to literacy learning to exist for the learner to effectively acquire basic literacy skills.

Hudelson (1994) cited in Baker (1996: 316), for example, argues for the prevalence of a print rich environment in the classroom, and this writer proposes outside the classroom as well, that demonstrates the multiple function of literacy and, as Goodman et al (1986: 15) suggest, the linguistic diversity of learners in the school'. For Hudelson (1994) as quoted by Baker (1996:316), such an environment in the classroom should have print materials such as displays of charts, calendars, timetables, attendance lists, pictures, a classroom

library containing books of various reading levels, pieces of writing or as he puts it 'an environment where print is seen as varied'. However, within the school, that is, outside the classroom, such an environment may have a variety of print materials. These may include rules and announcements on school boards, map of the school, name cards for different objects in the school such as head teacher's office, staffroom, toilets and other informatory as well as warning messages that are placed at some strategic places within the school environment. One advantage of having such a print-rich environment in the classroom according to Hudelson is that children do have opportunities of seeing written language used in its social and cultural context. This is particularly useful in communities where printed materials are hardly found in many homes.

Writing in support of the conducive environments for literacy acquisition, Olson and Torrance (2001) brings in a dimension of the environments which children have at home and the role that such environments may play in supporting or hindering literacy acquisition. In making this contribution, Olson and Torrance had in mind an environment which children have in their homes. What this implies is that print-rich school environments are not per se adequate. Perhaps this is because children are found in these environments for a limited period of time, sometimes lasting only three hours or less. For most of the time children are at home. Therefore, it makes a lot of sense for children to be immersed in print-rich environments in homes where they spend almost 75 to 80 percent of their daily time.

An additional important dimension that Olson and Torrance (2001: 10) allude to is the notion of parents reading stories to their children. Besides providing fun and enjoyment, stories provide language experience to the learners, an experience which they need for them to acquire literacy skills. In addition, by reading stories to them, children realize that the language they speak can also be written. The breakthrough to literacy approach already alluded to, also utilizes the practice of reading stories to children in the class by teachers (Ministry of Education/The Molteno project, 2004; Holdaway, 1979) not just for fun and enjoyment, but also as one way of giving children an opportunity to acquire new vocabulary.

Both Holt (1983) and Mchazime (2001) also allude to the need for a print-rich environment for literacy skills development in the early years of primary school. Holt (1983: 137), for example describes what he thinks was an appropriate environment for literacy development at a pre-school where his ward was learning. About this environment, he says ‘though the teacher did not try to teach children to read nor spur them into reading, there were plenty of books, signs, letters, and useful materials’ that exposed the children to print. The advantage of having such a print-rich environment is that

[...] it takes a child some time to get used to shapes of letters and words to the point where he can see at a glance that this word is like that one, this other word almost like it and the other word almost different. So we must give them plenty of time [...] (Holt, 1983: 137)

An important insight that one gets from Holt’s proposition on the usefulness of a print-rich environment for literacy acquisition is that skills are learned through practice. For instance, a child learns to ride a bicycle through riding it. Similarly as Smith (1979: 13) argues a child learns to read through reading. Also, writing is learned through writing and speaking through speaking. There is no short cut to skills acquisition other than through practice until one masters it. What this implies, therefore, is that displays of language and print materials within and outside the classroom can potentially aid children to realize that written language is part of their daily social activities, and that it is used in various ways, some of which are significant to them during their early years of primary education. Displays of these language materials should therefore be done not only when children are learning to read, but also even before that period so that they are exposed to shapes of letters and words for a long enough period of time.

Besides creating a print-rich environment that is conducive to literacy skills development, some educators also argue for the existence of an environment in which the learner does not feel frightened of being laughed at or ridiculed by the teacher whenever he or she gets something incorrect. Holt (1983: 130), for instance, says that

[...] little children can get frightened, cautious and defensive when put into [sic] a spot where they have to produce an answer which may be wrong.

What Holt says is not only true for small children but also for adults. We also feel very uncomfortable when we are in a situation in which giving an incorrect response would lead to ridicule and embarrassment. This is even more so when someone who knows more than we do about a subject we are discussing is present. Therefore, what children need is an environment in which they can use print materials freely at the time they need them and in the way they would like to use them (Holt, 1983: 131). Besides this proposition, Baker (1996) further suggests that children should also be given opportunities to select their own reading materials for pure enjoyment so as to learn that reading is not only a classroom and a highly formal structured activity, but also that it has value in itself. Holt. (1983) further argues that the things that children learn because they need them, they do not forget. However, the things that children are forced to learn, and sometimes in an intimidating environment are rarely remembered.

The need for providing children with freedom and independence in the use of print materials during early literacy development is also supported by Schoephoerster (1980: 5). In his contribution to this debate, Schoephoerster argues that

The great need of beginning readers is to become independent as soon as possible because in order to read for enjoyment, one must be able to build the meanings the author intended to when no one else is around.

Related to the notion of providing learners some independence and freedom during their early literacy acquisition is the existence of an environment in which learners are not interrupted when reading or writing. In supporting this, Holt (1983: 140) argues that children should not be interrupted in their early literacy development, for example, by correcting them every time they misread a word or, as Baker (1996) further adds, every time a child writes wrongly. Instead, Holt (1983: 140) argues that children should be allowed to go on reading and only correct themselves if necessary. This is because

constant checking up of children's correctness of what they learn may prevent and destroy not only what they learn, but also their capacity to learn.

2.6 Language for initial literacy acquisition

Another dimension of the concept of approach that is a part of this investigation on training of teachers for initial literacy teaching in lower primary school in Malawi is that of language or languages of instruction. There are 15 or more languages that are spoken in different parts of this country (Mchazime, 1996; Kathewera, 1999). Therefore, the question of which language or languages among these fifteen or so languages should be used for initial literacy learning is very critical in our multilingual society. This question is highly political and therefore very sensitive. All the same, educators and policy makers do not have to succumb to the dictates of politics, and thereby deliberately turn a deaf ear to this important issue. This is because the success of any initial school literacy programme relies on an appropriate choice of language or languages that children should use in their initial literacy acquisition at school.

One of the learning principles that educators propagate is that learning should start from what children already know before moving on to what they do not know (Mtunda et al, 1987: 115; Sampa, 2001; Pota, 2001). One of the reasons that are often put forward in support of this proposition is that children learn new knowledge much easier if it is connected to something that is already familiar to them. This view is also shared by the constructivist theorists who maintain that children always relate the new information they get to their prior knowledge for them to construct its meaning easily (Tompkins, 2003). This principle of beginning from known to unknown is even more important in early literacy classes in which children are beginning to read and write for the first time in their lives. This is because the only language that these children already know and therefore which they bring to their early literacy classes is the one that they speak at home. This is the only language that these children have already mastered and which they use in their oral communication. Therefore if the teaching in early literacy classes is indeed to start from known to unknown, then children have to learn their early literacy skills in their

mother tongue or in a language which they speak at home and are very familiar with it. Bloch (2000: 2) shares this view. She argues that

What young children know when they begin school has in most cases been learned in their mother tongues. This is the critical point for learning but in multilingual settings this fact is often ignored and hindered when the language of teaching is different from the language a child knows [...].

Perhaps for us to have a clear perspective about the necessity of learning initial literacy skills in one's own language, let us briefly examine the following four pre-requisites or as Tompkins (2003: 7) puts it the four cuing systems that make communication and therefore, meaning making in the reading process possible. According to Tompkins, (see also Garton and Pratt, 1998) these four pre-requisites for language learning are the phonological or sound system, the syntactic or structure system, the semantic or meaning system and the pragmatic or social and cultural system of a language. Let us, therefore, discuss each of these language and literacy learning pre-requisites in a little more detail now.

Every language consists of many sounds that are known as phonemes. In the case of those languages that follow the Greek system of writing (see Cooper, 1989: 125) each phoneme is represented by a grapheme, which is a letter or a combination of letters with or without diacritic symbols. For instance, the English language consists of 44 phonemes that are represented by 26 letters (Tompkins, 2003; Gimson, 1970). Children learn to produce these sounds as they learn to talk and they learn to associate the sounds with the printed symbols (that is graphemes) as they learn to read and write. The ability to hear and manipulate phonemes in words (Gillet and Temple cited in the National Reading Association, 2000) and understand how these sounds are connected to print (International Reading Association cited in the National Reading Association, 2000) is an important element during the process of initial literacy skills acquisition as well as for later success in reading. This ability is known as phonemic awareness (Cooper, 2000; National Reading Association, 2000). According to Cooper (2000: 167) the phonemic awareness, which is a part of the broader category of phonological awareness, 'helps children to

develop independence in decoding' words or parts of words. Tompkins (2003: 7) further argues that the broader category of phonological awareness

[...] plays a crucial role in reading instruction during primary grades.

Students use their knowledge of phonics as they learn to read and write. In a purely phonetic language, there would be a one to one correspondence between letters and sounds, and teaching students to sound out words would be a simple process.

However, it is important to note that these kinds of skills and the awareness of the relationship that exists arise through particular experiences and never the other way round.

Children begin school, in the case of Malawi, at age six. By this time these children are already aware of the basic phonological systems of the language that they speak at home. Therefore, what this implies is that it becomes a lot easier for them to hear and manipulate the phonemes and associate them with the graphemes when initial literacy skills are developed in a language that they speak at home, or which they are already familiar with. Tompkins (2003: 9) shares this view. She says that 'children in primary school use their understanding of the phonological system to create invented or temporary spellings' and in some cases symbols and pictures to represent the sounds they hear. Tompkins gives us an example of grade one primary school children who learn literacy through English as their first language. She says that these children "might spell 'home' as 'hm' or 'hom' and second graders might spell 'school' as 'skule'. based on their knowledge of the phoneme-grapheme relationship and English spelling" (p.9). These spellings are not wholly correct. However, they still represent the correct graphemes of the words 'home' and 'school'. These children are able to produce these spellings because they are associating the phonemes that they already have mastered with their graphemes even though the graphemes they produce are not entirely in their correct forms.

However, children face a lot of difficulties when they acquire their initial literacy skills through a strange language, such as an official (usually a colonial) language or a national language which they do not speak at home. Goody and Bennet (2001) presents some evidence of the problems that learners face when they learn their initial literacy skills in a strange language. Reporting on a research project on learning to read first in the child's own language that was carried out for Gonja and Birifor children in Northern Ghana, Goody and Bennet (2001: 183) say

The first phase [of the research project] looked at children's informal learning of adult skills in the community. Phase 11 was to follow these children into primary school to look at the role of the authority structures in the classroom learning. However, when I began to work in primary schools it was impossible to find much effective learning to observe. Village children who had never heard English were being entirely taught in English (L2), and few children seemed able to follow what was going on in the classroom. Since I had seen these same children learning very well outside school it was unlikely that their failure was due to lack of ability; the obvious problem was that for them school was 'beyond understanding'.

What is interesting in this study is that Goody and Bennet are comparing two practical environments in which learning takes place. These are the community environment where the child learns adult skills through a familiar language and the school environment in which the child finds himself or herself learning other essential social skills through a strange language. Their conclusion was that the learning that takes place in schools through an unfamiliar language was beyond understanding for the majority of children. The question that we may ask ourselves is why school learning was beyond understanding for children in Birifor. A possible and probably an obvious answer is that this was because these children had to grapple with two or more things at the same time. They had to learn and master the phonological system of English, the target language for literacy learning and at the same time associate these systems with print. For the majority

of children this is not an easy task. It takes time to master it and often frustrates and eventually discourages many learners from going on learning at school.

A second pre-requisite for communication and meaning making to take place in literacy learning is an awareness of the syntactic or structure system of the target language (Tompkins, 2003; Garton and Pratt, 1998). According to Tompkins, the syntactic system is the organization of a language in terms of how words are combined to make sentences that are meaningful. Speakers of any language arrange words in their language in a particular sequence that conveys a meaningful message. For example, Chichewa speakers say *ndibwera* (or *ndidzabwera*) *mawa* while the English speakers may convey the same message by saying 'I will come tomorrow'. Speakers of Chichewa may rearrange these words without distorting the meaning of the message by saying *mawa ndibwera* or *ndidzabwera* and English speakers may say 'tomorrow I will come'. Children learn the arrangement of words in a particular sequence to make meaningful sentences or utterances when they are learning to speak a language at home. In addition they learn appropriate tense markers (that is bound morphemes) such as *ndinabwera* (I came) *ndidzabwera* (I will come) as opposed to the free morpheme *bwera* (come) or plural markers such as '*anyamata*' (boys) as opposed to the free morpheme *mnyamata* (boy). An awareness of how word parts are combined in words and words in a sentence to convey a meaningful message is helpful when children are learning to read and write. Tompkins (2003: 9) shares this view. She says

Children use their knowledge of the syntactic system as they read. They expect that the words they are reading have been strung together into sentences. When they come to an unfamiliar word, they recognize its role in the sentence even though they don't know the terms for the parts of speech.

Children are able to use the syntactic system of a language especially during their initial literacy skills acquisition to decode meaning of strange words when a familiar language is used. However, as already alluded to, children face a lot of problems when they are forced to acquire their initial literacy skills through a strange language. This is because

they have to learn and master the structure of the language before they are able to grasp its basic literacy skills.

