RISE

RESEARCH ON IMPROVING
SYSTEMS OF EDUCATION

Pivoting to Learning: A Puzzle with Many Pieces

Susan Watkins and Amy Kaler

BLAVATNIK
SCHOOL OF
GOVERNMENT

UNIVERSITY OF
OXFORD

Center
for Global
Development

Oxford Policy Management

Funded by:

UKaid
from the British people

PIVOTING TO LEARNING: A PUZZLE WITH MANY PIECES

Susan Watkins and Amy Kaler[1]

In this paper, we address two issues that we believe are critical for the success of the RISE initiative in inducing systemic change in the education sector of a set of selected countries where access to education has increased dramatically but without a concomitant improvement in learning. We take as an example Malawi, where we have both conducted research, but we also provide examples from other countries in Sub-Saharan Africa that suggest similarities.

Although almost all children in Malawi now attend school for at least a few years, of every 1000 who start, about half have dropped out by the end of primary school (standard eight); of every thousand who start school, only 40 finish secondary school. The quality of education is low—75% of those in the sixth grade are innumerate and 64% are illiterate (Spaull and Taylor 2014). In rural areas, where 85% of the population lives, teachers complain of low salaries and the lack of adequate housing. Although non-governmental organizations have attempted to construct more school blocs and better housing for teachers, editorials in the newspapers regularly uncover substantial corruption in construction. Reviews and audits of the education sector have pointed to specific difficulties in procuring and delivering teaching materials, appointing and retaining teachers, and controlling and monitoring sector finances (O'Neill and Cammack 2014).

[1] Watkins is Professor Emerita, Department of Sociology, University of Pennsylvania and Visiting

First, we focus on the bedrock, the launching pad, of change: the cultural understandings of the meaning of education.   Without understanding what it means to be "schooled", and why people seek (or do not seek) to send their children to school, proposals for changing an education system will fall victim to a misfit between the architecture of plans for systemic change, on the one hand, and the understandings of the meanings of education as perceived by civil servants in the Ministry of Education, by teachers in classrooms, by parents of students and potential students, and by the students themselves, on the other. Importantly, there is little motivation for a change from a focus on credentials to a focus on education quality. This is by far the longest section, a measure of the importance we place on starting reform with "what is" on the ground before moving to "what should be".

Second, we turn to aspects of the political economy that policy makers and the implementers of reform will need to take into account in their efforts to pivot from access to learning. Well-intentioned narrow reforms, such as higher teacher pay, improving inputs, and teacher autonomy, that are implemented in ineffective systems may not be successful unless fundamental features are addressed. These include the degree to which actors in local hierarchies of power genuinely support the reform; their willingness to implement reform; their capability for complex coordination of bureaucracies both horizontally, across systems, and vertically, from the ministerial to the school level, and the ability of the state to exercise effective control over policy implementation throughout its territory.

Third, we offer suggestions for donors and implementers of systemic change.

1. COLLECTIVE UNDERSTANDINGS OF SCHOOLING

Background: Schooling has been one of the prime vehicles for interventions by the global north into African societies. In the 19th century, among the first

acts of Christian missionaries on arriving in a new community were to set up a church and a school, not always in that order. In Malawi, the first missionary school was established in 1875. Previously, there had been non-formal education settings, such as initiation camps, which used what are now called participatory teaching methods: the teaching and learning, often hands-on, emphasized norms and values and a give-and-take relationship between students and learners (Kaunda and Kendall 2001, also Hayes 2015, Venter 2013). The missionaries introduced a western and hierarchical model, which became, and remains, the standard for formal schooling. Teachers lecture, students listen, and speak only when questioned by the teacher. At the same time, the missionaries inculcated their pupils with the notion that schooling is a set of pious practices through which individuals seek salvation (Frye 2011).

Large-scale expansions in formal schooling in poor countries are a phenomenon of the 20th century, and were particularly rapid following the ratification of Free Primary Education as an international policy. Malawi was the first to implement the new policy, but other countries followed closely. These expansions were often justified by governments and donors in terms of the economic benefits formal education is expected to bring by way enhancing human capital or in terms of the political demand for accessible education for all children, promoted as a right of citizenship. In the 21st century, international development agencies and other altruistic actors came to be committed to the idea that that formal education, particularly for girls, is key to the achievement of a vast array of human improvements, from an end to gender-based violence to environmentally friendly agricultural practices. This belief in the power of education persists, even as it became evident that practice was decoupled from policy (Meyer 1999), calling into question whether all the spin-off benefits of formal education will actually be realized (e.g. Grant 2015).

Neither the economic and political rationale nor the colonial history of schooling

in global relations, however, can explain the place that formal schooling holds in the collective imaginations of many societies. Even in the midst of evidence that children's learning outcomes are often dismal and that school systems are often dysfunctional, the desire for formal schooling - to become an educated person - holds enormous power for both parents and students. To understand the power of this desire for the transformative effects of education, we need to look to the social and cultural meanings of schooling and of becoming an educated person. These meanings are not to be found in curricula or policy documents, and cannot be parsed from outcome indicators.

Sociological theory, particularly the notion of different forms of capital articulated by Bourdieu in his work on education, provides a guide (Bourdieu 1986). We also draw on the conceptual distinction between schooling and learning. Although both schooling and learning take place at the same time and in the same space, transforming an education system requires decomposing the idea of "education" into "learning" and "schooling". In principle, learning is what happens when children and adults are schooled; in practice, the two processes may be quite different, although they overlap in time and space in the classroom. What schooling actually does is to provide the student with credentials – markers of having succeeded in the education system, such as certificates, diplomas or exam results. These credentials serve social and economic functions that are not necessarily linked to—and are often de-coupled from—the content of what has been learned.

Contemporary understandings of schooling and learning

*Status***:** Formal education is an identity project as well as an instrumental tool. An important shared understanding of education is that to be educated through formal schooling is a symbol of *being*, not doing. All societies are marked by status differentiation, which may be manifested in different ways of dressing, different possessions, or different signs of entitlement. Credentials and evidence

of schooling are ways of marking a social distinction between those who have the right to speak first or to speak authoritatively, and those who do not. This is evident in the way that meetings of bureaucrats are organized in institutions. In Malawi, he (or, more rarely, she) who has a PhD speaks first, whether or not he has expertise on the topic. The school equivalent of hierarchy is illustrated by an excerpt from an ethnographic journal written in Malawi in 2006.[2] The ethnographer is talking with a friend who has a child in school. The topic is the teachers. The ethnographer wrote that her friend said:

> You see a head teacher of a school is a PT4 yet there is a PT3 or PT2[3] at the school, this makes the other teachers not to work hard at school. They see a Junior is heading a school yet there is a senior within [the school], this ends up affecting the performance of pupils hence those seniors [senior teachers] do not work hard in class. It is because there is lack of motivation.

