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## *Active-Learning Pedagogies as a Reform Initiative: The Case of Malawi*



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## **INTRODUCTION**

Active-learning pedagogies have generated much interest in the international development community. No longer is it sufficient to simply get children in school; it is now important that they receive education that is relevant and of high quality as well. Active-learning pedagogies, also known as participatory approaches or student- or learner-centered methodologies, put students at the center of the learning process. While this may seem intuitive to many education specialists, this paradigm shift can be difficult to put into practice. Veteran teachers who have been lecturing for years can find using active-learning pedagogies burdensome, while new teachers, who likely were taught using rote-learning, teacher-centered methods, may find it difficult to put the new methods into practice.

This study explores the case of Malawi in its efforts to shift to an active-learning approach as one initiative toward education reform. While policies have been put in place to support the use of student-centered methods, there is a divide between policy and practice. This divide is further complicated by issues the country faces since its shift to a multi-party system and the introduction of free primary education (FPE) in 1994. With FPE came an influx of students into an education system that was ill-prepared to handle the increased number of students.

Many donors that provide foreign assistance to Malawi have attempted to address education in varied ways. Two efforts in particular, the Malawi Education Support Activity (MESA) and the Malawi Teacher Training Activity (MTTA), have aimed to change teaching methods at the classroom level. This case study reviews the policies in place and the two interventions to draw attention to the gap between policy and practice to stimulate a dialogue among stakeholders about how to address the divide.

First, this report briefly describes the background and history of Malawi and its efforts toward education reform. Next, it highlights the various education reform discourses emanating from the government and donors. The history of reform strategies, including both government- and donor-implemented strategies, is then discussed. This discussion includes a detailed description of MESA and MTTA. Next, this report presents data from focus group interviews conducted with teachers, supervisors, and community members (in both MESA/MTTA-supported schools and other schools) – their perceptions of the policy and practice of active-learning pedagogies.

## **GEOGRAPHICAL, POLITICAL, ECONOMIC, AND CULTURAL OVERVIEW**

Malawi, a small country in southeastern Africa, is one of the poorest countries in the world, with 52% of its population living below the poverty line (DFID, 2007). Classified by the World Bank as both a low-income country and a heavily indebted country, Malawi's gross national income per capita in 2005 was \$160, compared to an average of \$579.70 for other low-income countries and \$744.80 for sub-Saharan African countries. Health issues also present a challenge. The HIV/AIDS rate is high, at 14.1% in 2005 (World Bank, 2007). Malnutrition and infectious diseases are widespread, with a presence of hepatitis A, typhoid fever, malaria, and schistosomiasis, among others. Given these health indicators, life expectancy is extremely low at 43 years (Central Intelligence Agency, 2007).

After the change of government in 1994, the government of Malawi offered free primary education. Enrollment in primary schools soared: from 1.9 million students in the 1993-94 school year to 3.2 million in the 1994-95 school year – a 68% increase in enrollment in one year (Ministry of Education and Malawi National Commission for UNESCO, 2004). This increase dramatically stretched education resources and resulted in an environment of constant change in order to correct the issues that emerged as a result.

## **AN OVERVIEW OF EDUCATION**

The Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MOEST) is responsible for the provision of primary and secondary schooling, as well as primary school teacher training and continuing professional development (Ministry of Education and Malawi National Commission for UNESCO, 2004). Administratively, there are six education divisions in Malawi, each of which is divided into four to six education districts. These districts are further divided into zones, consisting of 6 to 18 primary schools. Primary school lasts eight years and is made up of Standards 1 through 8. At the end of the primary cycle, the Primary School Leaving Certificate Examination is administered and is used to select students for secondary education (Ministry of Education and Malawi National Commission for UNESCO, 2004).

Primary education in Malawi is currently undergoing major change through the Primary Curriculum and Assessment Reform (PCAR), in which the curricula of primary school and of pre-service education for primary teachers are being reformed. As of late 2008, only the new Standard 1 curriculum had gone into effect, but by 2010 the curriculum reform effort will be complete for all eight Standards. The new curriculum is designed to be implemented by teachers using active-learning methodologies and continuous student assessment.

Secondary school is made up of two levels: junior level (Forms I and II) and senior level (Forms III and IV). The Junior Certificate of Education and the Malawi School Certificate of Education examinations are administered nationally at the end of junior secondary and senior secondary school, respectively (Ministry of Education and Malawi National Commission for UNESCO, 2004). The secondary education curriculum was last revised in 1999 and implemented in 2000 (Ministry of Education and Malawi National Commission for UNESCO, 2004). The Policy and Investment Framework (PIF), as revised in 2001, places special emphasis on changing the format of secondary schools from a boarding school format to a community day school format. This change was meant to increase access to secondary education (Government of Malawi, 2001).

The examination system in Malawi is high-stakes; promotions to the next level of school are based on students' performance on the exams. This poses obstacles when trying to integrate active-learning or student-centered pedagogies into classrooms, because often these pedagogies are seen as being ineffective in preparing students to pass the exams, which is the priority for most teachers, students, and parents.

Tertiary education in Malawi typically lasts two to five years, and options include university, primary teacher training, and technical and vocational education (Government of Malawi, 2001). Until 1998, the University of Malawi was the only university in the country. The government then opened the Mzuzu University to increase available spaces for students and to offer a degree program for secondary teachers (Government of Malawi, 2002). Currently, two private

universities are operational and offer courses and diplomas in education; however these institutions have not yet been officially approved by the government.