Besides the syntactic system, children also need to master the semantic or meaning system (Tompkins, 2003; Garton and Pratt, 1998) of the language for literacy learning. Reading as we have already alluded to is a meaning making process with the printed symbols (Grellet, 1981; Nuttal, 1982; Williams, 1993; Cooper 2000; Tompkins, 2003). Therefore, when children acquire reading skills they learn to read whole words that convey meaningful messages. Similarly when they acquire writing skills, they learn to write whole words that carry meaning. As Tompkins (2003) points out, words (or vocabulary) are a key component of the semantic system of the language for literacy learning. Therefore, acquiring initial literacy skills through a familiar language makes it a lot easier for children to read and understand what they are reading and to write and be understood by others.

An additional prerequisite for communication is an awareness of the pragmatic or social and cultural use of the language for initial literacy learning (Bernhardt, 1991; Tompkins, 2003; Garton and Pratt, 1998). The pragmatic element of a language deals with the social aspects of language use (Tompkins, 2003). This system of the language deals with questions such as 'For what purpose do people use language? How do people communicate with different audiences? Does language use change from one social class to the other, one cultural group to the other or from one ethnic group to the other? Learners need to know that language is used for many purposes and for different audiences. They also need to understand that the manner in which people talk or write varies according to purpose and their audience (Tompkins, 2003). If a language that people speak at home is used for initial literacy development, children become familiar with some of these pragmatic systems especially in speech. For example, they are familiar with basic language forms for making requests, conveying messages that were passed through them to other people and telling simple stories. Therefore, when they learn to write, they are able to do so with a purpose.

To become effective readers and writers, children need to be taught in ways that allow them to use these four systems, that is, the phonological, syntactic, semantic and the pragmatic systems of a language. As Tompkins further argues, effective teachers need to understand that children require these systems as they read and write.

My contention in this study is that in multilingual societies such as the one we have in Malawi, the only known language that children have when they start their early literacy classes in standard 1 is the language that they speak at home. Therefore, there is a need for policy makers and implementers to honour the children's right of learning in a familiar language that they speak at home, as also recommended by the Language Plan of Action for Africa (1987) that was drawn up by the OAU's Council of Ministers and other UN declarations on the rights of children.

Learning in one's own language is not only a child's birthright, but also has some educational advantages. UNICEF (1999: 41), for example, reports that

If the medium of instruction in school is a language not spoken at school, particularly when parents are illiterate, then learning problems accumulate and chances of dropping out increase. On the other hand, there is ample research evidence showing that students are quicker to learn to read and write when taught in their mother tongue. [...]. They also learn a second language more quickly than those initially taught to read in an unfamiliar language.

Therefore, language medium can either be a barrier or a gateway to success at school. In early literacy classes language medium can play an even greater role as a barrier, especially if a strange language is used in literacy programmes. This is because children have to struggle with two things at the same time: learning the strange language itself and learning literacy skills through that language, both of which may be demanding on the learner. On the other hand, language medium becomes a gateway to success for the young children to succeed at school if a familiar language, that is, the language that they commonly use at home is used as a medium and for initial literacy acquisition. This is

because the problems that children face in an early literacy class, in which a familiar language is used, are to some extent minimized as they will only have to struggle with mastering literacy skills without having to learn the language as well. It is for this reason that I use the language medium as an additional framework for evaluating the effectiveness of approaches that are currently being used for training early literacy teachers in this country.

2.7 Early childhood concepts

As pointed out earlier, the other abstraction that needs to be understood in this study is the issue of 'early childhood' as a stage in the development of a child. Our perception of this concept is very important because the study is focusing on the early childhood stage of literacy development. However, in this study I will deal with the concept of child development in the context of early literacy development. For us to have some insights in respect of this concept, we need to examine some theories of child development that educational psychologists have postulated.

The various psychologists that have written on this concept provide us with some insights on the stages of child development. One of the psychologists who give us a picture of the stages in the process of child development is Sandstrom (1961). Sandstrom identifies several stages in the process of child development. Some of these are what he calls 'newborn' (0-4 weeks), 'infancy' (4 weeks -6 years), 'puberty' (13 years for girls and 14 years for boys) and adolescent (13-20 years) stages.

Another educational psychologist who provides us with some substantial details on the developmental stages of children is Farrant (1964). Farrant identifies five stages of what he calls the physical and mental development of children. These five stages are 'pre-natal' (conception – birth), 'infancy' (birth – 2 years), 'childhood' (2-12 years) and 'youth' (12-16 years). What we therefore see here is that, unlike Sandstrom's postulation, a child's development, according to Farrant begins at conception. However, like Sandstrom, Farrant also divides the childhood stage into what he calls 'early childhood'

(2-5 years) and 'late childhood' (6-12 years). During the childhood stage, Farrant says that

[...] the child launches out an intensive search for knowledge [...].

The greatest mental achievement in early childhood is the conquest of language. This, together with the help of physical maturation, brings within reach of the child the learning of other forms of language like reading and writing. As he passes from early childhood to later childhood, the beginnings of abstract thoughts are made possible for the child by his growing control of language and the concepts that are an integral part of abstract thought (Farrant, 1964: 56).

According to this construct, early childhood is a crucial stage in the process of child development. This is because it is at this stage of development that a child acquires the basic skills of language, and these can include literacy, that he or she may need during the rest of his or her life for a meaningful survival in the society. This is, therefore, one of the reasons why children need to be equipped with meaningful and functional language and literacy skills at this early stage of their development.

Although the official school entry age is 6 years in Malawi, it is not uncommon to find children who are under or over this age in standard 1 (Namathaka et al, 2000; Chilora, 2004). In addition, pre-school education, that is the education of children between ages 2 and 5 is not formally provided for in this country. Therefore, the majority of children in this country begin their education in Standard 1 without any preparatory literacy learning from kindergartens. What this means is that for the majority of children in Malawi their first formal experience with print is the time they enter school in Standard 1. It also means that the majority of children in this country acquire their early literacy skills while they are already at primary school. It is on this understanding that the focus of this study is on the effectiveness of approaches that are used for training literacy teachers of early primary school classes, which are the first and most important sites of literacy learning for most Malawian children. Therefore, let us now turn to the design of the study and the

methods that were used for carrying out this research. These details are presented in Chapter 3 below.

University of Cape Town

Chapter 3 Research design and methodology

3.1 Study design

This study is based on an in-depth case study of the approaches that inform the training of literacy teachers of lower primary school classes at one of the teacher training colleges in Malawi and how these teachers' practices manifest these approaches in their early literacy classes at primary school. The investigation was carried out during the time that students were in college and children were in their schools.

The case study was selected as a method for this investigation because it provided me with an opportunity to deal with a variety of evidence ranging from documents, interviews, and classroom observations (Yin, 1984) on the phenomenon that was being investigated. It is hoped that the results of this investigation will be used to influence policy and practice in Malawi and beyond this case study.

3.2 Sampling method

The sampling method that I used in this study was purposive sampling. Only one teachers' training college (TTC), St Joseph's teachers' college, was selected for inclusion in the sample of the study. St Joseph's is a national teachers' college that is located in the central region of Malawi. What this implies is that, as a national college the students that are trained at this college come from different parts of Malawi and from different language groups. At this college I worked with teacher trainers that are training students on how to teach initial literacy skills to children in Standards 1 and 2.

Besides working with language and literacy teacher trainers at St Joseph's teachers' college, I also worked with three graduates of this college. The criteria that were used for selecting the three graduates of this college were threefold. Firstly their choice was based on the location of the school where they were teaching in 2004. Thus, I selected graduates of the college who are now teaching in urban as well as those who are teaching in rural areas. The second criterion that I used for selecting teachers who were trained at St Joseph's teachers' college was the mode of the training programme that they followed

during their initial teacher training. Consequently I selected teachers who attended a two-year teacher training, a one-year teacher training and those who followed the MIITEP (i.e. two-week initial orientation course followed by an additional three months residential course). The final criterion I used for selecting graduates of St Joseph's teachers' college for inclusion in the sample was the language that their learners speak at home. Therefore, I selected teachers who were teaching children who speak Chichewa at home and those who were teaching children who speak other languages than Chichewa at home.

The choice of this sampling method was based on the fact that I was working with a small sample in the study. However, it is still hoped that the cases I selected will enable me to answer my research questions and eventually achieve my research results.

3.3 Gaining access

Before the data collection exercise began, the researcher obtained written permission from the Secretary for Education, Science and Technology to carry out research in teacher training colleges and primary schools in Malawi (see appendix 6). This phase is important so that the authorities are aware of the type and purpose of investigations that are being carried out in their institutions. The need for seeking permission prior to the research is also supported by Mouton (2001: 244). Mouton argues that a researcher needs to obtain permission from the relevant authorities prior to carrying out the investigations.

On arrival at the college or primary school, the researcher first met the principal or the head teacher, in the case of primary schools. He then showed him or her, the letters of permission and introduction from the Secretary for Education, Science and Technology. Thereafter, the researcher briefed him or her on the nature of the research, its aims and the lecturers or teachers and learners he wanted to interact with in the college or school.

The researcher then met the lecturers or teachers and briefed them as well on the nature and purpose of the research. Briefing the subjects about the nature of the research is in step with what Seliger and Shohamy (1989: 196) recommends. The two scholars contend

that subjects in a research activity need to be informed about the nature of study. After the briefing, the researcher asked them if they would participate in the research through being interviewed and observed teaching language and literacy lessons in their classes. Next the researcher and the lecturers or teachers agreed on the day and time when the interview and lesson observation should be carried out.

In the case of the learners who were included in the sample, as Mouton (2001: 244) suggests, the researcher also told them about the nature of the test, its purpose and benefits. The researcher also obtained their consent (see Mouton, 2001: 244; Seliger and Shohamy, 1989: 196) and their teacher's before the test was administered. In addition, learners were assured that the test was not for grading them but for the researcher to find out what they were able to read and write in Chichewa.

The researcher used the preliminary meetings with the research participants (that is, teacher trainers, teachers and learners) in the college and schools to establish rapport with them prior to data collection. As Maykut and Morehouse (1994: 71) point out, some researchers argue that rapport established through open and honest exchanges prior to the investigation is essential to achieving the aims of a research activity.

3.4 Data collection techniques

In order to make sure that there was consistency and uniformity in the data collection procedures, the researcher collected all the data alone. Moreover, a variety of sources and data collection techniques were used in the study in order to ensure that the data that were collected through one source or technique were cross-checked against data that were collected through the other sources and techniques. This was done in order to ensure that the data that were collected and finally analysed were valid. The following were, therefore the data collection techniques that were used in the study.

3.4.1 Documentary analysis

A variety of documents were examined and analysed during the course of this study. These included teacher training syllabuses for language and literacy teaching and

learning (i.e. syllabuses for the two-year, one-year, and MIITEP teacher training programmes), syllabuses for language and literacy teaching at primary school, textbooks that are used for language and literacy teaching in Standards 1 and 2, training manuals and some policy documents on language and literacy teaching that Ministry of Education Science and Technology (MoEST), now Ministry of Education (MoE) issued over the past years. The data that I collected from the documents was used to triangulate findings (Saunders et al, 2000; Stake, 1988) on the approaches that are used for literacy development during the early years of primary school which I also collected from the other sources such as school and classroom observation, interview schedules with teacher trainers and Standard 1 and 2 teachers and from the post-test that I gave to Standard 1 children at the schools that were sampled in this study.

3.4.2 Classroom observation

In order to obtain some information on the phenomenon that I was investigating in this study, I had to observe teacher trainers training early childhood literacy teachers. This was done over a period of six months. In addition, I also spent a significant amount of time observing how teachers actually teach Standard 1 and 2 literacy classes at one urban school in Lilongwe and at two rural schools in an area where children speak Chichewa at home and in another area where children speak a different local language, Ciyao, at home.

My purpose for observing literacy teaching and learning approaches in lower primary school classes at both the urban and rural primary schools was to find out whether there were differences in approach and learner literacy achievement resulting from environmental factors. Similarly, my purpose for observing literacy teaching and learning at schools where children speak Chichewa only at home and at schools where children speak other local languages at home was to find out whether there were differences in approach and learner literacy achievement resulting from the language factor. Throughout the observation period, detailed field notes were carefully documented on the phenomenon that was being investigated. In addition, some questions that needed further clarification were formulated. Clarification on these questions was sought during

interview schedules with the language and literacy teacher trainers at St Joseph's teachers' college and with Standard 1 and 2 teachers at the primary schools.

3.4. 3 Interviews

The interview was the other technique that I used in this study. Through interviewing language and literacy teacher trainers and teachers, as Saunders et al (2000) also point out, I was able to gather some valid and reliable data that I hope would answer my research questions and eventually meet my research objectives.

In this study, both semi-structured and unstructured interview schedules were utilized. The semi-structured interview schedules were used when collecting data from the individual informants, that is, the teacher trainer who was observed in her class training literacy teachers for lower primary school classes. Prior to the interview, a list of themes and questions (see appendix 2) on which I wanted to get some information were prepared. However, the other questions had to come from the observation schedules. These were largely questions on some practices that were observed in the classroom, but which required further clarification.

