Who Should Be Deciding What to Be Taught in Schools? Perspectives From Secondary School Teacher Education in Malawi

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ABSTRACT: This study sought to gather perspectives on “who” and “what” should determine choice of the curriculum for secondary school teacher education. Five heads of departments for secondary school teacher education and 3 cohorts of secondary school teacher trainees participated in the study. Findings reveal mixed perspectives on determinants of curriculum choice. However, both sets of respondents agreed that there is need for increased and improved public participation in curriculum development activities. Practical and theoretical implications of the findings are discussed in this report.

KEYWORDS: Curriculum, students, teachers, education, curriculum choice

Introduction

When parents and guardians send their children to school, they might not be thinking that what their children will learn is chosen by mortal beings like them. Similarly, the students may be attending school as if the curriculum was a “sacred being” that warrants no questioning or participation. But the reality is that, usually, few individuals sit down and decide what to be taught in schools and they use different means of identifying the perceived needs of society that must be placed into the curriculum.1 Yet, as Bai concludes, “he who controls the curriculum controls future generations.”2 With this important role of the curriculum, one would therefore expect that at least teachers should have deep understanding of the rationale for what they learn at preservice teacher education and what they will teach in schools. This expectation exists because preservice teacher education is generally designed to prepare people to implement the identified public needs through teaching what is in the curriculum.3,4 This makes the role of teachers critical because apart from learning their own curriculum for their own life, student teachers also learn another curriculum which focuses on what and how to teach learners to help the learners become what is enshrined in the curriculum.5 This double role of a teacher requires special mastery of content, pedagogy, and understanding of justifications for the curriculum that is implemented.6 Nonetheless, it appeared evident that not much is known about what student teachers perceive of what they learn at preservice education in line with the curriculum’s relevance to their own life and to their professional development as teachers. It was from this regard that this study sought to find out perspectives of preservice teachers and of teacher educators in Malawi about “who” and “what” they think should determine curriculum choice for teacher education.

Background

The background of this study can be traced to heated debates that often erupted in Philosophy of Education classes at Lilongwe University of Agriculture & Natural Resources in Malawi on “who should decide what should be taught in schools.” After noticing that the students were always providing exciting and thought-provoking ideas on who should decide curriculum content in schools, the researchers decided to collect data from the students from 2011 to 2014 for 3 cohorts so that they could write a book chapter to inform future curricular processes. However, it was later decided to use the collected data from the students for this article. To enrich the article, more data were added from a PhD research by one of the researchers on what determines the courses which preservice secondary school teacher education institutions teach to student teachers. The later data were collected from heads of departments (HODs) from public universities in Malawi. The reason we changed from writing a book chapter to a paper was that we believed that thought-provoking views about who should decide what to be taught in preservice teacher education would be better shared through a journal paper like this.

Problem statement

Globally, there is ample extant scholarly literature which suggests that curricula are often wrongly treated as sacred...
documents that may not be questioned or changed. However, many other scholars contend that with the fast-changing world, curricula should also be changing to address the fast changes in human evolitional and revolutional developments. Much of such scholarly work concludes that if curricula do not adjust to changes and needs of the people, education would become irrelevant and obsolete thereby putting the future generations at risk. This perspective implies that it is necessary to constantly question whether the curricula that are taught are responding to the needs of the people or not to achieve what Biesta (2015) calls, “the beautiful risk of education.” Furthermore, most studies tend to focus on school management, school performance, accountability, and others and not the whole essence of the education that is offered.

However, the challenge of making curricula in consonance with the needs of the people is the same even in Malawi and little scholarly work is done on this. For instance, at African level, a study by Association of African Universities (2012) indicates that there appears a huge mismatch in Africa between what students learn and what is needed in the industry. Similarly, the former President of Malawi, the late Bingu wa Mutharika (2011), often argued that Malawi’s education system should be reformed to address the needs of the people of Malawi. The previous perspectives agree with Ali Mazrui’s observed paradox that Africa produces what it does not consume and consumes what it does not produce (Mkandawire, 2017). In context, Malawi is facing numerous challenges in the education sector and these challenges include shortage of teachers. Shortage of teachers is partly due to career mass brain drain from teaching which a recent study has connected to the way preservice teacher education is done. The problem warranting this study was therefore housed in the fact that we do not know much about what preservice student teachers think about what should be taught to them for their education to be fulfilling. We also do not know much about what lecturers who implement teacher education curriculum for secondary education think about who should decide what to be in the curriculum for teacher education. This study, therefore, falls within this knowledge gap and dilemma about who should decide a curriculum for schools to make education relevant and a good instrument for development, not like the paradox “too much schooling too little education” case.

