

**PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT IN SUPPORTING THEIR CHILDREN TO
DEVELOP READING AT AN EARLY GRADE**

MASTER OF EDUCATION (PRIMARY) THESIS

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DECLARATION

I the undersigned hereby declare that this thesis is my own work which has not been submitted to any other institution for similar purposes. Where other people's work has been used acknowledgements have been made.

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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

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DEDICATION

To my wife Bertha who entirely supported me when thunder and storm surrounded my life. You are strong pillar in my life. To my children Ellita, Junior, Andrew and Ovilhelha, you deserve a pat on the back for your patience and prayers during my studies.

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ABSTRACT

The study investigated behaviour and practices of parents when supporting their children to develop reading at an early grade and how parents cope with the challenges. The study used qualitative approach. Data was generated through interviews with parents and teachers and Focus Group Discussion (FGD) with standard two learners. The results show that there are certain activities that parents do with their children in order to develop reading. The study has also revealed that parents help their children differently, at different times and for different reasons. However, all parents agreed that they face considerable challenges in the process, which include low literacy levels, poverty, lack of reading resources, lack of time and lack of communication by early grade teachers. Furthermore, the study findings revealed that all parents use their own strategies to deal with such challenges. For instance, parents borrow books from schools on arrangement with teachers, ask neighbours and classmates to assist their children and offer of incentives to their children as part of encouragement. In order to promote children's reading at home, the study suggests the need to establish a strong relationship between parents and teachers, that school through PTA should regularly update parents on the progress of their children in school, and use of peers in the community.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

ACSSO	Australian Council of State, School Organisation
APC	Australian Parents Council
CCAP	Church of Central Africa Presbyterian
DEM	District Education Manager
EGRA	Early Grade Reading Activity
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
FLP	Family Literacy Project
FPE	Free Primary Education
GoM	Government of Malawi
LCD	Link Community Development
MIE	Malawi Institute of Education
MMCT	Mulanje Mountain Conservation Trust
MoE	Ministry of Education
MoEST	Ministry of Education, Science and Technology
NGO	Non-governmental Organisation
PEA	Primary Education Advisor
PTA	Parent Teacher Association
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
SCI	Save the Children International
SHED	Shire Highlands Education Division
WVI	World Vision International

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

1.0 Chapter overview

This chapter presents background of the study, statement of the problem followed by purpose of the research. The chapter further provides key research questions, the rationale and operational definitions of terms.

1.1 Background to the study

Over the years, the general challenges faced by the primary education sector in Malawi have directly and negatively impacted on the quality of education. Since the mid-nineties, the quality of education especially in the primary school sector had been going down evidenced among other things by low learner achievement levels, high drop-out and absenteeism rates (Chimombo, Mwale, & Ndalama, 2006; Kishindo, Susuwele, Ndalama, & Mwale, 2005; Ndala, 2015)

Research has demonstrated that failure of primary school learners to acquire basic literacy skills in Malawi is one of the major contributing factors to low achievement levels in school (Milner, Chimombo, Banda, & Mchikoma, 2001; Sampa, 2005). Chimombo et al (2006) for example, found that performance of learners in standard one

was below average in basic literacy skills and that many of the learners could not read or write simple words or sentences.

Based on these studies therefore, it is clear that primary school learners in Malawi have had difficulties to acquire basic literacy skills which are not only critical for their learning in language but also other school subjects. While a number of factors have attributed to the learners' inability to acquire basic literacy skills, the extent to which learners receive support at home from the parents or guardians is an important question that has often received less attention by researchers in Malawi.

Parents' involvement in their children's learning is of paramount importance. Most children have two main educators in their lives-their parents and their teachers. According to Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (2014), families (parents) are the first teachers children have. Parents are prime educators until the child attends early years of setting or starts school and beyond (Flouri & Buchanan, 2004). One critical learning foundation that needs to be acquired during the early grades of primary schooling is reading (Spaull & Taylor, 2015). It is also one of the skills that parents teach their children in literacy development. Yaden, Rowe and MacGilivray (2000) argue that a child's capability to succeed in reading at school depends on how successful the child is managed by his/her parents in the home environment. They further stipulate that it is the home environment where the child learns reading which moulds him/her into a productive and successful reader.

Among the few studies and interventions in Malawi that have made an effort to address issues of parental involvement in supporting their children to develop reading skills is Early Grade Reading Activity (EGRA). The intervention stresses on five big reading skills which are phonological awareness, alphabetic principle, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension. For the skills to be accomplished, EGRA promotes teacher training, reading instruction, parents and community involvement in organising reading fairs for learner learning (USAID-Malawi, 2013b).

Another intervention is called Literacy Boost. The intervention is being carried out by Save the Children International (SCI) in Zomba and World Vision International (WVI) in all the districts in Malawi, and seeks to strengthen children's reading ability through both the community and teacher focused elements. Literacy Boost brings literacy more strongly from the school into children's villages and houses. One of the areas of focus in Literacy Boost is community mobilisation. Community mobilisation is complemented by reading awareness and material creation workshops, as well as reading camps and book banks established in villages surrounding the schools (Dowd, Wiener, & Mabeti, 2010).

Family Literacy Project (FLP) was another initiative launched by Link Community Development (LCD) in selected Traditional Authorities in Dedza District between 2013 and 2015 (LCD, 2016). The intervention was designed to increase access to reading materials, using the learners' home language. It also aimed at increasing adult literacy of parents, particularly mothers, and enhancing community support for literacy through providing literacy classes, establishment of reading clubs and training classroom 'parent

helpers' who would attend literacy lessons in lower primary classrooms to help support the learning of their children (LCD, 2016).

While the above interventions have made significant contribution to our understanding of community interventions for promoting school literacy, attention to actual home support processes and practices by parents remain key and unexplored in detail.

1.2 Statement of the problem

There is empirical evidence that parental involvement in children's learning has significant influence on their learning in general, and literacy development in particular. While a number of studies have revealed that parents are involved in a number of useful activities that help their children to develop reading skills (Dowd, Wiener & Mabeti, 2010), one area that has been largely overlooked by research conducted in Malawi is exploration of the actual learner support processes for developing reading at the home in terms of the behaviours and practices of parents in such a process. More specifically and of interest to this study, are the actual challenges that parents encounter when providing home support to their children to develop reading at an early grade.

1.3 Purpose of the study

The aim of the study was to investigate the challenges that parents at home encounter in supporting their children to develop reading in standard 2.

1.4 Key research question

What challenges do parents encounter when supporting their children to develop reading at an early grade?

1.4.1 *Specific research questions*

1. What are parents' behaviours and practices for supporting their children to read at an early grade?
2. What are the barriers that parents meet when supporting their children to develop reading?
3. How do parents cope with the challenges of supporting their children to develop reading?

1.5 Significance of the study

The findings of this research will bring new insights and serve as an eye opener by exposing challenges that parents experience at home in supporting their children to develop reading and coping mechanisms.

The findings will further inform curriculum developers and policy makers to make informed decisions on how best parents should be involved in curriculum development taking into account that they experience challenges when helping their children at home. The study will also shade more light on the importance of partnership between parents and schools to support children in the learning so that teachers establish strong relationships with parents in promoting reading development in the children. When the

bond between teachers and parents is strong, children will value and appreciate the efforts that their parents will be making at home when it comes to reading.

1.6 Operational definitions of terms

The meanings of terms commonly used can be interpreted in different ways depending on how they have been used in context. To ensure clarity for the reader, the following definitions are provided below:

Adult Literacy: The ability of the persons aged 15 years or more to read and write a simple statement in any language.

Development: The process of change in which the child comes to master more and more complex levels of thinking, feeling and interacting with people.

Early grade: The first two classes in primary school (infant classes)

Incentive: A thing that motivates or encourages a person to do something.

Intrinsic motivation: Behaviour that is driven by internal rewards.

Perception: This is a complex process in which an individual attempts to make sense of the stimuli and situation he/she encounters.

Poverty: The state of continuous deprivation or lack of basics of life (food and non-food).

Practice: Action or knowledge on how something is done.

1.7 Organisation of the study

The study is organised into five chapters. Chapter one provides the background information to the study stating the statement of the research problem, purpose of the

study, research questions and definitions of the operational terms. Chapter two provides literature review where review of relevant literature and the theoretical framework of the study are presented. Chapter three discusses the research design and how data is generated and analysed with justification for methods for data generation and analysis. It further explains the study sites, sampling procedures, data generation and instruments, trustworthiness of the study and ethical issues. Chapter four discusses results of findings while chapter five provides conclusion of the study and recommendation for further academic study.

1.8 Chapter summary

This chapter has discussed the background to the study. It has also discussed statement of the problem, purpose of the study, research questions and significance of the study. Finally, operation definitions of some key words have been presented.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.0 Chapter overview

This chapter presents a review of literature on parental involvement in supporting their children to develop reading. It also presents scholarly works and research findings on challenges that parents face when supporting their children to develop reading at an early grade at home. The last section of this chapter discusses Sociocultural Theory, the theoretical framework for this study.

2.1 Definition of parental involvement

According to Vaden-Kierman and MacMacnus (2005), parental involvement in education has many faces and assumes varying degrees from simple questions asked at the dinner table to the daily checking and signing off on the homework completion, to regular visits to the library, museums, cultural art events, to participating in program evaluation. In this study parental involvement means the participation of parents in regular two ways, and meaningful communication involving learner academic learning and the school activities.

In addition, the term ‘parental involvement’ is often used to refer to any form of involvement in children’s education (ACSSO, 2005). There are three broad types of parental involvement: involvement at home, involvement at school and home-school

communication (Vaden-Kierman and McMacnus, 2005). Epstein developed a typology of parental involvement based on the way in which parents might become involved in their children's schooling (Epstein, 1987; Epstein., 1989). The six types of parent-school partnerships identified by Epstein include: Communicating, volunteering at school, learning at home, decision making, collaborating with the community, and parenting.

Communicating involves developing open and regular two way communication between parents and schools. This is communicating with families about school progress and student progress through effective school-to-home and home-to-school communication. Another way of communicating is getting more frequent feedback/ updates on progress (Moon & Lvins, 2004). According to Vaden-kierman and McMacnus (2005), communication is the key element that shapes parent involvement activities at home and at school and enhances school-family collaboration. The scholars further note that two-way communication between home and schools helps to build an on-going, productive, and trusting relationship between parents and educators, which increases parent participation in learning activities both at home and at school.

Volunteering at school is another form of parent-school partnership. Families are involved as volunteers and audiences at the school or in other locations to support students and school programs. Volunteering involves activities in schools under the guidance of the school staff. Learning at home as a type of partnership involves families in assisting their children in learning activities at home, including reading homework and other curricular- linked activities. Decision making includes families as participants in

school decision, governance, and advocacy through PTA, school councils, committees, and other parent organisations. Another form of parent-school partnership is collaborating with the community. Parents coordinate resources and services for families' students, and provide services to the community, while parenting assists families with child-rearing skills, understanding child and adolescent development and setting home conditions that support children as students at each age and grade level. It also assists schools in understanding families.

Epstein (1989) discovered three types of parental involvement which were explored in two cultures within the United States: Immigrant Chinese parents and European American parents of young children. In the study, Epstein found out that European American parents volunteered more on schools while Chinese American parents focused more on systematic teaching of their children at home. Chinese American parents were more critical of typical primary school report cards without ABC grades.