For focus-group interviews, I utilized the style of interviewing that Schurink (1998) recommends. This is an unstructured interview with a schedule or what Saunders et al (2000) call an in-depth interview. According to Schurink, a schedule in this type of interviewing is a guideline for the interviewer, and contains questions and themes, or a general idea (Saunders et al 2000: 244) that are important to the study. Responses from both semi-structured and unstructured interview were carefully documented and audio-recorded. The audio-recorded data was eventually transcribed word for word. Finally all the data collected through the interviews were analysed.

3.4.4 Post-test on literacy skills achievement

An additional source of data that I used for the evaluation of the effectiveness of approaches used for training lower primary school literacy teachers was a post-test on the learners' literacy achievement in the schools and classes where the graduates of St

Joseph's teachers' college had been teaching. In this survey, twenty Standard 1 learners were selected from each school for inclusion in the sample. These learners were given a test on literacy skills at the end of their academic year in November 2004. The purpose of this test was to find out what learners knew and what they were able to do in literacy after having been taught these skills for a period of one year in Standard 1.

One of the areas that were investigated in this test was learners' levels of early literacy skills development by the end of Standard 1. These skills included the basic concepts about print (see Tompkins, 2003: 75 for details), such as book orientation and directional concepts (e.g. showing the front and back of a book, turning to a right page in a book and showing where to start reading in a book), print directional concepts (e.g. showing the direction of print in a word, across a line and the direction of print on a page with more than one line of print) and letter and word concepts (e.g. pointing to a letter or word on a page in the book). The other 'pre-literacy' concept that was investigated was copying letters. These skills were selected for inclusion in the assessment because the current approach to initial literacy teaching in this country is skills-based, that is, from parts to the whole language. Therefore, I wanted to find out whether this approach is really helping learners to acquire basic initial literacy skills by the end of their first year at school.

Besides these concepts, learners were also tested on their abilities to write their names, familiar words in Chichewa and a simple paragraph in Chichewa. Finally, the learners were tested on their abilities to read at word, sentence and simple story levels and answer questions on the story they had read to see if they understood it. The story that the learners were asked to read was taken from a textbook of their grade level.

At the end of the whole exercise, the data that were collected were analysed. The results of this analysis are reported in chapter 4 below.

Chapter 4 Data Analysis and Results

As shown in the preceding chapter, a variety of sources for data collection were used in the course of investigating the effectiveness of approaches that are used for training literacy teachers for lower primary school classes in Malawi. These sources included analysis of documents, classroom observations, interviews with the teacher trainers and Standard 1 primary school teachers, and a literacy test that was given to Standard 1 learners in the schools that were included in the sample of this study. This chapter, therefore, discusses three things. First, it discusses how the data collected from each of these four sources was analysed. Then it discusses the results that were obtained from each set of analysis. Finally, it discusses the implications for the findings on approaches that are currently used for training lower primary school teachers on learner achievement in literacy in this country. Therefore, let us begin with how the data from documentary evidence was analysed.

4.1 Documentary evidence

A variety of documents that are used when teaching initial literacy through Chichewa were examined and analysed during the course of this study. These included primary school syllabuses, teacher training syllabuses for the various programmes that have been implemented in this country, teacher training instructional books and primary school textbooks (i.e. teacher's guide and pupils' books). The main theme that was used when analyzing these documents was the instructional approach to early literacy learning that was used by the authors.

An analysis of the Chichewa Syllabuses for primary school shows a segmented approach to literacy teaching in which learners begin to read letters, syllables, words and then sentences. For example, the 1982 primary school syllabus for Chichewa shows the following as the objectives for teaching Chichewa in Standards 1, 2 and 3 that were supposed to be rigidly followed and achieved during the course of teaching initial literacy skills:

The teacher must stress in particular accuracy of speech and pronunciation.

And in addition children must know

- a) all the 5 vowels i.e. *a, e, i, o, and u*
- b) all consonants
- c) consonantal combinations with vowels e.g.

single: $n + a = na$

$n + e = ne$

$n + i = ni$

double: $mw + a = mwa$

$mw + e = mwe$

$mw + i = mwi$

triple: $thy + a = thya$

$thy + e = thye$

$thy + I = thyi$

- d) word building – this must follow a) and c) above e.g.

$a + na = ana$

$e + na = ena$

- e) sentence construction e.g.

$mwana + aona = mwana aona.$

(Ministry of Education and Culture, 1982: 45)

Even when teaching reading in Standard 6, 7, and 8 which are the last three standards in the primary school cycle, the syllabus recommended that

Before formal teaching from a reader begins:-

Each child must be taught to recognise the 5 vowels and all the consonants step by step. Children must be able to recognise these letters or symbols from the wall charts and from the blackboard [...].

(Ministry of Education and Culture, 1982: 46)

When the Chichewa primary school syllabus was reviewed in 1991 (see Malawi Institute of Education, 1991), the skills-based approach to literacy teaching that was used in the 1982 syllabus was maintained. According to Carrel (1988) cited in Mchazime (1989: 14)

This model involves [...] decoding of individual linguistic units (e.g. phonemes, graphemes, words) and building textual meaning from the smallest units and then modifying pre-existing background knowledge and current predictions on the basis of information encountered in the text.

This may be seen in the translated objectives that are stipulated for teaching children reading in Chichewa as follows:

Learners should be able to:

1. read vowels e.g. *a, e, i, o, and u*
2. read consonants e.g. *b, ch, d, f, g, h*
3. read syllables e.g. *ba, be, bi, bo, bu*
4. read words e.g. *aba, ababa, iba*

(Malawi Institute of Education, 1991: 16)

On the other hand the following were given as the objectives for teaching writing in Chichewa:

Learners should be able to:

1. write vowels legibly
2. write consonants legibly
3. write syllables legibly
4. write words
5. write legibly
6. write sentences

(Malawi Institute of Education, 1991: 19)

Similarly, an analysis of the primary teacher training syllabuses for Chichewa also reveals that a skills-based approach is the only approach that is used for training literacy

teachers for lower primary school in Malawi. For instance, the syllabus for the Malawi Integrated In-service Teacher Education Programme (MIITEP) which also doubles as the student teacher's handbook, reveals that a segmented and mechanistic building block theory approach (see Edmund Huey cited in Edwards and Corson, 1997 for details) for initial literacy teaching is the one that teacher trainees are exposed to while undergoing their initial teacher training course in literacy teaching in this programme. The Chichewa syllabus for MIITEP teacher training programme clearly states that when teaching reading in Standard 1 teachers should teach vowels (*a, e, i, o, and u*), then syllables made of one consonant and a vowel such as *ba, be, bi, bo, and bu* followed by syllables made of two consonants and a vowel such as *pha, phe, phi, pho, and phu* (Teacher Development Unit, 1998: 479).

The Syllabus further states that when teaching syllables such as *pha, phe, phi, pho, and phu* the following procedure should be followed. First the teacher should revise *pa, pe, pi, po, and pu*. Then the teacher together with the children should read *pha, phe, phi, pho* and *phu*. Thereafter, the teacher and children should read words that are made with these syllables such as *phala, phika, phesi, phoso, and phula* (Teacher Development Unit, 1998: 479). In other words the approach that is stipulated in this Syllabus is that of beginning with the smallest units and then building on these until a child is able to read and write whole words, sentences and then simple stories. This is the approach that was also used in the one-year and two-year teacher training programmes (Ministry of Education and Culture, 1988, 1990).

In the case of textbooks, both the teacher's guide and pupils' books that are used for teaching initial literacy skills through Chichewa in Standard 1 were analysed. A close examination of the teacher's guide, for example, reveals that the same approach of beginning from parts to whole for literacy teaching that is used in the syllabuses is also used in the textbooks. Another interesting revelation in the textbooks for initial literacy development through Chichewa is that only two lessons have been set aside for teaching children concepts about print at the beginning of the Standard 1 literacy course. This may

clearly be seen in the following objectives for reading and writing lessons in units 1 and 2 respectively of the Standard 1 book.

Unit 1 (Reading)

By the end of this unit pupils should be able to

1. open their books correctly
2. hold their books correctly
3. place an object on the page to be read
4. name things
5. recognize pictures

Unit 2 (Writing)

By the end of this unit, pupils should be able to:

1. hold a pencil correctly
2. draw patterns
3. draw different things
4. recognize pictures

(Chikafa Phiri et al, 1991: p.1 and 5)

Developing concepts about print, like acquiring a language is a process that cannot be completed over a limited period of time such as 60 minutes (2 periods of 30 minutes each) as is the case in the textbooks that are used for initial literacy development through Chichewa in Malawi. There is a need for children to be exposed to concepts about print on a regular basis and not through time tabling it as is presently being done. As Holt (1983: 136) argues, 'it takes a child some time to get used to the shapes of letters and words for him or her to understand the print at a glance'. It is, therefore, necessary that children are given plenty of time in order for them to practise and internalize these skills.

In addition, the Chichewa teachers' guide for Standard 1 shows clearly that the approach that is being used for developing early literacy skills in the rest of the textbook is the part skills-based approach. In these instructional materials, as Mchazime (1989: 16) observes, the approach used insists that reading starts still with recognition of letters, then syllables

before proceeding to recognition of whole words. For example, children begin to learn to recognise the vowels (a, e, i, o, u) that are used in the Chichewa language before moving on to recognition of syllables and then whole words (see Chikafa Phiri et al, 1991: p 9-33). Twenty lessons of half an hour each have been allocated for teaching and learning recognition of these 5 vowels in the Standard 1 textbook for Chichewa. Each vowel is taught in four lessons as follows:

Lesson 1: Reading the vowel

Lesson 2: Moulding the vowel

Lesson 3: Writing the vowel

Lesson 4: Reading the vowel

(Chikafa Phiri et al, 1991)

In the textbooks for Chichewa that are used in Standard 1 reading and writing are taught in separate lessons. Sometimes these lessons are spread over a period of 2 or more days.

After mastering recognition of vowels, the children are introduced to a single consonant and vowel syllable combination before moving on to a two-consonant and vowel syllable combination. For instance, immediately after learning recognition of the vowels, children are introduced to *ba*, *be*, *bi*, *bo*, and *bu* and a few words that are made through the combination of vowels and these syllables such as

baba (be thirsty)

ababa (a father)

aba (have stolen

iba (steal)

Also 4 lessons have been allocated for teaching the consonant 'b' and vowel combination as follows:

Lesson 1: reading

Lesson 2: writing

Lesson 3: reading

Lesson 4: writing

(Chikafa Phiri et al, 1991: p34-39)

A similar approach is used for teaching recognition of syllables made up of other consonants and vowel combinations.

One of the observations that the researcher made was that story reading/telling has not been given much prominence and in some lessons it is missing in the activities that have been included in the instructional materials for Standard 1. The omission of story reading/telling activities is, arguably, consistent to the skills-based approach. In this approach, stories are often forgotten because they are seen not to be part of the 'formal' work in the lesson and their value in literacy learning is not understood by many teachers at all. However, this researcher is of the opinion that stories play an important role in language learning as well as in social and cultural functions. As a matter of fact stories are language. Therefore, children need to listen to stories or tell others stories as part of their language experience process.

Now let us turn to the data that was collected through lesson observation at a teacher training college and in Standard 1 and 2 classes in urban and rural schools.

4.2 Classroom observation

As already alluded to in the preceding paragraphs, the researcher observed teacher trainers training literacy teachers for lower primary school at St Joseph's teachers college. In addition, the researcher observed teachers who were trained at St Joseph's college teaching literacy lessons in Standard 1 and 2 at urban and rural schools. The purpose of the observation schedules at a teachers' college was to see the approaches to literacy teaching that teacher trainers train students to use when teaching literacy lessons in lower primary school classes. On the other hand the purpose of observing literacy lessons in primary schools was to see how the teachers who were trained at St Joseph's teachers' college transfer the approaches for literacy teaching and learning that they learned at college to their practice in lower primary schools literacy classes. Therefore, let us now discuss the findings of these observations in both the teachers' college and the two primary schools.

4.2.1 Approaches used for training literacy teachers

The data that was collected through observation of the actual training sessions at St Joseph's teachers' college was categorized into four themes. These were classroom organisation, creation of a print-rich environment, the approach used for helping children to learn initial reading and writing skills and the language(s) used for initial literacy teaching at primary school.

On classroom organisation the researcher observed that students always sat in rows, one behind the other like in a church. The teacher trainer stood in front of the students. In some lessons students were allowed to sit in groups, especially when the trainer wanted them to discuss or demonstrate a task. The students that were observed being trained for literacy teaching had been working as untrained teachers before they were recruited for training at the college.

The average size of a class at the college was 40 students. However, in one lesson the researcher observed that the trainer had combined two classes and was training them in one room. The main reason that the trainer gave for doing this was that there were not enough language and literacy trainers at the college, and therefore it was not uncommon for her to combine classes in some lessons. In this type of class organisation the researcher observed that students took an active part in the lesson only when they were answering or asking questions for clarifications. Otherwise, the training sessions were largely 'talk and chalk' by the trainer, just like at school, with minimal student contributions.

