ASSESSING THE IMPACT OF HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT PRACTICES ON TEACHERS' PERFORMANCE IN MALAWI

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ABSTRACT :

This study investigates the role of strategic Human Resource Management (HRM) practices in enhancing teacher performance in rural education settings, with a focus on Mchinji District, Malawi. Recognizing teachers as the backbone of the education sector, the research explores how recruitment, performance appraisal, professional development, and incentive systems affect the quality of teaching and learning outcomes. Despite national policies aimed at improving HRM in education, rural districts such as Mchinji continue to face significant challenges, including high teacher attrition, inadequate compensation, limited access to professional growth opportunities, and weak implementation of HRM frameworks. By analyzing these challenges in a localized context, this study aims to bridge the gap between policy intentions and on-the-ground realities. The findings are expected to provide actionable recommendations for policymakers, education managers, and development partners while contributing to academic discourse on strategic HRM in low-resource settings. Ultimately, the research underscores the importance of context-sensitive HRM strategies in achieving Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) of inclusive and equitable quality education.

KEY WORDS : Human Resource Management (HRM), Teacher Performance, Rural Education, Mchinji District, Malawi, Teacher Retention, Professional Development, Strategic HRM, Education Policy Implementation, Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), Teacher Motivation, Low-Resource Settings

INTRODUCTION

Human Resource Management (HRM) plays a pivotal role in driving organizational efficiency and productivity across sectors, including education. Within the education system, HRM practices such as strategic recruitment, performance management, continuous professional development, structured career progression, and well-designed incentive systems are critical in ensuring that teachers are adequately supported and motivated to deliver quality instruction. Teachers, as primary agents of knowledge transfer and skill development, are central to achieving educational objectives, socio-economic progress, and Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), which advocates for inclusive and equitable quality education.

In Malawi, the education sector faces persistent systemic challenges that hinder optimal teacher performance, particularly in rural areas. Districts such as Mchinji are characterized by geographic isolation, limited resources, and socio-economic constraints, which exacerbate issues like inadequate recruitment processes, limited professional development, and uncompetitive compensation structures. These challenges negatively affect teacher retention, classroom performance, and ultimately, student learning outcomes. Although global studies and regional initiatives, such as teacher performance contracts in Kenya and school-based management programs in Uganda, have demonstrated the benefits of effective HRM practices, their applicability to Malawi's rural education context remains underexplored.

This study is grounded in the recognition that national policies, while well-intentioned, often fail to address the realities of localized implementation. In Mchinji District, where public and private schools coexist, varying management structures provide a unique opportunity for comparative analysis of HRM practices. Furthermore, the district reflects broader systemic challenges faced by rural districts across Malawi, making it an ideal case for exploring how strategic HRM interventions can be adapted to low-resource environments. By examining the interplay between policy frameworks and practical realities at the district and school levels, this research aims to generate evidence-based insights that can inform policy refinement and guide stakeholders in enhancing teacher management and performance.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Review

The relationship between human resource management (HRM) practices and teacher performance is one that has attracted significant scholarly attention in recent years. Education systems across the globe increasingly recognize that teachers are the most critical in-school factor influencing student outcomes. Yet, teachers do not operate in isolation; their effectiveness is shaped by a complex interplay of personal abilities, institutional resources, and organizational systems. HRM practices—covering areas such as recruitment, selection, training, performance appraisal, compensation, and career development—represent deliberate organizational strategies to attract, develop, retain, and motivate a skilled teaching workforce.

Understanding how these practices translate into actual improvements in teacher performance requires more than just empirical observation. It calls for a theoretical grounding that explains the mechanisms at play. Over time, researchers have conceptualized this relationship through multiple complementary theories, each shedding light on different pathways through which HR interventions influence teachers' motivation, capability, and behavior. Together, these perspectives form a robust lens for interpreting empirical evidence and building a comprehensive conceptual framework.

One of the foundational theories underpinning the HRM–performance link is *Human Capital Theory* (Becker, 1964). This perspective views teachers as assets whose skills, knowledge, and competencies can be enhanced through targeted investments such as professional development, mentoring, and training programs. In the educational context, human capital investments increase a teacher's subject matter expertise, pedagogical skills, and classroom management capabilities.

