The Impact of COVID-19 on Primary Education in Malawi: Exploring Policy Responses and Practices

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Abstract

This paper explores the effects of Covid-19 on primary education in Malawi and focuses on policy responses and practices. Covid-19 caused major disruptions to the education system including loss of learning due to school closures. In response to the pandemic, the Malawian government developed policies and strategies to prevent the further spread of the pandemic and to ensure the continued learning of pupils. The policies on continued learning include measures to decongest classrooms and schools, remedial learning and remote learning. The Covid-19 prevention measures include social distancing, wearing masks and hand washing. However, these measures are being implemented in an already challenged education system characterized by low learning outcomes and inadequate resources.

This paper therefore examines how the policies and strategies are being implemented and their impacts on primary education in Malawi. This paper uses document analysis to understand the policies and analyses some primary data to gain insights into current practices.

Keywords: Covid-19, School closure, Decongestion, Social distance,
            Remedial learning.

1. Introduction

1.1. Background on the study

The overarching goal of the National Education Policy of Malawi is to promote equitable access, relevance, quality and improved governance and management of the education sector to contribute to sustainable socioeconomic development and poverty reduction (Ministry of Education (MoE), 2016). However, the emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic disrupted the education system and compounded the already existing challenges that the education system in Malawi faces. Such problems include but are not limited to large classes, inadequate numbers of teachers, limited classrooms and inadequate teaching and learning resources.

Coronavirus disease 2019 (Covid-19), first identified in Wuhan, China in December 2019, was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) in March 2020. Since then, Covid-19 has spread to many countries worldwide, affecting millions of people. As of 17 January 2021, there were over 93 million reported cases globally (WHO, 2021). In Malawi, the first three cases were confirmed on 2 April 2020; and as of 20 January 2021, approximately 14,851 cases of Covid-19 had been confirmed by the government (Ministry of Health (MoH), 2020/21). The World Health Organization advised the entire world that there was a need to enact social distancing as one way of reducing the spread of the disease. With this advice, countries started taking measures that would enforce social distancing; and these measures included directives implementing lockdowns, whose extent varied from country to country. Most countries including Malawi closed all schools and educational institutions in an attempt to limit the spread of the pandemic. The government of Malawi ordered a closure of all schools and educational institutions on 23 March 2020 in an effort to protect learners, teachers and parents from the pandemic and support national efforts in the fight against the spread of the coronavirus (MoE, 2020 a). In Malawi, the schools were closed for a period of 5 months for final-year learners and 6 months for the rest from March to September 2020.

Temporary school closures in more than 180 countries kept nearly 1.6 billion students out of school, further complicating global efforts to reduce learning poverty, which is defined through deprivations of schooling and of learning in terms of learner enrolment and minimum proficiency based on a desired and agreed set of competencies[1]. Data from the World Bank and UNESCO showed that 53% of children at the end of primary education in low- and middle-income countries already suffer from learning poverty (World Bank, 2019). In Malawi, school closures affected over 5 million learners in primary schools.

Studies around the world have examined the impacts of school closures on education. The most notable impact widely mentioned in recent research is the loss of learning. Pedro, Hasan, Goldemberg, Iqbal, and Geven (2020) conceptualize learning loss

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[1] http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/163871606851736436/Learning-Poverty-in-the-Time-of-COVID-19-A-Crisis-Within-a-Crisis

as learning that does not occur while schools are closed and the already acquired learning that is lost or forgotten when students lose their engagement with the education system. UNICEF (2020) highlighted that the longer vulnerable children are out of school, the less likely they are to return and that children from the poorest households are almost five times more likely to be out of primary school than those from the richest households. In addition, being out of school increases the risk of teenage pregnancy, sexual exploitation, child marriage, violence and other threats. Furthermore, Viner (2021) adds that prolonged closures disrupt essential school-based services such as immunization and school meals and disrupt the important roles school plays in child protection.

