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Rethinking agency in literacies: Malawian children's and teachers' perspectives

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study contributes theorised and empirically enriched insights from local practices into children's agency. The authors trace a converging interest in multimodal literacies, postcolonial philosophies and early childhood pedagogy to document and critically engage with children's agency in stories experienced by Malawian children in their primary schools. Agency is understood as the identities that children assign to their stories and understandings of self [Pahl, K. and Rowsell, J., 2012. *Literacy and education* (2nd edition), London: SAGE Publications]. Interviews with twenty-five children and two teachers from two primary schools in semi-urban Malawi and drawings from 49 children were analysed using the Sense-making Method [Weick 1995. *Sensemaking in Organizations*. Vol. 3. Sage]. Children's drawings and interviews revealed children's positive portrayals of collective agency in contexts typically associated with subdued identities (domestic chores). Gendered, age-restricted and otherwise limited agency in orchestrating diverse stories in the classroom were explicit in the teachers' accounts. The discussion imbues contemporary early childhood studies with a new understanding of children's agency, as a communal and context-dependent phenomenon.

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Introduction

Literacy is an essential education component and fundamental human right; to be able to read and write means to function effectively in the modern world. At the same time, positioning literacy at the pedestal of human achievement and rights is not without controversies. The 'myth of literacy', which proposes that basic literacy skills are the sole constituent of modernity, progress and civilisation, has permeated funding and intervention frameworks that propagate Western values as universal values across African countries (Vail and White 1991). Post-colonial researchers highlight that the heavy

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focus on teaching traditional reading and writingskills and the English language in African countries is an instantiation of this myth. .

In Malawi, which is the context for our study, the literacy rates have increased in the past ten years, but the increase has been relatively slow and higher for men than women (Soler-Hampejsek et al. 2018). According to World Bank's (2022) statistics, on average 62% of adult population is literate in Malawi. Various local initiatives (for example small local charities such as the CharChar Trust) and internationally funded programmes, many of which include a research component (e.g. two large-scale initiatives: READ Malawi and the National Reading Program, funded by USAID & DFID in partnership with the Government of Malawi), support the development of children's literacy skills and provision of literacy materials. These programmes address the urgent need to establish a reading culture in schools by teaching children basic reading skills (e.g. decoding skills), donating books to classrooms or training teachers. Our study is not a direct critique of these efforts, but we seek to critically engage with current literacy approaches in Malawi and explore how a relational and exploratory approach might provide alternative insights into children's local literacy experiences.

The study context: literacy in Malawi

Globally, there are about 393 million children who cannot read or write (Save The Children 2021). In Malawi, formal assessments of younger population's literacy rates show that 72.8% of second graders and 41.9% of fourth graders cannot read a story (Iyengar, Karim, and Chagwira 2016). Primary school education in Malawi is offered to children from the age of six. Class sizes and composition vary, with many classes being attended by children with a wide age span of 6–16 year olds. Although primary school education has been free in Malawi since 1994, there is still a shortage of qualified teachers and issues with overcrowded classrooms, especially in urban and semi-urban areas. The teachers are expected to follow the national Malawian school curriculum, which, in relation to literacy, prescribes that children proceed through a sequence of literacy tasks, beginning with letter formation and sounding them out, followed by syllabic learning, whole words and then whole sentences (Williams 1998). The approach has a limited science basis and variable documentation of its success, even when followed in a systematic, interventionist way. For example, Iyengar, Karim, and Chagwira (2016) carried out an intervention in rural districts in Malawi with volunteer teachers focusing on reading fluency over six months in an after-school programme for children from grades 1–5, and found a small gain in intervention students' accuracy of word reading and no difference in children's story comprehension, when compared to the control group.

Literacy teaching occurs in Malawian primary schools in the local language – Chichewa- and since the 2013 Education Act, also in English. While many Malawian people and international peace agencies (see Ouane and Glanz 2010) recognise that the use of Chichewa in Malawi should be at the forefront of language policies, the use of English and its promotion through Western literacy intervention and teacher training programmes continues to be widely promoted across the country. Based on an eighteen month-long ethnographic fieldwork in a village conglomerate in northern Malawi, Cochrane (2020) highlights the ideological asymmetries between externally induced

literacy programmes promoted by international organisations versus local literacy marginalisations and exclusions evident in African rural libraries. Cochrane (2020) argues that the use of English carries colonialist legacies and is problematic from an ethical point of view. Homogeneous and constraining frameworks of what it means to read and write have been applied to schooling efforts across the African continent and while these opened new emancipatory opportunities, they have also reduced the local culturally and socially constituted relations in literacy (Collins and Blot 2003).