For example, when a school invests in continuous professional development workshops on innovative teaching strategies or digital literacy, teachers acquire competencies that directly improve their ability to deliver effective lessons. Human Capital Theory argues that these skills are not only beneficial to the individual but also generate returns for the organization—in this case, the school—by raising overall performance levels and contributing to student success.

From this perspective, HRM practices serve as a mechanism to grow and sustain the capacity of the teaching workforce, ensuring that educators are well-equipped to meet evolving educational demands. The theory also highlights that such investments are not a one-time effort; they require ongoing support to keep pace with changes in curriculum standards, technology, and pedagogical approaches.

While skills and knowledge are essential, they alone do not guarantee high performance. Teachers also need the *motivation* to apply their abilities effectively. Several motivational theories contribute to understanding this dimension.

a. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

According to Maslow (1943), human motivation progresses through a hierarchy—from physiological and safety needs to social belonging, esteem, and ultimately self-actualization. In schools, HRM practices can address these layers by ensuring fair salaries (physiological needs), providing job security (safety needs), fostering collegial environments (social needs), recognizing achievements (esteem needs), and enabling professional growth (self-actualization). A teacher whose basic needs are unmet is less likely to engage deeply with their work, while one who feels valued and supported is more inclined to go above and beyond.

Empirical Review – Global Context

Globally**,** *Human Resource Management (HRM) practices* in education have been recognized as a major determinant of teacher quality, retention, and performance (Darling-Hammond, 2017). Education systems in high-performing countries such as Finland, Singapore, and Canada share common HRM strategies: rigorous recruitment processes, ongoing professional development, supportive appraisal systems, and competitive compensation structures (Schleicher, 2018).

In *Finland*, for example, teachers undergo *highly selective recruitment* into teacher training programs, with only about 10% of applicants admitted (Sahlberg, 2015). Once in the profession, teachers are provided with extensive autonomy, collaborative work cultures, and continuous professional learning opportunities, which foster both motivation and innovation in the classroom.

In *Singapore*, the Ministry of Education employs a *career ladder system* that integrates performance appraisal with professional development and promotion opportunities. Teachers receive structured feedback, have access to mentoring, and are offered sabbaticals for further study reinforcing *Herzberg's motivators* (OECD, 2019).

The *United States* provides mixed lessons. While some districts have implemented *performance-based pay* and robust appraisal systems, evidence suggests that without fairness, transparency, and adequate professional support, such measures can demotivate teachers (Hanushek et al., 2011). This aligns with *Expectancy Theory's* principle that instrumentality is undermined if rewards are perceived as inconsistent or biased.

These global cases highlight that HRM effectiveness in education depends not only on *policy design* but also on *implementation fidelity* and contextual adaptation. Rural or disadvantaged areas often require additional incentives, targeted professional support, and community integration strategies to match

urban performance levels (Mulkeen, 2010).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The present study employed **a** *descriptive correlational research design***,** a choice that was both deliberate and strategic, given the nature and objectives of the investigation. In simple terms, this design was selected because it is ideal for studies that aim to examine and describe the relationships between different variables without interfering with or altering them. In this particular case, the study sought to explore the link between *Human Resource Management (HRM) practices* such as recruitment, professional development, performance appraisal, career progression, and compensation and the performance of teachers in the education sector.

A *descriptive research design* is useful when the goal is to paint a clear picture of what exists in a given setting. It allows the researcher to systematically describe aspects of a situation, such as current HRM practices, and to gather accurate information about how they are implemented. This design does not involve making changes to the environment or introducing experimental conditions; rather, it focuses on observing and documenting reality as it is. This is particularly important in the education sector, where ethical and practical considerations often make it impossible to manipulate key variables. For example, it would not be feasible or ethical to randomly alter teacher salaries or change promotion criteria simply to test their impact on performance.

Target Population

The target population for this study comprised *secondary school teachers and school administrators* in Mchinji District. This included both *public and private secondary schools***,** ensuring diversity in HRM practices and performance management systems. The inclusion of both sectors was necessary to enable comparative analysis and to identify sector-specific best practices.