Moreover, simply being someone who *seeks* more education confers status. In chatting with two young (late teens, early twenties cooks at the dilapidated rural guest house where a colleague and I were staying, we asked whether they were in school. One said "No", the other said "Yes." When we asked how he could both work and go to school, he said that he had not actually been attending classes recently, because "I don't have money for the fees."

The status conferred by participating (and succeeding) in the education system indicates that schooling provides a form of *cultural capital*. These credentials mark the recipient as an enlightened person, a status that is recognized and respected by others.

---

[2] The Malawi Journals Project was established to access conversations about AIDS in informal social networks. Participant observers write about these conversations
[3] A PT4 has only a secondary education; PT2 and PT3 are higher ranks.

Schooling also generates *social capital*, by granting the possessor access to networks of potentially useful patrons or colleagues. Having a university degree means that the graduate has met and mingled with the most important and influential members of his or her generation, connections that may be drawn upon on in later life. This is hardly a Malawian or an African phenomenon – every society has its own versions of the "old boys' [and girls'] clubs", or the "old school ties", based on shared schooling experience, but it is particularly important in countries like Malawi where there are many more seekers of jobs in the formal economy than there are positions.

Schooling not only generates social capital, it also serves as a marker of existing social capital. Educational attainment in many African contexts is rarely an individual achievement – each successful student relies on a network of friends and family to help him or her meet the demands of education, not least the payment of school fees. In many rural Zimbabwean secondary boarding schools, on the first day of term students from poorer families would show up with entourages of parents, uncles, cousins and other connections, all of whom had contributed something towards that pupil's fees, and all of whom had a vested interest in that pupil's success. If the amount raised for fees was inadequate, the pupil would be sent back home to canvass the extended family for support. Those with strong extended family networks, who already possessed enough social capital to facilitate their attendance, could look forward to enhancing their status even further through the peer connections they would make, as well as the learning they would experience[4].

Jobs: Schooling, like religious congregations, serves both material and spiritual interests. The material dimension goes back to the early colonial period. The minutes of a meeting in Kenya of members of a local Native Council, the leaders of the African community in an area, describe a disagreement between the

---

[4] See also Mwiria 1990 for a view of the *harambee* system of collective fund-raising in Kenya to finance children's school fees.

Council and the District Commissioner on how the Council's funds should be spent (Kenya Colony and Protectorate; Ogot 1963). The District Commissioner wanted them spent on roads, to stimulate the economy: the Native Council wanted the funds to be spent on schools, so that their children could be educated and get a job working for the colonial government.

After African countries became independent, job opportunities expanded as a result of the arrival of foreign investors and NGOs, which created opportunities for modern wage employment—i.e. a regular salary—for the educated, and the expansion of civil service bureaucracies as the political leaders of newly independent countries saw new opportunities for patronage. Educational attainment has expanded faster than modern wage employment in many African countries, including Malawi (Ferguson 2015, Filmer and Fox 2014), where a measure of the desperation for jobs is that even short-term work as a survey interviewer is in great demand, with three to four times as many applicants as positions: unemployed secondary school graduates often resort to volunteering for an NGO, in the hopes that working for free may lead to a job with the NGO (Swidler and Watkins 2009).

Civil service positions are currently very secure in Malawi: strong teacher unions make it almost impossible to fire incompetent teachers or nurses[5], they are simply transferred to another school or health facility. Many jobs outside the public sector, however, are insecure—NGO projects are short term and may not be renewed, private sector ventures may succeed or fail. To buffer insecurity and to climb the career ladder, Malawians seek more and more educational credentials. It is hard to overestimate the importance of credentials: from the children of subsistence farmers who might get a job as an interviewer to the children of powerful bureaucrats, educational credentials not

---

[5] Public sector jobs are not always secure. During the crippling austerity programmes of the 1980s (known as "structural adjustment"), as donors demanded retrenchment from the civil service in Malawi and other poor countries (Anders 2010).

only determine access to economic opportunity and enhance the optimism that one's job will be secure, but also define social status and personal honor (Frye 2012). Credentials provide cultural capital that is directly convertible into financial resources.

Some jobs, such as sweeper or night guard, require no more than a modest amount of primary education. However, those who aspire to be part of the national economic elite must have a university degree, and, even better, a post-graduate degree. It is not that a cleaner must have the skills associated with a primary education, or that the deputy director of UNDP must have a PhD to do her job, but rather that the degree signals moral worth. Not to have any education at all defines one as, at best, lazy and at worst backward, uncivilized and foolish, terms that are often used by elites to refer to "the rural masses." Other jobs, such as a driver, require a secondary education and an expensive training course, and even to be selected as a volunteer for an NGO typically requires passing the rigorous exams at the end of secondary school, a sign of ambition and energy, of devotion to enlightenment.

And so it goes up the ladder. Those with a primary education can aspire to a secondary education that would make them eligible for position as a cleaner at World Vision; those with a secondary education can aspire to a further degree that would make them eligible for a low-level staff position; someone with a university degree can aspire to a job at the head of World Vision in a rural area or, with merit and luck, a job at headquarters in Lilongwe or Blantyre. And, the pinnacle to which one can aspire, a PhD, would make one eligible for head of a large NGO or a second in command at a UN agency in Lilongwe. At each level, acquiring the relevant credential becomes more expensive, and Malawian elites, as soon as they land one job, start saving to invest their resources in the next credential.

