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An assessment of the quality of learning in proliferated pre-primary schools (Nursery schools) in Malawi: A case of Lilongwe urban private schools

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Abstract

This cross-sectional survey explored the quality of education in private pre-primary schools in Malawi. Based on the Montessori framework of learning, the study aimed at assessing the quality of learning in the proliferated pre-primary schools (Nursery schools) using a case of Lilongwe urban private schools. Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected. Quantitative data was collected through structured questions using the Kobo toolbox. Qualitative data was collected through key informant interviews. Observations were also used as data collection tool to triangulate the responses from the respondents. The Montessori approach is a child-centered methodology that applies scientific interpretations from childhood to understand. From the results of the study, several schools were found to have a crop of experienced teachers who can handle the children in schools. In addition, most schools had chairs and furniture available for the children to use during the teaching and learning process: an important element in the Montessori approach. The study however, found that there was no harmony in the type of curricula used in private pre-schools in Malawi. While some schools are using the local curriculum, several schools use foreign curricula including the Montessori, Cambridge, and Abeka, and even some are using local-foreign blended curricula. As a result, there are varying views about the quality of education because everyone is basing the premise of quality on what works for them. Nevertheless, there are positive results especially arising those using foreign curricula as evidenced from the Montessori approach. In terms of technology adoption, most schools are lagging in using modern technology. The only technology common in the schools is the use of a television screen that is normally used to beam cartoons for children in the baby classes.

All in all, most schools are on the right trajectory in ensuring the implementation of quality education. However, if not quickly addressed, the observable gaps in the implementation can adversely affect the quality of education. On the other hand, the presence of critical elements and application of foreign curricula in several schools seem to work positively towards the promotion of quality of education in private pre-schools. Another critical milestone in private preschools is the emphasis on the attainment of critical skills by learners before they transition to the elementary level such as reading. Despite some milestones achieved, there is still a need for more efforts to be applied to raise and improve the quality of education offered in private pre-schools. Among the recommendations of the study is to consider the involvement of the government in the regulation of private preschools. In addition, there is a need for harmonization of the curriculum to enable the schools to align their learning with the national developmental long-term aspirations.

Keywords: Pre-primary education, early childhood education, private schools, quality of education, Montessori approach

Introduction

Pre-primary education has become a key important piece and is recognized by the majority across the world as a necessary stage of the education process for a child's development including contribution to the cognitive and social-emotional foundation (OECD, 2019) [76].

Lately, several countries have stepped up efforts aimed at expanding pre-primary education popularly known as the early childhood education in other circles. According to Ashurova (2021) ^[8], the need for quality education in the early childhood learning stage forms a strong foundation for the journey of education for a child. The pre-schooling stage is profound and imperative in the development of a child because all the preceding stages of education rely on this important foundation (Mukhiddinovna & Mukimovna, 2021) ^[67]. The ramifications of skipping this important stage of education are broad and transcendent. There is evidence that the inability to access early childhood education negatively affects the nation in the long run as failure by the government in the provision of preschool education deprives the nation of the human capital necessary to bridge the inequality gaps and promote peaceful societies and flourishing societies (Mukhiddinovna & Mukimovna, 2021) ^[67]. To some extent, the inability to provide quality pre-primary education restricts child's future to attaining the highest grade of their potential (*Early Childhood Education | UNICEF*, n.d.).

It is widely accepted that pre-primary education forms and is an important component of basic education and a necessary condition to achieve the goals of education for all. Other scholars continue to highlight that subsequent levels of a child's development are to a larger extent, dependent on the value input gained in the early five years of development (Black *et al.*, 2019, Cavallera *et al.*, 2019) ^[16, 21].

Realizing the importance of the foundation built by pre-schooling, different countries have taken different approaches in stepping up the efforts to provide early childhood education in their respective countries. Some developed countries, including the United States of America and France, have taken a further approach where the provision of childhood education is proportionally subsidized by the government (Vetter *et al.*, 2022) ^[97]. Other countries have embarked on a private-public partnership approach that has contributed to the implementation of early childhood education (Comfort, 2014) ^[23]. In other cases, especially in developed countries, private institutions providing early childhood education have been directly supported with annual funding by the central government. There is general goodwill for the provision of pre-primary school education in developing countries where some private preschools are supported by the government through pre-arranged financial support. Again, not only early childhood education is a requirement, but it is compulsory both in developed countries and developing countries across the world (Fredriksson *et al.*, 2020, Gayatri, 2020) ^[34, 35].

In most African countries, especially the sub-Saharan countries, the quality of education including the systems of education takes a different tangent to the type of pre-education implemented in the developed countries (Zhang *et al.*, 2021, Ardington *et al.*, 2021) ^[99, 61]. While the education provision is heavily controlled and managed by the central government, the education system in private institutions is polarised. Overall, the government still controls the policy guidelines, but the daily operations of private schools are entirely controlled privately by school owners and only to some extent, managed through private entities that are only affiliated with specific groups.