In this case, parental involvement has some social constructs which need to be understood and developed within the social context such as the family. The family is usually considered as the first social construct that a child belongs to. It provides the child with language, security and culture of the society. Even Keen (1997) notes that the family is one of the oldest and most common human institutions. From this premise, it can be deduced that reading has some social constructs, and it must begin in the family if children have to develop it as early as possible.

Multiple scholars have written about the importance of parental involvement in children's learning in order to enhance reading development.

The following section reviewed what other researchers found out concerning these assumptions and challenges they face when supporting their children to develop reading at an early grade.

2.2 Common methods of parental involvement

One popular method for engaging young children is reading aloud (Reutzel & Cooter, 1991). Reading aloud to children may provide the most single valuable opportunity for promoting literacy development. One of the most influential of these experiences is when adults read story books aloud to children. Reutzel and Cooter (1991) argue that reading aloud to children and listening to them reading aloud is probably the most common methods of parental involvement. The interaction that is connected to reading is beneficial to children's reading development. Parents and children should take turns, reading aloud to each other (Vacca, Vacca, & Gove, 2000).

Bush (1993) recommends that parents should make sure that there are enough resources in the home that have book connections. In a study by MacNeil (1999), it was found that 80 percent of children from families that were involved in literacy development through reading opportunities had a positive involvement in school performance including higher academic achievement.

Owne (1993) conducted a survey on children with richer home literacy environment and correlated with children's levels of reading knowledge and skills. It was found out that children from families with richer home literacy environment demonstrated higher levels of reading knowledge and skills. The children could read and comprehend with ease than those children coming from families without home literacy environment.

Vacca et al. (2000) also emphasise that the home provides many children with foundation of becoming literate. They further state that there are some activities that would provide opportunities to children for practice. According to Vacca et al. (2000) the first activity is by helping children with their homework. When teachers give a reading assignment, it is important that parents show interest. Another method is to ask their children about their homework (Reutzel & Cooter, 1991). As the children narrate it, this illustrates that they have provided opportunities for children to practice. Another activity is listening to children reading their favourite books. It could be of help if parents listen attentively to children when reading. In other words, children feel that things are worth listening to (Wray & Medwell, 1991). Provision of materials for children to read is another way of helping children to read (Vacca et al., 2000).

Research has shown that parents also participate in wide range of activities with their children (Harris & Goodal, 2007). These include: playing with letters and numbers, emphasizing the alphabet, reading with the child, teaching songs and rhymes, painting and drawing and visiting the library. Harris and Goodal (2007) further claim that parents who frequently help their children with their homework results in better attainment of

reading abilities at an early grade. Even learners tend to hold positive views about homework seeing it an important in helping them to do well at school in terms of reading (Sharp, Ken, & Benefield, 2011).

Children are also more successful at all grade levels if their parents participate at school and encourage education and learning at home whatever the education, background or social class of their parents (Floeri, 2004). Parents' education, family size, and marital status - all indicators of family social class and social structure are not significantly associated with the time parents help their children to develop reading. What is amazing is that in all the studies aforementioned, none has shown an interest to find out the challenges that parents experience when supporting their children to develop reading at an early stage in their lives.

2.3 Parents' behaviours and practices that promote reading

In Botswana, a research that was conducted in two rural communities showed that parents had very positive attitudes towards reading (Mathangwane & Arua, 2006). The research acknowledges that a family plays a vital role in the literacy development of children. As Morrow (1995, p.21) notes, 'parents are the first teachers their children have, and they are teachers that children have for the longest time.' Mathangwane and Arua (2006), further observe that parents or caregivers are potentially the most important people in the education of their children.

Tayler and Dorsey-Gaines (1988) and Teale and Sulzby (1986) contend that parents have mixed behaviour and practices towards reading. Some parents hardly ever converse with

their children at length, some do not read and do not provide print materials for their children yet others are very good readers, frequently read with their children and participate in their children's leisure activities.

In order to improve children's reading, parents use more strategies such as Pause, Praise and Prompt (PPP) when they read at home with their children (McNaughton et al., 1987). The PPP was developed in New Zealand during the 1970's with the aim of helping peers or parents to help school – age children in reading. PPP requires the parent to pause the reading after error, prompt the child, and praise the reading behaviour. In addition, Savage (2007) suggests the following strategies as those that would assist children to read: discussing with the children their experiences, encouraging children to think about particular events, encouraging children to watch TV programmes that have education value and monitoring their children's school performance through collaborating with their teacher.

2.4 Challenges parents meet in supporting their children to develop reading

Despite the active roles parents play in supporting their children learn to read, all of them face significant challenges in the process.

2.4.1 Lack of reading resources

In a Botswana study by Mathangwane and Arua (2006) shows that children are not allowed to take home their hard-bound reference books that are integral to the curriculum (Mathangwane & Arua, 2006). The underlying belief is that teachers fear that these books

would be lost or torn. If returned they will be in tatters. However, without the reference books, parents are uncertain about how to help their children with their homework. In Mali, a similar survey revealed that 75 percent of learners in grade 2 did not have text books and no students had supplementary reading books at their respective schools, a situation that is uncommon throughout the developing world (Evans, 2010).

Kazembe (2005) observes that in Malawian context, most families do not have books which they can read to their children. This is especially found in parents from low-income communities (Lawson, 2003). Due to their poor economic status, parents fail to purchase supplementary reading materials that they can read together with their children at home. Apart from lack of reading resources, some parents do not understand reading themselves while others are not interested in their children's reading.

2.4.2 Work commitments

Work commitment is another challenge that parents meet in supporting their children to develop reading (Anderson & Gehart, 2007). A study conducted in Britain shows that work commitments are the most commonly cited barrier by parents from getting more involved in their child's school life (Peters, Seeds, Goldstein, & Coleman, 2008). It implies that parents do not have time to assist their children with their homework or any other reading activity because of work pressure. This is especially seen in workers in low-paying jobs who often must work long hours to earn enough to support their families and many may not have time to attend to their children (Ballen & Moles, 1994). In relation to this, parents in economically disadvantaged families can face particular

difficulties when attempting to participate in their children's education in general and reading in particular. For example, some parents in low-income employment risk losing their jobs if they take time off work just to attend meetings and functions related to their children's school life.

2.4.3 Difficulties with basic literacy

The study in America shows that parents who are not well-educated themselves may find it difficult to help their children with their reading homework (Ballen & Moles, 1994). In addition, the study also reveals that difficulties with basic literacy can also be a barrier to parents being able to support their children. Analysis of longitudinal data on adults (using the British Cohort study and the National Child Development Study) has looked at how parents' literacy levels affect children (Bynner & Parsons, 2006). The study indicates that children of parents with the poorest grasp of literacy are at a substantial disadvantage in relation to their own reading development as compared to children who have parents with good literacy, hence do not feel confident with children's work (Anderson, 1997). The reasons being that some parents do not understand the work the child does, were not taught certain subjects when they were at school and some parents think that they may confuse the child or do it wrongly.

2.4.4 Life demands/ children as an issue

Other challenges cited by parents indicate that children are issues, child care difficulties and lack of time generally (Anderson & Gehart, 2007). Additionally, according to Boyer (1991), social and economic changes make it increasingly difficult for parents to provide the support that children need to develop reading especially due to the loss of community,

the increased fragmentation of family life, and the competing, often conflicting pressures in the parents' daily lives.

2.4.5 Lack of communication by teachers and schools

A study in Mexico shows that parents have developed negative or neutral communications from schools (Dickson & Caswell, 2007). They further argue that negative contact with schools can contribute to unfriendly climate that reduces the likelihood of parental involvement. If parents themselves have had negative experiences in their own schooling, they may already have formed negative view of schools. These parents can view their school as hostile territory.

A study in Germany shows that teachers are more likely to communicate with parents when their children misbehave or face significant problems (Dickson & Caswell, 2007). However, it is extremely important to let families know when the child is performing successfully or not. In this way, communication from school is not labeled as bad news.

2.4.6 Poverty

Poverty is another striking challenge that parents experience in supporting their children to develop reading (Dickson & Caswell, 2007). For instance, if the family is lacking basic needs like food, it will be extremely difficult for a hungry parent to encourage a hungry child to read (Morrow, Tracey & Maxwell, 1995). For instance, Chikuni (2010) states that almost 70 percent of children in Malawi go to school without eating food due to poverty.

Parents may perceive also schools as presenting obstacles in the form of lack of encouragement, not informing parents of what they can do and having no little scope for lifting around busy working and family rules (Mathangwane & Arua, 2006).

2.4.7 Time and life demands

A study in Germany indicates that time seems to be a major barrier impeding parents from participating in school activity or assisting their children with school work at home (Dickson & Caswell, 2007). Parents often report lack of time or schedule conflicts as the two most importantly barriers of parental involvement and feel that frequently parent activities including reading at home are at inconvenient times.

2.4.8 Lack of teacher time, too much to do, so little time

Although increased parent involvement has major and obvious advantages from teachers' perspective, teachers claim that more contact with parents increases teachers' and other personnel's responsibilities and raises various concerns about time availability and heavy workload (Evanthian & Patrick, 2008). Teachers feel overburdened and view parents' effort in assisting their children developing reading at home as being outside their expertise. Teachers often see working on family involvement as a task added to an already long list of responsibilities.

The next section discusses the theory that was employed in this research, namely Social-Cultural Theory.

2.5 Theoretical Framework

The study was guided by Lev Vygotsky's social cultural theory. Lev Semyonovich Vygotsky was born in a traditional Jewish family in Orsha (Belarus) in Russia (Gray & Macblain, 2012). Vygotsky's focus was on child development. He is, however, credited with developing an approach that connects social and mental processes and describes cognitive development as an essentially social process (Gray & Macblain, 2012).

Similarly, his interest was never in the child as an individual but, reflecting his Marxist ideology, in the child as a member of their cultural context. According to Vygotsky, development is not an individual process but the result of an aggregate of social relations embodied within the individual which he referred to as social cultural theory (Tudge, 1992).

John-Steiner and Mahn (1996) observe that socio-cultural approaches to learning and development are based on the concept that human activities that take place in cultural context, are mediated by language and other symbols, systems and can be understood when investigated in their historical development. As a result, children do not develop in isolation but in a social matrix. This social matrix is formed by the interconnection of social relationships and interactions between themselves and other caregivers (Carsaro, 1992). In this case, parents form part of caregivers who support their children to develop reading.

Vygotsky also believed that child development is the result of interaction between the child and the social environment (Gray & Macblain, 2012). He observes that social interaction can involve parents, siblings, peers and significant objects such as books.

Wertsh (1991) observes that human actions on both the social and individual planes are mediated by tools and signs; meaning that human development starts with dependence on caregivers. Rogoff and Barbara (1990) state that there are two types of mediation: mediation through another human being and mediation in the form of organised learning activity. In this case, parents form part of the first type of mediation- mediation through human beings. At home, parents mediate activities such as reading. Vygotsky also believed that language mediates thinking and learning. Parents provide the cultural tools necessary for the child's thinking. Whilst cultural tools such as nursery rhymes and fairy stories become as familiar as to be invisible, Vygotsky was keen to acknowledge their role in the development of reading. Cultural tools influence our perception, understanding and experience of the world (Gray & Macblain, 2012). According to Vygotsky, another cultural tool that mediates learning is language. Parents at home assist their children verbally to develop reading at an early grade. It is so because children have an innate ability to learn through instruction, a characteristic complemented by the adults' willingness to help and instruct (Gray & Macblain, 2012). It implies that the theory rests on the assumption that learning occurs in social grouping and that those that are more knowledgeable assist the less knowledgeable through scaffolding.