A potential weakness of this type of classroom organisation is that it denies the students an opportunity to learn from each other. As already pointed out, students, like any other learners learn a lot from each other besides learning from their trainer or teacher (Hudelson, 1994 cited in Baker, 1996). Therefore, they need an opportunity to interact with each other in the class besides interacting with their teacher. Students can surely have this opportunity if interactive and learner-centred approaches are used in their class.

On creation of print-rich environments, the researcher observed how this was done in the classrooms that were assigned for language and literacy and in the college campus in general. With regard to the language and literacy classroom, the researcher observed that some print materials at letter and word levels had been beautifully displayed on the walls of the classroom. Some of these materials were in English whereas others were in Chichewa. However, there were no displays of the work that was done by the students themselves.

At college campus level the researcher observed that only a few print materials at word level were on display. These were largely labels for certain rooms such as staff room, toilets, principal's office, general office and the library. These labels were all in English. There was no deliberate effort by the language and literacy teacher trainers and students to create a Chichewa print-rich environment in the college campus as a demonstration.

Print-rich environments are an important element for the success of a literacy programme. As already discussed in chapter 2 (see page 35), literacy skills like other skills are learned through practice. For instance, children learn to speak through speaking. At school they learn to read through reading. Similarly they learn to write through writing. If a child comes to school without a book and a pencil, it takes a long time for such a child to learn to read and write.

Besides observations on the environments for literacy teaching and learning in the classroom and around the college campus, the researcher also observed that the teacher trainers at St Joseph's teachers' college train their students in how to use the skills-based approach only for teaching young learners initial literacy skills. In the lessons on approaches for teaching reading in lower primary school classes that the researcher observed, the language teacher trainer kept on emphasising to her students the need to get learners in lower primary school to master writing and reading vowels first before they are introduced to writing and reading at word and then at sentence levels. When this researcher asked the trainer why she felt that children have to master vowels before they

are taught to write and read words, she just said that children cannot read words unless they are able to read and write vowels.

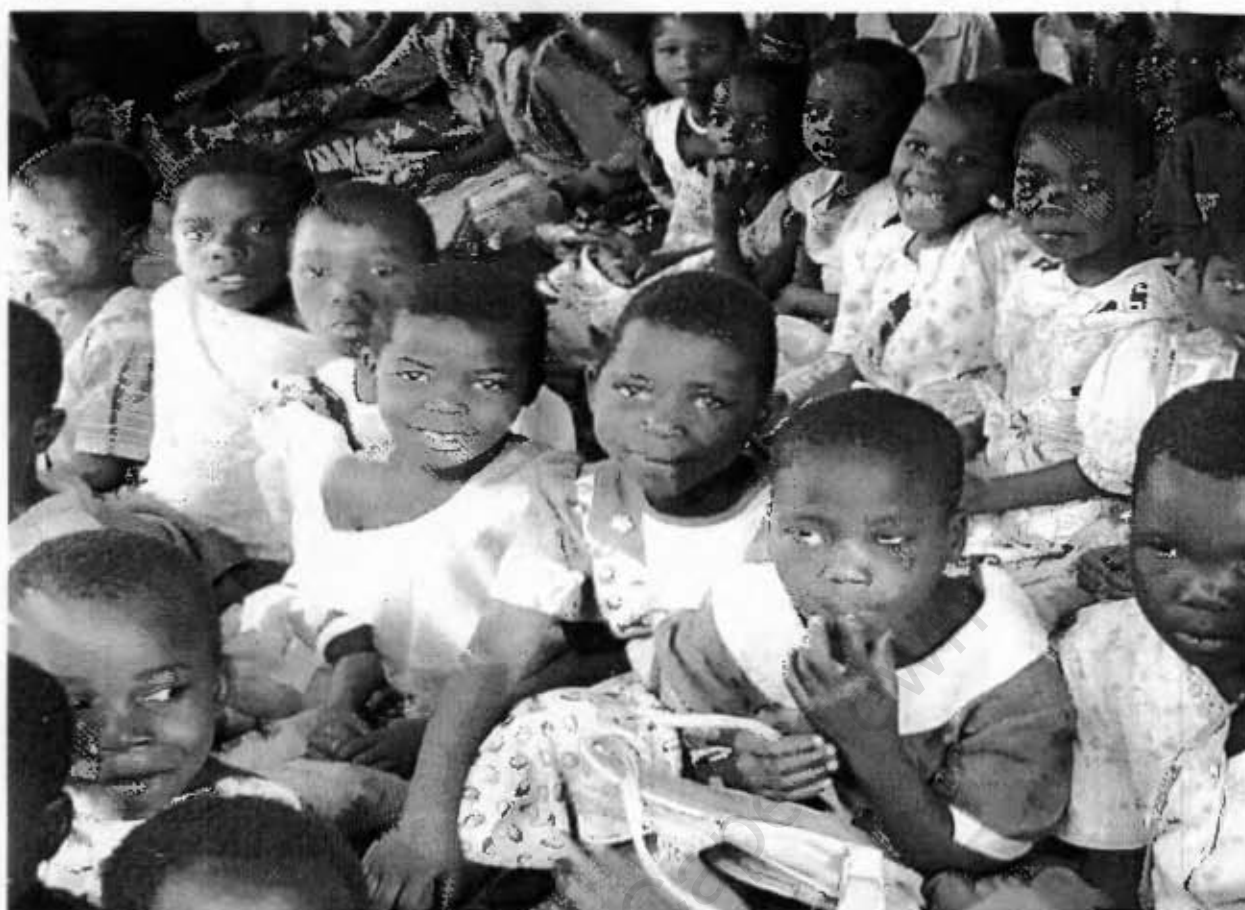
On the language that is used for initial literacy training, the researcher observed that only Chichewa and English were being used for training students to teach reading and writing skills. Students were being trained in how to use Chichewa for initial literacy teaching and learning in primary school classes. When this researcher asked the teacher trainer why students are trained in how to use Chichewa only for initial literacy development, the teacher trainer said that this was because of the current language in education policy which recognises and supports Chichewa as the only local language for initial literacy development in all schools throughout the country.

4.2.2 Approaches used for literacy teaching in lower primary school classes by teachers trained at St Joseph's teachers' college

The data that the researcher collected through observation of literacy lessons in lower primary school classes, was also categorized into four themes, namely, classroom organisation, creation of a print-rich environment, the approaches to literacy teaching and learning used by the teacher in the class and the language(s) for initial literacy teaching at primary school.

On classroom organisation the researcher observed that like at college, children sat in rows one behind the other (see Appendix 1). The enrolment in each of the classes that the researcher observed literacy lessons was above 100 children. All the children were taught as one class and were sitting on the floor as shown in Fig. 2 below. The researcher observed that in this type of classroom organisation children did not have an opportunity to interact with each other in the course of the lesson. This was because the class was fully packed and there was not enough space for the children to relax. The lessons were therefore largely centred on the teacher and children only spoke when they were asked to answer questions or read after the teacher in chorus form.

Fig. 2: Seating Plan in a Standard I literacy class at an urban school in Lilongwe



In all the classes children did not have books. Some of the children did not have pencils and exercise books. Therefore, they practised reading in chorus form using letter or word cards and the chalkboard. Many children did not practise writing at all. When the researcher asked the teacher why children were not given books to read especially considering that this was at the end of an academic year, teachers at the urban school reported that the school did not have any textbook for children. Pupils had to practice reading from a chalkboard. On the other hand the teacher at the rural school reported that the school did not have sufficient number of books for each child. In addition, she said that her children had not yet started reading from the book because the majority of them could not read even though this was at the end of an academic year.

On creating print-rich environments for literacy learning, the researcher observed that all classrooms both at the rural and urban schools did not have any displays of print materials (see Appendix 1). Considering that text books were not available for all the children in the class, it was, therefore, difficult for the learners to interact with print for a long enough time except during the 30-minute literacy lessons only.

On approaches to literacy teaching the researcher observed that the same skills-based approach was used. Each lesson began with reading vowels then syllables and then words in strictly that order. If there were two literacy lessons in a day, reading and writing lessons alternated. There was no telling/reading of stories as part of the language experience approach.

Also, the researcher observed that only Chichewa was used for initial literacy skills development at the urban school even though there were some children who spoke other local languages at home and one of their teachers spoke a different language at home. Chichewa was also the only local language that was used for initial literacy skill development at the rural school even though all the children in the class and their teacher did not use Chichewa at home. Perhaps this is understandable because the current language in education policy in this country stipulates that Chichewa should be the only local language that should be used as a medium of instruction in lower primary school (that is Standards 1 to 4) and be taught as a subject throughout the entire 8-year cycle of primary education.

Let us now turn to the data that was collected through interview schedules with the teacher trainers and the classroom teachers.

4.3 Interview Schedules

As stated in the preceding paragraphs of this chapter, two groups of people were interviewed in the course of this study on approaches that are used for teaching children initial literacy skills. These groups were language and literacy teacher trainers at St Joseph's teachers' college and the Standard 1 teachers from the schools that were

included in the sample of this study. Therefore, let us first look at how the data that was collected from the language and literacy teacher trainers was analysed and the results that the researcher got from this analysis.

4.3.1 Interview schedules with language and literacy teacher trainers

Four themes were used when analyzing the data collected from individual and focus group interview schedules with the teacher trainers. These were: the approaches that they use when training literacy teachers for lower primary school, the languages that they train their teachers to use for initial literacy development in lower primary classes, the environments for literacy teaching and learning that they train their literacy teachers for lower primary school to create in their classes and the training they give to their trainees in preparing, adapting and using materials for initial literacy development. Each of these main themes had sub-themes that were also used when analyzing this data. Therefore, let us look at each of these themes and sub-themes now.

4.3.1.1 Approaches for literacy teaching

When using this theme other sub-themes that were also used for analyzing the data collected from the interview schedules were theories for language and literacy learning that inform the approach teacher trainers use, and the role of story reading in early literacy teacher training. On the first main theme of approach for initial literacy skills development, the teacher trainers were unanimous in their report that initially trainees are trained in how to equip children with 'pre-reading' and 'pre-writing' skills. These skills include the basic concepts about print such as how to handle a book or a pen, book orientation concepts (i.e. the front and back of a book), print directional concepts within a word and on a page, letter and word concepts and number concepts in a book. They further reported that after mastering the 'pre-reading' and 'pre-writing' skills, the trainees are also trained in how to teach children vowels, syllables, simple words and then sentences in that order. What this implies is that during their initial teacher training courses at St Joseph's teachers' college, students are trained in how to teach their children literacy skills using the skills-based approach, that is, from simple parts of a language (letters, vowels, syllables and words) to the complex whole language. In this

approach, no attention is paid at all to whether the literacy lessons are meaningful to the children. This is because these discrete skills (i.e. letters, vowels, syllables and words) are taught outside of any meaningful context. This therefore contradicts the fact that literacy learning should be a meaning making process with the printed symbols (Tompkins, 2003: 3; Williams, 1993).

However, nearly all the teacher trainers at the Joseph's teachers' college were not sure about the language and literacy theories that inform the approach they use when training teachers for initial literacy teaching in lower primary school classes. Some of the language and literacy teacher trainers reported that they train in the way they do because this was the way that they, themselves, were trained as literacy teachers. Other teacher trainers reported that this is the way children are expected to learn to read.

On the role of story telling/reading in initial teacher training courses for language and literacy teachers, the teacher trainers reported that students are trained to tell or read stories to their students in their literacy lessons in lower primary school. The reasons they mentioned for training their students to read or tell stories in their literacy lessons were that stories provide an opportunity for language experience. Children learn and acquire additional vocabulary and sentence structures of a language that they use for their initial literacy skills acquisition through telling and listening to stories. However, this researcher did not observe any demonstration of story telling/reading during the training sessions.

4.3.1.2 Languages for literacy development

The main theme that was used when analyzing the data that was collected from individual and focus group interview schedules with teacher trainers at St Joseph's teacher's training college was the language or languages used when training literacy teachers of lower primary school classes. On this the teacher trainers reported that the students they train at St Joseph's teacher's college come from all parts of Malawi, especially from the southern and central parts of the country. The majority of these students speak Chichewa, Ciyao and Citumbuka. However, when training them for initial literacy teaching in lower primary school classes, the students are only trained in how to use Chichewa and English

in all the schools. What this means is that all the students at this college are trained to use Chichewa and English for initial literacy skills acquisition even in schools where children do not speak any of these languages at home and therefore hardly understand them in class.

The main reason that the teacher trainers mentioned for training their students in using only Chichewa and English for initial literacy skills development in lower primary school is that the current language in education policy dictates that only Chichewa and English should be used in all schools in the country. However, all the teacher trainers were in agreement that there is a tendency among teachers to code switch when teaching children in their classes during teaching practice in primary schools.