We do not seek to unilaterally reject Western values and celebrate postcolonial positions (see Adjei 2019) but rather recognise their mutual influences and contributions to children's contemporary literacy experiences. Several Western organisations have contributed to increased literacy levels among Malawian children in both Chichewa and English. For example, the Literacy Boost intervention by Save The Children in 15 schools showed significant advantage in promoting Standard 2 Chichewa reading skills in children and teachers' delivery of lesson plans in the target intervention schools (Jo Dowd and Mabeti 2011). We supplement these efforts with a qualitative research study of real-life literacy experiences in the classrooms of semi-urban Malawian children. We follow an equity agenda that aims to bridge home-school gaps, energise all members of the community in learning and that conceives of learning resources, such as books and stories, as sites of authentic learning that connect communities.

The study's framing: social and postcolonial literacies

Our post-colonial approach to literacy in African countries connects to the work of critical literacy theorists such as Brian Street (1984, 2014), Shirley Brice Heath (1982) and Gunther Kress (2009), who have moved the field away from the notion of literacy as an ability to read and write to literacy as a social practice. Critical postcolonial literacy studies have reframed literacy as an embedded and constituted practice (see Naqvi 2015) happening in community contexts through sign-making, identity and meaning negotiations enmeshed in deeply culturally dependent, multimodal relations. In alignment with this literacy reframing, we adopt an expansive view of literacy that pays attention not only to traditional text-based literary expressions but also to aesthetics and creativity in literacy (Kress 2004). In particular, we foreground multimodal literacies which address the neglected issue of multisensorial meaning-making in traditional literacy studies (Kress and Van Leeuwen 2020). We detail our approach with reference to the theoretical and empirical research that helped us frame our roles as ethical and relational data collectors and interpreters of children's rich meaning-making in the classroom.

Theoretical background

With literacy education in developing countries there is a danger to reproduce the symbols and meanings of dominant cultures and legitimize them as objective values of all societies. In conceptualising our study, we attempted to step away from an intervention design that could reinforce the socio-economic power of the global language (English) and the minority language (Chichewa) and instead, attempted to make local stories a central component of our literacy study. We sought to position the Malawian

children as cultural brokers who re-discover and share stories from their culture with the wider world. This approach is informed by Bourdieuean Cultural Capital Theory (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990), Funds of Knowledge (Moll et al. 1992) and Identity Texts research (Cummins and Early 2011). The three theoretical frameworks oppose the deficit thinking that permeates discussions in cross-cultural work, where some communities are perceived as culturally wealthy and others as culturally poor.

In alignment with this theoretical framework, the study's methodological approach applied the 'funds of knowledge' paradigm (González, Moll, and Amanti 2006). According to this paradigm, children build up complex bodies of knowledge and skills through their participation in the social literacy practices of their communities. Children's funds of knowledge often go unnoticed in more traditional text-based literacy education. Community funds of knowledge can be mobilised through story-making and story-sharing and used as authentic sources of local cultural knowledge. We capitalised on the strong history of oral story-telling in Malawi as the basis of children's literacy materials and were keen for the children to express their cultural identity with their story drawings. Such an approach is commensurate with the 'identity texts' research, which, through a bottom-up approach, supports communities in developing their own literacy materials.

Identity texts

Identity texts are pieces of creative work produced by children that reflect their identities as they contain topics and themes that children choose and find interesting. Identity texts research originally began with bilingual production of children's stories in Canada that aimed to connect classroom literacy materials to children's home background and thus boost children's academic confidence and literacy development in the dominant language (Cummins and Early 2011). To the best of our knowledge, identity text research has not been conducted in Malawi before. Identity text research identifies children's agency as the key identity and literacy construct and agency has been applied as a key conceptual tool in critical literacy studies, including this present study.

Children's agency

Cultures can be compared and contrasted on several dimensions, including understandings of children's agency. For us, the ways in which children assign meaning to their stories and identities within their stories, was an important window into their specific cultural understanding of self. Building on Pahl and Rowsell (2012), Kuby and Vaughn (2015) argue for documenting dynamic multimodal literacy representations through children's agency. In the personalisation theory, children's creation of their own identity texts promotes intrinsic motivation (Deci and Ryan 2004) and a sense of ownership and agency (Kucirkova 2017). Kuby and Vaughn (2015) further foreground children's agency in providing key windows into children's literate identities. We connected to their call for deviating from normalising approaches to literacy: 'As researchers and teachers, let us embrace changes or departures and question why sameness is valued in schools' (469).