2.6 Application of Sociocultural Theory on parental involvement in their children's reading

Since the theory emphasises on social interaction, parents are expected to interact with their children at home if reading development is to take place as early as possible. Since socio-cultural approaches to learning are based on the concept that human activities take place in cultural contexts and mediated by symbols, parents and other caregivers (neighbours, playmates and classmates) need to come in as early as possible. In this case, parents provide the cultural tools necessary to develop the child's reading ability. Gray and Macblain (2012) contend that cultural tools influence our perception, understanding and experience of the world. The symbols referred could be books and other relevant materials that can help their children develop reading as long as the activities take place in their cultural contexts. Wood (2005) observes that social interaction between children and parents are important. Even Freire (2000), notes that people educate each other through the mediation of the world. Similarly, learning to read can be facilitated by the presence of peer, siblings and an adult providing assistance to the child. More importantly, utilizing Vygotsky's theory in practice, believers in his theory would advise that parents expose their children to a variety of social situations, since each interaction is considered as a learning experience. Parents themselves may wish to look for opportunities for their children to develop reading at an early age.

2.7 Chapter Summary

The chapter has reviewed literature on parental involvement in supporting children to develop reading at an early grade. The chapter has also presented the scholarly work on challenges that parents meet in attempting to support their children develop reading at home. Finally, it has discussed the theory that guides this study. The next chapter will look at research methodology.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.0 Chapter Overview

In this chapter, the research design and data generation methods that were used to conduct the research are presented. It also discusses how participants were selected and ways in which the data was collected and analysed. The chapter concludes by highlighting ethical considerations.

3.1 Research Design

The study was guided by qualitative approach. Qualitative approach fitted well because it explored attitudes, behaviour and experiences and attempts to get an in-depth opinion from participants (Dawson, 2002). It also focused on participants' perceptions and experiences and the way they make sense of their lives (Frankel & Wallen, 1990; Meriam, 1988). As such, the study collected experiences, perceptions, opinions and views of parents on challenges that they face in supporting their children to develop reading at an early grade and how they cope with the challenges.

Within the qualitative approach, the study used phenomenological design. Patton (2002) stipulates that a phenomenological design is one that focuses on a detailed description of

what people experience. Phenomenologists believe that multiple ways of interpreting experiences are available to each of us through interacting with other, and that it is the meaning of our experiences that constitutes reality and reality is consequently socially constructed (Bogdan & Biklen, 1999). This approach was deemed appropriate because of the nature of the study. The study provides in-depth discussion of challenges that parents experience in supporting their children to develop reading at an early grade and their coping mechanisms. The only challenge with the design is that the same event is described in different ways because different people perceive a phenomenon differently.

3.2 Selection of study area

The study was conducted in Phalombe district which is in Shire Highlands Education Division (SHED). Phalombe district was chosen because it was closer to the researcher's working station which implies that the schools were accessible and without much economic stress. As Creswell (2003) puts it that studying one's backyard provides easy access to informants and information at a minimal cost.

Additionally, the case with accessibility and proximity was crucial with regards to the completion of the study within its time frame. However, the anticipated disadvantage of studying behind the researcher's own backyard could be that participants not taking seriously the interviews for knowing that the researcher was one of the members in their community. Bogdan and Biklen (1999) state that other people may not feel comfortable relating to you as a researcher to whom they can speak freely. As such, conducting a study with people you know can be confusing and upsetting. That was taken care of by

the researcher by first alerting the participants the purpose of the study and why they had been involved in the study.

3.3 Research sampling procedures

Phalombe district has 87 schools and eight zones. The schools are both in semi-urban and rural areas but many schools are in rural areas. It was anticipated that the location of the schools would have an influence on the behaviours and practices of parents, their challenges and ways of coping with the challenges in supporting their children to develop reading, hence the plan involving schools in both settings.

From the eight zones, two were purposively sampled, that is Migowi and Nambiro zone. Migowi zone which is in semi-urban area and Nambiro zone in rural area took part in the study for the researcher to have experiences in both settings. Purposive sampling is accepted in research as observed by Cohen and Manion (1980, p.77) who argues that, “In purposive sampling the researcher handpicks the cases to be included in his sample on the basis of his judgement of the typicality satisfaction to his specific needs”.

The researcher used simple random sampling to select one school in each zone. Migowi zone had thirteen schools while Nambiro zone had nine schools. Thirteen pieces of paper with names of schools in Migowi zone were put in one box and mixed. One piece of paper was picked from the box representing one school in the zone. This process was similarly utilised when selecting another school in Nambiro zone but this time with nine pieces of paper with names of the schools. The remaining pieces of paper belonging to

Migowi zone were mixed again. The researcher picked one piece of paper representing a school for pilot testing. Random sampling was used in the research in order to select schools because according to Rubin and Rubin (1995) all schools in the defined population have an equal chance of being selected for the sample.

After sampling, it was discovered that both schools belonged to the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian (CCAP). Unfortunately at this initial stage the researcher did not resample to ensure that the schools were from different backgrounds such as Government versus faith-based schools. The researcher appreciates that it would have been better to balance the selection of the schools at that initial level. However, selecting schools under the CCAP church did not in any way have a negative effect on findings because the study did not target proprietors of schools but parents, learners and teachers; hence there was no need to change schools. However, future studies should consider faith and nonfaith-based schools and find out if there will be an impact on the findings. This is so because it is often assumed that faith-based schools have better resources, such as books, than public schools.

In the selected schools, ten standard 2 learners (5 boys and 5 girls) were purposively selected from the attendance register at each of the schools through the guidance of the class teachers. Teachers helped to identify boys and girls who could easily express themselves and articulate at a group without challenges. A total of 20 learners took part in the Focus Group Discussions.

Purposive sampling was used to take care of standard 2 teachers of Chichewa. Standard 2 teachers participated in the study because they were not only directly involved with the target group (learners) but also for triangulation. Lacey and Luff (2001), defines triangulation as a means of gathering data and analyzing data from more than one source to give a fuller perspective on the situation you are investigating.

Twenty parents, twenty learners and two teachers took part in the research. A total of forty-two participants were involved in this research. Table 3.1 is a summary of sample population for the study.

Table 3.1: A sample population of the study

Type of participants	Gender		Total
	Male	Female	
Parents	5	15	20
Learners	10	10	20
Teachers	-	2	2
Total	15	27	42

The above data indicates that 75 percent of women participated in the study. This was so because by the time the researcher reached respective homes, women were readily available for interviews. Learners of both sexes equally participated in the study.

3.4 Data generation and instruments

The researcher collected data in the second term of the 2015/2016 primary school calendar. For the realisation of the purpose of this study, the instruments designed for data generation were interviews and Focus Group Discussion (FGD) (see Appendices D and E).

3.4.1 Interviews

An interview is a purposeful conversation usually between two people but sometimes involving more that is decided by one in order to get information from the other (Bogdan & Biklen, 1999). The researcher used interview in order to gather descriptive data in the participants' own words so that he could develop insights on how participants interpret the topic under study. Semi-structured interviews were used because they gave the researcher an opportunity to: probe more for clarity, gather insights into participants' thinking, generate rich descriptive data and understand individual perspectives.

The interview method was also deemed necessary because “an interview is a useful way to get a large amount of data quickly and elicit views and opinions from the participants” (Marshall & Rossman, 1999, p.108). Interviews also provided rich data filled with words that revealed the respondents' perspectives.

During interviews with parents, the researcher asked questions whose answers were directly audio-recorded and transcribed later. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with parents in which both open and closed questions were incorporated. The interviews

focused on parents' behaviours and practices, challenges they face and coping mechanisms when supporting their children to develop reading. The researcher conducted separate interviews with standard two Chichewa teachers in the two schools.

3.4.2 Focus Group Discussion (FGD)

Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were conducted with learners in order to find out challenges that parents experience at home and how they cope with the challenges. Two Focus Group Discussions comprising ten learners per group were conducted with standard two learners in each of the two schools. Krueger and Cagey (2000) as cited in Gay (1987) defined the FGD as:

A carefully planned discussion designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive, non-threatening environment. It is conducted with approximately seven to ten people by a skilled interviewer. The discussion is relaxed, comfortable and often enjoyable for participants. Group members influence each other by responding to ideas and comments in the discussion (p.238).

The main purpose of FGDs was to draw upon respondents' attitudes, feelings beliefs, experiences and reaction in a way in which would not be feasible using other methods, for example observation, one-to one interviewing, or questionnaire surveys (Morgan, 1988). FGDs with learners assisted in reducing the anxiety that learners would have developed if one-on-one interviews were used. This encouraged full participation in the discussion.

Secondly, FGDs provided answers to the same types of questions as in-depth interviews, except that they take place in a social context (www.nsf.gov.pubs, 2002). Another advantage of FGDs was that group participants stimulated each other to articulate their views or even realise what their own views are (Bogdan & Biklein, 1988). In addition, ideas of twenty learners in the two schools, gathered in the most minimal time possible which otherwise, would take a lot of time if they were interviewed using one to one approach.

A major challenge with FGDs could be that individuals may not share important experiences they have had because they are too embarrassed to share them in a group. Another problem with FGDs is that some individual members talk too much, and there are difficulties of keeping the discussion on topic. Since not all people are equally articulate and perceptive (Bogdan & Biklen, 1999; Cresswell, 2009) and others feel uncomfortable and become nervous speaking in a group, learners were given guidelines for Focus Group Discussion. They were advised to respect each other's views and told them there were no wrong or right answers. Creswell (2009) points out that Focus Group Discussions can be used as a method on their own right or a complement to other methods like in-depth interviews, especially for triangulation and validity checking.

3.5 Pilot study

Before fully embarking on the study, the instruments were pilot tested in one school. Morgan (1988) states that “piloting is the process whereby you try out the research technique and methods which you have in mind, see how well they work in practice and

if necessary, modify your plans accordingly” (p. 135). Robinson (2000) also argues that pilot testing is important because it helps one to assess the feasibility of the instruments. Pre-testing was done in order to find out if the tools were appropriate and effective. After the pilot study, it was revealed that some questions did not answer the research questions. For instance a question like, “are you married?” had nothing to do with this research. As the result, it was deleted. Other questions were modified accordingly. For example, a question like “what is the reading ability of your child in standard 2” was changed to “describe to me any changes you noticed to your child since your participation in reading at home”. Issues about quiet children in the pilot FGD did not arise since group participants stimulated each other to articulate their views. The school that participated in the pilot phase was not allowed to participate in the actual data generation phase. Pilot-testing also helped the researcher to have hands on experience in using the instruments so that confidence and nervousness were reduced when conducting the main research.

3.6 Data Analysis

Since data analysis is an ongoing process involving continual reflection about the data (Cresswell, 2009), data analysis was conducted concurrently with data collection, making interpretations and writing notes in the process (Huberman, 1994). For example, preliminary analysis of data from semi-structured interviews was done on daily basis after field work in order to identify all emerging issues (Chiwaya, 2005). Without ongoing analysis, data can be unfocused, repetitious and overwhelming in terms of the large volume of material that needed to be processed (Cresswell, 1998).