4.3.1.3 Environments for literacy skills development

The other theme that was used when analyzing the data that was collected from individual and focus group interview schedules with teacher trainers at St Joseph's teachers' training college was the environments for literacy teaching and learning that they train their students to create while in college for their initial teacher training course. On this, the teacher trainers reported that while on their initial teacher training course in literacy teaching, students are trained in how to prepare and utilize a variety of resources (such as word trees, word and sentence cards, classroom labels, news boards, name cards and word lists) when teaching children to read and write in Chichewa. The teacher trainers further reported that students are also trained in how to use TALULAR (that is, Teaching and Learning Using Locally Available Resources) such as bottle tops, backs of trees, food covers, cartons, bottles, in other words, anything they find in their environment. This revelation shows that while in college for their initial teacher training course, students are to some degree trained to create print-rich environments in their literacy classes. However, there no was no mention of training teachers in how to create posters that contain meaningful chunks of language and which can also be used to provide children some language experience.

4.3.1.4 Materials development

The final theme that was used when analyzing the data that was collected from individual and focus group interview schedules with teacher trainers at St Joseph's teacher's training college was materials development for literacy skills acquisition. On this the teacher trainers reported that students are trained in how to prepare, adapt, make and use materials for literacy skills acquisition in lower primary school classes. They said that students are trained, for example, in how to prepare supplementary readers for use by lower primary school children. However, the researcher did not see any evidence of supplementary readers made by the students or the teacher trainers themselves. Perhaps this could be a result of lack of paper and writing materials, especially pen and markers, which are sometimes not easily accessible in most schools and colleges in this country.

The teacher trainers also reported that because materials are not easy to find at their college, they just explain to the students how to make the materials instead of actually getting them to have hands-on experience on materials development. However, this researcher is of the opinion that this report was not in keeping with their other report in which they said that students are trained to prepare and use a variety of materials including TALULAR. By definition TALULAR refers to all the resources that are available in the locality of the school and college. Therefore, it does not hold much water for the teacher trainers to complain that the materials for giving their students hands-on experience are not available at their college.

4.3.2 Interview schedules with Standard I teachers

Besides interviewing teacher trainers, additional data on the approaches that are used for literacy teaching and learning in lower primary school classes were collected through interviewing teachers who had graduated from St Joseph's teachers' college. When analyzing this data, four themes were also used. These were the approach the teacher uses in his/her class when teaching children literacy skills, languages for initial literacy development, resources and environments for literacy skills development and the assessment they use in their literacy classes. Therefore, let us look at the results of each of these themes in detail now.

4.3.2.1 Approaches for teaching literacy in Standards 1 and 2

On the approach that they use when teaching literacy skills, all the teachers reported that they start from the smallest units of a language (vowels, syllables and words) before moving on to whole language. For instance when teaching the word *anga* teachers first teach the syllables *na, ne, ni, no,* and *ni*, then *ga, ge, gi, go* and *gu* and finally *nga, nge, ngi, ngo* and *ngu*. When asked why they teach children in this way, this is what the various teachers said:

- 'Pupils need to learn parts of a word first before learning to read the whole word. Even the syllables, pupils need to know syllables of one consonant before learning to read syllables with cluster consonants' (Mrs. M. M., teacher at a rural school – 15 September, 2004)
- 'I want to begin from known to unknown' (Mrs. R.G., teacher at an urban school – 21 October, 2004)
- 'Pupils cannot read at sentence level unless they read syllables' (Mrs. L. N., teacher at an urban school – 26 October, 2004)
- 'Children cannot read whole words if they do not know how to read syllables' (Mrs. D. C., teacher at rural school 12 July, 2004)
- 'It is easier to relate sounds of things at home with sounds of letters. This is moving from known to unknown' (Mrs. R K., teacher at a rural school – 11 June 2004)

The approach for teaching initial literacy skills that the teachers said they use in their classes is similar to the approach they are trained to use during their initial teacher training programmes as alluded to earlier. Therefore, students transfer the skills-based approach for literacy teaching and learning that they learn in college to their practice in literacy classes in lower primary school. This approach has been in use in this country for many years now. It is, therefore, likely that the developers and implementers (i.e. teacher trainers) of the teacher training language and literacy curriculum are just following the way they, themselves, were trained without critically considering the problems that learners have when they are taught their initial literacy skills through this approach.

On the problems that teachers face when teaching children writing and reading in their classes, there were also a variety of responses were also got. Some these responses were as follows:

- 'The Language problem. Children are used to their language (they speak at home) and it becomes difficult for them to learn in a strange language at school' (Mrs. A.A.N. and Mrs. A.W.N., teachers at a rural school - 26 October, 2004)
- 'No books. Large class size' (Mrs. L.N., teacher at an urban school, 26 October, 2004)
- 'Playful children. Class too big (137 pupils). No classroom.' (Mrs. R.G., teacher at an urban school - 21 October, 2004)
- 'Many pupils come to school without a pencil and an exercise book. Some children absent themselves very often. Large class size (216 children) and individual help is impossible (Mrs. M.M., teacher at a rural school - 15 September, 2004)

These responses do show that teachers of lower primary school classes face a lot of problems when teaching in their classes. These problems range from class sizes which are far too large, lack of classrooms and books, children coming to school without writing materials such as pencils and exercise books, absenteeism and the language problem. These are all genuine problems that may indeed affect learner achievement in literacy. In addition, these responses confirm the findings of the research studies that the IEQ and Save the Children Federation carried out in this country. For instance, on non availability of books Kamangira (2001) also found that most schools in the districts where the IEQ was carrying out research on quality of education which children receive at classroom level did not have books. Similarly, Namathaka et al (2000) found that pupils' as well as teachers' absenteeism was high in the Save the Children Federation's areas of intervention.

4.3.2.2 Languages for literacy development in Standards 1 and 2

One of the sub-themes that were used for analyzing the data that was collected on languages for literacy development in lower primary school classes was the language that the majority of children speak in sampled classes. On this, two teachers reported that the

majority of children speak Chichewa. Two other teachers, however, reported that the majority of children in their classes speak other local languages (Ciyao in a Standard 1 class at Mchengawedi School and Citumbuka and Citonga in a Standard 1 class at Kalambwe School). However, there was agreement among all the teachers on the languages that they use for initial literacy skills acquisition. These were Chichewa and English.

On the reasons why their children are taught initial literacy skills through languages that they do not speak at home, they all quickly attributed this to the current language policy which dictates that all children in the country should initially be taught through Chichewa and then English and that these two languages should be studied as subjects at school. However, teachers who teach in schools where children do not speak Chichewa and English at home reported that their children struggle a great deal to learn to write and read through two unfamiliar languages.

4.3.2.3 Resources and environments for literacy development

As already alluded to, resources used for literacy development in lower primary school classes was another theme that was used for analyzing the data collected from teachers. On this theme teachers mentioned books, charts and cards as some of the instructional materials that they use when teaching children to write and read in their classes. They also mentioned that pictures, drawings, real objects, real product printed names, backs of trees and coloured resources as some of the locally available resources that they use in the development of literacy skills in their classes. Of these, the following were mentioned by the majority of teachers as some of the resources that children like most in class: word cards, sentence cards and the chalkboard.

On the sub-theme of instructional materials that children seem to find most difficult, the majority of teachers mentioned books. A survey of the Chichewa books for Standard 1, however, showed that the content is very simple. Most of the work in this book is largely at letter, syllable and word levels. There are a few tasks towards the end of the book that are devoted to sentence and paragraph levels (see Appendix 4). Therefore, this researcher

is of the opinion that this dislike for books could not be because of the level of difficulty of the content in the books, but rather because of the fact that most schools do not have adequate quantities of textbooks for learners. As if this was not enough this researcher also observed that children at all the schools in the sample did not have an opportunity to take books home. Therefore, they may not be used to the fact that people in the literate world do not read from the chalkboard but books and other printed materials.

There was no agreement, however, among teachers on the sub-theme of resources for literacy skills development that they would like to have in their classes. The following were the resources that the teachers said they require in their literacy classes:

Resource	No. of teachers who mentioned it
Textbooks	4 teachers
Illustrated books	1 teachers
Word cards	3 teachers
Syllable cards	1 teacher
Other reading materials	1 teacher

Although the requirements vary from one teacher to the other, one thing that these results show is that teachers of lower primary school classes are in dire need of a variety of reading resources for their learners to be equipped with literacy skills. This fits in well with Smith's (1979) proposition already alluded to about children learning to read through reading, just as they learn to speak through speaking and to write through writing. However the researcher feels that teachers lack creativity in adapting, making and using locally available print materials. Also, they lack skills in adapting, making and using storybooks of their own.

4.3.2.4 Assessment

A fourth and final theme that was used to analyse the data that was collected from the Standard 1 teachers on the effectiveness of approaches used for literacy teaching in lower primary school classes was assessment. On this a variety of responses was also collected as follows:

Response	No. of teachers who gave the response
Continuous assessment	3 teachers
Term tests	2 teachers

Of the teachers who said they use continuous assessment, one said that they assess them every fortnight while the other two reported that they assess them every day. However, they did not elaborate how they assess these learners and this researcher did not observe them conducting the assessment. Also, this researcher did not see any evidence of records kept on the achievement that learners were making in literacy in the sampled classes. Teachers who reported that they use end of term tests, mentioned class sizes as the main problem that makes it difficult for them to assess their learners on a continuous basis. They reported that it would have been better to assess the learners frequently but this is not done because of the big class sizes. The format of the tests in Standard 1 involves copying words and sentences, and reading syllables and words from syllable and sentence cards. The researcher did not see any clear difference between these tests and the lessons. What the teachers reported as tests were as a matter of fact the same as the lessons.

The other area that the researcher investigated was on how teachers use the results of the end-of-term tests and continuous assessment. On end-of-term results there was agreement in the responses of the teachers. They all said that they use the results for grading and positioning of learners at the end of the term. However there were different responses on how the grades from continuous assessment are used. Some teachers said that they use the continuous assessment grades to diagnose specific needs of the learners. Other hand other teachers, said they use the grades from continuous assessment to monitor whether or not children have grasped the skills concepts and knowledge they learned in a topic or lesson. In addition other teachers said that the results from the continuous assessment are also used for grading and positioning learners at the end of a term. However, as already pointed out, this researcher did not any records of continuous assessment grades in all the sampled classes.

Now let us look at the data that was collected from the post-test in literacy skills achievement that the learners took at the end of their academic year.

4.4 Post- test on literacy skills achievement

A variety of data was collected through the test that the researcher administered to the learners in Standard 1 at the end of their school year. This included data on pupil age, repetition, and data on children's mastery of early literacy concepts and the basic literacy skills by the end of their Standard 1 studies. All the data that was collected from the post-test was carefully entered on a computer by the researcher and analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). Therefore, let us now look at the results of this analysis.

4.4 General results

4.4.1 Pupil age

As pointed out in 1.1 above, the official entry age into Standard 1 in Malawi is six years. However, there is no official maximum age limit that is specified for children entering this Standard. Therefore, one of the areas that were investigated in this study was the age range of children who are enrolled in this Standard. Data on pupil age was collected by initially asking the learners themselves to state how old they were and then cross-checking their responses with the information on ages that is recorded in the register of children enrolled in Standard 1 at the school. The results of this investigation are shown in the table below:

Table 4.1: Age range of learners in Standard 1

Pupil age	Percentage of learners
5	5 %
6	25 %
7	35 %
8	5 %
9	5 %
10	20 %
11	5 %

The investigation on pupil age showed that the mean age of learners who were in Standard 1 was 7.60 years. This finding confirms the findings of the study which the Save the Children Federation (SCF) carried out in their areas of intervention in Mangochi district. In this study the SCF also found that children in Standards 2, 3, and 4 were generally a year older than the official school class age (Namathaka et al 2000).

Also, as shown in Table 1 above the results showed that the age range of the learners that were included in the sample was between five and eleven years. Five years was the youngest whereas eleven was the oldest pupil age in the sampled children. What these results seem to suggest is that it is likely that some children are starting the Standard 1 class as early as 5 years of age, which according to the current primary school entry age policy is under-age. The investigation also shows that there are over-age children who are enrolled in Standard 1 who sit side by side with the under-age as well as the correct-age children. These results also confirm results from the other studies that were done in other parts in this country (Chilora, 2004) in which it was found that primary schools were enrolling under-age and over-age children in Standard 1.

The presence of both the under-age and over-age children in Standard 1 has implications for classroom practice that also affect the overall approach that is finally used for literacy teaching and learning at this tender stage of development. One of the challenges that the Standard 1 teacher has is that of selecting appropriate methodologies for literacy teaching and learning for the over-age and the under-age children alike. It is, therefore, more than likely that in a class of this wide age range variation certain age-group children might be delayed or rushed-up when the teacher is trying to reach a balance between the methodologies that are suitable for the under-age, the correct-age and those that are suitable for the over-age children in a literacy class.

4.4.2 Repetition in Standard 1

The number of years that a child stays in one class before moving on to the next class was another area that was investigated in this study. This was basically done by asking the learners themselves the number of years they had repeated Standard 1. This information

was cross-checked with their class teacher's records just to make sure that it was correct and valid. The results of this investigation are shown in table 2 below.