Other studies examined the opportunity costs of school closures in terms of the future productivity of students and found that school closures have a large cost in terms of lost future productivity. Peet, Fink and Fawzi (2015), cited by the National Planning Commission (2020), noted that one year of schooling increases wages by 12% on average in Malawi. It was further estimated at the time of the study that the value of the loss of future income was $861 per student, which translated into USD 5.2 billion if school closures continued for 9 months given the enrolment of approximately 6 million Malawian children in primary school. Pedro, Hasan, Goldemberg, Iqbal, and Geven (2020) estimate that globally, a school shutdown of 5 months could generate learning losses that have a present value of $10 trillion. According to this number, the world could lose as much as 16% of the investments that governments make in this cohort of pupils' basic education.

With school closures due to the pandemic, different governments worldwide responded differently to ensure continued learning. This includes broadcasting educational programs on national television; encouraging online learning through virtual classrooms via Google Classrooms, Zoom and Microsoft Teams; creating websites for online education; creating portals for learners and their parents; establishing virtual consulting spaces; and initiating home study programs, mobile learning, and printed materials for the most vulnerable students (Reimers, 2020; World Bank, 2020). Unfortunately, with the poor technological infrastructure in Malawi, the provision of primary education was limited to radio programs and television broadcasts. In Malawi, schools reopened on 7 September 2020 after 5 months of closure. In preparation for school reopening, the government established policy responses and measures to promote the safety of learners and quality education in the midst of the pandemic. Against this background, this paper seeks to examine how policies and strategies are being implemented and their impact on primary education.

Aims and Objectives

This paper explores the effects of Covid-19 on education in Malawi with a focus on policy responses by the government to provide primary education during the Covid-19 epidemic, including the practices in primary schools.

Specifically, the study is guided by the following objectives:

    i. To highlight the government policy measures in response to Covid-19 in education,

    ii. To document the implementation of the policy measures in response to Covid-19 in primary school education and

    iii. To examine the effects of Covid-19 on primary education in Malawi.

Research Questions

    i. What policies/measures has the government established to ensure the safety of learners and the quality of education amidst the Covid-19 pandemic?

    ii. How are primary schools implementing government policies/measures to ensure the safety of learners and the quality of education amidst the Covid-19 pandemic?

    iii. What have been the effects of Covid-19 on primary education in Malawi?

2. Methodology

This paper is primarily based on desk research that synthesized available information in Malawi to gain an understanding of how the Covid-19 pandemic has affected education in Malawi and how the government of Malawi and the Ministry of Education in particular responded to the pandemic. The global literature on Covid-19 supplemented the information gained from internal Covid-19 documents. Specifically, the literature search focused on areas such as school organization, class organization, teaching and learning processes and the impacts of school closures on learner enrolment and dropout. Furthermore, the desk review analysed the policy responses of the Ministry of Education to the pandemic and concentrated on measures related to remote learning during the school closures, decongesting schools and classes when schools reopened, remedial learning to compensate for the lost learning during the school closures, and general policy guidelines that intended to protect the learners and school staff from spreading or contracting the coronavirus.

Although this study's method was desk research, an effort was made to interview a few teachers, learners and Primary Education Advisors (PEAs) in Malawi to obtain an insight that supplemented the authors' knowledge of what occurred on the ground regarding the implementation of the policy measures that the government of Malawi established.

3. Discussion of findings

The discussion of the findings focuses on the policy responses to the Covid-19 pandemic in primary education in Malawi, the implementation of government policy measures and guidelines for Covid-19 prevention in primary schools and the impact of Covid-19 on education.

