

**Retracing Footsteps of the Literati: Towards an Understanding of Literacy
Development through Stories of Malawian Teacher Educators**

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(ABSTRACT)

If there is a single song in which nations, governments, human rights organizations, communities, and parents harmoniously blend their voices, it is that being literate is valuable and valued. Being literate entails one's access to and interaction with text in one's environment (Harris & Hodges, 1995). However, in developing countries, print is hard to come by due to several factors. What is of significance, though, is that despite the absence of readily available print environments that are prevalent in the developed world, one still sees highly literate persons emerging from poor developing countries.

This study sought to investigate how those who become literate achieve literacy despite growing up in places where print is not readily available. It was a search for factors that supported and enabled the participants to become literate persons. This investigation searched for an answer to the umbrella question: What are the conditions that promote literacy development in a print-limited environment? In order to answer this question, six postgraduate degree holding Malawian teacher educators were interviewed. The interviews generated six literacy autobiographies, i.e. stories of how they acquired literacy skills in English, a second language, when print resources were limited. From an analysis of those stories, themes emerged that indicated prevailing commonalities in the study participants' literacy developmental paths. The major themes that emerged were parental involvement in children's literacy development, influence of teachers on developing literacy, the role of peers and siblings as learners develop literacy, presence of text in the environment, literacy practices of participants as they grew up, and participants' perceptions of literacy and its development.

The study showed that literacy acquisition is a complex developmental phenomenon (Luke, 2002). It is a process that emerges from a combination of complementary factors. What emerged from the study is that, even in print-limited environments, there are facilitating conditions that enhance an individual's literacy development. The facilitating conditions were various people who helped learners acquire literacy, the availability of text, the meaningfulness of texts and tasks, the learners' intrinsic motivation, and the differences that evolved over time in the relationships between the learners and those with whom they interacted.

DEDICATION

To my family, especially my children Sharon Atikonda, Carolyn Tisungeni, and Manuel Kazembe Jr who felt the pangs of the absent father as they grew up while I was away from home concentrating on my doctoral studies and only saw them during sporadic visits. I hope they can now wipe away the memory of my long absences with the joy of this accomplishment.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In a very touching true story entitled “My Father’s Hands,” appearing in the New York Sunday News Magazine of November 30, 1978, Calvin R. Worthington eloquently tells the story of his late father whose hands, he claims, were warm, rough, and exceedingly strong. The deceased could gently prune a fruit tree or firmly wrestle an ornery mule into harness. He could draw and saw a square with quick accuracy. The hands of the said deceased were good hands that served their owner well and failed him in only one thing: they never learned to write. In other words, the deceased was illiterate. Actually, he had been withdrawn from school by his father after several seemingly fruitless months in first grade. It would seem that for some reason, shapes, figures, and recitations just did not fall into the right pattern inside the six - year old head.

In his old age, Worthington’s father died an untimely death from a heart attack while holding the helpful nitroglycerin pills bottle in his hands, one of which, if placed under his tongue at the onset of an attack, should have pacified the fatal heart attack. The big warm hands lost their struggle with death because imprinted on the bottle cap, were the words, “Child-Proof Cap – Push Down and Twist to Unlock.” The hands failed to open for the eyes had never learnt how to read.

The above story graphically conveys one of the sad realities that come with the inability to read and write. Although the numbing event encapsulated in this story took place several decades ago, the sad thing is that illiteracy is just as real today as it was then, in the West and, much more so, in the poor developing nations of the world.

Western pre-20th century world history testifies that in the past, reading and writing were the exclusive domain, a highly esteemed province, of the educated and powerful. The nobles, royalty, and religious leaders were the people of letters. After all, the ordinary folk did not need an education to get by in a world where one’s line of descent pretty much determined what they were to be in life. Artisans would be artisans and tillers of the land would be tillers of the land, unless otherwise called upon to fight for their royalty in wars whose causes they could hardly articulate. But in this cyberspace and information dependent 21st century, education is an imperative and, literacy is the key to the future.

But the big question is: How do we become literate? Is there something that we ourselves do, or does something happen to us, or is something done to us by either ourselves or by someone else that turns us to be literate? In the cultures where the printed word has been around since ages past, the question is: How do people become readers and writers? Do they all become literate in the same way? On the other hand,

what are the stories behind people's literacy development in a print-limited environment? How do teacher educators' personal literacy stories compare? Where are the teachers coming from in their literacy routes and foundations? Do such stories play out in these literacy torch-bearing professionals' lives and practice? Are there lessons that should be learned from teachers' literacy stories to inform the practice of teaching?

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This investigation was a study in the field of Literacy. It was a study grounded in teachers' perceptions and reflections of their own literacy development, under conditions that might be termed less conducive to researchers looking with Western academic eyes.

Need for the Study

Literacy is pivotal to the development of any country. Bhola (1989, p. 66) argued that "neither modernization nor democratization is possible without literacy... literacy is the only passport for independent learning and for citizenship in the knowledge society." Reading and writing have become indispensable to the creation and maintenance of dynamic, progressive, critical, analytical, creative, healthy, and politically stable nations and cultures. Unfortunately, primary school students in Malawi, it seems, hardly get hooked on reading and writing. A study conducted in Malawi during the closing quarter

of the 20th century is quite revealing. Mchazime (1994) explained that 70% of 170 interviewees who completed standard eight had read no other book than a school text.

Surely, such lack of reading is a sign of schooling and modern day literacy malnutrition. While not being the only reason, the prevailing lack of interest in reading and writing in primary school students contributes to the poor results on the Primary School Leaving Certificate, Junior Certificate of Education, and the Malawi School Certificate of Education examinations. It is an open secret that literacy is the passport to the socio-economic development of any progress-conscious country. Therefore, this displayed absence of reading and writing enthusiasm among primary school students in Malawi paints a bleak literacy picture of the country's future. This is a portrait of a situation needing reversal. One wonders about the teaching and learning that goes on in schools, that is, primary, secondary, and teacher education institutions. One might also pause to ponder what goes on in students' lives outside of school.

However, it must be understood that the enormous majority of Malawian children live in rural communities where they learn life skills available and used in the local environment in the absence of print. Perhaps it might be inappropriate to assume that these children suffer from an intellectual impoverishment commensurate with the material. Of course, being literate is an important personal asset that allows women and men increased opportunities in life. This provided the strong rationale for investigating how Malawian teacher educators became literate and, thereby, came to learn how learning to read and write is done under circumstances that have significantly remained unchanged for decades.

Tonjes and Zintz (1992) point out that lack of reading and writing skills among a nation's population takes a devastating toll on the country and bequeaths a legacy of unemployment, poverty, and alienation. Surely, no nation on the globe wants to have permanent abode in such an unpalatable environment.

Context for the Research

This study was conducted in Malawi, a 118,484 square kilometre country in the Southern Africa region. Malawi is a country that became free of the British colonial empire in 1964 on July 6. In this small developing nation, the vast majority of the 12 million population lives below the poverty line. In addition, the primary school population of over 3 million students entails large classes with a 1: 60 plus teacher – student ratio (National Statistical Office, 2002). The situation is compounded by inadequate classroom and related infrastructure inadequacy. Limited government expenditure on education due to a fragile government economic base, unavoidably leads to the availability of very insufficient and limiting teaching and learning resources.

Although newspapers, magazines, and book kiosks are available in cities and big towns, where, according to National Statistical Office (2001), only 14 percent of Malawi's 12 million population resides, saying that the country is a print-limited

environment is not an exaggeration. While the high cost of print material certainly scares away would-be readers, the country's low literacy rate does not make things any better. National Statistical Office (2001) indicated that literacy is higher among men (72 percent) and lower among women (49 percent). Besides, literacy is higher in the urban areas (75 percent for women and 88 percent for men) than in the rural areas (44 percent and 69 percent, respectively). Additionally, Malawi is a multilingual society of thirteen ethnic groups with 13 languages that fork out into 36 dialects. This is a society that is mostly non-English speaking because while the official language of business and medium of instruction in school from standard five in primary school through university is English, the national language, Chichewa, is the upheld medium of communication bridging the various ethnic groups across the country. Nevertheless, not everyone really speaks, let alone understands Chichewa.

Another factor that contributes to the literacy problem is that in Malawi no teachers are trained to be reading specialists as there is no such component in the country's teacher education program curriculum. Primary school teachers learn all the eleven content areas they are destined to teach, as they go through the teacher education program. But reading as a subject is not part of the curriculum. Furthermore, primary school teachers do not hold university degrees, and few primary teacher educators hold Masters degrees. The majority of teacher educators are trained secondary school teachers who came to primary school teacher education without professional primary teacher education training. At the time of this study, Malawi was in the process of establishing a cadre of professionally trained primary school teacher educators.

Such was the landscape of the field in which this study took place.

Purpose of the Study

However, despite this bleak scenario, the country has over the years produced some highly literate persons. Both within Malawi and outside the country, one may find literate Malawians. Many of these people were born in and got their primary, secondary, and tertiary education within the country. Just as it is true of all other people all over the world, there are Malawians who have become distinguished academics, scientists, physicists, medical doctors, or lawyers, in spite of Malawi's very low literacy and income levels and the myriad accompanying social and related problems.

Therefore, this investigation sought to find out how those who become literate do so in this not-so-conducive environment. The study purposefully sought literacy stories of six Masters degree holding Malawian teacher educators. These participants were chosen because they fall in a category of literate Malawians. Also the teacher educators' involvement would reveal findings that would inform teacher educators' practice in Malawi.

Research Questions

This study was a search for factors that support and enable learners to become literate by following how participants in this study became literate persons. It sought to investigate the umbrella question: What are the conditions that promote literacy development in a print-limited environment?

Finding the answer to the umbrella question given above meant finding answers to the following three questions:

1. What were the influences that led to literacy development for these teacher educators in a country that is print-limited?
2. What kinds of experiences did these teacher educators have as children that led to literacy development in a country that is print-limited?
3. What were the personal relationships that evolved during the literacy development of these teacher educators?

Outline of the Study

Chapter One is the introduction to the study. As already noted, this first chapter contains the need for the study, the context for the research, the purpose of study, and research questions. Chapter Two is a review of the literature related to this study. This chapter begins with the theoretical framework governing this study, followed by a synthesis of what literacy and related terms have come to mean. Wrapping up this chapter is a review of the literature that informs this study. Chapter Three is the methodology section where the design of the study is highlighted. This is the chapter that outlines the research questions; participants' selection, and data collection and analysis methods. Chapter Four contains research findings in the form of six stories of literacy development. The analysis of the literacy stories is in Chapter Five. Finally, Chapter Six contains the discussion of the findings, implications of the study for teacher education, and areas for further research that emerged from this study.

CHAPTER 2

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Learning is inseparable from living because from the time we are born and throughout life we do not stop learning. At all times we are learning. Even when we find ourselves unable to master a skill or understand some body of knowledge, what we learn is that that particular skill or subject is outside our scope. How do we come to know and how do we learn so that we can know? To ask the same question differently: How do we construct knowledge? How do we become literate? How do we develop literacy? These questions are central to this study.

In this chapter, I look at the theories on which this investigation hinges. I begin by taking a look at knowledge construction. After that I look at the branches of Constructivism known as radical constructivism and social constructivism. Thereafter, literacy is contextualized in which I offer a communicative transactional model that ties together the crucial aspects of literacy learning. The chapter concludes with a synthesis of research in areas that contribute to literacy development.

Knowledge Construction

From Socrates right through Descartes, Locke, Berkeley, Hume, Kant, Vico, Dewey, and Piaget, with many other philosophers and epistemologists in between and after, the way knowledge is arrived at continues to be debated. That be as it may, I find that Piaget (1937) made a fundamental statement in relation to knowledge when he wrote, “The mind organizes the world by organizing itself” (p. 311). This means that our understanding of the world is based upon our perception. Most importantly, the knowledge we claim to have has much to do with our experiences. By creating order in our minds, we are able to perceive the arranged order in the world.

The thought that we create our knowledge has given birth to the line of thinking referred to as *constructivism*. This is “a philosophical perspective derived from the work of Immanuel Kant which views reality as existing mainly in the mind, constructed or interpreted in terms of one’s own perspectives” (Harris & Hodges, p. 43). Brooks and Brooks (1999) made the proposition that we construct our own understanding of the world in which we live. This means that we create our own new understandings depending on the interaction between what we already know and believe and anything we experience afterwards. If we encounter something new, we either interpret it in line with our prior knowledge or we generate a new set of rules to account for the disequilibrium that comes with the new occurrence.

What is central to knowledge making or construction is that facts change and, subsequently, knowledge changes too. In school, for instance, as Baxter Magolda (1999)

asserted, teachers must come to the point where they help students grasp this idea by creating the conditions for this shift to occur. It is imperative that this ability to learn in line with changing conditions needs to be inherent in productive people. Unfortunately, it is not something that is in-borne but something that must be learnt. Constructivism has two major strands, namely: *cognitive constructivism* and *social constructivism*.

Cognitive Constructivism

Cognitive constructivism is largely based on Piaget's work on knowledge construction. Eggen and Kauchak (2001) viewed cognitive constructivism as the knowledge construction process that focuses on individual, internal constructions of knowledge. Knowledge is seen as entirely being in the mind of an individual. Such is the case because cognition is seen as an instrument of adaptation, that is, a tool for fitting ourselves into the world of our experience (Piaget, 1970; Glasersfeld, 2002). Heavily influenced by Piaget, Glasersfeld (2002), admittedly, has come up with a new elemental strand of cognitive constructivism, which he has called *radical constructivism*. In radical constructivism, as coined and advanced by Glasersfeld (2002), truth is not absolute or independent of us for what one considers to be true is relative, that is, simply another way of explaining something. According to Glasersfeld (2002), radical constructivism, is an approach to knowledge and knowing. It is a way of thinking and not the theory for explaining independent reality. The basis for this approach is the assumption that knowledge is in people's heads constructed individually based on personal experiences which are, unavoidably, subjective. While radical constructivism does not get into the argument of the existence or non-existence of reality, what this approach puts forward is the assertion that there is no way of ascertaining the existence of universal reality. This is so because knowledge exists in the mind of the knower based on their personal experience. Otherwise, there is no way of getting into the knower's mind to view the knowledge contained in there and be able to compare it to that of other knowers. What is crucial is that even when people go through the "same" experience (or event), the constructs they make out of such an experience do not necessarily denote sameness of knowledge. For example, riding in a fast cruising car may create excitement and joy in one while creating fear and numbness in another person on the same trip.

Radical constructivism hinges on two essential tenets: (1) knowledge is not received passively but constructed by each individual and (2) the function of knowledge is adaptive, assisting in organizing the experiential world and not in the discovery of ontological reality (Glasersfeld (2002)). The first principle nullifies the existence of knowledge independent of the knower's individual construction. This means that a knower constructs knowledge by actively putting together their prior experience in the wake of new experiences. No other person knows what the knower knows in the way the knower does. For example, the mention of "Virginia Tech" conjures up different images in the minds of different people, like, the Hokies (famous American football team) for some, or some part of the campus for others. The second principle asserts that knowledge is there to assist the knower get to an understanding of the way the world operates because it is prior knowledge and experience that determines our understanding

of the world. In this regard, what people know helps them make sense of the way they see their subjective reality and act the way they do. Furthermore, language is a very important tool used in communication and, thereby, in the construction of schemes that lead to the construction of knowledge.

Moreover, there are several concepts that are crucial to the understanding of radical constructivism as advanced by Glasersfeld (2002). One such concept is the concept of *truth*. In radical constructivism, truth is not absolute for what one considers truth might simply be one of several ways of explaining something. Another concept is *viability* of knowledge. This concept stipulates that knowledge is kept or discarded depending on its usefulness (*viability*). It is noted that knowers like staying in a state of *equilibrium* (balance or comfort). However, any new event creates a *disequilibrium* (disturbance or perturbation) resulting in action that leads to *accommodation* (tolerance), if it does not fit in the already existing constructs, or *assimilation* (acceptance) if it fits. The knower then has to *adapt* (accept) the *schemes* (mental sets) that are either verified or modified to fit into the prevailing state of knowing. What is important here is that individuals construct knowledge that is deemed useful at the time or in future.

Social Constructivism

Social constructivism owes its beginning to Vygotsky (1978). Social constructivism suggests that knowledge exists in a social context and is initially shared with others instead of being represented solely in the mind of an individual (Eggen and Kauchak, 2001; Turner, 1995). Therefore, social constructivism refers to the approach to knowledge and knowing that asserts that knowledge is a product of associations that take place in societies. What is pivotal here is the assertion that knowledge exists in a social context. Therefore, knowledge is shared with others and not just exclusively constructed within the mind of an individual. Interaction is paramount in Social Constructivism because it is the process of sharing that results in individuals refining their own ideas and shaping those of others in the particular society.

It is worth noting that within the umbrella term social constructivism dwell three closely related schools of thought, namely: (1) *sociocultural constructionism*, (2) *symbolic interactionism*, and (3) *social constructionism* (Prawat, 1996). In brief, sociocultural constructionism asserts that what we think, what we think about, and how we think, depends on our society and culture which we are mediated by. Knowledge construction, therefore, is dependent more on socialization than on the individual. Symbolic interactionism, however, asserts that knowledge is constructed by individuals through socialization. As such, knowledge is a social product which, through interaction, is confirmed by society but left to the individual to take away from the interaction what is worth. Social constructionism, on the other hand, while acknowledging the importance of the social aspect, goes on to emphasize that knowledge construction is dependent mainly on language. This is so because discourse communities have one language, and all experience is distilled by language.

Furthermore, social constructivism presupposes the coming into play of the following elements: society, culture, individuals, interaction or socialization, distributed cognition, and language (Bredo, 2000). First, Social Constructivism portrays society as the core determinant of knowledge. Knowledge is created in and by groups of people. Everything happens within a social framework, for example, within a society of politicians, scientists, nationals, residents, ethnic group members, and family because knowers are socialized into communities. Second, culture is also part and parcel of particular social groupings. Knowledge is constructed when one has some linkage to the culture of the knowers of something. Third, individuals bring their, prior knowledge, power of analysis and concepts construction that lead to the creation of the knowledge that is shared with others. Fourth, socialization or interaction is another indispensable element of Social Constructivism. Knowers get to know what other knowers know and then create their own knowledge through interaction with others. Consequently, this socialization leads to the codification, externalization and ultimate delocation of knowledge. Fifth, language is at the centre of knowledge construction. Actually, in order for a group of people to share knowledge, they must have a language that generates sameness of meaning when used by anyone of the members of the group.

All in all constructivism has a bearing on this investigation. Such is the case because the study hinges on how learners learn, that is, how they become literate. Furthermore, this process of knowing takes place in societies that are culturally mediated. Both the radical constructivism proposition of knowledge as being individually constructed and the social constructivism assertion of the centrality of society in knowledge construction play a pivotal role in literacy development. Whereas no one gets to know how to read and write on another's behalf, the knowledge one has must be in line with constructs of a given society in which the literate person is a member.

Contextualizing Literacy

We all obtain and provide massive information in our countless interactions with other people. From time to time, we all have something to say or questions to ask other people. To do that, we use a medium of communication that is both comprehensible between the communicators, and acceptable in the particular social setting. Although it cannot be disputed that individuals' perceptions of the world are not carbon copies of others, what is pleasing is that there is much overlap as points of similarities override differences by a very wide margin. As such, it is neither surprising nor uncommon for one to hear people say, "I understand" or "I see what you mean."

What's more, we perceive, decode, interpret, comprehend, and even analyze what others say only if and when they operate on the same wavelength with us. Similarly, we decide, encode, and transmit our intents to others in a way that facilitates productive interaction. These human communicative transactions, so crucial to human co-existence, take place within a given society. One has to be literate in order to participate in this indispensable activity. This is so because we interact with others in a meaningful way using "common" language within the parameters that are governed by a given society's

culturally acceptable codes. Therefore, it cannot be emphasized enough that literacy is central to societies' and nations' survival, development, and progress as well as the appreciation, preservation, and promotion of people's cultures. It is worth noting that unless we become literate about the goings on in the community, society and world we live in, we can neither make our contribution nor draw the benefits accrued to us by virtue of our membership to these. Unfortunately, literacy is perceived differently by stakeholders resulting in non-uniform treatment of issues related to literacy education (Allington, 2002; Graves, 2001; Ohanian, 2001; Smith, 1998).

Defining Central Concepts Inherently Associated with Literacy

To begin with, every society or community is cohesively glued together by its *language, culture* and *literacy* practices. Certainly, these may either be identical or different. However, the bottom line is that they serve the same three-dimensional purpose: preservation, self-correcting dynamism, and promotion of the uniqueness of each society. It is unlikely that the terms *language, culture, society* and *literacy* can enjoy the impossible opportunity of being universally singularly defined. I would like, at this juncture, to provide my definitions of these terms in the way they have come to make sense to me because their understanding has significant bearing on this investigation.

Language refers to the oral, written, graphic, and sign decodable patterns that are used to mediate purposeful communicative transactions between individuals. On the other hand, *culture* is the unique mix of beliefs, values, and ways of doing things that are special to a group of people in a given community or society. The term *society*, stands for a group of people who interact with each other because of their being members of the same geographical locality, members of the same institutional community, or members of the same professional fraternity, and, indeed, any other grouping. As for *literacy*, this is the term that refers to the ability to listen, speak, read, write, analyze, and synthesize a conveyed message and meaningfully respond to the same in a way that entails full comprehension of the interaction one is engaged in.

The words language, culture, society, and literacy embody crucial components of what I would call the indispensable human communicative transaction triangle. Figure 1 outlines the relationship that exists among these concepts in literacy education.

Indispensable Human Communicative Transaction Triangle Components

Understanding the interconnectedness of these components is paramount in productive literacy education. Society, culture, and language are the sides of the triangle that encase what goes for literacy within a particular community. In figure 1, I graphically present the interconnectedness of these components.

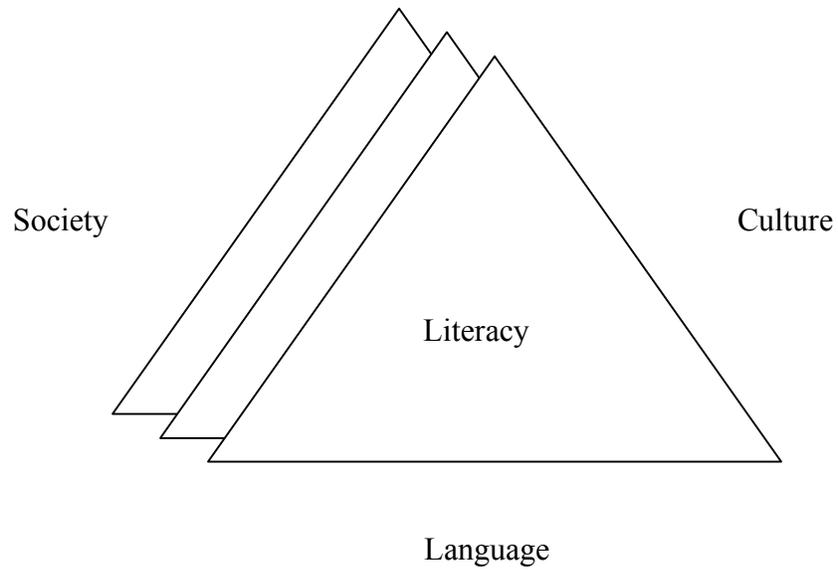


Figure 1. Indispensable Communicative Transaction Triangle

Note : Sides of a triangle showing components that facilitate the development of literacy, with multiple triangles indicating an individual's multiple literacies.

Society is “the sum of human conditions and activity regarded as a whole functioning interdependently” (The Oxford Dictionary and Thesaurus, p. 1442). Society may be seen as a concoction of persons who basically see things more or less through the same type of frame. These individuals belong because they have some commonalities that bind them together. The binding forces may be such things as affiliations, convictions, professions, localities, and hobbies, to name just some. What this means is that one has to be a member of a particular society in order for them to belong. But it must also be noted that one might be a member of several societies based on the particular forces that might be at play. For instance, one could be a university professor, on the one hand, and a radio program presenter on the other. In simple terms, an individual may be a member of two or more societies. That is where the multiple triangles come in each one standing for a person’s membership to a particular grouping.

Culture refers to the attitudes, values, customs, and behaviour patterns that characterize a social group (Eggen and Kauchak (2001). It is culture that moulds individuals who belong to and subscribe to beliefs, values and practices of certain groups into given modes of ways of looking at and understanding things. Different societies have significant similar and distinct perspectives to those of others. One needs to be a member of a society, in a way, in order to understand, appreciate, and participate in the goings on.

Language is the systematic, conventional use of sounds, signs, or written symbols in a human society for communication and self-expression (Crystal, 1992). Language is basically a medium of communication. It is acquired in the society one belongs to. If one belongs to a number of societies, they likely are or become conversant in the language of the respective ones. For instance, if one belongs to a society of mathematicians, he/she is bound to be capable of speaking the language of mathematics, which might be total “double Dutch” to someone who is “allergic” to anything falling under the umbrella of mathematics. Furthermore, a person that relocates to a different place, like a Chichewa speaking Malawian relocating to an English speaking community in Britain, ends up learning and speaking the language spoken in their new place of abode. This means that language finds meaning in the context of a socio-cultural setting.

In addition, language is the means by which interaction is fostered among members of a society that upholds a culture. Generally, one has to be fluent in a language in order to understand and convey meaningful messages by choosing the appropriate word choice and formation that carry the right shades of nuances.

Literacy signifies one’s ability to participate in a given discourse from an informed perspective. It entails having appropriate frames of reference that are available to members of a given society that embraces a culture one is conversant with. Successful and meaningful participation in some sport, or in an intellectually stimulating discussion, is dependent on one’s being literate in that particular area. Therefore, literacy embraces a lifelong context-bound set of practices in which an individual’s needs, despite varying in time and context, engender understandable messages.

These four components are intertwined. A person needs to be a member of a society in order to benefit from and contribute to it. Schools, for instance are communities of learners. Teachers learn from colleagues, students, and reflecting on their own works while students also learn from teachers, colleagues and their own motivation to find out things. Furthermore, being a member of a particular society has to do with being immersed in a particular culture. For example, one finds that one school culture is not totally transferable to another school. Every school has its own ways of doing and upholding values that make a particular school what it is. As such one has to be a member of such a school to become a participant.

Finally, being literate has much to do with being conversant with the language and culture of a society that informs one's ability to articulate their thoughts. As Vygotsky (1962) put it, our private thought and language are originally shaped through the way we learn to interact with others. The human communicative transaction model above contains layers of triangles that represent that an individual is capable of being immersed in several literacies. We enjoy the richness of multiple literacies, that is, the literacy of our specialized field of endeavour, the jargon of our favourite sport or hobby, the dialect of our hometown or other ethnic heritage (Newman and Beverstock, 1990).

Defining Literacy

There are several perspectives to literacy ranging from minimal literacy, that is, the ability to read and write on the one hand, and the complex skills used in information processing oriented scenarios, on the other.

Crucial and central to learning are the basic abilities of reading, writing, and counting. Such abilities are very useful in generating and storing various useful bodies of knowledge. In fact, in formal education, any level of information acquisition, interpretation, and usage, requires these prerequisite skills. One must be literate in order to store, retrieve, and make meaningful use of the available information, be it in making informed decisions or applications to other aspects of human endeavor such as travel and purchase of goods and services. Therefore, literacy is certainly essential to effective learning both in schools and in the society at large. Achieving high literacy levels in school is a task requiring the involvement of all teachers across the curriculum.

While The Oxford Dictionary (1996, p. 876) has defined literacy as “the ability to read and write,” academics and practitioners in education have not yet agreed on what the term *literacy* means. One way of understanding *literacy* is to see it as a continuum of skills, including both reading and writing but applied in a social context (Gray, 1956). *Literacy* is also viewed as the prerogative of reading and writing (Johnson, 1993). Furthermore, *literacy* “requires active, autonomous engagement with print and stresses the role of the individual in generating as well as receiving and assigning independent interpretations to messages” (Harris & Hodges, 1995, p. 142). Additionally, *literacy*

should be seen as a lifelong context-bound set of practices in which an individual's needs vary with time and context (Verhoeven, 1993).

Historically, the term *literacy* originates from the Latin term "litteratus" which in the Middle Ages meant "a learned person... one who could read Latin" (Venezky, 1990, p. 3). After 1300, being literate turned out to mean "minimal ability to read Latin" (p. 3). Macias (quoted in Venezky, 1990, p. 18)) added to this assertion when he said that "reading, of course, is primary to any definition of *literacy* and the other skills are, in a sense, secondary". However, after the Reformation, a "literate" person came to mean "one who could read and write one's native language" (Venezky, 1990, p. 3). But by the 1790's a literate person came to mean one who was well-versed in Greek and Latin. However, as of the Twenty first century the term *literacy*:

implies an interaction between social demands and individual competence...
Today literacy is understood as a continuum, anchored at the bottom by illiteracy. Of equal importance to illiteracy, however, is aliteracy – the unwillingness to use literacy even though the capability is present (Harris & Hodges, 1995, p. 142).

Consequently, to say that someone is "literate" is, therefore, dependent on how one defines *literacy* basically because the term literacy pervades every facet of life. For instance, Freire (1985) viewed literacy as a strategy of liberation that teaches people to read not only the word but also the world. Such a view articulates the broadening of horizons and awareness and acceptance of a much larger perception of self in relation to one's own world and to the world of others. For that reason, literacy must, unavoidably, be studied from a variety of perspectives since it is merely a term used in general reference to very complex human activities which no single perspective seems to reveal very much (Robinson, 1987).

It is, certainly, no wonder then that finding a universal definition of the term literacy remains rather elusive. One is, therefore, left to conclude that it must be due to the elusiveness of an "adequate" definition that professionals in this field of literacy have come to find a way of creating common understanding by attaching qualifiers to the term literacy so as to engender desired meanings. To begin with, some professionals (Gray 1956) split literacy into two levels: (1) *minimal level* which refers to the ability to read and write simple messages and (2) *functional level* which refers to a sufficiently high level for a person to ably operate in a society.

Venezky (1990) went one step further by categorizing literacy into three aspects. The first of these is *basic literacy*, that is, the type that allows self-sustained development in literacy. The second is *required literacy*, that is, the level expected for any given social condition. The third is *functional literacy*, that is, a general designation of abilities above basic literacy that allows some level of functioning through print in society. Stephens and Brown (2004) added to the arena with *content literacy*, referring to, using reading and writing as tools for learning subject matter. Whitehurst and Lonigan (2002) evoked *emergent literacy*, a term that refers to the developmental precursors of formal reading that have their origin early in the life of a child.

Luke (2002) talked of *multiple literacy*, that is in reference to the flexible and sustainable mastery of a repertoire of practices with the texts of traditional and new communication technologies via oral language, print, and multimedia, to critical literacy, thereby going beyond the presented obvious to uncover the hidden nuances of messages. Papen (2000) argued the perspective that literacy should not be conceived as a single set of competencies but different practices embedded in political relations, ideological practices, symbolic meaning structures and discourses. It is no wonder that bearing all this expansiveness, Hautecoeur (1992) simply conceded that *literacy* is an issue that is multi-faceted, complex and changing. Indeed, it is hard to pin down.

This lack of a universal definition of *literacy* poses further problems in the understanding of what constitutes *literacy*. In such a scenario, it is inevitable to ask questions like: what are the standards against which levels one might be labeled as literate or illiterate? For instance, if one is not a non-native speaker of English but very fluent in one's native language, do we label them literate or illiterate? This latter question is asked because one of the contentions for literacy is that it enables people to get involved in their society due to their being literate. This becomes problematic when one comes to consider that the person who might hardly contribute in the all-English speaking environment, might actually be a valuable contributor to their native society where English is not a necessary part and parcel of that environment. This is what probably explains why Venezky, Wagner, and Ciliberti (1990, p. ix) stated that "who is literate depends upon how we define literacy." In that regard, Chall (2002) has maintained that, because of changing standards in American schools, there has not been agreement on what constitutes functional literacy or minimal competence.

However, despite all this lack of a universally accepted definition, *literacy* is highly valued in societies. As such, it is expected of schools to ensure that those who go through a schooling system acquire desirable levels of *literacy*. It should be said that the role of schools is to assure that learners get engrossed in functional literacy because writing and reading have become increasingly important in societies than ever before.