Table 4.2: Number of years learners repeat Standard 1

Number of years learners repeat Standard 1	Percentage of learners repeating Standard 1
1	25 %
2	60 %
3	5 %
4	5 %
5	5 %

The results of this investigation revealed that the mean number of years children were in Standard 1 was 2.05 years. Also, as shown in the table 4.2, the results of the investigation suggest that the minimum number of years children repeated Standard 1 was one year whereas the maximum was 5 years. However, the study did not investigate the reasons why children were repeating Standard 1. This researcher suspects that this could partly be a result of underachievement of learners in literacy skills as a result of using a strange language and inappropriate approaches for literacy development.

These findings confirm findings from the other research studies that were done on lower primary school classes (Chilora 2004; Chilora and Mehazime 2005) and reports in the basic educational statistics (Ministry of Education Science and Technology, 2000) which also reveal massive repetition of children between Standards 1 and 4.

4.5 Results on literacy skills achievement

Achievement of literacy skills in Standard 1 after one year of instruction was the other area that was investigated in the study. On this area the researcher investigated children's mastery of the early literacy concepts and the basic literacy skills. Data on these areas were collected through giving the learners a test on early literacy concepts and basic literacy skills. Therefore, let us now look at how this data was analysed and the results.

4.5.1 Early literacy concepts

The investigation on early literacy skills as already alluded to in Chapter 3 centred on children's familiarity and mastery of concepts about print (see Tompkins, 2003 for more details) such as book directional concepts (e.g. showing the front and back of a book), print directional concepts (e.g. showing the direction of print in a word, across a line, and across several lines) and letter, word and page number concepts (e.g. copying or showing letters and words on a page, turning to the first page or indeed any page number in the book). An additional early literacy concept that was also investigated was children's abilities to copy letters. The following were the results of this investigation

4.5.1.1 Concepts about print

During the post-test, learners were given six tasks on the concepts about print using a Chichewa textbook of their grade level. Two of these tasks were on book directional concepts, the other two were on print direction within a word and within a line and several lines, and the remaining two tasks were on letter and word concepts in a line and on word boundaries. Each child in the sample was given a book and asked to demonstrate his or her awareness of the basic concepts about print. The results of this investigation are shown in table 4.3 below.

Table 4.3: Mastery of the basic concepts about print

Number of concepts correct	Percentage of learners
0	20 %
1	25 %
2	30 %
4	10 %
6	15 %

As shown in the table above, the majority of learners (75 percent) were not familiar with the basic concepts about print at the close of their year one studies at primary school. The majority of these learners could not tell the front and back of a book of their grade level, the direction of print in their books and they had no basic concepts about word

boundaries in a line. However, most of the learners had some basic letter concepts especially vowels.

Although this study did not investigate in detail whether learners use books in class and take them home after class, this researcher strongly suspects that this dismal performance on the basic concepts about print can be attributed to learners' lack of regular exposure and interaction with books. As Tompkins (2003) rightly argues, learners need regular exposure to print for them to 'own' the printed words. Some research studies, according to Tompkins (2003: 10) suggest that learners need to read a word 4 to 14 times before they can claim its ownership. However, this form of assessment may pose some problems especially in multilingual settings in which printed materials are always hard to come by and learners are being denied the right to acquire initial literacy skills in their familiar languages. This is because children in these settings have the difficult tasks of learning the target language for literacy acquisition before learning reading and writing in the strange language, both of which are quite demanding. Therefore, because of this children may be required to read a word for probably more than 14 times before they 'own' it. However, this is an area that still requires further research in multilingual settings

4.5.1.2 Copying letters

Copying letters was another early literacy concept that was assessed. This concept was included in the assessment because the approach that is currently used for teaching reading and writing in Chichewa in Standard 1 insists that learners learn to write individual letters before they can write a combination of these letters at syllable and word levels. Two methods were used for assessing learners' ability to copy letters. The first was through asking them to write their names. If pupils wrote their names correctly it was assumed that they were able to copy letters. However, if they failed to write their names they were given a chance to copy the first letters of their names or other words. This investigation showed that the majority of learners (90 percent) were able to copy letters correctly. However, on its own this result is still insignificant because in the literate world people do not write in single letters whenever they want to communicate with others.

Generally the results on the assessment of early literacy concepts (see Table 4.3) show that many children failed to acquire these concepts after being at school for one year. For instance, over 75 percent of the learners in the sample completed the year with little knowledge about book and print direction. In addition there were still some children (10 percent) who could not copy a single letter. What this means is that the approach that is used for teaching literacy in Chichewa may not be helping the children to learn to read and write.

4.5.2. Basic literacy skills

Besides the early literacy concepts, learners were given some basic writing and reading tasks in Chichewa. These tasks included writing names, words and simple stories, and reading words and simple stories. All these tasks were based on the content of the curriculum for Standard I Chichewa.

4.5.3 Writing

The ability to write legibly and meaningfully is an important communication skill in the literate world. Writing helps literate people to communicate and share thoughts, feelings innovations and cultural practices with other people. Therefore, the ability to write words and simple and short stories was one of the basic literacy skills that were tested. These writing tasks included the ability to write and read correctly their own names, other familiar Chichewa words and simple and short sentences and stories. Therefore, let us now look at the results of this investigation.

4.5.3.1 Write name

As alluded to in the preceding paragraph, learners were asked to write their names on a piece of paper that was provided by this researcher. This investigation revealed that the majority of the learners (80 percent) completed their year I studies without being able to write their names. This result confirms the results from other research studies that were carried out in lower primary school classes (Chilora, 2004; Mchazime and Chilora 2003; Chilora and Harris, 2001, Namathaka et al, 1999) in which it was found that children

were completing classes and were being promoted to higher classes without being able to write their names.

4.5.3.2 Write Chichewa words

Besides writing their names, children were also asked to write Chichewa words which they had learnt during their year one studies and which they were familiar with. The design of this task was that if learners wrote ten words and more they were going to be asked to write a simple story at paragraph level. The results of this investigation are presented below.

Table 4.4: Number of Chichewa words written

Number of words written	Percentage of children
0 words	85 %
3 words	5 %
4 words	10 %

As shown in this table, the majority of the learners completed their Standard 1 literacy studies without developing any writing skills at word level. The results also show that the maximum number of words that the children were able to write was 4. In addition, the results also show that all the learners who were included in the sample could not write at sentence and paragraph levels.

What these results show is that children are not learning literacy through the skills-based approach that is currently being used in our classes. Normally people do not write in individual words but in sentences. Therefore if these children were indeed learning literacy they should have been writing at sentence and simple story level.

4.5.4 Reading

Reading is one of the important skills which people in the literate world use in order to acquire information (Grellet, 1981: 4; Gould, 1983), get a message (Nuttall, 1982: 4), learn skills and knowledge about new developments taking place in their areas and other parts of the world and to extend their cultural backgrounds (Staige, 1979). At school

reading is one of the skills that learners use in order to acquire knowledge in other subject areas. In addition, the ability to read is one of the basic indicators that many people, including the illiterate parents, use in order to assess whether their children are learning at school or not. Therefore, in this study learners were given reading tasks. These tasks were at three levels, namely, word, sentence and paragraph levels. The purpose of these tasks was to find out what the learners were able to read after completing their Standard 1 literacy studies at primary school. All the words and the short paragraph that were given to the learners were curriculum based and were taken from the course book of their grade level. The results of this investigation are discussed below.

4.5.4.1 Read words

Learners were given 20 words to read. As alluded to in the previous paragraph all these words were taken from their course books. When reading these words the researcher assessed one pupil at a time. Each pupil was asked to look at a word and read it without any assistance from the researcher. The results of this investigation are presented in table 4.5 below.

Table 4.5 Number of Chichewa words read

Number of words read	Percentage of learners who read the words
0 words	75 %
1 word	5 %
2 words	5 %
4 words	5 %
16 words	5 %
17 words	5 %

As shown in this table the majority of learners in the sample could not read a single word from the list of words that they were given. This is in spite of the fact that these learners were completing their Standard 1 literacy studies. These are the children who are likely to be promoted to Standard 2 in 2005.

These results confirm the results that were obtained from a baseline study that the Malawi Ministry of Education carried out on Standard 1 children prior to the implementation of the Breakthrough to Literacy (BTL) Pilot Study in two districts in this country. In this study which was carried out three months prior to the end of the Standard 1 academic year, Ministry of Education found out that 86.9 percent of the learners that were included in the sample could not read at word level (Chilora, 2004). Only, 10 percent of the learners in the sample were able to read more than 5 words in Chichewa. This is a pathetic situation especially considering that nearly all these learners are likely to be promoted to Standard 2 where they will be expected to read longer texts.

4.5.4.2 Read a paragraph

Besides reading words, children were also asked to read a paragraph that was taken from a book of their grade level. In this task, children were asked to read this paragraph aloud. As each child was reading, the researcher crossed out any word that he or she was unable to read. After reading the paragraph each child was asked four comprehension questions on it in order to find out whether they understood the text they had read or not.

When analyzing the results of this investigation the researcher used mastery levels. This form of comparing learner achievement in literacy was adapted from the form of analysis that the IEQ Project used in its longitudinal study in three districts in this country. The researcher adapted this form of analysis so that he can compare the results he got with the results that the IEQ Project got during its longitudinal study. Three mastery levels were computed from the data that the researcher had collected. These were non mastery level for children who read between 0 to 30 percent of the words in the text, partial mastery level for children who read between 31 and 79 percent of the words in the text and full mastery level for children who read between 80 and 100 percent of the words in the text. The results of this investigation are presented in table 4.6 below.

Table 4.6: Levels of mastery

Mastery level	Percentage of learners
Non mastery (0 – 30 percent)	90 %
Partial mastery (31 – 79 percent)	5 %
Full mastery (80 – 100) percent	5 %

As shown in the table above, the majority of children who were included in the sample completed their standard 1 literacy studies before they were able to read texts of their grade level. The majority of these children are likely to be promoted to Standard 2 where they will be confronted with texts that are slightly longer and more difficult than the ones they read in Standard 1. These results further confirm what I have pointed out in the preceding paragraphs that the part to whole (i.e. skills-based) approach that is currently being used in lower primary school classes in this country is not helping learners to acquire literacy skills

4.6 Discussion of findings

There are several findings that this study is giving us on initial literacy teaching and learning practices that are followed in lower primary school classes in this country. One of these is on the approach that is used for literacy skills acquisition in lower primary school classes. The evidence that the researcher collected from the language and literacy teacher training materials (i.e. language and literacy college syllabuses, students' handbook and trainers' manuals), interview schedules with the teacher trainers and teachers and from classroom observation of the literacy teaching training sessions at St Joseph's college suggest that students are trained in how to use the skills-based approach only for initial literacy teaching and learning in lower primary school classes. This approach involves teaching learners the smallest units of a language first such as letter sounds, syllables and words. These linguistic units are taught to children in an incremental fashion. What this means is that learners cannot learn syllables until they

have mastered vowels. Similarly, they learn words only after they have mastered syllables. It is only after they have mastered these smallest linguistic units that the learners are now taught to read and write simple sentences and stories.

This evidence implies that students transfer the same approach for literacy teaching and learning that they learn in college during their initial training to their practices in literacy classrooms in lower primary schools.

However, as already pointed out in chapter 2, this researcher feels that the skills-based approach that is currently being used for literacy teaching and learning in lower primary school classes is a step backwards for the young literacy learners. This is because these children come to school when they are already speaking in sentences and are telling stories in their own languages. Therefore, for them to be taken to the letter and syllabic stage when learning to read is like taking them back to their early childhood stage when they were learning to produce sounds of parts of words such as 'ba ..., ba-aba, da..., da-adi, ma..., mu-ama', that is, to the babbling stage. Even when children are at this stage in their language acquisition, their mothers do not respond or speak to them in letters, or syllables. Instead, they speak to them in whole sentences that carry meaning. This researcher is, therefore, of the opinion that this approach is likely to delay children in acquiring the basic literacy skills in lower primary school classes which they will need for them to succeed in their studies as they progress to upper classes.

The second finding that we get from the study is on the creation of print-rich environments in the classrooms and the school campus for effective literacy skills acquisition. The evidence collected from classroom observations and interview schedules with language and literacy teacher trainers at St Joseph's teachers' college suggest that students are given training in how to create and make use of print-rich environments in their classes for literacy skills acquisition by the children. The teacher trainers reported that students are trained to create print-rich environments in their classes using resources that are locally available in the area around the school. Also, as pointed out in chapter 3, the trainers reported that they train students in how to develop and use suitable readers

for young learners in their classes. However, apart from the few displays in the classrooms at letter and word levels the researcher did not see any evidence of students' own written work, such as storybooks that students develop during their initial training course, being displayed in the classroom. In addition, there was no evidence of a print-rich environment created by the trainers in collaboration with their students in the college campus.

Therefore, the researcher is of the opinion that the creation of print-rich environments seems to be just an academic exercise that ends within the borders of the language and literacy classroom at college. This is because the researcher observed that the students who were trained at St Joseph's teachers' college did not transfer any of this practice to their literacy classes in lower primary school classes. All the literacy classes that the researcher visited at rural and urban schools had blank walls (see Appendix 1). There were not even time tables, just nothing. However, considering that children only read one text book the whole year per class, the researcher is of the opinion that the creation of print-rich environments in literacy classes should not be an option but a must for all lower primary school classes. As already pointed out, this is because all skills are learned and mastered through practice. If a teacher wants to create good and effective readers in his or her class then the children must be given an opportunity to read. Children can only have this opportunity if there are print materials to interact with on a regular basis.