The researcher familiarised himself with the responses from the interviews and Focus Group Discussion with parents, teachers and learners before developing any analysis (Hitchcock & Hughes, 1989). The researcher transcribed the recorded data verbatim and stored it both in Microsoft Word and in a Flash disc. The researcher read the transcripts several times intending to get the gist of the matter. Later, the researcher looked for inaccuracies, irrelevance, unclear information and missing data, and finally cleaned the data in order to remain with data that was relevant to the research questions of this study.

Then, the responses were labeled according to themes or issues generated based on the research question. After that they were colour coded. For instance, all information that was related to lack of reading resources as one of the challenges that parents face was coloured “green” while the coping mechanism for it was coloured “blue”. Colour coding assisted the researcher to find the information quickly when needed and even in finding out how many participants shared the same response in the study.

3.7 Limitations of the study

One limitation was that parents did not keep appointments. When the researcher visited their homes for interviews on the day that was agreed upon, the researcher discovered that they had gone out for other activities like farming and fetching firewood from the mountain. This slowed the whole process and the researcher had to make new appointments to avoid ending up having less number of participants taking part in the study.

Furthermore, it was difficult for the researcher to generate conclusive data from standard two learners due to their age. Learners' age ranged from 7 to 12. During the FGDs, some learners remained quiet. However, through probing, the researcher was able to validate data generated from those standard two learners. The last limitation was time frame for the research which was strictly eight weeks. It would have been better if the research was given ample time in order to collect enough data from the participants. To overcome this challenge, the researcher divided the research into parts and then assigned dates for their completion in a form of a time activity chart to allow sufficient time for each activity in order to guard against unforeseen circumstances and delays.

3.8 Ethical issues

In this study, ethical standards were maintained all the time. Respondents were informed of the purpose of the study in advance so as to gain their informed consent (See appendix C). The researcher advised them that those that were not interested should not be forced to participate since doing so would compromise the quality of data to be generated. Fortunately, all participants were willing to take part in the study.

3.9 Anonymity and confidentiality

Participants were also assured of privacy, anonymity and confidentiality of the information that they provided. They were informed that their names at any point would not be mentioned instead there would be letter codes that would be indicated on each interview response. This concurs with Borg and Gall (1989) who note that confidentiality must be further protected by not using names of individuals in any publications that result

from research project. Participants were also assured that the information they provided would be treated with confidentiality it would deserve and would be used for academic purposes only.

3.10 Enhancing trustworthiness of the study

To ensure trustworthiness of the study, the researcher used critical friends, mainly colleagues in the Master of Education (Primary) programme, who critically analysed the work starting with the proposal, instruments and findings. Secondly, the research instruments were pilot-tested on a group of learners and their parents before they were taken to schools under study. After pilot testing, some questions were revised because they were not addressing the research questions. Direct quotations from the respondents through interviews and FGDs were also used to show the trustworthiness of the study.

3.11 Access negotiations

The researcher got an introductory letter from the Dean of Education at Chancellor College, which helped him seek permission from Phalombe District Education Manager (DEM) to conduct the study in the district. The District Education Manger officially introduced the researcher in writing to the head teachers of the target schools to conduct the research in their schools. (See Appendices A-B).

Before embarking on the research, the researcher visited the schools to make arrangements with the head teachers as to when and how the study will be conducted. The researcher also briefed the head teachers about the topic of research. Telephone calls

to the head teachers were made a day before the interviews in order to confirm appointments.

3.12 Chapter summary

This chapter has presented a description of the research methodology. The chapter has included the research approach and design, selection of the study area, research sampling procedures, instruments for data generation and limitations of the study. The chapter has also discussed how data was generated and analysed. The next chapter presents the findings of the study.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

4.0 Chapter overview

This chapter presents and discusses findings of the study from the two schools. The first section discusses the general characteristics of the schools and demographics of the parents studied. This is followed by a discussion of key findings in relation to the main research question, the three research sub-questions outlined for this research in chapter one, and the social cultural theory that guided the research. The findings are presented under the following categories: Behaviour and practices of parents that promote reading, key barriers that hinder parents from supporting their children, and suggestions or ways of resolving them (coping mechanisms). The final section is a summary of the key findings.

4.1 General findings: The context of the two schools

This section describes the two study schools as of February 2016. The main focus is on schools' location, catchment area, teaching and learning conditions, learners' enrolment, staffing in terms of number of teachers trained and untrained, infrastructure available,

resource availability, socio-economic status of the parents, their literacy levels and age range of learners interviewed. For the purpose of ethical issues, the two schools are referred to as X and Y.

4.1.1 Description of School X

School X is located 3 km to the east of Phalombe District Education Manager's (DEMs) office along the Phalombe – Chiringa tarmac road.



Figure 1: One of the classrooms at School X

It was established in 1922 and belongs to the C.C.A.P Church. It is a brick fenced school so as to give the necessary protection to its learners. The fence is shared with a dispensary that helps learners to access medical services easily when needed. It is located within the trading center. The school being at the trading center, noise from video show rooms disturb some classes especially those that are conducted outside the

classroom. The school has 45 teachers in total. As of February 2016, the school enrolment was 2097 against eighteen school classrooms. There is one class for standard two with two female teachers. In total there are 148 learners in standard two. The school is surrounded by twenty six villages, making its catchment area.

4.1.2 Description of School Y

School Y is north –east of Phalombe district, 17 km from the DEMs office. It also belongs to the C.C.A.P Church and was established in 1991.



Figure 2: One of the classrooms at School Y

There are 36 teachers at the school. The school had 1900 learners as of February, 2016. The school has five school blocks making ten permanent classrooms. There is one class for standard two with three female teachers. In total, there are 178 learners in standard two. The school is surrounded by eighteen villages making its catchment area.

The school enjoys clean drinking water from a borehole with a hand pump that was donated by the Four Square Church in 1992. Even people from the surrounding villages drink water from this borehole, which makes the school to have a good relationship with the surrounding communities.



Figure 3: A borehole with a hand pump at School Y

Both schools have permanent buildings designed for teaching and learning. The only challenge is that classrooms are not enough to accommodate all learners registered. This leads to overcrowding of learners in one class and some learn in shelters in the case of School Y.



Figure 4: A shelter used as a classroom at School Y

In both schools, some learners learn in a C.C.A.P church buildings as shown in Figures 5 and 6



Figure 5: CCAP Church used as a classroom at School X



Figure 6: CCAP Church used as a classroom at School Y

The general characteristics of both schools are summarised in Table 4.1

Table 4.1: General characteristics of the two schools

Theme		School X	School Y
Location		East of the DEMs office	North-East of the DEMs office
Year of establishment		1922	1991
Proprietor		CCAP	CCAP
Number of teachers	Qualified (trained)	45	32
	Untrained	-	4 (Students on teaching practice)
Number of learners		2907	1900
Number of school blocks		9	5
Catchment area		26 villages	18 villages
Water source		-	Borehole

In both schools, children involved in the study were within the age range of seven to twelve years. Learners who were twelve years old in standard two meant that they repeated one or two classes. Among the twenty learners who participated in the study, two boys were repeating standard two while three learners, a boy and two girls repeated standard one. Most learners interviewed had elder sisters and brothers who were in junior and senior classes.

4.1.3 Demographic characteristics of parents

From the observation of the researcher, the population in the surrounding communities comprised poor households. They lived below the poverty line. Most parents were located in typical villages where economy is mostly agricultural based. They grow maize, tobacco, groundnuts and sorghum. Other parents fetch firewood from Mulanje mountain

as a source of income. This is against the by-laws made by Mulanje Mountain Conservation Trust (MMCT), a non-governmental organisation that guards the mountain against fetching firewood from the mountain. In addition, most parents had children ranging from four to eight which implies that they have a big family responsibility to take care of.

Their educational level varied from one parent to another. The literacy level of most parents was poor as many of them could not read and write, yet others dropped either at primary or secondary schools but with good basic reading ability. Though some were illiterate, what impressed the researcher was that they were socially active and had good interpersonal relationships demonstrated by the way they welcomed the researcher in their community. Furthermore, 15 out of 20 parents interviewed were women representing a 75 percent of the parents interviewed. This was so because each time the researcher visited the homes, women were readily available. Possibly, men were out of their homes searching basic necessities for their families. This was also noted by Kadzamira, Maluwa-Banda, Kamlongera, and Swainson (2001) in their study, which noted that women in Malawi are responsible for taking care of family members, hence their presence during the research.

Having described the two schools and demographic characteristics of parents, the following section focuses on the key findings on participants' perception on parental involvement in supporting their children to develop reading at an early age.

4.2 Parents' behaviours and practices for supporting their children to read at an early grade

The study intended to find out parents' behaviour and practices for supporting their children to read at an early grade. This section will provide the findings in relation to parents' behaviour and practices, parents' choice of time for assisting their children, how parents assist their children read, and parents' motivation for assisting their children develop reading.

4.2.1 Behaviour and practices of parents that promote reading

Through Focus Group Discussions and interviews with learners and parents respectively, the research aimed at finding out behaviour and practices of parents that promote reading. The findings indicate that generally parents help their children to develop reading skills at an early age. When parents were asked on what they do with their children for them to develop reading, they generally indicated that they ask their children to read to them extracts from their school textbooks. This was also corroborated by the learners:

Amatenga buku kumandiwerengetsa nkhani zosiyanasiyana
[She asks me to read to her].
(FGD 1, Learner 6, School X)

Nthawi zambiri mayi anga amandiuza kuti katenge buku lako ndizikuwerengetsa.
[My mother asks me to get the book and she starts teaching me how to read].
(FGD 2, Learner 19, School Y)

Teachers were also asked if there are certain behaviours and practices of parents that promote reading. Teachers from both schools agreed with parents and learners that some

parents play a vital role in education of their children especially when it comes to reading. One teacher had this to say:

*Makolo ena amakhala ndi anawo ndi kumawerenga limodzi
pomwe ena amawafusa kuti aziwawerengera kuchokera mbuku.*
[Other parents read together with their children, while others
ask their children to read to them].
(Female teacher, School X)

There is evidence that most parents involved in this study make effort to assist their children read and that teachers appear to be aware of such efforts. The quantity and quality of such parental efforts is debatable and need further examination in future research as it is beyond the scope of this study. Again, how teachers come to know about what parents do in this respect is also an interesting development as it may point to the strength of linkages of parents and school teachers.

4.2.2 Parents' choice of time for and approach in assisting their children read

The study explored whether there are specific time pattern for assisting children and the strategies parents use to develop their children's reading skills. The research found that parents do not have specific time for assisting their children to develop reading skills.

The following excerpts confirm this assertion:

*Tinasanapite kogona, amayi anga amandifunsa kuti ndidziwawerengera
zimene taphunira kuchokera mkothe mwanga.*

[Before going to bed, my mother asks me to read to her from my exercise book].

(FGD 1, Learner 10, School X)

*Tikadya nsima madzulo amalemba "s" ndi "a" ndi kundifunsa kuti
apa ndalemba chiyani? Ine ndimawerenga kuti "sa".*

[Soon after dinner, my parents write “s” and “a” then ask me to read to them as “sa”].

(FGD 1, Learner 17, School Y)

Basi akangobwera kumunda, akangophika nsima, timakhala pa khonde ndikuyamba kundiwerengetsa.

[After field work, I sit down with my parents and start teaching me how to read].

(FGD 2, Learner 14, School Y)

Ndimamphunzitsa kuwerenga akabwera kusukulu, ndimakhala naye pansi ndi bukhu lake ndi kumamphunzitsa.