Developing Literacy

How do we become literate? How do we become readers and writers? How do we become text users, decoders, analysts, and creators? How do we develop literacy? One encompassing answer is, by learning. Smith (1998) argued that just about all the important knowledge and skills we have directly results from our learning. Inseparable from students' learning are teachers. After all, as McGee and Richgels (2000) contended, teachers are concerned with supporting all children's literacy growth, and fortunately, with thoughtful instruction, most children succeed in becoming reflective, motivated readers.

The Role of Reading in Literacy Development

We develop literacy by principally learning to read and write. These are fundamental skills. It is no wonder that Whitehurst and Lonigan (2002) asserted that learning to read is a key milestone for children living in a literate society. The thinking here is that a critical part of the foundation for children's academic as well as after school success is provided by reading skills. It is hard to dispute that individuals who acquire more knowledge in various domains actually read well and read more. But for this to happen, one must be in an environment that is conducive to learning and presented with learning instructions and medium of communication that make sense to the learner. Reading is one gigantic door that leads to the inexhaustible world of multi-literacies. Once opened, it is almost impossible to shut this door. In addition, fruitful teaching helps learners acquire the important abilities of synthesis and critical literacy that are crucial for comprehending underlying agendas hidden in innocent looking communications that pervade the worlds of marketing, entertainment, politics and the myriad social practices.

Jenkins (2002) argued that reading is neither natural nor spontaneous but it is learned. Luke (1995) made the case that reading is a supple social practice with identifiable moral and ideological consequences in a four-tiered model that defines reading in terms of coding, semantics, pragmatics, and critical roles. In addition, Luke (1995) contended that critical reading, the awareness of and facility with the technique by which texts and discourses construct and position human subjects and society, is a very essential component of everyday life in social institutions. As such, reading is seen as being tied up with learning values and ways of a culture. Moreover, reading instruction is not about skills but the construction of identity and social relations. This is so because reading is viewed as social practice that comprises interpretive rules besides being constructed and learned in institutions like school, churches, family and work places.

Although Luke (1995) asserted that there are no universal skills for teaching reading, he presented a model of reading as a social practice that is suitable for making critical readers needed in the present world. Reading is not a private but social practice. Texts are not timeless aesthetic objects or neutral receptacles of information but important sites for the symbiotic reproduction of discourses and ideology, identity and power within communities. That is why it is imperative that readers should learn their roles as code breaker, text participant, text user, and text analyst.

However, Luke (1998) also observed that many teachers are facing challenges in that they continue to see many of their students struggling with literacy and having difficulty engaging with the cultures and texts of schooling in the mostly crowded classrooms. Unfortunately, the major, never-ceasing debate in literacy education happens to be over which instructional approach is best able to solve student reading and writing problems. Luke (1998) further argued that the issue is not one of finding the right and correct scientific methods of teaching literacy because such a way does not exist. Instead, the matter is about reconstructing and realigning the curriculum, instruction, and assessment in ways that better address the knowledges, practices, and aspirations of

communities most at risk in the face of the new technologies and economic conditions. Therefore, the question should not be: What is the best way of teaching writing and reading? Instead, the question should be: How and to what ends can teachers reshape students' reading and writing practices in communities facing new and old technologies, media and modes of expressions, emergent hybrid cultures and institutions, as well as forms of cultural identities and life pathways for which teachers have few precedents.

Furthermore, Allington (2002) explained that literacy is always a situated response to particular political economies of education. As such, the teacher's work, from a sociological perspective, is not about enhancing individual growth, personal voice, or skill development but building access to literate practices and discourse resources for social exchange in the social fields where texts and discourse matter. This is so because literacy education is about instructional access and inclusion, discrimination and exclusion, and setting the conditions for students to engage in textual relationships of power. Therefore, the way resources are selected and framed has consequences for students' capacity to become active designers and agents in shaping their social futures and those of their communities and cultures.

Duffy (1992) advocated two approaches used in teaching children to read: (1) the skills and strategy approach and (2) the whole language or literature based approach. In the *skill and strategy approach* students learn about language systems in isolation; it is very structured, carefully sequenced and teacher directed lessons; passing tests and not understanding is the important thing; and, students learn to answer questions without understanding use of language system. On the other hand, *whole-language* or *literature based approach* places emphasis on actual reading of books and writing of stories. With this approach learning is relatively unstructured, non-sequenced, and without quizzes, while teachers promotes real reading without being unduly directive.

It is important to note that the latter approach is unhelpful to at-risk students because such learners get left behind (Wilhelm et al., 2001). The combination of the two approaches seems to be the most effective. There is practical immediacy to instruction since learning is situated in a meaningful activity. In addition, the curriculum is sensibly ordered and the teacher provides the required scaffolding. Moreover, evaluation is on whether the learners have gotten from the reading what they need in order to accomplish a given task. The combined approach emphasizes authentic use not contrived exercises thereby focusing on teaching and learning for understanding. Then the direct instruction ensures ordered and forthright teaching with students not left to figure things out unassisted. Therefore, by engaging in authentic activities, learners do what literate people do in real life situations. The literacy development of learners in such a learning environment is enhanced.

The Role of Writing in Literacy Development

The skills of reading and writing develop together as children grow in literacy. Children who have read good books over and over and who have been read aloud to

again and again are, through that process, developing their repertoire for reading as well as for what makes good writing. However, these young writers also need to be convinced that their life experiences and the bits and pieces of those experiences set down in their writer's notebooks can be turned into stories, that their nascent thoughts and reflections can be splendid works of art (Harwayne, (2001). Furthermore, constructivist teachers view reading and writing as opportunities to provide forms of authentic classroom communication (Strickland & Strickland, 2002). "Students learn language and literacy simultaneously in environments that permit them to read, write, listen, and speak for a variety of authentic purposes" (p. 13).

Writing is an integral part of the process of developing literacy. Support for including writing in kindergarten classrooms came from the National Research Council (USA) in 1998 when it issued the following standards that students should meet by the end of kindergarten:

1. Independently writes many uppercase and lowercase letters.
2. Uses phonemic awareness and letter knowledge to spell independently (invented or creative).
3. Writes (unconventionally) to express own meaning.
4. Builds a repertoire of some conventionally spelled words.
5. Shows awareness of distinction between "kid writing" and conventional orthography.
6. Writes own name (first and last) and the first names of some friends or classmates.
7. Can write most letters and some words when they are dictated. (Snow et al., p. 80)

However, Edwards (2003) went further in her suggestions for writing in kindergarten by including short compositions, such as writing a sentence that describes a picture and writing a short story that tells what is happening in a wordless picture book. In discussing the place of writing in the kindergarten classroom, Routman (2000) asserted that students need to be immersed in "compelling literature ... read it together, discuss it, and notice writers' techniques, personal styles, forms, word choices, leads, descriptions, power to persuade, ability to forge a connection with the reader, and more (p. 400). It is through reading stories and through reading each other's writing that students come to see themselves as writers. Reading helps develop students' understanding of how writing works, but it is also through writing that children develop their reading skills.

On the other hand, Johnson (1993) argued that there are two literacies based on linguistic language and visual language that work together within children's texts, not only in fiction but also in content texts. Art can do things that words cannot. Color, symbolism, spatial depth, and texture can convey more than words; therefore, visual literacy becomes part of the reading process. However, drawing is also part of children's writing process in that illustrations, regardless of artistic ability, correlates and adds to the stories they write. "Children learn the art of writing by reading a wide range of materials, and they learn how illustrations "work" by studying the artwork of picture books

(Johnson, 1993, p. 24). Visual language can also be used as a bridge between literature or content texts and writing about those texts. Older students can use “symbolic representations” rather than writing to show their understanding of written texts (Wilhelm et al, 2001). In this way the formulations of visual language assist understandings of reading language that can then be put into written language.

Another area in which writing is helpful in literacy development in the context of schooling is the type of writing that is done across the curriculum. Self (1987) stated that writing across the curriculum means that all teachers will give students frequent opportunities to use writing in ways that will help them to learn course material and learn to think with that material. Writing becomes a tool for learning. It should be noted that writing across the curriculum does not entail only the production of academic, literary or practical products but also writing that centers on thinking and learning about subject matter.

Therefore, writing in all content areas is helpful to students because writing develops the thinking of learners. Actually, engaging in writing encourages learners’ thinking and learning since one cannot write unless he/she is thinking. Self (1987) contended that thinking propels the pen forward in a meaningful way. And it is the thinking and recording in a meaningful way that make people remember or learn better what they write. When the teacher’s focus is not on techniques but on intention to mean, ideas in a lesson are articulated by learners in the latter’s own language as they are turned into thinkers and doers by the writing.

In addition, writing enhances learners’ assimilation and understanding of subject matter. Stephens and Brown (2004) made this point when they wrote that providing students with multiple opportunities to construct meaning in subject matter classes enhances their content knowledge and promotes a deeper conceptual understanding of it. It is only when this happens that learning can be said to be taking place. After all, the heart of writing across the curriculum is to help students view writing as a natural and useful way to learn subject matter, to discover content by putting it into their own language, and reflect on what they know. Furthermore, the study of content areas is actually the study of language. Stephens and Brown (2004) developed this line of thought by saying that biology is not plants and animals. It is language about plants and animals. History is not events. It is language describing and interpreting events. Astronomy is not planets and stars. It is a way of talking about planets and stars. Therefore, writing across the curriculum helps learners internalize the language of the particular subject matters.

Finally, it should be said that writing across the curriculum also helps dispel the myth in the learners that only people with special abilities and in certain subject areas can write. Johnson (1993) posited that it is practical to make a book of words, graphics, and pictures, whether the aim is to explore one’s creative potential (an illustrated poem) or make a scientific investigation (inventing a machine). The point is that when learners write in a particular subject matter, they come to realize that they can frame their learning in multiple ways.

The following letter written by a student, Tim, to his class teacher Mrs. Morgan, clearly underscores the importance of using writing to promote learning as well as the role of writing in developing his literacy:

12/4/85

Dear Mrs. Morgan,

The last two years we have been writing to learn. Never in all of my school experience have I done so before. All the teachers I ever had previously only wanted me to repeat information I was given and not to expand on it with my own thoughts. I find it very difficult to give someone back the same information they want to hear without putting it in my own words and saying it how I need to in order to get the point across. In those years of school I wasn't learning I was repeating and it was boring and turned me off to school. Now I write to learn and I don't just repeat information. I find when I write to learn I learn to write and it opens up new areas and different aspects of the learning process and sometimes it actually gets interesting and when a person is interested it makes all the difference in the world. – Tim

(Morgan, C.G. 1987, p. 60)

The Role of the Home in Literacy Development

While schools are in the business of educating children, teachers are in the practice of helping children learn so that the learner achieves some degree of mastery, not just rote knowledge. One thing that is noted, though, is that the school is a whole world of its own that has, in a way, a culture and discourse of its own. Purcell-Gates (1997) explained that when there is a dichotomy between the literacy of the school and that of the communities outside of school, learners are in for a difficult time.

As such, there is need to try everything possible in acknowledging and bringing into the school, the literacies of the community to facilitate students' learning. The point is that what happens in the home has a substantial bearing on a learner's literacy development. If a child sees parents and older siblings reading and writing, the child will want to do the same. Likewise, if no literacy practices occur in the home, children may not grasp the value of reading and writing.

The term *home literacy environment* generally has referred to participation in literacy-related activities in the home, which can include the availability of print material and frequency of reading (Leseman & de Jong, 1998). They further suggested that there are three aspects of the home literacy environment that are important for the development of literacy: opportunities for practice, promotion of literacy activities by literate family members, and motivation. Parents play a crucial role in the literacy development of their children. According to Cochran-Smith (1986):

Children are not born knowing how to connect their knowledge and experiences

in literate ways to printed and pictorial texts. Rather they must learn the strategies for understanding texts just as they must learn the ways of eating and talking that are appropriate to their cultures or social groups. (p. 36)

However, students often come to school without the basic skills necessary for later success. They lack the early literacy skills that have been shown to facilitate learning how to read (Allor & McCathren, 2003). Among the essential skills are

- the development of both expressive and receptive oral language (Kamhi & Catts, 1999), and
- the understanding that print symbolizes language and holds information (Adams, 1994).

Many studies have indicated that children who are early readers come from families where literacy activities such as reading aloud, and having books are valued and practiced (Bus, van Ijzendoorn & Pellegrini, 1995; Lancy, Draper, & Boyce, 1989; Morrow, 1983; Teale, 1978). Additional activities that impact children's literacy development include being read to on a consistent basis, interacting with the reader through question and clarification dialogues where they negotiate meaning of the text together. Adams (1994), in her extensive review, identified reading aloud to children as one of the most important activities for building the skills necessary for early reading. She estimated that children who are read to for approximately 30 minutes each night will have acquired at least 1,000 hours of print exposure when they begin kindergarten. This extensive print exposure is seen as an important prerequisite for children to begin to understand the phonemic structure of language and to readily identify letters.

Because many parents lack the skills to provide literacy experiences for their children at home, some schools have initiated programs that help parents to learn such strategies and skills. Storybook reading has been touted as a process for parents and children to read together. Smetana (2005) reported on a Collaborative Storybook Reading Program carried out in a kindergarten class in a culturally diverse, small urban school. Parents and other family members were given interactive training sessions. Fifteen at-risk students were the target group. At the end all of the parents indicated that they used all of the interactive strategies as they read with their child, and all indicated that they were comfortable assisting their children with learning how to read and do school work. The interactive storybook reading program resulted in significant improvement in student ability to retell a story. Their interest and attention to stories being read aloud in class increased. The students began to mimic what readers do – predicted story events, understood and discussed story structure, began to repeat text and vocabulary, and began to understand that reading is the process of communicating with the author. The students approached the skill level of those who had early literary experiences.

Griffin and Morrison (1997) developed the nine-item *Family Literacy Environment Scale* for a longitudinal study of kindergarten children. Their results revealed that home literacy environment was significantly related to receptive vocabulary, general knowledge, and reading recognition, but not to mathematics scores,

in kindergarten children after controlling for demographic variables. There continued to be a significant relationship between home literacy environment, general knowledge, and reading ability for this sample at the end of second grade.

The Role of Teaching Strategies in Literacy Development

Schooling is about teachers helping students mediate the knowledge they bring to school with what they find in school in order to negotiate meaning in the situated contexts of instruction. It is important for teachers to facilitate students' acquisition of subject discourses through the process of perfecting the practice of constructive meaning making, that we call learning. The different content areas are, actually, different discourses the students engage in. This means that teachers must ascertain the help that students need by engaging them in strategies that develop literacy, specifically reading comprehension, in a variety of discourses.

Over the last twenty-five years, comprehension strategy research has primarily centered on single strategy approaches and multiple strategy approaches. Students were typically taught a specific comprehension strategy as compared with a control group of students who had not been taught the strategy. Several strategies proved useful for improving children's reading comprehension before, during, and after reading including: prior knowledge activation, question generation during reading, making mental images during reading, summarization, and analyzing story structure (Pearson & Dole, 1987; Pearson & Fielding, 1991). Other studies centered on explicit explanation of single comprehension strategies to build a repertoire over time (Duffy, 2003; Duffy et al., 1987; Roehler & Duffy, 1989). The explicit explanation approach emphasized the importance of teacher explanation of why we read, how the reading system works including understandings about print, texts, concepts, vocabulary, and strategies and the use of mental process modeling through the use of "think aloud" processes to show students how to think through the application of comprehension strategies before, during and after the text. After the teaching explanation and modeling, the teacher provided mental scaffolds to assist learners in applying the strategy taught in a group and individual settings. Over time, teacher cuing, prompts, and support were gradually withdrawn to encourage students to use the strategy on their own. Evaluations of the explicit explanation of strategy instruction (EESI) by Duffy et al. (1987) found that EESI students outperformed control students on standardized measures of reading.

Several adaptations of explicit explanation of individual comprehension strategies instruction eventually led to Keene and Zimmerman's (1997) description of their classroom work in *Mosaic of Thought*. They proposed the explicit explanation and teaching of six comprehension strategies: (1) Connecting the Know to the New, (2) Determining Importance, (3) Questioning, (4) Using Sensory Images, (5) Inferring, and (6) Synthesis. Each strategy is taught one at a time for several weeks until all six are taught. These six strategies are then embedded in a Reader's Workshop, where the teacher reads aloud, provides shared and guided reading experiences, and offers independent reading opportunities. Because these practices were grounded in classroom

practice, Pressley (2000) suggested that there is a need for research on the Keene and Zimmerman approach on student achievement in reading.

On the other hand, multiple strategies approaches were also being explored during this same time. Palincsar and Brown (1984) proposed the teaching of four comprehension strategies in an instructional cycle called Reciprocal Teaching. The strategies were summarizing, questioning, clarifying, and predicting. Oczkus (2003) described the application of these strategies in a classroom setting. Students first read to a predetermined point in a text and then somewhat mechanically use all four strategies in processing the text. Later they use the strategies when the text calls for or supports use of one or more of the four strategies (Palincsar, 2003). Wherever Reciprocal Teaching has been evaluated the effects on reading comprehension improvement have been moderate to large regardless of group size, number of teaching sessions, or age of the students (Rosenshine & Meister, 1994; Palincsar, 2003).

Another multiple strategy approach is Transactional Strategies Instruction (TSI), which involves explicit teacher explanation coupled with teacher modeling, followed by guided practice during lively discussions of texts where teachers and students construct meaning together. According to Pearson & Duke (2002) the TSI model includes thinking aloud, constructing images, summarizing, predicting, questioning, clarifying or monitoring, story grammar analysis, and text structure analysis. Research on TSI is limited to four published studies (Anderson, 1992; Anderson & Roit, 1993; Brown, Pressley, Van Meter, and Schuder, 1996; Collins, 1991). In each of these studies, TSI was shown to be overwhelmingly effective in improving students' comprehension test scores and their ability to narrate texts effectively.

The use of multiple strategy approaches gained importance with the Report of the National Reading Panel (2000) when it recommended the teaching of comprehension strategies as essential to effective reading instruction, and specifically endorsed the teaching of sets or families of strategies as found in Reciprocal Teaching, Transactional Strategies Instruction, Collaborative Reasoning, Questioning the Author, and Concept Oriented Reading Instruction. For example, Questioning the Author is a widely researched strategy in all subject areas. Salinger and Fleischman (2005) described using Questioning the Author strategy for studying literature with good success. At the same time, comprehension instruction using expository texts and non-linear texts (Pearson & Duke, 2002) have become more important as new models for the role of cognitive processing evolves.

Walter Kintsch's (1998) Construction-Integration Theory argued that long-term working memory (LTWM) and cognitive retrieval structures (CRS) point to an even broader and deeper definition of reading comprehension. Many children develop listening comprehension abilities long before they enter school from being read to, interacting with parents, and engaging in ordinary life activities. These familiar experiences support the capacity for understanding simple stories. However, learning to read information texts about unfamiliar topics places new and increased demands on students because the

information is new, most of it cannot be learned through direct experiences, and it is organized in expository discourse structures that may also be new. Students, who acquire a rich knowledge base in a content area, also acquire long-term memory capacities that help them build richer text connections that help them retrieve and use the knowledge to learn. However, long-term working memory capacities and the associated cognitive retrieval structures are acquired only through sustained learning of subject matter across time and through deliberate effort on the part of students and high quality instruction on the part of teachers.

Summary

Constructing knowledge from text and understanding how that knowledge is related to other knowledge and experience in life is a necessary condition for developing high levels of literacy. The cognitive aspect aside, literacy is a profound social process. As one writes, one's thoughts unfold, take shape and are clarified. As one reads and listens, other people's ideas touch, nourish, and transform the reader's thinking. Literacy is a globally valued precondition for one's full participation in society, and is therefore a demand that nations place on learners who are individual citizens. Therefore, not only must learners remember and understand a variety of texts, but they also must continue to learn skills, processes and acquire knowledge in order to efficiently organize and access that knowledge for application in this world to facilitate further learning.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Wildman, Niles, Magliaro, and McLaughlin (1989) observed that teaching is an extremely complex process and one in which the teacher should be engaged continuously through the process of teaching, reflecting and learning. Bearing that in mind, this study intended to investigate participants' development to becoming literate individuals and literacy torch-bearers. What is noteworthy is that even in Malawi, a country that has quite an insufficient trained teaching cadre and teaching resources, which are essential ingredients in the promotion and attainment of literacy, some Malawians have excelled academically and professionally. Therefore, this investigation sought to find out how those who become literate do so in such an environment. The study was a search for factors that support and enable learners to become literate by following how participants in this study became literate persons. It sought to investigate the umbrella question: What are the conditions that promote literacy development in a print-limited environment? The following three specific questions were derived from the overall question:

1. What were the influences that led to literacy development for these teacher educators in a country that is print-limited?
2. What kinds of experiences did these teacher educators have as children that led to literacy development in a country that is print-limited?
3. What were the personal relationships that evolved during the literacy development of these teacher educators?

This chapter starts by placing the study in a qualitative educational research paradigm, followed by an argument for an autobiographical approach specifically. Methodological issues of selection of the participants, data collection procedures, data analysis, and limitations of the study are discussed.

Qualitative Research Paradigm

This investigation is qualitative in nature. My desire to do careful investigation and to share what I learn both in a methodical and in an individual, personal way led me to choose a qualitative research approach. The study aimed at gathering amounts of narrative and descriptive data that documented what the participants have gone through on their way to becoming highly literate adults. I was interested in understanding how they became literate and what being literate means to the participants.

The qualitative approach was chosen because it entails a commitment to the naturalistic interpretive approach to its subject matter. Noteworthy also is the thought expressed by Denzin and Lincoln (1998) that the word *qualitative* implies emphasis on process and meanings that are not rigorously examined or measured in terms of quantity,

amount, intensity or frequency. As such, in the study, although I was going to self-consciously draw upon my own experiences, this investigation's intention was to make connections among participants' lived experiences. Although the study asked participants to narrate their life stories, the life story is distinguished from a written autobiography in that it is determined by an oral situation of communication specified by an interview recorded on tape, and by the embedding of the speech act in an institutional framework, that is social sciences (Chanfrault-Duchet, 2000). The questions I asked, the information I attended to, the interactions I had with my participants, and the writing I did all had a direct bearing on the participants' literacy stories.

Newman and Beverstock (1990) asserted that what we value determines the direction of our lives. In a significant way, as Fingeret (1987) argued, this particular investigation was done to illuminate how teachers in Malawi view themselves as learners and, retrospectively, to understand student perspectives of instructional programs, their description of the relationship between students' cultural and classroom behaviour, as well as the functions of literacy in settings other than schools. I consider this as very important because I view literacy as both a personal and a social process of coming to know that, unavoidably, happens to be political, cultural and context dependent. Actually, Green, et al. (2001) contended that what counts as literacy in any group is viewed in the actions members take, what they orient to, what they hold each other accountable for, what they accept or reject as preferred responses of others, and how they engage with text. That is why the study looked at how teacher educators within the unique context of Malawi acquired literacy and came to understand literacy as well as their own literacy development.

On the other hand, in this process of striving to get answers to the how question, I chose and employed the qualitative approach in order to emphasize my role as an active learner who seeks to tell the story from the participants' view as opposed to being an expert who passes judgment on the participants. As Creswell (1998) expressed it, through this investigation I intended to construct a holistic picture, analyze words, report detailed views of informants and conduct the study in a setting that is natural. I used the interpretive research strand of inquiry, which according to Merriam (1998), considers education to be a process and school a lived experience. In this regard, understanding the meaning of the process or experience produces the knowledge to be gained from an inductive, hypothesis or theory generating method of inquiry.

Sherman and Webb's (1988) argument that qualitative research implies a direct concern with experience as it is lived or felt, resonates with my quest. In my view, I consider reality to be the construction by individuals as they interact with their social worlds. I concur with Merriam (1998) that meaning is embedded in people's experiences. Therefore, I anticipated that participants' meaning would be negotiated through my own perceptions as the investigator. Such was the case because, as argued by Patton (1985), qualitative research is an effort to understand situations in their uniqueness as part of a particular context and the interaction there. In this case, what was pivotal was to understand the nature of the setting, what it meant for the participants to be in that setting, what their lives were like, and what their world looked like in that particular

setting. What was equally crucial was to strive for depth of understanding in the analysis of the outcome, which in turn was to be ably and faithfully communicated to those interested in the particular setting, that is, Malawi teacher educators and teacher educational professionals across the world.

For this study I embraced the five characteristics of qualitative research as advocated by Merriam (1998). First, there was the need to understand the meaning these teacher educators had constructed, that is, how they made sense of their experiences in becoming literate. Second, as the researcher in this qualitative study, I was the primary instrument for data collection and analysis. Since data were to be mediated through me, I needed to be responsive to the context, adapt techniques to the circumstances, be sensitive to nonverbal aspects, and clarify and summarize aspects as the study evolved. Third, qualitative research is grounded in fieldwork; therefore, I went to the participants in their natural setting and collected data. Fourth, because qualitative research primarily employs an inductive research strategy, I moved from observations and intuitive understandings gained in the field to arrive at some themes and categories in response to the question driving this particular study. Fifth, the literacy stories and analysis of those stories generated in this study are richly descriptive.

Employing the Autobiographical Method

Green, et al. (2001) viewed literacy as “a socially constructed phenomenon that is situationally defined and redefined within and across differing groups, including reading groups, classrooms, schools, communities, and professional groups” (pp. 124-125). Thinking along the same lines Baker and Luke (1991) argued that literacy is not a generic process located solely within the heads of the individuals or process that is the same for all people in all situations. Such being the case, this study aimed at understanding the participants’ views of literacy and how they became literate.

This investigation chose the autobiographical approach in order to let participants talk about themselves, that is, their own knowledge about themselves through their own perceptual and experiential lens. Graham (1998) viewed autobiography, among other things, as a method that works in reclaiming hidden or forgotten aspects of an individual’s past. In the same vein, Gusdorf (1980) saw autobiography to be one means to self-knowledge as it recomposes and interprets life in its totality. Autobiography adds consciousness to the raw contingencies of experience. As such, it is no wonder that Weinstraub (1975) argued that autobiography must be regarded as an interweaving of self-consciousness and experience. More directly, Howarth (1980) considered autobiography to be a self-portrait. Britton (1981) pointed out that by telling our life stories we actually shape our lives into a kind of narrative in order to possess our experiences fully. Similarly, Abbs (1976) asserted that the attempt to re-create the past reveals the intimate relationship between being and knowing, existence and education, as well as between self and culture.

Therefore, it may be said that when we view life as a process, autobiography may have a special function in helping us understand life dynamics. Such a view was what governed this study since the task was to come to an understanding of how the participants developed their literacies. In order to achieve that, I attempted to access the participants' past and present through their stories about themselves.

Sample Selection

This researcher purposefully sought six Malawian teacher educators to inform this investigation. These participants were master's degree holding teacher educators working in different teacher education institutions of Malawi. This criterion was used to ensure that the participants should be undoubtedly literate by any standard nationally and internationally. As the medium of communication during the investigation was going to be English, it was thought that because of their developed English language fluency and proficiency, they would be able to orally communicate their thoughts succinctly.

In addition, participants chosen to take part in the study were those who had been practicing teacher educators for over three years. The assumption was that, using their professional experience, the participants would be able to conceptualize and contextualize what they had gone through while growing up. Seidman (1998) argued that despite the pressures, strains, and contradictions that affect those who work in collegiate institutions, in the same way as those who work in other fields, college faculty are paid for the pleasurable activities of reading, writing, teaching, and doing research. As such, the participants were also chosen because they were likely to find talking about themselves pleasurable.

Furthermore, the demographic patterns of Malawi are such that the Central Region has almost twice the population of the Northern Region while the Southern Region has almost twice the population size of the Central Region. With that in mind, the researcher selected one participant from the Northern Region, two from the Central Region, and three participants from the Southern Region. In addition, of the six participants two were female. One of the female participants came from the Central Region and the other from the Southern Region. All this was done in an attempt to strike a balance regarding the participants' region of birth and gender representation.

Data Collection

Creswell (1998) asserted that qualitative inquiry and research design falls into the traditions of biography, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography and case study. Merriam (1998) and Mason (1996) regarded interviews, observations, and document analysis essential ways of data collection in qualitative research. Consequently, these may be viewed as ways qualitative investigators use in data collection to inquire, experience, and to examine. It may be argued that in qualitative research, these are the basic ways of knowing.

In this study, my view was that the participants were multiple individuals who had gone through the same phenomenon, that is, the experience of becoming literate in the Western sense of the term. By extension, that means these purposefully chosen participants should be identically located as a homogenous sample because, ethnographically speaking, they share the same national socio-political culture and also what can be viewed as the culture of the Malawi education system. This is worth mentioning because, as argued by Patton (1985), without context there is little possibility of exploring the meaning of an experience. What is also equally important is that the study should be viewed as a case study because it is a bounded system involving multiple individuals while investigating the process of the development of literacy, which is a single phenomenon.

As the study was to involve human subjects, appropriate forms were completed and endorsement provided by the Institutional Review Board of Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University (see Appendix A). After agreeing to participate, each teacher educator signed a consent form (see Appendix B) and thereafter data collection started. Data for this study were collected through interviews and researcher-generated documents, that is, autobiographical literacy stories.

Interviews

I began pursuing my investigation through semi-structured tape-recorded interviews with each of the participants. The semi-structured interview was preferred to the tightly structured interview because the latter does not give participants the chance to become narrators of their life stories (Summerfield, 2000). At the same time, I did not use unstructured interviews because I was operating under the constraints of time and had specific research questions in mind. Of course, all three approaches, that is, structured, semi-structured, and unstructured have some merits for oral history (Summerfield, 2000). I designed my interview guide (Appendix C) with, mostly, open-ended questions but during the interviews I felt free to direct specific questions to the narrator. Such an approach allowed for fresh insights and new information to emerge (Merriam, 1998).

Both Ives (1995) and Seidman (1998) advised that the interview process begins with focused information and progresses to the more unstructured, reflective questions. During the interview process, participant and researcher engaged in co-construction of the life story of each particular participant (Chamberlain, 2000). The semi-structured interviewing questionnaire was essentially a helpful guide, but I encouraged the participants to tell their own stories. Of course, I asked specific informational questions, and sometimes asked for clarification of something a narrator had said. In addition, I also had some reflective questions. Although at times my participants looked at me in a way that told me they were waiting for me to ask them something, most of the times they talked for long periods without my asking any questions. Such was the case because, to a large part, the narrators were telling their stories in their own words and in so doing were answering many of my questions without my asking them directly.

Although my goal was to hear each participant's story, I remained mindful that the questions I asked were an important part of the process through which their narrative was to be collected and would shape its final configuration (Silverman, 2000). Actively listening and paying attention to the narrator meant, in part, asking them to define expressions in their own terms, digging into their feelings about the actions and events they narrated and asking for their evaluations of circumstances, choices, and actions (Anderson & Jack, 1991).

The interviews for my research were scheduled for sixty to ninety minutes, at a place and time convenient for the participants (Wolcott, 1995; Seidman, 1998). While three of the participants chose that we hold the interviews in their offices, the other three chose that the interviews take place in the comfort of their homes. One participant in the latter group even decided that we hold the second interview in a seemingly quieter section of a shopping complex.

In order to capture the data fully, I tape-recorded all the interview sessions on standard dictating cassettes using a clear voice double recording time voice operated recording tape recorder. To minimize the possibility of technical problems, prior to each interview session I tested the tape recorder and used a fresh set of batteries for each interview. I started transcription of the tapes soon after the first interview had been completed. This enabled data analysis to be ongoing and for information gained early in the process to be used in later interviews and for fashioning new questions (Silverman, 2000; Merriam, 1998; Strauss, 1996; Mercier & Murphy, 1991). In addition, transcribing each interview as it was completed gave me the opportunity to evaluate myself as interview researcher (Wolcott, 1995) and to attempt to become a more effective and perceptive interviewer.

As a researcher, another important methodological consideration for me was that I involve my participants with all aspects of the inquiry process (Behar & Gordon, 1995). In total I conducted twelve interviews. Each one of the participants was interviewed twice. After the initial interaction, which was the main interview, I provided the participant a transcription of the interview. At the second, follow-up interview the participants had the opportunity to point out errors, to make suggestions, and to elaborate or explain. I also probed further to seek clarification and to follow up on issues or questions that had emerged as a result of the analysis of the data collected during the first interview. Then the data generated from both interviews were presented in personal stories that illustrated the participants' individual literacy development paths (as presented in Chapter Four). The stories were then taken back to the respective participants so that they could confirm that they were a true reflection of themselves in line with what they had discussed with me during the two interviews. These member checks of the transcripts and autobiographies ensured the study's validity (Merriam, 1998). Such checks were the primary way a researcher can be sure that the each story that was written is the story the particular participant wants to tell (Borland, 1991).