Our interest in cultural conception of one's agency, was inspired by Adjei's (2019) cross-cultural framework of children's agency. Here, Western views of agency as individual, intentional volition to make choices for a better life are different from an African

collective conception of agency that explains agency as communal and context-dependent: ‘in Africa, the experience of the person as relationally connected to others and the community is not a value belief about how things ought to be, but rather, it is an ontological experience about how things are’ (Adjei 2019, 490). While historically, the focus on African children’s agency has been the agenda of studies examining children with special needs or from marginalised backgrounds (Lewis and Norwich 2004), agency, is experienced and expressed through a person’s instinct to be connected, and ‘at one with others’ (Adjei 2019, 495).

Political, academic and practical definitions of agency vary and position the study of children’s agency at the intersection of neoliberal interests in children as self-empowered, autonomous, responsible and independent citizens versus children at risk of poverty, abuse and victimisation (Ansell 2016; Bordonaro 2012). This gives rise to several ethical conundrums connected to children’s agency and the rich international research discussing these (e.g. Bordonaro and Payne 2012). Bordonaro and Payne’s concept of ambiguous agency (2012) and assertion that while agency ‘is a recognised capacity of human beings, it does not exist in the same “quantity” in individual actors’ (369) resonated with our ethical stance to document children’s spontaneous expressions of agency.

Methodological framework

Study’s ethical approach

The study was approved by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data’s (NSD) ethical committee that obliged the researchers to fully respect children’s interest to participate in the study and seek their ongoing consent at all stages of the research. Even though the children’s consent to participate was obtained from their parents, the researcher, together with the teachers, asked children if they wished to make drawings for research purposes and speak to the researcher about their drawings, and only included the children who explicitly said so. The researcher was local to the schools attended by the participating children and has a long history of working with school children, teachers, charities and organisations in Malawi. The researcher’s role in recruiting the schools, informing parents about the study and collecting data capitalised on her local knowledge. She was involved in all stages of the project, from the design of the study to the data interpretation and article write-up, with clearly allocated tasks and open shared communication.

Researcher reflexivity

Our qualitative research method and ethical stance obliged us to engage in iterative cycles of researcher reflexivity as a way for achieving ethical research practice. In addition to the procedural ethics of seeking permission from the relevant Ethics Body, we engaged with day-to-day ethics in practice that arise during fieldwork (Guillemin and Gillam 2004). The researcher kept a reflective fieldwork diary, which she translated into English at the end of data collection period and shared with the research team.

Relevant to multimodal literacies, postcolonial philosophies and early childhood pedagogy, are visually based data collection tools, such as children’s drawings.

Children's drawings

Children's drawings are of substantial research and pedagogical interest in early childhood literature, because of the representational value they carry for children's thinking and aesthetic sense (Lyon 2020). Drawings are context-specific (Longobardi, Quaglia, and Iotti 2015) and they reflect and support children's imagination, sign-making, expression of ideas and understanding (Hong, Broderick, and McAuliffe 2021; Sakr 2017), and thereby children's language and literacy development. Given that young children have comparatively less experience in verbalising their thoughts, educational researchers and professionals have been exploring ways in which children could express meaning through non-verbal, graphic, visual and multimodal means (Quaglia et al. 2015). Drawings tend to be non-linear, thoughts and ideas do not need to be represented in a specific order which allows for free expression that is unbounded by a need for temporal sequence (Lierat 2013).

Podobnik, Jerman, and Selan (2021) distinguish between what they term children's 'relaxation drawings' and 'analytical drawings'. Relaxation drawings are drawn by children to elicit a positive response from others, while analytical drawings are drawn by children's desire to share their own understanding and are part of children's meaning-making of the world. We consider 'children's drawings as multimodal artefacts, which they use to shape and represent their mental images and signs onto paper' (5; Deguara and Nutbrown 2018), as children's 'reflection of self, of interests, and of practices' (Deguara and Nutbrown 2018., 19). As Adams (2017) states, in essence, 'drawing is about shaping and sharing thought' (250), thus, it offers something unique as a research method. Through the process of drawing, and subsequent discussions about their drawings, children have 'an expressive channel to voice their inner stories' (Lierat 2013, 82).