**Purpose of the study**

This study sought to establish perspectives on who should be determining what to be taught in teacher education in the views of student teachers and their lecturers.

The ultimate research questions for the study were as follows:

1. Who do student teachers and teacher educators think should be deciding what students in preservice education should learn?
2. What do student teachers and teacher educators think should be done to ensure that preservice education is relevant for the development of students and the society at large?

**Justification for the study**

This study sought to contribute atypical literature to the dilemma on curriculum choice in the changing world from the perspective of the students who are usually neglected in curriculum preparation. This is because many times people do not think much about what is taught in schools and why. Furthermore, findings of this study might ignite or add to the debate from the general public about their role on curriculum development and review because by leaving it to the few people to decide, few people control the future of children and of the world. The preservice teachers’ and lecturers’ perspectives are also critical for comparing perspectives and learning options that exist on curriculum choice. Beyond this, the results could help in understanding how curriculum choice affects the people who learn the curriculum itself. It is hoped that the findings have some theoretical implications and power to make education planners rethink how curricular choice could be improved.

**Literature Review**

The term curriculum is a Latin word, *curriculum*, which has changed meanings from “running” or “race” or “course” to what a person is supposed to pass through as they grow in life. The kind of questions one might ask about a race-course (would be):- How long is it? What obstacles are there…What kinds of things does it contain? (p. 66)

In general, an educational curriculum is not just the content of courses but also what is taught, how it is taught and learned, and how the whole environment tries to support learning. However, curriculum choice involves all factors that affect decisions on which content, methods, environment, and what kind of teachers to be accepted or rejected in the process of implementing a curriculum.

Furthermore, review of literature suggests that curriculum development or reviews are basically based on at least 3 assumptions: (a) that what is in the curriculum is necessary for society, (b) that what is in the curriculum is good for individuals in the society, and (c) that the people who choose the curriculum have a right to choose for the society. These assumptions have influenced different approaches to curriculum development and implementation. The common approaches to curriculum development can be largely categorized into the top-bottom
approach, the bottom-top approach, and the participatory approach.\textsuperscript{30,31}

Attempts to understand curriculum choice make more sense when put under the lenses of the purpose of education which has been hotly debated on by scholars for decades. Literature indicates that the purpose of education has been changing in the perceptions of people as Friedman and Kass\textsuperscript{32} state,

"...and of students without compromising anything.\textsuperscript{34} Choice is a challenge because it is contentious as perspectives differ between needs of students and needs of society as a whole.\textsuperscript{35,36}"

In terms of curriculum choice, many scholars agree that curriculum choice focuses on knowledge, societal needs, and learners. For example, Akker states that

A classic approach to the eternal curriculum question of what to include in the curriculum (or even more difficult as well as urgent: what to exclude from it) is to search for a balance between three major sources or orientations for selection and priority setting:

- **Knowledge:**
  - what is the academic and cultural heritage that seems essential for learning and future development?

- **Society:**
  - which problems and issues seem relevant for inclusion from the perspective of societal trends and needs?