Schooling can be a marvelous vehicle for upward mobility, for the minority who are successful at each level of the education system. However, most students are not. Some are pragmatic, and drop out of the academic competition when it becomes clear they are not succeeding. As noted earlier, in Malawi, 75% of students in grade 6 are innumerate; 64% are illiterate.[6] These students, and their parents, surely recognize that success in school is beyond their grasp. The figure below on school attrition in Malawi was produced by Margaret Frye using data provided by UNESCO (2007, 2008*a*, 2008*b*).[7]
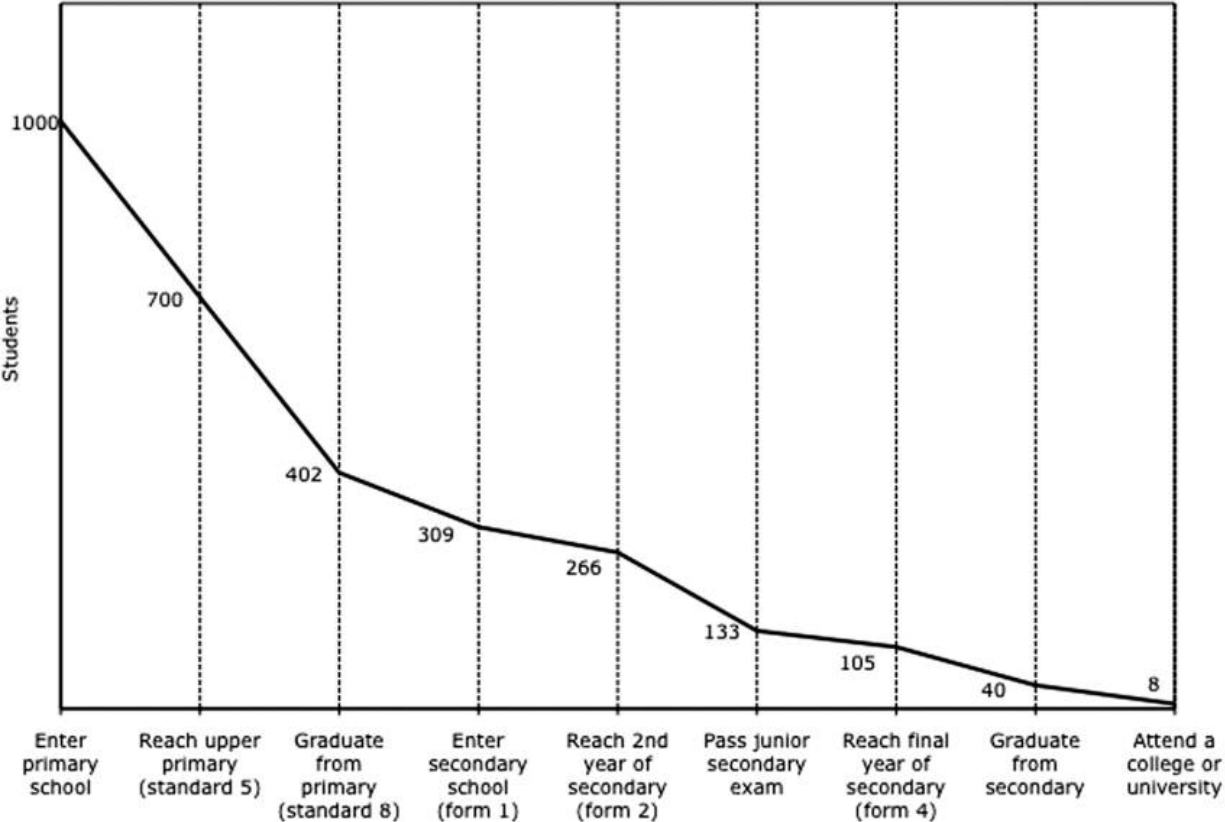
The point estimates are likely to be inaccurate. The bottom-line data collectors are supposed to have a count of students and send this information to the Ministry of Education annually, but a recent attempt to count students in 10

[6] Spaull and Taylor, 2014, cited in Center for Global, Rise Vision Document #1, p.1.
[7] Figure 3 in Frye 2012: 1578.

schools found that some school registers had not been updated in years, an indication of the inability of the central government to exert control in local areas (or, perhaps, their disinterest in doing so).[8] Nonetheless, the decline in school attendance is clear.   Attrition is particularly steep between entry into primary school and graduation from primary school, in part because of the difficulty of the national examinations at the end of secondary school and in part because school fees are required.

Most of those who drop out of primary school are rural, simply because the majority of the population is rural. Their parents are likely to be subsistence farmers, perhaps with a sideline in small-scale retail or cash crops. Leaving school may make sense to the parents, the children, or both. For a child who is struggling in school, education becomes a gamble – if the family continues to pay fees, the child might do well in exams and get a job, but most likely not. Hope for the child's future is balanced against the cost of fees, and the opportunity cost of having a child who could be helpful in subsistence farming or small-scale retail. And even if the child receives a Malawi School Certificate of Education for passing the rigorous exams at the end of secondary school, neighbors observe that they are still around, they cannot get a job. So what's the point of staying in school?

A 2012 Gallup poll in Sub-Saharan Africa shows the extent to which respondents are pessimistic about the value of secondary school for getting a job. Asked whether secondary schools in their area prepare people for employment, the percentages saying "yes" varied from 86% in Rwanda to 38% in Tanzania. Of

---

[8] Watkins 2015, personal communication.

the 29 countries, the percentages saying yes were 65 or less in 18 countries, including Malawi (68%).[9]

Faced with this calculus, it is surprising that more Malawian students (and their families) do not cut their losses. The cultural meanings of education, however, strongly associate schooling with enlightenment, clarity and moral worthiness. A study by Margaret Frye of the aspirations of girls who do make it to secondary school in Malawi describes the meanings that are attributed to education.

> *…in newspapers, in NGO documents, in school curricula, and in the language of the students themselves, education is consistently discussed in relation to images of light and clarity, while the experiences of the less educated are discussed using language such as "bleak," "dim," and "blind." The Nation, one of the two national newspapers of Malawi, publishes a section every Sunday entitled Education Is Light. Save the Children, an international NGO dedicated to increasing access to education, runs a program instituting Bright Future Committees to encourage dropouts to return to school. In the Life Skills Curricula and Youth Alert Magazine, I found 26 instances of the term "bright futures."[10]*

This image was also evoked in Frye's interviews. Liness, age 16, a student in a relatively elite district secondary school, says that "knowledge is light"; Mary, 18, in the same type of school, says, "Riches may evaporate while education brings light that will be with you forever. If you just work hard in school, your bright future will be yours." Teresa, age 24 and not in school, explains that "if you don't have education, you suffer a lot. You live like a blind person who cannot see anything."

---

[9] http://www.gallup.com/poll/181910/africans-differ-whether-schools-prepare-people-work.aspx?utm_source=alert&utm_medium=email&utm_content=morelink&utm_campaign=syndication.
[10] Frye 2012: 1597.

Frye asked students who had not yet completed their last year of primary school to estimate their chances of completing secondary school. Attrition from secondary school is less than from primary school, but is till substantial: of the 309/1000 who entered, only 40 graduated (and of those, only 8 attended college or university). In striking contrast to the data on attrition from secondary school, those who reached entered secondary school considered it highly likely that they would graduate. Frye interprets what appear to be highly irrational aspirations as an attempt to claim an identity, one of aspiring to become more enlightened. Thus the desperation for more schooling is "a moral, rather than academic, endeavor."[11]

In another set of interviews conducted with those who had passed the grueling exam at the end of secondary school, or had completed university, or had managed to obtain an MA, the respondents invariably included a passionate presentation of their aspirations for further education, with many following up with a hand-written letter (in the old days) or, now, an email, asking for help in achieving their dreams.[12] Steve Sharra, who writes knowledgeably about Malawi, captures the widespread desperation for a university degree: "Many who do not make it after Form Four spend the rest of their lives sweating to find an alternative route to university education. In June 2011 I met a Standard Four teacher who was spending his entire salary on fees for his bachelor's degree program at a local private university in Lilongwe."[13] An entire sector of private secondary schools, academies, and even universities has sprung up in Malawi to cater to the desire for credentials. A degree is a passport to a job, even when quality of education is spotty at best—which is likely if the degree is from a local

---

[11] Frye, Schooling as Devotion, p.4 of draft.
[12] Watkins and Swidler, forthcoming.
[13] Sharra, Steve. 2013. http://mlauzi.blogspot.com/2013/06/solving-study-leave-conondrum-for.html

private university-- and the credentials themselves may be recognized nowhere outside the country.