Furthermore, whilst a drawing may be thought of as the creation of an individual child, Vygotskian theories (e.g. 1978) illustrate that children co-construct their personal thoughts and ideas in a social and cultural context. Children may copy or 'borrow' a particular form or style from their peers, but the resultant image is always transformed and it 'always possesses attributes uniquely one's own' (3; Rech 2018), meaning that children's drawings are constructed on both social and personal levels simultaneously.

In this study, we were interested in children's analytical drawings as a window into their thinking about self, and a way for them to articulate their views and feelings regarding the stories they experience in the classroom. Images are 'a rich source of qualitative data' (Walker 2007, 100), and their use in empirical research is subject to various methodological decisions.

Study aims

The study is part of a larger research project, in which we study children's local stories in relation to sensory engagement and children's agency. In a study by Kucirkova and Mwenda Chinula (2023), we reported that children's drawings were not a suitable method to understand children's olfactory preferences in stories. The present examines a different question as we build on the growing international evidence concerning ethical literacy interventions that combine Western interests with local priorities and involve

children's voices into adult research agendas. We aimed to understand Malawian children's agency and story engagement in the classroom with the use of a non-intrusive culturally sensitive methodology. Our objective was to document the ways in which children express their views through the stories they draw and narrate to the researcher. Our research questions were:

How do Malawian children conceive of their agency as revealed in their story drawings?

What do Malawian children and their teachers value in stories?

Methodology

Data sources

The participating children attended the primary school classrooms in two different schools in semi-urban Malawi, Mzuzu. The researcher collected drawings from forty-nine children aged between six and eight years and the researcher interviewed twenty-five of the children who made their drawings. In addition, the two principal teachers teaching in these classrooms were interviewed.

The researcher recruited the children by contacting directly the teachers in the local primary schools, who contacted the children's parents and helped with sharing study information and signing of consent forms. The researcher agreed observation and interview dates with the individual teachers as per their convenience. On the day of observations, the children pursued a standard lesson, which included reading a story about the people of Chewe village who were making pots. The teacher chose this story from the Chichewa book used in ordinary teaching. After the official teaching, the children were encouraged to make a drawing of any fictional story they wished, using the paper and pencils provided by the researcher. When the children finished their drawings, the researcher held one-to-one interviews with the children about their drawings, during which she asked them what they depicted in their images. The researcher had also one-to-one interviews with the two principal teachers in the classrooms where she collected the data. Our Findings are thus based on a triangulation of interview data with the children and teachers and children's drawings.

Data analysis

The interviews were audio-recorded with a hand-held device and transcribed. The transcriptions were translated from Chichewa to English by the local researcher (Author 3). Author 1 and 2 analysed the transcribed English data using classic thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2012), steps of which are detailed in Clarke and Braun (2013) as a theoretically flexible approach that uses reflexivity, follows structured coding that reduces but simultaneously, analyses data through active searching for similarity across data, reviewing and naming the themes and reasoning behind them (see Braun and Clarke 2019).

To analyse children's drawings, we used Weick's method of 'sense-making' to *make sense* of the diverse exemplars of children's identity in their stories, with emphasis on questions of theoretical and empirical significance. 'Sensemaking edits continuity into

discrete categories, observations into interpretations, experience into bounded events, and perceptions into pre-existing plans and frameworks.’ (Weick 1995, 108). Drawing on Weick (1995), Czarniawska (2005) specifies that sensemaking is not about sense-giving or sense-taking, nor is it about making general rules based on ample datasets. Rather, ‘Where there is no frame or at least no obvious connection presents itself, one has to be created – and this is sensemaking’ (Czarniawska 2005, 271). Weick (1995) specifies several concepts necessary for the pursuit of sense-making. The first concept is that of exemplars: ‘Sensemaking, as a focus of inquiry, is only as significant and useful as are its most recent exemplars. The way those exemplars are framed, discussed and investigated is what sensemaking is about and can contribute.’ (Weick 1995, 65). Weick (1995) describes sensemaking as an ongoing activity, that is in a constant ‘flow’ (43). Weick’s flow metaphor was used to capture the dynamic and multidimensional relationships among the key personalisation variables identified in the literature review.

The sense-making approach was facilitated by employing multimodal approaches to analysing images (Kress and Van Leeuwen 2020), and techniques that have been applied to analysis of picture fiction (Painter 2009; Painter, Martin, and Unsworth 2010). Adapting these frameworks, the images were all inductively coded using qualitative data analysis software. We coded ‘ideational meaning’, or the content of the image, i.e. people, buildings, utensils and tools, for example. As an indicator of what or who was most important in the story, images were coded to capture whether people or objects were in the centre and foreground, or on the periphery of the image. We explored interpersonal meaning through how people were framed, whether they interacted with the viewer, or whether they were depicted engaging in action. Finally, we coded the sentiment or emotion conveyed in facial expression in the drawings. The drawings were analysed by all three authors, who arrived at a shared interpretation through discussion and consensus.

