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An Exploratory Study on the Factors Influencing Teacher Retention in Rural Community Day Secondary Schools: A Case Study Of Michulu, Kaphirintiwa, and Chilumba Community Day Secondary Schools in Salima District, Malawi

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the factors influencing teacher retention in rural Community Day Secondary Schools (CDSSs) in Salima District, Malawi, with a specific focus on Michulu, Kaphirintiwa, and Chilumba CDSSs. Despite efforts by the government and stakeholders to improve education access and quality in rural areas, teacher attrition remains a persistent challenge, undermining the effectiveness of rural education delivery. The study had a total of 80 respondents selected through purposive sampling method.

Using a qualitative case study approach, data were collected through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and document analysis involving teachers, head teachers, and education officials. The findings reveal that poor working and living conditions, limited professional development opportunities, inadequate infrastructure, and lack of incentives are key factors contributing to low teacher retention. Additionally, social isolation and lack of community support were found to demotivate teachers stationed in rural settings.

With strict usage of Herzberg's Factor two theory, the study recommended the implementation of targeted retention strategies, including rural hardship allowances, improved housing, and continuous professional development programs, as well as stronger community-teacher partnerships. The study also emphasized on the importance of effective implementation of the government's policies on teacher retention. Enhancing these factors is essential for improving teacher satisfaction and long-term commitment to rural schools, ultimately contributing to better educational outcomes in underserved areas.

Introduction

The key questions of the study were on identifying key factors and the school management approach that improve teacher retention in rural areas. The study also answered the question about why teacher retention was still a big challenge despite the prevalence of ways of improving teachers' retentions which many scholars recommended in their studies. Teacher retention remained a significant challenge in many developing countries, including Malawi, where rural schools often struggle to attract and retain qualified educators (Mulkeen, 2010). Community Day Secondary Schools played a critical role in expanding access to secondary education, particularly in remote areas like Salima District. However, these schools are frequently affected by high teacher turnover, which negatively impact the quality of education, student achievement, and school stability (Kadzamira, 2006). Teachers in Community Day Secondary Schools often cite inadequate housing, poor working conditions, low remuneration, limited professional development opportunities, and lack of support from both the community and school management as key reasons for leaving (UNESCO, 2017).

In Salima District, these challenges are particularly acute due to geographical isolation, poor infrastructure, and limited government support. While previous research has addressed teacher attrition problem in Malawi, teachers do like working in rural community Day Secondary School.

Background of the study

Education serves as a foundational pillar for socio-economic advancement in any nation. Therefore, it is imperative for governments to guarantee equitable access to high quality education for all citizens, thereby fostering inclusive participation in national development processes. Despite this imperative, significant disparities persist in the distribution of teachers-particularly in rural areas. Wallace and Sartono (2010) observe that rural schools often lack adequate teaching personnel, thereby undermining the government's commitment to providing quality education. This staffing imbalance is largely attributable to the tendency of teachers to prefer urban postings, where economic and social amenities are more readily available. Consequently, rural schools are frequently left with unfilled teaching positions and a shortage of qualified teachers.

Rural areas in Malawi frequently struggle to attract and retain qualified teaching personnel due to a combination of factors including limited infrastructure, scarce professional development opportunities, and generally poor living conditions. These challenges contribute to elevated levels of teacher turnover compared to urban settings, leading to frequent disruptions in the teaching process. Such instability not only undermines the consistency of instruction but also has a detrimental impact on student performance and learning outcomes (Bennell & Akyeampong, 2007).

Despite many challenges facing rural schools the need for qualified and committed teachers remains just as critical as it is in urban areas. These schools play vital role in shaping the future of their communities, and without well trained educators, the quality of education suffers. By equipping students with relevant knowledge and practical skills, education opens doors to better job opportunities and long-term economic empowerment. As the World Bank (2019) rightly emphasized, "no country can afford to underinvest in its human capital." Meaningful investment in education, alongside healthcare and skills training, is essential not only for unlocking a country's economic potential but also for fostering innovation, improving productivity, and driving inclusive social development.

Persistent teacher shortages in rural areas continue to have far-reaching effects on the quality of education in Malawi. These gaps often result in poor academic performance, diminished student motivation, and increased dropout rates, especially in remote communities where educational resources are already limited (Mulkeen, 2010). Such outcomes directly hinder the country's broader educational goals and efforts to promote quality in learning opportunities.