Validity and Reliability

Issues of validity and reliability must be addressed by researchers in all their work. In addition to the steps insuring internal validity already referred to, I took further actions to insure the integrity of my research. Merriam (1998) noting that there is some disagreement about whether the term reliability is applicable to qualitative research, said that “the question then is not whether the findings will be found again but *whether the results are consistent with the data collected*” (p. 206, original emphasis). I agree with this assessment because for me what was vital was the consistence of the investigation results with the data I collected. If I was the instrument of data collection (Merriam, 1998), if my participants were collaborators, and if we were co-constructing this study, then the people we were at the time of the study, the context in which we situated ourselves, and the relationships we developed can never be scientifically replicated. Nevertheless, this belief did not free me from maintaining scientific rigor in the study. I insured the reliability of my research through the triangulation of data, through my explicitness concerning my own position as researcher, and by maintaining careful records of my data and of my process (Merriam, 1998).

The question of external validity for quantitative research concerns whether or not the study is generalizable (Merriam, 1998). However, “in qualitative research, a single case or small nonrandom sample is selected precisely *because* the researcher wishes to understand the particular in depth, not to find out what is generally true of the many” (Merriam, 1998, p. 208, original emphasis). Therefore, if we pay attention to the particulars, we may also find broader significance. Geertz’s maxim, which says that there is no ascent to truth without a descent to cases, is a useful guide in qualitative research (Wolcott, 1990). Looking through a similar lens, Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) spoke of a “persistent irony” at the centre of qualitative portraiture as a method of social science research: “As one moves closer to the unique characteristics of a person or a place, one discovers the universal” (p. 14).

Wolcott (1990) suggested that validity as understood by the quantitative researcher—measuring “whatever it is that is supposed to be measured”—is not applicable to qualitative research (p. 122). Miles and Huberman (1990) asserted, however, that another understanding of validity is an essential concept in qualitative research:

We have a right to ask whether things happened as they are painted (do statements fit observations?), whether conclusions were tested and strengthened rather than simply being asserted, whether another analyst would draw a reasonably similar picture given the same set of field notes, and whether the text is totally idiosyncratic or builds on prior knowledge about the same phenomena.... We need methodological accounts; we need the possibility of an ‘audit trail’.... We want a work[wo]manlike sense that the researcher was *there* and came back with something we can trust. (pp. 347-349, original emphasis)

Because my study was qualitative and did not set out to measure a specific concept, to prove a hypothesis, or to support preconceived ideas, my concern with reliability and validity centered on carefully recording data, diligence in obtaining sufficient data, documenting my own research journey, and providing an analysis that was rigorous and supported by my data.

Confidentiality

The issues of confidentiality of the participants were strongly taken into account. However, because Malawi is a country with few well-educated persons, I could not guarantee that a careful reading of the stories from friends within the country would not lead to a deduction of a participant's identity. To further confidentiality, I have used pseudonyms for the autobiographical stories.

Data Analysis

The study used the content analysis method as I searched for the meaning conveyed in the stories told and the themes that emerged from them. Merriam (1998) argued that all qualitative data analysis is content analysis since it is the content of interviews, field notes, and documents that is analyzed. Similarly, Manning and Cullam-Swan (1994) argued that content analysis is a qualitatively oriented technique by which standardized measurements are applied to metrically defined units that are used to characterize and compare documents. The view is that context analysis centres on communication, especially the frequency and variety of messages. Therefore, content analysis was applicable in qualitative investigations like this one. As Merriam (1998) stated, in the adoption of content analysis for use in qualitative studies, the communication of meaning is the focus. And the search for meaning, that is, the teasing out of meaning from the collected data was what this particular investigation was all about.

Data analysis in this study took heed of the advice offered by Merriam (1998) that the right way to analyze data in a qualitative study is to do it simultaneously with data collection. I subscribed to the view that without ongoing analysis, the data can be unfocused, repetitious, and, certainly, overwhelming when one considers the gigantic volume of the data waiting to be processed. Besides, data that is analyzed while it is collected turns out to be both parsimonious and illuminating. As such, this continual analysis helped in offering me leads to areas requiring focus during my next meetings with my informants.

The recording, transcribing, and archiving of the oral literacy histories generated by this study were important. However, these steps alone could not answer my research questions. These were achieved only through careful analysis of the data provided by the tapes, transcriptions, and the participants' individual literacy stories based on their transcripts of the interviews. One of the first steps in data analysis was the coding of transcripts on two levels (Merriam, 1998). The first level of coding was simply a method

by which I would be able to identify my data. The participant's name, the date of the interview, the page number of the transcript, and other pertinent information were rigorously identified as the data were being collected so as to enable me to readily locate the information I needed later (Merriam, 1998).

Moreover, in addition to this identification coding, from the first interview, I began to develop interpretive constructs related to analysis (Merriam, 1998). This level of coding began with reviewing the transcripts and marking passages that were interesting, that provoked further questions, or that repeated or contradicted earlier passages (Seidman, 1998). Tentative analytical categories and labels were assigned to the passages, which later evolved and became more complex as analysis continued (Seidman, 1998; Merriam 1998; Strauss, 1996). This tentative analysis was done on all the transcripts and aided the coherent development of the literacy stories. As the stories were rigorously analyzed, emerging themes were identified across the six stories. When the relationships became increasingly common, I went ahead coding the texts narratively (Clandinnin and Connelly, 2000). While the findings of this investigation are contained in the literacy stories that are presented in Chapter Four, the analysis of the findings in terms of themes that emerged out of the findings is presented in Chapter Five of this study.

Limitations of the Study

There were at least three limitations to a study of this nature. First, the number of participants was limited to six teacher educators with master's degrees. This number permitted three types of extensive contacts with each participant. However, a larger number of participants may have yielded different results, especially if they had been purposefully selected to represent a range of economic backgrounds. Likewise, if the participants had included educated Malawians other than teacher educators, their stories may have been different. A second limitation was that from the outset the participants knew I wanted to study how they became highly literate in a country that has low literacy rates. As a researcher, I relied on their responses to my questions. Their responses were their best endeavours to re-create for themselves, and for me, what they could remember from their past. In other words, their stories were filtered through time, perception, and memory. A third limitation was that the participants might have also wanted to give me responses that they thought would fit my research needs. As teacher educators who had either completed a literacy course or were conversant with literacy practices, these participants knew the impact of various practices on literacy and could have articulated their own experiences through that knowledge.

Chapter 4

SIX LITERACY STORIES

The findings of this research emerged from the interviews I had with six Malawian teacher educators. The purpose of the interviews was to hear their stories of their development of literacy in a print-limited environment. The interviews were then transcribed. I held a follow-up interview with participants to verify, clarify, and add information. From these expanded transcriptions, I then developed “literacy stories” for each participant. Each story was taken to the appropriate investigation participant for verification that it was a true reflection of what had been said during the interviews. These are real stories of the participants’ literacy experiences although the names are pseudonyms.

Benson’s Story

When I arrived at Benson’s office just before ten o’clock on this bright sunny and hot summer morning, I learnt he was not around. His secretary informed me that he had gone to the bank. She advised me to wait for him and assured me that he would be back soon. He did not take long indeed because before my eyes had finished taking in what was in the secretary’s office, the door opened and in came the dark six foot two broad shouldered and heavily built Benson.

“Oh you are already in. That’s fantastic. Please come this way,” Benson spoke as he led the way into his office.

We went in, sat in his burgundy cozy visitors’ sofa seats, shook hands, and exchanged greetings before going into the scheduled interview.

“As indicated when I was asking for this opportunity to have this conversation with you,” I began, “the purpose of this banter is for you to reflect for sometime on your past, particularly on your literacy development. But to begin with, what is your nationality?”

“I am a Malawian, born in Chikwawa in 1962 of bona fide and very indigenous Malawian parents,” Benson came in.

“Did you have any siblings?”

“Well, yes. I grew up in a family of eight. We were five boys and three girls. I happen to have come third in line after the two girls. Unfortunately, both the girls passed away so that as things now stand, I have to say that I am the oldest in the family,” Benson explained.

“And turning to your parents, what was your father, professionally?” I inquired.

“My father was a qualified Clinical Officer. He was very professionally sound and rose within the ranks in Government because he was a very intelligent person who never made it to Medical School because he came from a disadvantaged background. But whatever training he got, he made very good use of it.”

“How about your mother?”

“My mother didn’t go very far with education basically because of financial limitations. She was brought up in a home where the father was actually a cook for the then Principal of Blantyre Secondary School. Actually, she grew up interacting with daughters and sons of this Principal. But in terms of potential, she is quite an intelligent woman.”

“How far have you yourself gone up academically?” I asked.

“I hold a Master’s degree in Higher Education Management and Planning,” Benson replied.

“Now looking at your home, as you were growing up, were you financially hard up, comfortable, or very well off?” I inquired.

“Well, I wouldn’t say very well off. You may recall that there were eight of us, that is, children in the family and my father was a member of what we would call the Malawian middle class. Therefore, because of the size of the family, we cannot say that there was too much cash to spare. Nonetheless, we were reasonably comfortable,” he recalled.

“Going back to your earliest days as a child learning to read and write, can you recall the time you think you began to know how to piece letters together to form words and read?” I asked.

“I must say that my father was highly committed to seeing to it that we all got a good education,” Benson began, “because he himself had seen the benefits of good education. And because my mother too was converted to the view that if we were to be comfortable in life, we needed education, she too saw to it that whatever little education she had herself, was actually shared with us.

“So, from the age of four I was already being helped to read by my parents, both my father and mother to such an extent that by five years of age I was able to read quite a number of things. And I am told that, generally, I was also very curious by way of laying my hands on anything that I could read. And because my sisters who were ahead of me used to bring a lot of reading materials from school, I tended not to be satisfied with my own reading but wanted to venture into reading what my sisters brought home.”

“From what you have said, I get the impression that there was quite some reading culture prevailing in the home,” I intoned.

“That’s right. There was a lot to be read within the house. And because of the fact that we were always at a District centre, it was somewhat easy to access *Boma Lathu*, a national Government newspaper. We used to go to the Information Department to collect *Boma Lathu* for free. Apart from that, the schools I attended were relatively well endowed with resources. What I mean here is that the school texts were available in sufficient quantities that I was able to have access to them,” Benson explained.

“Did the primary schools you went to have libraries?” I asked.

“No. There were no libraries as such. But the available school texts were useful from standard one up to five. Later on when I got to standard seven and eight, the school I attended in Nsanje, Nsanje Primary School, had a good library. And I used to read quite a lot from the library.

“Apart from that, we had a neighbour, a missionary woman, whom I deliberately befriended when I saw a big shelf of books in her house. I used to run errands for her and in return she used to lend me books. I would read a book a week, finish, go and

collect a new one. Actually, I can say that between standard seven and eight, I read quite a bit.”

“Getting you back to your early days, did your father read a lot at home?” I asked.

“Yes, my father read quite a lot.”

“What sort of things, if I may ask?” I probed.

“Essentially, he read his medical books. But apart from that, generally, he wanted to inform himself. As such, he brought home *Time Magazine*, *Newsweek Magazine*, *The Daily Times* as well as *Malawi News*. And from time to time, he bought books of general interest.”

“How about your mother, did she spend time reading as well?” I probed further.

“At the time I was growing up, my mother was studying for the Junior Certificate of Education examinations by correspondence. So, she had lots of lecture notes from the Malawi Correspondence College, now known as the Malawi College of Distance Education, which she used to read. We, the children, used to read these lecture notes as well.”

“How about your sisters, did they also read much?” I still inquired.

“Yes they did. You know, when my sisters went to secondary school, I was still in primary school then, and was curious to find out what they were doing in secondary school. So, whenever they came home, they brought with them, certainly, more advanced books. I remember reading Camara Laye’s *The African Child* while I was in standard eight basically because of its availability in the home. The other literary works by respected African writers I got exposed to while in standard eight included *Cry the Beloved Country*, *The River Between* and *Things Fall Apart*. So, I got exposed to the kind of literature my sisters brought home.”

“Did your brothers follow in your footsteps?” I inquired further.

“Certainly, that was the kind of pattern. What actually happened was that I benefited from my sisters and when I made it to secondary school, I was like the role model for my brothers. As such, anything of interest I brought home that was readable tended to be shared with my brothers. Therefore, they read more at the stage where I didn’t read much because I didn’t have too much to read.

“Consequently, as I went up the academic ladder, when I went to university, that is, books I never read myself were available to my brothers right at an early age for them. Particularly my last born brother, who is himself an established international economist in South Africa, read a lot. You can imagine, even while in standard eight, he was pestering me about ‘who is this Plato in *The Republic*?’ ‘What is Mimesis?’ And because I was doing an education degree, part of the process of testing whether I indeed had the capacity to teach, was that I also tried to digest and explain these sophisticated ideas in such a way that a standard eight boy could make sense of them and thereby whet his reading appetite even more.

“In looking back, I must say that I am most delighted about that. I feel that I contributed quite significantly to his development. He was an extremely outstanding chap in secondary school. And when he went for his degree in the USA in Iowa, he excelled. At the University of Illinois he did a research Master’s degree in one year when it was supposed to be done in two years and graduated top of his class with distinction. Now, in his late thirties, he is already Director of Multiple Investments in a bank in South Africa.

“And the other brothers, of course, ended up as university graduates in their own right. One went to Bunda College of Agriculture and did a Bachelor’s degree in Agriculture. This one is now in Florida, USA. One other brother did a Bachelor of Social Science degree and is now heading the Administration Department of the Malawi Electoral Commission. The one who did not go to the university is a talented artist. He ended up in TV production and went to Namibia for his training.”

“How did it feel the time you got lost in a book for the first time, that is, when you were able to read and everything else in the world around you kind of ceased to exist?” I asked.

“I must say that right from an early age, I was fascinated by storytelling. And I think what took me into reading newspapers or anything that was written was basically an attempt on my part to accumulate as much language as I could because I realized that those who told good stories had a way of playing around with words. Yes, in a way that was very unusual compared to the normal speaker or writer. So, anytime I got hold of a book, my preoccupation was to discover the tricks the particular writer employed in order to engage me in the manner he or she appeared to do. And, perhaps my major weakness as a child growing up was that I tended to waste my time with books than with doing the usual things children do.”

“Were you able to read before you had even gone into primary school?” I inquired.

“That’s right. You know, I bothered my parents quite a lot. For instance, when my father was reading a newspaper I wanted to find out what he was doing. And he would then tell me what it was. As he did that, I then would be recording in my mind what it was. And, you know, it was quite common for me to write on the ground as we did not have much access to paper then.”

“Did your ability to read on the one hand and the ability to write on the other come simultaneously or they come one after the other?”

“They came more or less at the same time. As indicated earlier, my earliest episodes in writing were done on the ground, particularly during the rain season when the ground was soft. I used to write A, B, C and so on and then call my mother to come and check whether or not what I had written was actually correct. I did the same with my sisters.

“In fact, when they told me that I was going to start standard one, I was very excited about it and intensified those acts in the hope that by the time I got to school I would be able to do the same even there,” Benson explained.

“What do you remember as the very first thing that you wrote apart from writing in the sand?” I asked.

“Well, what I remember very well was my first class in standard one. Upon entering the classroom we were given slates. I trust you remember slates. Well, I had a slate and its pencil. And then my teacher, who was quite an engaging fellow, I must say, wrote the English alphabet on the chalkboard and asked us to copy what he had written on the chalkboard onto our slates. Actually, he wrote only the five letters of the English alphabet, that is A B C D and E. After he had done that he started going round to check if we had copied correctly what he had written on the chalkboard.

“But in my case, because I had been doing that at home, this exercise of copying A B C D and E was no big deal. Actually, I finished doing this very quickly and went a

step further and added, I think, F G H and I. So when the teacher came round and saw that I had done more than what was on the chalkboard, he asked me, ‘Why have you done more than what you were told?’ I said, ‘I thought I should fill the time doing this because I finished A B C D and E.’ My teacher just broke into laughter and proceeded to see what the student next to me was doing. And when I went home, I narrated the incident to my mother. She also laughed and gave me lots of encouragement to continue doing that.”

“Did your parents take time to read or tell you stories?” I asked.

“My mother was a very good storyteller. Usually, she told us folktales in the evenings. In her storytelling, she had the ability to hold her audience spellbound. And from an early age I quickly picked up that element. As a result, whenever a storytelling session began in my class, I was the preferred candidate to kick it off. I should think that this was because I had lots of self-confidence derived from what I had learnt from my mother.

“Over the years I found that whenever I told a story, it was always different. My stories were responded to in a manner different from what my friends got as feedback. So, I started feeling and convincing myself that one day I shall tell stories of my own in written form rather than orally. And as you know, that’s what has happened. I have never looked back since I started, that is, since I published my first story in the 1980s.”

“How far back in your life do you remember writing your first story?” I asked.

“Writing my own stories never started until when I got into secondary school. For the greatest part of primary school, it was basically participating in oral storytelling. You know, during the end of school term, or semester as others call it, our parents were invited and they came to school. And as part of the occasion’s entertainment, before teachers started announcing the results of the just ended term’s examinations, that is, calling out names of those who had passed, we were asked to stand in front of our parents and recite poems from our textbooks.

“But when I got into secondary school, what was noticeable was that my compositions were always quite different from the rest of the class because of the kind of expressions I was able to bring into them. Usually, I had more advanced expression than the stage I was at. And I suppose this was basically due to the advanced reading I used to do. In fact, I remember my Form Two teacher telling me to slow down a bit because he felt I was getting too involved in fairly sophisticated writing before knowing the basics.”

“Did you slow down, as advised?”

“I slowed down in terms of what I could write. But in terms of what I could read, I did not. I continued reading anything I laid my hands on. It was hard for me to slow down my reading pace basically because the secondary school I went to had a beautiful well-stocked library. And my problem was that I felt I didn’t have enough time to (laughter) read everything I thought was of great interest.”

“You are highly esteemed for expressive, eloquent and fluent writing in English as well as Chichewa. I am not sure in what other languages you have competence in. Did this fluency in Chichewa and English come about because of the avid reading you were reading both Chichewa and English books or not?” I asked.

“Well, you see, the time I was going to junior primary school was the very time Malawi had large numbers of American Peace Corps teaching in secondary schools. And so it happened that my primary school was closer to a secondary school where some of these people taught. Part of our fun as children was to test our rudimentary English,

learnt in junior primary school, on the American Peace Corps as they cycled to the secondary school. And they would respond to us. Now, the more they responded to us the more we got encouraged to engage them. With time, we moved from greeting them by the roadside and followed them into their homes. (laughter) I must say that these were people of generous heart because they were able to notice and become helpful when they realized that my friends and I were eagerly determined and fascinated to master the English language at such an early stage.

“So, whenever we got into their houses, they engaged us; they talked to us more in English. And I noticed that by the time we were getting to standard four and five, the level of English we had acquired was relatively higher than what an average Malawian child without exposure would ordinarily have. Therefore, I believe that that kind of kick start laid the foundation on which I built when I got into the upper classes in primary and secondary school.

“Apart from that, my own father realized at an early stage that being fluent in English would give one an advantage in life as one grew. Consequently, much as in the home we spoke Chichewa, from time to time he corrected us when we made mistakes in English. Besides, he regularly spoke to us in English. And in the process, I found out that I was able to communicate in both languages.”

“How about the Chichewa side of things?” I inquired.

“I think that can be explained by the fact that my Civil Servant father during his working life, which is the time that I was growing up of course, was transferred to different Chichewa and Chinyanja speaking areas. For instance, as I was growing up I lived in Ntchewu, Lilongwe, Kasungu, Nkhokhotakota, and Dowa. All these are Chichewa speaking areas. Therefore, in each one of these areas I was able to pick up new concepts and words that enriched my Chichewa vocabulary.

“And that coupled with the fact that I was a staunch fan of our famous J. W. Gwengwe made it easy for my Chichewa to be polished. Actually, I read anything written by J. W. Gwengwe. I am certain you remember that in those days J. W. Gwengwe was the Master storyteller. For this reason, I read him inside out and, I am sure, that helped me quite a lot.”

“Earlier on you said that you started doing much of writing in secondary school. What did you write?” I inquired.

“Much as, of course, in secondary school, I wrote poetry, I mostly wrote short stories.”

“Why was that?” I inquired further.

“It was largely because at that time we were never taught poetry be it in Chichewa or English. The literature we had was mostly prose. That’s why my interest in poetry really flourished when I started university where there was a shift as I concentrated in poetry for some time before I later balanced up the two,” Benson explained.

“Was your writing in secondary school in both English and Chichewa or you wrote much in one or the other language?”

“I wrote much in English. You know, among the teachers who taught me there was one Andrew Kulemeka, who was a very good short story writer. At the time, he had been publishing in Star Magazine which was edited by one Innocent Banda and produced by Blantyre Print. Each copy was a collection of short stories written in English by

Malawian graduates. The stories were fantastic. I, therefore, found it fascinating to see my own teacher contributing to that magazine. And I wanted to be like him.”

“What were the kinds of stories you wrote in secondary school?”

“Well, in secondary school, the kind of stories I wrote were, largely, instructive. They talked about students who were anti-establishment and how such students ended badly by losing an opportunity to continue with their education and so on. I think I was largely limited by the stimuli within the school context I was in. During my time, the secondary school I went to had a school magazine. And my contribution to the school magazine was usually short stories.”

“When you entered university, what was your writing like?”

“I think during the first two or three years of university a larger part of my writing was poetry. The quarter bit of what I wrote was short stories I think. But by the time I got to the fourth and fifth year, I had struck equilibrium as it was now half-half. Yes. When a subject was better expressed in poetry, I tackled it poetically. However, if I thought the subject would be better managed in prose, I did it in a short story form.

“I suppose it is also worth mentioning that when I got to the university, I discovered that there was a kind of renaissance, people going back to Chichewa poetry, Chichewa short story writing. I must say that I became part of that renaissance.”

“Do you have an anthology of the things you have written?” I asked.

“I do not have an anthology for those pieces I wrote in primary and secondary school but certainly for those in university. Actually, I have produced two anthologies. The first one was published in 1990 and the second one in 2001. They are both Chichewa pieces anthologies.

“Apart from that, I have had short stories published in various newspapers and journals in Malawi and other countries. For instance, I have poetry and short stories in English in a journal published by the University of California. In addition, I have also published poetry in English in a South African magazine called *Tribute*.

“What is the literacy culture like now that you are in your own home away from your parents?” I inquired.

“Actually, I read daily. Initially, I was what you would call a jack of all trades. Come biology, it would be my breakfast; history would be my lunch, and something else would be my supper or dessert. Of course, I continue to read this and that because I am aware that in this knowledge economy there is no way one can do away with Science, for instance. So, I read technical articles on medicine, HIV/AIDS, and what-have-you. However, in terms of emphasis, I am reading more biographies than creative literature and theoretical books of writing.”

“Why biographies?”

“The shift has come about basically due to my quest to find out what makes people successful. As you may appreciate, you know, biographies are usually about people that have succeeded in life in one way or the other. So, in my attempt to get the formula for success, I have chosen to read biographies to see if there are any commonalities among those who have succeeded. And I am glad to say that I am beginning to find some commonalities among those people that have been successful.”

“Have you passed on the mantle to those you are bringing up in your home?”

“It is fascinating that my son never stops following me into the reading room. He has not gone to primary school yet but he is able to write his name. So, the story is now a

replica of what I myself went through when I was growing up. I have taken charge of teaching him how to read and write. Of course, he goes to pre-school where they are also taught. But I reinforce what they are taught in pre-school.

“I also read to my son stories from storybooks. I am the one who usually reads to the son because I am the storyteller and my wife is a scientist.”

“What has been the impact of the emergence and proliferation of television watching on you and your home?” I asked.

“Actually, I still read daily. You know, when I acquired a TV, I was consciously worried that I could lose my affinity for reading because of the TV. So, as a matter of conscious effort, even when I have watched TV for so long, I make sure that I read something before I go to bed. I do this because, up to now, I seriously believe that I am what I am basically because of the written word,” Benson explained.

“So, what advice would you give a parent or teacher of a young child?”

“I would say that the critical age for a child is before they go to primary school. At this stage of their growth, parents should show a lot of interest in teaching children many things about life so that when they start reading, their interest should be literally in everything. And the other thing I would strongly urge parents to do is to keep the TV away from children in terms of regulation. Children should watch less TV. Whatever they are permitted to watch should be in a much more regulated fashion other than just leaving them free to watch anything and everything, just like that.

“Children should be encouraged to read more. You know, what reading does is that it opens up avenues to a lot of information which may be of interest to the child without even the mother or father knowing that the child is interested in such and such things. And by the time the child says, ‘I want to become a medical doctor,’ for instance, the parents can be sure that the choice is made from a position of reasonable knowledge other than sheer fantasy.”

“Well, Benson, thank you very much for according me this opportunity to have this conversation with you. I very much appreciate your acceptance and time given to me. Thank you so much.”

“You are most welcome,” Benson said as we stood up and he escorted me to the door.

Dalitso’s Story

It was a hot summer morning was when I arrived at Dalitso’s office for a scheduled interview with him in the Education Department of his Teacher’s College. We had agreed that I should meet him at 10:00 a.m., and I arrived early to find the light complexioned, round faced sanguine male teacher educator in his office quite engrossed in a book that was open on his desk. Hearing my knock he looked up, smiled broadly, stood up and walked to the door to shake my right hand as he told me that I was most welcome.

“Please take a seat,” Dalitso said as he pointed to one while returning to his own on the other side of the desk.

We both took our seats after which we exchanged greetings and briefly talked about the hot weather. In this peripheral interchange, we shared the same view that some cloud cover would have done this part of our land some good.

Pleasantries having been dispensed with, Dalitso caught my attention with, “I have just been informed that we are having an emergency meeting for all teacher educators starting at 10.00 a.m., which is just five minutes from now. The meeting is likely going to take the whole of today knowing that it is a planning meeting. The problem is that some of us were away and have just returned to the campus and did not get the communication about the meeting when it was circulated. In fact, I have just returned from Mangochi where I was for the past four weeks. But knowing that you have traveled over ninety kilometres to get here, I do not want you to go back without doing what you have come here for. As such, I was just wondering whether we could delay the interview a couple of hours so that we meet at 12.00 noon and go through it over the lunch hour.”

I said that I understood the situation and appreciated his suggestion. However, I proposed that maybe I should return home and come another day because I felt it would not be fair for him to go through the day without having at least an hour to rest before going into another busy session that would be coming that afternoon. But Dalitso still insisted that we should have the interview during the day’s lunch hour. With that, he asked me to find something to do in the interim as he quickly picked up a paper pad and pen before disappearing in the direction of the conference room. As advised, I spent the said two hours in the College’s library taking note of the kind of literacy books that were in stock. Time flew and before I knew it, noon had arrived.

When our interview session reconvened at the said time, I sincerely expressed my gratitude for Dalitso’s acceptance to participate in my research and much more for accommodating me despite his very busy schedule. And without much ado I asked about his nationality.

“I am a Malawian national. I was born in the Southern Region of Malawi, in Mulanje District to be precise. I was born on the 13th of December in 1966 and have lived in this country ever since. I happen to be the first born child in a family of six children, that is, two girls and four boys. Besides, both my parents, who have since passed on, were Malawians of indigenous Malawian descent,” Dalitso explained.

“I am so sorry to hear about their passing on,” I expressed my belated condolences before asking, “but when they were still around, to which profession did each one of your parents belong?”

“They were both teachers. I know academically my father had a Malawi School Certificate of Education before obtaining a teaching certificate. As for my mother, she had a lower education certificate and a teaching certificate of a lower class than that of my father. It could have been T3 or T4, but I am not certain which one of these it may have been.”

“And where do you yourself stand professionally?”

“I am also a teacher, a teacher educator, to be precise. I hold a Master’s degree in Curriculum and Instruction.”

“I see. Now going back to your early days when you were growing up as a child, in terms of your family’s economic standing in the community, would you say that as a

family, you were hard up on money, or you were comfortable or even quite well off for that matter?" I asked.

Dalitso took a moment's pause before responding. "If I reflect on the economic status of teachers then, I would consider my parents not so well up in terms of economic status and not so low. The fact that they managed to send us to school at the time, when primary education was not free, was an indicator that we were not completely poor in the society. Of course we sometimes lacked certain basic needs, something typical of a Malawian teacher then, but my parents were at least earning something at the end of each month as they had their sure salaries," Dalitso said.

"Did your parents, being teachers that they were, read or tell you stories when you were a child?" I inquired.

"My parents had shelves of books in the home. However, I don't really remember sitting down with my parents and one of them reading a story to me or to us children in the home. Of course, I recall that I used to get a book from a shelf and maybe ask my father what that story was all about. As for stories, such as stories about animals, folktales, that is, these were told in the community. Such stories were quite common and I still remember them. But in the case of my parents reading to us children, no, they did not. The only kind of reading I can recall is of them reading just words to me."

"But how did you yourself start off as a reader then?" I inquired further.

"Well, all I can remember is that there was a book titled *Ukan*, which really started me off. I remember having learnt to read using this book. It was a Chichewa book, which is my vernacular language," Dalitso recalled.

"Would you recall of a time, as you were growing up, you would say you got lost in a story, that is, lost in a book world, because you found the story gripping or very interesting, as it were?" I wondered.

Dalitso's face lit up and he responded, "Yes. At the time, I must have been in standard three or four. I guess I would say that that was when I really began reading stories on my own."

"Do you remember some of the stories?"

"Yes, I sure do," Dalitso responded. "One of the stories I still remember so well is the story of a crow and a chicken. It is the story about why a crow always picks chicks from a chicken and why the chicken keeps scratching the ground. The story went that a crow had a needle and the mother chicken borrowed that needle. But in the course of using it, mother chicken lost that needle. Now when the crow asked to have the needle back, mother chicken could not find it. Meanwhile, the crow said that until mother chicken returned the needle, the crow shall be picking chicks. And that is what happens while the mother chicken continues scratching the ground in search of the lost needle. This story remains engraved on my mind. Actually, I have a very clear picture of a crow flying and landing on the ground to get chicken and the mother chicken trying to protect the chicks so that the crow does not pick them. So, that's the story I remember from my earliest interaction with texts.

"Perhaps something I consider interesting and worth sharing with you is how I learned to speak English at quite an early age. At the time we were living in Newlands suburb in the south of the city of Blantyre. It so happened that our house was next to that of English white people. And as a boy, the sons of these white people were my very first friends. My association with these English speaking white children hastened my English

language acquisition and fluency. What I am still able to recall is that we were able to play together although our mother tongues were different. Although I do not remember the exact games we used to play, what is clear is that from my interaction with them I learnt their language. It was like when I was chatting or playing with these English speaking children nothing was strange. Life was just normal as we conversed in English as we played. Whenever I returned home to my father and mother after playing with these friends of mine, my parents also spoke to me in English. There was no problem there. However, whenever I left the city and went to our home village where they expected me to speak Chichewa, they marveled at my speaking English.

“While I do not remember most of the things that I did as a child, one thing that has remained with me is actually what was happening whenever I went home, that is, my home village. It used to happen that whenever I went home, the standard six, seven, and eight boys would gather around me and listen to my good English, and marvel at how, young as I was, I could speak things that they sometimes could not follow. At the time, I must have been five or six years old,” Dalitso said ending with a chuckle.

“Now, talking about your primary school days,” I took the conversation back to Dalitso’s time as an upcoming reader, “did you read anything else apart from prescribed school texts?”

“Yes I did, indeed. You know, there used to be a monthly Government newspaper called *Boma Lathu*. My father received a copy of this newspaper every month. Each time a copy arrived, I read it from cover to cover. There was also an Agriculture magazine called *Za Achikumbi* produced by the Agricultural Extension Branch which I also read. The third one was a monthly magazine called *Moni*. So, these are the three I remember very well that I used to read every month.”

“At that time were your parents suggesting to you what to read?” I asked.

“My parents being teachers, we had shelves full of books in the home. My father just let me read any book I wanted. In fact, he used to say that all the books on the shelves were mine. So, I had a wide choice when it came to what to read. Obviously, some of the books were quite advanced. As a result, I generally picked the ones I could easily follow. But with time, I also got to read even advanced books, ones that had higher vocabulary at an early age,” Dalitso explained.

“If you were to juxtapose those texts written in your vernacular with the ones written in English, which ones got much of your attention?” I inquired.