Findings

Children’s agency in stories: drawings’ analysis

The Sense-making method revealed the key themes of people, objects (such as tools and utensils), environment (trees, flowers and buildings), and transport in children’s drawings. Half of the children’s drawings portrayed only non-human objects, such as tools and plants. Drawings that included people tended to show the person or people engaged in activity and depicted with, or amongst objects of a similar size and positioning. In these drawings, it appeared the activity, or task was central to the author’s / artists’ expression of their story. However, in a few drawings, people were central and in the foreground of the frame. These drawings tended to be of multiple people, rather than a single figure, who were portrayed looking and smiling directly at the viewer, or at each other, suggesting that social and interpersonal aspects were most important. Drawings that included people were all drawn with a positive (smiling) or neutral facial expression. References to daily chores, utensils and resources necessary for cleaning, sweeping, gardening and cutting the grass or trees were also visible in children’s pictures, as shown in Figures 1 and 2.



Figure 1. Children's original drawings.

Children's agency in stories: interview analysis

Chores seemed to be perceived as positive by the children, and they identified with the story characters performing various chores in a positive way. This was substantiated from the interviews with the researcher, as shown in Extract n1. and 2 (Figures 3–6).

Extract nr.1

Researcher:

What do you like to do?Child nr.11:

like washing dishes. I

Researcher:

What else do you like to do?Child nr.11:

Sweeping,Researcher:

Anything else?Child nr.11:

Mopping the floorExtract nr.2

Researcher:

see. So ... in your picture ... does the woman have a name? I

Child nr.8:

Yes. Her name is Maggie.Researcher:

Oh ok. What does Maggie like to do?Child nr.8:

She likes doing household chores like cleaning dishes and windows.Researcher:

Allright. Is that what you like doing as well?Child nr.8 I like to mopping, cleaning dishes, and cleaning windows ... and sweeping.



Figure 2. Children's original drawings.

Children's perceptions of who they are in the stories and in real-life contexts, and what they are allowed to do based on age or gender categories, were discernible in their recollections of the story read in the classroom. These recollections reflected child's agency as restricted by age and gender.

Extract nr.3

Researcher: Ok. Did you find the story that was read in class interesting?