General objective of the study

To investigate the factors influencing teacher retention in Community Day Secondary Schools and effective strategies for enhancing teacher stability in these schools.

Specific objectives

1. To identify the key factors influencing teacher retention in rural Community Day Secondary Schools.
2. To examine the role of school management in supporting teacher retention in rural Community Day Secondary Schools.
3. To evaluate the effectiveness of current strategies aimed at improving teacher retention in rural Community Day Secondary Schools.

Literature Review

Factors influencing teacher retention in rural secondary schools

Numerous studies both in Africa and outside were conducted to examine teacher retention in rural areas. Literature review show a number of factors that influence teacher retention in rural areas. Mkonongo (2004) found that teacher retention is affected by poor economic and social status and suggested that improving them is the best way of retaining teachers in rural areas. In Ghana, Akuoko et al. (2012) identified salary increments as a primary incentive for retaining teachers in rural areas. In a study conducted in Zimbabwe, Gomba (2015) found out that job security, assistance from families and support from colleagues can help retain teachers in rural areas. In Lesotho, research study showed that teachers like working in urban areas since it is easy to find good social services. Lesotho government uses a local hire system in which the government gives a school the authority to hire teachers of its choice. Teachers have a choice of schools they apply for a job as such they cannot move away from schools they choose. Deployment is automatic, once a teacher chooses a school, deployment has already taken place (Mulkeen and Chen (2008). Research conducted in Texas, USA, by Miller (2020) revealed that school working conditions and environmental surroundings cultural venues, recreational opportunities, housing prospects and family and friends nearby influence teacher retention.

Research studies on teacher retention in rural areas also revealed that school leadership also plays a significant role in retaining teachers in rural areas. Improving working conditions by providing good work facilities and accommodation near school enhances teacher retention in rural areas (UNESCO, 2017). Headteachers ensure that teachers have good accommodation, clean water, and other required social services.

Several research studies have proposed strategies to improve teacher retention in rural areas. One key recommendation is the provision of decent accommodation near schools (UNESCO, 2017). When the government constructs or renovates teachers' housing, it encourages teachers to remain in rural postings. Additionally, incentives such as rural hardship allowances, opportunities for promotion, and recognition of high-performing teachers have been shown to positively influence teacher retention (World Bank, 2018). Another important strategy is enhancing community engagement and support. Teachers in Community Day Secondary Schools often work in isolation, with limited involvement from the local community. Strengthening school-community partnerships through local school committees, parent-teacher associations, and community-based education initiatives can help integrate teachers into the local social environment. When teachers feel respected, supported, and appreciated by the communities they serve, they are more likely to remain committed to their roles (Bennell & Akyeampong, 2007).

Theoretical Review

This study adopted Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory of Motivation as the guiding theoretical framework. This theory offers valuable insights into how various aspects of the work environment influence employee satisfaction and retention, making it particularly suitable for examining the experiences of teachers in rural settings.

According to the theory, there are two distinct categories of factors that affect job satisfaction and dissatisfaction: motivators and hygiene factors (Herzberg, 1966).

- Motivators are intrinsic factors that lead to job satisfaction and increased commitment. These include achievement, recognition, responsibility, personal growth, and the nature of the work itself.
- Hygiene factors, on the other hand, are extrinsic elements that, if inadequate, lead to job dissatisfaction. These include salary, working conditions, supervision quality, policies, and job security.

Herzberg argued that the absence of hygiene factors can cause dissatisfaction, but their presence alone is not enough to motivate workers. True motivation and retention come from the presence of motivators (Herzberg, Mausner, & Snyderman, 1959).

Research Methodology

Research Design and Methodology

This study employed a qualitative case study design. A qualitative approach was deemed appropriate because the research aimed to explore and understand the lived experiences, perceptions, values, and attitudes of teachers and education stakeholders regarding teacher retention in Community Day Secondary Schools in Salima District. According to Mwila (2024), qualitative research involves the collection and analysis of non-numerical data to gain deeper insights into social phenomena.

The case study design was selected because it allows for an in-depth investigation of a bounded system—in this case, selected Community Day Secondary Schools in Salima District—within its real-life context. It enables the researcher to examine the multiple dimensions influencing teacher retention, including personal, institutional, and community-level factors. This design also facilitates the use of open-ended, flexible data collection tools such as semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and document reviews, which are suitable for capturing rich, detailed narratives from participants.