Malawi's teacher training and professional development activities are coordinated through the Department of Teacher Education and Development within the MOEST. The main goal of the pre-service teacher training programs in Malawi is to increase the number of qualified teachers at the primary and secondary levels in order to meet the demand due to the Free Primary Education (FPE) policy (MoEST and Malawi National Commission for UNESCO, 2004). Primary school teachers are trained at primary teacher training colleges, while secondary teachers are trained at Domasi College, Chancellor College (which is a part of the University of Malawi), and Mzuzu University. Primary teacher education lasts two years, one in the college and one in a primary school classroom, representing a recent change from a system in which only three months were spent at the college. Secondary teacher education programs consist of four years of study and a year of teaching practice in schools. Most of the secondary teacher education programs lead to a Bachelors of Education degree. Chancellor College also has a certificate program that prepares secondary teachers who do not have an education background.

Continuing professional development for teachers is supported by teacher development centers throughout the country. There are 315 teacher development centers in Malawi and each is staffed by a primary education advisor (PEA) that is assigned a number of schools in the area to support. The PEA is also responsible for supervising student teachers and overseeing their school-based practicum (Exegesis et al., 2004). Community participation is achieved through the establishment of school management committees, which are recognized by the government, are autonomous, and are responsible for school governance and management (Government of Malawi, 2001).

## **EDUCATION REFORM DISCOURSES**

### **Government of Malawi Perspective**

In response to the rapid increase in students resulting from the introduction of FPE in 1994, the MOEST developed the Policy and Investment Framework (PIF) to outline a strategy for moving forward from 1995-2005. The PIF was revised in 2001 to incorporate lessons learned and establish a direction for 2000-2012. This document sets forth priorities and advances approaches to cope with many of the obstacles encountered after FPE was introduced.

In addition to abolishing school fees for all eight standards of primary education, the framework changed both junior and senior secondary school from a distance education format to a day school format and eliminated the requirement to wear school uniforms as a condition for school attendance. The government also emphasized Chichewa and local languages, instead of English, as the language of instruction for primary Standards 1 through 4 (UNESCO, 2000).

In its 1985-1995 plan, the Government of Malawi focused on resources, equity, and system efficiency. Developed in the wake of the "World Declaration on Education for All" (Inter-Agency Commission, 1990), however, Malawi's 1995-2005 PIF shifted the focus toward an emphasis on providing access to basic education through the provision of free primary education. Targets as described in the 1995-2005 framework included achieving a net enrollment ratio of 90%, reducing dropout rates to less than 5% in Standards 1-7 and 15% in Standard 8, promoting

equity, achieving a teacher-to-pupil ratio of 1:60, reducing school sizes to 1,000 students, building 30,000 classrooms and furnishing all classrooms, recruiting and training 18,000 paraprofessional teachers in four years, and securing 40% of education funding from external stakeholders (UNESCO, 2000). In the revised 2001 PIF that set the direction for 2000-2012, following the Dakar Declaration (UNESCO, 2000) and in context of continuing challenges stemming from increased primary enrollments, the Malawi government added a focus on quality and stakeholder and community participation in education, especially in financial matters. With respect to the quality focus, the document (Government of Malawi, 2001) states:

The third objective is to maintain and improve the quality and relevance of education. Quality improvement will be addressed by strategies, which aim at combining the right inputs (good physical infrastructure, qualified teachers, and adequate instructional materials), the right processes (good management, effective teaching/learning, effective supervision and fair examinations), and the right outputs (motivated and well-educated students, capable of contributing to the development of the nation. With regard to the relevance of Malawi's education system, the PIF calls for ongoing reviews of the curriculum to ensure that it addresses the needs of individual school goers as well as those of the nation at large more effectively. Because adequate numbers of professionally qualified teachers are critical in promoting quality education, the PIF underlines the need for a quality and sustainable teacher-training programme especially for primary and secondary institutions.

However, the 2001 PIF contains no references to active-learning methods, nor does it explicitly address the need for pedagogical reform. Nevertheless, student-centered pedagogies are highlighted in the primary school and primary teacher education curricula, which were announced in 2007 and are currently being implemented.

According to interviews with Ministry of Education personnel and a thorough inspection of government reform documents, the government of Malawi is striving to promote teachers' use active-learning pedagogies as opposed to teacher-centered approaches. They gave the following reasons why the government is advocating active-learning pedagogies:

- The learning process becomes more enjoyable to students when they are engaged through student-centered pedagogies.
- Learning becomes meaningful and exciting as learners investigate issues.
- The classroom environment becomes democratic; therefore, supporting and consolidating the democratic principles prevailing in the country.

According to one interviewee, “[the Ministry of Education] understand[s] active-learning in the way it is theorized in literature.” Another staff member said that active-learning methodologies are appropriate given Malawi's democratic system of government and saw student-centered methodologies as a tool for infusing democracy into the classroom, as they allow learners to express their views and respect others' views, thereby learning to be tolerant of one another. Active-learning pedagogies are perceived to have the ability to instill the spirit of camaraderie as

learners are continuously encouraged to work and explore together, formulate conjectures, and discuss the viability of their solutions.