The third finding that we get from the study is on languages for literacy development. The interview and classroom observation schedules showed that Chichewa and English are the only languages that are used for literacy acquisition in lower primary school classes. The researcher observed that Chichewa was being used for initial literacy development in Standard 1 in all the schools that were included in the sample including those schools where nearly all the children do not speak Chichewa at home. Literacy through English is introduced a year later. Reports that the researcher got from teacher interviews with the classroom teachers suggest that children who speak other local languages at home face a lot of problems when learning to read and write in Chichewa and English when they start school in Standard 1. As has already been pointed out in

Chapter 2, language can be a gateway to success. However, it can also be a major barrier to early literacy skills acquisition especially if a strange language is used for acquiring these skills during the first years of primary education. It is in light of this that the researcher feels that in multilingual settings such as the one we have in this country, children should be given an opportunity to acquire literacy skills through a familiar language preferably a language that they speak at home. This is their birth right and it should not be taken away from them on the pretext of very flimsy reasons.

An additional insight that the study is giving us is related to learner achievement in basic literacy skills. The evidence that the researcher got from the post-test on literacy skills that was given to children at the end of their Standard 1 studies shows that learners are not making much progress in literacy skills development, let alone becoming readers and writers. In lower primary school classes through the skills-based approach that is currently being used. The majority of these children complete the first year of their literacy studies before they have mastered any basic literacy skills such the ability to write their own names, and to communicate simple messages to others in sentences through writing. Also, the majority of these children cannot read simple words and texts of their grade level. The researcher is, therefore, of the opinion that these children are likely to be promoted to other classes at the end of the year even though they have not yet mastered the basic literacy skills which they need for them to succeed in Standard 2.

The results on learner achievement in literacy skills development seem to confirm the results which the IEQ project obtained in their longitudinal study in three districts in this country. In this study the IEQ Project assessed learner achievement in literacy through Chichewa and English for a period of four years. The project began to assess Standards 2, 3, and 4 children in 1999. These children were followed in 2000, 2001 and 2002 in their classes. In all these years the project found that many children were being promoted from one class to the other before they had mastered not only a text of their grade level in Chichewa but also texts of lower grade levels. The results in English were equally bad (Chilora and Mchazime, 2003). The IEQ studies also revealed that some of the learners who had been promoted to as high as Standard 4 could not write their own names.

What these results imply is that learners are taking a long time (more than twelve months) to acquire the basic literacy skills in lower primary school classes which they need to succeed in their studies in upper primary school classes. It is, therefore, highly likely that the skills-based approach which is currently being used for literacy teaching and learning is delaying learners from making a breakthrough to literacy as early as possible in their studies. This researcher therefore proposes that there should an overhaul to the approach that is currently being used for literacy development in lower primary school classes. Chapter 5 discusses these proposals and makes recommendations for action.

University of Cape Town

Chapter 5 Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusion

This study began with a specification and description of the problem that is being investigated. I said that the main reason that prompted me to carry out this study arose from the findings of the research studies that have been carried out in lower primary school classes in this country. These studies have consistently shown that many learners complete the first three or four years of their primary education without being able to read, not only texts of their grade levels, but also those of lower grade levels. I further said that these studies also reveal that some of these children fail to write their own names after being at primary school for four or more years. However, these findings do not state reasons why there is this dismal failure in children's achievement of basic literacy skills during the first four years of primary education in this country. Therefore, my hypothesis was that the low levels of literacy skills development in lower primary school in Malawi is a result of inappropriate approaches to literacy teaching and learning that are used during the initial three to four years of primary education.

In order to have a clear understanding of the phenomenon that I was investigating, I presented in chapter 2, a review of the related literature on the concepts of approaches, the nature of literacy and literacy teaching and learning, and of early childhood. This review provided me with a framework for understanding the concept of literacy and the approaches that might be used for literacy teaching and learning to succeed. Also, the review assisted me to develop the instruments that I used when collecting the data for this study.

The results of the study are presented in chapter 4. These results seem to confirm my hypothesis. The part-to-whole approach that is currently being used for literacy teaching and learning does not seem to be assisting the learners in lower primary school classes to acquire basic literacy skills at the end of an academic year. The approach is retrogressive and is delaying the children from learning the necessary literacy skills that they need for them to succeed in other subjects in their classes and in subsequent classes. The problem that is created by the part-to-whole approach that is used for literacy learning and

teaching in this country is compounded by the fact that some learners are learning their initial literacy skills through a language that is strange to them and in environments that are not conducive to literacy development.

As we have already observed, the level of literacy achievement is ultimately a key to the socio-economic development of any society. A nation's prosperity, well-being and its standing among other nations in the world largely relies on the levels of literacy attainment by its citizens (Dombey, 2004: 1). Therefore, the zero or very low literacy achievement status by learners in lower primary school classes cannot be left as it is forever in the continued hope that this nation will develop socially and economically. Some action has to be taken by the policy makers and implementers in order to reverse the current situation that exists in our schools and to improve children's low levels of literacy achievement. Therefore, let us now turn to some recommendations on the actions that need to be taken by all that are concerned with the improvement of learners' literacy skills acquisition in our schools.

5.2 Proposed recommendations

In order to improve the current status of low levels of literacy attainment in lower primary school classes, there is a need for policy makers and implementers to have a correct perception of the concept of literacy. Literacy should not be perceived just as a task of decoding letters, syllables or words. As a matter of fact, there is more to it. Learners also need to comprehend what they read (Nation and Snowling, 2004: 342) and other people need to understand what the learners write. In other words, communication has to take the central place in any written discourse. Even during the early days of literacy learning children have to understand that when people write or read, they do so because they want to communicate with another person. When they communicate, they do not do it through isolated letters and syllables but through sentences that carry meaningful messages. Therefore, the approach to literacy teaching and learning that I propose should be adopted in lower primary school classes, should be the one that promotes meaning making with the printed symbols and not just barking at print as is the case at the moment.

Although letters and syllables make words and words make sentences when combined, an approach to literacy teaching and learning that insists on beginning with letters and syllables before learning to write and read at sentence and whole language levels, does not assist learners to perceive literacy learning as a process of making meaning with the printed symbols or, in other words, as a process of communication or self expression. This is because letters and syllables on their own do not have any meaning. Therefore, no one can communicate to the other using letters or syllables only. It is for this reason that I would like to propose that the approach to literacy teaching and learning that needs to be adopted should be the one that focuses on the kind of discourse that gives meaning to the learner, that is, on discourse that helps the learner to receive, share or send messages. In this proposed approach parts of the language should be taught in the context of meaningful use or production of texts. The parts of the language should not per se be the main focus of literacy instructions.

As pointed out in chapter 2 (see pages 25 and 26) children, in nearly all communities, are already emerging speakers, readers and writers by the time they start schools. These children can draw objects of different shapes, which in itself, is a form of writing. Also, they have invented graphic symbols which they use to represent ideas and messages they share with others. They have their own way of interpreting the symbols that they use. In other words, they can read these symbols and give them meaning. In view of this, it is important that the approaches that are selected for early literacy teaching and learning in lower primary school classes should recognise, support and build on the skills that children bring into the literacy classroom. This will eventually help the young writers and readers to construct or build the written language system for themselves.

Literacy learning is essentially language learning. For the children to master and use the language there is a need for them to learn its vocabulary, sentence patterns, their meanings and the social and cultural contexts in which the language is used. Children master the vocabulary and sentence patterns of a language when they are exposed to them on regular basis using appropriate social and cultural contexts. Story telling/reading and songs/rhymes are some of the tools that provide learners natural social and cultural

contexts for language use. Also, they provide the learners with an opportunity to learn new vocabulary and sentence structures and a forum for using and internalizing them. Therefore, story telling/reading and singing and performing songs/rhymes should be accorded a central place in initial literacy programmes.

As has been pointed out in the previous chapters, learning needs to start from what the learners already know before moving on to what they do not know or from concrete to abstract. In literacy classes the only thing that children already know when they begin to write and read is carried in the language that they bring from their homes. It is therefore, very important that learners learn their initial literacy through a language that they are familiar with. When literacy is learned through familiar languages the learner has a good chance of comprehending what they read and write, thus, literacy learning becomes a meaning making endeavor.

For a learner to learn to read, he/she must practise reading. Similarly, for them to learn to write they must practise writing. There is no shortcut to the acquisition of these literacy skills apart from practising. Therefore, the environments in which literacy teaching and learning takes place in the class and within the school campus should be rich with print materials. This is important especially in this country in which the majority of people are illiterate and print materials are hardly available in the homes of many learners.

The part-to-whole approach to literacy teaching has been in use in this country for a considerable period of time. However, as reported in chapter 1 and other parts of this study, the various studies that have been conducted on literacy achievement in lower and upper primary school classes in this country have consistently shown that learners take many years (four years or more) to acquire basic literacy skills. It is in light of this that I would like to propose that the Ministry of Education in Malawi should investigate the effectiveness of using the whole language/emergent literacy approaches in lower primary school classes. This could initially take the form of a pilot in a few selected schools with a view to adopting it and rolling it out to all the schools in the country.

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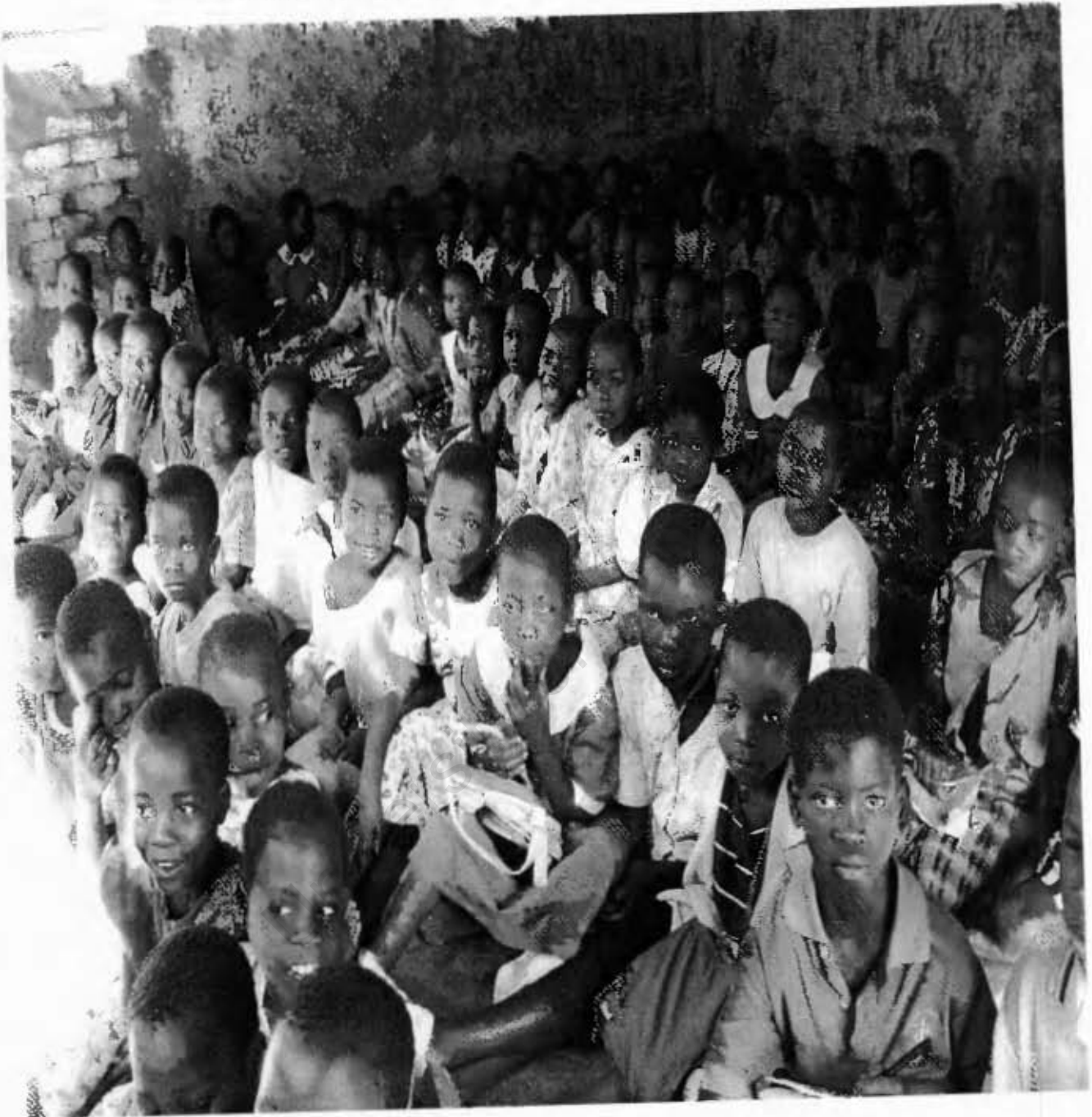
APPENDIX 1

**CLASSROOM ORGANISATION IN A STANDARD 1 CLASS AT KABWABWA
PRIMARY SCHOOL IN THE CITY OF LILONGWE**

University of Cape Town

APPENDIX I

CLASSROOM ORGANISATION IN A STANDARD 1 CLASS AT KABWABWA
PRIMARY SCHOOL IN THE CITY OF LILONGWE



APPENDIX 2
INTERVIEW SCHEDULE WITH TEACHERS

University of Cape Town

APPENDIX 2

INTERVIEW SCHEDULE WITH TEACHERS

Name _____ School _____
Sex _____ Standard _____
Qualification _____ Year of qualification _____
Date of interview _____

A. Teaching literacy in Standards 1 and 2

1) Can you describe what you do when teaching children in your class to read and write?