Dalitso paused briefly, “At that early age, going back to the time I began to read books on my own, that is, I started with Chichewa books. We had fascinating and exciting easy to read stories written in Chichewa. It was until I came to standard five, six, and seven, in other words, senior primary school, that I now got interested in English texts. I also remember that there were a series of books written in English called *Outdoor World*. These ones I read from standard five up to eight.

“When I went to secondary school, in English we had Practical English Books one through four written by Ogundipe. They had very fascinating stories followed by pronunciation and grammar sections. In fact, in junior secondary school I read Pacesetter novels most of which were written by Nigerians. Whereas in senior secondary school I read a lot of the African Writers Series books such as *The Narrow Path* by Francis Salormy, *An Old Man from the Village*, plus many more. In addition, I also read a lot of the Corgi books written by James Hadley Chase including *An Ace Up My Sleeve*.

“However, when I went to university, I read fewer novels as I now got interested in books related to different disciplines. Actually, what I developed in college was a system of choosing a field of interest each year. As such, if I decided the year was a sociology year, it meant reading a lot of sociology books that year. Psychology year meant reading more books on psychology, and so on and so forth. This continues to be my practice even today long after leaving university. For instance, last year was HIV/AIDS year and this year is human rights year.”

“Again, going back to your earliest days as a learner,” I turned Dalitso’s mind back in time, “what are the earliest things you remember writing?”

“I must say that I started writing as a child way before I even stepped in a classroom,” Dalitso began, “Actually, with me writing started with simple drawings, patterns and then different images on sand. I remember that I used to enjoy drawing a car without tyres. This is a thing that has remained with me to this day. Sometimes when I get bored, I tend to sketch a car. What is interesting though is that I sketch my car in the very same way I used to when I was young. I have still not improved on it.

“As indicated earlier, I started reading and writing right in the home. By the time I got into primary school to start standard one, I was already writing my name and some Chichewa words. I am not certain whether I was writing comprehensible English then. Anyway, in terms of writing in junior primary school, I remember copying notes and writing homework. It was like I was only writing when there was need, that is, when asked to do so. However, in senior primary school, while still doing what I used to do in junior primary school I remember writing a few very short stories. I should think this came about because I used to read a lot of stories and sometimes just thought of creating one myself once in a while.

“There was also something else I used to do while in senior primary school besides writing stories. I used to do or rather replicate experiments done in school back at home. I repeated at home every experiment done in school in standard six, seven, and eight. I even dissected a frog by myself. Besides, I remember to have opened up a dry cell or battery, and labeled it. I also remember that I bred mosquitoes and observed the different types of mosquito larvae and how they behave. I poured oil on the water source and then observed them die or come up. Therefore, that time I used to do a lot of observations as science turned out to be my strongest passion in senior primary school. Consequently, much of my writing was related to that because I was recording often what I was doing and the observations I was making.”

“How about when you joined secondary school, what was your writing like?” I urged Dalitso to go on.

“What I remember writing in secondary school were class exercises, notes, and homework. Outside that what I wrote was mostly correspondence. However, every once in a while I would write a poem,” Dalitso recalled.

When I asked Dalitso to tell me about his writing practices while at university, I saw his face suddenly lose a bit of its smiling look.

“You know, I had a problem in that I took a programme that I was not interested in because I was forced to do it. I was forced to do something else and not what I would have liked to do. If I had a chance, I would have liked to study psychology or sociology. Instead, I was pushed to study education. The thing is that I went to university on sponsorship. I was told by my sponsors that they would sponsor me only if I studied

education with a religious studies major. I could not even have chosen to do sciences as my path was clearly stipulated.

“Therefore, outside academic writing, I independently wrote a few poems. But since I was not taking a Creative Writing course, I simply wrote for my friends. At the time I used to like going sight seeing, observe sunrise or sunset and nature. So, I wrote quite a lot on that.”

“Now that you are out of university and established in your profession, do you still write things that are simply of interest to you?” I asked.

Dalitso was quick to reply, “Oh yes, I do. I still write, only that now I am interested in writing for children because I feel there has not been enough reading materials produced for children in Malawi.”

“How do you do that?” I wanted to know.

“What I do is that once I have a story line in mind,” Dalitso explained, “I bring together some young boys and girls. I then tell them the story and in the process observe how interested they are in the story. If the story captures their attention, I go ahead and write it up. So far, I have three scripts. Let me say though that as of now I have not yet published any of them but keep hoping that some day that will be possible.”

“Has that interest in writing children stories stemmed from your own life experience?” I probed.

“I would say *yes* to a great extent. You may remember that I have said I was exposed to books. I was interested in books my parents led me to. I realize in our country today, especially in villages, there are many children who have not been exposed to books or text outside the classroom walls. You know, I have actually come to discover that generally children enjoy reading. Unfortunately, there has not been enough material produced for them in the country.”

“Do you think things would have been different if you had not that much exposure to books as you actually did when you were a young child?” I asked.

“I think there would certainly have been a difference,” Dalitso responded. “You see, when children do not see the need for writing and reading, it is because they have not been exposed to it. In fact, they don’t see the gap within themselves. Sadly, they do not know that they have this gap. It’s obvious that one can only know something when they have been exposed to it.

“I know that my experiences were not the most ideal. Probably that was due to the educational levels of my parents. They had books quite alright. But, maybe they did not know that if they had read to me I would have been more interested in books. Of course, I can say that I was interested in reading but that was out of my own initiative. My parents just made the bookshelves accessible to me by telling me that I was free to pick and read any of the books that were on the shelves,” he said.

“In that case, do you think parents have any role to play in creating and whetting the reading appetite of their children?” I asked.

“I strongly believe so,” Dalitso passionately acknowledged. “And their role is quite crucial. And I believe that even the illiterate or uneducated parents can still foster or encourage their children to read if they are only exposed to ways how they can encourage them. Actually, I have seen some parents, when I go to work with children and teachers in primary schools, who get books and give them to their children to read. Some parents even go to the extent of forcing their children to sit down and read.

“Unfortunately, these parents don’t guide the children. They don’t create the curiosity in them. Such adults don’t trigger the interest to read in the children who unavoidably become bored. They become bored because they are forced to read by their parents and do not see the need for it in themselves. But I think that if parents were helped and led to see how they can facilitate the development of reading skills in their children, they could play an active role. Certainly, the initiative of children is important. However, this initiative of children needs the support of teachers at school and parents or guardians in the home situation to foster interest.”

“I am curious to know, are you married?” I asked.

Dalitso laughed before saying, “That’s quite an interesting question. Yes, I am married with two children aged five and two and half years.”

“How are you presenting yourself as a role model to your children and probably those you are bringing up in your home, in the light of the views on early literacy development that you have just expressed?” came my follow-up question.

“I am able to say that up to now, I have managed to develop in our children curiosity and interest in reading and writing,” he responded. “The five year one is able to write her name. She is also able to write all the letters of the alphabet. In addition, she is able to write numbers 1 up to 30. Furthermore, she likes drawing whatever catches her attention. As for the younger child, she is still having a good time in the scribbling stage.

“What is so pleasing is that I have also instilled this curiosity and interest in their mother. Professionally she is not a trained teacher but a computer person. But I have encouraged her and tried to teach her how she can encourage the children to be reading. As such, when I am at work and she is at home, she tries to encourage them. They read together stories in English and in Chichewa. At the time she is more or less their teacher. And when I go home, it is now my turn. The children leave their mother and come to me.

“That is what I am doing in an attempt to create the appropriate environment. There are so many children’s books in my home that I have bought for them besides their toys. My children know the books and their titles. Sometimes they forget the stories and end up asking ‘what happened to the hyena here?’ Then we remind them.

“So, I am only trying to put into practice this *gospel* I have described that if parents were to play their role, maybe children would become better readers. In the meantime, I am also experimenting with these ideas in order to see how they can feasibly work. What I am saying about the significance of the role of parents is because I have seen tremendous improvement in these children of mine. They are doing fine.”

“As a full stop to our conversation, may I know, in your view, who gets much of the credit for your becoming who you are today?” I asked.

After a short pause Dalitso informed me, “My parents.”

That marked the end of our conversation. I extended my sincere gratitude to Dalitso for accepting to be one of my research informants and much more for accommodating me in his very tight work schedule on this particular day. With that he saw me to the door before returning to his office to pick his papers and head back to the college’s conference room for the afternoon session of the meeting the faculty members of staff were having on this day.

Emmie's Story

It was a cloudless hot summer afternoon. As I drove towards the southern suburbs of Blantyre City to meet Emmie, I enjoyed the green scenery of the undulating Shire Highlands. Emmie had graciously accepted to participate in my research and had suggested that I meet and interview her at her home on this particular afternoon. She had chosen this day because she was not going to work as later in the afternoon she would be visiting a relative who was hospitalized. Hence, she thought she could spare about one and half hours for our conversation before leaving for the hospital which was on the northern end of town.

The directions she gave me on the telephone were excellent because I had no problems at all in locating her home, a thing that is not easy in a city where signposts and road names are a rare luxury. One of her sons opened the huge brown gate and ushered me inside the tall brick fence that protected the well manicured cream painted three bedroom house. As I drove in, five foot four or so, light chocolate complexioned Emmie, who was standing on the porch, directed me to a parking spot using her right hand forefinger. I parked, cut the engine, got out, and proceeded to the porch where Emmie and her last-born daughter were standing, welcoming me to their home. They ushered me into their well-lit sitting room where Emmie and I sat facing each other on comfortable couches. The son and daughter came and greeted me and quickly retreated to the dining table, where a pile of books and notebooks could be seen from where Emmie and I had sat.

After greetings and talk about the weather of the day, I thanked Emmie for according me the opportunity to interview her so that I could learn the story of her literacy development. I began by asking her to tell me her nationality and place of birth.

"I am Malawian by nationality," she began, "I was born in Zomba on July 18, of the year 1957. My religious leanings are that I am a Christian of the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian. Although I am now married and have children of my own, I actually come from a family of five brothers and six sisters. As such, when I was growing up there were eleven of us children in our home. In terms of profession, I am a teacher educator working with a Government college of Education. At present I hold a Master's of Education degree in Education Management."

"What are your parents, professionally?" I inquired.

"While my father was an accountant by profession, my mother was simply a home maker despite having gone to school up to standard six during her days," Emmie said.

"When you were growing up as a child, would you say that in your family you were hard up on money, hard little money, were comfortable, or were well off?" I asked.

Emmie took some time before responding. "It is difficult to say; we had little or no money," she began, "but I think we were comfortable. I say this because we did not lack food and we were living in good houses. Besides, our father could take us on trips to see places of interest. Therefore, I think we were comfortable."

"Would you say that your parents valued reading?" I wondered.

"Yes, especially my father. He encouraged us to read. He used to borrow story books from the library and given them to us to read. He also read stories to us.

Moreover, he always checked whatever we had done at school each school day,” Emmie said.

“Did he ever tell you the importance of reading?” I asked.

“No. I don’t remember him saying anything to that effect. I just remember that he read stories to us. But I believe that he placed a lot of importance on reading. For instance, whenever we were traveling he made us look at road signs and read billboards or posters. He always made it a point to explain to us what they meant,” Emmie explained.

I then wanted to know for how long Emmie listened to her father read stories to the children as they were growing up.

“Well,” Emmie came in, “I think I was a drop out somewhere around standard five or six. I stopped listening while the young ones continued listening to him read stories to them. At that time I was confident and felt I knew how to read. I considered listening to stories read by my father as something done by children.”

“When do you think you learned how to read?” I asked.

Emmie briefly paused then said, “I think I learnt to read before I went to school. It’s actually my parents and brothers who taught me how to read. As you already know, there were many of us. It so happened that sometimes we used to have a class among ourselves, the children that is, at home. What used to happen was that one of us children would play teacher with the rest of us children playing students. I don’t remember teaching one of the classes, but I just remember we used to play such school games. And, come to think of it, I am sure that those who were teaching were actually emulating my father.”

“Do you remember how or when you first came to realize that you were able to understand that letters that were put together could be read as words?”

Emmie paused and then responded, “I do not recall a specific incident. But I remember reading Chichewa stories. I do not recall the exact title of the book. All I can remember is that the book had short stories written in Chichewa. Later on I realized that I could read English books although I could not understand what the words meant, I could still read them.”

“How did you source your reading materials?” I asked.

“During my early days I depended on my father to bring me stories to read. Other than that, I read school curriculum prescribed texts books that were given to students in school. These books comprised Chichewa, English, and Mathematics textbooks. These were the books that, generally, I read. Of course the primary school I attended did not have a school library just like most public primary schools throughout the country then. But let me be quick to add that even when I went to secondary school where a library was available, I still did not make full use of the school library. I only visited the library whenever a teacher told the class to go to the library and read a particular book for an assignment that was given in class. Therefore, whenever I visited the library to read, it always had to do with some class assignments not just the interest to go to the library and read for pleasure. No. I think I was not motivated enough to simply enjoy reading anything I laid my hands on.”

“Who do you think should have given you that motivation?” I wondered.

Emmie was quick to respond this time, “I think both parents and teachers. At least my dad started it at home. But when I was exposed to books at school, no one was

doing it. I am sure that if the reading culture I experienced in my home had been continued in primary school, I would have been a good reader. You know, when I went to primary school no one was reading and there were no books. In fact, we only read during classes, the round robin kind of stuff.”

“How was it when you went to university? I asked.

“It was tough going,” Emmie responded. “I found myself in a situation where we were given a number of books to read. Since the books I was expected to read were many, I only concentrated on reading those books that were on the reserve section in the library, that is, those books that directly related to given assignments. Of course, a rare once in a while I could afford to read for pleasure. I read newspapers and magazines especially *Ebony*, *Woman*, *Bona*, *Moni* and some comics.”

“In terms of writing,” I turned the coin over, “when did you write letters to make words and were confident you really had written something?”

“That was in early primary school, I think in standard three. At the time we were writing what the teacher had instructed us to do in class.”

“What kind of things did you write in junior primary, senior primary, secondary school, and at university?” I asked.

Emmie paused for a moment, “As far as I can remember, I wrote whatever my teachers asked us to write. Even in the early days, say, in classes two, three and four, I always wrote what the teacher asked me to. I remember we wrote exercises. In primary school we usually answered comprehension questions based on a given passage. We also did some gap filling exercises as well as changing sentences from present tense to past tense, or some other grammar exercises. The practice was more or less the same in secondary school. At university, it was not different because my writing was basically in the form of course assignments.

“I must say that throughout my growing up I did not take the initiative to write things like short stories or poems. Anything I wrote was school related. The only things I personally took the initiative to write were letters I wrote friends and my father. Otherwise, even at university I did not write for pleasure.”

I wanted to know whether or not Emmie’s father showed as much interest in her writing development as he did in her reading development.

“He was very much interested in seeing to it that his children’s writing abilities were developed. Just as a case in point, you may be pleased to note that when I was in primary school, he used to check whatever we had written at school that day. In fact, he used to mark whatever we had written and then tell us what we should have written. Whenever he found that we had written something wrongly, he would say, ‘you should have written it like this.’

“Furthermore, he continued with this practice while I was in secondary school. For instance, he used to keep all the letters that I wrote him while at school. He then marked the letters for language, punctuation and grammar. Then, when I returned home on school recess, he brought out the edited letters and went, ‘What did you mean here?’ or ‘you should have done it this way.’

“Did you grow up with either a typewriter or a computer in the home?” I asked.

Emmie replied, “A computer was unheard of, but a typewriter, yes my father owned one. Unfortunately, although we were playing with it, my brothers and I did not

seriously go into learning typing skills. My father patiently showed us how to type capital letters as well as using the shift keys and the space bar.”

“While you were growing up and had learnt how to read, can you recall an event, historical, political, or otherwise, that took place and you came to know about it because you read about it, say, in a magazine or newspaper?” I wanted to know.

Without delay Emmie said, “Nothing that I can recall. Things that happened like the change of the Malawi currency from British pound sterling to Malawi Kwacha were learnt through the radio and not through reading.”

“As you look back on your literacy development path leading to your becoming who you are now, who or what has had the most influence on you?” I asked.

Emmie took a brief moment before saying, “I am sure that my father is such a person. I cannot think of any other person apart from him when I consider the things he used to do with us. Certainly, he wanted us to learn a lot of things. Among other things, he took us to places of interest like Shire River, Lake Malawi, Mwalawanthunzi, Chingwe’s Hole, and the source of Mulunguzi River on Zomba Plateau,” Emmie explained.

Desiring to know whether Emmie’s own home was a replica of the home she had grown up in as a child where some literacy development practices took place, I asked her to enlighten me on literacy activities that took place there if there were any.

“There is reading taking place in my home. I encourage my children to read. I bring books home and ask them to read these books. Actually, sometimes I bring a long list of books from the library and ask each child to keep a record of the books they have read.

“As a result, I have seen that there is some kind of reading culture being developed. Sometimes I just see someone picking up a book and start reading on their own. I don’t even have to tell them to do it. I suppose I might be setting myself up as a model because I am always reading, mostly my academic books. Of course, at times I also read story books, religious books and newspapers. In the past, my husband also used to read substantially. Nowadays, he doesn’t read anymore. As such, when the children are seeing a parent reading in the home, it is me their mother.

“Sometimes, when looking back at my past, I recall the games we were playing as children. I now realize that some of them were, in fact, literacy development games. For example, there was a game which involved skipping a string. While skipping the string we used to sing: ‘Fish, fish spell your name. F-I-S-H.’ It is now that I realize we were actually playing literacy development games.”

Having heard so much and being mindful of Emmie’s impending trip to visit a relative who was admitted to hospital, the interview came to an end. Once again, I thanked Emmie for her willingness to participate in my investigation. With that, she saw me to the door where we shook hands, and then I left with Emmie’s son closing the gate behind me once I got back on the road.

Joshua’s Story

Joshua had chosen that I meet him in his office on this cool July week day to interview him. I was in his office at 2:25pm for the 2:30pm agreed time. The dark

complexioned bespectacled Joshua was waiting for me when I arrived. With a smile he motioned me to a visitor's chair as he left his executive desk to come and sit opposite me for the interview.

We exchanged greetings after which I expressed my gratitude for his accepting to participate in my investigation. As I had already explained to him what my study entailed and the purpose of my interview earlier on, I went into the interview without wasting time.

"Would I be privileged to know your nationality please?" I began.

"I am a Malawian national born on 17 May of 1961 in Dowa, a district in the Central Region of Malawi," Joshua said.

"What is your marital status?" I inquired.

"I am married with three children, two girls and one boy, aged seventeen, fifteen, and twelve. The boy is the youngest," Joshua said.

"How many were you in your family when you were growing up as a child?" I asked.

"I come from a family of three boys and I happen to be the youngest of the trio," Joshua responded.

"What is your father's profession?" I probed.

"My father is a builder or bricklayer, if you like. However, he does not own a company, as it were, because he does it single-handed although once in a while he hires one or two bricklayers to help him. Besides, he always has a couple of people assisting him with mortar preparation for laying the bricks, and mixing cement and sand for plastering the buildings," he replied.

"How about your mother, what is she professionally?" I probed further.

"My mother was, for she has since passed on, a home maker. During her growing up time, there was not much a woman could do considering she grew up and lived right in the countryside where bringing up a family was, basically, a woman's lot," Joshua said.

"How far up have you gone academically?"

"I have a Master of Education degree in Management and Human Resources Development," Joshua explained.

"While you were a child did your parents read to you?" I asked.

"No. None of them ever read to me when I was a child."

"But did they do some reading, say to themselves, in the home?" I asked.

"Yes, they did. I do not remember seeing my father doing any serious reading. He would flip through a magazine or newspaper, once in a while. However, let me say that he did some amount of writing and sketching. I remember seeing him writing letters. He also wrote lists because, you see, he owned a grocery shop and, therefore, he used to write lists of needed items that would be bought to replenish the stock.

"On the other hand, I recall seeing my mother reading her Bible and religious books very often. I recall being fascinated with listening to my mother as she read to herself. A leader in the women's arm of her church congregation, she frequently read her Bible and wrote her sermons and teaching lessons' outlines. Other than that, I do not remember seeing her writing such things as lists or letters. She more often read aloud in the shade of a tree in the front yard of our home mostly during afternoons of the hot dry summer months of the year. There were times when I sat by her side as she read aloud

stories from the Bible. Such times were very special to me and, honestly, I still cherish the memories. I remember bubbling over and bombarding her with questions when she read from the Bible stories of the three Hebrew young men who were thrown in a fiery furnace, Daniel who was thrown in a den of lions and Jesus walking on water, among others. As far as I can recall, I never heard my mother speak a word of English, let alone read or write one. Nevertheless, she read and wrote Chichewa very well. She had been in school up to standard three,” he said.

“Did your parents teach you to read?” I inquired.

“I appreciate that I was born into one of the few families in the community where some reading and writing was done. However, my parents did not teach me how to read and write. I should think my parents and brothers felt that teaching reading and writing were the responsibility of teachers in school. Therefore, giving credit where it is due, I must say that I was taught reading by teachers in junior primary school,” Joshua replied.

“Narrate to me your earliest school experiences,” I requested.

“Well, I think my earliest school experiences were that schools were places where children went to be with their friends, sing, play, listen to or tell stories, and do some additions and subtractions. Reading and writing aside, we did a lot of playing, singing, and dancing as well as making handicraft work of toys (people and cars) out of clay. On some days we listened to school programs broadcast on the national radio. This meant doing what the presenter was telling us to do. If the presenter said ‘jump’ we repeated the word while doing the actual jumping as demonstrated by the teacher. And that was much fun! I do not remember teachers ever giving us homework while I was in junior primary school.

“Like the majority of Malawian children for whom kindergarten both as a word and an institution happens to be outside their lexicon, I started school as a non-reader. Before I started school I knew nothing about reading and writing numbers and the English alphabet, which is also the same one used in Chichewa, my first language except for letters Q and X which are non-existent.

“In standard one and two what went for reading essentially was that some pages in a school text were memorized after parroting and chorusing the contents (texts) many times led by the teacher. One of my most memorable teachers made a song out of the English alphabet. He would arrange us in four groups. A group would either sing soprano, tenor, alto or bass (laughter). And each group had a portion of the alphabet. For instance, the soprano group would only sing A B C D.

“Of course, learning to read and write English turned out to be quite difficult though exciting. The basic reason was that English spellings were not as easily predictable as Chichewa spellings happened to be. I came to learn that whereas every syllable in Chichewa ends with a vowel, that rule did not apply in English. For instance, when asked to write *cry* I would spell it as *karayi* and *happy* as *hape*. Pronunciation was another hurdle more especially because among other factors, Chichewa has no fricative *th* as in *this* or *thesis*. The closest I would come up to pronouncing *this* would be turning the *th* in *this* to a *z* sound that would go as *zis*. Another example was simply eliminating the rolling *r* sound in *burn* and pronouncing it as *ben* as one does with *beg* and not *burg*. But with time, that sorted itself out. I suppose what compounded the difficulty of learning English at the outset was that English was not a medium of communication right from standard one,” Joshua said.

“But do you remember the time you first came to realize that you were now able to read?” I asked.

“Yes, I sure do. I can still vividly recall the first time and day I was able to really read. I was in standard three then and the place was at was at my grandfather’s, on my mother’s side. Late in the afternoon of one day I picked up a book he had been using in his adult literacy program, for he had never gone to school during his days as a youngster, and therefore came to learn to read and write quite later in his life. The experience began by me realizing that I could put together the syllables *u*, *ka*, and *ni* of the title of the book entitled *Ukani* which means “wake up” in Chichewa. Not believing myself, I turned the first page and was greatly surprised that I could read the first sentence, then second, the third and so on. And before I knew it, I had reached the last page.

“I was very excited and ecstatic with joy that I was now able to read. I could not (and still cannot) tell what exactly happened and how it happened. What can be said, though, is that, as I now looked at print, I was able to string letters and words together and make sense of them instead of simply making up a story based on what I could remember the teacher saying in class or the picture seemed to indicate. I now wanted to open any book I could lay my hands on and see if I could read it. My standard three Chichewa text was the first one I energetically delved into.

“How about writing?” I asked.

“With reading, came writing as well. I think I would not be wrong to say that they came simultaneously. I say this because having learnt the Chichewa alphabet, that is, consonants and vowels, in isolation followed by syllables and syllable combinations to make words, word combinations to make sentences were now the obvious logical follow up. From the time I first learned how to spell my name, I wrote it almost on any piece of paper I could lay my hands on. Covers of my exercise books and textbooks ended up having my name written all over them.

“Did you have a library in the school you went to?” I asked.

“Actually, I changed primary schools a lot basically because my father used to relocate a lot. You see, between standard one and eight, I attended ten primary schools. None of these schools, though, had a library. In fact, I don’t remember a primary school I visited in my primary school days that had a school library.”

“What did you do for reading materials in primary school then?”

“Basically, the books I remember reading in primary school were class texts. Each class, each year that is, had one English text, one Mathematics text, and one Chichewa text. The English and Chichewa texts contained comprehension, grammar, vocabulary, and composition sections within every chapter. Other than that, there was the Mathematics text which was also nothing but numbers.”

“Did you not do any reading outside the primary school classroom texts?”

“I did and quite substantially for that matter. Once a month, I got hold of a monthly magazine called *Moni*, published by Montfort Press in Blantyre. Actually, I remember flipping through the pages of this magazine from as far back as when I was in standard two although I was unable to read then. The most interesting sections of this magazine for me were a cartoon, an adventurous witty young boy, called Chatsalira. There was also Dr. Gombar’s “Such Is Life” column that contained out of the ordinary

happenings in the world. And then, there were the sports and the short story sections. Sadly, *Moni* magazine went out of circulation in July 2002.

“There was also *Boma Lathu*, a free national Government newspaper published by the Department of Information. This newspaper covered development issues across the country as well as humorous anecdotes from around the country with eye-catching titles like “Man fights with a hyena”, and a not-so-wise slow-learning cartoon character called Ajojo. I got hold of copies by chance once in a while from those who were either on the publisher’s mailing list or were able to collect it from the Department of Information’s office at the distant district headquarters.

“Furthermore, when I reached standard five, I subscribed to a free South African monthly magazine titled *Bantu*, which covered stories in English from across the southern African region. In the 1980s the magazine changed its name to *Southern Africa Today*. From within Malawi there was also a weekly newspaper called *The African*, published by Likuni Press of Lilongwe that had a cartoon called Kamzimbi. This one had to be bought and I used to buy copies once in a while.

“I also remember that once every month, my father used to go to the city of Lilongwe to buy merchandize for the groceries shop he used to run. Although he himself hardly did any reading, he used to buy me several monthly magazines and old copies of weekly newspapers. Therefore, I used to look forward to his trips to the city because of their predictable benefits to me,” Joshua explained.

“Do you remember some of the titles of these magazines and newspapers?” I asked.

“*Parade* magazine from Zimbabwe was one of them. This one I used to enjoy very much because among other interesting aspects it had a photo story or comic strip that covered several pages. And the story involved a character whose name I still remember to this day: Sam Mperu. There was also a Malawian magazine that fell along the same lines as *Parade*, which was titled *Star Magazine*. And there was a short stories collection titled *Star Stories*. Besides these, there were other international magazines and back issues of *Malawi News* newspaper that he used to buy whenever he came across them. Now that I come to think of it, I am amazed that he went to the trouble of doing this knowing that he himself hardly read or spoke English really.

“There is no doubt in my mind that what my father did actually helped in igniting in me a very strong liking for the printed word. In the years that followed, I found myself amassing a collection of magazines, mail order catalogues, and tourist magazines from Denmark, UK, South Africa, and Canada. I also had quite a huge collection of comics namely: *Kid Colt*, *Captain Devil*, *Devil Bad Bat*, *She*, *Lone Wolf*, and *Beau Dupont*. I also had all my class notebooks from standard one through standard six neatly packed in three big cartons,” Joshua explained.

“Why do you think your father took the trouble of buying you such reading material?” I asked.

“I would say that he probably wanted to achieve through me what he had not achieved himself, that is, get a good education. Hence he must have felt that by helping me to get exposed to such reading material I would be what he desired I should be. Actually, when I was in standard three, I remember my father one day asking me to tell him how many heads of cattle he had. I told him ‘none’ because he did not have any. He then asked the same question about my uncles and my grandparents. The answer was the

same: none. At the end he told me that he had asked me that question to tell me that my future lay in my own hands. He asked me to work hard in school because that was the only way to a meaningful future for me and my brothers, because there was no inheritance awaiting us in the form of heads of cattle as was the case with my peers.”

“In terms of books, what are the earliest books you remember reading while in primary school outside classroom texts?” I inquired.

“Well, the earliest book I remember reading outside prescribed class texts was titled *People of Other Lands*. Through this book, which I read while in standard five loaned to me by my class teacher, I got to know some people from all the continents on the globe like the Eskimos of North America and the Aborigines of Australia. While in standard six, I also read Charles Dickens’ *David Copperfield*, which I borrowed from our next door neighbour. I think I would be right to say that this was the time that I first found myself getting lost in a book,” he said.

“Earlier on you said that all the primary schools you went to did not have school libraries. Does that mean that you first stepped into a library when you went to secondary school?” I asked.

“No. Not really. I first entered a library when I was in standard eight. At the time I had moved away from my parents and was living with my eldest brother who was working at Mponela, a small town in Dowa District. My first library experience was not a school but a public library that was housed in a very small room within the town’s community hall complex. I read most of the books available in that library. But that should not sound as if there was much because I am sure all the books on the bookshelves hardly numbered anywhere close to a couple of a hundred,” Joshua explained.

“What was your reading experience in secondary school?” I inquired.

“Getting into secondary school provided a very fertile ground for my interest in reading to grow. It was in secondary school where I found a library that housed hundred of books covering a wide range of disciplines. I read all children’s literature books found in that library. There were a lot of graded readers that I read including *The Burning Star of Ndutu*, *Kwabena and the Leopard*, *The River that Changed its Course*, *The Old Man and the Village*, and *Coral Island*.

“When I exhausted the available novels section of the secondary school library, I was privileged to be lent books by my form one and two teacher of English, who also doubled as the school librarian, from her own personal library. In this way I got introduced to the world of *The Chronicles of Narnia*, *The Secret Garden*, *Oliver Twist*, *A Tale of Two Cities*, *Hamlet Prince of Denmark*, *the Prisoner of Zenda*, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and many others.

“On the academic front, however, I read all the expected texts that were available in the content areas, that is geography, history, biology, physics, chemistry and so on. One content area that got my attention was English literature. This is where I read the following novels: *Out of the Silent Plane*, *Matryona’s House and Other Stories*, *The River Between*, *The Narrow Path* on the English side. In Chichewa literature I read *Kalenga ndi Mzake*, *Kukula ndi Mwambo*, *Mbiri ya Angoni*, and *Mkwatibwi Wokhumudwa*, among others.

“However, because I also happened to have been chosen my class (year) representative in my secondary school’s Top of the Class Quiz Competition team, I also

read any latest copy of newspapers, magazines and any books deemed helpful to widen my general knowledge,” Joshua explained.”

“What was your reading like when you went to university?” I inquired.

“At university I would say that most of my readings were related to prescribed readings plus those I picked from the library that I considered relevant to my areas of study. Besides readings in literature, my favourite area, I also immensely enjoyed reading psychology, philosophy and sociology. I guess this is so because I have always been fascinated by what people do, why they do what they do, and what makes people tick. On the lighter side, at university I also read national and international newspapers, *The University Harvester* magazine and Chancellor College’s own *The Muse*.

“This was also the time I got introduced to the world of Tintin. I bought and read most of the Tintin books. Besides, I also made sure that I bought a novel each month throughout my five year undergraduate study period.”

“Nowadays do you still do a lot of reading?” I probed.

“Yes, and a lot of it. As you may appreciate, the nature of my work demands that I read much to keep abreast of the current professional trends so that I ably assist my students. Nevertheless, I also read a lot to pacify my personal appetite for the written word.”

“What do you like reading for pleasure?”

“After having read a lot of espionage stuff, the likes of Wilber Smith, Ludlum, John le Carre, and Joseph Wambaugh, as well as scores of Agatha Christie’s and other mystery writers, plus lots of Christian literature, I have now moved to biographies, historical fiction and children’s literature. I like reading lives of real people for that helps me to understand how they have come to be what they are and why certain things have come to be as they are in the world today. One of the remarkable people I have read about is Colin Powell, the one time United States of America’s Secretary of State. I have also read several Christian missionaries’ personal accounts of their experiences as they went to spread Christianity in South America, Africa, the Middle East, Russia, China, and Asia.