3.1. Policy responses to the Covid-19 pandemic in education in Malawi

As stated earlier, the first step that the government enacted regarding education was to close schools, which were later reopened after 5 months. In June 2020, the government

established the National Covid-19 Preparedness and Response Plan focusing on the intended responses to Covid-19 by different sectors including the education sector. This was in preparation for the reopening of schools. According to the Government of Malawi (GoM) (2020), some of the specific objectives of the education sector were to promote the safety of learners and teachers through safety measures and decongesting classes once the schools were reopened. Furthermore, the Ministry of Education developed some guidelines to be followed by learners, teachers and all other stakeholders in schools (MoE, 2020a). This was done to curb the spread of the coronavirus in schools. The guidelines focused on the following areas: training, quality instruction, social distancing, sanitation and hygiene, the use of face masks and disease monitoring and management.

a) Training

Training was provided to ensure that before schools reopened, head teachers, teachers, other school staff, learners and the community were familiar with the Covid-19 guidelines and that they were aware of how to prevent the further spread of the pandemic. The training followed a cascade model and spread to the grassroots' levels in communities through school structures such as the Parent Teacher Associations (PTAs), School Management Committees (SMCs), mother groups and chiefs. Reports indicate that training was performed and that all stakeholders were aware of the guidelines. Teachers were also trained on how to conduct remedial learning to compensate for the lost learning. However, compliance and adherence to the guidelines remains an issue in most schools.

b) Quality instruction

It was the Ministry of Education's interest that in order to compensate for the learning lost during the long school closures, strategies should be enacted to ensure that learners obtain quality teaching and learning when schools reopen. Strategies such as remediation periods before and after school days, increased teaching and reduced class sizes were advocated as policy measures to address the gap.

c) Social distancing

Social distancing is one of the widely publicized measures for the containment of the spread of the coronavirus (Center for Disease Control (CDC), March 2020). Therefore, it is important that learners and teachers in school enact social distancing to avoid transmitting the virus among people. Hence, the Ministry of Education reiterated in the Covid-19 guidelines on schools reopening that schools should maintain a 1-2 metre distance between learners in class and ensure that no more than 2 learners sat at a desk. Furthermore, the Ministry of Education, among other things such as ensuring social distancing, directed the following: schools should decongest their classes by reducing class sizes to 40 learners per class, classroom breaks and start/end times should be staggered to avoid crowds of learners, large gatherings such as school assemblies and sporting events should be severely restricted, no unauthorized guests should be allowed to enter the school premises, and arrival and departure times of learners should be staggered.

d) Sanitation and Hygiene

According to the Center for Disease Control (CDC) (2021), sanitation and hygiene

are fundamental principles of controlling the spread of the coronavirus. The Ministry's guidelines advocated for the following sanitation measures in schools: continuous access to safe water in schools; hand washing stations at school entrances and outside of classrooms and offices; washing hands with soap and water or rubbing hands with alcohol-based hand sanitizer regularly; regular cleaning of surfaces, sanitation facilities, classrooms and offices; sanitizing frequently touched surfaces; removing and disposing of trash regularly; disinfecting classrooms and all other common spaces regularly; and cleaning the school surroundings at all times.

e) Use of Face Masks

Masks are recommended as a simple barrier to help prevent respiratory droplets from travelling into the air and onto other people when the person wearing the mask coughs, sneezes, talks, or raises their voice (CDC, 2021). As a requirement by the Ministry of Education, all learners, teachers and all other staff working in schools and education institutions are to wear a mask that covers the mouth and nose properly. All learners and staff were sensitized to the importance of wearing a mask, and head teachers were expected to enforce adherence to the practice.

f) Disease monitoring and management

To ensure that the schools are safe for both teachers and learners, it is necessary that schools are guided by the precautionary measures on disease monitoring and management established by the government. Some of the measures directed by the government were as follows: schools should have a designated quarantine area for isolating sick learners and teachers; the health room should be cleaned and disinfected at least twice per day; schools should have a structure/process for regular screening by Health Surveillance Assistants (HSAs); and schools should monitor the temperatures of learners, teachers, and other school staff and any visitors using a thermal scanner. Other measures were that teachers should also monitor and track daily class attendance; learners identified as having a fever, cough, or other symptoms consistent with Covid-19 should be isolated and HSAs should be contacted immediately; and learners, school staff, parents and guardians should be advised to remain at home and not to come to school when they are sick.

3.2. Implementation of government policy measures and guidelines for Covid-19 prevention in Malawi's primary schools

Given the policy measures and guidelines enacted by the government to ensure the safety of learners and the quality of education amidst the Covid-19 pandemic, this paper sought to establish how primary schools in Malawi implemented such measures. Details of these measures, which included decongesting schools and classes, remote learning, remedial learning and others, are discussed below.