- **Learner**
  - which elements seem of vital importance for learning from the personal and educational needs and interests of the learners themselves.\textsuperscript{33(p41)}

Scholars also indicate that there is a paradigm shift in the world today where employment is not much based on college qualifications but the competencies of the graduates. This demands that the students choose the curriculum that helps them to be competitive in the job market. For instance, Friedman and Kass\textsuperscript{32} observe the looks for critical skills like "leadership, humility, collaboration, adaptability, and loving to learn and relearn" and they aver that these soft skills are rarely taught in a college.\textsuperscript{32} It is probably in this regard that most employers have realized that

"What matters to many companies are skills, expertise and knowledge, not college degrees. This may be the reason that firms such as Google would rather hire individuals that demonstrate real competence than employ college graduates with high GPAs.\textsuperscript{32(p4)}"

From the previously stated context, the challenge is therefore on making choice of what knowledge, skills, and values to be taught so that they meet the needs and demands of society and of students without compromising anything. Choice is a challenge because it is contentious as perspectives differ between needs of students and needs of society as a whole.\textsuperscript{35,36} In this study, it was clear that theoretically there must be a conflict of interest in curriculum choice among different stakeholders.\textsuperscript{37,38} But it was unknown how this conflict exists and exhibits itself in the views of lecturers and students in the secondary school teacher education sector.\textsuperscript{34,39} For instance, are there any incontestable qualifications which people who develop or review curricula for societies have that should mandate them to choose people’s future through the curriculum they make? However, persistent calls to align curricula to the needs of Malawi were deemed enough evidence to show that there are practical problems about curricular choice which requires scholarly investigation (Mutharika, 2011). In today’s pursuit of curriculum, it is indisputable that pedagogues and andragogues (adult learners) must be given room to have their views incorporated.\textsuperscript{40,41} Providing the andragogical learners like student teachers room to participate in choosing their curriculum is critical because education is a junction for almost all problems and opportunities of individuals and societies. This situation strongly affirms that it is important to hear perceptive of student teachers and teacher educators on how curriculum choice could be done to enhance quality, relevance, and satisfaction of what teacher education offers. In sum, the foregoing discussion provides the context and space within which this study found its rationale.

### Methodology

This study used the qualitative research design because issues of perceptions were believed to be best explored qualitatively.\textsuperscript{42} Practically, 3 cohorts of second year students studying Philosophy of Education at Lilongwe University of Agriculture & Natural Resources were involved in the study. The classes comprised 26 students on average. The students were purposively sampled because in Malawi’s public universities, students usually apply for change of program from teacher education to other programs between first and second years of their study.\textsuperscript{43,44} These students were purposefully sampled because they had already shown in their Philosophy of Education course that they had divergent views about how curriculum choice and reviews should be done. Furthermore, they were readily available for data collection thereby making convenient sampling ideal as scholars advise.\textsuperscript{44} Data were collected during class discussions first during lesson presentation and later students with divergent views from the common assumptions about curriculum were identified and interviewed separately. In the first stage, class discussion was used to get the general views about who the students teachers thought should decide curriculum content and why. In the second phase of data collection, students with controversial ideas on who should decide curriculum content were identified and later interviewed individually to gain special ideas from them on the matter. Themes were...
thereafter generated from the perspectives, and using the number of participants, the themes were ranked to show which perspectives were more common among participants for reporting in this article.

The study also interviewed 5 heads of teacher education departments from 5 public universities which provide preservice teacher education in Malawi. These were sampled purposefully to help establish what determines content that is taught in their preservice teacher education. The HODs were sampled because they were considered to be the main custodians of academic traditions and values for teacher education programs. This set of data was collected between January and March 2016.

Data from the 4 cohorts of Bachelor of Science in Agriculture Education students were analyzed thematically through identification and ranking of the people who should determine the curriculum and why. Similarly, data from the 5 heads of teacher education departments from public universities were also analyzed thematically on what the heads think about the matter. Practically, the heads were also asked to rank according to levels of importance their perceived determinants of curriculum choice. The data were later categorized into the themes according to their similarities as advised by many other scholars (Saunders et al, 2009). The findings were thereafter compared between perspectives of heads of teacher education departments with those of student teachers.