“In terms of historical fiction, James A. Michener remains my favourite writer. He is such a master storyteller when it comes to presenting history in action-packed prose that turns out to be very enlightening and educative because you see history developing through the lives of living persons during their times and circumstances. Whether one reads *Tales of the South Pacific*, *Space*, *The Drifters*, *Hawaii*, *The Source*, *Alaska*, *Caravans* or indeed the dozen others, one cannot help but see that each story is about a real people in a real country going through real life vicissitudes although fictitiously presented.

“For instance, through *The Covenant* one sees the incredible story of South Africa plus the birth of the now defunct deplorable and inhuman *apartheid* system and the hope and resilience of the people on both sides of the divide, that is, the oppressed (black Africans) and the oppressors (Afrikaans), as well as the helpless minorities (English, Indians, and mixed race) caught in the middle of the diabolic conflict.

“As regards children’s literature, I have come to enjoy reading stories written for children from diverse cultures, countries and continents. For instance, I have enjoyed Saint-Exupery’s *The Little Prince*, Collodi’s *The Adventures of Pinocchio*, Orlev’s *The Island on Bird Street*, Berry’s *A Thief in the Village and Other Stories from Jamaica*,

Ihimaera's *The Whale Rider*, Park's *A Single Shard*, Sachar's *Holes*, and Lindgren's *Pippi Longstocking*, to mention just some.

"Nowadays, week in and week out, I read almost every issue of *The Nation*, *The Daily Times*, weekend newspapers, *Pride Magazine*, *BBC Magazine*. Once in a while I also read *Bona* and *Drum* of South Africa and some of the other Malawian newspapers on the market. In addition, I also read a portion of *The Bible* and some Christian literature on a daily basis," Joshua explained.

"Do you read to your children?"

"Not anymore. I used to read to them when they were young. We have three different sets of volumes of Bible Stories. There is also a set of Stories from Africa. I have read all these to them. We also have a lot of children's storybooks, cartoons, and films like Cinderella, and Pocahontas. But I guess they still like my reading stories to them because not long ago I went into my boy's bedroom to read him a bedtime story, he was ten years the: the girls opened their bedroom and requested that I sit in between the two bedroom doors for they wanted to listen to the story too (laughter).

"Even the reading of a portion of Scripture before bed time is no longer the monopoly of us parents. The boy or one of the girls does the reading and shares with the rest of us the day's portion from their daily Scripture guide which they will have read in advance," Joshua explained.

"Do your children read things of their own choice?" I asked.

"Yes. Actually, when the papers arrive at home each one takes their turn to read them. They also read children stories that are available in the home as we buy books time and again. Besides, they bring books from the public library where each one of them holds a membership. When they think I have time to spare, they always ask me to escort them to the library when they go to return and get new books or check their electronic mail or just surf the internet."

"You mean they are also conversant with the use of the internet?"

"Yes they are. Everyone in the family is. And that includes their mother and me. Whereas I have been using the internet just for the past seven years, my wife and children have done so for the past four."

"Do you have a computer in the home?" I asked

"Yes we have three desktops and one laptop."

"How did you and the members of your family learn keyboard skills?"

"Some seventeen years ago, I was teaching at a secondary school where Office Practice was one of the content areas. Included in this area was Typing. As such, the school had a set of typewriters that students were using in learning typing skills. I approached the teacher of the subject to introduce me to typing. The teacher simply gave me the course text and gave me a brief on the theory of typing and set up of the keyboard. Armed with that knowledge I learned typing all by myself using this textbook by sparing thirty minutes each day after knocking off from work before returning home over a period of four months. This was in 1988.

"When I first got access to computers in 1994, I simply transferred my typing skills to the computer keyboard after someone had showed me how to turn on and shut down a computer and working in Word. The rest of the things I do are generally through personal learning using the various types of available software. But then to help my

family not get traumatized while learning to use the computer, I purchased a typing software programme which they have all benefited from,” Joshua explained.

“Do you assist your children with their school work?”

“Knowing the importance of offering children assistance with their school work, both my wife and I give them a helping hand whenever they happen to need it. I am always interested in the books they read and they enjoy telling me the stories they have read. There are those films that we tirelessly watch together as a family, such as *The Lion King* and *The Gods Must Be Crazy* and countless musicals. We also engage in passionate discussion of films they have watched and books they have read. We play a lot of games together. Among the games are *Scrabble*, an English word game, and *From Egypt to Canaan*, also an English Bible based word game. Interestingly, all the three children write, creating and writing their own stories. And since they know that stories are my passion, the first and third born always want me to read their stories. However, the second born does not want me to read her stories yet. She is writing a series of what she calls episodes. The last time I checked with her she was on episode seven.”

“And if we can just go back to your early days, what do you remember about your learning to write experiences?” I asked.

“Well, during the first days in standard one we wrote figures, numbers and letters in the sand outside the classroom. From writing in the sand, we graduated to writing on slates. Later on we started writing in notebooks. In standard two we wrote in notebooks only. From standard three onwards we did a lot of answering comprehension questions and solving mathematical problems. These were done either as part of class work or homework. Throughout my primary school days, I did a lot of writing from standard three through eight. I think I must consider myself fortunate in that I was taught in these classes by teachers who believed in giving a lot of written assignments to students.”

“What was the nature of these assignments?”

“Mostly they comprised answering English or Chichewa comprehension questions after reading a passage in a book or solving some mathematical problems. But in standard five and six I had a teacher who brought story telling into the classroom. He used to tell us very interesting stories. At the end of each session, he used to ask us to write down the story as we heard it and he would mark that. This led me to start writing stories of my own, either documenting those told by my grandfather or my own creations. As a result, by the time I finished standard six, I had two eighty-page notebooks filled with my own created short stories.”

“Did the teacher mark your creative writing?”

“My standard six teacher read and marked my pieces. Beyond that nobody did. As a result, I didn’t present them to anybody to have a look. I basically wrote for myself. Even when I went to secondary school, I wrote a number of sketch plays that I didn’t show any teacher but simply narrated the plots to some close friends with whom I acted these stories out during Variety Show weekends.”

“Basically, what kind of writing did you do in secondary school?”

“We wrote a lot of homework along the same lines I did in senior primary school, content area assignments, that is. We also wrote notes from books besides those given by the subject teachers, and completed science workbook units after doing

experiments. The only serious creative work that I did then was composing about four songs for a singing group that I belonged to.”

“What was your writing trend like at university?”

“Apart from course work assignments I think at university I wrote a lot of letters. These letters were mostly of encouragement to Christian friends who were either in other constituent colleges of the University of Malawi or were still in secondary schools across the country. Besides these two activities, I started writing a story that was completed after I graduated with my Bachelor’s. It is a 219 page story for late teens and young adults.

“I must say that while doing my Bachelor’s, I wrote four love poems. When I was studying for my Master’s, I wrote four poems depicting my experience in a foreign land. Two of them were published in that university’s magazine called *Challenge*.”

“Now that you are deep inside your working life, what is your writing like?”

“On my professional front, I write my lecture notes, seminar papers, consultancy documents, that is, project proposals and reports, to mention just the major things. On the leisure side, I compose songs that I play on the guitar. I have written four plays and three have been performed, and I also make contributions to one of Malawi’s daily newspapers’ opinion column. I have also written poems reflecting the changing political landscape in Malawi, one in 1994, the second in 1999, and the third one in 2004 depicting, in three words, *hope*, *shock*, and *frustration*, respectively.”

“*Who* or *what* has been your influence in your literacy development?”

“I think it is both *who* and *what*. On the *who* side, my junior and senior primary school teachers get the credit for introducing me to letters, words, sentences, numbers and writing of compositions. Without them, it is doubtful that I would have become what I am. And I guess special mention should be made of my secondary school teacher of English, Mrs. Pearson, who introduced me to the world of children literature by lending me her own books. There is also my father. He provided large quantities of the printed word that whetted my reading appetite and encouraged me to be focused in my education. My mother also played her part as she made me realize through her reading of Bible stories that fascinating stories come out of the written word. I longed for the time I could read these stories by myself. My grandfather on my mother’s side also played a significant role in that besides the fact that my ability to read clicked using his own adult literacy development textbook, he also told me fascinating stories about his past. It was these stories that enabled me start writing my own stories later on while I was still in primary school.

“On the *what* side, I think the available printed word is what provided the impetus for me to want to read more starting right in primary school through secondary school. I came to realize that by reading I was able to relocate to a different place and time and be able to partake in what was happening where I did not have the opportunity to be physically present. When I went to secondary school, besides reading and appreciating the stories I read, I started getting interested in the way

writers played with words, that is their style of writing both in Chichewa and English books.

“What's more, the presence of a radio in the home also played some significant role in my literacy development, particularly in my development of the English language. Two things stand out. First, I enjoyed, and still do, listening to music and singing. I remember that from as far back as when I was in standard three I enjoyed listening to the radio and memorized popular songs of the time like those by Abba, Jim Reeves, The Minerals, Mirriam Mekeba, The Beatles, Olivia Newton John, Electric Light Orchestra, The Hurricanes, and countless others. I was able to sing along almost any of the popular songs by the time I reached standard five.

“Second, I found a program on the Malawi Broadcasting Corporation, the country's only radio station then, where someone read stories from books. I was intrigued and got hooked although the stories were in English. Now that I come to think of it, that was rather strange since by standard three, I could barely go beyond a greeting in English. Yet when the day and time came along for the continuation of the story, I was always by the radio every week. Unavoidably, with the passing of time, I started following quite easily. The stories that I can still recall were *Cry the Beloved Country* by Alan Paton and *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe.”

“What advice would you give parents and teachers?” I asked.

“To parents I would say that they should spare time to read or tell stories to their preschool and junior primary school children. That generates curiosity and interest in the children who are by nature inquisitive. Parents should also provide literacy material in the home so that children get to know the printed word before they are even able to read. In addition, parents should read in the home so that children can see the value of books and other printed texts. You know my son, for example, starting from the time he was able to walk and get to church with me, he used to carry a pocket Bible and hymn book. Whenever, the congregation was reading a text, or singing a hymn, he too would open his to some page, and sometimes his book would be upside down. But I guess that didn't matter so long he too was in line with the rest of us. As such, my children never tore books or newspapers when they were young because I guess they considered them valuable. One thing that my parents didn't do but I have done and urge other parents to do is to help their children with their reading and school work in general. If we appear interested in their work and eager to help, children realize that we value what they do and tend to work harder than they otherwise would do.

“Turning to teachers, I would say that children should not see learning as laborious but fun. Teachers should make every effort to make their lessons as involving as possible for children. They should also be ready to offer help to children who seem to be struggling because for most children the only help they get with their school work is that which comes from teachers. Furthermore, children should be encouraged to read widely to broaden their view of the world they live in by giving them more reading material outside their prescribed curriculum texts. Teachers should involve children in oral and written activities because the only way children can develop their spoken language fluency is when they practice the language,

probably having teachers themselves as role models. Moreover, teachers should give students a lot of meaningful written work to develop children's writing competency," he said.

"Well, with that we come to the end of our conversation. Let me thank you most sincerely once again for giving me this opportunity to talk with you."

"It's been a pleasure," said Joshua standing up and escorting me to the door.

Lumbani's Story

On this very warm and bright sunny summer day I arrived some five minutes before 2 o'clock in the afternoon, the time Lumbani had suggested I meet him at his office. When I got there, he was standing by his office door which was open at the time. I should think he must have been looking forward to my coming. Just about a couple of inches short of being six foot tall, Lumbani is dark, in the Southern African sense of the word, broad shouldered and well built. With a smile across his face he extended his right hand in greeting, which I took in mine while returning his smile.

"You are most welcome. I suggest we go to the Audio-Visual Centre. We have less likelihood of us being disturbed there than here," Lumbani said as he closed his office door and led the way to the Audio-Visual Centre.

We were at the new venue of the interview in less than two minutes. As an indication that Lumbani had made necessary arrangements before my arrival, he took me straight to an inner room past the offices of the technicians who manage the centre. In the quietness of this our 'interview room' we sat on comfortable hard backed chairs facing each other. After another exchange of pleasantries and talk of the day's weather, I expressed my gratitude to him for his acceptance of my request that he be a participant in my investigation. I also restated the purpose of the conversation with him which was for me to learn his literacy development story.

"What is your nationality?" I asked as a way of setting the ball rolling.

"I am very Malawian although I was born in Chingola in Zambia where my father was working, at the time of my birth," Lumbani said.

"Any siblings?" I inquired.

"I come from a family of six brothers and a sister, that is, seven children in total. All of us were born in Zambia before the family relocated to Malawi in the 1980s," he replied.

"When you were growing up as a child, what were your parents, professionally?" I asked.

"My father was a miner. He just rose through the ranks. But in terms of education, he did not go beyond primary school. As for my mother, I can say that she was, actually, illiterate. You see, whereas my father could read, my mother could not," Lumbani explained.

"As for yourself, how far up the academic ladder have you climbed?" I probed.

"Well, after successfully completing primary school, I went to secondary school where I got the Junior Certificate of Education after two years. Thereafter, I got a Malawi School Certificate of Education after another two years. And this saw me enter

the University of Malawi. At university, following three years of study I obtained a Diploma in Education. After another two years, I obtained a Bachelor of Education degree in 1990. Then I taught for ten years before returning to university in 2000 for an Honour's degree that I completed in 2001. Then in 2002 I enrolled in a Master's degree programme with the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University or Virginia Tech as it is popularly called. I completed the studies in 2003. As such, I am now a holder of a Master's degree in Curriculum and Instruction."

"If I may take you back to the days when you were growing up as a child," I once again got Lumbani's attention, "how would you rank your family on an economic scale, in other words, were you financially well off, comfortable, or hard up for money?"

"Well," he replied after a short pause, "I think there was a progression. Initially, at the time I was born, that is, my father was a low income earner. But over time, by the time I was in grade one, my father had moved into the middle income bracket. Such was the case because, for example, we were now occupying a three bedroom house in the city. This shift connotes that we had moved from a low income section to a middle income section."

Bearing in mind that Lumbani's mother could not read, I asked, "Did your father read to you when you were a child?"

"All that I remember my father reading to me were my school reports or invitations to meetings. But in terms of literacy support there is not much except that he paid my library subscription fees when I joined the library services. In addition to that, he allowed me to go to the library to read," Lumbani explained.

"Why do you think he did that?" I probed.

"Presumably, he wanted me to go through education. And I suppose by doing that he must have felt he would be helping me to excel in my studies."

"Can you recall the time you were first able to read?" I requested.

"Between grades three and four was the time that I was so confident that I knew how to read. I should think that because of the phonology activities the teachers involved us in, I could read the word 'disappointment' by grade three although I could not tell what it meant. By that time, I could just look at a word, see its composition, and read it. I still remember that I could read the word 'point' without understanding what it meant," Lumbani replied.

"How would you describe the primary school where you started school education?" I inquired.

"Well," Lumbani explained, "the community I started growing up in as a child was multilingual. Therefore, because of this factor, vernacular languages were not taught in school. I suppose because they were numerous. As such, the language of communication and instruction turned out to be English right from grade one, that is, standard one in Malawi. Besides, at this school we had several white teachers and a lot of interaction in terms of activities in school."

"What were some of the activities?"

"For starters, we used to sing a lot. And we were relating the songs to what was written on the chalkboard. For example, we would sing a song with the sentence 'One man and a dog walking to Lusaka.' After our singing the teacher would then put the words on the chalk board and relate the words in the song to the letters on the board. In addition, our teachers devised a system where we could say 'did da did da' which they

used for teaching us the phonology of words. As a result, we could read a word without even understanding it.”

“While in junior primary school did you yourself do any reading at home?” I asked.

“Quite considerably. Actually, what happened was that, when I started grade one, I was living right in the heart of the city. Although the primary school I went to had a school library, there was also a public library close to my home. And I used to read books from this public library. At the time my favourite cartoon was Tintin. I greatly enjoyed reading the thrilling adventurous escapades of Tintin.

“By the time I reached grade five, I had enrolled with a Bible Correspondence College. As a result, I used to receive and read pamphlets and thereafter respond to questions that were sent to me from time to time. Besides, I was also a member of the Sunday school at my church where we used to get a lot of Christian pamphlets and leaflets which also engaged me a lot. At my household level, beginning with my junior primary school, these are some of the things that informed my reading pattern,” Lumbani said.

“Beginning with junior primary school how did your reading habit unfold?”

“As I indicated earlier on,” Lumbani explained, “in junior primary school I was captivated by cartoons with Tintin being my favourite. However, when I moved into senior primary school my affinity went to social studies. Reading about citizenship, different countries, and government was what stimulated my reading appetite a great deal. While I was still in Zambia I also read a number of magazines; the one I enjoyed reading the most was *Obet*. But here in Malawi, while in both primary and secondary school, *Moni* magazine was my favourite. Particularly I enjoyed reading the Chatsalira cartoon and the column titled “Think Twice” written by Selso Kalilombe.

“Interestingly, when I went to secondary school, I got selected to be a member of my school’s Top of the Class Quiz Competition team member. This membership gave additional pressure to read more and to read widely as part of our preparations for competitions with other secondary schools. My reading was now no longer confined to subjects being studied in school. Instead, I was now reading that plus anything I could lay my hands on because the competition had one round called Mixed Bag in which one’s ability to correctly answer questions depended on how wide their general knowledge was.

“Furthermore, the presence of a school library gave me additional impetus to read a lot. And my membership to the school’s Top of the Class team was extra fuel that energized me to read more. Consequently, due to my incessant borrowing of books from the school library, I was appointed by teachers to become the Library Prefect. And that made me read a great deal. That is the time I moved into fiction. I went into reading James Hardy Chase’s novels. I also read Mark Twain’s books including *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. Francis Selormey’s *The Narrow Path*, plus *Weep Not Child* and *A Grain of Wheat* by Ngugi wa Thiong’o, are among the African Writers Series books published by Heinemann that I read at this time,” Lumbani explained.

“Did your reading pattern change when you went to university?” I asked.

“Yes, it did. You see, when I went into college, I moved into Humanities which actually demanded a great deal of reading. At that time I moved into political literature,” Lumbani replied

“Why?” I further asked.

“At this time I became a convinced Marxist. I read a lot of Karl Marx’s works, Franz Fannon’s books, and works of major politicians like Mikhael Gorbachev’s *The Perestroika*. Besides, I was also an avid reader of newspapers both national and international plus several magazines including *The Muse* and *The University Harvester*,” he replied.

“As a child, how did your ability to write take root?” I inquired.

“I think I was in a unique situation that turned out to be advantageous to me. You see, I started primary school at the age of more or less eight which was certainly later than my age mates.”

“Why?”

“This happened because every time my father took me to school to have me registered, the school head teacher would say ‘This boy is too young.’ It would appear I had a body that was smaller than my age in terms of physique. As a result, it was in the eighth year that I was accepted into grade one to start my primary education. But that does not mean I was just at home all that time. No. I actually spent much of my time in nursery school where many of our activities involved singing and drawing.”

“Does that mean that when you finally got into primary school you were already able to write your name?”

“No. I think it was when I got to grade two that I was now able to write my name.”

“What else do you remember writing while you were in junior primary school?”

“We used to write assignments. I remember quite well that we used to work in groups. In those days we used to receive all school textbooks in advance. As such, together with my group, we were able to figure out which assignments would be coming when. Therefore, my group members and I read and worked out the problems in advance, that is, before the day the exercises were to be done in class.”

“Who made up the group?”

“Well, these were my school mates, actually, my classmates to be precise. Interestingly, though, these members of my group were neither my playmates at home nor, indeed, residents of my neighbourhood.”

“What can you say about your writing in senior primary school?”

“I remember winning a writing competition and was awarded crayons and pencils for being able to write figures and letters so well. I guess this was the case because by the time I was going into senior primary school I had mastered most of the spellings at that stage and was able to write most of the spellings, good paragraphs and easily respond to questions, especially in social studies and mathematics. Therefore, in senior primary school classes I was comfortable.”

“But I think the interesting bit is that at the time that I went into senior primary school, I still did not know how to write anything in vernacular. You know, I left Zambia after completing standard five. When I came to Malawi I got into standard six. And this is when I started learning vernacular syllables, consonants, and vowels A E I O U. Actually it just took a brother and few friends telling me ‘this is A E I O U.’ Hence, although I started learning how to read and write vernacular quite late, I was able to handle it. What may even be more interesting is that when I went into secondary school, I passed Chichewa at the Junior Certificate of Education level and also got a very good credit at my Malawi School Certificate of Education level. I must say that this was

largely due to my personal hard work and initiative because looking at my background in vernacular, even my teachers were not hopeful that I could pass the subject, let alone pass it well.”

“Going back to your earliest days, what do you remember to be the first things you wrote?”

“Starting way back when I was in junior primary school, I started writing an autobiography, a journal that is. I was writing about whatever was happening in my life including how we moved from Zambia to Malawi and how we settled down when we got here. I kept that journal right through secondary school. And when I went to university, I used to record most of the daily happenings on pieces of paper some of which I still have to this day.

“While in secondary school, I remember that one of the things we used to do was writing book reports. We had a teacher called Mr. Banda who was quite enthusiastic at ensuring that we read as many books as possible. And every time we finished reading a book, he demanded a book report. One thing that he kept emphasizing was that whenever one was writing a piece, even a short story, one needed to have a strong opening.

“Of course, one of the things I did frequently was writing letters to parents, relatives and friends. I did much of this when I went to secondary school. The basic reason I used to correspond a lot while in secondary school was because my parents and brothers were in Mzuzu while I was in Chikwawa. The seven hundred plus kilometre distance between us necessitated that I write a great deal of letters.”

“What language did you use in your correspondence?”

“I wrote my parents in either Tumbuka or Tonga. However, when writing my friends, especially those in Zambia, I corresponded in English.”

“Earlier on you talked about writing book reports. Did this and the enthusiasm of Mr. Banda or indeed any other teacher like him have any impact on you?”

“Of course, yes. One thing for sure is that it developed the urge in me to begin writing fiction. One of the first pieces that I wrote and published in 1983, while I was in secondary school, is a short story entitled ‘The Folly of Disobedience.’ And one of the unpublished ones that I still have is entitled ‘Completely Alone in the World I Am.’ Besides, I also wrote some sketch plays.”

“What issues did you tackle in your writing?”

“Basically, I wrote on moral issues, behaviour, that is. For instance, ‘The Folly of Disobedience’ is a story of a child who is raised up properly but who, later, starts misbehaving, loses his job and marriage all because he decided to disobey his parents’ good advice.”

“Now, when you went to university, what was your writing like?”

“At Chancellor College, I found that there existed the Writers’ Workshop. This was a forum where writers gathered weekly to critique literary pieces presented for discussion. Upon my arrival I immediately became a member of the Writers’ Workshop.

“In terms of my writing at that time, I had generally moved into poetry. As such, most of the pieces I contributed to the Writers’ Workshop were poems. Actually, one of the poems I contributed won a Delta Baxter Award in 1989. This award came with four hundred and twenty-five Kwacha prize money. Although the amount is small by today’s

standards, at the time it was quite considerable. That same poem has appeared this year in a new poetry anthology by Anthony Nazombe.”

“What were the themes your poems ran along?”

“Basically, my poems touch three areas: love, religion, and politics. However, most of the poems I contributed to the Writers’ Workshop hinged on political liberation. Such was the case because at the time Malawi was a one party state and we had a dictatorship. If you look at most of my poems written during that era, they were in cryptic. They have geographical and religious imagery but commenting on the political situation of the time.”

“Do you still do that?”

“No, I don’t. Writing in cryptic went with the demise of the dictatorship and the end of the one party state in 1994. The issue of talking in cryptic or idioms does not carry weight any longer because we now have freedom of expression. No one can appreciate that type of writing any more. Of course, cryptic writing can transcend time as the talk about political conditions can exist either in a dictatorship or a democracy. But the fact is that the impetus to question political issues through poems has worn off now that we are able to raise the same issues in prose so that they are easily understood by all.

“Let me also hasten to add that while at university I turned out to be an editorial board member of the magazine called *The Muse*, which was produced by the English Department at Chancellor College. In this magazine, contributors analyzed novels, poems, short stories, and presentations at the Writers’ Workshop, alongside other literary issues. I used to contribute articles to this magazine. In addition, during my time at university I was also a contributor to a university magazine called *The Harvester*. This one used to contain discussion of intellectual issues including literary works.”

“Currently, what sort of reading and writing do you do?”

“Basically, almost every weekend I get the weekend newspapers which my sixth grade daughter enjoys reading. My wife also reads the papers sometimes. Unfortunately or fortunately, because of my involvement in Curriculum issues at present I am more or less working on four books at the same time. Right now I am writing a Life Skills book for junior secondary school and a Social Studies book for senior primary school.

“What this means is that even at home I am always on the computer. Of course, when my daughter wants to play on the computer I give her space. And I also request that she gives me space when I have a lot of work to do and must use the computer.”

“How did you acquire computer literacy?”

“Well, in terms of computer literacy development what happened is that when I joined the university in 1986 I became a member of the Computer Society that existed at the college. During this time I learned how to log on, work in Word, and shut down. However, after graduating from the university I did not touch a computer until 1998 when I was working with Mike Kienan, a Danish International Development Agency (DANIDA) Education Advisor. He taught me some things but I learnt most of the other things on my own.”

“Is your wife also comfortable with computers?”

“She tells me that she is computer literate. However, I have not yet seen her spending time on the home computer.”

“I gather from what you have said that you do a lot of reading almost on a daily basis. Do you also read to your children?”

“Well, I wouldn’t say that I read to my children and neither does my wife. But of late, I have been instructing my standard one child by using the home computer. What I do is that I write, in Word, numbers 1 2 3 up to 5 and then make him read to me what number it is when I point to a number and ask him: ‘What is this?’

“You know, although this is a practice I have just started, some two weeks ago, he is doing quite well. And more so now that we are doing with words the same thing we were initially doing only with numbers. Sometimes I make dots and ask him to join the dots to come up with a letter.”

“You have said that neither you nor your wife reads to your children. Does this come about because your own parents never read to you when you were a child?”

“No. It’s not really a tradition. Indeed, both my father and mother never read to me, in terms of stories that is. But having gone through education, having done the Master’s programme which included a course on Literacy Development, I know that there is a lot of research that advocates reading to children even to the one still in the womb. I am aware of all that.

“And, you know, some two weeks ago I placed my daughter in a nursery school. The teacher there advised that we should be speaking English in the family so that the child gets to know certain English words which will ease her more smoothly into the nursery school environment. I passed on the teacher’s request to my wife. And although we do not normally speak English in the home, we are now trying to speak to the children in English. Of course, sometimes I lapse into vernacular.”

“Who or what played a significant role in your becoming who and what you are?” I asked.

“If we talk of a person who has had very significant influence on me in terms of literacy development, I think that person is my secondary teacher of English, Mr. Banda. He played a very significant role in encouraging me to write. He used to check whatever I wrote and, I must say that, he was quite impressed by the pieces I wrote.

“But when I entered university, the Writers’ Workshop was one of the major influences by giving me a broader outlook on issues especially in writing. You know, every time I write I hesitate to come out because I am afraid maybe the piece will be criticized. That in itself has made me realize that when you are writing a piece, you have to look at it from many angles.”

“What advice would you give parents and teachers as far as children’s literacy development is concerned?” I asked.

“I think it is important for parents to provide a literacy rich environment within the home. Children should get to know books even before they start using them. It’s interesting that my children don’t tear books. They have got a lot of books in the home but not even the smallest child can tear a page. Instead, the child just takes a book, opens it, and closes it. This is a thing I find interesting. Therefore, if children are given an environment where there are books, magazines or newspapers in the home, you actually prepare them to develop interest in reading and writing.

“As for teachers, I think there are a lot of things that need to be done to ensure that children develop literacy wise. One such thing is that teachers should give assignments related to book reading in which children should give reports of what they have read to their classmates or teachers either orally or in writing. Another thing is making the classroom itself literacy rich. You know, the walls of most classrooms are

just empty. Now, if teachers placed literacy materials, that is, wall hangings or posters related to subjects being studied or materials related to entertainment on the walls, that should reinforce some of the things that are covered in class and be reminders of aspects that would otherwise have been easily forgotten,” Lumbani said.

“What do you think about the curriculum you went through in primary school as well as in secondary school?” I asked.

“Our curriculum seems to emphasize the use of one standard book per subject. In other words, if students are not using that book they think that they are lost. But I wish our curriculum was one that invites or leads students to read any other sources. That would really assist in ensuring that they are not only stuck to one thing. In fact, the style of writing in one text may be repulsive to one student who may, therefore, not enjoy it. Hence, if given a variety of materials, it is possible that such a student would enjoy reading a different text which would certainly assist them in their literacy development.

“In addition, I think one of the major things I would advise is that stories that students are exposed to should be captivating. Unfortunately, I find most of our books, especially those in primary school, wanting in this aspect. For instance, most of the poems found in the books are foreign in origin. Besides, the stories are not that captivating. I strongly think that we need to give children stories they can relate to. For example, poems or songs like ‘Twinkle twinkle little star’ were developed in a context different from ours. The point here is that things coming into the classroom at the initial stage of literacy development should be those coming from the children’s environment. This means, therefore, that we must come up with things that will easily make sense to the children,” Lumbani said.

“Well, let me sincerely thank you for sparing your time to have this conversation with me. I am most grateful,” I said steering the conversation to its end.

“It’s a pleasure,” Lumbani said.

With that we concluded our interview and left the Audio-Visual Centre with Lumbani returning to his office as I headed back home.

Sarah’s story

At the time I was arranging for this interview Sarah had suggested that we meet at her office at 10 o’clock on this particular Friday morning. She had said she had a couple of hours she could spare before lunch on this day. Therefore, not wanting to keep her waiting, I arrived some two minutes before the scheduled time.

I met dark complexioned jovial five foot seven Sarah in the corridor leading to her office from the college’s reception area as she was coming from her morning class. Once inside her office, she offered me a seat as we exchanged greetings while she herself remained standing. Seeing that I was comfortable, she excused herself and went out. Within three minutes she returned and informed me that we had to move to the college’s language laboratory. She said that she was afraid we would not be without interruptions if we remained in her office particularly because she shared the office with a colleague.

We found the language laboratory empty and settled into chairs facing each other. As we settled into our seats, I thanked her for accepting to inform my investigation and

once again explained that the purpose of the conversation was for her to afford me the opportunity to learn her literacy development story.

“What is your nationality Sarah, if I may ask?” I got things started.

“I am a Malawian national. I was born of Malawian parents on September 4 of 1960. My eyes first opened to the world right here in Malawi at Lake View, a Seventh-day Adventist Mission station in Ntcheu District. This is the most southern of Malawi’s Central Region districts.”

“Any siblings?” I asked.

“Well, I come from a family of seven children, that is, one brother and six sisters. Except for my father and brother who passed away in late 1990s and June 2004, respectively, my six sisters and my mother are still around.”

“Do you belong to some specific religious leaning?”

“My religious colours are that I am of the Christian faith and the Seventh-day Adventist conviction. My immediate family members, my grandparents of both sides, and most of my distant family members are, or have mostly been Seventh-day Adventist Christians as well.”

“What was your father, professionally?” I inquired.

“Professionally, my father was an educationist. He had a first degree in Education plus other certificates which were basically Education oriented as well. He worked as an educator. In fact, I understand he was an Inspector of Schools dating back to Malawi’s pre-independence era. Later on when Malawi became independent in 1964, my father went on to become an Education Officer with the Ministry of Education. Thereafter, he rose through the ranks of the Malawi Civil Service to become Regional Education Officer before holding several other senior positions at the Ministry of Education Headquarters.”

“How about your mother, what was she?”

“Although my mother also got some education and could have worked in formal employment, she was simply a home manager. Her upbringing was such that she had an exposed life. Actually, she could read and converse pretty fluently in English. I suppose this can be attributed to the fact that she was brought up by English speaking white missionaries working at Mwami Seventh-day Adventist Mission.”

“And talking about you, what are you professionally?” I inquired.

“I am a college lecturer or I should say that I am in teaching, rather.”

“How far up the academic ladder have you gone?”

“Currently, I hold a Master of Education degree as my highest academic qualification.” Sarah said.

“Going back to the time you were growing up as a child, how much value do you think your parents placed on education?” I asked.

“Both my parents placed a very big value on education. In fact, when I look back to what I have become, including being quite fluent in both my written and spoken language and holding a Master’s of Education degree, I realize that I owe all that to them and the exemplary upbringing I had in our home. I must admit that my father and mother were good examples of parents. They truly had their children’s education welfare very close to heart.”