[When he comes back from school, I ask him to take his book and teach him reading from it].

(Parent 2, February 17, 2016)

From the above statements, it is evident that parents help their children develop reading at different times of the day depending on their flexibility. It also appears that each parent has his/her own style of helping his/her child. Those that help their children immediately after classes could be an ideal time before learners forget what they learnt, although one can also argue that at such a time the children are tired with the day's class work and concentration may not be enough. Yet helping children after supper could also have some implications. After supper, children also get tired from play and hence limited interest and concentration to learn. After all, children like playing and by this time they might have also exhausted the energy they had for the day. Possibly, parents should use play time to teach and encourage their children to read. Experience has shown that standard 2 learners knock off at 11:20 am and after that the remaining hours are for play. So parents

and other community members should use this time to teach them reading other than leaving them to play for the whole day.

4.2.3 Strategies used by parents to supporting their children read

When parents were asked to explain how they assisted their children read, the parents mentioned a number of strategies. The study revealed that some parents help their children to develop reading through different techniques such as reading aloud from the textbook, comprehension questions, word formation, alphabetic principle and writing activities. The following are excerpts from some parents:

Ndimamfunsa kuti andiwerengere kenako ndimamfotokozera. Nthawi zina ndimamfunsa mafunso pazimene amawerenga kuti ndione ngati wamvetsa zimene amawerenga. Nthawi zina ndimamfunsa kuti apange mawu ndi ma letters amene ndampatsa kenako andiwerengere mawuwo.

[I ask him to read to me. Sometimes, I ask him comprehension questions based on what he was reading. I could also ask him to make words from a list of letters given and read the words made to me].

(Parent 7, February 22, 2016)

Pena akalemba kusukulu ndimangofuna ndione pena ndimakayika kuti walemba ndi iyeyo ndiye ndimampatsa kope lina kuti alembenso ndi cholinga choti ndikhulupirire kuti analemba ndi iyeyo ndipo awerenge zimene walembazo. Ana ena ndi atambwali amapanga anzawo ganyu.

[When she knocks off, I check what she wrote at school. Then, I give her a new exercise book to write the same work without referring to her previous exercise book. After that, I ask her to read to me what she has written. Am afraid of using her friends to write for her. Some children are crooks, they cheat].

(Parent 14, March 04, 2016)

Poyamba ndimakhala naye pansi kuti adziwe alifabeti. Kachiwiri maphatikizo amawu, kenako ndinaona kuti akukwanitsa.

[Firstly, I teach him letters of the alphabet. Secondly, I teach syllables.
As of now, he is reading].
(Parent 19, March 10, 2016)

The findings above reveal that parents use different strategies when assisting their children to read. It appears most parents ask their children to read aloud to them followed by comprehension questions. This makes children to internalise what they were reading and focus on main ideas of the text. For parents that teach their children reading, starting with letters of the alphabet, children associate the letter name and its sound at an early stage which is the basis for better foundation to reading (USAID-Malawi, 2013a). However, the extent to which parents assist their children using varied approaches is subject to further exploration. As a broader approach, the study further revealed that other parents send their children to preschool where they develop emergent literacy skills before sending them to primary school. This was reported by one parent who explained:

Mwana ameneyi chosangalatsa choyambirira anapita kusukulu yamkaka pamene amachokako akudziwa kale kuwerenga. Panopa timaonetsetsa zolembe zake kuti timuthandize.

[What is so pleasing about this child is that he was once enrolled at a nursery school where he developed emergent literacy skills. This time we check his work and assist him where necessary].

(Parent 11, February 29, 2016)

Emergent literacy encompasses all aspects of children's oral and written language skills. These skills include conceptual knowledge (e.g. knowledge of the functions of the print) and children's early procedural knowledge of writing and reading (e.g. invented spellings) (Epstein, 2001).

On overall, findings illustrate that more educated parents help their children develop reading skills in elaborative ways. Though they show their skills differently, what is so clear is that they use better strategies required to teach children develop reading skills. However, it appears that some parents do not assist their children regularly due to other commitments. This implies that some parents unintentionally do not adequately compliment teachers' efforts in assisting children to develop reading.

4.2.4 Parents' motivation for assisting their children develop reading skills

In responding to the question on why parents help their children develop reading at early grade level, the study found that parents have different reasons for helping their children. Most parents help their children because they understand that education is essential in everyday life. One parent made the following statement:

Ndimamulimbikitsa kuti aziwerenga ndi cholinga choti adzakhale ndi tsogolo labwino.

[I encourage him to read in order to have a bright future].

(Parent 12, March 02, 2016)

Furthermore, some parents consider education as an investment. They believe that once their child is able to read and write (literate), the child will in turn help them when they grow old. One parent narrated:

Ndikuganiza choncho chifukwa panopa mwana wopita kusukulu ndi yekhaya ndiye akhoza kudzandithandiza kutsogoloku akaphunzira ine nditakalamba.

[I think so, because as of now she is the only child who goes to school. Once educated, she might support me once I grow old].

(Parent 9, February 22, 2016)

Although the general assumption of parents' support to the education of their children is to get back what they spent on them, there are some factors that might prevent this from becoming a reality. The factors might range from productivity level to employability of the child.

Some parents help their children develop reading at an early grade for knowing that once the child is able to read, it is a springboard for learning other subjects. It will be easy for them to excel in other learning areas. One of the parents noted:

Ndimadziwa kuti ngati akutha kuwerenga ndiye kuti maphunziro enawonso sangamuvute ngati masamu.

[I know that if he is able to read, it will not be difficult for him to do well in other learning areas like Numeracy and Mathematics].

(Parent 6, February 19, 2016)

Literature also confirms this assertion that if the child is able to read and write, it is easy for him/her to excel in other types of learning (Evans, Myers, & Ilfeld, 2008). For instance, a child may solve a mathematical problem correctly if he/she understands the question in the language he/she is competent with. Failing which, it will be difficult for him/her to solve it.

However, experience has also shown that although some learners develop reading skills, it appears that other learners are good in one learning area and poor in another learning area. For instance, some learners do well in languages and perform poorly in sciences and

vice versa. So, it does not always follow that when the learner develops reading, he/she will also excel in other learning areas.

4.3 Key barriers to supporting children, and suggested solutions

The study sought to find out barriers that parents meet when supporting their children to develop reading and how they cope with the challenges (coping mechanism). Table 4.2 is a summary of the challenges that parents, learners and teachers mentioned.

Table 4.2: Summary of challenges encountered by parents

Challenge	Parents N=20	Learners N=20	Teachers N=2	Total N=42
Lack of reading resources	16	12	2	30
Low literacy levels of parents	12	11	2	25
Lack of time	11	8	2	21
Uncooperative children	6	4	-	10
Poverty	11	9	2	22
Lack of appropriate skills and knowledge	12	8	2	22
Lack of communication	13	3	-	16

Based on the table above, it is not a surprising finding that lack of reading resources is the most highly barrier considering that the situation in our primary schools is like that, if not they are not adequate at all. Another striking barrier coming out clearly is about the

low literacy levels of parents. This finding is in tandem with the demographic characteristics of parents that have been raised earlier on in this chapter. As discussed later in the section, poverty as a key barrier is significant as it may show the deep-rootedness of the challenges at family level, suggesting further that families might see parental support from the lens of the household struggles for basic needs. In such a case, supporting their children's reading might not be a priority.

4.3.1 Lack of reading resources

The study revealed that generally teachers do not give books learners to read at home due to limited stock at the school. It was reported that teachers among other things fear that learners may lose the books, and learners often tear books that may not be easily replaced by their parents. The consensus among learners for not being given books to be read at home, among others include the fear that the books will be stolen or be torn. This is what one learner reported:

Akuti sangatipatse mabuku chifukwa anzathu atha kutibera komanso ting'amba.

[Teachers are saying that they cannot give us books to take them home because they might be stolen or we will tear them].

(FGD 1, Learner 1, School X)

Teachers were also asked if they give books to learners to take them home. The study found that teachers do not give learners reading books for two reasons. Teachers reported:

Mabuku ndi ochepa ndi kuchuluka kwa ana m'kalasi sizigwirizana, tizioneka ngati tikukondera

[Chichewa books are not adequate for each and every learner. If we borrow few learners, they might think that we are biased towards some learners]

(Female teacher 1, School X)

Another Standard 2 teacher had a different opinion for not giving learners books to take them home. This is what she reported:

Ana amang'amba mabuku komanso akhoza kumaberana ndiye tizingolimbana ndi makolo awo kuti akagule zimene sangakwanitse.

[Learners tear books and we are afraid that their parents may not replace them once stolen]

(Female teacher 2, School Y)

The research also established that apart from prescribed text books for learners to read, they are not given supplementary reading materials as one of the parents explained:

Ifeyo ngati makolo moti tikusoweke mabuku a padera oti aziphunzirira kuwerenga

[We are in need of supplementary reading materials].

(Parent 11, February 29, 2016)

Though it is a known fact that books should be taken home for learners to read, teachers in the study deny learners from doing so. The greatest fear for teachers is not only the concern for security but also that teachers do not trust learners. This could be dealt with by introducing books to learners and orient them on the value of books. In the Malawian setting, it is unquestionable that some learners start school without being exposed to books. Yet, for learners to develop fluency and comprehension at an early age, they need to be exposed to different types of texts. These include prescribed books, supplementary readers and old textbooks. If teachers and parents want their children to

develop love of reading both in and out of school, they need to be provided with abundant opportunities for reading.

It is interesting that the findings of the study are similar to a research that was conducted in Botswana where children were not allowed to take home their reference books (Mathangwane & Arua, 2006). The reasons were similar to those found in this study that they will either be stolen at home or will not be returned.

When parents and learners were asked on how they deal with this problem, the study found that some parents borrow books directly from teachers for their children. Some parents and learners had this to report:

Ndimambwerekera mabuku ku sukulu ndi kwa anzanga.

[I borrow books from school as well as my friends].

(Parent 15, March 8, 2016)

When parents were probed on how they access the books at school, yet children were denied the chance, the researcher learnt that on agreement between the teacher and parents, this was possible. It was on condition that the parent would be entirely responsible for the book unlike when it is in the hands of the child.

Other parents source other reading materials locally instead of relying on the school. This is what other parents said:

Ndimamuwerengetsa mabuku ena ndi ena amene tinaphunzira kale kale.

[I use old books that we were reading during our time for him to read].

(Parent 12, March 02, 2016)

It is interesting to note that some parents have access to school books for their children through the same teachers who deny children access to the same books. From experience, it seems such parents who borrow books for their children are literate. It is likely that illiterate parents cannot think of borrowing books for their children since they do not see the value of books. It also defeats the teacher's sentiments that books are not given to learners because the community might feel that they are biased. Yet, there are elements of bias when few parents come and borrow books for their children while others do not. Possibly, those that borrow books are the same parents making their children to be on the advantage side over other children. It could be better if teachers make it open during PTA meetings that parents are allowed to come at school and borrow books for their children.

4.3.2 Low literacy levels of parents

The study has revealed that most parents fail to support their children develop reading skills at an early stage because they are illiterate. It was learnt that most parents could not either read or write. This was a concern for most parents as some explained:

*Ndikulephera kumuthandiza kuwerenga chifukwa ineyo sindinaphunzire,
aphunzitsi amanena kuti timphunzitse kuwerenga koma ine sindidziwa
kuwerenga ndiye ndimphunzitsa bwanji?*

[Though teachers encourage us to teach our children how to read, my challenge is that I am illiterate].