Sampling Technique

A *stratified random sampling* technique was adopted. Schools were first categorized into public and private strata to ensure representation from both sectors. Within each stratum, respondents were selected randomly using staff lists. This method was chosen to:

- Increase representativeness of the sample.
- Enable sector-based comparative analysis.
- Minimise sampling bias.

DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION
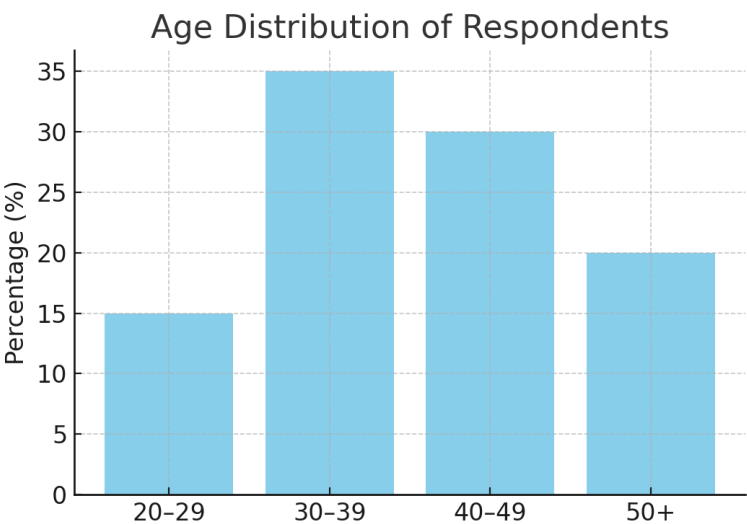
The age profile of respondents reveals valuable insights into the composition of the teaching workforce surveyed. As shown in *Figure 1***,** the largest proportion of respondents falls within the *30–39 years* age bracket, accounting for *35%* of the total sample. This finding suggests that the teaching population in the study area is heavily represented by *mid-career educators'* professionals who have accumulated substantial classroom experience while still retaining adaptability to changing educational demands. Such teachers are often in a career stage where they balance a strong mastery of their craft with openness to ongoing professional development, making them a critical group for the implementation of HRM policies and innovative teaching

strategies.

The second largest group, comprising *30%* of respondents, falls within the *40–49 years* category. These individuals typically have *well over a decade of teaching experience* and often occupy positions of responsibility, such as heads of departments, subject leaders, or mentors for younger teachers. Their role within schools extends beyond direct instruction, as they frequently serve as cultural and procedural anchors, transmitting institutional knowledge and shaping workplace norms. From an HRM perspective, policies that leverage their expertise such as leadership development programs, peer mentoring initiatives, or recognition awards could help sustain high performance and morale within this cohort.
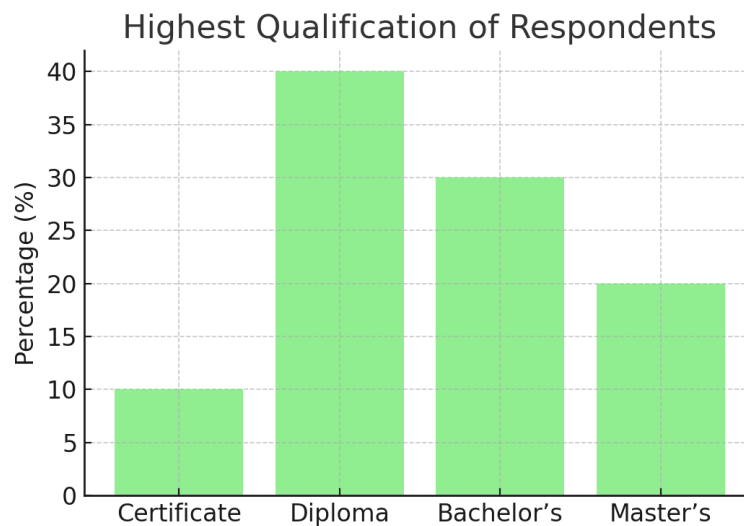
Highest Qualification Levels of Respondents