According to Ikegbusi (2021) ^[40], Nigeria's education system has more children enrolled in private pre-primary schools than those enrolled in public pre-primary schools. While high tuition fees characterize private schools, the majority of

students especially in the urban and peri-urban are heavily enrolled in private pre-primary schools. In comparison to other African countries, countries in the East African part have more children enrolled in public pre-primary schools than private pre-schools. However, a larger percentage of public schools are characterized by a dearth of essential resources for the normal functioning of a school (Abdullahi & Adebayo, 2019, Palermo *et al.*, 2019) ^[1, 79].

In Tanzania, the operationalization of child centres nursery schools, and pre-primary education are directly affiliated with a government primary school (Ndijuye & Tandika, 2020, Baum *et al.*, 2019, Ndijuye *et al.*, 2022) ^[74, 13, 43]. Private preschool education providers are only allowed to provide education up to the age of five. In 1995, the government of Tanzania put into effect an educational policy called Education and Training Policy that formalized early childhood education into the formal education system. Since then, pre-primary education has been recognized by the government as essential to enhancing child development and development of potential transition in the child (Baum *et al.*, 2019, Lyayuka, 2020) ^[13, 55].

Education provided by private institutions plays a significant role in the development and advancement of education quality and standards across the world (Green *et al.*, 2010) ^[36]. Pre-primary private schools have created an option for most parents in fast pacing world to allow their children to access education in a convenient, and at times, high quality than the education provided by the state while at the same time giving the comfort and flexibility for parents to attend to their daily business.

In Malawi, the number of private schools at all stages of education including preschool, primary, secondary, and tertiary continues to increase (Asim *et al.*, 2019) ^[9]. Unlike in the past when private schools only existed to fill the gap to accommodate students that did not make it to state-owned schools, to date, private schools now fill the gaps created by the state's schools. Such gaps include offering a higher quality of education, convenience, and other ancillary factors that are now deemed superior to those offered by the state (Martono *et al.*, 2020) ^[59].

Malawi desires to transform into a 'wealthy and self-reliant, industrialized upper middle-income country by 2063'. This is captioned in the long-termed plan called Agenda 2023 aimed at moving Malawi from the current impoverished into an economically sound nation. Among the indicators of the Agenda 2063, *inter alia* include enhancing the quality of early childhood, primary, and secondary education systems. The goals of the agenda are also closely linked to the global sustainable development goal (SDGs), aligns with the various human rights frameworks and conventions on education, and locally support the constitution of the public of Malawi together with other laws and acts aimed at the promotion of education.

Malawi still contends the need to develop human resource ability, which is the direct result of challenges resulting from poor quality of education at all levels including early childhood, primary, and secondary levels (*Malawi Private Enrolment in Primary Education, 1970-2022 - Knoema.Com*, n.d.). The Malawi education sector is comprised of 5 subsectors including basic education consisting of early childhood, development, complementary basic education, adult literacy, and primary education; secondary education; teacher education; tertiary education (universities, technical and vocational education), and cross-cutting services.

According to Shallwani (2018) ^[90], most studies on pre-primary education have tended to focus on the public education provided through Community-Based Child Centres (CBCC) in Malawi. Most CBCCs are started and run by local or international Non-Governmental Organisations NGOs (45%) or by communities (42%) (Baum *et al.*, 2019) ^[13].

Initially, CBCCs were introduced in Malawi to meet the physical and nutritional needs of children while to a lesser extent focusing on educational outcomes. Over time, calls have been made from a wider stakeholder base to allow CBCCs to meet the demands of the changing nature of knowledge by stressing the education component. Almost all the CBCCs are run by local education community committees that include representatives of members from different structures of the society including parents, gatekeepers, and other important structures in the community.

There has been unprecedented growth of private pre-primary schools in the world and this has attracted the attention of central government and scholars alike (Cavallera *et al.*, 2019) ^[21]. The fast-growing conditions of urban centres with subsequent growth in the population and expansion of parallel settlements have created a population of children that require preschool education. This has attracted the attention of both entrepreneurs and education stakeholders with the need for the introduction of private pre-primary schools to meet the needs of the growing population. While the population presents a need for the introduction of schools, others have taken advantage to create a market value for the same through the provision of pre-primary school education. However, little has been studied about the status, the quality of education, and the way things are run in private pre-schools in Malawi. Lately, there has been a proliferation of private pre-primary schools in most urban settings of the country. Most of the studies conducted on the pre-schooling have tended to concentrate on the rural setting CBCC provided by the government. Data is very limited on the quality of education provided in private pre-primary schools in Malawi. Shallwani (2018) ^[90] highlights that CBCCs are more concentrated in rural areas than in urban areas with few private pre-schools, as such there could be gaps in the provision of pre-primary education in rural settings. Most urban areas are without public-run pre-primary schools and this motivates parents to send their children to private pre-schools hence a rise in demand for such schools. However, the status of education remains scanty as evidenced by the lack of data on the subject. In Tanzania however, the quality of education provided in private pre-primary schools is of higher quality than in public pre-primary schools (Shavega *et al.*, 2016, Legkauskas & Magelinskaitė-Legkauskienė, 2021) ^[91, 50].