Although interviewees seemed to share the same understanding of active-learning pedagogies, they held different views as to whether or not the government was doing enough to help teachers in using these methods. Interviewees also differed regarding whether exposing teachers to active-learning methodologies in training sessions necessarily resulted in their using those methodologies in the classroom.

### **USAID Perspective**

USAID's initial entry into Malawi was in 1960. Between 1960 and 2002, USAID provided approximately \$664 million in development assistance to Malawi (USAID, 2002). After the 1994 election, USAID and other donors, including the World Bank, United Nations, the European Community, and the African Development Bank, resumed development assistance activities in Malawi after withdrawing funding due to concerns about human rights. In addition to agriculture, conservation, HIV/AIDS, and democracy, USAID focused its development efforts on education. In fact, between 1995 and 2000, USAID contributed the largest amount of funding to the primary education sector in comparison with other donors, both multilateral and bilateral (USAID, 2002). However, more recently the United States has shifted its focus away from education and toward health initiatives. According to the FY 2008 Congressional Budget Justification for Foreign Operations, in 2006 approximately \$12 million dollars were spent on basic education in Malawi. The 2008 request, on the other hand, is \$2 million (U.S. Government, 2008, pg. 235), representing an 83% reduction.

In the 2000-2005 USAID Country Strategic Plan, one of the four strategic objectives was "Improved Quality and Efficiency of Basic Education." The document states:

USAID's Strategic Objective for the education sector...will continue to assist [the] government in implementing and managing the recently formulated investment program (Policy Investment Framework), paying particular attention to the quality of teaching and learning within the schools (USAID, 2000, p.81).

To achieve these goals, USAID set out to improve teachers' professional skills and increase the use of continuous assessment and Fundamental Quality Level (FQL) norms, which are what USAID defines as the basic conditions for a school to function (USAID, 2000, p.88). With respect to teacher professional development, USAID sought to encourage the MOEST to move forward with the National Human Resource Development plan for the education sector, which develops a vision and a practical plan to improve pre-service teacher training (USAID, 2000).

While active-learning and participatory approaches are not highlighted in USAID/Malawi's policy or strategic planning documents, the descriptions of projects funded by USAID/Malawi during this period signal a focus on these methodologies:

- The *Quality Education through Supporting Teachers* (QUEST) project sought to enhance quality by promoting "creative teaching," which included using innovative and diverse student-centered teaching methods in classrooms, developing teaching aids from

local materials, making classrooms attractive for students, providing individual attention to students (especially girls), and using continuous assessment of students to improve learning. (Anzar et al., 2004, p. 17)

- In 2003, USAID funded the *Malawi Education Support Activity* (MESA) project, through the EQUIP1 mechanism. One of MESA's key outcomes included training teachers to increasingly and effectively use creative/participatory methods of teaching, continuous assessment, gender-equitable learning, and teaching/learning resources. (Anzar, et al., 2004, p. 21)
- In its Request for Proposals for a *Malawi Teacher Training Activity* (MTTA), USAID/Malawi (2004, p.7) stated that potential implementers should use "innovative classroom practices" and "participatory methodologies."
- Another Request for Proposals was released by USAID/Malawi in 2005, calling for a *Primary School Support Project* that would address active-learning by "providing inservice training ... for teachers in interactive and participatory methods; classroom organizational skills so as to maintain an environment that is conducive to learning." (USAID/Malawi, 2005, p. 5-2)

## REFORM STRATEGIES

The government of Malawi relies heavily on foreign development assistance to implement most of its reform efforts in education. Therefore, it is difficult to isolate those strategies employed by the government versus those employed by donors, since it is most often a joint effort. Our discussion below will focus on the following donor-funded and/or MOEST-coordinated reform initiatives: a) the Malawi Integrated In-Service Teacher Education Programme (MIITEP), a four-year fast-track teacher training program designed to alleviate the teacher shortages; b) the large-scale primary school curriculum and primary teacher education curriculum reforms; c) the Initial Primary Teacher Education (IPTE) program, launched in 2005 to replace the MIITEP program; and d) two complementary USAID-funded projects focused on enhancing teachers' pedagogical practices, the Malawi Education Support Activity (MESA, 2003-2006) and the Malawi Teacher Training Activity (MTTA, 2004-2008).

### Malawi Integrated In-Service Teacher Education Programme (MIITEP)

The MIITEP was introduced in 1994, and supported in large part by GTZ, in order to accelerate the training of teachers and to help ameliorate teacher shortages due to the major growth in student enrollments following the introduction of free primary education. The program aimed to train 18,000 teachers and reintroduce 4,000 retired teachers. When the program ended in 2005, 23,419 teachers had been certified under the program (Exegesis et al., 2004). Through this program primary teachers were given three months of orientation at a PTTC, 20 months of classroom-based in-service training, and a final month of review at the PTTC.