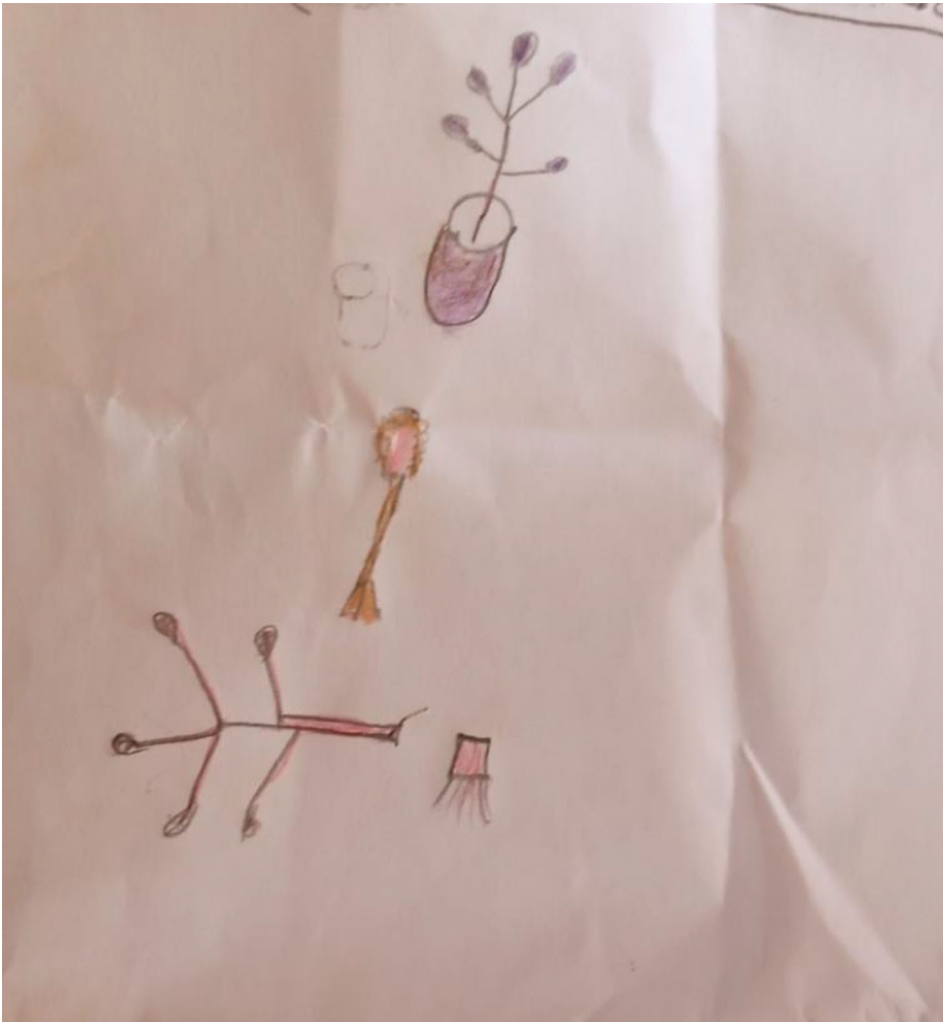


Figure 3. Children's original drawings.

- Child nr.3: Yes.
 Researcher: Which part exactly?
 Child nr.3: Where a girl was cutting grass.
 Researcher: ooh ok. Why was that part interesting?
 Child nr.3: Because when boys are cutting grass, I am not allowed to join in ... I cannot cut grass.
 Researcher: So it was interesting that a girl could cut grass in the story?
 Child nr.3: Yes
 Researcher: I see. By the way, who cuts the grass at your home?
 Child nr.3: My father and my uncle.
 Researcher: I see. Could you also cut grass?
 Child nr.3: I could ... but I don't know how ... my friend [name withdrawn] knows how to do it although she is a girl.



Figure 4. Children's original drawings.

Teachers' agency in children's stories: interview analysis

It was clear from the interviews that the teachers valued stories that were age-appropriate for the children and perceived the age appropriateness as a key quality criterion for children: 'these [the stories] are not good because they are not appropriate for their age.' (Teacher 1)



Figure 5. Children's original drawings.

Age-appropriateness was also commented on in terms of the book's texture, or physical qualities:

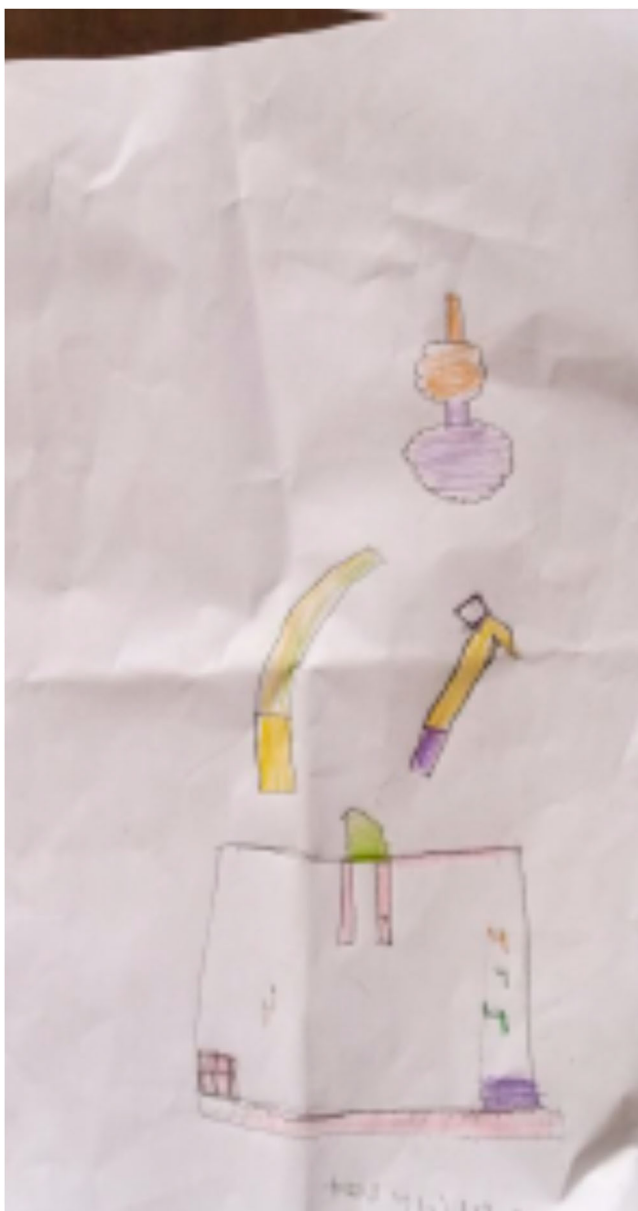


Figure 6. Children's original drawings.