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2016 delineates the country's policy on education that guides education in Malawi. Early childhood Development (ECD) and early childhood education (ECE), primary and secondary education are acknowledged as an essential basis for the pursuit of further education. The policy describes the need to provide quality education holistically through increased access and equity, improved quality and relevance, and improves governance and management. In addition, the NEP supports the government's commitment to international commitment to support childhood education. Furthermore, the NEP recognizes the government's

commitment to related international conventions including the Education for All (EFA) and sustainable development Goals that categorically ensure education for all. The policy has to some extent therefore liberalized pre-primary education and since then education continues to be provided by both the government and private's institutions. Over the past decade, therefore, there has been a proliferation of private pre-primary schools especially in the urban centres. In Malawi, the enrolment of private enrolment in primary schools has increased. This show depicts the increased number of students enrolling in private primary schools in Malawi (*Malawi Private Enrolment in Primary Education, 1970-2022 - Knoema.Com*, n.d.).

Most studies in Malawi carried out on pre-primary education have tended to focus on pre-primary education offered by the government in ECD through CBCCs which are normally found in rural areas and tend to be managed by the community or non-governmental organizations. Studies carried out in Malawi on preschool education have all focused on public pre-primary schools offered in rural settings (Shallwani *et al.*, 2018, Raikes *et al.*, 2020, Munthali *et al.*, 2014, Soni *et al.*, 2020, Black *et al.*, 2020, Lu *et al.*, 2020) ^[90, 83, 69, 95, 15, 54]. Therefore this study will focus on private pre-primary education with a focus on the quality of staff, the issue of motivation to do with the staff, the role the proprietors play in the running of the institution, challenges to understanding the level of quality of education in the private pre-primary schools.

Literature review

The concept of quality in education

Over the past years, the issue of quality in education has gained ground and has strongly been stressed in the process of teaching and learning. The global sustainable goal recognizes quality education as an essential component of achievements to have been attained by the year 2030 (Bacon *et al.*, 2023, Robert *et al.*, 2005) ^[50, 85].

While quality is unanimously agreed as an imperative ingredient in education Guo (2019) ^[37], the concept of quality is regarded as broad as such it becomes difficult to isolate a specific definition that can comprehensively capture the definition of quality in education in its entirety without overlapping in other concepts (Ryzhov *et al.*, 2021, Dias *et al.*, 2022) ^[87, 31]. Highlighting the concept of quality, Kusumawati (2022) ^[48] argues that the term quality in education is elusive, and mostly when applied to education, it is largely used without a specific definition. Nevertheless, the term quality could largely be defined in line with the underlying goals and values that form the basis and standards which the education system wants to achieve. Brown (2019) ^[17] asserts that there exist the echelons within the concept of education that forms building blocks when looking at the concept of quality at the pre-primary school level. One such level is the classroom quality that is peculiar to how children gain assessable knowledge, skills as well as attitudes, and behaviors. The other level of quality could deal with the economic goal of places where learners come from and the last level deals with the relevance of education concerning the broader sense of education (Kim *et al.*, 2018) ^[45].

Nevertheless, the concept of quality continues to draw different perspectives among different scholars. For example, contemporary scholars take the views of quality in terms of application to the social development tangent. The emphasis on quality, therefore, is placed on inputs such as

infrastructure, and books, and outputs such as the number of students qualifying for a particular skill or courses studied (Morgan, 2019, Li *et al.*, 2019) ^[66, 51]. Other similar words synonymous with quality of education include efficiency, equity, and effectiveness (Krasnov *et al.*, 2018) ^[47]. It is necessary therefore, to ensure that the definition of quality is flexible to allow a wide scope of changes that have become a norm in the education spectrum (Muttaqin, 2018, Kauko *et al.*, 2018) ^[70, 42], this is because other elements also play an important role in determining the state of quality of education including politics, culture, and economy.

Different approaches can be considered while looking at the concept of quality in education. These include the humanistic approach, the positivist approach, and the economic approach. While looking at childhood education, the issue of quality can slightly be different from traits that may be considered at different levels including the primary, secondary, or tertiary education levels. Elements associated with quality at the preschool level can consider issues of accessibility, and the required skills of teachers, including sustainability of the learning process.

Among the major goals for ensuring the quality of education, including the need to achieve excellence in the processes of education, inputs, and outputs that are reflected in literacy levels, numerals, and other equally important essential education skills. As such, it is not erroneous to state that quality of education involves elements that include learners, the teaching and school environments, the content of materials being offered to learners, the process involved in the implementation of education, and the learning outcomes of the learners (Kauko *et al.*, 2018) ^[42]. At the same time, it is also imperative to note that the elements that make up the quality of education do not work in isolation but rather are interdependent on another element (Madani, 2019, Darmaji *et al.*, 2019) ^[56, 26].