The MIITEP admitted students who had successfully completed either junior secondary (passed the JSCE exam) or senior secondary school (passed the MSCE exam) and undergone an oral interview (Exegesis et al., 2004). This was a change from previous and subsequent requirements that teachers at least pass the MSCE. The structure of the program consisted of three parts: an orientation course, in-service teaching, and a final review. The orientation was a residential program in which students spent three months at a teacher training college. The content of the course was taught using five specially tailored teacher handbooks that were based on the primary

school subjects plus foundation studies (MacNeil, 2004). In addition to content-related material, MIITEP attempted to shift teacher training practices toward a more participatory and student-centered approach. The in-service training portion of the program lasted 20 months, in which students were assigned to schools and were advised and assessed by qualified teachers, primary education advisors, headteachers, and college tutors. College tutors were expected to visit their students in the field. During this period students were also required to write 12 papers, conduct four projects, and attend 12 zonal seminars. The final component of the program was a one-month review course in which students returned to the TTC for a final review and examination (MacNeil, 2004).

The MIITEP was successful in that it achieved its goal of training 18,000 teachers in a relatively short period of time and in a cost-effective manner; however, it faced many obstacles as well. The rigorous nature of the program proved problematic for both students and supervisors. The time constraints of the program meant that college tutors were unable to visit the in-service students while also conducting orientation training for another cohort. The rationale behind the MIITEP was to shift the place of learning for new teachers from colleges to classrooms. This relied heavily on support from existing teachers in schools, but because many of these teachers were unqualified themselves (and even if they were qualified, they had not been exposed to the new teaching practices being promoted by the program), the student teachers did not get high-quality instruction and advice during the in-service portion of the program.

Moreover, many times college tutors tended to teach their classes using the methods they had encountered during their own schooling – didactic and lecture format. This method directly competed with the student-centered and participatory methodologies being advocated through MIITEP (MacNeil, 2004). According to Kunje, Lewin, and Stuart (2003), the primary teacher curriculum seems to be contradictory in that the philosophy behind the program promotes and encourages the use of active-learning and participatory approaches, but the handbooks and teaching styles during the short three-month orientation course revert to the traditional rote approach.

### **Primary School Curriculum and Primary Teacher Curriculum Reform**

In addition to the change in the teacher training format, there has been an emphasis placed on reforming the primary school curriculum. This process began in 2001 as a result of the new direction set by the PIF. The government of Malawi announced that the school curriculum would be revised with the aim of making national education programs more reflective of changing socioeconomic and political realities and making it interesting to the learners by allowing them to take a central position in the learning process (Malawi MoEST, 2003a). The new outcome-based curriculum was introduced in primary schools in January of 2007, beginning with Standard 1. To align teaching practices with the new curriculum, the government reformed the primary teacher education curriculum (Malawi MOE, 2005a). The process of reforming the teacher education curriculum began in 2004 and the curriculum was introduced into teacher training colleges in 2006.

A close study of the two curricula reveals extensive reorganization of subject content and a shift from teacher-centered toward student-centered, active-learning pedagogies (Malawi MOE, 2005a; Malawi MOE, 2006). The National Strategy for Teacher Education and Development (NSTED) addresses to educate and continually develop the professionalism of teachers so they are able to

use a variety of student-based delivery techniques at both primary and secondary school levels (Malawi MOE, 2003b). Both the Initial Primary Teacher Education (IPTE) and Primary Curriculum and Assessment Reform (PCAR) frameworks are in agreement with the NSTED and advocate for the use of active-learning pedagogies in teacher training colleges and schools. The two frameworks redefine the role of the teacher to create a context for learners to explore, investigate, and share experiences. They describe the teacher's role as that of an effective helper "not by showing the 'right' way but by drawing attention to a neglected or counter-productive factor in the students' processes" (Malawi MOE, 2004).

For the new primary school curriculum a slightly different arrangement was put in place. A team of trainers was constituted at the national level. These trainers are responsible for training Primary Education advisors (PEAs), who in turn train teachers in their respective zones. At the beginning of the introduction of the new curriculum in Standard 1, the PEAs were given a one-week orientation that covered the new materials. The PEAs then oriented Standard 1 teachers and head teachers for one week. Most of the content for the training was on teaching and familiarizing the teachers with new terms and concepts used in the textbooks and syllabuses. The orientation was followed by what are called cluster meetings (a cluster is a grouping of three or four schools). In the first term the cluster meetings, which lasted for half a day, took place every two weeks. During the meeting between teachers and their Primary Education Advisors, participants shared experiences by reflecting on the past two weeks. Emphasis was on what worked and what seemed not to work. Part of the time was also spent planning for the next two weeks. Centrally developed training manuals were used during the cluster meetings. The meetings were held in the afternoon (after classes had ended) during the week and were attended by all Standard 1 teachers and head teachers. Although this arrangement continued in the second term, the frequency of the meetings was reduced to once a month and this continued in the third term. The cluster meetings are monitored by the national training team. The national training team is made up of classroom teachers, tutors, curriculum specialists, and education methods advisors.

The government also reintroduced the requirement that all student teachers have passed their MSCE in order to enroll in teacher training colleges. In addition, the government issued a directive that Standard 1 teachers should not be transferred and should not be allowed to change grade levels, thereby giving the teacher the opportunity to have continuous exposure to the new curriculum at that grade level. This arrangement is intended to help teachers transform from teacher-directed to active-learning pedagogies and master the curriculum content at their level.

