



Assistance to Basic Education: All Children Reading (ABE ACR)

MERIT: The Malawi Early Grade Reading Improvement Activity

Safe Learning Environments for Reading: A Qualitative Study of
Primary Schools Reading Environments in Malawi, September 2018

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Safe Learning Environments for Reading: A Qualitative Study of Primary School Reading Environments in Malawi

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ACRONYMS

ABE	Assistance to Basic Education
ACR	All Children Reading
CDCS	Country Development Cooperation Strategy
DEM	District Education Manager
MERIT	Malawi Early Grade Reading Improvement Activity
MWAI	Miske Witt & Associates International
MoEST	Ministry of Education, Science and Technology
NARI	National Assessment of Reading Instruments
NASIS	National Assessment of School Inclusion and Safety
NRP	National Reading Programme
PEA	Primary Education Advisor
SIG	School Improvement Grant
SIP	School Improvement Plan
SIS	School Inclusion and Safety
TALULAR	Teaching and Learning Using Locally Available Resources
TDC	Teacher Development Center
USAID	United States Agency for International Development

I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Study Purpose and Questions

The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) MERIT: The Malawi Early Grade Reading Improvement Activity was designed to provide technical assistance to the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MoEST) in Malawi to improve reading performance in Standards 1 to 4 nationwide. This report, *Safe Learning Environments for Reading*, summarizes findings of a qualitative study undertaken to build upon earlier MERIT research that raised numerous provocative questions about the conditions under which Malawi's girls and boys are learning to read.

In February 2017, MERIT conducted a baseline study in a randomized sample of 86 government primary schools. This study, the National Assessment of School Inclusion and Safety (NASIS), was designed to collect data on how gender-responsiveness, inclusion, positive reinforcement, and physical and emotional safety related with one another and how they affected children learning to read. The NASIS results showed that teachers' and head teachers' perceptions of school environments and relationships were different from learners', particularly regarding issues of physical safety. There were also important differences between what teachers and head teachers said was taking place and what data collectors observed about teachers' and learners' behaviors in the schools and the classrooms. Further, while teachers and head teachers reported being supportive of the official policies related to all four elements, NASIS 2017 data indicated they were less sure of how to implement inclusive education and positive reinforcement and discipline policies.

The NASIS 2017 baseline data collection scope and process did not include sufficient time at each school site to observe classroom dynamics and school practices related to gender-responsiveness, positive reinforcement, safety, or inclusion. Hence, this small-scale qualitative study, *Safe Learning Environments for Reading*, was conducted in May and June 2018 in eight schools to follow up on the NASIS 2017 baseline findings. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore in greater depth the mixed results from the baseline study by examining how gender-responsiveness, inclusion, positive reinforcement, and physical and emotional safety interact with one another. In addition, this study explored how contexts, relationships, resources, and school policies and practices support or constrain positive reading environments for learners, particularly for girls and children with special needs.

Project Background

In 2015, MERIT was launched as a five-year USAID-funded activity to support the MoEST's National Reading Programme (NRP) in Standards 1 to 4. MERIT trained teachers and coaches in reading instruction for early grade learners and published textbooks and teachers' guides. In addition, MERIT focused on four key contextual elements related to reading: gender-responsiveness, inclusive education, positive reinforcement, and physical and emotional safety. MERIT has five main objectives, and Miske Witt and Associates International (MWAI) is responsible for activities that aim to foster safer, more gender-responsive, and more positive learning environments for children to read in

Malawi, and ensuring that gender is a cross-cutting theme integrated into all MERIT activities.

Study Questions, Design, Methods, and Limitations

The research questions guiding this study are as follows:

1. What are the perceptions and experiences of diverse school actors in relation to gender-responsiveness, inclusion, positive discipline and reinforcement, and school safety?
2. What are the practices—institutional, relational, and material—that support or constrain a safe, gender-responsive, inclusive, and positive school experience for Malawian girls and boys (Standards 1 to 4) learning to read?