3.2.1. Decongesting of schools and classes

Given the challenges of large classes faced by most primary schools in Malawi, especially in the lower grades of standards 1 to 4, where two-thirds of learners enrolled at

the primary school level are concentrated, there was great need to decongest the classes to ensure social distancing.

According to MoE (2020 b), most of the classes in Malawi range from 70 to 100 learners, which could encourage the spread of coronavirus given the way it is transmitted. According to the Ministry of Education guidelines for reopening schools, the ideal class size is 40 learners per class. Some of the suggested strategies to decongest schools and classes that schools were encouraged to apply included the following: splitting large classes using extra existing rooms like dining halls, open air classes and tents to increase the amount of learning space; employing the double shift system whereby the large classes should be split into two with one class in the morning and the other in the afternoon; overlapping classes; recruiting more teachers; redeploying teachers, increasing teacher-learner contact time; staggering the beginning and end of the school day; staggering break times; and cancelling assemblies, sports games and other events that create crowded conditions.

Given the different strategies for decongesting schools from which schools could choose depending on their situation/environment, schools decongested classes using different strategies. These vary from district to district and within districts from school to school. Common scenarios were as follows. Some schools allowed standards 1 to 4 to attend classes once in two days. I.e., standards 1 and 2 attend classes one day while standards 3 and 4 attend classes on the following day, and they keep alternating until the end of the term. Other schools split a class (for standards 1 to 4) into streams and choose which streams to attend school on which day. In the end, each stream attends class once in two days. This strategy was used due to an inadequate number of teachers to cater to new classes created in an attempt to reduce class sizes. Due to the same problem, it was not possible to have all the classes on the same day. Some schools allowed standards 1 and 2 to attend classes in the morning and standards 3 and 4 to attend classes in the afternoon. This meant attending classes every day but with reduced time. Such schools had adequate numbers of teachers to cater to the different classes. It is worth noting that an adequate number of teachers and classroom availability are also key to decongesting classes. With a sufficient number of classrooms, learners can be split into a number of classes, but without teachers to teach them, such efforts are unbeneficial. Therefore, with the current teacher shortages in Malawi, decongesting is a daunting task. Interviews with some PEAs and teachers revealed that in some schools with very high enrolment, for instance, over 300 learners in a class, it was challenging to reduce the class size to less than 40 learners per class considering that the numbers of teachers and classrooms are inadequate in schools. It is therefore imperative for the government to fast track teacher recruitment and enhance teacher deployment to schools with inadequate numbers of teachers.

The study also observed that most of the schools had cancelled morning assemblies to avoid crowding and reduce the spread of Covid-19. While schools are striving to comply with these measures, there have been instances where adherence has been hampered by large school enrolments, inadequate numbers of teachers, inadequate

numbers of classrooms and minimal enforcement by some school authorities. Teachers reported that it was difficult for schools to control learners during break time with most of the learners playing around and creating crowded scenarios.

3.2.2. Remote Learning

To mitigate the negative educational impacts of long school closures due to the pandemic, the Ministry of Education organized some distance learning opportunities for learners to continue receiving their education at home. Remote learning frameworks included the use of radio, television, internet and mobile technology (MoE, 2020 a). The radio and television programs were mainly meant for primary school learners, and online learning materials that demanded internet and mobile technologies were mainly meant for secondary school learners and those in tertiary institutions. The use of textbooks and printed study guides for rural primary school learners with limited technology during the school closures was also explored (Department of Inspection and Advisory Services report, 2020).

3.2.3. Remedial Learning

Before Covid-19, although schools and teachers were encouraged to utilize remedial learning for learners who were falling behind, no formal guidelines were enacted, and most teachers were not formally trained on how this could be done. According to Ravishankar, El-Kogali Sankar, Tanaka, and Rakoto-Tiana (2016), primary education in Malawi is characterized by low learning outcomes with learners progressing to higher grades without necessarily having acquired basic competencies. Despite such evidence, no effort to encourage remedial learning to support such learners seemed to have been made by the education system.

