



The Educational Experiences of Mature Female Students in Secondary Schools: A Case Study of Kamanzi and Mpando CDSSs, Malawi

Juma Dyless^a, Prof. Victor Mwila^b

^a Department of Education in Education Administration and Management, P.O Box 33008, DMI-St. Eugene University, Zambia

^b Department of Education in Education Administration and Management, P.O Box 33008, DMI-St. Eugene University, Zambia

ABSTRACT :

The presented research study focused on the educational experiences of adult female learners at Kamanzi and Mpando Community Day Secondary Schools (CDSS) in the Lilongwe Central East Education Division in Malawi. Although international and national policies have made commitments for inclusive education, it seems the educational experiences of women aged 20+ years who are returning to secondary education are mainly ignored as they navigate competing domestic, economic, and socio-cultural demands of adult women. Using the lenses of Knowles' Adult Learning Theory and Feminist Theory, the study focused on the motivations for going back to school, challenges faced, and the strategies to cope with those challenges among mature female students. A qualitative case study was chosen as the methodological design of the research and purposive sampling was used to inform participant selection. Semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions were the data collection methods, which were thematically analyzed using NVivo software.

The main findings indicated that motivations were based on the themes of personal empowerment and economic mobility and modelling those aspects for the next generation. Learners experienced difficulties in the areas of domestic responsibilities, financial stressors, stigma, and institutional rigidity, but demonstrated resilience by time management strategies, peer networks, family support, and community supports. Conclusively, mature female learners are active agents who are redefining the construct of gender and enabling intergenerational change. In terms of policy, recommendations included a flexible timetable, financial schemes, learning to teach andragogy, and psychosocial support. The findings underscore the importance of inclusive and age-responsive reforms to create equitable educational environments for all learners.

Keywords: Mature female students; Adult learning; Secondary education; Coping strategies; Malawi; Inclusive education.

1. Introduction

Education is a basic human right and a powerful driver of social, economic advancement in the world. In Africa, education is a key contributor to reducing poverty, enhancing gender equity, and achieving sustainable development. Although progress has been made in expanding access to education for girls and women, women and girls, especially mature learners, continue to encounter barriers to accessing and completing their education. While there has been substantial attention to the experience of school-aged girls, the experience of older women returning to education is under researched. In Malawi, Community Day Secondary Schools (CDSSs) afford women aged 20 years and above an opportunity to return to their education, but the experience is markedly different than that of their younger counterparts. Mature female learners often need to manage education alongside household responsibilities, financial pressures, and cultural expectations outside of school, as well as the stigma of being an older female learner, often traditional school expectations, and limited institutional support (UNESCO, 2021). It is important to consider the motivations and barriers to learning for mature female learners, as well as the adaptations they make in their lives to meet educational goals, to develop inclusive, gender-sensitive, and age-responsive education policy that supports lifelong learning and empowerment of women.

Nomenclature

A	Age (20+ years)
CDSS	Community Day Secondary School
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
NVivo	Qualitative data analysis software

2. Literature Review

Research on mature women students in secondary schools elucidates their unique barriers, motivations, and learning processes that shape their educational experiences across diverse African contexts. In both global and regional terms, education represents a lifelong entitlement, but mature women returning to schooling at twenty years of age and older typically encounter specific barriers that differentiate them from younger student

cohorts. Across a variety of African contexts, cultural norms and economic pressures converge with inflexible modes of institutions to create barriers and opportunities for these learners. In Ghana, for instance, Adu-Yeboah & Forde (2015) found that mature women students were often confronted with stereotypes that they were "too old" to be in school. Women students drew on their lived experiences as forms of resilience and valuable assets for their own learning, in spite of these negative stereotypes. Similarly, in East Africa, studies conducted in Tanzania (Zakayo & Onyango, 2024) reflected how women grappled with a variety of responsibilities with their household roles, employment, learning and academic obligations, which led them to considerable levels of stress and fatigue. Nevertheless, many women persisted in their motivations to provide for their households and be strong role models. In Ethiopia and South Africa, research similarly suggested that patriarchal structures and financial barriers complicated their experiences as learners; while issues of education offered women opportunities to actively respond and resist entrenched inequality.

Instructional approaches are an important aspect of factors that are related to learning outcomes. Knowles' anagogical principles underscore that adult learning is maximized when teaching is participatory, problem-oriented and grounded in lived experiences. However, many of the educational systems within the African context continue to operate as traditional teacher-focused learning systems. Research from Ethiopia and Nigeria both indicated that pedagogies that utilized rote learning and a high coverage of lectures led to older / mature learners being disengaged in their learning, yet pedagogies that included participatory techniques such as story-telling, group projects and experiential learning increased retention and confidence of the learners in their learning. The effectiveness of the instruction also appeared to depend on how well-qualified the facilitator was, as many were ill-prepared to enact an anagogical method of learning. Where teachers were able to adopt learner, needs-based approaches the mature women felt respected and motivated, lending weight to the purported potential of education to transform.