By focusing solely on qualitative methods, the study prioritizes depth over breadth, emphasizing meaning, interpretation, and the subjective experiences of participants rather than numerical generalizations. The researcher engaged with teachers, headteachers, and education officials to gain holistic insights into the challenges and motivators influencing teachers' decisions to stay or leave.

Study population

The study population refers to the entire group of individuals who share common characteristics relevant to a particular research inquiry (Best, 1998). This study had a total of 80 respondents: teachers, headteachers, education officials, and community educational stakeholders. Specifically, the population comprised all teachers in three selected Community Day Secondary Schools, the headteachers of these schools, two Cluster Leaders overseeing the clusters where the schools are located, three Primary Education Advisors (PEAs) from the relevant district education zones, the Director of Education, Youth, and Sports (DEYS) for Salima District, members of each school's Board of Governors (BOG), and selected members of Parent Teacher Association (PTA) from each school.

Data collection

This study employed both primary and secondary data sources to gather comprehensive and reliable information on the factors influencing teacher retention in rural areas of Salima District, Malawi.

Data analysis and interpretation

Response Rate

Category	Targeted Response	Actual Response	Response Rate
Teachers	38	38	100%
School leaders	05	05	100%
Education Officials	04	03	75%
Community stakeholders	33	33	100%
Total	80	79	98.7%

Source: Primary Data

Out of the 80 questionnaires distributed, 79 were successfully completed and returned, yielding a high response rate of 98.7%. This strong return rate was achieved through persistent follow-up efforts by the researchers to ensure that the targeted sample was adequately reached.

Demographic data

This section presents the demographic characteristics of the respondents, including their age, gender, teaching experience, and level of education. Understanding these characteristics is essential for contextualizing the study's findings. The data collected in this regard are presented and discussed below.

Gender and respondents

	Gender	Frequency	Valid Percent
Valid	Male	50	63.3
	Female	29	36.7
	Total	79	100

The data indicate that out of the 79 respondents, 51 were male and 29 were female. While this reflects a reasonable level of gender representation, it does not demonstrate a balanced gender distribution. However, this disparity may not have implications for interpreting gender-related perspectives within the study.

Level of Education

	Level	Frequency	Valid Percent
Valid	PSLC	21	27
	JCE	09	11
	MSCE	06	08
	Diploma	05	06
	Degree	38	48
	Total	79	100

The study also examined the educational qualifications of the respondents to understand the academic background of teachers serving in rural areas of Salima District. The findings revealed varying levels of education among the participants, which may have implications for teacher retention and performance.

The majority of respondents held a Bachelor's Degree in Education, followed by those with a Diploma in education. A smaller number of respondents, particularly members of BOG and PTA reported having Malawi School Certificate of Education, Junior Certificate of Education, and Primary School Leaving Certificate of Education. This distribution suggests that qualified teachers responded to the issue of rural teacher retention.

Suggestions and Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, it is evident that teacher retention in rural Community Day Secondary Schools (CDSSs) in Salima District is influenced by a combination of environmental, financial, institutional, and motivational factors. These findings, interpreted through the lens of Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory, highlight the need for both improved working conditions (hygiene factors) and enhanced professional growth opportunities (motivators) to effectively retain teachers in rural settings.

Strengthening financial incentive like revising rural hardship allowances, improving work conditions, providing continuous professional development opportunities, recognizing and rewarding high-performing teachers, and effective implementation of government policies on rural teacher retention are the strong ways of retaining teachers in rural areas.

Conclusion

This study set out to examine the factors influencing teacher retention in rural areas, with a particular focus on Salima District in Malawi. The findings reveal that teacher retention in rural schools is influenced by a complex interplay of factors, including working and living conditions, professional development opportunities, community support, and incentive structures.

The study also found that incentive mechanisms—such as rural hardship allowances, opportunities for promotion, and recognition of high-performing teachers—play a significant role in influencing teachers' decisions to stay. However, inconsistent implementation of these incentives has limited their effectiveness.

Furthermore, the level of community engagement was shown to affect teacher retention. Teachers who felt respected and supported by the community were more likely to remain in their positions. However, many teachers in Community Day Secondary Schools expressed feelings of isolation and a lack of collaboration with local stakeholders.

Based on these findings, it is evident that improving teacher retention in rural areas like Salima District requires a multifaceted approach. This includes investing in teacher housing, ensuring consistent and fair distribution of incentives, providing opportunities for professional development, and strengthening school-community relationships. Addressing these areas will not only improve retention but also enhance the quality of education in rural Malawi.

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