This qualitative research study was designed to collect extensive observational and interview data from teachers and students in a diverse set of primary schools that participated in NASIS 2017. To select the research sites, the research team analyzed the NASIS 2017 baseline data to identify key patterns and discrepancies among and between actors, from the interviews and observations, and related to the four elements of safety, inclusion, gender-responsiveness, and positive reinforcement and discipline. The research team chose eight schools to represent the full range of students' experiences identified in the NASIS. These ranged from schools with high *reported and observed* levels of the four elements, to schools where stakeholders *reported* the four elements to be high but researchers *observed* the levels to be low (and vice-versa) or where the four elements were mixed between high and low, to schools with low levels of all four elements, both *reported and observed*.

To further classify the schools for this qualitative study, the research team calculated a unique school inclusion and safety (SIS) score from the NASIS 2017 data. This score weighted equally the responses of the actors (teachers, head teachers, and learners) and the data sources (interviews and observations). It also included as many data points from the NASIS 2017 as possible to provide a holistic picture of the 86 NASIS schools at baseline. These SIS scores were then used in this qualitative study to classify the eight schools from most to least effective at creating gender-responsive, inclusive, safe, and positive learning environments for students learning to read. This qualitative study provides more extensive qualitative data and a more nuanced examination of the data to complement the quantitative patterns revealed in the NASIS 2017 baseline data by examining the school contexts and relationships that affect the four elements (safety, gender-responsiveness, inclusiveness, and positive reinforcement and discipline)—and, thus, learners' opportunities to read.

A team of six researchers collected qualitative data from May 28 to June 8, 2018, in eight schools in the Central and Southern regions of Malawi. The study was designed to collect consistent information from diverse school actors in Standards 1 to 4 (i.e., women and men teachers, girls, boys, learners with disabilities) on their perspectives and experiences, and on classroom and school-wide processes and practices related to safety, gender-responsiveness, inclusion, and positive reinforcement and discipline (**Annex I** presents a detailed narrative on data collection). The research team designed and used seven protocols for this study: school observation, classroom observation,

school administrative data protocol, head teacher interview, teacher (group) interview, student interview, and student focus group discussion (**Annex II** includes the instruments). To analyze the data, the researchers used inductive, theoretical, and comparative coding of the protocol responses and field notes to explore similarities, differences, and emerging themes across data sources, participants, and schools. The initial analysis of each school was compared to the SIS scores, and the lead researcher then constructed composite case studies to illustrate the key components among higher- and lower-scoring schools' relationships, resources, and contexts. The composite case study for the top-performing schools illuminates best practices for improving gender-responsiveness, inclusion, safety, and positive reinforcement and discipline in early grade reading environments.

The limitations of the study, which were due to the resources available, included the small number of schools (eight), the amount of data collection feasible per school site (one day each), and the geographic regions included in data collection (Southern and Central regions only, not the Northern region).

Findings

Practices That Promote Gender-Responsiveness, Inclusion, Positive Reinforcement, and School Safety

Using qualitative methods, the research team observed a range of perceptions and experiences among teachers, students, and head teachers in relation to gender-responsiveness, inclusion, positive discipline, and school safety. These data complemented and expanded upon the SIS scores created from the NASIS 2017 baseline data. The NASIS baseline data had indicated that girls and boys generally had equal opportunities to participate in class. Aside from gender-segregated seating in some schools, the data did not reveal significant issues related to gender-responsiveness. However, the qualitative data revealed more unevenness related to gender-responsive classrooms. For instance, some mixed seating patterns (such as clusters of girls sitting in front on the floor along with girls and boys at desks in mixed seating patterns) led to unequal learning opportunities based on the teacher's ability to move around the room and interact with learners. Teachers could move freely around learners seated at the desks, but they could not give direct and equal attention to girls seated on the floor. Observers also noted that classrooms with gender-segregated chores (e.g., boys sweeping, girls cleaning toilets) in schools with inadequate latrines, changing rooms, and/or water availability had less equitable gender relations overall and fewer positive interactions among girls and boys. In addition, in multiple schools, many girls reported feeling sexualized (e.g., reports of sexual touching or gossip about relations with boys), which impacted their interactions with boys and teachers. Lastly, the research team noted unequal gender relations among teachers and between teachers and head teachers, leading to less gender-responsive classrooms and schools.