### **Initial Primary Teacher Education**

In 2005 the Malawi government, in part to respond to the obstacles of the MITTEP program, instituted a new primary teacher training program (Initial Primary Teacher Education, or IPTE). The IPTE program was also directly linked to the PCAR framework that aimed to put in place an outcomes-based curriculum. The new program requires a full year of residence at a teacher training college, followed by a full year school-based assignment. The second year of the current program is school-based and supported by primary education advisors (PEAs). The students are expected to learn on the job, practicing the theories they learned during the previous year in college classes (Government of Malawi, 2007). Student teachers are assigned a mentor, who is another teacher, and are expected to plan their lessons jointly with the mentor. Mentors help the students on a daily basis while tutors and primary education advisors also visit students for supervisory guidance and support. Head teachers are also required to provide professional

guidance and support. The student teachers are expected to demonstrate leadership skills by taking the lead in school improvement activities, including school sanitation, absenteeism interventions, and community mobilization and participation. In addition, student teachers attend various school committees and club meetings. At the end of the school-based phase, student teachers are required to submit an action research project.

Of the seven chapters of the IPTE Framework document (Malawi MOE, 2005a), one is devoted to teaching and learning and very explicitly indicates the Government of Malawi's commitment to the use of active-learning approaches in its education reform efforts. It reads:

The emphasis of the new primary school curriculum and teacher education curriculum is on quality and relevance. Therefore the approach to teaching in both schools and colleges should be learner-centered. Learning is most effective when...teaching and learning methods encourage the interest and active participation of all,...learners discover and use individual learning techniques,...learning resources are adequate, relevant, stimulating, attractive and combine challenge with fun and enjoyment.

### **MESA and MTTA**

The MESA project, which began in 2003 and ended in 2006, focused on whole-school improvement by working with teachers to improve their professional skills, mobilizing communities to support their schools, and mitigating the impact of HIV/AIDS through integration of life skills into the curriculum (MESA, August 2005). According to project reports, in the districts that the project was operating dropout rates decreased, enrollment increased, performance of pupils improved, and teachers used active-learning pedagogies in their classrooms. MTTA's vision focuses on employing interactive and participatory approaches in teacher professional development under the assumption that teachers who experience these methods in their own development will ultimately employ the same methods in their own teaching. By engaging in participatory methods of dialogue, reflective practice about their own teaching behavior, and establishing personal codes of professional conduct, MTTA provides teachers opportunities to learn ways of practicing and exhibiting good citizenship behavior themselves as well as methods to instill this behavior in others. Teachers who attend a TTC experience the Life Skills for HIV/AIDS Education curriculum and can then introduce it in their classrooms using appropriate facilitation skills to ensure active student participation and open discussions on this difficult topic.

MESA also supported the Malawi Institute of Education to create a guide, entitled "Participatory Teaching and Learning: A Guide to Methods and Techniques," which was to be used as part of pre-service and/or in-service training programs in teachers' colleges in Malawi. The guide offers suggestions for teachers to use in the classroom that allow students to experience a variety of pupil-centered approaches to learning. These student-centered approaches are described, examples are given, and the advantages of using the technique are put forth in the guide. For instance, the guide states:

A quality teacher will acknowledge the needs and interests of the pupil, permit the pupil to learn at his/her own pace, encourage learning through doing and where necessary provide remedial and enrichment instruction among others.

As such this booklet intends to update teachers with methods and techniques that will help them best realise these intentions. (MIE, 2004)

While MESA trained teachers in pedagogies, the project staff and USAID noticed that many of the teachers did not have the required content knowledge to teach various subjects. As a result, USAID decided to fund the Malawi Teacher Training Activity (MTTA) to address content knowledge issues in math, science, and English. MESA and MTTA were meant to be sister projects, so MTTA worked in the same schools and with the same teachers as MESA. Although MESA reported substantial improvement in teachers' understanding of pedagogies and, as a result, an increase in student learning, funding issues caused the project to end and the government did not choose to scale-up the intervention to all schools in Malawi. In addition, follow-up studies have not been conducted to assess whether teachers who participated in MESA activities fell back to their previously used teacher-centered practices. The MESA project ended in 2006. As a result, MTTA added some of the pedagogy training into its training activities to give further support to teachers in both pedagogy and subject matter.

MTTA activities begin with consultants and experts training MTTA staff in various pedagogies and subject matter. This group then trains PEAs in the districts in which MTTA is working. The PEAs organize large training events with the teachers in their districts over school holidays. Finally, the teachers develop their own school-based training activities to supplement the larger trainings. MTTA has also developed Mobile Teacher Training Troupes (MTTTs) to further assist in teacher training activities. The MTTT is a group of retired teachers or teaching experts hired by the project. This group will travel to a school and spend a week there. For the first day or so, they do classroom observations. During the next few days they will provide model lessons and actually teach classes so the teachers can observe. During model lessons, after-school meetings will take place so teachers can ask questions and the MTTT can explain the practices in more depth. At the end of the week, the teachers will take over classes and the trainers will observe and provide more feedback. Upon further discussion with teachers at MESA/MTTA-supported schools, however, researchers learned that this procedure was not always followed and that instead of demonstrating lessons on actual students, the MTTT facilitators demonstrated using the teachers as students.