As a result of Covid-19 and the long school closures, it was realized that many learners were not accessing the remote learning strategies such as radio that had been established. There was greater awareness among education officials that a large majority of primary school learners will fall behind in their learning. This, coupled with the fact that learning outcomes were already low, meant that there would be large challenges when schools reopened. Under the guidelines for reopening schools during the pandemic, the ministry identified remedial learning as one of the guiding educational principles. The guidelines advised educators that schools should put the central focus on remedial education and catching up and advised schools to maximize instructional time (by extending timetables to accommodate daily remedial instruction periods) for learners and make adjustments to timetables to accommodate remedial instruction before and after classes (MoE, 2020 b). To facilitate the implementation of remedial education, all teachers were trained and reoriented on remedial education strategies before schools reopened. Schools were also instructed to conduct formative assessments during the first week of reopening in order to assess learners' retention during the school closures and continuous assessment during remedial lessons to track progress.

The remedial learning strategy also outlined different roles and responsibilities stakeholders were supposed to take. District education officials (directors of education, youth and sports and district education managers) were tasked with the responsibility of providing guidance to support learning recovery after reopening, provide training for head teachers and primary education advisors on the guidelines and support remedial lessons through providing teaching and learning materials. Furthermore, head teachers were to be responsible for providing support to learners who had fallen behind during the school closures with special attention to students from poor households, students from disadvantaged areas and students with disabilities using strategies such as remedial or catch-up classes, after school study classes, and/or learning during school holidays. In addition, head teachers were supposed to ensure that the primary focus of remedial programs should be on foundational skills, early literacy and numeracy. Head teachers were also responsible for ensuring that blended learning strategies were developed, such as school/home, especially for students with disabilities. Head teachers were also to ensure that alternative learning approaches such as workbooks with lesson notes and exercises were utilized.

However, the remediation periods were not possible in some schools because of the shifting and staggering of classes that was adopted as a measure to decongest the schools and classes. Unless the contextual factors are first addressed, it will remain a dream to expect quality education in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic.

3.2.4. Sanitation and Hygiene

According to one of the PEAs, schools sought to adhere to the sanitation measures, and the Ministry supplied necessities such as buckets of water and chlorine for disinfecting surfaces. However, the schools experienced an inconsistent supply of disinfecting materials and other necessary materials such as soap and sanitizers. This resulted in sporadic disinfection of the surfaces and washing hands without soap.

3.2.5. Use of Facemasks

Various reports from the schools indicate that it has been difficult for learners to comply with the requirement of wearing masks, especially in the early days of school reopening. Some learners did not have face masks due to either a lack of seriousness of their parents or due to poverty. Some complained of difficulties breathing, others with underlying conditions such as asthma felt uncomfortable with the masks, and others just hated the idea of wearing masks. It took much sensitization by the Ministry of Education together with nongovernmental organizations for people to appreciate the importance of children wearing face masks in school. In some cases, well-wishers donated face masks to learners who did not have face masks. Teachers in some schools had to literally sew facemasks for themselves and needy children. Mother groups were also taught on how to design and sew face masks, which were also distributed to needy learners. However, it was challenging for the mother groups to mass produce such face masks due to limited

resources and since they were made by hand. Furthermore, regular washing of the cloth masks appeared to be problematic, especially for boys. It is advisable that school administrators and teachers work together and enforce adherence to the practice of wearing masks in schools.

3.2.6 Disease monitoring and management

Reports on the ground indicate that although some schools are trying to implement the measures provided on disease monitoring and management, there are cases where coordination between the schools and the HSAs has been problematic as the HSAs do not regularly visit the schools, especially primary schools. Most schools were also reported not to have special rooms designated for isolating sick learners and teachers due to inadequate and poor school infrastructure.

3.3. Impact of Covid-19 on education
3.3.1. Decongestion of schools and classes

Despite the fact that decongesting classes helps schools maintain a class size of 40 in an effort to enhance social distancing, it has greatly affected how schools and classes are organized.