I feel that it would matter how the book felt to the touch because if it's too course to the touch maybe they would not like it and if it were too soft ... say like those of the bible or newspaper, it would be too delicate for them to handle. (Teacher 2)

The teachers' interviews suggested that the children's participation in daily chores was perceived as a positive activity for the child that is modelled in 'good stories' and praised by adults: 'If they experience stories that help build their character in a good

way ... like making them hard workers ... these are good stories ... these are important story experiences.’ (Teacher 1).

While for Teacher 1 the choices were restricted, for teacher 2 there seemed to be more awareness of their own agency in what kinds of stories are shared with the children.

We are given prescribed material that we were given ... it outlines what we need to do when we are having a lesson with a focus on a story. For example, if the outline says we should teach new words to the children after reading a story, that is what we write on our lesson plans ... or on the board or on flash cards. (Teacher 1)

Teacher 2:

It all depends on how one, as a teacher, approaches the lesson ... I feel that using a lot of gestures where applicable helps the children understand and also get involved in the story reading as opposed to simply reading. For example, if the story is about a woman or mother sweeping, I will get a broom and pretend to be sweeping while reading the story. When the children see me do that, they get very excited and tell each other that “Teacher is sweeping”. Or if the story requires me to jump, I jump in front of the class and they all get excited.

As for the experience of a story, the possibility to act the story out was important to Teacher 2, as illustrated in the example of sweeping above. She elaborated saying ‘ I also involve them where possible ... I would tell them to get up and jump like I jumped or demonstrate on doing a certain task ... this way they stop whatever they were doing and concentrate on the story and what I am teaching.’

The teachers’ accounts demonstrated their awareness of the need for children’s agency and their own techniques to support it in a constrained classroom environment.

Discussion

While placing a strong emphasis on individual exemplars, Weick (1995) also advocates for the need to go beyond simple descriptions if one is to achieve a holistic and innovative understanding: ‘The inventor has to put something there, or consolidate what is there, or poke around what might be there, or orchestrate some kind of agreement about what is there.’ (163). In this section, we conceptually synthesise and consolidate our findings with a view to highlight the qualities that Malawian children and teachers value in their story-related experiences.

Children’s perceptions of their own agency

Klocker (2007) uses the term ‘thin agency’ when referring to child domestic workers from rural areas, who do domestic chores in other people’s households. The children in our study referred to doing chores inside their own homes and spontaneously shared enthusiasm and enjoyment of this work. This finding brings to fore the importance of critical engagement with the notion of children’s agency. Methodologically, we need to acknowledge the limitation of an adult–child interview method known for intimidating adult–child power dynamics (Eder and Fingerson 2003). It could be that children drew domestic activities and commented on them positively because they thought that was what

their teacher and researcher would like. The use of drawings and visual methods more broadly, has been highlighted as addressing the limitation of socially desirable answers in childhood studies (Briggs, Stedman, and Krasny 2014) and the use of drawings rather than direct adult–child interviews may have addressed this limitation in our project. Nevertheless, the notion of children’s positive account of agency while doing domestic choices, unpacks the definition of agency with a more nuanced thinking.

Children’s strong preference for domestic chores stands in contrast to Western portrayals of children’s agency in stories and society. In particular, the socio-moral ideal of children as free agents who learn through play (Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, and Eyer 2004) seems at odds with the possibilities afforded in rural Malawi where the social structures intersect with domestic restrictions and obligations (Holloway, Holt, and Mills 2019). Although the children’s agency in these contexts deviates from normative understandings of childhood, it does not mean it is not existent. Our findings are more in alignment with Adjei’s (2019) African centred, collective understanding of agency. From this perspective, children’s accounts and drawings illustrated the value they placed on contributing to family life.

Furthermore, children’s participation in chores could be understood as expressing their agency as a sense of belonging and interconnectedness with others. Worldwide, children are involved in various work contexts with considerable physical strain and emotional impact (see Ansell 2016), and they exercise their agency within these contexts. Evans (2012) described in detail the agentic acts of children in siblings-headed households in Tanzania and Uganda. Based on our data, it would be thus difficult to claim that children’s drawings and reports of liking domestic chores demonstrate the facets of resistance (cf Sipe and McGuire 2006) or self-empowerment (cf Tucker 2000) associated with agency in childhood studies.