Theoretical framework

This study basically used the Marxist theoretical views about the role of education in society. Marxism skeptically asserts that education can become another oppressive system of preparing generations to live a life that will make them always oppressed by the people who own power. The assumptions are that education can be used to be a mere means of socializing people into the social classes already created. But if well used, it can be a catalyst for liberation and actualizing individuals to become the fullest beings they can be. The paradox is that when education is used as a means of socialization, it risks perpetuating oppressive elements of society where the status quo is maintained. That means the architects of the curriculum would ensure that education is designed to make people of low class and power still remain in their low statuses, whereas the “haves” and more powerful remain atop. If education is used as a means to enfranchise the people who are exploited and oppressed, that education will face resistance from the people who have power and who want to maintain their power. In this perspective, curriculum choice is political and contentious because people have different interests and they tend to wish to protect their own group interests such as ethnicity, tribalism, and some hegemony within the society. If education takes a “golden mean” approach, there are also other risks involved like failing to agree on what should be taught. Curriculum choice is therefore very sensitive despite that the public is often not actively involved in choosing what to be selected into the curriculum. These views have an implication on factors that are involved in curriculum choice even for teacher education. For instance, could the teacher education mode used in Malawi, which includes curriculum choice, be part of the causes for the challenges of teacher quality and teacher shortage as some studies suggest? Could involvement of student teachers in curriculum development and review increase satisfaction by the students? How does Marxist view on the purpose of education help us understand perceptions of student teachers and teacher educators on curriculum choice determinants? Using Marxist perspectives, it is possible that the indifferent attitude of the public to activities about the public curriculum is a product of class education which has made society accept that others, not themselves, should be responsible for the education of their society. This theoretical stance was therefore perceived suitable to bring in tools for assessing perspectives of students and lecturers about determinants of curriculum choice.

Findings and Discussion

This section presents views and sentiments of the student-students and teacher educators on their perceptions about determinants that should be used in curriculum choice for preparing secondary school teacher education curriculum. We first present the views of student teachers and then of teacher educators before subsequently making a discussion of the findings.

Perspectives of students

The main finding from student teachers was that curriculum choice for teacher education should be done for the primary interest of the teacher trainees themselves and then second for the big vision that a country wants to achieve through education. In this case, the students generally agreed that the right way to do that would be to involve all key stakeholders including student teachers, practicing teachers, curriculum specialists and those aspiring to be teachers. On who should spearhead the process, the students recommended multiple stakeholders with preference of curriculum specialists as leaders of curriculum development and review.

As previously stated, in general, the student teachers agreed that teacher education curricula should be developed with emphasis on making their interests at the center so that education helps students become the best that they can become in life. To achieve this, students felt that curriculum activities should consider their interests and contribution so that students are part of designing their own destiny. In this regard, one student representing a group discussion argued that

The problem we have is that most of the times, we, the owners of education do not participate in development and review of the curriculum. This makes us learn some of the issues that may not help us. For instance, how many students or former teacher attend the curriculum development or review processes? We usually see the same people meeting to develop what we will learn. Lack of our
participation makes our views not included in the curriculum and that brings frustration when we realize that what we want to learn is not included in the curriculum.

These sentiments are in agreement with the African wise saying involving the people who face the problems when fathoming out mitigative measures. In a similar sentiment, one group discussion concluded,

There is a gap between what the youth think and what old people think. By sidelining us in curriculum change or development, the people who make curricula make us learn what they learned long time ago and some of that stuff is not relevant in our life today. This is why some of us think of doing other courses after our first degrees so that we can compensate for what we have missed. **Aphunzitsi amatikhomelera** (We, teachers are oppressed and not given much freedom).

Another group report felt that curriculum specialists are the best to lead and help develop and review teacher education curriculum because as specialists they know best what to be done. In this case, one group wondered,

How can people who do not know something choose what to learn it? Curriculum specialists know through their education and experience about what to be taught and learned in schools. Role division tells us that specialists do best in their areas and so we should respect what curriculum specialist know and plan for us. As for us, we should learn what they choose for us. Our time will also come when we will become specialists and plan for the next generations.

From the above sentiments, students were arguing that “choice” can only be done when people who are asked to choose “know” options that exist. The other perspective of students was that there should be entire participation of the society or country in curriculum development so that all own the future that is placed in education:

Teacher education curriculum should be selected by society based on the needs of that society. In this case, curriculum should not be chosen by specialists but by the people themselves in the help of specialists who should act like secretaries. This means parents, local leaders and national leaders should get together and define what they want to become as a society and choose what students will have to learn in order to become that what they have chosen. What this group thinks is wrong now is that this job has been left to specialists and politicians. The problem is that if that group which makes curricula goes wrong or makes a mistake then the whole future generation is spoiled. Maybe Malawi is not developing because education planners made wrong choices for us. We learn things that we already know in society while our friends in developed countries are learning big sciences like how to make planes and other technologies.