Enlightenment*:* Given the importance of education as a marker of status, it is not surprising that in Malawi, in Kenya, and other African countries, those who are educated are often described in conversation and public discourse as "enlightened". Those who are enlightened are respected and are expected to enlighten others. Missionaries in the colonial period enlightened their congregations and established schools; in the past and currently, chiefs, their counselors and traditional adepts of the spiritual world enlighten their subjects.

The missionary schools in Malawi set the institutional template for the way that teachers perceive the practice of schooling. Schooling, Frye finds, "is understood as a form of ascetic devotion, in which teachers prioritize the strict regulation of morality among students" and "attending school is viewed as a type of salvation, delivering students from their village existence into a transcendent realm of humanity."[14]

This association with "enlightenment" is not always positive. When education is associated with the world outside the rural village or high-density urban area, students, particularly girls, who succeed may be at risk of being perceived as uppity or as turning their backs on their traditional values. In rural high schools in Zimbabwe in the 1990s, students who did well at A-levels were referred to disparagingly as "nose-speakers", people who imitated the nasalized English accent of the white economic elite. This term was leveled much more often at high-achieving girls, who were considered to be haughty and unwilling to consider marriage with their peers from the village.[15] At the same time, groups of A-level boys proudly referred to themselves and their friends as "SRB" boys –

---

[14] Frye 2015,"Schooling as Devotion", unpublished ms.
[15] Hunter [2014] mentions the mocking name "ooscuse me" [excuse me], used to label black residents of Cape Town flats.

loyal to their Strong Rural Background and its values. In 2015, t-shirts proclaiming "SRB" loyalty could be bought on the internet by members of the highly educated and professionalized Zimbabwean diaspora. The t-shirt is a visible symbol of the ambivalence of schooling, which both provides cultural capital to high achievers and distances them from their background. A "SRB" t-shirt would be irrelevant to an unemployed or marginally employed school leaver—it acquires meaning when worn by a successful, or almost successful, graduate, as a sign that the escalator of upward social mobility has not swept him away from his roots.

What goes on in the classroom?

Given the complex cultural meanings associated with schooling and its function in securing and circulating forms of capital, one might ask "where does learning come in?" This is where talking directly to teachers and to their recent graduates can provide insight. Because success as determined by credentials is so strongly prized, classroom activities that are not directly determined by these credentials receive low priority. An interview with two university graduates now working for an NGO provides a picture of their own schooling.[16] As might be expected given the collective understanding of education in Malawi as well as the hierarchical nature of the political economy, teachers "teach to the test" and schooling practice is top down.

> SW: What goes on in classroom?
>
> Response: The teacher has to follow the lesson plan. The lesson takes 45 minutes. She has three minutes to introduce the topic, and then a minute to write an example on the chalkboard. Every few minutes she introduces another topic that has to be covered.   If the class is on reading, she

---

[16] Watkins 2014.

distributes the books, reads a passage, then asks them three questions and grades those. Asking questions is not encouraged.

SW: When do students speak?

Response: When the teacher introduces a topic and writes an example on the board, she asks the class what they know. If no one talks, the teacher talks, and then poses questions to see if they are following, "So–and-so, what have you understood?" Mainly, there is no time for discussion. The teacher has to give notes to the students, so sometimes the whole class is just the teacher writing notes to give the students.

Students who are shy [ashamed] sit at the back, and many teachers concentrate on the front row. My father's first question to me was always "where are you sitting?" The teacher's report for the day will say that all the children understood. Kids who haven't understood have to stay late or come early tomorrow. Ask kids to stay late if haven't understood, or come early tomorrow. At that time if one or two make a mistake, the kids were beaten. Some teachers still beat kids, they feel that if some kids can't listen, they need a beating.[17]

Much the same is true in Ghana. In a study of education in Ghana by John Meyer, he found that the ideologies on instruction encouraged "empowered participation by the students", but in practice "teacher-centered instruction is the rule." As in Malawi, the common classroom spatial pattern is for the students to be clustered in the back of the room, the teacher and her desk occupy the first half, thus centering everything on the teacher.[18]

Although teachers are at the bottom of the hierarchy of the Ministry of Education, they have an enormous amount of power, manifested in both the volume of notes which are transmitted and the teacher's prerogative of chastising students who do not appear to be learning. An ethnographer for the

---

[17] Watkins interview with a graduate of the University of Malawi.
[18] Meyer, John. 1999. Organizational Linkage in Basic Education in Ghana: The Costs and Uses of Monitoring and Evaluation. Report to USAID.

Malawi Journals Project[19] wrote about an argument she heard between parents and teachers. The relevance of the story is that teachers trump community voice.

The ethnographer and two friends are walking by the school where the parents and teachers are waiting for the Standard 8 exams [end of primary school]. The friend tells her that the students had been boarding at the school so that they could study for the exams; however, the teachers discovered that the students were having romantic relationships. The ethnographer wrote that her friend said

> that the teacher has dismissed some students for having romantic partnerships and now they are afraid that the dismissed kids did better than the ones who remained in school. The parents complained to the chiefs, the chiefs went to the headmaster, the headmaster said the teachers were only doing what they were supposed to. He called the parents and teachers together for more discussion. …Then the teachers told the parents that since they [the parents] are so intelligent they [the teachers] are going home. So you the parents must come every day and teach the children. Then the teachers left the parents and the chiefs there.

> So the chiefs talked to the parents that they were wrong because they have shown arrogance to the teachers which means that they tell their children to be arrogant to their teachers because they are not their relatives. Can they manage to teach their children like how the teachers do? The chiefs asked.