“Did they ever read to you in the home?” I inquired.

“Yes they did. They both read to us stories every evening before bedtime. Of course, father did most of the reading. My father was such a good story reader. He packed so much expression and emotion in each story he read to us. And just the thought of it, I am able to kind of vividly picture him in my mind doing just that. I guess because of that, I can say that my sisters and I have all become good readers as I have come to observe that we also read to our children with gestures, expression, and non-verbal cues. However, whenever father was away, mother stepped in and read to us a story either from the Bible or from a bedtime children’s stories book,” Sarah said with such big smile across her face.

“When you started school, did your parents show any interest in what you did at school?” I asked.

“Very much so. You know, after we started going to school, my father made it a point every evening of school days that he perused through our school exercise books to have a feel of what we had done at school that day. Whatever we had got wrong at school, he saw to it that we made corrections before going to bed to show that we now understood why we had had it wrong and could now do it right. He also started encouraging us to be doing some reading and writing at home from quite an early age.

“In addition, I guess to ensure that we developed this appetite for books, my father registered us with the National Library Service. Thereafter he often took us to the library to borrow books. After reading a book we were asked to summarize the story to him. At the end of some of these books there were comprehension questions based on the story. I remember father used to encourage us to answer some of these questions.”

“Why did he encourage you to do so much reading?” I asked.

“At the time, I guess he knew what he was doing but for us it was just like we were having fun. It was later on when I got to understand why he encouraged us to read, read, and still read more. I actually recall father telling us later on that we should read because it was only through reading that we could pass our examinations. He kept emphasizing that if we did not read there was no way that we would know. After all, the knowledge the teachers were passing on to us in school was in books. They taught us the same things that were in the books. Yes, the very things we were reading about. Therefore, it was like he was telling us that there was really nothing new that our teachers would tell us in class if we read. He made us feel that we would know a lot of things through reading because they were the same things that the teachers would be talking about in class.

“What are your earliest primary school experiences recollections?” I probed.

Sarah paused for a moment and then responded, “I started my primary education in what was then called an integrated school. The school was attended by Asian, White and indigenous Malawian children. The teachers at the school were good and gave lots of class work. We knew that, every time we were given something to read, a writing exercise would follow. Such exercises ranged from comprehension questions, gap filling exercises, oral presentations, and discussions. I remember that even back then, when I was in standard one and two, we normally sat in groups. Our desks were grouped together and that facilitated group learning.”

“Do you remember what it was like the day you first came to realize that you were able to really read something?” I asked.

“My ability to read came in quite a dramatic fashion. Even today, some forty-something years later, I still have a vivid picture of the happenings on the day that I first came to know how to read. I was in standard two and it was during the third and last semester of the year.

“Let me begin by saying that in standard one and the first and second term of standard two my reading was hazy. Of course I knew my alphabet by the time I got to standard two. However, what used to happen during that time was that whenever the teacher told us to read, I was only able to pick a few syllables and words here and there, the most common words that is. Sometimes, I did this just by imitation thinking that because my classmate had said this, then the word I was asked to read had to be the same one my classmate had read.

“However, on this unique day, it was during the evening just before bedtime, my father asked me to get my standard two English textbook and open on a page towards the end of the book and read to him. He knew it was the third term and we had by now read almost the whole book. I failed abysmally. I found the text he had asked me to read very difficult because it was full of words that confused me. For instance, I still remember the word *brother*. I was pronouncing it as BRO-TE-HE-RA. This evening my father was in a very uncompromising mood. He emphatically told me that I was not going to bed that night. The two of us were going to sit right there at the table until I showed him that I knew how to read.

“Knowing that he meant what he said, I found myself in a fix. As a way forward, I asked him to allow me to start reading from the beginning. I felt that if I began from the very beginning, perhaps what I read first would give me clues to reading the difficult words that were coming later. He accepted my request. I had my book and he had his own copy of the same text book. I began to read slowly making up my words as I went. Somehow, something just clicked in place to say that the sounds were not isolated. Suddenly, the first thing that registered in my head was that the sounds were showing that these things were the same. Even when I happened not to know the meaning of a word, the pronunciation was what I had already come across in another sound somewhere. So, whenever I saw a word with some sound that I knew, I capitalized on the main sound, then brought about the other unknown sounds. Fortunately, because by this time I already knew my English alphabet, it turned out to be somewhat easy to just sweep across a word,” Sarah explained with much excitement.

“How did your father take it?” I asked.

“You should have seen him. He was happily shocked and so too was I as with much ease I now read page after page. It was just coming naturally. With my father now satisfied that I was able to read, we retired for the night. However, I was over the moon. I just wanted to read and continue reading. In fact, that night I hardly slept a wink for sleep vehemently eluded me. Come morning, the first thing I did was to tell my elder sister that I now knew how to read. Thinking that I was just joking, she took out her text book which was for a class higher than mine and pointed to a text that she asked me to read. To her amazement, I did. When I went to school that day, I went straight to my class teacher and announced that I was now able to read. The teacher’s joy was not veiled. That day I wanted to override my classmates as I volunteered for every reading assignment.

“From then on, I got glued to books. And my becoming a registered member of the National Library Service brought me into a whole new world, that of books. In fact, each time I got books from the library I finished reading them the very day. The following day I would be urging my father to take me back to the library so that I could borrow another pile. And it was not uncommon to see me arguing with the librarian over the number of books I was borrowing because I always wanted to get more than the number I was permitted to get at any one time. I just wanted to read more.”

“Did your primary school have a library?”

“Providentially, the integrated primary school I attended from standard one to four had a school library which I frequented very much. But the public school I attended from standard five to eight did not have a library. As such, I entirely depended on the public library for my reading materials. The situation improved when I went into secondary school because I went to one of those good secondary schools in the country where I found a well-stocked school library.”

“What books do you remember reading while you were in primary school?” I asked.

“At that early age, while in primary school, I remember reading *Cinderella*, *Billy the Goat* and a lot of the most famous folktales and fables that I was able to lay my hands on.”

“How about when you went to secondary school, what did you read?”

“In secondary school, I read almost all the novels that were in the school library. I remember reading Chinua Achebe’s books including *Things Fall Apart*, Ngugi wa Thiongo’s books and several African Writers Series novels published by Heinemann. Also I read Mills and Boon, and James Hardy Chase books. I read almost all the biology books that were in the library because that was one of the subjects that I found very interesting. All in all, I can say that when I became a reader, I saw that books ushered me into a totally different world where only those who were able to read could get into.”

“Can you recall any specific happenings at the time you were growing up as a young girl, who was a reader, that you got to know about because you were able to read?” I asked.

Sarah paused and then thoughtfully said, “Yes I can. You know, the magnitude of the importance of being able to read can indeed be illustrated using two incidents that happened while I was young and still in primary school. These are things I got to know about basically because I was able to read.

“The first incident happened in 1975; the year cholera got to be really known in Malawi. I came to know what caused cholera, how it was spread and how we could protect ourselves from catching it. All this I learnt from reading newspaper articles that appeared in large numbers in the press then. In some articles maps were actually drawn to show where cholera had originated from and how it was contaminating all this area as it was being carried by water, particularly during the rain season.”

Sarah paused briefly and then continued, “The second incident took place while I was in standard five. One day, I read from a newspaper my father brought home after knocking off from work, about a case that was starting in the High Court the following day. This was the case of Kawisa who happened to have masterminded the Chilobwe murders that involved the killing and siphoning of the victims’ blood. Hence, when the day came I urged my sisters that we should go to the High Court which was, after all, not

very far from home as it was just across the road. We were also fortunate that the case was taking place while school was on recess; otherwise, it would not have been possible to skip school and go to the High Court. And although we were not able to follow the proceedings, we were happy simply to have seen Kawisa, the man whose name created fear in people all over Blantyre, if not the entire country.”

“Can you recall a time that, once you were able to read, you really got lost in a book?” I asked.

She paused momentarily before saying, “Yes. There was an incident that happened when my father bought and brought home a five-volume set of biology books. This incident typically depicts the times when I found myself lost and locked in a world of my own as I read.

“You know, at the back of each volume of this set of biology books was a synopsis of what the other volumes contained. I read through volume one followed by two then three in quick succession. As I read through each following volume I could make connections as concepts from a previous volume got magnified and detailed in the next one. Unfortunately, when I finished reading volume three, volume four and five were nowhere to be seen. The synopsis on the volumes I had read indicated that volume four dealt with sexual concepts of man, that is, the growing and changing of the woman and the man’s body. When I informed my father that I was through with volumes one through three and was looking for volumes four and five, he told me that for some reason unknown to him these two volumes had not been sent together with those that I had finished reading although he had ordered the entire set. For some unexplained reason, I was not convinced and felt he was not telling the truth.

“One day father and mother left home together without locking their bedroom door. Intuition told me that the books I was looking for were somewhere in that room. Therefore, I went in and started searching. Before long I found the books. Notwithstanding the fact that I was not in my bedroom, I simply sat down and started reading. I got so engrossed in absorbing these new concepts which were more or less shocking to me that I neither heard them drive in nor walk into their bedroom. What startled me was my father’s voice who asked what I was doing in their bedroom. But instead of answering his question I countered with an accusation about why he had told me that the volumes in my hands had not been sent together with the others. We argued for a while with father, but I insisted in saying that I needed to know about the things I was reading about, that is, puberty and growing up. I was wondering whether the things said in the book were indeed going to happen to me when I grew up. My father was at a loss for words.”

“Why do you think he had said that?” I asked.

“I suppose my parents did not want us to be exposed to these concepts at that age. I am sure though that after that incident my father urged my mother to start telling us, the older girls, what girlhood, womanhood, and manhood are all about because she now started doing so. But as of that particular day, I now really came to fully realize that books contained things a person would never know unless they read.”

“Do you still do a lot of reading?”

“Reading is a habit that has remained with me to this very day. I remain a very avid reader of books,” she said.

“Remembering that as a child you were read to, have you done likewise as an adult now?”

Sarah was quite quick to respond, “Yes, I read to my daughter and other children that I have brought up in my home. I am glad to say that my sisters and I took after our father when it comes to reading stories to children in that we also pack the stories with emotions and non-verbal cues. Another thing that pleases me greatly is that my love for reading has rubbed off on my daughter and other children that I have brought up in my home. They too have naturally cultivated this affinity for books because, unless otherwise stated, they always see me having a book in my hand whenever I am home. They also do likewise. Even when chatting, we each have something to read in our hands. When we become quiet, each one gets busy reading. Fortunately for them, there are more books in the home to whet their reading appetite than what I had in our home when I was growing up.”

When I asked Sarah about how she learned how to write, she admitted, “When it comes to learning to write, it was less dramatic. I remember of course being encouraged to write the English alphabet as being the first things I did in writing. I do not remember writing things just for the sake of writing as I read just for reading’s sake. My writing in school was basically related to class work. It was obvious in primary school that every time we were given something to read we knew that a writing exercise would follow.

“I grew up with the thought that one had to write on things that were worthwhile, things that would be appreciated by the teacher and would be graded. Therefore, as I grew up I suppose what became important to me was writing things that mattered, that is, things that were needed by my class teachers.”

“Does that mean that your parents did not give you as much support in your writing development as they did with your reading development?” I asked.

After a pause, Sarah said, “I am afraid, I think no. They didn’t. And come to think of it, I now realize that I lacked support from both my family and teachers to enable me to develop writing in areas outside the classroom.”

“You didn’t even get involved in letter writing at all?” I asked.

Sarah quickly responded, “Of course I did. You know, beginning from the time when I was in senior primary school to the time I was in secondary school and beyond, letter writing was unavoidable. While in primary school I wrote letters to friends. And while in secondary school, besides writing letters to friends and sisters to keep in touch with them, I also wrote my parents. You know, with parents automatically one had to write them. I had to write them to send pocket money or transport money when school was about to close or when there was need to make contribution to a certain club or towards a school trip.

“While in secondary school, however, what I consider to be the only serious kind of writing outside the classroom that I did was writing an entry to an essay writing competition in which one was selling Malawi to tourists. We were requested to write on some tourist attraction that we had visited. And by this time, my family and I had visited several tourist attractions in the country.”

“What did you write on?” I inquired.

“I wrote about Kasungu Game Reserve, which I had just visited with my family earlier on that same year. Of course, I did not scoop the main prize but only managed to

get a consolation prize comprising notebooks and writing materials. But the fact that I got a consolation prize against all other competitors was something I am sure.”

“Do you do some writing nowadays?” I asked.

“Yes, of course I do. Right now, being a college lecturer, writing is the other side of my work. What I mean is that writing is just unavoidable in my teaching profession. One has to read, write, and teach. I also know the importance of doing research. However, just the thought of it becomes quite unnerving when I think of writing proposals, research papers, and research reports. I must admit that I find this difficult.”

“Why is it that you find such kind of writing difficult?” I asked.

Sarah took a short pause before saying, “Well, I think I find writing difficult principally because my background in serious kind of writing was quite unimpressive. I know I just managed to get through my graduate work and have also just scraped through my postgraduate studies. I guess I need to put much effort into developing my writing skills.”

“Well, let me thank you so much for sparing your time. I hope you won’t mind if at some point I come back to ask one or two more questions,” I said.

“No. No problem at all.” Sarah replied.

I once again expressed my gratitude to her for having granted me the opportunity to talk with her. With that we came to the close of our interview. Sarah returned to her office as I headed back home.

CHAPTER 5

DATA ANALYSIS

From an analysis of the literacy stories that were developed from interviews of six Malawian teacher educators, five major themes emerged. While there were similarities across the stories, there were also differences in the influential factors for their literacy development. But even more important was that the analysis suggested that literacy hinges on multiple factors that are interdependent and complimentary. However, the discussion of these themes must of necessity appear linear in that each is presented and explained in turn. The major themes that emerged were parental involvement in children's literacy development, influence of teachers on developing literacy, the role of peers and siblings as learners develop literacy, presence of text in the environment, literacy practices of participants as they grew up, and participants' perceptions of literacy and its development.

Parental Involvement in Children's Literacy Development

The involvement of parents is important when it comes to children becoming literate. The study has confirmed that parental involvement played a central role in children's literacy development. Of course, the type and level of involvement differed, but it was there somehow in the lives of these six Malawi teacher educators. Both fathers and mothers participated in helping their children to become literate. Notably, though, in the Malawian context, the study showed that it was mostly fathers that had much more significant direct involvement. The role of mothers in this context was mostly one of complementing what the father did both directly and indirectly.

For these Malawian educators, the fathers' involvement came through mainly in three dimensions. To begin with, fathers were role models for these children as they started on the path to becoming literate individuals. Sarah voiced that opinion when she said:

“My father was such a good story reader. He packed so much expression and emotion in each story he read to us. And just the thought of it, I am able to kind of vividly picture him in my mind doing just that. I guess because of that, I can say that my sisters and I have all become good readers as I have come to observe that we also read to our children with gestures, expression, and non-verbal cues.”

Benson also pointed out how his father modeled his literate life: “You know, I bothered my parents quite a lot. For instance, when my father was reading a newspaper I wanted to find out what he was doing. And he would then tell me what it was. As he did that, I then would be recording in my mind what it was.”

Moreover, fathers influenced their children's literacy development in that they were essentially the ones who performed the role of provider of materials and supplies. The participants in this study were in school during the era when school fees had to be paid in Malawi. Basically it was their fathers who sourced and paid these fees because during those times fathers were the breadwinners in the homes and mothers usually stayed home or, if employed, their income was much lower than that of the male parents. Therefore, this meant that had the fathers not provided school fees the likelihood of the participants becoming literate individuals would have been very remote, as the latter would have had no money for school fees and, consequently, would not have gone to school.

However, payment of fees aside, this investigation revealed that the participants' fathers actually provided reading materials that turned out to be essential in the literacy development of the study's informants. Joshua explained this in the following way:

"I also remember that once every month, my father used to go to the city of Lilongwe to buy merchandize for the groceries shop he used to run. Although he himself hardly did any serious reading, he used to buy me several monthly magazines and old copies of weekly newspapers. Therefore, I used to look forward to his trips to the city because of their predictable benefits to me."

Emmie also told about her father's role as a provider of reading materials and supplies: "He encouraged us to read. He used to borrow storybooks from the library and give them to us to read."

Furthermore, fathers were also influential in their children's literacy development in that they cultivated, nurtured, and encouraged their children to engage in literacy development activities. Lumbani recalled getting his father's support:

"But in terms of literacy support there is not much except that he paid my library subscription fees when I joined the library services. In addition, he allowed me to go to the library to read... Presumably, he wanted me to go through education. And I suppose by doing that he must have felt he was helping me to excel in my studies."

Sarah also told of the encouragement her father provided to her and her siblings in their literacy development as they were growing up:

"You know, after we started going to school, my father made it a point every evening of school days that he perused through our school exercise books to have a feel of what we had done at school that day. Whatever we had got wrong at school, he saw to it that we made corrections before going to bed to show that we now understood why we had had it wrong and could now do it right. He also started encouraging us to be doing some reading and writing at home from quite an early age. In addition, I guess to ensure that we developed this appetite for books, my father registered us with the National Library Service. Thereafter he often took us to the library to borrow books. After reading a book one was asked to summarize the story to him. At the end of some of these books there were

comprehension questions based on the story. I remember father used to encourage us to answer some of these questions.”

Similarly, Emmie noted the interest her father showed and the encouragement he gave to ensure that the children really progressed in their literacy development:

“He was very much interested in seeing to it that his children’s writing abilities were developed. Just as a case in point, you may be pleased to note that when I was in primary school, he used to check whatever we had written at school that day. In fact, he used to mark whatever we had written and then tell us what we should have written. Whenever he found that we had written something wrongly, he would say ‘you should have written it like this.’ Furthermore, he continued with this practice while I was in secondary school. For instance, he used to keep all the letters that I wrote him while at school. He then marked the letters for language, punctuation and grammar. Now, when I returned home, say, on school recess, he brought out the edited letters and went, ‘What did you mean here?’ or ‘you should have done it this way.’”

Despite this apparent influential dominance in children’s literacy development by fathers, it must be acknowledged that mothers’ contribution was also immense albeit made in a somewhat modest way. As is the case in almost all societies and cultures, mothers in Malawi have the responsibility of introducing children to the world around them. For instance, it is mothers who first introduce children to language, human interaction practices and all that goes with early childhood development. Beyond the emotional support and basic provisions, mothers of these participants also provided support and encouragement for literacy development. For instance, while acknowledging that her father was the one who mostly read to the children, Sarah had this to say about her mother when it came to reading in the home: “However, whenever father was away, mother stepped in and read to us a story either from the Bible or from a bedtime children’s stories book.” Benson’s mother also provided a lot of support and encouragement that he needed as he began his journey to becoming a literate individual. In his own words Benson encapsulated his mother’s support:

“My earliest episodes in writing were done on the ground, particularly during the rain season when the ground was soft. I used to write A, B, and so on and then call my mother to come and check whether or not what I had written was actually correct.”

In a different sort of way, Joshua’s mother encouraged him to develop an interest in reading so that he could read on his own the fascinating stories his mother used to read from the Bible:

“I recall being fascinated with listening to my mother as she read to herself. There were times when I sat by her side as she read aloud stories from the Bible. Such times were very special to me and, honestly, I still cherish the memories. I remember bubbling over and bombarding her with questions when she read from the Bible stories of the three Hebrew young men who were thrown in a fiery furnace, Daniel who was thrown in a den of lions and Jesus walking on water, among others.”

The importance of parents in literacy development became evident in other ways as well. For example, the literacy level of the parents were for the most part fairly similar among these six teacher educators. Except for Lumbani's mother, these study participants' parents were themselves literate although their levels varied. For instance, Benson had the following to say about his parents:

"My father was a qualified Clinical Officer. He was very professionally sound and rose within the ranks in Government because he was a very intelligent person who, perhaps, never made it to Medical School because he came from a disadvantaged background. But whatever training he got, he made very good use of it... My mother didn't go very far with education basically because of financial limitations... But in terms of potential, she is quite an intelligent woman... At the time I was growing up, my mother was studying for the Junior Certificate of Education examinations by correspondence. So, she had lots of lecture notes from the Malawi Correspondence College, now known as the Malawi College of Distance Education, which she used to read."

Dalitso told about his parents' professional standing, an indicator of their literacy levels, in the following way:

"They were both teachers. I know academically my father had a Malawi School Certificate of Education before obtaining a teaching certificate. As for my mother, she had a lower education certificate and a teaching certificate of a lower class than that of my father. It could have been T3 or T4 but I am not certain which one of these it must have been."

As for Sarah, she had this to say about her parents:

"Professionally, my father was an educationist. He had a first degree in Education plus other certificates that were basically Education oriented as well. He worked as an educator... Although my mother also got some education and could have worked in formal employment, she was simply a home manager. Her upbringing was such that she had an exposed life. Actually, she could read and converse pretty fluently in English. I suppose this can be attributed to the fact that she was brought up by English speaking white missionaries working at Mwami Seventh-day Adventist Mission."

Like the parents' education levels, the home economic standing was also a somewhat similar factor. The participants in this study came from families that were economically comfortable. When asked to recall the financial standing of his family as he grew up, Benson replied:

"Well, I wouldn't say very well off. You may recall that there were eight of us, that is, children in the family and my father was a member of what we would call the Malawian middle class. Therefore, because of the size of the family, we cannot say that there was too much cash to spare. Nonetheless, we were reasonably comfortable."

When asked to recall the financial status of her family while she was growing up Emmie expressed the same thought when she said:

“It is difficult to say we had little or no money.... But I think we were comfortable. I say this because we did not lack food and we were living in good houses. Besides, our father could take us on trips to see places of interest. Therefore, I think we were comfortable.”

Even Lumbani, who was born while his family was living outside the country and relocated back home after he was in senior primary school, recalled his family’s economic standing this way:

“I think there was a progression. Initially, at the time I was born, that is, my father was a low income earner. But over time, that is, by the time I was in grade one, my father had moved into the middle income bracket. Such was the case because, for example, we were now occupying a three bedroom house in the city. This shift connotes that we had moved from a low income section to a middle income section.”

The findings have also indicated that parents of children who become literate take the step of introducing their children to the world of print. In different and yet somewhat similar ways, parents of the study participants introduced their children to print in their homes. Dalitso, for instance, was introduced to the world of print in the following way:

“My parents being teachers, we had shelves full of books in the home. My father just let me read any book I wanted. In fact, he used to say that all the books on the shelves were mine... Of course, I recall that I used to get a book from a shelf and maybe ask my father what that story was all about.”

Benson simply acknowledged the availability of print in the home while he was growing up and learning to read and write by saying that “there was a lot to be read within the home.”

Another important factor about the role of parents was that the value they placed on literacy practices and education directly influenced their children’s literacy development. Parents who valued education saw to it that their children should also see education and being literate in the same light. While some parents explicitly told their children the importance of getting an education, others simply urged the children to work hard on literacy development activities without much direct involvement. Sarah explained how much her parents valued reading:

“Both my parents placed a very big value on education... I actually recall father telling us later on that we should read because it was only through reading that we could pass our examinations. He kept emphasizing that if we did not read there was no way that we would know. After all, the knowledge the teachers were passing on to us in school was in books. They taught us the same things that were in the books. Yes, the very things we were reading about. Therefore, it was like he was telling us that there was really nothing new that our teachers would tell us in class if we read. He made us feel that we would know a lot of things through reading because they were the same things that the teachers would be talking about in class.”

Benson also pointed out that his parents highly valued education and wished their children nothing but the available best the children could access:

“I must say that my father was highly committed to seeing to it that we all got a good education. . . . I should think because he himself had seen the benefits of good education. And because my mother too was converted to the view that if we were to be comfortable in life, we needed education, she too saw to it that whatever little education she had herself, was actually shared with us.”

Emmie also provided an indication of the importance her father placed on his children’s reading and writing abilities: “I believe that he placed a lot of importance on reading. For instance, whenever we were traveling he made us look at road signs and read billboards or posters. He always made it a point to explain to us what they meant.”

However, in a different sort of way, Lumbani’s father without explicitly telling him the value of education just went on to pay for the child’s membership to a local library. Lumbani commented on his father’s gesture, “He allowed me to go to the library to read. . . Presumably, he wanted me to go through education. And I suppose by doing that he must have felt he would be helping me to excel in my studies.” Joshua also said something along the same lines when asked why his father bought him reading materials time and again despite the fact that the latter did not really read much himself:

“I would say that he probably wanted to achieve through me what he had not achieved himself, that is, get a good education. Hence he must have felt that by helping me to get exposed to such reading material I would be what he desired I should be. Actually, when I was in standard three, I remember my father this other day asking me to tell him how many heads of cattle he had. I told him ‘none’ because he did not have any. He then asked the same question about my uncles and my grandparents. The answer was the same: none. At the end he told me that he had asked me that question to tell me that my future lay in my own hands. He asked me to work hard in school because that was the only way to a meaningful future for me and my brothers because there was no inheritance awaiting us in form of heads of cattle as was the case with my peers.”

Although the influence of parents on children’s literacy development was crucial, the analysis revealed some differences among parents’ practices. For instance, on the one hand were parents who read to their children. Emmie’s father fell in this group because besides bringing books home from the library so that his children had reading materials in the home, Emmie said, “He also read stories to us.” Likewise, Sarah mentioned that her father and mother “both read to us stories every evening before bedtime. Of course, father did most of the reading.”

However, there were some parents who did not take time to actually read to their children. Of course, they offered the necessary encouragement and support their children needed for literacy development. Nevertheless, they neither read to nor told the children stories. For example, Dalitso called:

“I don’t really remember sitting down with my parents and one of them reading a story to me or to us children in the home... As for stories such as stories about animals, folktales, that is, these were told in the community. Such stories were quite common and I still remember them. But in the case of my parents reading to us children, no, they did not.”

In the same way, when asked whether his parents read to him while he was a child, Joshua replied, “No. None of them ever read to me when I was a child.”

As these parents helped their children toward literacy, some of them were keen to know the progress of their children academic performance. These parents eagerly checked what their children were doing in their studies, sometimes time lending them a hand so as to ensure they were not left behind in their studies. Sarah related her father’s interest in the following way:

“You know, after we started going to school, my father made it a point every evening of school days that he perused through our school exercise books to have a feel of what we had done at school that day. Whatever we had got wrong at school, he saw to it that we made corrections before going to bed to show that we now understood why we had had it wrong and could now do it right.”

Benson’s father also took the initiative of correcting his children’s spoken English whenever they made errors as they spoke it in the home. He spoke of his father’s help thusly:

“Apart from that, my own father realized at an early stage that being fluent in English would give one an advantage in life as one grew. Consequently, much as in the home we spoke Chichewa, from time to time he corrected us when we made mistakes in English. Besides, he regularly spoke to us in English. And in the process, I found out that I was able to communicate in both languages.”

On the other hand, other parents neither take the trouble of going through their children’s schoolwork nor helped the children with their school work in areas that the children had problems. Recalling whether or not his parents assisted him with his homework, Joshua said, “Even after I started going to school, both my parents... never took time to instruct me in school related activities.” As for Lumbani, while acknowledging that his father paid library membership fees for him, he also explained that his parents did not get directly involved in his schoolwork. Lumbani recalled, “But in terms of literacy support there is not much except that he paid my library subscription fees when I joined the library services.”

Influence of Teachers in Learner’s Literacy Development

Purcell-Gates (2002) asserted that teachers must intentionally work to move print in its various functions and forms into the learners’ life so that as language learners the latter should acquire written language concepts from which they are to productively interpret reading and writing instructions. Basically, cultural practices are learned

implicitly through participating within the culture. For those new to a culture, though, the implicit must be made explicit to the degree to which the new participants can appropriately interpret behaviours and ways of seeing that are unknown to them (Purcell-Gates, 2002). It is accepted that schools have a culture of their own. As such, when children start school, they are introduced to a whole new world that is quite distinct from their home or community setting. This new community has its own norms and practices that articulate new beliefs the newcomers will have to eventually embrace. Teachers are, in a way, the gatekeeper of this new community where reading and writing are top of the list of cultural practices. Therefore, teachers are largely responsible for ensuring that children become members of this new community and possess the literacy skills required for the learners' survival and prosperity.

As such, the work of teachers was prominent in these literacy stories. In any formal education setting, teachers are at the helm of learning as they introduce learners to reading and writing. As a case in point, Lumbani explained his teachers' influence on his becoming a reader and writer:

“Between grades three and four is the time that I was so confident that I knew how to read. I should think that because of the phonology activities the teachers involved us in, I could read the word ‘disappointment’ by grade three although I could not tell what it meant. By that time, I could just look at a word, see its composition, and read it. I still remember that I could read the word ‘point’ without understanding what it meant.”

Likewise, Joshua gave credit for his becoming literate to his teachers when he said:

“My junior and senior primary school teachers get the credit for introducing me to letters, words, sentences, and numbers. Without them, it is doubtful that I would have become literate. And I guess special mention should be made of my secondary school teacher of English, Mrs. Pearson, who introduced me to the world of children literature by lending me her own books.”

Sarah also had lots of praise for her junior primary school teachers. They seemed to have been very practical, creative and enthusiastic in their teaching practices, something that students found helpful, encouraging and motivating. She talked about her teachers:

“I started my primary education in what was then called an integrated school. The school was attended by Asian, white and indigenous Malawian children. The teachers at the school were just good and gave lots of class work. We knew that every time we were given something to read, we knew that a writing exercise would follow. Such exercises ranged from comprehension questions, gap filling exercises, oral presentations, and discussions. I remember that even back then, when I was in standard one and two, we normally sat in groups. Our desks were grouped together and that facilitated group learning.”

Furthermore, some teachers became role models for their learners. Benson illustrated the impact one of his teachers had on him, a thing that set the tone for what he was to become, that is, a very expressive writer in both English and Chichewa.

“You know, among the teachers who taught me there was one Andrew Kulemeka who was a very good short story writer. At the time, he had been publishing in *Star Magazine*, which was edited by one Innocent Banda and produced and published by Blantyre Print. Each copy was a collection of short stories written in English by Malawian graduates. The stories were fantastic. I, therefore, found it fascinating to see my own teacher contributing to that magazine. And I wanted to be like him.”

In addition to being a role model, the support and encouragement teachers gave to these students was important to their literacy development. Lumbani gave an example:

“While in secondary school, I remember that one of the things we used to do was writing book reports. We had a teacher called Mr. Banda who was quite enthusiastic at ensuring that we read as many books as possible. And every time we finished reading a book, he demanded a book report. One thing that he kept emphasizing on was that whenever one was writing a piece, even a short story, one needed to have a strong opening.”

Peers’ and Siblings’ Influence in Learner’s Literacy Development

It is argued that our private thought and language are originally shaped through the way we learn to interact with others (Vygotsky, 1962). Being born in particular communities and societies shape children’s earliest interactions. Of course, those who play with a child are involved in shaping the thoughts of the child, as they are the ones the child can relate to. And in the context of a home or community, children learn from one another as they play together. The analysis of these literacy stories found, though, that besides simply passing time together some peers or siblings made it a point to help in the literacy development of those younger than themselves. While having fun and being helpful, a sibling or a peer also introduced younger children to literacy activities that assisted them in becoming literate persons. For example, Emmie recalls, “I think I learnt to read before I went to school. It’s actually my parents and brothers who taught me how to read. As you already know, there were many of us.” Benson also captures the same sentiment of being assisted by siblings when he says:

“My earliest episodes in writing were done on the ground, particularly during the rain season when the ground was soft. I used to write A, B, and so on and then call my mother to come and check whether or not what I had written was actually correct. I did the same with my sisters.”

The analysis has also shown that peers and siblings played a role in teaching a learner language that is essential in literacy development. For instance, Dalitso told about how he came to learn speaking English, which turned out to be a language that eventually facilitated his literacy development.

“Perhaps something I consider interesting and worth sharing with you is how I learned to speak English at quite an early age. At the time ... our house was next to that of English speaking White people. And as a boy, the sons of these White people were my very first friends. My association

with these ... hastened my English language acquisition and fluency... What is clear, though, is that from my interaction with them I learnt their language.”