2) Why do you teach them in this way?

3) What problems do you have when teaching reading and writing in your class?

4) How do you overcome these problems?

B. Languages for literacy development in Standard 1 and 2

5) Which languages do most of the children in your class speak at home?

6) What other languages are spoken by children in your class?

7) In which language(s) do you teach your children to learn to read and write?

8) Why do you use these languages?

C. Resources and environment for literacy development

9) Which instructional materials do you use for teaching children in your class to read and write?

10) What other locally available resources do you use for literacy development in your class?

11) Which instructional materials do most children in your class enjoy most?

12) Which instructional materials do they seem to find difficult?

13) Which other instructional materials would you like to have for literacy teaching in your class?

D. Assessment

14) Can you describe how you assess pupils in your literacy class?

APPENDIX 3

INTERVIEW SCHEDULE WITH TEACHER TRAINERS

University of Cape Town

APPENDIX 3

INTERVIEW SCHEDULE WITH TEACHER TRAINERS

Name _____ College _____
Sex _____ Classes teaching _____
Qualification _____ Year of qualification _____
Date of interview _____

A. Approaches for literacy teaching

1) Can you describe what you do when training literacy teachers for lower primary school?

2) Which theories about learning inform your training?

3) Why do train them in this way?

4) What is the role of story telling/story reading in your early literacy teacher training?

5) What problems do you experience when training literacy teachers for lower primary school?

6) How do you overcome these problems?

B. Languages for literacy development

7) From which parts of Malawi do most of the students you train come from?

8) Which languages do your students speak at home?

9) Which languages do you train your teachers to use for literacy development in early primary school classes?

10) Why do you use these languages for literacy training in lower primary school classes?

11) What form(s) of language (oral/written) is the training of literacy teachers conducted in?

C. Environment for literacy development in lower primary school?

12) What environments for literacy teaching and learning do you train literacy teachers for lower primary school to create in their classes?

13) Why do you train them to create this kind of environment in their classes?

D. Materials development

What training do you give your teachers for using, adapting and/or making materials for literacy teaching?

Appendix 4
Lesson observation schedule

University of Cape Town

Classroom Observation Schedule

Teacher's name _____ Sex _____ School _____
 Class _____ Subject _____
 College _____ Year of training _____
 Observer's name _____ Date _____

Observation item	Rating				comments
	Not done	Satisfactory	Good	outstanding	
PLANNING TO TEACH					
1 Suitability of objectives					
a) objectives are specific					
b) objectives are measurable					
c) objectives are attainable					
2 Instructional approaches to literacy planned for the lesson					
a) Syllabic					
b) Phonic					
c) Whole language					
d) Balanced approach					
LESSON DELIVERY					
1 Classroom seating plan					
a) Learners are sitting in groups					
b) Learners are sitting in pairs					
c) Learners are sitting as individually					
2 Lesson introduction					
a) From known to unknown					
b) Learners are involved					
c) A story is read/told					
3 Instructional approaches to literacy used in the lesson					
a) Focus is on syllables and then whole words					
b) Focus is on phonics					
c) Focus is on the whole language					
d) Focus is on the balanced approach					
3 Language used for literacy development					
a) Uses learner's language of play					
b) Uses Chichewa, the national language					
c) Uses English					
d) All learners understand the language used					

Observation item	Rating				comments
	Not done	Satisfactory	Good	outstanding	
4 Environment for literacy learning					
a) A variety of print materials are displayed					
b) Learners' written work is displayed					
c) Displays are at an appropriate level to the height of learners					
5 Materials used for literacy learning					
a) Materials are available					
b) Learners have access to the materials					
c) Locally available materials are used in the literacy lesson					
6 Closure of the lesson					
a) Summaries the main points of the lesson					
b) Uses questions assess understanding of the main points					
c) Learners are involved in the lesson conclusion					

Appendix 5
Post-test on literacy skills development

University of Cape Town

Post- test on literacy skills achievement

A guide for data collection

Materials needed

Pencil

Chichewa summary sheet

A flat writing surface

Section 1: General information

Introduce yourself and chat with the child a little to make him or her feel comfortable. Tell the child your name. Say that you are going to ask him or her a few questions, but that this is not a test. Then ask the child these introductory questions in Chichewa:

1. How old are you? _____
2. Were you at this school last year? Yes _____ No _____
3. How many years have you been in Standard 1? _____
(Score: Record the number of years)

Section 2: Writing

Instructions

Provide the child with a piece of lined paper, a pencil and clipboard to write on. Say to the child:

I want o see how many Chichewa words you can write.

Then ask the child these questions. If the child does not understand, repeat the question.

4. Write your name for me on this paper.

(Score: 1 point for writing and reading the name correctly, 0 for failing to write it.)

If the child CANNOT write his or her name, check if he or she can copy some letters. Print the first letter of his or her name. Say:

5. Look at this letter. Please copy this letter.

(Score: 1 point for copying the letter correctly, 0 for copying it incorrectly)

If the child writes his or her name ask him or her to write any Chichewa words that he or she knows. Say:

6. Now write any Chichewa words you know for me. For example names of objects at home, names of other people or animals.

(Score: Count the number of words written and read correctly.)

Give the child 5 minutes to write the words. If the child writes 10 words or more, ask him or her to write a simple paragraph describing his or her friend on the paper already provided to him or her. Say:

7. Now I want you to write the name of your friend. Write about your friend likes and what he or she does not like. What games does he or she play? What song does he or she likes?

(Score: Count the number of words written in the paragraph a [fluency] and number of words spelt correctly [spelling].)

Section 3: Concepts about print

Instructions

Give the child a Chichewa book for Standard 1. Then say:

8. Show me the front of this book. Which is the back of the book?

(Score: 1 point for correctly pointing to the back and front of the book, 0 for incorrectly doing it.)

Give the child a Chichewa book for Standard 2. Ask him or her to open a book at page 20. Say:

9. Open the book at page 20.

(Score: 1 point for opening the at page 20, 0 for failing to open at this page.)

If the child fails to open the book at page 20, open it for him or her. Then say:

10. I want you to read on this page. Where do you start from? Where do you go to next?

(Score: 1 point for pointing at the starting point, 0 for failing to do so.)

11 Show me one word on this page. Now show me another word.

(Score: 1 point for pointing to the correct word, 0 for failing to do so.)

Ask the child to point to any letter on the page you have opened. Say:

12. Now show me one letter on this page.

(Score: 1 point for pointing to the letter, 0 for failing to do so correctly.)

Section 4: Reading

Give the child a list of common Chichewa words in Standard 1. Say:

13. I want you to read these words for me.

(Score: Count the number of words read correctly by the child.)

Give the child a Standard 1 Chichewa passage to read. Then say:

14. Now I want you to read this story for me.

(As the child read aloud, cross out (/) any words that he or she reads incorrectly. Also find out how many words he or she reads in a minute. After 1 minute, put a bracket in front of the word (e.g. *Amayi atituma kukagula] zipewa*). Then let the child go on reading until he or she finishes reading the whole story.

(**Score:** Count the number of words the child read in 1 minute and write it in the 'Words read per minute.' Then count all the words read correctly in the passage and write it in the 'Total number of words read correctly'. Finally, calculate the percent of words read correctly in the passage and write in the 'Percent of correct words read'.)

Ask the child questions on the story to find out if he or she understood it. Say:

15. I will now ask you 4 questions on the story you read. Please listen carefully to each question.

(**Score:** Count the number questions correctly answered by the child.)

University of Cape Town

Post- test on literacy skills achievement

Common Chichewa words

ababa

agogo

gule

mutu

boma

gona

sopo

sosa

atate

zipewa

tola

tavala

koka

ziwiri

kusefa

zoyera

bowa

moto

kalulu

galu

University of Cape Town

Post- test on literacy skills achievement

Name: _____ School: _____
Standard: _____ District: _____
Pupil sex: *Male/Female* (cycle one)

Standard 1 Chichewa Reading Passage (Mutu 26, masamba 50 ndi 51)

Amayi atituma kukagula zipewa.	4
Atiuza kukagula zipewa ziwiri.	8
Tagula zipewa zoyera.	12
Ife tizivala zipewa zoyera.	15

Mafunso

- 1 Ndani watuma anawa? (amayi awo = 1)
- 2 Kodi waatuma chiyani?(kukagula zipewa = 1)
- 3 Kodi agula zipewa zingati? (zoyera = 1)
- 4 Nanga agula zipewa zingati? (ziwiri = 1)

Number of words read per minute	
Total number of words read	
Percent of correct words read #/15	
Number of comprehension questions correct	

Appendix 6
Correspondences

University of Cape Town

Malawi Institute of Education,
P.O. Box 50,
Domasi,
Malawi.
19th March, 2004.

The Secretary for Education Science and Technology
P/Bag 328
Lilongwe 3
Malawi
(Attention: Director – EMAS)

Through:
The Director,
Malawi Institute of Education,
P.O. Box 50,
Domasi.

Application supported
31
2004

Dear Sir,

**Permission to carry out research for a Masters degree in
Education**

I am reading for a Masters degree in Education at the University of Cape Town, in South Africa. As a partial fulfilment of the requirement for this degree, I am required to carry out research on an agreed relevant topic. The topic which I am investigating is in the area of 'Teacher training for early literacy development'. This study requires me to observe some lessons in teacher training colleges (TTCs) and in primary schools.

The purpose of writing you, Sir, is therefore, to request permission for me to carry out this research at Lilongwe Teachers' Training College and in some primary schools in Lilongwe Urban, Lilongwe Rural West and Lilongwe Rural East districts between May and June 2004.

Yours faithfully,

HG Chilora

CC: Professor Neville Alexander, PRAESA, University of Cape Town
Carole Bloch, PRAESA, University of Cape Town

Telegrams: MINED LILONGWE
Telephone: (265) 789 422
Fax: (265) 788 064/184

Communications should be addressed to:
The Secretary for Education, Science and Technology



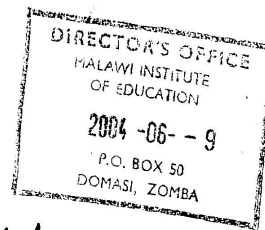
In reply please quote No.:
MINISTRY OF EDUCATION, SCIENCE AND
TECHNOLOGY
PRIVATE BAG 328
CAPITAL CITY
LILONGWE 3
MALAWI

Ref. 1/432/4/1

4th June, 2004

Mr H.G Chilora
Malawi Institute of Education
P.O Box 50, Domasi

THR: THE DIRECTOR,
MALAWI INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
P.O BOX 50, DOMASI



Forwarded
9/06/04

Dear Sir,

PERMISSION TO CARRY OUT RESEARCH FOR A
MASTERS DEGREE IN EDUCATION

I am pleased to inform you that this Ministry has no objection for you to carry out a research for a Masters Degree in Education in Teacher Training Colleges and Primary schools.

I have accordingly prepared a letter of introduction for this purpose which you will show to the institutions you intend to visit as proof of permission given to you to conduct the research.

I wish you well in this exercise.

Yours faithfully

BR Mpando
FOR: SECRETARY FOR EDUCATION SCIENCE AND
TECHNOLOGY

Telegrams: MINED LILONGWE
Telephone: (265) 789 422
Fax: (265) 788 064/184

Communications should be addressed to:
The Secretary for Education, Science and Technology



In reply please quote No.:

MINISTRY OF EDUCATION, SCIENCE AND
TECHNOLOGY
PRIVATE BAG 328
CAPITAL CITY
LILONGWE 3
MALAWI

Ref 1/432/4/1

4th June, 2004

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

LETTER OF INTRODUCTION

The bearer of this note is Mr H.G Chilora whom I write to introduce to you.

Mr Chilora is currently studying for a Masters Degree in Education at the University of Cape Town, in South Africa. As part of his training he is required to carry out a research exercise in the area of "Teacher Training for Early Literacy Development". The details of objectives of the study will be explained by Mr Chilora himself.

In order to assist the officer in his work, this Ministry has authorised him to work in the Teacher Training Colleges and Primary Schools and the purpose of this letter, is therefore to request all those concerned to give Mr Chilora every assistance possible on this research exercise .

Thank you

B.R Mpando
FOR : SECRETARY FOR EDUCATION SCIENCE AND
TECHNOLOGY