(Parent 17, March 09, 2016)

Inetu sindimadziwa kuwerenga kuti ndingamuthandize mwana wanga ...

[I am unable to read as such I cannot teach my child reading].

(Parent 7, February 22, 2016)

Ndinasiira sukulu panjra moti mmene ndingamuthandizire sindidziwa.

[I dropped school so early so that I am not sure of how I can support my child].

(Parent 8, February 22, 2016)

Learners too concurred with their parents that they are not helped by their parents because they are illiterate. To confirm it this is what one learner reported:

Mayi anga sanaphunzire ndiye ndipovuta kundithandiza.

[My mother did not go to school; as such it is difficult for her to help me].

(FGD 1, Learner 4, School X)

These findings are similar to the Botswana studies in chapter two by Bynner and Parsons (2006) who argue that parents with the poorest grasp of literacy are at a substantial disadvantage. The reasons being that such parents do not understand the work that child does or thinks that they may confuse the child if they do it wrongly. On the other hand, it does not require someone to be literate so to assist the child. From the researcher's experience, asking questions about reading assignment, work covered in class or just showing interest in the learners work could be considered as ways in which parents can assist their children develop reading. Even assisting children verbally is part of caregivers' role that Social cultural theory advocates for.

However, the findings reveal that even illiterate parents find some mechanisms in order to help their children develop literacy skills at an early grade. The following are some ways in which parents deal with this challenge:

Ndimafunsa anzake kuti azimuthandiza komanso ndimamuuza kuti azilimbikira sukulu asadzakhale mbuli ngati ineyo.

[I ask her peers to support her. In addition, I encourage her to work hard in class so that she should not be an illiterate person like me].

(Parent 17, March 09, 2016)

Another parent explained:

Nchifukwa chake ndinapeza mphunzitsi woti azimuthandiza.

[It is for this reason that I hired a part time teacher].

(Parent 20, March 11, 2016)

The assistance that peers and part time teachers offer to these learners for them to develop reading is in tandem with the social cultural theory that encourages peers and caregivers to help and scaffold. What is so pleasing is that some illiterate parents bank their hopes even on the elder children in the family in order to assist their peers to develop reading rather than depending on teachers only. Social Cultural Theory puts able siblings in the role of a mentor. This implies that teaching is mentoring and mentoring is teaching.

It was also reported that some parents go to adult literacy centres for the intention of knowing how to read and write as a coping mechanism. This is what one learner reported:

Amayi anga amapita ku sukulu ya kwacha ndi cholinga chofuna kuti azindithandiza kuwerenga panyumba.

[My mother enrolled with adult literacy so that she is able to assist me how to read].

(FGD 1, Learner 7, School X)

Parents who join adult literacy sessions do not only assist their learners develop reading but this also has a long lasting effect on themselves. It is believed that their thinking

ability, problem solving and social interaction in the community improves for the better. The underlying belief is that someone who has gone to school has better reasoning than someone who did not. While this is true to some extent, experience has also shown that it is not always true. There are certain parents who did not go to school but are able to interact, solve issues and even could encourage their children to work hard at school. Such parents have social literacy.

4.3.3 Poverty

Interviews with parents revealed that parents fail to support their children effectively because of poverty. One parent explained in this way:

Chifukwa cha umphawi wa zovala, chakudya, ine ndimapita ku phiri kukatola nkhuni ndi cholinga choti tigulitse tipeze zosowa zathu. Ndiye mpata umasowa wothandizira mwana wanga.

[Due to poverty, I normally go to the mountain to look for firewood for sale so that I can get food. As the result, I do not have time to assist my child].

(Parent 2, February 17, 2016)

To curb poverty at family level, some parents reported that they operate small scale businesses as one way of getting basic needs in their families. As one parent narrated:

Ndimapanga timabizinesi kuti mwina tithe kupeza zofunika za tsiku ndi tsiku.

[I operate small scale businesses in order to find our daily needs].

(Parent 5, February 19, 2016)

Other parents fetch firewood from Mulanje mountain in order to sell for their basic needs.

*Ine ndimapita ku phiri kukatola nkhuni ndi cholinga choti tigulitse tipeze
zosowa zathu ndiye mpata umasowa wothandizira mwana wanga”*

[I normally go to the mountain to fetch firewood for sale so that we meet
our daily basic need needs].

(Parent 2, February 17, 2016)

The findings reveal that some parents are creative enough despite the socio-economic challenges in their households. They operate small scale businesses and fetch firewood from Mulanje mountain for sale in order to minimise the effects of poverty. The Government of Malawi has now deployed military officers to strength the security with the Department of Forestry against the unnecessary cutting down of trees on the mountain. It could be meaningful if parents intensify farming instead of fetching firewood as a source of income generation.

As noted from the above findings, poverty hinders parents from supporting their children because are busy looking for daily basic needs for their families. As such, learners are likely to miss the required support from parents. These findings are similar to what Morrow, Tracey and Maxwell (1995) observe that if the family lacks basic needs like food, it will be extremely difficult for a hungry parent to encourage a hungry child to read. Moreover, strategies that parents follow in order to cub the challenges are not supported by the social cultural theory. The theory advocates supporting children directly using other peers and adults through social interaction which is not the case here.

4.3.4 Lack of time

The study has found that most parents do not have time that they can use to support their children develop reading skills. Research shows that this is due to pressure of work, demands of other children as well as family responsibilities. This is what was reported by one parent:

Sindimakhala ndi nthawi yomuthandiza bwino bwino chifukwa cha ntchito, komanso udindo wa pabanja muja ndakuuzani kuti pa nyumba pano pali ana eight, amenewo ndi masewera? Nthawi zina ndimakagwira ntchito kutali kogonera konko, amunanganso ali kutali. Ndiyenera ndi waganizirenso choncho mavuto ndi ambiri.

[I don't have time to support my child not only due to pressure of work but also demands of other children, like I said; I have eight children in this house. Worse still my husband does not stay with me. All in all, I have a lot of problems]

(Parent 18, March 10, 2016)

It is interesting to note that these sentiments emanated from a fairly educated working class parent who would be expected to assist her child develop reading skills, but she openly admitted that she had no time to help her child. One would have expected that she would easily assist her children with reading. This is in tandem with work commitment issues as a challenge cited by Peters et al (2008) who observed that even parents fail get involved in their child's school life due to among other factors, pressure of work.

However, due to lack of proper planning, parents do not find time to help their children develop reading skills. Time needs to be budgeted as well and this can help parents to be guided on what to do and at what time should it be done. Parents should be encouraged to

prepare a tentative daily time table so that they manage and utilise time for reading judiciously and effectively.

Based on the study findings, the following are some strategies that busy or working parents use to cope with their challenges in supporting their children read:

Ndimafunsa anzake kuti azimuthandiza.

[I ask her fellow friends and playmates to help her].

(Parent 17, March 9, 2016)

Other parents ask neighbours and other children within the community to assist their children. This is what one parent pointed out:

Ndimafunsa anzanga woyandikana nawo kuti akamathandiza mwana wawo, azitengakonso wangayi. Ndipo amachitadi bwino bwino.

[I ask my neighbours that when assisting their children, they should also take my child on board, a thing that they do].

(Parent 12, March 3, 2016)

According to Sociocultural theory, neighbours are considered as caregivers who also have a responsibility of developing the child in a natural context (Gray & Macblain, 2012). However, this has its own implications in this context. For instance, neighbours may not effectively assist the child for knowing that he/she is not his/her own child. After all, the other parent is not paying anything as a token of appreciation unless it is assumed such an arrangement is made between the parents. Additionally, the child himself/herself may not feel comfortable to be continually be supported by a different adult other than the mother or father.

4.3.5 Uncooperative children

One challenge that most parents cited in the research was that some children do not listen to them when teaching them reading. It was reported that children sometimes underrate their parents as “old fashioned” and therefore follow and trust instructions from their teachers only.

The following sentiments were made by some parents:

Nthawi zina amadelera kuti ife ndi ambiri yakale...

[Sometimes, these children underrate us as old fashioned].

(Parent 6, February 19, 2016)

Nthawi zina mwana samatha kumvetsa zimene ndi kunena, ndi kundikwiyira, nthawi zina amadelera.

[Sometimes the child does not understand what I say, and becomes bored. Sometimes, he underrates me].

(Parent 2, February 17, 2016)

Ana samasangalatsidwa kuwerenga ndi makolo awo akuti koma aphunzitsi awo.

[Children are not happy to read with their parents, in preference to their teachers].

(Parent 14, March 04, 201)

It should not be ruled out that some learners are uncooperative when working with their parents. Some parents might be the root cause of the lack of cooperation with their children. For instance, if parents teach children the content below or beyond the ability level of their children, they may respond negatively. On the hand, if parents’ teaching strategies are not well linked with those of teachers, children might not be comfortable to follow what their parents teach them. As a result, children are labeled as uncooperative.

The study found that different strategies are employed by different parents to cope with this challenge including use force and punishments as some learners explained:

Eee! Amapeleka chilango.

[Our parents punish us].

(FGD 1, Learner 4, School X)

Timamuopseza kuti azimva zimene tikumuza.

[We threaten him/her].

(Parent 6, February 19, 2016)

Although punishing learners could be an ideal step towards stopping them from taking reading activities lightly, in the long run the child is used to punishment. As a result, it becomes no longer a deterring factor. Research has also shown that parents who use punishments for academic performance or display negativity or anger about academics can discourage children from developing intrinsic motivation (Gottfried, Flemming, & Gottfried, 1994). Possibly the right way is what other parents do as stipulated below. One parent stated:

Mavuto amenewa ndimawathetsa. Ndikadziwa kuti zimene ndi kunena sakumva, ndimamukhazikitsa mtima pansi, kumunyengelera mpaka amagonja ndi kuyamba kumphunzitsa.

[When I discover that he is not getting what I am saying, I reason with him and start teaching him again].

(Parent 2, February 17, 2016)

Furthermore, there are other parents who believe in giving gifts as incentives to their children as part of encouragement when teaching them reading. This was noted in statements made by one parent who stated:

Pofuna kumulimbikitsa ndimampatsa mphatso tsiku ndi tsiku akamaliza kuwerenga.

[As part of encouragement, I give him incentives daily as soon as he finishes reading].

(Parent 14, March 04, 2016)

While the researcher acknowledges the importance of extrinsic motivation like giving gifts to children, it may imply that without gifts, the child will shun away from the reading activity. What is important is to prepare the child develop intrinsic motivation. One way is to encourage children on the benefits of reading and share success stories of those who excelled with their education.

4.3.6 Lack of appropriate skills and knowledge

The study found out that despite the fact that some parents are literate, they do not have the appropriate skills and knowledge on how they can assist their children to develop reading at an early grade level. From the responses, it was clear that parents lack skills and knowledge:

... Mavuto ndi ambiri, monga ndilibe luso ndi upangiri wa momwe ndingamuthandizire mwana wanga.

[...there are so many challenges, but the main one is lack of skills on how I can support my child].

(Parent 3, February 17, 2016)

In agreement to the above statement, another parent reiterated:

Popeza njira zimasintha koma ife aphunzitsi amatiyambitsa kuwerenga ndi alifabeti koma masiku ano sindidziwa bwino bwino.

[Since teaching methodologies change, but during our time, our teachers started teaching us how to read by introducing letters of the alphabet, but nowadays, am not sure of the appropriate method].