### **Classrooms Interaction Patterns: Changes and Challenges**

Researchers for this case study held focus groups with teachers, supervisors, and school management committee/PTA members in a total of 16 schools in six districts. Of these, 12 were MESA/MTTA-supported schools, with all four of the districts in which MESA/MTTA works being represented in the sample. The remaining four schools were schools in two districts in which MESA/MTTA has not been working. Discussions in the focus groups centered on how active-learning methodologies are being used in the classroom and how government-supported policies and project-supported activities are either encouraging or discouraging the use of active-learning pedagogies. There was also discussion on what is needed to further support the rollout of student-centered pedagogies in Malawi.

The researchers found that teachers and supervisors in both project-supported and non-supported schools were able to effectively describe active-learning methodologies and unanimously agreed that student-centered methods are more useful than teacher-centered methods. They also agreed that the use of active-learning has been promoted by the government – through the courses at the

government-funded TTCs and through the rollout of the new curriculum. Some of the benefits of using active-learning pedagogies that teachers and supervisors mentioned were that students are able to remember and master the subject matter better, the process allows for discovery, and that students are less shy when working in small groups. However, they also noted that active-learning methods require more time and are not very effective in classes with a large number of students. When asked specifically if the teachers used active-learning methods, the response from teachers at MESA/MTTA-supported schools was overwhelmingly positive, while those teachers at non-supported schools explained that they had been exposed to the concept, but were reluctant to use the methodologies due various issues, including the size of their classes and their familiarity with alternative (i.e., teacher-centered) methods. The use of the Mobile Teacher Training Troupes (MTTT) in the continuing professional development of teachers was extremely popular among those teachers from the MESA/MTTA-supported schools. Most agreed that watching the active-learning method demonstrations helped them to put into practice what they were learning in workshops. However, as noted later on, the MTTT was not as effective as it could have been had it demonstrated lessons on actual student classes rather than using the teachers themselves as the students. This would have given teachers additional strategies for dealing with large classes or classroom management techniques.

### **Teacher and Pupil Behavior and Learning**

Many teachers and supervisors in MESA/MTTA-supported schools indicated various changes in teachers' behavior over the past four years (since the start of MESA). They noted that teachers now more often use group work, continuous assessment practices, and teaching and learning materials. Teachers also indicated that they have become more resourceful and collaborative, are able to give more individualized attention to students, and prepare more extensively/effectively for their lessons. These teachers also described their teaching approach as including less use of drill and more time devoted to students doing experiments. Interestingly, some teachers mentioned that when they first began using active-learning methods, they doubted that pupils could come up with their own solutions. However, as they saw the students learning and retaining the knowledge, they became more confident in learner-centered methods. One teacher also explained that at the TTC they learned that learner-centered methods involve lecturing and then giving students an activity to do, but through MESA/MTTA-organized workshops they came to understand that a learner-centered approach involves structuring the entire lesson around pupils' engagement in an activity.

Teachers in project-supported schools also noted changes in student behavior and student learning. For instance, all of these teachers agreed that pupils had increased their critical thinking and problem solving skills, as evidenced by their participating in debate and discussion; analyzing pros and cons; expressing disagreement with one another and the teacher; and engaging in creative thinking, reasoning, and considering consequences. Many indicated that these skills are especially important for the mitigation of HIV/AIDS, and at least one school noted that there have been fewer pregnancies in the past few years. Teachers in almost a quarter of the supported schools reported that in the context of group work now emphasized in their lessons they have observed high-achieving students more often helping low-achieving students. They expressed concern, however, that slow learners may be benefiting more from the use of active-learning pedagogies, and high-achieving pupils sometimes become bored with the activities and do not participate. Teachers also feel that girls are benefiting from the use of active-learning methods, not only because they feel more encouraged to participate in small groups, but also because both

boys and girls are becoming more comfortable with interacting with one another. Other behaviors noted by teachers are that students are sharing more, asking more questions, exhibiting higher self-confidence, and giving priority to their school work.

With regard to student learning, teachers and supervisors in project-supported schools reported that older pupils were now more frequently passing the PSCE and being accepted to secondary schools, younger students were able to read and write more quickly, and slow learners were catching up with their peers.

Teachers in non-supported schools have also been exposed to student-centered teaching methods – however, only through government-implemented initiatives such as PCAR workshops and PEA visits. Some teachers indicated that the workshops oversimplify the employment of these methods or underestimate the challenge of changing teaching methods after years of using teacher-centered methods. When teachers returned to school they found it very difficult to use the strategies and techniques promoted at the workshops. Ultimately, it seemed that those teachers that are not supported by MESA/MTTA reverted back to the teacher-centered methods as they found it too difficult to use active-learning strategies in their contexts. Similar to the responses indicated by teachers from supported schools, these teachers also indicated a lack of human resources as one of the biggest obstacles to using active-learning methods in the classroom. While the teachers understood the benefits of using student-centered pedagogies, other factors such as large classes and a lack of resources tended to push them toward using teacher-centered methods instead.

### **PERCEIVED OBSTACLES TO THE USE OF ACTIVE-LEARNING METHODS**

Large class sizes (partly stemming from the introduction of free primary education), lack of teaching and learning resources, and lack of adequate facilities were the most common factors that teachers believed hindered their use of learner-centered methods in the classroom. Malawi continues to experience a shortage of qualified teachers, resulting in some classes being taught by untrained teachers (MOE, 2002). In addition, most classes are overcrowded, and teaching and learning materials are in short supply, making it difficult or nearly impossible for students to get hands-on experience (Kishondo, Mwale, Ndalama, and Susuwele, 2005). There is also unequal distribution of teachers in schools, favoring urban schools (Chimombo, Mwale and Ndalama, 2005). In some schools, one teacher is responsible for teaching two grades every day, posing a challenge in terms of planning as well as lesson delivery. However, because Malawi cannot afford commercially produced teaching materials, the use of locally available resources is promoted. This is popularly called TALULAR (Teaching and Learning Using Locally Available Resources). Teachers are encouraged to use locally available resources to facilitate learning.