In the context of this study, a humanistic approach that emphasizes that education be looked at through the lenses of the process will be adopted (Purswell, 2019, Javadi & Tahmasbi, 2020) ^[82, 41].

Quality of the product (Learner)

Education is meant to enhance the behavior of learners in teaching and learning and therefore learners are at the centre when looking at the quality of education. According to Bindewald (2022) ^[14], learners are at the heart of the process of teaching and learning including developing policies and other adjustments that ensure the quality of education. Several conditions need to be taken into consideration such as knowledge, interest status, language, race, gender culture, and language when considering interventions that aim at enhancing education among the learners. Another equally important aspect germane to learners is the process of quality of education parental support that is reflected in the involvement of parents in the teaching and learning process of the learners at school. Active involvement of parents in the education process of the learners confirms to have a positive effect on the attainment of skills and motivation of learners (Silinskas & Kikas, 2019) ^[93]. An extant study indicates that numerous factors contribute to the attendance of cleaners in pre-schools and among the common characteristic is the higher level of involvement of parents which ripple effect to improved child performance in class (Henderson *et al.*, 2020, Prakash *et al.*, 2019) ^[39, 81]. A common characteristic among high-performing learners in preschool is regular attendance

(Mikuyu, n.d.). As highlighted by Morgan (2019) ^[66], regular attendance at school by learners translates into high-performance of the students. Consistent with this assertion is a study by Sherif & Venter (2021) ^[92] who highlights that learners with consistent attendance in schools tend to achieve higher than others.

The learning environment

The teaching and learning environment is made up of and influenced by some elements that include physical surroundings, psychosocial, and the delivery of learning in the setup (Arslan, 2021) ^[7]. A peaceful, safe environment that allows a diversity of learner to dwell together to achieve their education significantly contribute to the teaching and learning outcome (Soltaninejad *et al.*, 2021, Al Mushaiqri *et al.*, 2021, Kippe *et al.*, 2021) ^[94, 4, 40]. An equally important element regarding the school environment includes the location and the state of condition of the school infrastructures. As highlighted by Anderstaf (2021) ^[5], elements including the presence of essential and basic materials such as furniture, books, washrooms, and clean water supply are critical elements when looking at the quality of education. While such elements are critical, their presence is not enough, such elements need to be of high quality (Özbeý & Köyceğiz, 2020, Nah, 2020) ^[78, 71]. In addition, an all-inclusive setting further curtails the perpetuation of discrimination in the school environment. An environment that is free from discrimination and allows inclusiveness is an important quality aspect of the quality of education (Erikson, 2020, Lancaster & Bain, 2020) ^[33, 49]. There is nexus between policy and implementation of initiatives that aim at bridging the gaps between teaching and learning and the quality of education in pre-schools. Therefore, a closer look at factors that contribute to the quality of education is imperative to the achievement of educational goals.

Quality of the teaching and learning content

The content materials contained in the teaching and learning content have far-reaching results on the learners' education outcomes (Li *et al.*, 2019) ^[51]. The type of curriculum used has a bearing on the type of knowledge the learners will gain after being exposed to the curriculum. The use of the local curriculum and the adoption of foreign curricula greatly influence what learners acquire in the process of education differently. While the content presented to learners in private pre-primary schools may be similar in some way Lillard (2019) ^[53], there are some significant variations in the way such content is presented to students in class that make others superior. As such, some content presented to learners may be of higher quality or value than others. There are therefore specific responses and criteria used by the pre-schools in the adoption or rejection of a particular curriculum for their schools. Among the factors influencing the types of content used or not used by the school include the knowledge of the proprietor, the setting of the school, and the economic abilities of the school as well as the vision of the school (Nah, 2020) ^[71].

The quality of teaching and supporting staff in private Pre-schools

An important component when looking at the quality of education is the element of teacher qualification (Rentzou *et al.*, 2019) ^[84]. Most countries that are now developed have deliberately set up standards required for any professionals to