(Parent 16, March 09, 2016)

... zimandivuta ndi mabuku amene timaphunzira ifeyo kale ndi alero ndi osiyana choncho sindimadziwa kuti ndingamuthandize bwanji. Njira zake sindimazidziwanso.

[Books that we learnt during our time are totally different from those that our children are using, hence no knowledge and skills on how I can teach him reading].

(Parent 4, February, 2016)

Experience has shown that methodologies for teaching reading change over time. For example, in the past two decades, the curriculum emphasised on phonics approach to reading whilst the present primary school curriculum emphasises on whole word approach. It is common knowledge that some parents or teachers teach or behave in the very same way they were taught. It is not surprising therefore that that parents still find it difficult to cope with the strategies promoted by the current syllabus.

Most parents found an alternative for lack of skills and knowledge and they generally opted for part time teachers. This is what one parent reported:

Nchifukwa chake ndinampezera mphunzitsi woti azimuphunzitsa.

[Due to lack of knowledge and skills, I hired a part time teacher to assist my child].

(Parent 20, March 1, 2016)

According to the social cultural theory, mediated, social and collaborative activity can be thought of as a bridge which brings the child from lower reading skills to higher reading skills. So involvement of a part time teacher (an adult) is a step towards the achievement of reading skills in children.

Although involvement of a part time teacher sounds good, it should also be noted that not all parents can afford to hire a part time teacher due to their socio-economic status. This element might make teachers maximise their effort on part time teaching considering the fact that this is an additional payment to them to the detriment of children at the school. So, children from poor families perpetually suffer.

4.3.7 Lack of communication

Participants in the study indicated that lack of communication by teachers on the progress of their children is one of the major problems parents face. Some parents argued:

Aphunzitsi samanena mmene ana athu akuchitira mkalasi, kaya akukhoza kaya akulephera ife sitimadziwa timangoti bola akupita ku sukulu.

[Teachers do not report the progress of our learners, whether they are doing well or not. Although they go to school regularly, we don't know their progress].

(Parent 7, February 22, 2016).

However, another parent explained that teachers communicate to them only when the child has misbehaved. This is what one of the parents contended:

Aphunzitsi amatidziwitsa za ana athu pokhapokha ngati wapalamula.

[Teachers communicate to us only when the child has done something wrong].

(Parent 18, March, 2016)

When teachers were asked if they communicate the progress of their learners, one teacher explained:

Makolo timawauza momwe mwana akukhozera nthawi ya PTA komonso posekera teremu.

[Parents are communicated during PTA meeting and at the end of each term].

(Female Teacher 2, School Y)

Parents wish if teachers could inform them on the progress of their children and some parents suggested the following approach:

Azindiitana ndikumandifotokozera mmene mwana wanga akukhozera...

[Teachers should invite and inform me at school about the progress of my child.

(Parent 17, March 09, 2016)

Azitiitana kumakatiuza mmene ana akuchitira mkalasi.

[Teachers should invite us at school and report about the progress of our children].

(Parent 4, February 18, 2016)

The findings are similar to studies conducted in Germany where teachers communicate to parents only when their children misbehave at school (Dickson & Caswell, 2007). This tendency is in contrast to the social cultural theory that advocates for social relationship and interaction between caregivers, siblings and teachers. In absence of communication between parents and teachers, children will not develop reading skills because area of focus in children will not be established by parents.

Although teachers agreed that they generally communicate progress of their learners to their parents, they do not meet parents' expectation. Parents would want to be updated by teachers regularly. Yet, this is not possible considering the number of children teachers handle in lower classes. On the other hand, teachers do not have enough time and resources to reach out to every parent of the child he/she has in the classroom.

4.3.8 Other related challenges

Apart from the challenges that parents directly face when supporting their children develop reading, the study also found that there are other barriers that parents noted as issues on the school management side. Such challenges include lack of interest and commitment by teachers and large classes.

4.3.8.1 Lack of interest and commitment by teachers

The study revealed that some teachers lack interest and commitment towards their learners' learning as some parents complained:

Aphunzitsi ena sakhala ndi chidwi chofuna kudziwa zovuta za mwana aliyense ndi kumawathandiza moyenera.

[Some teachers do not have interest to identify individual needs of each and every child in the classroom and help them accordingly].

(Parent 20, March 11, 2016)

This finding is in agreement with Anderson and Gehart (2007) who also observed that teachers had the same challenge of lacking interest and commitment in their work. But when teachers were asked if they lack interest and commitment, they denied this. This is what one of the teachers explained:

Ndizabodza kuti ife sitimakhala ndi chidwi ndi ophunzira, koma kungoti ifenso tili ndi mavuto ambiri-mbiri.

[It is not true that we are not committed. The fact is that we have also our own challenges].

(Female teacher 2, School Y)

Although, it is true that some teachers are not committed to their work, experience has shown that some teachers strive to assist children efficiently and effectively. This is seen through remediation lessons conducted by some teachers after classes for free. Teachers help struggling learners to acquire necessary reading skills as part of scaffolding them. On one hand, teachers face many challenges including poor environmental factors and lack of external motivation which impede their normal operation.

To mitigate this challenge, parents suggested that teachers should identify struggling learners, and encourage their parents to assist them on areas that need support. One parent for instance had this to say:

Aphunzitsi azithabe kuzindikira ana amene sakuchita bwino, kenako tizigwirana dzanja ndi cholinga choti ana azitha kuwerenga bwino bwino.

[Teachers should still strive to identify learners who are struggling to read and join hands with us to rectify the problems identified].

(Parent 15, March 08, 2016)

It is still the teachers' responsibility to diagnose individual learning needs of children if the teacher is to achieve the intended learning outcomes. Parents also need to compliment teachers' efforts in assisting their children learn to read. However, there is need for the government and the society at large to lessen challenges teachers face which in turn inflict into their daily efforts.

4.3.8.2 Large classes

The study showed that most parents allude to large classes as another challenge that impedes teachers to support each learner accordingly for them to develop reading. One parent had this to say:

Mkalasi anawa amakhalamo ambiri khoma to khoma. Nchifukwa chake mphunzitsi sangathandize mwana ali yense komanso sadziwa kuti ndi wuti sakutha kuwerenga bwino bwino.

[These children are overcrowded in class. It is for this reason that a teacher cannot manage to help each and every learner in class. The teacher also doesn't know which learner is unable to read properly].

(Parent 7, February 22, 2016)

Some learners also commented on the same. This is what one learner said:

Kusukulu, mkalasi timakhalamo ambiri ndiye aphunzitsi sangakwanitse kutithandiza tonse.

[We are many of us in our class. It is impossible for the teacher to help each one of us].

(FGD 2, learner 16, School Y)

Teachers also agreed that they had large classes. One female teacher reported:

Mkalasi mwanga muli ana ochuluka zedi. Muli ana 178.

[I have a large class of 178 learners].

(A female teacher, School Y)

The issue of large classes in the two schools is not a surprising finding as the problem of large classes in Malawi has been a longstanding one and the Government has over the years made attempts to reduce pupil: teacher ratio. Despite Government's efforts, the challenge remains and highly influences literacy practices at school level (MoEST, 2009). The findings further indicate that Parents' awareness of overcrowded classes motivates them to take the responsibility of supporting their children at home as one parent reported:

Chifukwa chakuchuluka kwa ana mkalasi, ndiyenera ndizimuthandiza kunyumba kuno.

[Due to large classes, I help my child here at home].

(Parent 7, February 22, 2016)

Knowledgeable parents should indeed support their children to develop reading since children depend on others especially those with more experiences as advocated by social cultural theory. Based on this finding it may be argued that where parents appreciate the contextual challenges in schools, they are likely to support their children with reading at home.

Parents suggested if teachers could have sizeable classes for effective teaching and learning. One parent reported:

*Aphunzitsi akanayenera kukhala ndi nambala yoyenera mkalasi mwawo
ndi cholinga choti onse azipindula chifukwa ana ena amangosewera.*

[I would have loved if teachers had the recommended number of learners
in their class in order to help each learner accordingly. In large classes,
other learners they just play].

(Parent 5, February 19, 2016)

While we acknowledge the ratio 1:60 as manageable class, in the Malawian context based on the Malawi Education Sector Plan (MOEST., 2008), this seems to be a non-starter because of the Free Primary Education (FPE) which was introduced in 1994. This resulted in high enrolment rates of pupils by 70 percent from 1.9 million in 1993/1994 school year to 3.2 million in 1994/1995 school year (Kunje, Lewin, & Stuart, 2003). However, what needs to be done is to devise new approaches to handling large classes like group work; otherwise, splitting the large classes into manageable classes will also demand extra classrooms and more teachers.

4.4 Chapter summary

The chapter has analysed and discussed findings of the study in response to the main research question. The chapter has established that there are different ways in which parents support their children to develop reading ranging from reading to their children, making words from a list of letters and asking neighbours, playmates and part time teachers to help their children. The study has further shown that parents meet a number of challenges when supporting their children, which include: lack of reading resources, low literacy of parents, lack of time, some children being uncooperative to their parents, lack of communication, poverty and lack of appropriate knowledge and skills. Other related

challenges that parents observed were lack of interest and commitment by teachers as well as large classes. Finally, the chapter looked at coping mechanisms for each challenge. From participants' perspective, the general consensus was that there are better ways of dealing with those challenges. Parents employ a part time teacher, ask neighbours, classmates and playmates of their children to help, give incentives while others give punishment to their children as means of dealing with challenges they face. The next chapter will look at conclusions, implications, recommendations and areas for further research.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION, IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.0 Chapter overview

The study investigated parents' involvement in supporting their children to develop reading at an early grade. The main research question guiding the study was: What challenges do parents encounter when supporting their children to develop reading at an early grade? To answer this question the researcher addressed three key sub-questions on: parents' behaviours and practices for supporting their children to read at an early grade; barriers parents meet when supporting their children to develop reading; and how parents cope with the challenges of supporting their children to develop reading. These sub-questions and the main research question have been addressed in Chapter 4 of the thesis. This chapter presents a summary raised from the study findings, some implications and recommendations.

5.1 Key issues

In terms of behaviour and practices of parents that promote reading at an early grade, one key issue the study found was that parents take a bold step to read together with their children. However it was noted that, some parents ask neighbours and classmates to help

their children read, while another group of parents send their children for part time classes. The study also revealed that parents as caregivers had different motives for supporting their children to develop reading at an early grade. The research also found that parents use different times of the day for supporting their children to develop reading. These findings do confirm what other studies have found that parents are generally willing to support children develop reading despite certain limitations in the home environment (Wray & Medwell, 1991). Although the study intensity and quality of parents support could not be established through this study as it was beyond its scope, the different levels and patterns of support raise interesting issues with regard to the variations of possible reading gains by children considering the mix of practices identified.

The second sub-question looked at barriers that prevent parents from supporting their children to develop reading. Evidence from the study demonstrates that parents face a variety of challenges when supporting their children included lack of reading resources, poverty, low literacy levels of parents, lack of knowledge and skills, lack of time, lack of communication by teachers, Again, this finding confirms findings from previous studies both in Malawi and beyond (Chikuni, 2010; Morrow, Tracey & Maxwell, 2005). The fact that poverty is one of key barriers suggests the deep-rootedness of the challenges faced by homes, and the need to link future school literacy development initiatives to family livelihood.