Time was also believed to be an obstacle to teachers' use of learner-centered methods. Active learning is perceived to take more time than teacher-centered methods, and additionally teachers felt that learner-centered methods require more planning, which also takes time. The time issue, teachers feel, is compounded in Standard 8. Because Standard 8 only lasts two terms (instead of the three terms for other standards), the great amount of material to be covered, and the pressure on both teachers and pupils to pass the PSCE that takes place at the end of Standard 8, teachers typically return to teacher-centered methods. Similar time pressures moving teachers away from using active-learning pedagogies were caused by a recent decision to allocate two of the five

periods previously devoted to social studies to a new subject (life skills) without reducing the amount of material to be covered for the Standard 8 social studies exam.

At the system level, a commonly noted problem was the lack of teacher incentives, namely poor salaries and inadequate teacher housing. These factors, teachers feel, make it very difficult to focus on preparing their lessons, and sometimes caused them to go into business on the side, further straining their time. Additionally, the government of Malawi's policy change eliminating the requirement that all students wear a uniform was perceived to hinder the effectiveness of active learning because pupils notice who is poor and who is not, and this may cause some pupils to participate less or be passive during lessons.

With respect to the role of parents and other community members, particularly in MESA/MTTA-supported school communities, respondents seemed generally well-informed about their specific role at the school and relatively involved in school activities, but they were not familiar with the concept of active-learning and were not aware of the various professional development activities to which teachers in their schools were being exposed. Thus, during interviews they did not offer their assessments on these issues. However, when one looks at the following characteristics of a "good teacher" that they identified, one notes the absence of an image of the teacher as facilitator of students' active-learning and participation in class:

- Respects and encourages students to work hard
- Sober during working hours
- Good behavior – no intimate relationships with students
- Always punctual
- Able to make students pass their examinations
- Hard working
- Respects students and members of the community
- Knowledgeable
- Does not administer corporal punishment
- Tolerant
- Resourceful
- Presentable

For example, parents' attention to passing exams is likely to push teachers toward using more teacher-centered methods. Thus, although not mentioned by teachers and supervisors, it may be that community conceptions of the "good teacher" may make it difficult for teachers to implement active-learning pedagogies. This was also indicated as a problem in schools that were not supported by MESA/MTTA. Teachers indicated that parents pressure teachers to assign written exercises and are not fully aware of the benefits of using active-learning methods.

More generally, in Malawi as in other countries, if parents are happy with the way their children are being taught and learning in school, they will encourage their children to attend and work hard at school. The opposite is also true; if parents do not approve of the way children are being taught in school, they are unlikely to encourage attendance and studying. Parents also have a tendency to compare how they were taught with how their children are being taught. With the shift from teacher-directed to student-centered pedagogies, it is very difficult for parents to see it as positive because they are tied to the traditional methods used when they were learners.

## **PERCEIVED SUPPORT FOR ACTIVE-LEARNING METHODS**

Teachers reported that certain government policies promoted the use of active learning – namely, the school age policy and the use of the mother language for Standard 1. The school age policy dictates that pupils must be at least six years old to attend government-funded schools, thus preventing enrollment of pupils whom the teachers believed were too young to comprehend the subject matter and to handle the routines of lessons, thus hindering the use and effectiveness of participatory methods. Teachers feel that the shift to using the mother language (rather than English) as the medium of instruction in Standard 1, has reduced pupils' shyness and reluctance to participate in discussions and other activities in class.

With respect to professional development, most teachers indicated that MESA/MTTA activities, as opposed to the government-sponsored activities, were helpful in promoting the use of active-learning methods. One of the most successful activities in the eyes of the teachers and supervisors was the use of the Mobile Teacher Training Troupes (MTTT). They felt that the MTTT was able to provide real-time feedback that was based on actual lessons they were conducting. Most of the visits lasted a week and began with the MTTT observing the teachers during their normal lessons. This was usually followed by the MTTT giving recommendations to teachers, and then the MTTT conducted demonstrations of sample lessons using the teachers as pupils. Next, all of the teachers would collaborate on planning a lesson and one teacher would volunteer to deliver the lesson with peers acting as pupils, after which all of the teachers and the MTTT would gather to give feedback.<sup>1</sup> The week ended with final recommendations from the MTTT and the development of an action plan for the school.

Additionally, teachers and supervisors noted their training on TALULAR was especially useful because TALULAR taught teachers (and eventually students) how to make their own resources using locally available materials. Teachers felt strongly that these resources make learning more fun, causing students to be more active and participatory in class.

Teachers also mentioned the new primary curriculum as facilitating their use of active-learning methods by encouraging them to use instructional resources (especially promoting TALULAR), conduct continuous assessment, keep student records, and use small groups.<sup>2</sup> The new curriculum also devoted part of the first term to orienting students about appropriate conduct in school – this, teachers felt, was beneficial to the use of active-learning.