In this study, we framed literacy as an embedded and constituted practice (e.g. Naqvi 2015) rather than a set of skills. The children’s drawings, and both children’s and teachers’ interviews with the researcher demonstrated children’s capacity to engage creatively with a story and relate it to their own lives and experiences. Many of the children expressed their interpretations of the story in great detail in their drawings and in their verbal descriptions. Extract nr.3 might also suggest critical thinking and analysis around gender roles in the family. We suggest that the children’s drawings reflect the diversity of children’s agency and lived experiences within the specific context of semi-urban Malawi. The children’s references to self as a domestic helper and worker carry symbolic and ideological consequences for early childhood research and literacy.

The role of stories strikes us as particularly important in conveying alternative, or reaffirming existing, understandings of children’s agency. In our data it was evident that some children had collaborated in the drawing activity and drawn the same objects using similar techniques, colours and form. In this respect, children’s expressions of their stories had been a joint endeavour and illustrates how children naturally copy from each other when creating texts (Rech 2018). From a European ontology, copying others may be perceived as a simple process of reproduction and not thinking for oneself, and thus, less agentic. However, with a focus on children’s writing, Dyson (2010) argued that rather than ‘copying’, children ‘remix their borrowed words and images for new cultural productions’ (12–13). Copying can be thought of as a dialogic process, the resultant texts emerged from the relationship, rather than any single

individual. These texts elucidated children's social and personal agency and their desire to participate in shared activity.

As for children's agency from teachers' perspectives, the teachers' interest in stories that are adjusted to the child's age and that correspond to children's age both in terms of content and physical layout shows a different understanding and appreciation of children's literature than that promoted by Western Reading for Pleasure initiatives. The UK curriculum for example, emphasises children's free choice and independence in choosing and reading books they like to foster children's intrinsic motivation and varied reading diet (Cremin et al. 2009; Cremin et al. 2022). Age banding has been criticised for restricting children's reading choices and autonomy (Warren and Maynard 2012) and gender stereotypes are known to influence what and how pre-school children learn from books and therefore recommended to be avoided (Seitz, Lenhart, and Rübsam 2020). If children are exposed to diverse stories, they can learn about diversity and significantly promote their understanding of self and others (Crisp et al. 2016). However, as the interviewed teachers emphasised, children in the classroom are only exposed to stories prescribed by the Malawian primary school curriculum. While the teachers recognised the restriction this poses for children's literacy engagement, they seemed to be mostly concerned about the delivery and format of the story. Teacher 2 supplemented the story-book reading with role-play and acting out of the story, and she commented on how dramatising the story constituted an important technique to concretise the story ideas and get children's attention. The teacher's practice may have inadvertently contributed to a story-sharing style valued by non-traditional, free pre-school settings such as Montessori or Steiner kindergartens, where story-acting is linked with children's higher creativity (Mottweiler and Taylor 2014) and imagination (Lindqvist 2001).

Study limitations and implications

Our focus on children's drawings is an attempt to move beyond textual representation of children's voices and the danger of disconnecting these from the wider context (Cooper 2022). The method of story drawings allowed us to tap into children's views with an inclusive methodology that honours children's imaginations and inner worlds (Bland 2018). Children's drawings are heavily influenced by the culture and environment where they grow up, as demonstrated for example in Ahmad's (2018) analysis of 736 Jordanian pre-schoolers, third of which spontaneously drew nature-related pictures. We included researcher-led interviews with children to aid with our interpretation of their artworks and while the researcher was native to the classroom culture, we may have missed important cultural and social references.

Nevertheless, we see the continuing need for researchers' serious engagement with children's lived experiences and the acknowledgment that our portrayal is a very initial and provisional, way of tapping into the materiality of children's voices (Cooper 2022). We therefore tentatively conclude that our study provides the first step to documenting Malawian children's literacy lives from the children's perspectives, drawing on children's drawings and spoken accounts shared with a Malawian researcher. The teachers' and the researcher's own reflexivity moved the study to thinking about the connections between postcolonial, critical literacy studies and contemporary literacy interventions in African countries. As a whole, the study exemplifies a tangible way of

critically engaging with contemporary literacy studies to facilitate an important dialogue on the cultural positionality implied by early childhood researchers.

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