Decongesting classes has led to huge losses in learning time, especially in schools where learners in lower standards attend classes once in two days, losing half of the days in the entire term. For instance, when the schools reopened on 7 September 2020, learners were expected to attend school for 74 days (excluding one day for the Mothers' Day holiday) before closing. However, those learners attending classes once in two days only attended school for 37 days and lost 37 days of learning. Already, the schools had lost 2 weeks of the second term and 14 weeks of the third term due to the school closures. With the adjustment made to the school calendar by the Ministry of Education, the number of days for learning per year has also been reduced. It is well known that time spent learning, or learning time, is one of the most reliable predictors of learning opportunities. Evidence indicates that any interruption in schooling, including scheduled vacations, can lead to a loss of learning for many children. Lavy (2015), cited in Cattaneo et al (2016), examined international gaps in student achievement, estimated the effects of instructional time using PISA 2006 data and found that instructional time has a positive and significant effect on test scores. Clearly, Covid-19 has had impacts on the policy responses in the education sector. Before Covid-19, it was emphasized in education policy that there should be 60 learners to 1 teacher in a classroom, but with the pandemic, the government emphasized 40 learners per class at the primary education level.

The study also found that teachers were not able to deliver as much work as they would have in normal circumstances because they only taught the learners half the time following the decongestion of the classes. This implies that the loss of learning time due to Covid-19 also poses the danger of limiting the delivery of the curriculum to learners within the specified time.

In addition, learners who attended classes once in two days tended to lose the knowledge and skills gained when they stayed at home. This confirms what other studies found regarding learning time. Reimers (2020) stated that the interruption of one's studies causes not only a suspension of learning time but also a loss of knowledge and skills gained. This is likely to exacerbate the learning crisis characterized by low levels of learning with large numbers of students not acquiring the basics in literacy and numeracy that already existed during the pre-Covid-19 period in Malawi.

Attending classes once in two days has also led to increased absenteeism among learners, especially young learners in some schools. Young learners, especially those whose parents do not have interest in education, end up being absent from school on the days they are supposed to be in school while others end up showing up to school on days they are supposed to stay home. This confusion would easily be solved by the involvement of parents in monitoring children's attendance in school at the time of Covid-19. However, some schools were able to sensitize parents to the new norm of school attendance and had fewer problems.

3.3.2. Remote learning

Despite the government implementing various remote learning platforms, the lack of the necessary tools for remote learning made it extremely difficult for Malawian learners and students to fully access and utilize the platforms that the government implemented. Primary education advisors that were interviewed in this study indicated that the remote learning strategies that the government implemented did not reach many learners as most of them do not have access to the necessary tools such as smartphones and radios. Additionally, most students come from rural and poor backgrounds where the opportunity costs of schooling are high, making it unlikely that they would find space and time at home to engage in home schooling. Although the government encouraged parents and guardians to support their children's learning at home, this was not always possible as some parents/guardians in Malawi are illiterate. According to the 2018 population and housing census, the literacy rate for those aged 5 and above in Malawi was 69%. Apart from being illiterate, some parents are more often busy working in fields or engaging in their small-scale businesses to sustain their livelihoods. Hence, learning at home in Malawi cannot be guaranteed due to technological and economic barriers. Although the government indicated that textbooks and printed study guides will also be distributed to rural learners with limited technology, the extent to which this was done remains unclear.
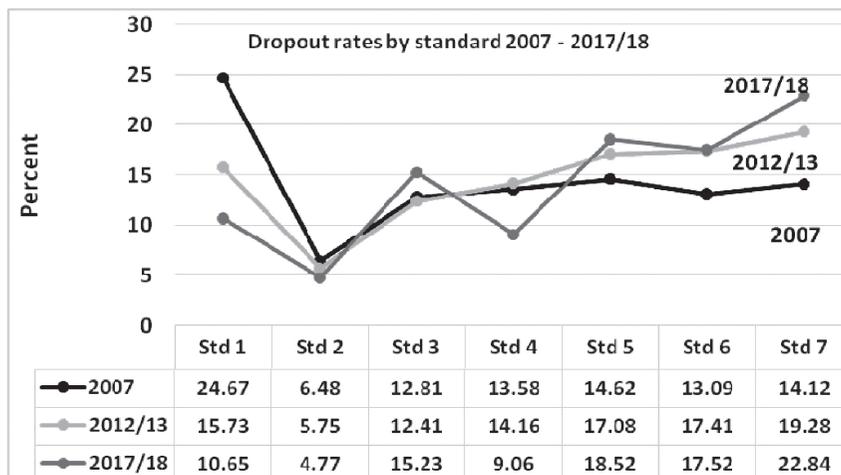
3.3.3. Enrolment and Dropout