In conclusion, the students felt that curriculum must be chosen through participatory approaches where curriculum specialists act as “secretaries” or facilitators who would translate the views of society into action plans.

**Perspectives of lecturers**

This section presents the perception of lecturer-participants of all whom were heads of departments. From HODs at the university institutions that train secondary school teachers, we wanted to find out what criteria they use to select courses for secondary school teacher education and how they determine which teaching subjects to enroll students into. The study also sought to establish what the lecturers think should be the determinants of curriculum choice. The results show that there are many factors that are used.

First, perceptions of the 5 HODs agreed that the main determinant for the choice of any curriculum is ideally the needs of the people. But they said that the controversy comes in on establishing those needs and prioritizing them into an educational curriculum. They cited lack of funding and poor public participation for curriculum development and review processes as main hindrances in curriculum choice in Malawi and most developing countries. For instance, one head of department (HoD) said,

Ideally all eligible Malawians are supposed to participate, as good citizens, in public curriculum activities because curriculum is about the education of their children or even of themselves and education is generally provided from public funding, from their own public money. But because of factors like poor funding and high illiteracy levels, the public usually does not actively take part. Yet they end up blaming the education system when they see that education does not provide what they expect.

In a similar sentiment, heads felt that oftentimes the politicians meddle into the role of education specialists by not seeking technical advice from educationists in their educational planning. For example, linking to former presidents of the Republic of Malawi, HoD said,

Sometimes the problem is that politicians simply dictate what to be put in curriculum without research-based evidence about what we need in Malawi. You can see that Muluzi declared for the introduction of Free Primary Education in 1994 without having proper situation analysis about how to implement it. Similarly, Bingu just declared that he would construct five universities in Malawi without any clear justification about how the areas of specializations were selected and how the locations of the universities were determined. All these top-bottom approaches disrupt the participatory problem identification processes which eventually lead into challenges in implementation.

One HOD also asserted that sometimes in the teacher colleges, choice of courses seems arbitrary as there is no credible research on the impact of some courses on helping teacher trainees to become better teachers. He averred,

The choice of courses is generally arbitrary too. We seem to say “because this is what is taught at XXX College or because this is what was taught, therefore these are the courses to be taught for pre-service teacher education.” Sometimes, we include a course in the curriculum because one member of staff has a qualification in
that area and we do not include other courses because we do not have that capacity in the department at that time. For instance, our universities fail to enroll learners with disability because we do not have capacity to handle them.

On the same choice of courses, one HOD observed that because of lack of funding, curriculum reviews are not as regular as required and so there are staff members who teach the old same things and they give the same old notes to students. For instance, he claimed,

There are some lecturers here who are giving out the notes to students which I copied when I was a student here long time ago. One wonders then if there are no changes or improvements in that course. But because we do not have regular reviews, students maybe learning some archaic information. Sometimes new members of staff fear to talk about this because these are the old people who have been in the colleges since long time ago and they fell untouchable.

On subjects of specialization, teacher educators said that lately they receive information specifying teacher demands from the Ministry of Education. However, they also said that because it is expensive to train science teachers, colleges fail to fulfill their adequate mandates:

We know that currently the Ministry of Education needs many science and English teachers. The problem is that it is more expensive to train science teachers since this requires labs, chemicals and other teaching and learning needs. But with no funding, colleges