The academic qualifications of the teaching workforce are a central consideration in understanding both teacher performance and the potential effectiveness of human resource management (HRM) practices. As depicted in *Figure 3*, the respondents in this study possess a relatively high level of formal education, with the distribution as follows:

1. *Diploma holders:* 40%
2. *Bachelor's degree holders:* 30%
3. *Master's degree holders:* 20%
4. *Certificate holders:* 10%

This profile paints a picture of a *professionally trained workforce*, where the majority have pursued education well beyond the minimum entry requirements for teaching. Such a composition has important implications for how HRM interventions are received, implemented, and translated into improved teacher performance.

Diplomas the Largest Group (40%)

Diplomas constitute the most common highest qualification among respondents, accounting for *40%* of the sample. In the Malawian education system, a teaching diploma typically represents *specialized training* acquired after secondary school, often at a teacher training college or similar institution. This qualification equips educators with core pedagogical skills, curriculum knowledge, and classroom management techniques.

Teachers with diplomas occupy an important position in the education sector. They often form the backbone of the teaching workforce, delivering lessons across a wide range of subjects and year groups. While they may not have engaged in as much advanced academic research as degree holders, their training is strongly practical, preparing them to handle day-to-day classroom realities.

From an HRM perspective, diploma holders may be highly receptive to structured professional development programs, as these can serve as opportunities to deepen their subject knowledge, expand their pedagogical repertoire, and prepare for leadership roles. Furthermore, since diploma training is often oriented toward immediate classroom application, this group is likely to benefit from *applied learning opportunities* such as workshops, peer mentoring, and competency-based training.

Bachelor's Degree Holders a Significant Segment (30%)

The second largest group, *30%***,** hold *Bachelor's degrees***.** This qualification typically involves a more extensive academic grounding in subject matter as well as exposure to research methods, critical analysis, and, in some cases, advanced pedagogical theory. Bachelor's degree holders often bring to the classroom a deeper conceptual understanding of their teaching subjects, which can enrich lesson delivery and enhance curriculum development.

For HRM initiatives, this group presents unique opportunities and challenges. On one hand, their higher academic background means they may be more confident in experimenting with innovative teaching methods, engaging in curriculum reform, and contributing to policy discussions. On the other hand, they may also have *higher expectations* regarding career advancement, professional autonomy, and recognition. HRM systems must therefore ensure that such teachers have clear pathways for progression, opportunities for continuous learning, and roles that match their expertise.

Bachelor's degree holders can also be valuable assets in mentoring less-qualified colleagues. HRM policies that encourage *peer-led professional development* can leverage their skills to raise the overall standard of teaching across the workforce.

Master's Degree Holders The Advanced Group (20%)

Teachers holding *Master's degrees* make up *20%* of the respondents. This is a substantial proportion, especially when compared to many education systems in sub-Saharan Africa, where postgraduate qualifications among school teachers are still relatively rare. Master's degrees usually involve advanced study in specialized areas such as curriculum design, educational leadership, or specific subject disciplines combined with a significant research component. This group represents a *highly skilled segment of the workforce***,** capable of engaging with advanced HRM initiatives that require analytical thinking, evidence-based decision-making, and strategic leadership. Teachers with Master's degrees are well-positioned to take on senior roles, influence policy, and contribute to institutional improvement projects.

From an HRM standpoint, one of the key challenges is ensuring that these highly qualified teachers remain engaged and committed to the teaching profession. Without adequate recognition, opportunities for leadership, or competitive remuneration, they may seek alternative career paths in academia, consultancy, or administration. Effective HRM strategies must therefore provide *career progression frameworks* that make full use of their skills while offering incentives for retention.

Certificate Holders – The Minority Group (10%)

Only *10%* of respondents indicated that a *Certificate* was their highest qualification. Certificates typically represent foundational training, often shorter in duration and less comprehensive in scope than diploma or degree programs. Certificate holders may have entered the profession earlier in their careers and, depending on the context, may not have had opportunities or resources to pursue further education.