---

[19] The Malawi Journals Project is a collection of journals written by local participant observers between 1999 and 2014. The anonymized journals are available at http://hdl.handle.net/2027.42/113269

So the parents started to apologise that they were wrong. And the chiefs should go and tell the teachers that they must come and teach the remaining children …They are going to tell their children that they must study very hard at home so that they should pass the exams. So the chiefs went to the headmaster's house and told him what the parents had said. Then the headmaster told the chiefs that they should tell the parents that they should come any day to finish their discussions because he cannot manage to go to every teacher's house. So the chiefs said they wanted the discussions to be the next day so that the teachers wouldn't miss many days of teaching their children. So the following day they finished their discussions. The parents apologized, saying that they cannot manage to teach their children because they don't have an experience of it. They were just talking that time when they were challenging.[20]

This story captures the tensions between teachers and community members over the all-important exam results. While teachers may have more power than parents in the classroom, both teachers and parents are subject to the verdicts passed on their children by the examination system. A teacher who is perceived to not be preparing his or her student to pass may expect an uncomfortable relationship with parents, who, in this case, resorted to the traditional authority embodied in the chief to express their disapproval. In the end, however, the teachers won. In 1990s Zimbabwe, during the month after O-level results were released, male teachers talked semi-jokingly about having to avoid their favorite beer-drinking spots because they feared being accosted by angry fathers on behalf of their sons (and, less often, their daughters) who had, in the local vernacular, "been failed by" (kutadzwane) the exam. The very construction of the phrase "to be failed by" suggests the powerlessness of the students: they

---

[20] Anna, 8 November 2006.

might work hard or not, be clever or not, but it was the exam system itself which passed or failed students. Teachers were part of the examination machinery, and could be held accountable by parents if the exam failed local children.

This story also points to one of the other functions of schooling in Malawi—the construction of a moral, righteous self. The emphasis on morality and virtue contradicts John Meyer's thesis that education is primarily a secularizing and rationalizing institution (Meyer et al 1977). Frye argues that the idea of education as a rational and instrumental institution is not consistent with sub-Saharan African history, where missionaries played a powerful role in constructing the institution of education as one in which schooling is perceived as a form of ascetic devotion: it is primarily a moral, rather than academic, endeavor. Schooling is also conceived of as a form of salvation, as when teachers draw a distinction between "earthly traditional culture and transcendental scholarly pursuits."

Frye's observations of classrooms, readings of teaching manuals and interviews showed that teachers place a strong emphasis on moral regulation and behavioral taboos. "Teachers spend a surprising amount of time and energy enforcing these taboos, patrolling the border between behaviors that point to scholastic success and those that will likely lead students astray. Through restraining their bodily desires and strictly regulating their behaviors, students prove themselves to be worthy of higher education…in lists of rules and teachers' disciplinary strategies, these moral dimensions supersede concerns about intellectual performance; talking during class and failing to do one's homework are overshadowed by concerns related to sexual conduct." This emphasis on moral regulation and behavioral taboos is unlikely to be unique to Malawi—it was also characteristic of schooling in Cameroon (Johnson-Hanks 2006).

Below is an excerpt from an interview by Frye with a headmaster of a secondary school in a rural village.

> Mr. Nyoni: I remember, I had to talk to the head boys, actually we had a head boy and a head girl. So I talked to them, since when they were away from the school, they were assisting me to monitor such type of relationships. But still I felt, since a head boy and head girl they are also part of the students, definitely sometimes they were hiding.
>
> MF: So the head boy and head girl were supposed to monitor and see which students were involved?
>
> Mr. Nyoni: Yes. And sometimes as a headmaster I was also supposed to make a spot check. At night, together with one of the teachers we had to move around. To the places where the students were staying.
>
> MF: How often did this happen?
>
> Mr. Nyoni: Twice a week.
>
> MF: Twice a week you would go around at night?
>
> Mr. Nyoni: Yes, me or some of the other teachers. And that's when we also discovered that maybe in the course of doing this we found boys and girls chatting somewhere during the night. Imagine. Yeah. So it was a difficult situation.
>
> MF: And what did you do when you caught them chatting?
>
> R: Definitely we brought them into the office, and often we also called the parents. Yeah.

The monitoring of student romantic relationships is clearly a moral concern, but it also is pragmatic, as the episode of the fight between parents and teachers showed. Parents who send their children to secondary school are investing in the "bright future" of their child. In the context of sub-Saharan Africa, where the morality of reciprocity are strongly held, it is not just the future of their child but

also their own futures, since the children are expected to get a job that will permit them to pay school fees for younger siblings, to help their parents when needed, as well as to help members of the extended family. "Immoral" behavior, such as sexual transgression at school, threatens the investment that the family has made in education. The social capital which the student has drawn on in order to get to secondary school must be recirculated when the student finishes, and if he or she disgraces him or herself, the entire social network loses out.

Redirecting popular motivation for learning

What would it take to improve numeracy and literacy such that, say, 90% of those Malawian children in Grade 6 are both literate and numerate? The short answer is that there needs to be a cultural and institutional fit between the architecture of plans for systemic change, on the one hand, and the understandings of the value of education as perceived by civil servants in the Ministry of Education, by teachers in classrooms, by parents of students and potential students and by the students themselves—and particularly by the international actors—the donors who provide money and the NGOs that are active in the education sector. The longer answer consists of several steps, below, in rough order of their primacy.

Currently, there is no reason that teachers, parents or students should care about the learning students do in the course of their schooling, except insofar as it enables them to pass tests and exams: what matters is the credential, which roughly correspond to the number of years of schooling (bearing in mind that in primary school there is a great deal of repetition of grades). There has been no notable call for change, suggesting that the longstanding meanings of the value of education satisfy a broad constituency.

For a pivot to learning to occur, motivation would have to change; a *sine qua non* for this is making learning the criterion for a job, rather than simply a credential that shows that an applicant passed the exit exams from secondary school and university. Currently, national education systems are not set up to switch from a credential-based system of determining success to one which is based on demonstrated learning. Only donors or some very determined actors within the government could do this. At present, there is no reason to expect that most people in the government would want to—the current civil servants reached an elite status with a degree testifying that they have completed a certain number of years of education. What would be their motivation for changing this? We have concluded that the most likely stimulus for changing motivation would be if the quality of learning were made a requirement for a job in the formal economy.

2. THE POLITICAL ECONOMY AND PIVOTING TO LEARNING

In highly donor-dependent countries, such as Malawi, donors have considerable influence on government policy, not least through the power of the purse. International organizations have considerable power due to the large amount of funding they provide. Substantial amounts go directly to the government to support key government responsibilities, such as education and health. Government officials and members of parliament may resent the power of donors and disagree with their recommendations, but these sentiments are likely to be expressed through inaction rather than publicly.

Formal power in Malawi flows downward along several hierarchies: the formal hierarchies of government (political and bureaucratic power), traditional modes of governance (e.g. chiefs), religious denominations, and international government and non-governmental organizations. Government power has

primarily been the "soft power" of exhortation, regulations, patronage and corruption rather than coercion or violence. A key feature of the exercise of power in both formal and informal structures is a culture of deference to authority, signaled by the near-total absence of calls for "power to the people". Popular assent or dissent is expressed in voting, which is embedded in ethnic patronage, by a handful of civil society organizations promoting democracy and human rights, and by a very occasional protest, typically a strike by university lecturers for higher pay.