teach in pre-primary schools. As highlighted by Nasiopoulou (2019) ^[72] there is a remarkable difference in the qualifications of teaching staff available in the public and private institutions. Most teachers in the CBCCs in Malawi are not qualified and mainly work on a part-time and volunteer basis (Sherif & Venter, 2021) ^[92]. In other countries including England, teachers required to teach in the pre-schools are required to have an undergraduate degree (Melnyk *et al.*, 2019, Paull & Popov, 2019) ^[63, 80]. In addition, there is also a general requirement that 50 % of teachers must possess at least a level 2 qualification that is equivalent to two years of post-compulsory schooling. This however is in sharp contrast with the requirements for teachers that have flooded teaching in CBCCs in Malawi. According to Soni (2020) ^[95], the minimum requirement set of MSCE, for teachers required to teach in CBCCs is barely adhered to. Most teachers and caregivers have not completed the primary school level of education. Which is the lowest qualification possible in the education system in Malawi. In other countries including Brazil, a study by Seusan & Maradiegue (2020) ^[89] found that there is no significant difference in the qualifications between those teaching in the public school and those teaching in the private school. On the other hand, a study by Khatete (2019) ^[43] in Nigeria registered that there is a difference in the range of qualifications for teachers in private preschools. Further, this study found out that the state of the level of qualification among private preschools is very bad and does not have standardized elements among the teaching professionals. In an extant study conducted by Bwezani (2022) ^[19], Malawi underscores the importance of teacher qualifications. While the study recommends the need for caregivers/teachers in the CBCCs in Malawi, the study does not contribute any information regarding the state of qualification of teachers in private pre-schools again Kiende & Orodho (2019) ^[44] revealed that the qualification of teachers has an important bearing on the quality of the outcome of teaching efforts in the pre-primary section.

Several studies conducted in Malawi on preschool are bereft of data on the qualifications of teachers in private pre-schools in Malawi. Most studies have concentrated on the research in public CBCCs largely offered by the government, communities, and private institutions. Therefore, it is imperative to look at the levels of qualifications for teachers in the pre-primary schools among the private institutions as a prerequisite of the quality of preschool education.

The motivation of teachers in the private pre-primary schools

Another equally important element that largely contributes to the quality of education in private pre-primary schools includes the level of motivation of teachers. Silinskas & Kikas (2019) ^[93], argue that motivation is the psychological process in an individual that induces and stimulates a person to act in a certain manner. There the level of motivation of teachers has a huge bearing on the attainment of education goals by learners in schools. Another correlation exists between teachers' motivation, job satisfaction, and performance of teachers in the teaching and learning process (Melnyk *et al.*, 2019) ^[63]. However, there are mixed feelings about teacher motivation in the CBCCs and the education system in general. Scanty and no information appears to be available about the level of motivation of teachers in private pre-schools in Malawi. Extant studies in the sub-Saharan region reveal the different levels of reactions between the

motivation of teachers and the type of institution. As asserted by Aboagye (2020) ^[2], there is generally high motivation of teachers in private preschools than those teaching in public preschools. However, In another study by (Opoku *et al.*, 2020) ^[77], in Ghana revealed that the level of motivation of teachers in private pre-schools was low among many teachers. Many teachers cited the issues of remuneration and poor working conditions as contributing factors to low motivation. The study also continues to assert that there is a very significant correlation between teacher motivation and the standards of teaching and learning. Low motivation is generally followed by other deviant behavior displayed by the teacher including deterioration in the standards, misbehaviour, and despicable teaching and professional standards of the teacher (Dewaele, 2019) ^[30]. This in the end affects the process of teaching and learning with some schools producing poor results and outcomes among the student. Such behaviours when unchecked have the potential to completely harm the teaching and learning process of the learners when remain unchecked for a long time.

The role of proprietors in the quality of education in private pre-primary schools

The role played by the owners of school institutions in the enhancement of the quality of education goes a long way. Unlike public institutions where most of what the leaders of school institution is uniform across many schools and clearly outlined by the government, most private institutions' leadership and management depend on the set of guidelines determined by the owner of the school (Waruwu *et al.*, 2020, Mulleta *et al.*, 2020) ^[98, 68]. Mostly, private schools exist as business ventures where the main aim is to generate profits (Dewaele, 2019) ^[30]. However, there are other equally salient roles played by the proprietors that enhance the quality of education of private pre-primary school education. According to (Dar, 2021) ^[25], all other elements depend on the proprietors to fulfil them. Teacher qualifications, education, motivations, and job satisfaction all depend on the role of the proprietor to fulfil. A strong leader's role provided by the proprietors of private schools is critical to the enhancement and achievement of quality education. Proprietors need to be strong leaders who can lead groups of other staff members in the right direction. Proprietors assume the role of leaders naturally and their leadership style has a huge bearing on the outcomes of their institutions.

Research objectives

1. To assess the quality of learning environments and experiences – including the physical environment, inclusiveness, program and curriculum, and learning activities (language and literacy, numeracy, and free play).
2. To examine tutor's qualifications, compensation, and perceptions-including their education and training, their years of experience, their level of financial compensation for their work, and their comfort handling different teaching activities.
3. Explore the role of school owners in the promotion of quality education.

Research questions

1. What is the quality of early learning environments and experiences – including the physical environment, inclusiveness, program and curriculum, and learning

- activities (language and literacy, numeracy, and free play)?
2. What are tutor's qualifications, compensation, and perceptions – including their education and training, their years of experience, their level of financial compensation for their work, and their comfort handling different teaching activities
 3. What is the role of school owners in the promotion of quality in private pre-schools Explore the role of school.