Primary school enrolment was universalized after the implementation of free primary education in 1994. Gross enrolment rates have exceeded 100% since 1994; however, during the same period, net enrolment rates have been below 100%, suggesting that not all eligible school-age children are enrolled in school. In 2020, for example, the fifth Integrated Household Survey (IHS5) estimated the NER to be 88% and thee GER

to be 123% (NSO, 2020). Over the past five years, primary enrolment grew by 2.4% on average. Primary school enrolment increased from 4,901,009 in 2015/2016 to 5,371,563 in 2019/2020 with female enrolment being consistently higher than male enrolment over the period. The gap between female and male enrolment appears to be widening over the period. Long school closures, in addition to disrupting learning, were also widely expected to decrease the demand for education. Such disruptions are likely to have a negative impact on enrolment. It is largely expected that enrolment might decrease from pre- Covid-19 levels because of the socioeconomic shocks that households are experiencing as a result of the pandemic. When schools reopened, there were reports that Covid-19 was expected to have led to a deceleration of enrolment growth between 2019/20 and post-2020 school years.

With the school closures, there were fears of increased dropout when schools reopened. The primary education system in Malawi is already plagued by the persistent problem of high levels of wastage in terms of high repetition and dropout rates and low completion rates, which have stubbornly continued to undermine the gains Malawi has made since 1994 in increasing access to primary education.

Dropout rates in primary education in Malawi have been persistently high and increased significantly during the pandemic. During the period when schools were closed, it was reported that the incidence of teenage pregnancies and early marriages significantly increased from the previous year. Figure 1 shows the dropout rates by standard for 3 periods. Generally, dropout rates were lowest in standard 2 across the 3 time periods and higher for the rest of the standards. It is possible that Covid-19 may have exacerbated the already high levels of dropout mainly as a result of school disruption causing the long school closure period.

Figure 1: Dropout rates in Malawi primary school over the years

	Std 1	Std 2	Std 3	Std 4	Std 5	Std 6	Std 7
2007	24.67	6.48	12.81	13.58	14.62	13.09	14.12
2012/13	15.73	5.75	12.41	14.16	17.08	17.41	19.28
2017/18	10.65	4.77	15.23	9.06	18.52	17.52	22.84

Source: Calculated using data from the MoE, Malawi Education Statistics, various years

With Covid-19, the dropout rates were expected to have significantly increased from previous levels. Schools remained closed for 6 months, and this raised fears that many children would fail to report to school after their reopening. Anecdotal reports confirmed these fears with some districts and schools reporting that many children, especially girls, did not return to school after schools reopened. An Interactive Voice Response (IVR) survey conducted by UNICEF reports that after schools reopened, 22% of primary school children did not return to school. The major reasons given for not returning to school after reopening included concerns that schools were not safe (54%) and pregnancy and early marriage (17%) (UNICEF Malawi, 2020-2). A government-led Covid-19 rapid assessment of teenage pregnancies and child marriages reported 13,000 cases of child marriages and over 40,000 cases of teenage pregnancies during the period when schools were closed between March and July 2020 (UNICEF Malawi, 2020-1). The cases represented an increase of 11% in the cases compared to the same period in the previous year. According to the report, the main reasons for this were cultural beliefs, lack of economic and social alternatives for the youth and the desire to start a family (ibid).