While this group is the smallest, its presence is still important to acknowledge. HRM initiatives targeting certificate holders should focus on *capacity building* offering pathways for upgrading qualifications, encouraging participation in in-service training, and providing support for further study. In some cases, these teachers may have extensive practical experience that compensates for the lower formal qualification, making them valuable contributors to the school community.
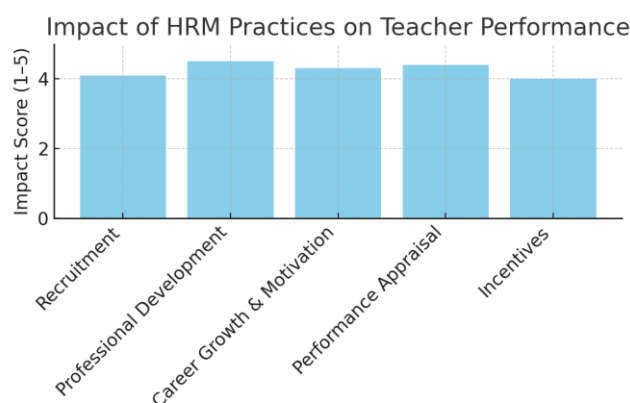

Impact of HRM Practices on Teacher Performance

Figure 5 presents the comparative scores assigned by respondents to five major Human Resource Management (HRM) practices based on their perceived influence on teacher performance. These scores were derived from a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (very low impact) to 5 (very high impact). The results reveal a clear hierarchy of perceived importance: *professional development* received the highest mean score at *4.5*, followed closely **by** *performance appraisal* (*4.4*), *career growth and motivation* (*4.3*), *recruitment* (*4.1*), and finally *incentives* (*4.0*).

This scoring pattern underscores two central findings: first, that continuous learning and structured evaluation systems are the most valued performance drivers among teachers; and second, that while all five HRM practices are considered influential, they differ in the degree and type of impact they have on day-to-day teaching outcomes.

The sections that follow unpack these findings, examining each HRM practice in turn and discussing both the quantitative score and the qualitative insights that help explain it.

1. Professional Development – Mean Score: 4.5

The fact that *professional development* ranked highest in perceived impact is consistent with both global educational research and the lived experiences of teachers in Malawi. Respondents associated continuous training with direct improvements in *classroom delivery*, *student engagement*, and *curriculum mastery*.

Suggestions

Future studies should adopt longitudinal approaches to examine the sustained impact of HRM interventions such as professional development programs, performance appraisal reforms, and digital HRM systems on teacher performance and student outcomes over time. Comparative research involving multiple districts urban and rural would offer insights into context-specific dynamics and support the formulation of scalable strategies. Further, integrating quantitative measures of student achievement with HRM data could strengthen evidence on the direct link between teacher management practices and educational outcomes. Exploring the relationship between teacher well-being, job satisfaction, and HRM effectiveness would also provide a holistic understanding of teacher retention and motivation in low-resource settings.

Recommendations

To improve HRM practices in secondary schools in Mchinji District, there is a need to *enhance professional development*, focusing on needs-based training, collaborative learning communities, and integration of modern pedagogies. Performance appraisal systems should be standardized and linked to constructive feedback and professional growth plans. Introducing structured career pathways and transparent promotion criteria will motivate teachers, while providing targeted incentives such as rural hardship allowances will address retention issues. Furthermore, schools should integrate technology into HRM practices by improving ICT infrastructure and digital literacy among teachers. Finally, consistent policy implementation supported by strong monitoring and evaluation systems is crucial to ensure that national frameworks translate into effective practices at the school level.

Conclusion

This study confirms that effective Human Resource Management practices are critical to enhancing teacher performance and educational quality in Mchinji District. Professional development and performance appraisal emerged as the strongest predictors of teacher effectiveness, while recruitment, incentives, and career growth pathways also contributed positively when implemented systematically. Differences between public and private schools highlight opportunities for cross-learning and policy integration to balance transparency, professional support, and motivation. However, systemic challenges such as budget limitations, limited ICT infrastructure, and inconsistent policy implementation continue to hinder progress. Addressing these barriers through targeted interventions will create a supportive environment that fosters teacher motivation, continuous learning, and improved student outcomes.

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