| COURSE NAME                              | 1   | 2   | 3   | 4   | 5   | 6   |
|------------------------------------------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| Educational Psychology                   | ✓   | ✓   | ✓   | ✓   | ✓   | ✓   |
| Philosophy of Education                  | ✓   | ✓   | ✓   | ✓   | ✓   | ✓   |
| Educational Leadership and Management    | ✓   | ✓   | ✓   | ✓   | ✓   | ✓   |
| Instructional Media and Technology       | ✓   | ✓   | ✓   | ✓   | ✓   | ✓   |
| Sociology of Education                   | ✓   | ✓   | ✓   | ✓   | ✓   | ✓   |
| Testing, Measurement and Evaluation      | ✓   | ✓   | ✓   | ✓   | ✓   | ✓   |
| Special Needs Education                  | ✓   | ✓   | ✓   | ✓   | ✓   | ✓   |
| Curriculum Theory and Development        | ✓   | ✓   | ✓   | ✓   | ✓   | ✓   |
| History of Education                     | ✓   | ✓   | ✓   | ✓   | ✓   | ✓   |
| Psychology of Education/Educational Psychology | ✓   | ✓   | ✓   | ✓   | ✓   | ✓   |
| Educational Research Methods             | ✓   | ✓   | ✓   | ✓   | ✓   | ✓   |
| Research Project                         | ✓   | ✓   | ✓   | ✓   | ✓   | ✓   |
| Education and National Development       | ✓   | x   | ✓   | ✓   | x   | x   |
| Teaching Practice                        | ✓   | ✓   | ✓   | ✓   | ✓   | ✓   |

| NAME OF COURSE                        | TEACHER COLLEGES |
|---------------------------------------|------------------|
|                                       | 1   | 2   | 3   | 4   | 5   | 6   |
| Economics of Education                | ✓   |     |     |     |     |     |
| Introduction to Planning              | ✓   |     |     |     |     |     |
| Educational Inspection and Supervision| ✓   |     | ✓   |     |     |     |
| Guidance and Counseling Psychology    | ✓   |     |     | ✓   |     |     |
| General Teaching Methods              | ✓   |     |     |     |     |     |
| Communication Skills for Education    | ✓   |     |     |     |     |     |
| Fundamentals of Information Systems   | ✓   |     |     |     |     |     |
| Teaching Profession in Malawi         | ✓   |     |     |     |     |     |

Adapted from Mkandawire (2017: 105-106).
fill the other student admission space with other specializations thereby contributing to shortage of teachers in sciences.

This study also found out that the curriculum for all secondary school education institutions in Malawi had largely the similar education courses despite few differences in names of the courses and other specifications. Although it is not possible to judge course content by their titles, the similarity of the titles could help decipher what kind of content they have considering that all teacher education programs originated from the University of Malawi which has been the only university in the country up until some 15 years ago. Nonetheless, the study also noted that some teacher education institutions had some courses that did not appear in other institutions that also provide preservice secondary school teachers education. Table 1 shows the details of similarities and differences.

**Discussion**

This section is a discussion of findings of the study with focus on practical and theoretical implications of perspectives on curriculum choice. The discussion is organized based on key themes drawn from the findings.

**Curriculum should be based on real needs of the people**

First, findings from both teacher trainees and their lecturers agree that ideally curriculum choice for teacher education should be done through participatory approach with all eligible stakeholders such as students, former student teachers, and parents involved. Student teachers emphasized the need of incorporating the needs of students, whereas teacher educators focused on making curriculum to be an answer to collective needs of society, of the country. This finding is basically in tandem with extant literature by curriculum and development scholars that curriculum choice should be based on the needs of society and should be collectively chosen. However, according to students, the problem is that the youth are sidelined on the curriculum that is meant for them making curriculum content and methodology missing the views of the beneficiaries of the curriculum. For students, the solution is to change the approach by making the students as key stakeholders in curriculum developments and reviews. A similar study by Carey also established the critical importance of involving students in curriculum development and concluded that there should be a revision of the culture and processes of university curriculum and decision making by increasing student participation. One notable difference between the perspectives of students and lecturers is that students emphasized the need to incorporate the needs of students into the curriculum, whereas lecturers focused more on basing the curricula on the needs of society. On another observation, HODs (lecturers) while agreeing that curricular choice should be done through participatory and consultative processes, they said that the main hindrances are lack of funding and negligence of the general public to participate actively in the curricula that affect them. These hindrances were said to be made worse due to lack of political will and limited participation of the private sector in providing resources for curricular activities. For instance, the general public was accused of keeping quiet when dealing with education planning and yet they keep complaining about education standards. From these views, it is evident that both students and lecturers agree with the view that curriculum choice needs to be collectively chosen by the public but that there are factors that need to be addressed if the public is to make meaningful gains from their education and the education of future generations. For curriculum to gain the trust and confidence of the people, therefore, the findings suggest that adequate resources must be availed for the development of curricula for teacher education. Otherwise, teacher education curriculum and education at large is the one that prepares the future of nations and hence requiring enough resources. Lack of such investment in education planning would imply failing to prepare for the future generations of society. If we take the philosophical trajectory of liberative educationists like Paulo Freire, the challenges hindering participation in curriculum choice and review should therefore be strongly challenged through dialogical praxis by the general public so that education is designed to optimally serve the core interest of the general public.