Similarly, this qualitative study also revealed unevenness across classrooms and schools regarding inclusion of learners with disabilities or special education needs. SIS scores calculated from the NASIS 2017 data had shown that teachers expressed high levels of support for inclusion. NASIS data collectors had observed teachers using multiple approaches to explain the same concept, which was beneficial for pupils with special

education needs. However, teachers reported they felt under-trained, under-resourced, and unable to exercise inclusion successfully in their daily practice. In this qualitative study, the research team noted that many schools were making progress: more children with visible disabilities were seen attending school, teachers used multiple teaching approaches to support inclusion, and special needs resource centers and special needs education teachers were observed incorporating learners successfully into school and social activities. Yet interviews among learners with disabilities revealed difficulties for them in mainstream classrooms, such as bullying from other students, some unsupportive teachers, and the segregation of successful students from struggling students. And observations revealed that children with special needs were often socially and educationally isolated in mainstream classes. Teachers in the qualitative study also reported difficulties identifying students with special needs, challenges accessing resources since demand exceeded supply (e.g., an insufficient number of large print materials for learners with visual impairments), and a desire for more and deeper training to support full inclusion successfully.

With regard to positive reinforcement, the SIS scores showed a range of support for positive reinforcement across the 86 schools. Teachers reported they supported positive reinforcement and generally provided more positive than negative reinforcement to learners, but the teachers also said they did not feel they understood or had been trained adequately to use positive reinforcement or positive discipline methods effectively. This study showed a shift, as many teachers across the eight schools praised the MERIT training and demonstrated in their classrooms the positive reinforcement techniques learned in this training. Yet in-depth interviews with pupils and classroom observations in these eight schools also revealed that teachers' responses to students still varied. Some teachers allowed pupils to make fun of their peers, praised pupils for trying to make demeaning remarks about others, or punished learners for incorrect responses. Relatedly, the qualitative research team noted important differences in responses to learner tardiness, misbehavior, and bullying across classrooms and schools. Schools with higher SIS scores usually responded with care by counseling students, and they generally followed MoEST rules by punishing learners *after* class rather than interrupting in-class learning. Middle- and lower-scoring SIS schools gave contrasting accounts of addressing learner tardiness, misbehavior, and bullying, from making pupils do chores (drawing water from far away) to giving physical punishments or sending students home. Learners in these schools reported a range of feelings about whether they thought the punishments were fair.

Regarding physical and emotional safety, the SIS scores showed great differences between national policy and safe school frameworks and what was observed in classrooms and schools. Some classes were held outside, most latrines and handwashing facilities were not clean and operating, and students were observed kneeling outside of classrooms waiting to enter. Interviews from the NASIS 2017 baseline also gave evidence of unsafe school rules and norms (e.g., pupils reported witnessing corporal punishment). This qualitative study deepened those findings by illustrating how school infrastructure is important for safety, inclusion, and equity and for determining who could attend school, be comfortable at school, and had the best opportunities to learn. In the physically safest schools, all school buildings were visible from a central location (allowing teacher

oversight of the full school grounds), an adequate number of school blocks had ramps, and the school had adequate water and latrines. In contrast, unsafe schools held classes outside and had no water sources, broken latrines, high levels of noise, limited resources (chalkboards, seating), and partially completed infrastructure projects that were safety hazards (e.g., unfinished steps, exposed rebar, piles of broken furniture), which impeded opportunities to learn to read, particularly for girls and for pupils with disabilities.