4. Conclusion and way forward

4.1. Conclusion

Overall, Covid-19 caused serious disruptions to education service delivery and is likely to have long-term negative impacts on learning outcomes. The pandemic has also widened inequalities in access to education and in learning outcomes between children coming from the richest and poorest households and between children from rural and urban areas. However, the pandemic has resulted in some positive policy changes that have the potential to improve the quality of education in the long term. For example, in order to decongest classrooms, class sizes have been reduced. In addition, remote education is once again receiving attention, and efforts are underway to develop remote education as an alternative method of education delivery. Strategies for remedial learning have been developed and teachers are focusing on how they can deliver remedial learning. This important aspect of teaching and learning was not prioritized in the pre- Covid-19 period despite overwhelming evidence of low learning outcomes among learners.
Enrolment and dropout

The long period of school closure at the beginning of the pandemic is believed to have resulted in high dropout rates, which disproportionately affected girls, children from disadvantaged families and children from rural areas. During the school closures, incidences of teenage pregnancy and early marriages escalated, resulting in early dropout from school. Although official data on post-school closure enrolment are not yet available, there were reports that after reopening, a significant number of children failed to return to school. Anecdotal evidence suggests that after reopening, there was a decline in enrolment compared to the pre- Covid-19 period. Unless strategies to sustain the demand for education are implemented, the socioeconomic impacts of Covid-19 may force

households to withdraw their children from school as a coping strategy. Covid-19 has the potential to depress the demand for education as households seek to handle the pandemic.

Decongestion

The emergence of Covid-19 provided an opportunity for the government to think outside the box. They devised strategies to ensure the safety of learners and the provision of quality education. The government encouraged schools to decongest their schools, including reducing class sizes to 40 learners, which was very helpful in maintaining social distancing. The decongestion of classes varied from school to school with some schools allowing learners to attend lessons every day but with reduced time while other schools opted for learners in the lower grades to attend classes once every two days. However, this created challenges given the inadequate resources such as inadequate numbers of teachers and classrooms in the schools. This led to a great loss in learning time, which would eventually affect learner performance. It also led to absenteeism of learners, especially young learners.

Remote learning

It is clear that the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic caught the education sector in Malawi off-guard as structures for remote learning did not exist and were not fully developed. As a result, very few learners and students benefitted from the remote learning measures that were implemented. Hence, the long closure of the schools as a result of the pandemic resulted in lost learning for many if not all learners. Cognizant of this fact, when schools reopened, the government of Malawi implemented strategies for compensating for the lost learning. Such strategies included remedial learning while in school and remote learning when the learners were not in school during afternoon hours the weekends. However, the following question remains: "to what extent have these catch-up strategies been implemented?"

Remedial learning

The pandemic also led to the loss of learning, which experts say may not be reversible. Schools were closed for 6 months, during which the majority of learners were not reached by distance or remote education because structures and resources for distance education were not fully developed. Although strategies for remedial education have been implemented, there are fears that because of teacher shortages due to huge enrolment numbers, these strategies may not be effectively implemented such that their impact on learning outcomes will be minimal at best.

4.2. Way forward

Given the challenging environment of inadequate numbers of teachers and inadequate school infrastructure such as classrooms in Malawian primary schools, there is a need for the government to seriously invest in these aspects through recruiting teachers and enhancing teacher deployment to schools with inadequate numbers of teachers if quality education is to be provided amidst the Covid-19 pandemic. There is also a need to enhance community involvement in the education of their children.

As a long-term measure, it is also important for the government of Malawi to seriously invest in technology that would support remote learning strategies not only in times such as those presented by the Covid-19 pandemic but also as a means of increasing access to education at all levels. Current government efforts in reviving school broadcasting services are commended. These services should be made permanent structures of the education system because they have the potential to reach rural children and can be easily scaled up among the masses.

Finally, there is a need to strengthen the monitoring of the current remedial learning strategies that have been implemented as they offer opportunities for further improving learning outcomes among primary education learners.

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