The third and last sub-question was about coping mechanisms that parents use in order to overcome the challenges given in the second research sub-question. The study has revealed that parents find their own coping mechanisms of dealing with challenges outlined above such as employing a part time teacher, joining adult literacy classes to become literate, asking classmates and neighbours to help their children and others giving incentives to their children as one way of encouraging them to develop reading at an early age. This finding is crucial as in many ways point to the fact that while parents may be hard-pressed to support their children develop their reading skills; they are able to find their own alternative solutions to the challenges. The question of whether such solutions are efficient and effective is different issue altogether.

5.2 Implications of the study

Parental involvement in supporting their children develop reading at an early grade has some implications on children. For example, some of the strategies that parents use are quite useful in that they can help children develop reading without difficulties. Teaching reading starting with letters of the alphabet and giving children a list of letters to formulate words are some of the strategies that can help children develop reading fast. The same strategies are also used by teachers when teaching reading in lower classes. Therefore, the research strongly appreciates the efforts of parents in the promotion of literacy on their learners.

A major implication of the study, therefore, is that if learning is to continue at home, children must be allowed to take books at home (Mathangwane & Arua, 2006). It may of

course only require that the teacher keeps and updates his/her records regularly as to track who has the book and for how long.

Furthermore, while teachers' fears on the security of books is well founded considering that most of the children might not have had exposure to books in the home before coming into school, it is a sign perhaps that learners are not oriented on how to handle books when they come into the school. It is crucial therefore that before issuing books to learners teachers orient learners on how to keep books safe both at school and at home.

In view of the variations in parents' behaviours and practices in this study, it seems reasonable to suggest that in the context of the two study schools and their communities, parent support for children's reading in the home setting can be a complex phenomenon and a solution to the core barriers may therefore not be a universal one.

5.3 Recommendations

Based on the study findings, the following recommendations are be in the context of the two schools involved in the study:

- There is need for primary schools through Parent Teacher Association (PTA) to regularly communicate to parents on the progress of their children.
- Parents should use peers in the local communities to enhance reading.
- Communities should mobilise resources that learners can use when reading apart from relying on prescribed books provided by schools.

- The Ministry of Education, Science and Technology through the Department of Planning should build more classrooms in primary schools in order to reduce teacher/ pupil ratio.

5.4 Areas for further Research

This study provides a springboard for other research opportunities in the area of parental involvement in supporting their children to develop reading in the following areas:

- Exploring quality and quantity of parental home support and its implications for literacy development at early grade level
- Investigating appropriate time that parents can assist their children develop reading.
- Investigating the use of Learner Centered Education methods in the teaching of reading in early grade using the available resources.
- Investigating the impact of parents' behaviour and practices on children's reading ability.
- Comparative studies between faith and non-faith based schools for impact

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: An introductory letter to conduct an educational research



CHANCELLOR COLLEGE

Principal: Richard Tambulasi
B.A (Pub Admin), BPA(Hons) MPA, PhD

P. O. Box 280, Zomba, MALAWI
Tel: (265) 01 524 222
Telex: 44742 CHANCOL MI
Fax: (265) 01 524 046
Email: deaned@cc.ac.mw
bchulu@cc.ac.mw

OFFICE OF THE DEAN OF EDUCATION

17th December, 2015

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

Dear Sir/Madam

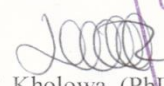
LETTER OF INTRODUCTION (MASTER OF EDUCATION)

The Faculty of Education would like to introduce to you Mr Melvin G. Mutonga, Registration no. MEd/PR/LIT/02/14, Chancellor College M.Ed Student who is supposed to do research in area of his interest.

This letter serves to request you to assist his with data collection in your zone.

The Faculty of Education will appreciate your support in this very important aspect of our students' training.

Yours faithfully,


F. Kholowa, (PhD)
DEAN OF EDUCATION

cc: - Supervisor



Appendix B: Authorisation Letter from the DEM (Phalombe)

Telephone: 01481067
Cell : 0999669790
Fax : 01481067
E-mail : phalombedem@gmail.com

Communication should be addressed to
The District Education Manager.



In reply please quote No: EP/1/3/1

The District Education Manager
P.O Box 146, Phalombe

7th March, 2016

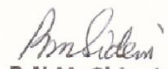
TO : THE HEADTEACHER, NAMINJIWA F.P. SCHOOL,
PHALOMBE ✓
: THE HEADTEACHER, MIGOWI F.P. SCHOOL, PHALOMBE

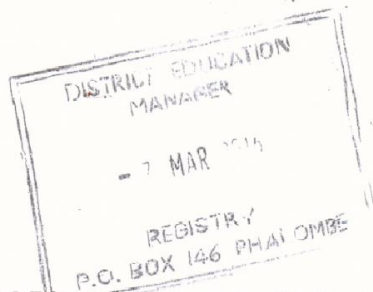
PERMISSION TO CONDUCT EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH STUDY AT NAMINJIWA F.P. SCHOOL

The bearer of the letter is **Mr. Mervin G. Mutonga**, a student of Chancellor College pursuing Master Degree of Education (Primary Education) in Literacy. He has been given permission by the District Education Manager – Phalombe to collect data for educational research study on reading experiences of standard two learners.

Would you please kindly give him the necessary support for the data he requires for his research study.

Thank you.


R.N.M. Sideni,



For : The District Education Manager – Phalombe.

Appendix C: Introduction and informed consent

My name is Mervin Gabriel Mutonga. I am a student from the University of Malawi, Chancellor College. I am collecting data for an academic research study whose general objective is to find out challenges that parents face when supporting their children to develop their reading ability in standard 2. I would be grateful if you could spend some time with me to answer some questions. Information that you will give me will be confidential and your name will not be written anywhere. Note that your answers are strictly for this academic research. The researcher is a post graduate student for Master of Education (Primary Education) specializing in Literacy. You are not forced to answer any questions that you do not want to and you may withdraw from the interview at any point.

Do you have any questions?

May I continue?

Appendix D: Interview guidelines for parents

FAMILY BACKGROUND

1. Gender: Male/ Female
2. How many children do you have? (*Muli ndi ana angati?*)
3. Do they all go to school? (*Kodi onse amapita kusukulu?*)
4. How many children do you have in standard 2? (*Muli ndi ana angati m'sitandade 2?*)

READING SUPPORT

5. What kind of reading support do you provide to your child? (*Kodi mwana wanu mumathandiza bwanji kuti adziwe kuwerenga?*)
6. Describe for me any changes you noticed in your child since your participation in reading at home? (*Tafotokozani kusintha kumene mwakuona mwa mwana wanu pamene munayamba kumuthandiza kuwerenga kuno kunyumba?*)
7. Have their interest levels increased? (*Kodi chidwi chake chowerenga chinakwera?*)
8. How do you know that? (*Mwadziwa bwanji?*)
9. Do you need any reading support? (*Kodi mukusowa chithandizo cha momwe mungamuthandizire mwana wanu kuti adziwe kuwerenga?*)
10. If yes, what kind of reading support? (*Ngati ndi eya, ndi chithandizo chanji?*)

11. Who should give you the necessary support that is needed for your child to develop reading? (*Mukuganiza kuti angakupatseni chithandizo choyenera ndi ndani?*)
12. Do you get any advice from anyone on how best you can help your child develop reading? (*Nanga mumalandira uphungu wina uli wonse wa momwe mungamuthandizire mwana wanu kuwerenga?*)
13. If yes, from whom do you get the advice? *Ngati ndi eya, mumalandira uphunguwu kuchokera kwa yani?*)
14. What kind of advice do you get? (*Tatchulani uphungu umene mwakhala mukalandira?*)

SCHOOL SUPPORT

15. How do teachers help you to support your child in reading? (*Kodi aphunzitsi amakuthandizani bwanji kuti muthandize ana anu kuwerenga?*)
16. How would you like school to involve you in your child's reading development? (*Mukadakonda sukulu ikukuthandizani motani kuti mwana wanu adziwe kuwerenga mofulumira?*)

CHALLENGES

17. What challenges have you been facing in attempting to support your child to develop reading in standard 2? (*Kodi mumakumana ndi mavuto otani pamene mukuyesera kumuthandiza mwana kuwerenga?*)

18. How do you resolve challenges that you face when supporting your child to develop reading in standard 2? *(Nanga mumachitapo chiyani kuti muthetse mavuto amenewo?)*
19. What other ways do you think could help you support your child accordingly? *(Tafotokozani njira zina zomwe mungamuthandizire mwana wanu kuwerenga moyenera?)*

EVALUATION

20. In your own opinion, do you think you have a role in supporting your children to develop reading at an early grade? *(Kodi mukuganiza kuti muli ndi udindo omuthandizira mwana wanu kuti adziwe kuwerenga ali wachichepere?)*
21. Why do you think so? *(Nanga udindo wanu ndi wotani pa mwana wanu?)*

Closing Remarks

Thank you very much for the information that you have provided to make this study a success. Once again be assured of confidentiality about the information that you have provided.

Appendix E: Interview guidelines for Focus Group Discussion (FDG)

With learners

PARENTAL SUPPORT

1. What kind of reading support do your parents provide you to develop reading at home? (*Kodi makolo anu amakuthandizani bwanji kuti mudziwe kuwerenga mosavuta?*)
2. Since they started supporting you in reading, what changes have you noticed in your reading ability? (*Pamene anayamba kukuthandizirani kuwerenga, mukuona kuti mwasintha bwanji?*)
3. What are the most common challenges that your parents face when supporting you to develop reading? (*Ndi mavuto otani omwe makolo anu amakumana nawo pokuthandizani kuwerenga?*)
4. How do your parents resolve challenges that they face when supporting you to develop reading in standard 2? (*Nanga amachita chiyani kuti mavutowo awathetse?*)
5. What other ways do you think could help your parents support you accordingly? (*Tchulani njira zina zomwe makolo atha kuthandizani kuwerenga moyenera?*)

SCHOOL SUPPORT

6. How do the teachers help your parents to support you in reading? (*Kodi aphunzitsi amathandiza makolo anu kuti azikuthandizani kuwerenga?*)

7. In your own opinion, why do you think parents have a role in supporting their children to develop reading at an early grade? (*Chifukwa chiyani mukuganiza kuti makolo anu ali ndi udindo wokuthandizani kuwerenga muli ali achichepere?*)

Closing Remarks:

Thank you very much for the information that you have provided. This has been a successful discussion. Your opinions will be a valuable asset to the study. Once again be assured of confidentiality about the information that you have provided.

Thank you.

Appendix F: INTERVIEW GUIDELINES FOR TEACHERS

1. **Gender:** Male/ Female
2. Age: -----
3. Nationality:_____
4. **Highest Education Qualification:** _____
5. For how long have you been in the teaching service?
6. How many years have you been teaching standard 2?
7. Do you teach other subjects apart from Chichewa?
8. Do you like the way you teach Chichewa? Why?
9. What challenges do you face when teaching Chichewa?
10. How do you resolve the challenges?
11. What reading support does your school provide to parents at home for them to help their children to develop reading at an early grade?
 - a. If not, what would you recommend the support that parents could be provided by school for them to support their children develop reading?
 - b. What challenges do parents at home face when supporting their children to develop reading?
12. In your own opinion, do you think parents have a role in supporting their children to develop reading at an early grade? Why?

Closing Remarks:

Thank you very much for the information that you have provided to make this study a success. Once again be assured of confidentiality about the information that you have provided.

Thank you for your participation! You have been helpful!