Finally, teachers and supervisors indicated that MTTA's instruction on the use of small groups has been one of the key lessons in their shift toward the use of learner-centered methods. While most of the teachers had indicated they learned how to use groups at the teacher training colleges, they made it clear that using small groups (defined variously as fewer than 6 or fewer than 15 pupils) was a new concept to them.

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<sup>1</sup> Most respondents indicated that it would have been more helpful had the MTTT done their demonstration with real pupils in a real class with 70 or more pupils.

<sup>2</sup> Teachers identified a problem that curricular guidelines specified that groups should be no larger than 6 pupils, but in a class of 80 this would have resulted in approximately 13 groups – too many for one teacher to handle, they believed.

## **CONCLUSION**

The government of Malawi is committed to introducing and sustaining active-learning pedagogies because they are aligned with democratic principles and because the government recognizes that learners live in a world where individual decision-making is a critical skill. Active-learning methodologies empower the learner to think critically and practice decision-making, which are important skills, especially in light of the HIV/AIDS pandemic. However, according to respondents, the implementation of this policy has not been fully successful. Although it is evident through the interviews with government personnel and key policy documents that the government of Malawi supports the use of active-learning pedagogies, there seems to be a gap between what is happening on the ground and what the government would wish to see happening. Currently the efforts seem fragmented, and most of the efforts to achieve active-learning pedagogies are implemented by projects funded by external donors. While there is a movement toward the use of active-learning methods in the classroom, some teachers have chosen not to change because they feel threatened by trying new ideas, while others feel they are prevented from trying new methodologies with their students due to pressure exerted by examinations, which, ultimately, students must pass in order to graduate.

Through focus group discussions with several MESA/MTTA-supported schools and two unsupported schools, it has become apparent that the MESA and MTTA projects have created a system that provides continuous support to teachers and supervisors in their efforts to employ active-learning methods in the classrooms.<sup>3</sup> While key personnel in the government of Malawi and the teacher training colleges seem to understand the importance of the use of active-learning pedagogies, until now they have not provided enough guidance and support to in-service teachers, and the tendency seems to be that the teachers revert to using teacher-centered methods upon entering the classroom environment. This situation is aggravated by the fact that when a new teacher with knowledge of the new methodologies arrives at a school, many of the existing teachers are typically using teacher-centered methods, thus not providing a context conducive to trying out and refining the active-learning, student-centered methods. The government has put its primary focus on fostering active learning at the pre-service level, while MESA/MTTA focuses on in-service teachers. It seems that in order for the reform of using active-learning methods in the classroom to really take root, support at both levels is needed. However, since MESA/MTTA is operating in only 4 of 27 districts in Malawi, the investment that the government is putting into pre-service education is yielding the desired returns.

This is further aggravated by the fact that the tutors at the teacher training colleges have not been exposed to active-learning pedagogies during their pre-service and in-service training and have not changed their practice. Most tutors regard teacher-dominated pedagogies as efficient and time-saving, even though it is believed that teacher-dominated methodologies stifle students' creativity and desire to learn. The tutors typically do not consider how ineffective teacher-directed pedagogies are in terms of knowledge construction, retention, and application.

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<sup>3</sup> Ironically, however, MESA/MTTA may be inadvertently contributing to a loss of some of the most promising primary school teachers. MESA/MTTA has provided enough professional development and support, not to mention the donated books, to allow teachers to study and pass the MSCE, with the consequence that some have been accepted into higher education. This not only takes these teachers away from the schools during their studies, but when they graduate they are more likely to become teachers in secondary schools because of the higher pay and better accommodation given to secondary school teachers.

Apart from organizing training to support the new curriculum, the government does not have any other programs to support in-service teachers (Malawi Institute of Education, 2007). Furthermore, the pre-service programs supported by the government do not seem to adequately prepare teachers to effectively use active-learning pedagogies in their classrooms. Worse still, those programs that do aim to train in the use of student-centered methodologies often use teacher-directed pedagogies to do so. This misalignment confuses teachers and does not provide concrete examples that they can model.

The nature of the examination system in Malawi is a further obstacle in the effective use of active-learning methods. A high-stakes system in which a pupil's future is determined by their exam performance at the end of Standard 8 creates a system that promotes the use of teacher-centered pedagogies. While there have been efforts, especially in the districts supported by MESA/MTTA, to adopt continuous assessment practices, these assessments ultimately mean nothing as far as the pupil's ability to move on in the education system. That being said, it is recognized that the continuous assessment efforts may help a pupil in passing the exams by identifying difficulties early on. However, in order for active-learning to really take root, the government will need to reform its promotion policies to incorporate both final exams and continuous assessment.

Availability of teaching and learning resources is another major hindrance in the use of active learning. Active learning relies heavily on hands-on experience, and without teaching and learning materials the full benefit of student-centered methodologies cannot be garnered. It is reassuring to see that the new teacher education curriculum incorporates the use of TALULAR.

Finally, teachers' salaries, placement, and accommodations should be reassessed. Because of the practice of teacher placement, most teachers are not placed in their home districts, making their jobs more difficult and straining. As discussed, those primary teachers that work to upgrade their qualifications and are accepted at the university are often lost to the secondary system because of better pay and accommodations. This only places further strain on the primary system.

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