The influence of peers and siblings in literacy development also comes out powerfully in that sometimes they actually go into teaching the learner actual letters of the alphabet. This is demonstrated by Lumbani in the following story:

“In those days we used to receive all school textbooks in advance. As such, together with my group, we were able to figure out which assignments would be coming when. Therefore, my group members and I read and worked out the problems in advance, that is, before the day the exercises were to be done in class... But I think the interesting bit is that at the time that I went into senior primary school, I still did not know how to write anything in vernacular. You know, I left Zambia after completing standard five. When I came to Malawi I got into standard six. And this is when I started learning vernacular syllables, consonants, and vowels A E I O U. Actually it just took a brother and few friends telling me ‘this is A E I O U.’ Hence, although I started learning how to read and write vernacular quite late, I was able to handle it.”

In other cases, children played games that turned out to be literacy development games. This happened in the school and at home as well as in community setting. Emmie, for instance, recalled:

“Sometimes, when looking back at my past, I recall the games we were playing as children. I now realize that some of them were, in fact, literacy development games. For example, there was a game which involved skipping a string. While skipping the string we used to sing: ‘Fish, fish spell your name. F-I-S-H.’ It is now that I realize we were actually playing literacy development games.”

It other times peers and siblings augmented teachers’ work in the home or community environment. During creative play, children helped their peers by playing the role of teacher and instructor in the spirit of fun and games. This playing, of course, contributed to some children’s literacy development in that there was remedial work done on what was learnt at school. What Emmie experienced, illustrated this point well.

“It so happened that sometimes we used to have a class among ourselves, the children that is, at home. What used to happen was that one of us children would play teacher with the rest of us children playing students... I don’t remember teaching one of the classes but I just remember we used to play such school games.”

Presence of Text in the Environment

Being literate entails having the requisite skills for coding, decoding and interpreting messages conveyed in a particular society. Text must be available in the

environment in order for learners to become literate. The first available text that participants in this investigation were exposed to was the oral word. And as they grew, they were told stories by parents, peers or other members of the community. Killam and Rowe (2000) argued that in Africa many of the traditional recitatives of clan lore – folk legends, songs, riddles, ancestral sagas, cautionary anecdotes, and heroic panegyrics – are integral to the life of the community. Therefore, the oral tradition is the first text that Malawian children come across in their introduction to the world of the literate. The participants in this study also came to listen to and know stories presented to them orally before they were able to see stories in print. Dalitso, for instance, recalled having listened to stories while young: “As for stories such as stories about animals, folktales, that is, these were told in the community. Such stories were quite common and I still remember them.” Benson also recalled the storytelling sessions he had in the home as a child:

“My mother was a very good storyteller. Usually, she told us folktales in the evenings. In her storytelling, she had the ability to hold her audience spellbound. And from an early age I quickly picked up that element. As a result, whenever a storytelling session began in my class, I was the preferred candidate to kick it off. I should think that this was because I had lots of self-confidence derived from what I had learnt from my mother.”

What could be seen as a variation of oral text within the environment was the presence of people who simply took it upon themselves to help the upcoming literate persons by engaging with them orally. The home use of the oral language by parents and siblings was the basis for the participants’ introduction to their mother tongue as their first medium of communication. However, besides interaction with peers who significantly influenced Dalitso’s literacy development, adults also played a role in helping learners polish their use of language that would be used in text. Benson explained how the presence of such interactive adults helped him advance significantly in his spoken English:

“Well, you see, the time I was going to junior primary school was the very time Malawi had large numbers of American Peace Corps teaching in secondary schools. And so it happened that my primary school was closer to a secondary school where some of these people taught. Part of our fun as children was to taste our rudimentary English, learnt in junior primary school, on the American Peace Corps as they cycled to the secondary school. And they would respond to us. Now, the more they responded to us the more we got encouraged to engage them. With time, we moved from greeting them by the roadside and followed them into their homes. (laughter) I must say that these were people of generous heart because they were able to notice and become helpful when they realized that my friends and I were eagerly determined and fascinated to master the English language at such an early stage.

So, whenever we got into their houses, they engaged us, they talked to us more in English. And I noticed that by the time we were getting to

standard four and five, the level of English we had acquired was relatively higher than what an average Malawian child without exposure would ordinarily have. Therefore, I believe that that kind of kick start laid the foundation on which I built when I got into the upper classes in primary and secondary school.”

The participants in this investigation surely needed a way of learning and perfecting their code breaking and interpreting skills as literate individuals. Therefore, while acknowledging the deprivations that might have been experienced as these participants grew up in an environment where, generally, print was in very short supply, they still recalled having had access to reading materials in the home as well as in the school set up. To begin with, Malawi is essentially a religious country with the majority being Christians belonging to different denominations, a good percentage belonging to the Islamic faith, and then a sizeable percentage of those who adhere to indigenous religious practices. The analysis revealed that as the participants were growing up, among the texts they found in their homes were religious literature. Joshua remembered the presence of the Bible in his home: “I recall being fascinated with listening to my mother as she read to herself. A leader in the women’s arm of her church congregation, she frequently read her Bible and wrote her sermons and teaching lessons’ outlines.” Sarah also recalled her mother reading stories to the children from a religious book: “However, whenever father was away, mother stepped in and read to us a story either from the Bible or from a bedtime children’s stories book.” In addition to the Bible, Lumbani remembered reading other religious materials:

“By the time I reached grade five, I had enrolled with a Bible Correspondence College. As a result, I used to receive and read pamphlets and thereafter respond to questions that were sent to me from time to time. Besides, I was also a member of the Sunday school at my church where we used to get a lot of Christian pamphlets and leaflets which also engaged me a lot.”

Another form of text available in the participants’ environment at the time the participants were growing up turned out to be newspapers. The most common newspaper that participants seemed to have while growing up was *Boma Lathu*. Benson said that “because we were always at a District centre, it was somewhat easy to access *Boma Lathu*, a national Government newspaper. We used to go to the Information Department to collect *Boma Lathu* for free.” Dalitso also recalled reading the same *Boma Lathu* newspaper while growing up: “You know, there used to be a monthly Government newspaper called *Boma Lathu*. My father received a copy of this newspaper every month. Each time a copy arrived, I read it from cover to cover.” And Joshua has the following to say about *Boma Lathu*:

“There was also *Boma Lathu*, a free national Government newspaper published by the Department of Information. This newspaper covered development issues across the country as well as humorous anecdotes from around the country with eye-catching titles like “Man fights with a hyena”, and a not-so-wise slow-learning cartoon character called Ajojo. I got hold of copies by chance once in a while from those who were either

on the publisher's mailing list or were able to collect it from the Department of Information's office at the distant district headquarters." Besides *Boma Lathu*, other newspapers were also found in the homes at the time the investigation participants were growing up in their parents' homes. Benson had the following recollections about the texts his father provided: "He brought home *Time Magazine*, *Newsweek Magazine*, *The Daily Times* as well as *Malawi News*. And from time to time, he bought books of general interest."

Although children's storybooks were not a very common feature in the lives of these participants, school textbooks were at least available. Hence, school texts being the basic and almost only ready resource, teachers relied heavily on them when helping their students learn and develop reading and writing skills. When Emmie was a young child, she read books that were brought home by her father. However, she also said she was dependent on school textbooks:

"During my early days I depended on my father to bring me stories to read. Other than that, I read school curriculum prescribed textbooks that were given to students in school. These books comprised Chichewa, English, and Mathematics textbooks. These were the books that, generally, I read."

From the literacy stories it is evident that, although print was in very short supply for the majority of Malawian children, some children were lucky in that they found themselves in the midst of an abundance of print. Dalitso was a representative of the latter group:

"My parents being teachers, we had shelves full of books in the home. My father just let me read any book I wanted. In fact, he used to say that all the books on the shelves were mine. So, I had a wide choice when it came to what to read. Obviously, some of the books were quite advanced. As a result, I generally picked the ones I could easily follow. But with time, I also got to read even advanced books, ones that had higher vocabulary at an early age."

Benson also elaborately articulated the presence of text in his environment and the impact it had on him and his siblings:

"You know, when my sisters went to secondary school, I was still in primary school then, and was curious to find out what they were doing in secondary school. So, whenever they came home they brought with them, certainly, more advanced books. I remember reading Camara Laye's *The African Child* while I was in standard eight basically because of its availability in the home. The other literary works by respected African writers I got exposed to while in standard eight included *Cry the Beloved Country*, *The River Between* and *Things Fall Apart*. So, I got exposed to the kind of literature my sisters brought home... I benefited from my sisters and when I made it to secondary school, I was like the role model for my brothers. As such, anything of interest I brought home that was readable tended to be shared with my brothers. Therefore, they read more at the stage where I didn't read much because I didn't have too much to

read... When I went to university, that is, books I never read myself were available to my brothers right at an early age for them. Particularly my last born brother... read a lot. You can imagine, even while in standard eight, he was pestering me about 'who is this Plato in *The Republic*?' 'What is Mimesis?'"

However, it was interesting to note that some parents, when taking their children around, used the text they found wherever they went as a means for helping their children's literacy development get rooted. Emmie remembered her father doing the following whenever her family went traveling: "Whenever we were traveling he made us look at road signs and read billboards or posters."

For those participants who grew up with a library within their vicinity, they had quite a sizeable amount of print available to them besides school texts. Although the country as a whole fits into the description of being print-deprived, exceptions were (and still are) available. For instance, Sarah remembered starting primary education at a school that had a school library: "Providentially, the integrated primary school I attended from standard one to four had a school library which I frequented very much. But the public school I attended from standard five to eight did not have a library." The school where Lumbani started his primary education also had a school library. In addition, the neighbourhood he lived in prided itself on having a public library. These two places provided the needed texts in the environment that greatly assisted in spurring Lumbani's literacy development. He talked about these two places: "Although the primary school I went to had a school library, there was also a public library close to my home. And I used to read books from this public library."

One common denominator for Malawians who attend a secondary school or add a post-secondary school education is that they certainly find themselves in some abundance of text. All the participants in the study said that the secondary schools as well as colleges they went to had school libraries. The presence of these libraries provided an enormous volume of reading material and, thereby, tremendously added to the pace and progress of their literacy development. Benson made the following recollection regarding his secondary school library: "...the secondary school I went to had a beautiful well-stocked library. And my problem was that I felt I didn't have enough time to (laughter) read everything I thought was of great interest." Lumbani also had poignant recollections of the impact his secondary school library had on him in the following way: "Furthermore, the presence of a school library gave me additional impetus to read a lot. And my membership to the school's Top of the Class team was extra fuel that energized me to read more. Consequently, due to my incessant borrowing of books from the school library, I was appointed by teachers to become the Library Prefect. And that made me read a great deal."

Some participants had neighbours with books which they kindly lent the young readers. For instance, Benson talked of a kind neighbour's assistance:

“We had a neighbour, a missionary woman, whom I deliberately befriended when I saw a big shelf of books in her house. I used to run errands for her and in return she used to lend me books. I would read a book a week, finish, go and collect a new one. Actually, I can say that between standard seven and eight, I read quite a bit.”

Joshua also recalled benefiting from a neighbour who lent him books: “While in standard six, I also read Charles Dickens’ *David Copperfield* which I borrowed from our next door neighbour.”

Literacy Practices of Participants as They Grew Up

The analysis of the literacy stories unraveled a number of commonalities in terms of literacy development practices that the study participants engaged in as they were growing up. One practice that ran through the lives of the study participants was listening to stories. Being born and growing up in a culture that is rooted mostly in the oral tradition, it was just inescapable for the participants to get immersed in listening to stories. Stories were told in the home, in primary school, and in the community at large. While some of the stories were from children’s storybooks, others were from the Bible, and yet others were those handed down from generation to generation through the cultural oral tradition. Remembering the stories told in the home by her father and for how long she listened to them as a child, Emmie recalled:

“I just remember that he read stories to us...I think I was a drop out somewhere around standard five or six. I stopped listening while the young ones continued listening to him read stories to them. At that time I was confident and felt I knew how to read. I considered listening to stories read by my father as something done by children.”

Benson also related the storytelling times that prevailed in his home while he was a child: “My mother was a very good storyteller. Usually, she told us folktales in the evenings. In her storytelling, she had the ability to hold her audience spellbound.” Recalling his childhood, Dalitso remembered that he listened to “stories about animals, folktales, that is, these were told in the community. Such stories were quite common and I still remember them.”

These six teacher educators indicated that they did a great deal of reading both in school as well as in the home. Sarah described her involvement in reading once she became a reader:

“I got glued to books. And my becoming a registered member of the National Library Service catapulted me into a whole new world, that of books. In fact, each time I got books from the library I finished reading them the very day. The following day I would be urging my father to take my back to the library so that I could borrow another pile. And it was not uncommon to see me arguing with the librarian over the number of books I was borrowing because I always wanted to get more than the number I was permitted to get at any one time. I just wanted to read more.”

Lumbani also fondly recalled his very strong affinity to books and text in general once he became a reader:

“In junior primary school I was captivated by cartoons with Tintin being my favourite. However, when I moved into senior primary school my affinity went to Social Studies. Reading about Citizenship, Countries, and Government was what stimulated my reading appetite a great deal. While I was still in Zambia I also read a number of magazines the one I enjoyed reading the most was Obet. But here in Malawi, while in both primary and secondary school, Moni magazine was my favourite. Particularly I enjoyed reading the Chatsalira cartoon and the column titled Think Twice written by Selso Kalilombe.”

When he went into secondary school education, he talked about the amount of reading that he did;

“The presence of a school library gave me additional impetus to read a lot. And my membership to the school’s Top of the Class team was extra fuel that energized me to read more. Consequently, due to my incessant borrowing of books from the school library, I was appointed by teachers to become the Library Prefect. And that made me read a great deal. That is the time I moved into fiction. I went into reading James Hardy Chase’s novels. I also read Mark Twain’s books including *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. Francis Selormey’s *The Narrow Path*, plus *Weep Not Child* and *A Grain of Wheat* by Ngugi wa Thiong’o, are among the African Writers Series books published by Heinemann that I read this time.”

Writing was another one of the practices that the participants engaged in as they entered the world of the literate. They started writing scribbles even before they entered primary education. Benson had the following recollections about his earliest practices in writing: “...it was quite common for me to write on the ground as we did not have much access to paper then... As indicated earlier, my earliest episodes in writing were done on the ground, particularly during the rain season when the ground was soft.” Dalitso talked further about how he got started as a writer: “Actually, with me writing started with simple drawings, patterns and then different images on sand.”

When the participants started going to school, they also engaged in practices that entailed writing that enhanced their learning. They used to do a lot of classroom writing exercises. In primary school Sarah recalled that writing “was basically related to class work... that every time we were given something to read we knew that a writing exercise would follow.” Emmie had somewhat similar recollections of her earliest writing episodes:

“As far as I can remember, I wrote whatever my teachers asked us to write. Even in the early days, say, in classes two, three and four, I always wrote what the teacher asked me to. I remember we wrote exercises. In primary school we usually answered comprehension questions based on a given passage. We also did some gap filling exercises as well as changing sentences from present tense to past tense, or some other grammar exercise. The practice was more or less the same in secondary school.”

Lumbani's early primary school writing experiences were also similar to those of Sarah and Emmie:

“We used to write assignments. I remember quite well that we used to work in groups. In those days we used to receive all school textbooks in advance. As such, together with my group, we were able to figure out which assignments would be coming when. Therefore, my group members and I read and worked out the problems in advance, that is, before the day the exercises were to be done in class.”

Most writing entailed copying lesson notes and writing of exercises that teachers marked and graded. Starting from early primary school right through senior primary school and secondary school, they copied notes that teachers gave them in all the content areas they studied. They also wrote exercises, usually daily. Among the writing practices were compositions. Benson captured his secondary school composition writing experience:

“But when I got into secondary school, what was noticeable was that my compositions were always quite different from the rest of the class because of the kind of expressions I was able to bring into them. Usually, I had more advanced expression than the stage I was at. And I suppose this was basically due to the advanced reading I used to do. In fact, I remember my Form Two teacher telling me to slow down a bit because he felt I was getting too involved in fairly sophisticated writing before knowing the basics.”

When the participants went to college, this practice of academic related writing continued as they went on to take notes during lectures and read various prescribed and related course texts plus journals. Course assignments and examinations were also some of the writing practices that all participants engaged in right through their academic lives.

Of the six teacher educators, it was interesting to note that the two women did not engage in composing creative pieces or enjoy writing. Emmie said that “throughout my growing up I did not take the initiative to write things like short stories or poems. Anything I wrote was school related. The only things I personally took the initiative to write were letters I wrote friends and my father. Otherwise, even at university I did not write for pleasure.” Although Sarah at one point in secondary school wrote an essay on Kasungu Game Reserve as a tourist attraction, a piece that won her a consolation prize of notebooks and writing materials, she considered that the only serious kind of writing she ever did outside the classroom content area kind of related writing. Sarah says about herself:

“I do not remember writing things just for the sake of writing as I read just for reading's sake. My writing in school was basically related to class work... I grew up with the thought that one had to write on things that were worthwhile, things that would be appreciated by the teacher and would be graded. Therefore, as I grew up I suppose what became important to me was writing things that mattered, that is, things that were needed by my class teachers.”

On the contrary, the male teacher educators were more likely to take the initiative and get involved in creative writing outside of school related writing practices. They

were likely to engage in poetry and prose writing that was not teacher sanctioned. Joshua explained what he did in the following way:

“But in standard five and six I had a teacher who brought story telling into the classroom... This led me to start writing stories of my own either documenting those told by my grandfather or my own creations. As a result, by the time I finished standard six, I had two eighty-page notebooks filled with my own created short stories... I basically wrote for myself. Even when I went to secondary school, I wrote a number of sketch plays that I didn't show any teacher but simply narrated the plots to some close friends with whom I acted these stories out during Variety Show weekends... at university... I started writing a story that was completed after I graduated with my Bachelors. It is a 219 page story for late teens and young adults... I must say that while doing my Bachelors, I wrote four love poems. When I was studying for my master's, I wrote four poems depicting my experience in a foreign land. Two of them were published in the University's *Challenge* magazine. While studying for my doctoral degree, I wrote four poems, three of them for my professors in three courses that I took, expressing my sentiments about those courses.”

Dalitso explained his getting into creative kind of writing right from senior primary school onwards:

“However, in senior primary school, while still doing what I used to do in junior primary school I remember to have written few very short stories. I should think this came about because I used to read a lot of stories and sometimes just thought of creating one myself once in a while... What I remember writing in secondary school were class exercises, notes, and homework... However, every once in a while I would write a poem... I went to university on sponsorship. I was told by my sponsored that they would sponsor me if I were to study Education with a Religious major. I could not even have chosen to do Sciences as my path was clearly stipulated. Therefore, outside academic writing, I independently wrote a few poems. But since I was not taking a Creative Writing course, I simply wrote for my friends. At the time I used to like going sight seeing, observe sunrise or sunset and nature. So, I wrote quite a lot on that.”

Lumbani acknowledged that one of the most important influences on him was a secondary school teachers who ignited in him the quest for creative writing:

One of the first pieces that I wrote and published in 1983, while I was in secondary school, is a short story entitled: ‘The Folly of Disobedience.’ And one of the unpublished ones that I still have is entitled: ‘Completely Alone in the World I Am.’ Besides, I also wrote some sketch plays... Basically, I wrote on moral issues, behaviour, that is. For instance, ‘The Folly of Disobedience’ is a story of a child who is raised up properly but who, later, starts misbehaving, loses his job and marriage all because he decided to disobey his parents’ good advice... At Chancellor College I found the Writers Workshop. This was a forum where writers gathered weekly to critique literary pieces presented for discussion. Upon my arrival I immediately became a member of the Writers Workshop... In

terms of my writing, I now generally moved into poetry. As such, most of the pieces I contributed to the Writers Workshop were poems. Actually, one of the poems I contributed won a Delta Baxter Award in 1989. This award came with four hundred and twenty five Kwacha prize money. Although the amount is small by today's standards, at the time it was quite considerable. That same poem has appeared this year in a new poetry anthology by Anthony Nazombe... In addition, during my time at university I was also a contributor to a university magazine called *The Harvester*. This one used to contain discussion of intellectual issues including literary works."

Benson also showed that he too got involved in creative writing early and in quite a sophisticated kind of way. In secondary school he mostly wrote short stories because at the time no Chichewa or English poetry was taught and the available literature was mostly prose:

"That's why my interest in poetry really flourished when I started university where there was a shift as I concentrated in poetry for some time before I later balanced up the two... Well, in secondary school, the kind of stories I wrote were, largely, instructive. They talked about students that were anti-establishments and how such students ended badly by losing an opportunity to continue with their education and so on... During my time, the secondary school I went to had a school magazine. And my contribution to the school magazine was usually short stories... I think during the first two or three years of university a larger part of my writing was poetry. The quarter bit of what I wrote was short stories I think. But by the time I got to the fourth and fifth year, I had struck equilibrium as it was now half-half. Yes. When a subject was better expressed in poetry, I tackled it poetically. However, if I thought the subject would be better managed in prose, I did it in a short story form... I suppose it is also worth mentioning that when I got to the university, I discovered that there was a kind of renaissance, people going back to Chichewa poetry, Chichewa short story writing. I must say that I became part of that renaissance... I do not have an anthology for those pieces I wrote in primary and secondary school but certainly for those in university. Actually, I have produced two anthologies. The first one was published in 1990 and the second one in 2001. They are both Chichewa pieces anthologies."

Participants' Perceptions of Literacy and Its Development

Because my participants were teacher educators, I was interested in their perceptions of literacy and its development. They expressed their views in terms of their own roles as parents as well as their roles as teachers. Speaking from the point of view of a parent, Benson's articulated his perspective about literacy development:

“Children should be encouraged to read more. You know, what reading does is that it opens up avenues to a lot of information that may be of interest to the child without even the mother or father knowing that the child is interested in such and such things. And by the time the child says, ‘I want to become a Medical Doctor,’ for instance, the parents can be sure that the choice is made from a position of reasonable knowledge other than sheer fantasy.”

Joshua went further in describing parents’ contributions to children’s literacy development:

“I would say that they should spare time to read or tell stories to their preschool and junior primary school children. That generates curiosity and interest in the children who are by nature inquisitive. Parents should also provide literacy material in the home so that children get to know the printed word before they are even able to read. In addition, parents should read in the home so that children can see the value of books and other printed texts. You know my son, for example, starting from the time he was able to walk and get to church with me, he used to carry a pocket Bible and hymn book. Whenever, the congregation was reading a text, or singing a hymn, he too would open his to some page, and sometimes his book would be upside down. But I guess that didn’t matter so long he too was in line with the rest of us. As such, my children never tore books or newspapers when they were young because I guess they considered them valuable. One thing that my parents didn’t do but I have done and urge other parents to do is to help their children with their reading and schoolwork in general. If we appear interested in their work and eager to help, children will realize that we value what they do and would work harder.”

Thinking along the same lines, Lumbani, as a parent, gave the following perspective of literacy that parents need to have:

“I think it is important for parents to provide a literacy rich environment within the home. Children should get to know books even before they start using them. It’s interesting that my children don’t tear books. They have got a lot of books in the home but not even the smallest child can tear a page. Instead, the child just takes a book, opens it, and closes it. This is a thing I find interesting. Therefore, if children are given an environment where there are books, magazines or newspapers in the home, you actually prepare them.”

Dalitso’s viewed parents’ place in children’s literacy development as a crucial one:

“I believe that even the illiterate or uneducated parents can still foster or encourage their children to read if they are only exposed to ways how they can encourage them. Actually, I have seen some parents, when I go to work with children and teachers in primary schools, who get books and give them to their children to read. Some parents even go to the extent of forcing their children to sit down and read.... Unfortunately, these parents don’t guide the children. They don’t create the curiosity in them. Such adults don’t trigger the interest to read in the children who

unavoidably become bored. They become bored because they are forced to read by their parents and do not see the need for it in themselves. But I think that if parents were helped and led to see how they can facilitate the development of reading skills in their children, they could play an active role. Certainly, the initiative of children is important. However, this initiative of children needs the support of teachers at school and parents or guardians in the home situation to foster interest.”

Teachers’ beliefs and philosophies have a direct bearing on their practice. Therefore, teachers’ perceptions of literacy influence what they do and how they relate to their students in the process of the teaching-learning encounter. The participants in this study expressed what they consider important things teachers must do to help children establish their foothold in literacy practices. For instance, Lumbani gave quite a comprehensive view of desired teacher practices alongside a snapshot of the Malawi school curriculum:

“As for teachers, I think there are a lot of things that need to be done to ensure that children develop literacy wise. One such thing is that teachers should give assignments related to book reading in which children should give reports of what they have read to their classmates or teachers either orally or in writing. Another thing is making the classroom itself literacy rich. You know, the walls of most classrooms are just empty. Now, if teachers placed literacy materials, that is, wall hangings or posters related to subjects being studied or materials related to entertainment on the walls, that should reinforce some of the things that are covered in class and be reminders of aspects that would otherwise have been easily forgotten.

“Our curriculum seems to emphasize the use of one standard book per subject. In other words, if students are not using that book they think that they are lost. But I wish our curriculum was one that invites or leads students to read any other sources. That would really assist in ensuring that they are not only stuck to one thing. In fact, the style of writing in one text may be repulsive to one student who may, therefore, not enjoy it. Hence, if given a variety of materials, it is possible that such a student would enjoy reading a different text which would certainly assist them in their literacy development.

“In addition, I think one of the major things I would advise is that stories that students are exposed to should be captivating. Unfortunately, I find most of our books, especially those in primary school, wanting in this aspect. For instance, most of the poems found in the books are foreign in origin. Besides, the stories are not that captivating. I strongly think that we need to give children stories they can relate to. For example, poems or songs like ‘Twinkle twinkle little star’ were developed in a context different from ours. The point here is that things coming into the classroom at the initial stage of literacy development should be those

coming from the children's environment. This means, therefore, that we must come up with things that will easily make sense to the children." Joshua also viewed teacher practices as being quite central in helping children's literacy development. He illustrated what teachers need to bear in mind while carrying out their professional practice:

"... children should not see learning as laborious but fun. Teachers should make every effort to make their lessons as involving as possible for children. They should also be ready to offer help to children who seem to be struggling because for most children the only help they get with their schoolwork is that which comes from teachers. Furthermore, children should be encouraged to read widely to broaden their view of the world they live in by giving them more reading material outside their prescribed curriculum texts. Teachers should involve children in oral and written activities because the only way children can develop their spoken language fluency is when they practice the language, probably having teachers themselves as role models. Moreover, teachers should give students a lot of meaningful written work to develop children's writing competency."

In conclusion, the themes that emerged from the analysis of the six literacy stories of the selected Malawi teacher educators were not, for the most part, surprising. However, the themes do reinforce current knowledge about literacy development in general but more specifically the themes address the issues of becoming literate in a print-deficit culture. For example, the importance of parents, teachers, and siblings in literacy development was not surprising. On the other hand, the variation in the ways that the participants acquired literacy materials throughout their literacy development reinforced the need for resources in this context as teachers and teacher educators struggle with enhancing literacy practices.

CHAPTER 6

DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHER EDUCATION, AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

In order to study the conditions that promote literacy development in a print-limited environment, I interviewed six Malawian teacher educators with master's degrees. Whereas print and electronic texts are resources available for promoting literacy in many countries, Malawi, one of the poorest countries in the developing world in the southern part of Africa, has a scarcity of these resources. Furthermore, Malawi's 56 percent literacy rate in a country of 12 million people does not paint an impressive picture. Beginning in 1994 primary school enrolment more than doubled from 1.6 million to over 3 million students due to the introduction of free primary education (National Statistical Office, 2002). Unfortunately, this increase in primary school enrolment has created a strain on the Malawi primary school education system because the influx did not come with an equal increase in teaching resources, classrooms, and teachers. The lack of teaching and learning resources has resulted in over 70 percent of those children who reach standard eight, leaving without having read anything other than their classroom texts while in primary school (Mchazime, 1994). Unless standard eight students go on to secondary school, it is very unlikely that would read any book after leaving primary school.

From the interviews I developed six literacy stories presented in Chapter 4. From the analysis of those stories, six major themes emerged, which are explained in Chapter 5. The discussion of the findings in this chapter is in relation to the three specific research questions: (1) What were the influences that led to literacy development for these teacher educators in a country that is print-limited? (2) What kinds of experiences did these teacher educators have as children that led to literacy development in a country that is print-limited? (3) What were the personal relationships that evolved during the literacy development of these teacher educators? Following that discussion, implications for teacher education are proposed. Finally, suggestions for future research emerging from this study are also discussed.

Discussion of the Findings

Literacy acquisition is a complex developmental phenomenon that emerges from a combination of factors. However, certain conditions facilitated these individuals' developing literacy. Some of the influences, experiences, and relationships remained constant across the phases of development from infancy and early childhood through tertiary education (see Table 1). Furthermore, other influences, experiences, and relationships emerged or became more or less pronounced for these participants' literacy development in some phases of their lives than in others.

Table 1: Interconnectedness of literacy development influences, experiences, and evolving relationships during a learner’s different development phases

Phase	Literacy Development Influences	Literacy Development Experiences	Evolving relationships
Infancy – Early childhood (ages 0-5)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People • Home environment • Text availability • Meaningfulness • Intrinsic motivation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Oral language • Listening to oral stories • Being read to • Interacting with print • Scribbling • Literacy games 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mother • Siblings • Father • Significant others • Peers
Primary school (ages 6-13)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People • Text availability • Meaningfulness • Intrinsic motivation • Home environment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Oral language • Storytelling • Independent reading • Being read to • Reading along • Writing class notes • Answering questions • Literacy games • Singing alphabets songs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers • Peers • Siblings • Father • Mother • Significant others
Secondary school (ages 14-17)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People • Text availability • Intrinsic motivation • Meaningfulness • Home environment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Oral language • Content area reading • Independent reading • Answering questions • Writing class notes • Independent writing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers • Peers • Siblings • Father • Mother • Significant others
Tertiary (ages 18 +)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People • Text availability • Intrinsic motivation • Meaningfulness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Oral language • Content area reading • Independent reading • Academic writing • Independent writing • Academic discussion • Intellectual discussion 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers • Peers • Significant others • Siblings • Father • Mother

Influences that Led to Literacy Development

People were an indispensable influence in these learners' literacy development. The term *people* refers to parents, siblings, peers, teachers and significant others that the learner interacts with. These people not only made the initial connections to literacy but also turned out to be both sources and targets of interactions. The presence of people, specifically parents and siblings, was particularly crucial in the early literacy development stages because it is the time the learner is mostly dependent on others for text availability and introduction to requisite literacy skills of reading and writing (Leseman & de Jong, 1998). It is people who provide the context, content, and reason for a learner's connection to literacy as they are the ones who connect the learner to the world of literacy. They share stories that may or may not contain cultural nuances the learner needs to know. The significance of these interactions, as argued by Purcell-Gates (2002), is that forms of oral language associated with literacy are orally transmitted and, once acquired, facilitate the acquisition of literacy-related skills and success in formal education. Parents, siblings, peers, teachers, and significant others play their role in influencing a learners literacy development.

The findings suggested that, generally, parents who are literate make every effort to ensure that their children become literate too (Bus, van Ijzendoorn & Pellegrini, 1995; Lancy, Draper, & Boyce, 1989; Morrow, 1983; Teale, 1978). Except for one, the parents of these participants were literate. Furthermore, all parents saw to it that their children went to school and had literacy development resources or access to such resources. For example, besides bringing books and newspapers home, Sarah's father personally introduced her to a public library. Lumbani's father also provided library membership fees so that his son could use the facility. In addition to setting standards they wanted their children to attain, these parents complemented teachers' role as they helped their children with homework or simply added to what teachers had already done in school. In this study, Emmie's father, for example, often helped his children do their homework while they were in primary school. While Emmie was in secondary school, all the letters she wrote her father were read and meticulously marked for language and punctuation errors.

Siblings and peers played an influential role in these participants' literacy development. For example Lumbani arrived in Malawi from Zambia, where he had been bor, and started school already in senior primary school without knowing how to read and write Chichewa, the Malawian national language. Lumbani was taught to read and write Chichewa by brothers and peers and not by teachers or parents. Another fascinating example of peer influence was Dalitso. Because Dalitso's parents were both primary school teachers one might have expected that they would introduce him to English. However, Dalitso was introduced to the English language by sons of an English speaking, white family that lived next door. His oral interactions while playing with these peers when he was an infant enabled Dalitso to become a fluent English speaker before he could even write a sentence in his own vernacular.

Older siblings were also a great influence on younger children. Some of the siblings took time to provide instruction that was helpful in enabling a learner become literate. Other siblings actually provided literacy development resources. For instance, Benson aspired so much to be able to read like his elder sisters who helped him out with his alphabet and figures. In addition, when he became a reader, he always desired and managed to read what his sisters were reading. As such, while he was still in primary school, he was reading secondary school materials brought home by his sisters whenever school was on recess. Likewise, when he himself went to secondary school and thereafter to university, he encouraged his younger brothers to read what he himself had been exposed to, a thing that greatly assisted in accelerating his younger brothers' literacy development as well.