Framework for quality of education in private early childhood schools

The Montessori theory of learning approach

The Montessori theory of learning is an approach to classroom learning, termed after Maria Montessori, who is believed to be the founder of the theory. The approach stresses two elements called independence and choice (Mavric, 2020) [61]. Maria Montessori was an Italian physician who was highly persuaded by her views while working with children suffering from developmental delays in Rome in the late 1890s.

The approach has some unique components that separate it from other theories of learning. Among them include the 3-hour time block for activities, mixed-aged classrooms, and specific learning materials and curricula (Ahlquist & Gynther, 2020) [3]. As highlighted by Chen & Guo (2021) [22], a Montessori classroom will normally look very different from a normal setup. Starting from the way materials are arranged to the play materials in the classroom and playground, everything is different from a normal classroom setup (D. Brown, 2023, Majid *et al.*, 2021) [18, 57].

The theory argues from the premise that naturally, children have the desire to learn and this can be adequately expressed in an appropriate environment (Baligadoo, 2020) [12]. As a result, the approach strives to form an enabling environment that is inundated with order cleanliness, comeliness, and peace (Damore & Rieckhof, 2021) [24]. As described by Debs (2022) [28], Montessori enables students to achieve a certain higher level of achievement in academic exploits. This is achieved through the creation of an enabling environment that promotes the development of the child intellectually, emotionally, and socially. The method is largely a child-centered methodology that applies scientific interpretations from childhood to understand. An important emphasis in the approach according to Lillard (2018) [52], is the emphasis on the collaboration of learners, making use of hands-on learning experiences and support for self-directed learning. Learners are directed to learn with specifically designed materials as opposed to direct instructions.

Another important key feature of the Montessori approach is the type of materials used which are student's age specific. Younger children are provided with materials that tend to enhance real-world skills. Children are therefore provided materials that boost real-world skills such as using scissors and other utensils (Montessori, 2018) [29, 28, 65, 88]. In addition, there is also a unique way of how students engage with the learning materials. There are normally extended periods given to students to ensure their interest is captured from students (Damore & Rieckhof, 2021) [24].

Another critical feature that differentiates a typical Montessori classroom from a normal classroom is that it is composed of children with multiple age groups learning together. An important feature of this setup is that children benefit from the families created within the classroom

thereby fostering social and academic traits within the classroom and the school (Saylor *et al.*, 2018) [88].

According to Demirbaga (2018) [29], the approach also argues that the child normally goes through learning planes that provide them with an opportunity to learn and master certain skill sets. The first plane of the Montessori is comprised of 0-6 year olds. During this stage, the child acquires language and develops an interest in small objects. The second plane includes children between the ages of 6-12, and this marks the beginning of the intellectual dependence of the child. The third plane largely made up of children between the ages of 13-18, is characterized by puberty and distinguished by the child's need for recognition of work. The fourth plane is largely made up of people between the ages of 18-24. An important characteristic of this stage is that this category exhibits a life of independence where they do most things on their own.

Among the advantages of the Montessori approach as highlighted by Ruhl (n.d.) include the emphasis on independent learning at a very young age, increased interaction of students, and creating an inclusive environment that allows for varying ages of students and availability of various learning styles and developmental pathways.

Methodology

This study was conducted in the Lilongwe urban City in locations or 'Areas' of 36, 37, 49, Kawale, and Likuni, Lilongwe is the capital city of Malawi and is located in the central region. It stands at an altitude of 1.05m.



Fig 1: Map of Lilongwe

Study Design

A research design is a pathway taken by the researcher to solicit responses to the set of questions and controlled variables (Bakker, 2018) [11]. The study employed a cross-sectional survey design throughout the research to assess the quality of education in private pre-schools. According to Hammad & Alqarni (2021) [38], cross-sectional survey research is applied where data is collected from an entire population or a subset of the population to assist in responding to the research questions.

The study also applied the mixed methods of research design. Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected. Quantitative data was collected through structured questions using the Kobo tool kit. Qualitative data was collected through key informant interviews. Observations were also conducted to triangulate the responses from the respondents.

Participants, sample size, and inclusion criteria

During the study, cross-sectional survey research was used to obtain data from the school environment, teachers, and school owners in private pre-schools through the application of probability and non-probability sampling techniques.

Purposive sampling was applied to ensure that the respondents were well knowledgeable of the status quo of education in private pre-schools to ensure the quality responses from the respondents. Purposive sampling has the advantage to solicit an in-depth knowledge of the phenomena under the study (Campbell *et al.*, 2020) ^[20].

The study was conducted purposively in the selected urban private pre-schools (n=31) in the urban areas of Lilongwe city the participants of the study included teachers, head teachers, and owners of the schools. 31 respondents were reached out, 17 males and 15 females.

Ethical consideration

Confidentiality of the research subjects was considered a priority during the data collection process. No names were identified or assigned to any respondent, and only numbers

were assigned to be used for data analysis. Consent was sought from each respondent before commencement of data collection and each respondent was informed of his or her right to participate in the data collection process. All the materials used for data collection will be handled with strict confidentiality.