Education systems are puzzles with a lot of pieces. Whether or not a donor policy becomes national policy, and whether or not the policy is implemented, depends on the willingness and capabilities of local hierarchies of power. In Malawi as elsewhere, the efforts to induce a pivot to learning will have to take into account the extent to which these hierarchies—at all levels from the president to teachers in the schools—genuinely support the proposed reforms and the extent to which the relevant bureaucracies can coordinate with each other horizontally, across systems, and vertically, from the ministerial to the school level. Moreover, and complicating the process of systemic change, there are likely to be several ministries involved in education reform, including not only the Ministry of Education but also the Ministry of Finance, which determines budgets, and the Ministry of Gender, which has a strong interest in keeping girls in school. And in sub-Saharan Africa, these ministries, both at the national and the district level, would have to coordinate in a clientelist context and one in which the current emphasis on schooling rather than learning is perceived as satisfactory by many, if not all, of the actors.

As in many other African countries, the state in Malawi can be characterized as fragile, a "lame Leviathan" with a large centralized structure but limited ability to implement policies and deliver services throughout its territory. The political

imperative is to maintain strong central authority to guarantee the survival of the regime. In the context of a weak state, maintaining central control is done through informal patron-client relations, which can veer into corruption at high levels as well as lower levels where services are delivered. Maintaining central control also means that in practice accountability is upwards and thus that there will be substantial bureaucratic inertia, since all but trivial decisions are likely to be shunted to the next higher level.

Although the education sector is highly decentralized in terms of provision of services, the control of resources is centrally determined. In rural districts, central ministries retain control of key functions such as human resource management, payroll and capital development, with other function such as monitoring and training teachers devolved to the districts. A study of local service delivery in Malawi emphasizes that this dual administration contributes to fragmented governance— "multiple and overlapping sites of authority, unclear mandates, multiple reporting lines and weak accountability mechanism" (O'Neill & Cammack et al 2014, p. vi). The authors also point out that local government is relatively informal. "This creates a disjuncture between the formal institutions of local government (rules-on-paper) and the ones actually used (rules in use), which gives rise to ad hoc systems adopted by a succession of district executives" (op cit p. viii & vi).

In a highly donor-dependent country, it can be taken for granted that in meetings between donors and high-level bureaucrats, the bureaucrats will, reasonably enough, agree to just about anything that provides monetary support for their institution and for themselves (Swidler and Watkins forthcoming; Watkins, Swidler and Hannan 2012). Underneath the surface of an agreement, however, there may be substantial differences between the priorities of donors and those of the various cadres of actors, from the

President, cabinet members and members of parliament to senior Ministry of Education officials and lower-level bureaucrats who would be charged with implementing the sort of systemic change—down to the level of the classroom—proposed by RISE. A cogent example is an argument between donors and high-level bureaucrats in the Ministry of Education officials that polarized the sector, and described in an excellent dissertation by Laura Savage (2012) and based on her experiences in Malawi:

> *Donors, I was repeatedly told, want a focus on basic education: primary schools, early child development programmes for children under five, adult literacy and improved access for a significant proportion of school-age children out of school. The Government of Malawi, on the other side, wants to retain financial and policy focus on higher education.*

Savage points out that only 0.3% of those of university age are students of higher education, and 90% of these are from the wealthiest households, yet more public funds go to them than to primary students: a study by the World Bank found that "'the public annual cost of one student in public universities is equivalent to the public annual cost of two hundred and fifty nine primary level students'" (Savage 2012, p.91). In a discussion of the donor focus on basic education, a senior Ministry official said "Some of us have signed these agreements, but deep down some of us believe that no country has developed by investing heavily in primary. No country. You know if you have lots of graduates they can impact the economy. The donor emphasis on basic [education] I just don't understand." Another senior Ministry official said "There is no way we can say we will give half our budget to primary, this has been a problem." He then referred to a previous initiative: "[But] the FTI [a fund for an education initiative] is no joke. It is purely for basic [education]. We had to comply." (ibid, p. 92)

Country ownership won: the number of government-funded tertiary institutions expanded from one (the University of Malawi) to four (Savage 2012, p. 92). Although the senior ministry officials justified their preference for investing in tertiary education in terms of its presumed greater effect on the economy, it is also the case that the ministry officials are elites (e.g. at least a university degree) and, because they have a regular salary, would want their own children to have a tertiary education subsidized by the government.

In the political economy of school reform, compliance with donor priorities is less likely the further the actors implementing the pivot to learning are from the donors. Brokers—those who make it possible for the donors to reach the beneficiaries—have a great deal of freedom of action. District bureaucrats in the education sector, such as those whose job is to monitor the schools by regular visits, are themselves monitored primarily through reports that they themselves write. Although they are accountable to the next layer above them, monitoring in a country in which government has little power to affect what goes on at the local level is likely to be weak and/or ineffective. The brokers implementing school reform may not care about an expansion in tertiary education vs. primary education, nor about a pivot to learning: the current understanding of education as credentialing as served them well, in the sense that they have been able to achieve a job with a regular salary.

Lastly, and importantly, the pivot to learning is not only about systems and institutions, but about the individuals tasked with implementation. Even if they are willing, capable and support the pivot to learning, the brokers whose job is to implement, to make the reform happen on the ground, have to cope with the demands of their professional and personal lives. For a civil servant to be eligible for promotion, she needs to have the appropriate certification, which

may mean taking night courses at a university or on-line courses; she also needs to have patrons who will speak on her behalf and she needs to guard against jealous co-workers who may want to block her rise (Swidler and Watkins forthcoming). In addition, because civil servants have a secure job with a regular salary—and often are the only ones in their extended family who do— they are often subject to the demands of their clients, particularly relatives who need money for school fees or health emergencies, and have to make trade-offs between observing the moral ethic of redistribution and investing in first world education and health care for their children.

3.**SUGGESTIONS FOR DONORS AND IMPLEMENTERS**

Donors should respect the collective meanings of education in the countries in which they are supporting a pivot from schooling to learning. In the case of the RISE effort to improve learning it would seem to be preferable to make progress through a carefully calibrated series of "nudges" ("to pass lightly across or touch gently") rather than a rapid rush to transform longstanding educational practices. It will be slower, but more likely to succeed than, say, de-legitimizing and de-valuing what teachers have been doing.