**Curriculum specialists should be facilitators for public needs**

The second finding was that the views of both student teachers and HoDs were in agreement that curriculum specialists should simply act as a guide in curricular development and review. However, in the words of students, the curriculum specialists should only be entrusted to work as “facilitators” or “secretaries” and “translators” of the public needs into the curriculum. They also stated that currently, teachers who passed through the curriculum and are teaching in schools are usually not part in the selection of curriculum content. They also stated that currently, teachers who passed through the curriculum and are teaching in schools are usually not part in the selection of curriculum content and yet they have more experience on what was good and what does not practically work from their training. They claimed that teachers who translate the curriculum into practice have a lot of experience but they are usually only invited for orientation to changed curricula. They felt that the teachers and students would make valuable input in curriculum development and review for teacher education. As pointed out earlier, in an African saying, not involving teachers and students in curricular development and review activities is like “shaving a man’s head in his absence.” The students’ perspective was that curriculum development should therefore use participatory approaches and the public and students themselves should be genuinely involved in determining their life and the life of their children which is placed in the curriculum. “We, as students, have our own life that we want to lead and so it is not fair to be given an
education that limits us only to teaching as is the case now,” one student argued. In this case, the students worried that leaving curriculum development to specialists alone may leave the needs of the students out. For example, they contended that there is a risk that the specialists could make wrong curriculum choices and thereby destroying the whole generation that passes through that curriculum. This point is also strongly resonant in the work of Bai et al (2001) on curriculum planning where they advise society to help create and improve future generations by participating in curriculum planning. 62,63 Some teacher trainees further argued that the absence of the youth in curriculum activities was causing students to learn outdated stuff instead of learning what could make them become more competitive and relevant to the challenges and opportunities of the world. Coincidentally, one response also revealed that there are few lecturers who teach outdated staff partly because curricular reviews do not take place regularly. It is important to note, however, that some studies show that sometimes students’ expectations of what they learn and what really is in the job market can be viewed as mismatching but that this “mismatch” is more complex than may be perceived by them. 64 All the more, a couple of studies have shown that student participation in curriculum development and review activities is very important in making education relevant and responsive to the people and the future.65–67

Curriculum development is a rigorous process

In another perspective from lecturers, although it was perceived to be ideal to make all legitimate people participate in curricular activities, some curricular processes were perceived to be at a higher level of intellectual rigor. This factor was isolated as one of the rationale responsible for limiting levels of participation in the curriculum process just as some curriculum development theories state.1,68 They argued that curriculum development and reviews require special knowledge and expertise and therefore the general public can only be consulted to source out their perceptions and needs but that the rigor to transform those needs into curriculum requires high-level competencies. It was with the same argument that they blamed most politicians of dictating what curricular programs and changes to be made while they are generally not good at that as often they do not even check research evidence to support their dictated education programs. The views of the lecturers appear to agree with ideas of William Reid that a curriculum is more of a public “pursuit” rather than a material entity and that as such it is an achievement that anyone involved in schooling must and should pursue while expecting controversies.57 Although these views sound a little different, there is emphatic consensus that all stakeholders must take part in varying ways in curriculum development if education is to be relevant and hold the trust of the people. Otherwise, indifference of the public in curricular participation is like a customer in a restaurant not specifically demanding what kind of food to eat and yet continuously complaining that the food served to him is bad. To increase public participation in curricular activities, there is need for civic education on the necessity for the citizens to participate in development and review of public curriculum.