Quality assurance and control

The researcher ensured that the researcher did all the data collection without using a third party. This ensured that the researcher obtains the information firsthand, and employed observations in the data collection process to triangulate the responses from the respondents with what is observed. In addition, data were collected using the Kobo toolkit. This ensured that errors were greatly eliminated in the process of the data collection process.

Results

Table 1: Means and standard deviations of the study results

Descriptive Statistics					
	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Experience	31	1	3	1.87	.718
Is the general physical environment safe for early childhood learners?	31	1	2	1.26	.445
Is the furniture (chairs and tables) comfortable and appropriate for the children	31	1	4	1.26	.631
Are the bathrooms/washrooms appropriate	31	1	4	1.58	.886
Does the school use the appropriate Curriculum	31	1	3	1.39	.667
Does the school have learning activities	30	1	4	1.33	.802
Does the school use modern technology	30	1	4	3.30	1.208

Experience

Based on the responses from the respondents, teachers' experience was one of the strengths of the schools (M=1.87, SD=.718). Most schools highlighted that the teachers were more experienced having taught in the pre-schools for a long period.

The general Environment

Most schools scored better on the appropriateness of the school and learning environment (M=1.26, SD=.445). Most respondents highlighted that their school environments were conducive to teaching and learning. Most respondents highlighted that their school environments also promoted inclusive education by allowing children with varying disabilities to have the opportunity to learn together with fellow children without disabilities. An ideal and enabling environment for teaching and learning children is a characteristic of a Montessori approach.

The arrangement of chairs in the classroom appropriate for learning

According to the Montessori approach, one of the characteristics of the approach is that the arrangement of the furniture has to be aged specifically for the learners. According to the results of the study, (M=1.26, SD=.631), this reveals that several schools had appropriate arrangements of chairs and other furniture suitable for the age of the students. Regardless, through observations, the arrangement of the furniture and chairs were generic and not appropriate. In some schools, there were no chairs at all. Students were seated on the mat during the process of teaching and learning.

Availability of appropriate bathrooms for students

In general, there was a mixed response from the respondents on the appropriateness (M=1.58 and SD=.886). Most of the respondents highlighted that the bathrooms were appropriate for the students. Some had appropriate washrooms while others has a pungent smell coming from the washrooms reaching far from the facilities rendering an enduring discomfort when approached.

Does the School use the appropriate Curriculum?

The respondents gave varying responses based on what worked for them. (M=1.39 and SD=.667). However, it was understood that the type of curricula used was based on the preference of the owners of the school.

Does the school have enough learning activities?

The school scored relatively low on the school activities (M=1.33. SD =.802). However, just like the issue curriculum, each school defines activities as what students do outside the classroom setting without taking into consideration the appropriateness of the learning activities. According to Montessori learning, each child's age group has specific activities that contribute to the learning process and not just playing. The variability in the type of curriculum used is huge.

Does the school use Morden technology in the teaching and learning process?

Almost all the schools are lagging in terms of using technology in the implementation of preschool (M=3.30. SD=1.208). The research observed that most schools do not

have technologies that are used in the teaching and learning process. The only technology available in several schools is a television screen used for babies to watch during their break

time but not necessarily used during the teaching and learning process to share lessons.

The perspective of teachers on the Quality of preschool education in Private schools

Table 2: Observation checklist

		G	VG	E	B	VB
ARQ1	Quality of learning environment					
1	The general physical environment is safe for early childhood learners.	30			1	
2	The furniture (chairs and tables) are comfortable and of appropriate age	20	8		2	1
3	The bathrooms/washrooms	11	9		11	
4	The play areas/outdoors	26	3		2	
5	The arrangement of furniture is not too crowded....	11	17		3	
6	The lighting of the room....	22	6		3	
7	Learning climate is friendly (Inclusiveness)	20	8			3

When asked about the quality of learning in the private pre-schools. Some school owners were not open with their responses. However, some teachers were open in their line of thought as described by one of the teachers who said:

'I think the implementation of private pre-schools in Malawi is too liberalized. There is no clear governing policy that directs the implementation of preschools, especially in private schools. Even if the policy is there, there is a serious lack of enforcement of such. As a result, everyone implements pre-schools education based on what they think and know. It is always hard for students to catch up with their friends in a new school because there are normally no standardized curricula in the pre-schools'.

Additionally, another teacher commented that,

'It is always hard to know what others are teaching in other private pre-schools. There is virtually no coordination or corporation in the implementation of preschool education. So far, this is our third year since we started operating as a private school but none from the government has come to supervise us of our operations. We do most of the implementation on our own.

Further, it was also observed that several schools are operating 'illegally' without registering with the government authorities. One of the owners of the unregistered school who has been operating for a year highlighted that there is no need to register because is afraid that the government may not allow them to register as they are operating from a house considered not fit for the operations of a pre-school.