Donors should accommodate to the existing political economy

The implication of the complexities of school reform and particularly the necessity for coordination across multiple hierarchies of power and multiple, and multiple subsystems in the education sector is that implementation of school reform is unlikely to be smooth. Rather, it is likely to be loosely coupled: that is, one subsystem may adapt to change quickly but the next step in the implementation of reform is delayed by bureaucratic opposition or inertia. In the context of weak but highly centralized states where accountability is upward

but not downward, reform is likely to be a lengthy process. Donors should be modest, and realistic, in their expectations. In short, donors should expect that the best they can do, at least in the short run, is to satisfice.

Research that is rigorously evaluated should guide widespread reform

A systems research agenda will examine how to tailor different reforms to different contexts. It looks at the efficiency of the use of inputs, how pieces of the system fit together, such as how schools are run and financed, how goals are set, how innovation and training happen. Donors, and RISE, should demand rigorous evaluations.

RISE has been tasked with selecting a variety of research studies that would create a conceptual frame for the full range of functions a system of basic education has to accomplish. The outcome of these studies should be rigorously evaluated by independent evaluators before scaling-up begins. In the world of foreign aid, implementers are reluctant to report failure, depending instead on numerical monitoring and evaluation, a report by a consultant, and testimonials from beneficiaries (Watkins, Swidler and Hannan 2012). Donors should communicate to implementing organizations and partners that they are interested in the bad news as well as the good.

Implementers should look around

One simple measure that could improve evaluation of research as well as the process of implementing reform is the strategic use of field visits. This requires donors or their representatives to leave the capital cities, drive out into the rural areas, possibly for several hours over bad roads, and visit schools which are recipients of their funds. Information gathered in a hands-on, face-to-face visit

can contextualize the quantitative monitoring data and the selective testimonials typically garnered in evaluations. Spontaneous and impromptu observations are also valuable. In the early 1990s, an enterprising staff member for a major NGO (a Zimbabwean herself) would make an appointment to visit a field site and then show up one week before the appointed date, blaming the confusion on a calendar mix-up ("So sorry, I forgot we said next Tuesday, not this Tuesday!").[21] She was thus able to visit the site and see how things actually worked, and, most crucially, to talk with students and teachers who had not been primed to give positive reports to the visitor from the city.

Incentives for all

Until recently, both academics and program implementers had been reluctant to offer monetary incentives, the former because incentives might be considered by ethics review boards to be coercive and the latter because incentivized programs are considered not to be sustainable. Recently, however, there has been a recognition that efforts to promote change using monetary incentives might be more effective than disseminating information and exhorting people to change. In Malawi, Baird, McIntosh and Ozler (2009) conducted a Conditional Cash Transfer trial aimed at changing the sexual behavior of school girls. They gave incentives to both schoolgirl and parent, conditional on school attendance. Although most of the schooling outcomes were unresponsive to variations in the size of the transfers to parents, higher transfers given directly to the schoolgirls were associated with significantly improved attendance and progress, but only if the transfers were conditional on school attendance. If incentivized interventions reach a critical mass, it is possible that through the working of social networks improved school attendance would be sustainable without further monetary incentives.

---

[21] Kaler, personal observation.

Incentives could be provided to the civil servants who would implement the pivot to learning. The value of incentives in improving performance was demonstrated in an experiment on motivating teachers in India to actually attend school. Duflo and Hanna (2005) found that incentives to teachers resulted in an immediate and substantial decline in teacher absence—and that, once there, they taught. The World Bank forbids providing incentives to civil servants, but this need not be the case for other donors. For example, incentives could be provided to senior bureaucrats in the Ministry of Education for the timely completion of tasks related to the coordination of sector-wide reform, to district officials for regular visits to schools for monitoring and support, and to teachers to encourage them to place more emphasis on improving the quality of learning. The announcement of incentives needs to be explicitly linked to measurable outcomes, with strategies for evaluation in place from the outset. As Gauri and Vawda have pointed out, however "With intense incentives, it pays to monitor the agent's performance carefully" (Guri and Vawda 2004, p.9).

Incentives need not always be monetary. One way to incentivize change may be to identify and publicly recognize classroom teachers who are achieving the "pivot to learning" on a micro-scale, in their overcrowded and under-resourced classrooms. Even in areas which are uniformly poor and neglected by central bureaucracies, classroom practices are not uniform. A visitor, especially an unannounced visitor, could easily note the variations across classrooms, from those in which student creations and contributions were prominent to those which were dominated by harsh and punitive teachers, or perhaps worse, by bored or absentee teachers. Identifying those teachers who were able to at least partially transcend the limitations of their classrooms can promote a culture change in microcosm. For example, a teacher-identification scheme based on

classroom observation and interviews, incorporating teachers at low-performing schools as well as high-performing ones, could not only provide incentives to these teachers but could also provide insight into what it means to be a teacher in a particular context, beyond quantitative outcome metrics.

Talking with teachers

Ultimately, reaching 90% numeracy and literacy by grade 6 will depend on primary teachers at the bottom of the hierarchy of power in the Ministry of Education. The RISE Vision 3 document—"Why Research into Education Systems is Needed"—presents a series of questions to be asked about teachers and teaching. Most, however, are questions that could only be addressed by officials in the education sector. Yet it is likely that they are not intimately familiar with what goes on in the classroom, they live in a more rarefied setting of meetings and paperwork. Talking with teachers could help in answering these questions.

Teachers are at the heart of education in Africa. Most research into education, however, focuses on metrics and outcome indicators, or on the sort of broad, systemic data that is the bread and butter of ministry officials, donors, and other high-level stakeholders. Yet teachers in the classroom are the ones who must execute the pivot from schooling to learning, if it is ever to happen—their voices should not be underrepresented. It would thus be important that the architecture for RISE include a component, in each country study, in which teachers are asked what they do in the classroom, and more importantly, about why they do it.

Understanding teachers' work as producers of cultural and social capital, as suggested by qualitative research with teachers themselves (e.g. Frye 2012,

Johnson-Hanks 2006) may yield points of convergence with RISE's definitions of learning. It is unlikely that these collective projects of modernization and "enlightenment" will quickly give way to new understandings of the purpose of education in many communities, the simplest way of attaining RISE's targets, but it is quite possible that successful learning can be enhanced even in settings in which schooling, rather than learning, is the primary function of education.

More broadly, talking to teachers is important because teachers spend their professional and personal lives at the intersection of the political, cultural and social forces which bear upon primary education, negotiating parental expectations, community standards, student capabilities, financial constraints, institutional imperatives, bureaucratic norms, and the ebb and flow of morale. Their stories of the classroom thus would add complexity and realism to perspectives on learning that concentrate on the formal activities of the educational system. Through the accounts of teachers, we can appreciate the subtle as well as obvious forces at work in African classrooms that dilute the link between schooling and learning. The importance of the personal status of being "an educated person", or the association of credentials with moral worthiness, for example, are not easily captured with outcome-centered or system-centered research strategies, but narrative accounts from teachers can illuminate these. Thus, we propose that each country in the RISE portfolio should include in its interventions a component of qualitative research with teachers, and that the country teams conduct the research not only at the beginning, as formative research, but at regular intervals during the project, to capture both the teachers' opposition and their support, before proceeding to the next stage of the project.