There are still considerable structural and cultural barriers. For many women, poverty, inadequate facilities, and no childcare provisions make accessing school difficult. Furthermore, stigmatizing cultural beliefs, such as that about older learners, and the privileging of males in education, further diminish feelings of confidence and participation in education. From studies in Tanzania and South Africa, older female learners often face ridicule from their peers or are marginalized within the primary culture of the school, which increases feelings of invisibility.

The literature also identifies formidable gaps. Much of the research literature is focused on adolescent return to school after pregnancy, while there has been little attention given to those women aged twenty and above in conventional secondary school settings. Their unique experiences, which might include heavier domestic responsibilities, different social expectations, and adult oriented expectations out of schooling, are not well understood. There is an urgent need for research specific to the context, and this is especially true in Malawi where much of the school system is still designed for adolescents.

3. Methodology

This research utilized a qualitative case study approach to explore the educational experiences of mature female learners attending secondary school. The study focused on Kamanzi and Mpando Community Day Secondary Schools (CDSSs), which are located within the Lilongwe Central East Education Division in Malawi. A case study approach was deemed appropriate for this inquiry as it provides an in-depth and context-specific understanding of "how" and "why" learners navigate their educational experiences, consistent with Yin (2018). The researcher engaged with two schools where mature students learned alongside adolescent learners to identify individual challenges while also capturing collective coping strategies, which is useful for other similar contexts.

The study utilized a population sample of mature female students who were aged 20 years and above in their studies in the two community day schools. The population profile included married women, single mothers, widows, and older female learners who were returning to school after a break caused by early marriage, childbearing, or socio-economic challenges. A purposive sampling strategy was applied to select participants who were expected to provide rich and experience-based evidence related to the educational experiences of mature female learners. Ultimately the researcher was able to recruit twenty participants ten from each school with the aim that diversity would be represented by age, marital status, and socio-economic status. The sample size proved to be adequate for achieving thematic saturation, in which case no new theme emerged during the analysis phase.

The study collected data through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs). The interviews provided in-depth accounts of participants' experiences while FGDs enabled group reflection and comparison of experiences. Each FGD had five participants and lasted between 45–60 minutes. Discussions were conducted in both English and Chichewa for participation purposes, and all sessions were audio recorded with participant consent.

Data were analyzed thematically by Braun and Clarke (2006). Qualitative data were transcribed, coded, and organized into themes (aligned with the study objectives) for systematic interpretation and triangulation between data sources. Ethical protocols were strictly followed, including informed consent, anonymity through pseudonyms, and privacy during sessions. These measures were consistent with feminist protocols that value empathy, respect, and participant empowerment.

4. Findings

This study examined the educational experiences of adult women in Community Day Secondary Schools (CDSSs) in Malawi, focusing on Kamanzi and Mpando schools. The women, aged 20 years and older, returned to education in spite of structural, cultural and financial constraints. Their motivations were varied: personal empowerment, economic chances and role modeling for their children and community. Education was viewed as a means of reclaiming dignity and cue to an intergenerational approach to interrupt cycles of poverty and marginalization.

Nonetheless, mature learners faced significant challenges. The most pronounced included domestic responsibilities, economic difficulty, school structure and stigmatization from peers, teachers and community members. These challenges diminished their confidence, created less time for studying and increased strain on family relationships. Cultures reinforced these constraints as women's priority was to care for others rather than their own

development. Institutional frameworks did not represent a flexible approach either as most timetables, pedagogy and support for mature students was solely developed for adolescent learners.

In spite of these obstacles, participants showed tenacity through various coping mechanisms such as time management, peer study groups, family and community support, and their faith. While these informal coping mechanisms were sufficient to support them, it highlighted to them that institutional structures were inadequate in meeting the needs of adult learners.

The results of this study emphasized that older female learners are agents of change. Their determination created tensions around gender norm conformity and underscored the potential for transformative practices through inclusive, age-sensitive education. The study advocated for policies such as flexible timetables, funding opportunities, teacher training on adult-sensitive practices, and community awareness strategies to minimize stigma, to aid in creating quality education systems for women regardless of age.

4.1 Motivations

Motivations included personal empowerment, economic mobility, and role modeling to children and communities.

4.2 Challenges

Challenges included domestic obligations, financial limitations, stigma, and inflexible institutional structures.

4.3 Coping Strategies

Coping strategies included meticulous time management, peer networks, family support, community support, and resilience.

5. Discussion

The results indicate a contradiction between an ethos of high motivation for study while surrounded by systemic barriers. Mature female students represent agents of change, pushing against gendered institutions yet simultaneously reconstituting their identities. However, while their activity was supported to some extent, institutional supports to adult learners in the form of necessary adult sensitive policies and analogical teaching and learning practices fall short.

The results from this study, align with a benefits perspective, reflect the complexity of the lived experiences of mature female students in Malawi and the ways that structural compulsion and individual agency intersect. Participants showed evidence of the self-directedness and resilience posited by Knowles' Adult Learning Theory and appeared motivated by change they felt would enable empowerment, economic mobility, and role modeling to their own children. Their perseverance demonstrates the potential of education to be transformative, for the individual as well as for intergenerational and community development.