However, literacy development for some of these participants occurred outside the learner's immediate family circle. In this study where parents were unable to provide printed text, significant others stepped in and performed the role of provider of text. One example was a missionary lady who lived in Benson's neighbourhood when he was still in primary school. She lent Benson her personal books over a period of years because at the time Benson's father was at the time unable to buy books. Likewise, Joshua was introduced to the world of English literature through the writings of Charles Dickens, which were lent to him by a neighbour.

Teachers were also a vital influence in these participants' literacy development. However, teachers played different roles as these learners moved through the literacy development process. One such critical role was that of helping learners connect with print through reading and writing. Joshua acknowledged that at home neither his parents nor siblings introduced him to numbers and letters. He started school as a non-reader. The teachers in junior primary school were the ones who helped him learn his numbers and letters. Similarly, it was the encouragement and support that teachers gave to Limbani, Joshua, and Benson, as they developed their writing skills, that has enabled them to published some of their poems and stories for which they have won awards.

The home environment was another influence in literacy development. For these participants the importance of early environment for later development and academic success was evident. Factors such as parents' educational level, the use of print in the home, the availability of print in the home, and the frequency of child-parent storytelling or story reading sessions were a significant plus in these learners' literacy development. Purcell-Gates (2002) asserted that print knowledge results from explicit focusing on as well as teaching by parents within the context of home literacy activities. In the same vein, Lancy, et al. (1989) contended that children who receive instruction from parents in letter naming score higher on tests of letter recognition than those who do not. The parents in this study, while facilitating the establishment of a conducive literacy developing home environment for their children, also made sure that their children started formal schooling as early as possible.

In this study, all parents made the home environment literacy development friendly. For instance, the parents saw to it that their children had print whether bought

by themselves or borrowed from public libraries. In half of the families, parents actively took a personal interest in their children's learning to read and write by, sometimes, taking up the teacher role. They either instructed or checked what their children had done in school. Because parents were seen reading in the home, older children read as well and, in due course, the younger ones joined in too. In four of the families, story reading and storytelling were a common feature as well.

The reading done in the home by parents and siblings greatly influenced Sarah who also eventually became an avid reader. Likewise, the spectacular way in which Benson's mother told stories in the home greatly influenced Benson who also mesmerized his peers in school with his wonderful storytelling and today has established himself as a nationally celebrated poet and storyteller. Both of these participants ascribed much of their literacy development to the influence of their home environment. Purcell-Gates (2002) contended that the many ways in which children experience and learn from home literacy practices suggests that these practices are facilitative of later literacy achievement in school and at least some of the difference in literacy achievement among children can be explained by different experiences with print in their homes.

Availability of text was another essential influence and component of the literacy development process. Living in a world of print has a positive influence on a child's path to becoming literate persons (Allington, 2002; Purcell-Gates, 2002; Ohanian, 2000; Graves, 2001). However, for that interaction to occur, text in its varied forms must first and foremost be available. It did not matter where the text came from or who provided it. What was important was that text, whether oral or print, was available as these participants gained literacy. For example, the oral text that these learners interacted with through storytelling connected them to the concept of story. Parents, teachers, peers, and significant others told stories. Although these people's reasons for telling stories and their storytelling techniques as well as types and sources of their stories were different, they told stories which the learners interacted with.

In addition to the oral text, the learner must also interact with the printed word. The printed text came through storybooks as well as school content area textbooks. In this study, all the participants recalled their interaction with print as going far back to their earliest childhood. Half the study participants were read to at home. Once the participants learned how to read, they interacted with print through books, magazines, newspapers, and religious leaflets. These interactions took place at home, in class at school, and in libraries. The reading materials were provided by parents, teachers, siblings, and significant others in the community or sourced by learners themselves whenever such opportunities arose.

Intrinsic motivation was another crucial influence on literacy development. Guthrie and Wigfield (2002) argued that motivation is crucial to engagement because motivation is what activates behaviour. It is obvious that no one eats on another person's behalf. Each individual must eat so as to pacify the pangs of hunger that grip him. Likewise, learners have an important role in their own literacy development. It is crucial that learners have a good amount of intrinsic motivation in order for them to move

forward on the literacy development path. The findings in this study suggested that learners progress a lot when they put a lot of effort into their learning experiences. For example, Dalitso enjoyed learning science so much that he found from within himself the energy to keep replicating at home the experiments that were done in school. Also Guthrie and Wigfield (2002) contended that intrinsic motivation refers to the dual qualities of enjoyment or interest in performing an activity, such as reading, and the disposition or intention to participate in the activity when it is appropriate. Learners read a lot because either they enjoy what they read or they want to please parents or teachers who have requested them to read particular texts. The more such learners read the more they get to know more and want to read more. With time, such learners turn into persons who get lost in the world of print. The experience of Sarah when she established her foothold in reading is a case in point. She plunged herself into any book that she got hold of whether from the library or brought home by her parents. One day she became so engrossed in reading one of the biology books that her parents had hidden from the children that she did not hear her parents drive into the yard and only knew about their presence when the father asked her what she was doing in their bedroom. This strong desire of wanting to know is what enabled her turn into an avid reader in life.

Another example of intrinsic motivation was that of Benson who started mesmerizing his classmates and peers with his storytelling skill before he started writing stories and poems of his own. Because he wanted to become a writer and poet, he learned the strategies employed by writers and poets as he read other people's literary works while going through primary school, secondary school, and university. Even when a secondary school teacher advised him to slow down because his writing style had become sophisticated, he did not but continued writing creative pieces because writing was to him just as enjoyable as reading had become. However, two of the participants reported deriving no enjoyment from writing that was not required by school. They were not intrinsically motivated to developed creative writing skills and even as adults find it difficult to engage in creative writing.

Meaningfulness of the literacy development practices was another one of the influential factors in the process. Allington (2002), Purcell-Gates (2002), Ohanian (2000), Graves (2001), and Wells (1986) argued that children learn faster when they are presented with activities and concepts that show that what they are doing is relevant to their day to day life. Whatever the learner engages in, there must be some meaning the learner can draw from the experience. It may be that the learner engages in reading or writing certain things because a parent or teacher has said so and the learner complies so as to avoid being regarded as disobedient if they do not. For example, Emmie said that she essentially went through school and college prescribed texts just because the teachers said she should. As such, she hardly spent time reading for pleasure and never engaged in writing any creative work just for the joy of it. She neither read nor wrote for pleasure because she saw no reason for doing that since such pieces were not part of the things teachers asked her to write.

However, other participants reported that getting lost in the world of print or writing for pleasure was part of their literacy development. Sarah, for example, found

reading meaningful because her father had told her that if she read she would know things that her teachers knew because what the teachers taught in class came from the very books that were available to her in the home. Benson, while still in primary school, found meaning and delight in reading books that his older sisters brought home from secondary school. Part of the meaningfulness for him was understanding the books his sisters had also read. What seemed crucial to literacy development, though, was that irrespective of the types of literacy encounters, meaningfulness kept the learners engaged and wanting to continue.

In summary, these findings suggested that there were influential and complementary conditions that supported the literacy development of these participants. However, there were different permutations of how the essential elements came together. For instance, while the availability of text was critical for supporting the learners' literacy, the source or the supplier of the text could be parents, siblings, teachers or any significant other person in the community. In addition, whereas having parents who were themselves highly literate facilitated the literacy process for these participants, the literacy stories suggested that learners whose parents were illiterate could become highly literate if other conditions.

Literacy Development Experiences

Learners go through a progression in their literacy development. This progression involves sequentially interconnected experiences that embrace infancy, early childhood, junior primary, senior primary, secondary, and adulthood. The participants in the study had access to such experiences. These literacy development experiences can be categorized as home or family experiences, experiences with peers, school experiences, and away from home experiences (see Figure 1).

The home or immediate family circle is where a learner's literacy development process begins (Leseman & de Jong, 1998). The home environment is where they learn their first language, which becomes their initial medium of communication in the literacy development process. All the participants in this study had this foundational cornerstone of literacy experiences. They learnt to speak and understand the inherent cultural nuances of their first language from parents and siblings. However, in half of the participants' families, parents spoke to their children in English to encourage them to speak English, which gave them the opportunity to practice using the English language they were learning in school.

It was also at home where the participants heard their first stories, which were generally told by parents. While some of the stories were oral folktales, others were taken from storybooks or the Bible and read to the children. For the study participants storytelling generated an interest in stories and also the ability to tell and eventually, for some like Benson, Lumbani, and Joshua, to write stories of their own.

Another home environment literacy experience was the participants' interaction with print. It was at home where they first saw and learned to value the printed word. Dalitso, Sarah, Emmie, and Benson agreed by saying that because they grew up in homes where there were substantial numbers of books that were valued by parents and siblings, they also came to highly value print as well. This is in agreement with what Morrow (1983) asserted that children exposed to books early and frequently become aware that printed words have sounds, and they recognize that print carries meaning. As the study participants were read to at home, they came to experience knowledge and the different worlds that exist only in books. It was also at home where these study participants started reading independently after they became readers. Although, a lot of reading had to do with school work, they also read books, magazines, and newspapers of their choice. Cunningham and Allington (1994) said that children need to be engaged in meaning-seeking communication activities and be guided through a variety of activities that increase their competence and develop their metacognitive awareness of what they are actually trying to achieve as they read independently. The study participants recalled home as being the place they experienced getting lost in books.

All the study participants agreed that they had their first writing experience at home. Of course, this writing was in the form of sketches and drawings before they came to write letters and words. Benson and Dalitso recalled the times they were writing, sketching, and drawing in the sand. Four of the study participants knew how to write letters of the English alphabet before they started school. In fact, two of them were able to write their names by the time they started primary school. The participants first held and scribbled with pens and pencils on paper at home before they started going to school.

The study participants also went through literacy development experiences while interacting with peers and siblings. One common experience was playing school with peers from the neighbourhood after classes or when school was on recess. They also played literacy games like a rope skipping game that involved spelling a word that had been called out. All the participants played these and other games. Actually, Lumbani recalled that he together with some close friends among classmates formed a group that always worked together in class related activities. This group worked in advance on sections of content areas that were yet to be covered in class, a thing that helped him and his group be ahead of their classmates in class work.

A learner also comes to develop competence in language use by interacting with peers (Kamhi & Catts, 1998). What might be viewed as an extreme example is that of Dalitso who started learning speaking English from peers who were children of the next door family neighbours. Just through interaction during playing times Dalitso picked up the English language and was able to sustain a meaningful animated conversation in this language way before he even started school.

Furthermore, the study participants also had a lot of literacy development experiences while in school. Duffy (1982) suggested that reading instruction ought to consist of spontaneous, joyful and creative encounters with print. Two of the participants first learned their letters and numbers in school. At school, participants listened to stories

told by both teachers and fellow students. They also interacted a lot with print particularly in content areas as they read through school textbooks during read aloud, read along, and silent reading sessions.

Imbedded in the school literacy development experiences were writing related ones. There were a lot of answering both oral and written comprehension, mathematics, and other content areas questions. These were done virtually every day in school. The participants in this study recalled that almost every time a teacher gave a reading exercise, almost automatically what followed were comprehension questions. Likewise, every time a teacher demonstrated on the chalkboard how a particular mathematics problem could be solved, what followed were several problems that they had to solve showing all the appropriate calculations clearly written down step by step. During these times, there were also occasions when learners marked and graded work of fellow students, a thing that was done after the teacher had given and written expected answers on the chalkboard. Later on, particularly in secondary school years, some participants ended up writing creative pieces for school magazines. In college, half of the participants wrote short stories and poems for magazines and newspapers as well as for critiquing at a writers' club forum.

Another experience the participants had in school was that of singing songs that had some content area message in them. They sang, for instance, the English alphabet song as well as the Chichewa language vowel and consonant song. This meant that while the learners enjoyed the vocal and animated singing they went through, what was of greater value beside the enjoyment they derived from the singing was that through the singing they were able to learn their alphabets without the conscious realization they were doing so.

Oral language usage experiences were also had in school. Story telling was one of such experiences that participants had. There were occasions when students listened to their classmates tell stories. Most of these stories were folktales. Sometimes, the participants took part in poetry recitals, which took place mostly at the end of a school academic year. Two of the study participants recalled taking part in classroom storytelling sessions as well as doing poetry recitals at the end of the school year's farewell function.

Finally, participants also had some literacy development experiences away from both home and school. Actually, Sarah and Emmie recalled that, while driving with the rest of their families to some tourist attraction sites, they engaged in reading road signs as they went driving past them. There were times when these study participants interacted with significant others in their communities. Benson recalled visiting with American Peace Corps volunteers who were in the neighbourhood teaching at a nearby secondary school. The basic reason for visiting with them was to practice his spoken English language on them, a thing that helped him to significantly improve his knowledge and usage of the English language.

Evolving Relationships

The findings of this study suggested that a learner's literacy development depends on evolving relationships that are dynamic because they change over time as the learner goes through the different developmental phases. The involvement of parents, family members, and significant others was not necessarily the same because at each point some relationships tended to be more involved than others (see Table 1). The phases were categorized as before the child goes to school, when the child starts to school, and as the child advances in school.

Before the child goes to school. This category encompasses two phases: the infancy phase followed by the childhood phase. During the infancy phase, it is family members who interact with the child in the home. In the Malawian cultural setting, it is generally the mother and siblings who spend more time with the child, than does the father during infancy. As such, it is the mother and older siblings who provide most of the oral text to the child during the infancy phase. Whereas the mother talks to, plays with, and even sings lullabies to the baby, the father is hardly anywhere in the picture.

However, during the early childhood literacy acquisition stage, the child's siblings and the father, in somewhat a small way, come into the picture as they talk and play with the child. Purcell-Gates (2000) pointed out that during this preschool stage a child learns the natures, characteristics, and language forms from family members. At this point it is worth noting that the home is an essential locus of learning about print for young children.

When the child starts to school. This phase principally embraces the duration of the learner's formative years, that is, the years spent in junior primary school. During this phase the mother-child relationship remains very strong as she is the care provider in terms of nutrition and emotional support. This is also the time the father-child relationship begins to pick up momentum. The father, who is generally the breadwinner, has the role of provider of resources. In this study, it was the study participants' fathers who brought home books, newspapers, magazines and paid school fees.

During this stage the father also provided the learner with sources of text such as libraries. The guardian flavour in the father-child relationship was pronounced in this phase too. For example, when Limbani's started going to school, it was his father who accompanied and got him enrolled in school. During this period, the mother-child relationship started taking a backseat in influencing the literacy development of a child while the father-child relationship grew stronger. Moreover, what was noticeable in these Malawian teacher educators' literacy stories was that the home was the base that supported literacy development throughout primary school. It was generally parents who sourced text for the children. All the study participants, in their stories recalled that they had a lot of literacy development experiences in the home as they all seemed to remember much regarding their parental, siblings, peers, and significant others' contribution.

However, all the participants recalled that primary school experiences were things to do with tedious routine class exercises, like gap filling, answering comprehension questions, copying notes written by the teacher on the chalkboard, and sometimes round robin reading sessions. Almost everything was school or examination related, and there was hardly anything done for pleasure. Those who wanted to venture into creative writing generally did so without much support from the primary schooling system.

It should also be noted that during this stage, teachers became part of the scene. Teachers were the ones who introduced the children to the formal world of schooling, books, numbers, as well as foreign languages. They introduce the learner to school literacy, which is most useful beyond the home and immediate community. As far as their learning was concerned, learners during this phase established a stronger relationship with their teachers, while the relationship with parents weakened. This new relationship seemed to be an outcome of spending longer time with teachers than with parents, siblings and significant others.

As the child advances in school. This is a phase that includes senior primary, secondary school, college and beyond. The findings in this study suggested that mother-child and father-child relationships relaxed more and more as the child grew. As these participants became readers and writers, they started becoming more and more independent as they, in a way, sought to detach themselves from parental strings. For example when Emmie reached a stage when she was able to read for herself, she stopped listening to her father's evening story reading sessions in the home. Her reason for doing that was that since she was now able to read on her own, she saw no reason to continue listening to her father reading stories to the children.

Furthermore, when these learners entered secondary school, the school took over the responsibility from home as the support base for the learner's literacy development. Secondary schools provided literacy texts ranging from content area textbooks to works of fiction as well as newspapers and magazines. In secondary school the learners were actually encouraged to get involved in literacy development activities like English drama and debate clubs which were aimed at helping learners polish their spoken English language. The presence of writers' clubs also assisted immensely

In this period of literacy development, it was teachers who had a lot more influence on the learners. During this phase learners spent more time in contact with teachers than with their parents. For instance, when Joshua went into secondary school, he relied on his teacher of English for texts because the latter had engaging books. This was also the time that learners provided support to others while they also received assistance from others with their literacy development. For example, when Benson was getting support from his teachers in college, every time he went back home, he shared his texts with his younger brothers who derived much pleasure from reading these texts their elder brother was studying at university.

Implications for Teacher Education

A number of issues emerging from the study have noticeable implications for teacher education. It appears that the classrooms should be a platform where there are a lot of literacy experiences that learners should interact with (Routman, 2002). There must be a lot of reading, talking and writing. Bearing in mind that both oral and written language are only perfected through practice, it is imperative that classrooms must be awash with meaningful speaking and writing experiences. In this study, Sarah acknowledged that her English language fluency had much to do with the engaging classroom activities she had experienced particularly in early primary school.

In addition, teacher educators should serve as models for teacher trainees. In other words, what teacher educators do in their interaction with teacher trainees must mirror what the teacher trainees are to become when they take their place in the classroom. In the study, Joshua, Benson, and Lumbani point to teachers who had lasting impact on their lives because of what they did. Those wonderful teachers provided the desired encouragement and were themselves splendid role models. For instance, Benson strongly aspired to become a writer upon seeing that his teacher was publishing in local newspapers and magazines very captivating stories. He has published several stories and poems in both international and national journals and magazines as well as national newspapers. He also became a teacher educator hoping to inspire teacher trainees. One of the important implications for teacher education is that teacher educators should display professionalism and encourage teachers to set high standards for themselves. Teacher educators must demonstrate that they are avid readers, resourceful, creative and interactive professionals if prospective teachers are to acquire these characteristics of a caring literate adult and display the same to their prospective students.

By writing literacy stories of their own, teacher educators would not only learn about their literacy experiences from such a self-reflection but also provide a model for their prospective teachers. Such a process would inform the teacher educator's practice. Similarly, in order to enable prospective teachers to understand how they developed their own literacy, teacher education programs could have them write their literacy autobiographies. Such reflection could help them identify factors that influenced their own literacy development. Drawing from their personal experiences and the experiences that their colleagues share, prospective teachers would then be able to better appreciate the variety of factors that enhance literacy development.

Listening to oral stories was one of the earliest literacy development experiences that some of these study participants engaged in and enormously enjoyed. However, it was noted that some of the study participants' parents did not tell them stories. The implication here for teacher education is to imbed in teacher training curricula an oral literature component. Since oral stories are part and parcel of Malawi's cultural heritage, it is appropriate that this rich body of literature is brought into the classroom. Story telling sessions would be just as engaging in the classrooms as they are in the homes and communities and thereby greatly contribute to learners literacy development. It is also important to note that, for those children who, unfortunately, come from homes where no

story telling sessions take place, having story telling sessions in the classroom would provide such experiences for literacy development.

The study also suggests that the participants did a lot of reading in their homes because somehow print was available. But understanding that for the majority of children in a print-limited environment access to print in the home is difficult because some parents cannot afford to purchase such resources, teacher educators should expose teacher trainees to the tenets of storybook writing. With such knowledge, teacher trainees should be in a position to create their storybooks, which may then be used in class. An added advantage is that such stories would be culturally relevant to the community and school environment. This kind of writing ensures that the teacher has a resource for teaching that is also capable of capturing the interest of the children. Another helpful strategy is that of helping students write their own stories., which are then used as a learning resource in class. In this study, Dalitso and Benson very strongly advocated this approach. The contribution of this kind of writing that is done by students themselves to their literacy development cannot be overemphasized. Not only will the classroom have more reading materials but also the connections between reading and writing will promote students' literacy development. While ensuring that resources are created within the classroom environment, this practice will also dispel the myth that writing is a domain of some people with out-of-reach abilities.

There is another important aspect of writing that would be helpful in literacy development in a country like Malawi. To begin with, Malawian writers hardly write for children. These writers should take the challenge of producing works that are as captivating as they are entertaining and relevant to the cultural world of Malawian children. The teacher educators in this study agreed that most of the content areas books and storybooks have an underlining cultural perspective that is basically alien because the books came from alien cultures. As such, it is not surprising that children do not feel attracted to read because the reading material does not connect with them. Teacher educators need to become proactive in not only assisting teacher trainees in developing culturally appropriate materials but also to develop awareness of the impact of such culturally inappropriate materials on the literacy and content learning of students.

The participants in this study acquired a variety of reading materials from parents and significant others. Teacher educators should promote strategies that lead to the use of locally available print resources like old magazines or newspapers. While it is hoped that eventually, texts would be available for students in all content areas, even then additional reading materials would need to be provided so that classroom in Malawi would truly reflect an environment that promoted literacy. Therefore, writing is certainly important in an environment where print is scarce. Besides promoting thinking, analysis, subject matter retention, and writing skills development, writing also makes available to the learners culturally relevant teaching resources. As such, the importance of writing to literacy development can and should not be underestimated.

The emergence in Malawi of organizations that promote literacy development, including the Girls' Attainment in Basic Literacy and Education (GABLE), and the

Malawi Government's implementation of the Free Primary Education concept, attest to the need for and importance of literacy development. Perhaps that is a strong indication that early primary school education should concentrate on literacy development. Currently, the primary school curriculum is characterized by a fragmented delivery of content, for example there are time slots for science, mathematics, social studies, and Chichewa. The focus in the teaching of these subjects is on specific content that will be on end-of-term and end-of-year examinations. Such an emphasis on memorizing content leaves little time for developing literacy skills of reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Shifting the emphasis to literacy within the teaching of the content would provide learners with more extensive opportunities to practice with language and interact with text, which is essential and crucial in literacy development (Their, 2002). Therefore, teacher educators need to understand how to develop curriculum and instruction that integrates content teaching with literacy development.

Considering that literacy is the key to national development, this study suggests that primary school teachers neither read a lot themselves nor read a lot to their students. This may be the case because teachers are themselves not hooked on reading and, consequently, do not know how to become their students' reader role models. By extension, the study also suggests that teachers do not read to their students, perhaps because they do not know how to read aloud dramatically nor do they understand the value of reading aloud in literacy development. Primary school teacher educators should include in the teacher preparation programs both theory and practice in reading aloud as an essential support for literacy development.

Suggestions for Further Research

The purpose of this study was to find out the literacy stories of six teacher educators who became highly literate in a print-limited country. While these six stories provided useful information, it could be worthwhile to interview more teacher educators to see whether the findings in this investigation would be similar or different to those in a study involving a much larger study population. These participants appeared to have more economic advantages than many in the general population. Therefore, studying a larger population might shed light on whether there are other important factors that promote literacy in such an environment. Further research with people in other professions such as lawyers, medical doctors, engineers, accountants, politicians, journalists, and bankers might help to see if their literacy development stories have similarities or differences with those of teacher educators.

This study was qualitative and used a purposefully small, similar sample. Using the results from this study, a questionnaire could be developed and administered to a larger population of people that included different professions and cultural backgrounds. The findings of such a quantitative study could help educators understand the range of literacy development in Malawi.

One of the findings of this study was that a child's parents were a vital influence in their literacy development. In the context of this study all the participants grew up in homes where their fathers assumed direct responsibility for their upbringing. However, in some Malawian cultural settings, such as the Lomwe of the Southern Region and the Chewa of the Central region of the country, a child's uncle's influence overrides that of the child's father. As such, a study that investigated how this uncle's cultural influence comes to bear on one's literacy development could provide more information for teachers and teacher educators as they develop instruction for schools in those areas.

Currently, Malawi is grappling with the HIV and AIDS pandemic. One of the sad effects of this on the children is that many are being orphaned at a very young age. One study may be conducted on orphans who happen to be looked after by relatives. Another one may be on those orphans who happen to be in orphanages. And yet another study may be a comparative study of the two groups. The aim of such studies would be to find out how these children develop literacy in the absence of their biological parents.

Another possible research avenue would be studying literacy development influences of current Standard 8, Form 2 or Form 4 students, who have achieved literacy. Such students would have come through public schooling under the free primary education introduced in 1994, which is currently being blamed for low standards because of large numbers and few resources. It would be enlightening to find out their literacy stories and the influences that contribute to literacy development in the current environment.

Malawi, like other African cultures, is rich in oral literature. A study that looks into the use of story telling in school to enhance literacy development would be worthwhile. A comparative study could be made of two early primary school groups, one in which storytelling is used and another where no storytelling is used. A study of this nature could enlighten and inform teacher education on the place of storytelling in the school and, if seen to be significant, how storytelling could be incorporated into the primary school teacher preparation curriculum and the primary school curriculum to help with children's literacy development.

In this study two of the six participants had learnt English prior to entering school. Three of them learned English concurrently with Chichewa in school, and one learned Chichewa in standard six. However, all eventually became proficient in both English and Chichewa. In Malawi, the education policy is that students will learn to read and write in their vernacular prior to beginning to learn English. However, in practice most Malawi primary schools begin some English instruction in standard one. Currently, Malawi primary school education is experimenting with Breakthrough to Literacy concepts where children's literacy is developed first only through their vernacular. Given the incongruence between public education policy, school curriculum, and the interest in Breakthrough to Literacy, more research should be conducted on the effects of learning English at different stages and with different approaches in primary school.

Replicating this study in another developing country, such as in the Southern Africa region would also be an area of investigation. Such a study would look into literacy development stories of six teacher educators of a chosen country. It would be enlightening to see the influences and experiences of the participants of such a study and to see the nature of the similar and differences.

Summary

This study investigated factors that influence literacy development in an environment that is print-limited. Literacy development stories of six Malawian educators were collected and analyzed. The study suggests that literacy development is influenced by people, text availability, home environment, school environment, a learner's intrinsic motivation, and dynamic relationships. During the literacy development process, the learner goes through different interconnected phases from early childhood to adulthood.

The study also suggests that there are different experiences that a learner goes through that play a significant role in a learner's literacy development process. Furthermore, as the learner interacts with people, text, peers and all other influences, the intensity of relationships changes with time. The learner moves from being totally dependent to independent with some element of interdependence.

Furthermore, the participants in this investigation represented a highly literate group of people in a print-limited country. In a country of 12 million people, their literacy level represents a small minority. Nevertheless, their literacy stories can be used to inform teacher educators as they develop curriculum and course work that focuses on literacy acquisition in primary education.

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APPENDIX A

VIRGINIA POLYTECHNIC INSTITUTE AND STATE UNIVERSITY

Informed Consent for Participants in Research Projects Involving Human Subjects

Title of Project: Retracing footsteps of the literati: Towards an understanding of literacy through stories of Malawian teacher educators

Investigator: Manuel Boyd Kazembe and Patricia P. Kelly

I. Purpose of this Research/Project

The purpose of this study is to investigate literacy development of teacher educators in Malawi. Interview transcripts will provide the data for this study

II. Procedures

The researchers will interview participants. The participants will tell their stories in response to the prompt “tell me about yourself as a reader and writer in the past and now.” The data collection will take place at venues suggested by participants. After the first interview, there may be one or more follow up interviews. Each interview should last approximately one hour.

III. Risks

There are no expected risks related to participation in this study.

IV. Benefits

There are no specific benefits for volunteers related to participating in this study. The researchers wish to engage in an open study of literacy development of teacher educators in Malawi. Previous studies of this nature have not been conducted. Therefore, the goal is to inform educators about literacy development in Malawi. No promise or guarantee of benefits has been made to encourage participation in the study.

V. Anonymity and Confidentiality

Participants will not be asked to give their names and no identifying information will be collected other than their profession. Pseudonyms will be used in the writing of the research report. Although total anonymity cannot be guaranteed, the collected information will be treated very confidentially. The recorded audio tapes will be erased one month after the completion and submission of the study report.

VI. Compensation

There is no compensation for participation in the study.

VII. Freedom to withdraw

Participants are free to withdraw from this study at any time. Participants are free not to answer any questions. In addition, participants may ask that the tape recorder be turned off at any time during the interview

VIII. Approval of Research

This research has been approved, as is required, by the Institutional Review Board for Research Involving Human Subjects at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, by the Department of Teaching and Learning.

IX. Participant’s Responsibilities

I voluntarily agree to participate in this study. I will complete the interviews.

Signature of Participant : _____

Name of Participant : _____

Date : _____

APPENDIX B

Semi-structured interview guide

I. Demographic data

1. Name:
2. Place and date of birth
3. Nationality:
4. Highest academic qualification:
5. Occupation:
6. Religion / denomination (optional):
7. Immediate family members:
8. Parents' / guardians' education and professions:
9. How would you describe your family economic circumstances when you were growing up? (e.g. we had very little money, we were comfortable, we were well off, we were extremely well off)

II. Family literacy values and practices

1. What value did your parents/grandparents/guardians place on reading/writing?
2. What were their thoughts about education? What stories did they tell you about reading/writing?
3. Did your parents and grandparents go to school? To what level? (treat mother, father, and grandparents separately)
4. Did your mother and father/grandparents read at home? If yes, what? (newspapers, magazines, the Bible / Koran or other religious texts, pamphlets, etc.)
5. Did your mother or father/grandparents write on a regular basis? If yes, what? (letters, shopping lists, religious documents, community or organizational material)
6. How important did your parents think reading and writing were? What kind of values did they place on reading and writing?
7. Can you remember anything that your mother or father/grandparents said about reading, writing, or education?

III. Early literacy practices/values

1. Did your parents read to you?
2. Did your parents ask you to read to them?
3. When did you learn to read? To write? Who taught you?
4. Tell the story of how you first learned to read/to write.
5. What kind of things did you read at home when you were young? (e.g. comics, magazines, pamphlets, school texts, library books, computer games)
6. What kind of things did you write at home when you were young? (e.g. stories, sketches.)
7. How about when you were an older child? An adolescent?
8. Where and when did you read and write when you were a young child? An older child? An Adolescent?

9. How did you get access to books? Was there a library in your school or near your house? If yes, did you use it? When? How frequently?

IV. School literacy practices

1. What kind of reading/writing activities did you learn/do in English classes in primary school/secondary school/ college?
2. What kinds of reading/writing did you do for other classes in primary school/secondary school/college?

V. Current literacy practices

1. What kind of reading/writing/speaking activities do you do?

VI. Historical/cultural/social/familial events that provided content for literacy

1. What important historical/political/social events were happening in Malawi or around the world when you were a child growing up? When you were a teenager?
2. What important family events happened when you were a child growing up? When you were a teenager?

VITA

Manuel Boyd Kazembe obtained a Bachelor of Education degree with English as a major from the University of Malawi in 1986. He received a Master of Education degree in Management and Human Resource Development from the University of Sydney in March 2000.

He taught English and History at three secondary schools in Malawi from October 1986 through February 1993. Thereafter, he joined Staff Development Institute, a Malawi government's human resource development institution, to teach English and Business Communication. Since joining Staff Development Institute, he has designed, developed, delivered, and evaluated many training programs in the areas of Human Communication and Information Systems, Business and Organizational Communication, Human Resource Development, Training and Development, Training of Trainers, Corporate Procurement Fraud Detection and Prevention, Customer Care, and Business Etiquette.

He has participated in teacher education beginning with the implementation of the Malawi Special Teacher Education Program that started in the early 1990s. In the mid-1990s he also participated in the designing and implementation of an English Language Fluency Development program for Malawian Court Interpreters on behalf of the British Council office in Malawi.

Over the years he has been a teacher of English, teacher educator, head of Languages Department, deputy head teacher, head of the English and Communication Department, as well as a management development and training consultant.

He has co-authored a book, *A Guide to Scarlet Song*, published by Longman with first publication in March 1993. He has also published several articles on education, cultural, and political issues in Malawi. He continues to be a panelist on a weekly talk-show program that discusses topical issues in Malawi.

Manuel B. Kazembe was born in Dowa, Malawi, in Southern Africa. He is married and has three children: Sharon Atikonda, Carolyne Tisungeni, and Manuel Jr.