Politicians should not meddle in the role of the academics

As previously mentioned, the other finding of this study was that the problem is that politicians and other authorities meddle in curriculum issues which they usually know little about. This perspective mainly came from lecturers (teacher educators) who argued that politicians use top-down curriculum decision-making approaches through decrees about what to be done without being well informed by evidence mainly from education experts. This conflict between politicians and academicians on education and curriculum planning has been universally raised in many studies.69–71 Teacher educators hence suggested that there should be a way where educational needs of the public are legally protected so that no single politician that comes into power changes the education direction according to their will. They argued that this way, curricular choices would be based on the real needs of the people and would be taken seriously for funding and implementation. We also agree that there is indeed need to protect what is to be learned in schools by avoiding decrees of politicians or by the development partners called donors on what should be done in schools. For this to be ensured, there should be a way of limiting powers of politicians and other actors in determining what happens in schools. This can be done through empowering the public to own the curriculum by involving them more in planning and implementation processes of education programs. Otherwise, it is ironical that where parents send their children to spend most of their life (schools), the parents seem not to be much involved in planning. We believe parents and students should be more involved in determining their destiny and so experts should only facilitate the process by providing available alternatives.

Educational planning needs adequate funding

The other finding was that curriculum change, through curricular reviews, is difficult because of poor of funding. For instance, 2 lecturers concurred that lack of regular reviews has seen some university lecturers teach the same courses in the same way they taught long time ago. They said that this has a risk of reproducing graduates who are living behind their time and generation as they may be learning what is outdated. Few studies have assessed context problems where universities teach outdated information72 and this problem therefore needs proper checking mechanisms which may involve students’ participation in curricular development and reviews.
Recommendations

Based on the findings, this study recommends the following as far as curriculum choice is concerned. First, curriculum development processes should be genuinely involving primary beneficiaries such as students and parents so that the product from curricular activities incorporates the needs and views of the learners. But because there appears to be public indifference to curricular issues, there is need for civic education on the importance of public involvement in development and review of public educational curricula. Second, both government and the private sector should be taking active roles in financing curricular developments and reviews. These resources are critical because if planning is poor, the results are usually also poor. We think that the truth that stakeholders miss is that by not adequately funding curriculum planning and review activities, government and private sectors increase their cost because they end up spending more resources in retraining the graduates when they find out that they are deficient of job demands. Third, universities and teacher education institutions should find innovative ways of reviewing their teaching materials to avoid alleged cases where some lecturers are said to teach outdated information and content of doubtful use. Fourth, Malawians and other countries in similar situations should find better ways of making their needs get into the curriculum rather than being dictated by politicians and other stakeholders like donors. In the same thinking, we think politicians and donors sometimes dictate what to go into the curriculum because the owners (general public) seem to have no plans or negotiation basis to justify their plans. Finally, comprehensive studies should be periodically done to establish which courses in teacher education curriculum really help students to become good teachers. The case of reviewing courses taught in university institutions should not be limited to teacher education because this problem appears universal.

Conclusions

In this study, we sought to establish views of student teachers for secondary school and HODs for secondary teacher education on who and what should be determining curriculum choice for teacher education. Their perspectives have implications in different disciplines of study including medicine. We used qualitative approach to collect, analyze, and report findings. Findings show that both lecturers and students think that curriculum choice should be participatory and involve students and parents in a genuine and honest manner. The study also showed that currently there is minimum participation of some sectors of stakeholders because of lack of resources. The study also unveiled perspectives that due to lack of resources, some lecturers teach outdated and issues of doubtful value to the students because curricular reviews are not regular. This study hence recommends that stakeholders should find ways of making curricular developments and reviews more participatory and regular so that what goes into the curriculum is both relevant and important for educational development. One of the ways to increase public involvement in curricular activities would be to conduct civic education and make public awareness on the importance of their involvement in curricular planning and implementation.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

MTM conceived, designed and executed the whole study up to report writing. Professor ZL provided guidance and supervision in the whole study. FKM and JS provided peer reviewing of the paper before the paper was submitted to the editor for peer review and further processing. FKM and JS also edited the paper after the editor provided peer review feedback and recommendations.

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