Nonetheless, the study uncovered systemic barriers that reflect the findings of wider African research. Adult learners were disadvantaged by burdensome household responsibilities, financial constraints, stigma, and an unaccommodating school context in comparison to adolescent learners. These findings mirror feminist perspectives that argue how patriarchal norms and cultural expectations limit women's educational opportunities. Within this context, the learners' challenges represent both personal and political acts of resistance by actively claiming their right to education and challenging established gender norms.

The coping mechanisms identified of time management, peer support groups, family and community support, and faith demonstrate both creativity and determination. However, the reliance on informal support systems presented gaps in provision institutionally. As a result, the findings indicate a need for systemic change starting with adjustable timetables, targeted financial support, and educating using pedagogy sensitive to adults. This would significantly reduce personal sacrifice and cultivate equitable educational access for mature female learners.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

Women students who return to school in Malawi show resilience and agency despite facing structural, cultural, and institutional challenges. The study recommends the following support for these students:

1. Policy: support through flexible timetables, scholarships, and financial support.
2. Practice: teacher training in andragogy, and support through mentoring and counseling.
3. Greater community commitment through stigmas reduction campaigns.

The study examined the educational journeys of women students who returned to school in Malawi's Community Day Secondary Schools in regard to motivations, challenges faced, and ways of coping. The study found the women returned to school with strong ambition toward a sense of self-empowerment, livelihood improvement, and to serve as role models for their children. Studying was considered in terms of personal advancement, poverty cycle breaking, and challenging gender norms.

Although this is a hopeful situation, a number of obstacles hampered participants from realizing their dreams. Household responsibilities, financial constraints, social stigmas and rigid school systems made it hard for participants to balance their responsibilities to both their family and their education and/or communities. Even though teachers and classmates would sometimes reinforce that they were "too old" for education, the inflexibility of structures therefore further marginalizes adults for non-enrolment or retention. And yet study participants exhibited resilience in a variety of ways; strict time management, progressive study groups with peers, resources from their community, or faith were all reasons given for staying on track despite the marginalized experiences they faced in school.

Given the challenges outlined here, the study suggests schools provide flexibility with programming through class time or location options for evening or weekend classes; develop loan stipends for adult learners; and ensure that teachers are trained in equity in adult education. Schools should also have counselor and mentorship supports in place as well. In addition to educational institutions being facilitators of adult learning, families, **and community** and faith organizations must also support women going back to education. These opportunities for adult learning around the topic of equity challenge the stigma that adult education exists in many societies and countries, to recognize adult learning as a right for in adult learning as a life skill will reduce stigma, improve equity and contribute to nation building.

REFERENCES

1. Adu-Yeboah, C., & Forde, L. D. (2015). Returning to study in higher education in Ghana: Experiences of mature undergraduate women.
2. Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2022). *Thematic Analysis: A Practical Guide*. London: SAGE Publications.
3. Banda, L., & Khonje, P. (2022). *Gender roles and educational participation in rural Malawi*. Zomba: Chancellor College Press.
5. Chikoko, V. (2021). *Adult education and gender inequalities in Southern Africa*. Johannesburg: Wits University Press.
6. Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.
7. Chimombo, J. (2020). Education for All: The Challenges of Reaching the Marginalised. Zomba, University of Malawi.
8. Dover, A., Sugrue, K., & Author (2024). Challenging violence in South African education: a feminist pedagogical and legal analysis. *Curriculum Perspectives*.
9. Hooks, B. (2020). *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*. London, Pluto.
10. Kamau, S. (2022). *Women and adult education in Kenya: Barriers and breakthroughs*. Nairobi: University of Nairobi Press.
11. Kadzamira, E., & Rose, P. (2021). *Barriers to girls' education in Malawi: Revisiting the evidence*. Lilongwe: Centre for Social Research.
12. Knowles, M. S., Holton, E. F., & Swanson, R. A. (2015). *The Adult Learner: The Definitive Classic in Adult Education and Human Resource Development*. New York, Routledge.
13. Maguire, M. (2020). Challenges of Interviewing Female Students in Rural Settings. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 33(4), 445–460.
14. Ministry of Education. (2022). *Malawi Education Sector Performance Report 2021/2022*.
15. Lilongwe, Government of Malawi.
16. Merriam, S. B., & Baumgartner, L. M. (2020). *Learning in adulthood: A comprehensive guide*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
17. Nyirenda, R. (2024). *Adult learners in Zambia: Challenges and coping mechanisms*. Lusaka: University of Zambia Press.
18. Ngwira, F. (2023). Re-entry and Educational Attainment among Women in Rural Malawi. Blantyre, Montfort Academic Publishers.
19. Patton, M. Q. (2015). *Qualitative Research & Evaluation Methods* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.
20. Seyoum, Y., & Basha, G. (2017). Andragogical methods to sustain quality adult education in Ethiopia. *International Journal of Instruction*, 10(3), 47–62.
21. Tanye, M. (2021). *Mature Women in Secondary Education: Reclaiming Learning Spaces*. Accra. Ghana Women's Education Network Publications.
22. UNESCO. (2021). *Global Education Monitoring Report: Inclusion and Education*. Paris,
23. UNESCO Publishing.
24. United Nations. (2023). *The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2023*. New York, United Nations Publications.