LAST WORDS

Collective understandings of education in Malawi and other African countries go back at least as far as the missionary schools. The motivations of enlightenment, status and jobs have been resilient.[22] Nonetheless, systemic change may be possible without disturbing the cultural and institutional fit that has upheld collective understandings of the value of education. For example, once Malawians knew that HIV was sexually transmitted, they knew, from experience with sexually transmitted infections, how it could be prevented; once they began to see relatives, friends and neighbors die a miserable death from AIDS, many became motivated to change their sexual behavior, even though it meant giving up at least some of the joys of sex. In Malawi, HIV incidence peaked in 1997, and fell rapidly in the subsequent five years, even though there was little during those years in the way of donor-funded initiatives to transform community and individual responses to the epidemic. Rather, local strategies of prevention were worked out in informal social networks—not necessarily complete abstinence and complete fidelity, but also fewer partners and a more careful selection of partners in order to avoid those deemed likely, on the basis of local knowledge, to be HIV+ (Watkins 2004).

Pivoting to learning should be even easier, and thus more rapid, than changing pleasurable sexual behavior. There would still be a credential that demonstrated showed enlightenment, status and that was required for a job with a salary: only the requirements for the credential would change.   Coming to know people who could not get a job because their learning –rather than just schooling—was inadequate might result in a desperation for more learning—and for having one's

---

[22] There have certainly been superficial changes—shortly after FPE was adopted, the required primary school course in "Bible Study" was replaced by a required course in "Religious and Moral Education." (Kendall 2004: 92).

children learn—that would be no less pervasive that the current desperation for another credential.

REFERENCES

Anders, Gerhard. 2010. <u>In the Shadow of Good Governance: An Ethnography of Civil Service Reform in Africa</u>. Leiden and Boston, Brill.

Auri, Varun and Vawda, Ayesha. 2004. 'Vouchers for Basic Education in Developing Countries: A Principal-Agent Perspective". Washington D.C.: The World Bank 19 (2).

Bourdieu, Pierre. 1986. The Forms of Capital. In J. Richardson (Ed.) <u>Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education.</u> New York, Greenwood, 241-258.

Ferguson, James. 2015. <u>Give a Man a Fish: Reflections on the New Politics of Distribution.</u> Durham and London: Duke University Press.

Filmer, Deon; Fox, Louise. 2014. Youth Employment in Sub-Saharan Africa. Washington, D.C.: The World Bank.

Frye, Margaret. 2012. "Bright Futures in Malawi's New Dawn: Educational Aspirations as Assertions of Identity". *American Journal of Sociology* 117 (6): 1565-1624.

Frye, Margaret. 2015. "Schooling as Devotion". Unpublished manuscript.

Grant, Monica. 2015. "The Demographic Promise of Expanded Female Education: Trends in the Age at First Birth in Malawi." *Population and Development Review* 41:3, <u>409–438</u>

Haynes, N. "Change and Chisungu in Zambia's Time of AIDS". *Ethnos*, *80*(3), 364-384.

Hunter, M. 2014. "The bond of education: gender, the value of children, and the making of Umlazi Township in 1960s South Africa". *The Journal of African History*, 55(03), 467-490.

Johnson-Hanks, Jennifer. 2006. <u>Uncertain Honor: Modern Motherhood in an African Crisis.</u> Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Kaunda, Zikani; Kendall, Nancy O'Gara. 2001. "Prospects of Educating for Democracy in Struggling Third Wave Regimes: The Case of Malawi". 2001. *Current Issues in Comparative Education 4(1): 16-51.*

Kendall, Nancy O'Gara. 2004. The "Successful Failure" of Free Primary Education in Malawi. PhD Dissertation, The School of Education and the Committee on Graduate School, Stanford University.

Kenya, Colony and Protectorate. 1931–37. Office of the Provincial Commissioner, Nyanza Province: Local Native Councils, Central Kavirondo, Estimates (Kenya National Archives PC/NZA/2/1/29).

Meyer, John; Boli, John; Thomas, George; Ramirez, Francisco O. 1997. "World Society and the Nation-State". *American Journal of Sociology*:144-181.

Meyer, John. 1999. Organizational Linkage in Basic Education in Ghana: The Costs and Uses of Monitoring and' Evaluation. Unpublished report for USAID.

Morfit, Simon. 2011. "AIDS is Money': How Donor Preferences Reconfigure Local Realities". *World Development* 39 (2): 64-76.

Mwiria, K.1990. "Kenya's Harambee secondary school movement: the contradictions of public policy". *Comparative Education Review*, 350-368.

Ogot, Bethwell A. 1963. "British administration in the Central Nyanza District of Kenya,
1900–1960." *Journal of African History* IV(2): 249–273.

O'Neil, Tam & Diana Cammack with Edge Kanyongolo, Moir Walita Mkandawire, Tuntufye Mwalyambwire, Bryn Welham and Leni Wild. 2014. Fragmented governance and local service delivery in Malawi." Overseas Development Institute.

Savage, Laura Collins. 2012. Understanding Ownership in the Malawi Education Sector: "Should We Tell Them What to do or Let Them Make the Wrong Decision?." PhD Dissertation. Newnham College, University of Cambridge.

Spaull, N.;Taylor, S. 2013. Trends in effective enrollment. Save the Children Working Paper.

Swidler, Ann; Watkins, Susan C. Forthcoming. The Romance of AIDS Altruism in Africa. Princeton University Press.

Sureide, Tina; Tostensensen, Arne; and Skage, Ingvild Aagedal. 2012. Hunting for Per Diems: The Use and Abuse of Travel Compensation in Three Developing Countries. Bergen: Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (NORAD).

Swidler, Ann; Watkins, Susan C. 2009. "Teach a Man to Fish": The Sustainability Doctrine and its Social Consequences." *World Development* 17 (7): 1182-1196.

Watkins, Susan C. 2004. "Navigating the AIDS Epidemic in Rural Malawi". *Population and Development Review*   (4): 673-705.

Watkins, Susan C.; Swidler, Ann; and Hannan, Thomas. 2012. "Outsourcing Social Transformation: Development NGOs as Organizations". Annual Review of Sociology 38: 285-315.

Watkins, Susan C.; Ashforth, Adam. 1999-2015. The Malawi Journals Project. http://hdl.handle.net/2027.42/113269

Venter, R. 2103. "Xhosa Male initiation: Freedom of Choice versus the Need to Belong". *Journal of Child & Adolescent Mental Health*, *25*(2), 139-147.