When asked about the motives for operating a private preschool. Most school owners admitted to having been motivated by the business philosophy, as there is readily available demand for pre-schools. One of the school owners admitted that:

'I run this school to help me to meet the needs of my daily life'.

When asked if running a private school based on the premise of business orientation compromise the quality of education, one of the school owners highlighted that there is a thin line between the operation of the institution and the business.

'I am not worried because I help people to teach their children and in the end, they pay me and therefore this is a win-win situation for all'.

Discussions

The objective of this study was to explore the quality of education in proliferated private pre-schools in the city of Lilongwe in Malawi. The finding of this study will contribute

to the processes put in place to guide the regulation and implementation of private preschool education in different parts of Malawi. A critical setback of the study included the use of a small sample for the study when compared to the number of private pre-schools that are in operation in Lilongwe district now. In addition, the study only included teachers and school owners as respondents to the study. The study would have been strengthened if it included the views of other stakeholders including parents and government officials. However, Due to limited resources, only data from teachers and owners of the school were included in the study. The study includes and applied several methods including observations, application of the online questionnaire, and interviews with teachers and school owners to examine the quality of education in the private pre-schools.

Quality of education in private pre-schools in urban

In general, the quality of learning in private preschools is considerably better but not the best. This is consistent with a study by Ndijuye (2020) ^[74] who highlighted that most private pre-childhood schools offer a better education than the same type of education offered by government institutions. Several schools that were visited have a considerably good quality environment that allows students to freely interact with the school facilities and others without problems, despite most schools operating in residential houses 'turned' into schools. Regardless, most of the school environments visited seem to offer a conducive learning environment for students. According to Montessori (2018) ^[29], the quality of learning contributes significantly to the quality of learning and therefore it can be argued that those most private pre-schools are better off in terms of the quality of the environment.

While several respondents highlighted the inclusion of teaching and learning aids in the process of teaching and learning, most of the learning aids from the school where data was collected had generic teaching materials that mostly did not necessarily cater to the needs of each of the learners in the process of learning. According to Saylor (2018) ^[88], the Montessori approach ensures that the learners are given age-appropriate learning aids that help their development in various areas of the learner's learning process. Despite the availability of learning aids, most of the materials used in the school seem not to address the specific needs of children.

Another important attribute observed by some private preschools is the enrolment of children from various backgrounds. One of the motivations for the inclusion of

learners came from the motivation of the business approach, where owners want to maximize profits as much as possible. On the other hand, some schools allowed children with learning difficulties such as autism because the curriculum and the learning environment used had the provision to offer support for such students. In such schools, students with varying types of disabilities are given special attention that enables children to participate effectively in the process of teaching and learning.

On the other hand, there is one area that most schools struggled with including the availability of qualified teaching personnel to help the children. While most schools indicated that they have qualified teachers, a sample of the teachers that were engaged in the interview proved that some teachers had not gone far with education beyond the secondary school education level. Others, especially those attending the 'baby class sections' are normally those that have not even attained a Secondary school qualification. This comes from the premise that the owners want to use cheap labor from the teacher to maximize the profits realized from the business. Recruitment of teachers in private pre-school is mostly based on the discretion of the school owners.

Additionally, most schools struggled with the innovation and use of Modern technology in the implementation of education. Most schools still use the conventional teacher centered learning methodology where the teacher mostly plays a key role in dispersing knowledge to the learners. This is in contrast with the Montessori approach where the role of the teacher is that of the facilitator.

Conclusion

It is hoped that the study will make a small contribution to the improvement of the state of the quality of education especially in the private pre-primary school in Malawi. The study has highlighted several areas where private pre-primary schools have strengths and weaknesses in the process of implementation of pre-primary education. While there are gaps in the implementation of pre-primary education in private pre-schools, there are more areas of strength in their implementation. In comparison with children from CBCC, children from private pre-school have an upper hand in terms of educational skills gained over time (Soni *et al.*, 2020b)^[96]. There is also a need for regulation by the government in the implementation of private pre-primary schools in Malawi. As highlighted by De Souza (2022)^[27], the government is key to the provision and regulation of education in the country, and this includes pre-primary education as this forms the basis of all education. However, as revealed by the respondents, the government is aloof in the process of implementation and this renders the implementation in private schools to dictate on their own what they want to do. As revealed by the study results, most of the schools are run on a business model basis and this slightly places the priorities on the wrong path in the implementation of private pre-school education.

The study also reveals a lack of consistency in the implementation of the curricula. Different schools have adopted curricula based on the 'feelings' of the owners of schools. There is no harmonization of the curricula used in different schools and therefore a dire need to harmonize the curricula to ensure that students learn the same materials. This has left the school to use different curricula ranging from Montessori, Cambridge, Abeka, EDC, and blended curricula. The curriculum must be harmonized to allow the easy flow of knowledge among the children.

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