GEO SCIENCE EDUCATION IN MALAWI: THE CASE OF GEOGRAPHY IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS

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Abstract

Malawi has an 8-4-4- education system consisting of primary school, secondary school and university education. Geo science is a broad discipline that is introduced at primary, and continues to be taught at secondary and tertiary education in Malawi. Geo Science concepts in Malawi are found in subjects such as Geography, Agriculture, History and Biology. Quite often, advanced core concepts of geo science including Physical, Human, Economic, Geology, astronomy and Social and Environmental aspects are covered in Geography. In this abstract, Geography is used synonymously with Geo science. Geoscience education in Malawi, widespread and combined approach should be analyzed if the whole system is to make sense and make Geography the honor it deserves.

Introduction

In Malawi, most children start formal education at primary school at the age of six where Earth science concepts are immediately introduced. The primary school takes 8 years from standard 1 to 8. Common concepts at this stage are physical geography of the student’s environment and its surrounding. Geography in primary school in Malawi is integrated in Social Studies. Among other subjects taught in social studies are History and Civics. At the end of 8 years, pupils write the national examinations for Primary School Leaving Certificate Examinations which are jointly set, conducted and marked by the Ministry of Education and the Malawi National Examination Board. Mrs. Phiri, the head teacher at Kalambo primary school in Lilongwe central Malawi, with vast teaching experience, noted that primary school students perform quite well in Geography during the primary national examination compared to languages and science subjects. Students have to pass and get selected if they are to attend public secondary school education. Secondary education in Malawi takes 4 years from form 1 to form 4. Students can attend secondary education in public schools run by government or private schools run by the private sector. The quality of education varies widely in both sets of schools. In private schools, the tuition fees are exorbitant to the extent that it is more than 50 times than in public schools (Simumbwa 2008). This is not affordable for an average Malawian who lives at $ 1.25 per day (UNICEF)

For a long time, there has been a restriction that Geography be taught as one of the core subjects

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in Malawi, but this restriction has since changed due in great part to multiparty politics dispensation advancing that each student has a freedom of choice to learn the subjects the learner wishes. The perception resulted in placing Geography into one of the elective subjects in the curriculum. Students in secondary schools sit for two National Examinations: a Junior Certificate Examinations (JCE) at form 2, and a Malawi School Leaving Certificate (MSCE) at form 4. Geography performance or pass rate at MSCE have been failing sharply in the past twenty years reaching as low as 19% in 1995 prompting the Subject Specialist at the Ministry of Education Headquarters to call stakeholders in order to reflect on the dismal performance. This reflection meeting recommended curriculum review (All Africa 1999)

The Malawi government revised the curriculum and reduced its content in 2000 with the vision to contribute to the Millennium Development Goal of Education for All (Masperi 2008). In addition, some new and exciting topics were incorporated in the new syllabus and other topics such as the Great lakes, Gold mining in South Africa and many more which until then considered irrelevant to Malawian context were removed to make the curriculum more relevant and address the needs of the society.

Over the recent years, more inclusive and diversified interventions have been put in place to reverse the failing pass rate. For instance, government reinforced the policy of promoting activity based lessons where students are active participants in a lesson (MOEST, 2004). The policy has since formed the basis of participatory approach in a learner centered approach.

In addition, government increased number of qualified Geography teachers in government secondary schools. The teachers spent 3 to 7 years in college specializing in Geography content and methods for teaching the subject. Regardless of imploring all these interventions, there are still indicators that students continue to fail in Geography. According to (British Council 2001) argues that lack of proper and effective instruction materials such as books, text books, and even journals has been cited as the main challenge to the failing of students. Other factors such as opposition from other related subjects have also contributed to the current status.

Consequently, ever since Geography was placed as an elective subject, the subject has become less popular among the learners. This has increased the failure rate for Geography at national examinations. However, the most single underlying factor for the failure of Geography in Malawi is the learners themselves. The learner's attitude towards geography is relaxed. Most learners do not see the value of learning geography in the wake of unemployment of geography specialists at hand and slim chances to tertiary level. For example, of the 130, 293 learners who sat for the Malawi School Certificate Examinations in 2014, only 71, 486 qualified for the certificate and just 2000 were selected to pursue various programs at various public universities of Malawi (University Office, 2015)

In addition, as compared to Geography that has been taught ever since Malawi got its independence in 1964, in recent years after multiparty politics in 1994, good grades have been scored in newly introduced subjects like Social Studies and Life Skills. As such, many learners prefer these new subjects to geography as it is believed the new subjects are simple, relevant and address the needs of the society (Kadzamira 2001). The new subjects are offered in the same department of humanities with Geography and are considered information subjects. According to (Banda 2000) the students contends that if someone is good at Life Skills, one may work as a counselor in various organizations dealing with Human Immune deficient Virus (HIV) and AIDS issues while Geography has very few openings in Malawi apart from teaching. It should be noted that teaching is perceived a very low grade work in Malawi (personal communication Fidel Mgowa). Therefore learners are not inspired to pursue Geography amid lean chances of career path in the near future.

Therefore, to comprehensively understand Geoscience education in Malawi, widespread and combined approach should be analyzed if the whole system is to make sense and make Geography the honor it deserves.
References

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