Institutional, Relational, and Material Practices That Support or Constrain Safe, Gender-Responsive, Inclusive, and Positive Schools

For this study, qualitative data were also collected on the institutional, relational, and material practices that supported and constrained safe school experiences. These data revealed that school culture (including the norms of classroom interactions and school leadership), student supervision, and available textbooks greatly affected safety, inclusion, and equity in school. In schools with higher scores (ranked safer, more inclusive, gender-responsive, and with more positive reinforcement), the school culture was positive and nurturing. Teachers generally interacted with care and empathy (not physical punishment), and they sought out struggling students (e.g., chatting with students about family and personal life, providing uniforms, porridge). These teachers engaged students throughout the day and actively engaged with lessons (e.g., using “I do, you do, we do” approaches and TALULAR [Teaching and Learning Using Locally Available Resources]), thus promoting learning. These classrooms tended to have more resources, including some benches in rows so teachers could move around to all students, and at least one textbook for every three learners (with textbooks either maintained in class, or brought from home).

Lower-scoring schools tended to have physically disorganized classrooms with more than 100 learners in a room or outside and few textbooks. Teachers spoke in harsh tones, were physically aggressive with students, or remained seated at their desks, appearing bored. In these schools, researchers also observed significant amounts of time where students had no adult supervision (e.g., teachers out of class or not on campus for the day), and there was increased arguing, roughhousing, and fighting among pupils, and time off task. In lower-scoring schools, head teachers also had difficulty addressing teacher absences (i.e., they did not have a consistent system or a policy), supervising teachers, identifying learners with special needs, and prioritizing safety and inclusion decisions while managing resources and maintaining positive school-community relations. Lower-scoring schools also had few textbooks, and learners often fought to try to gain access to the books, which negatively impacted inclusion of all learners and opportunities for them to improve their reading.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Key findings can be incorporated into MERIT teacher and head teacher trainings, and into Teacher Learning Circles, which will support schools in strengthening institutional, relational, and material practices and in providing gender-responsive, inclusive, and safe learning environments with positive reinforcement and discipline. These findings can be implemented or addressed through low-cost interventions at the school level. For instance, previous USAID projects have already piloted and developed materials and

processes to support successful head teacher and teacher training for school improvement (e.g., Primary School Support Project: School Fees Pilot [2006-2008]; Malawi Teacher Training Activity [2004-2008]). These activities can be utilized to support expanded teacher training to help improve safety and, relatedly, reading outcomes for learners. Topics would include identifying learners with special needs; engaging more deeply with positive reinforcement goals and techniques and gender-responsive teaching practices; building positive classroom and school cultures; and collaborating with school leaders on common discipline approaches to lateness, bullying, and misbehavior. Head teacher trainings could also support and enhance students' opportunities to learn. Topics would include managing teaching and learning resources (e.g., teacher absences); developing a school-wide system for addressing teacher absences and shortages; reviewing NRP guidelines on the need for low student–textbook ratios and managing textbooks; techniques for managing school-community relations; and ideas to promote school safety related to infrastructure (e.g., low-cost, space-saving benches). Other low-cost, high-impact interventions that have been implemented in high-performing schools, such as grass-thatched changing rooms or urinals/latrines, temporary shelters, benches, and ramps could be constructed with community mobilization, support, and School Improvement Grant (SIG) funding.

In addition to the recommendations above, this study sheds light on important lessons for future research regarding safe learning spaces for reading. For example, school observations ideally should capture time before and after class (five to 10 minutes) to observe school discipline issues effectively. Future data collection should include additional time to talk with teachers and learners about special education needs and identify issues of inclusion in schools. In addition, this qualitative study highlighted once again how extremely important it is to collect data from learners, as learner accounts related to school discipline and to teacher-learner relationships may align more closely with researcher observations and provide useful feedback for teachers and head teachers about the realities of children's school experiences. Middle-scoring schools tended to have greater variability among actors, data points, and instruments, pointing to the need for more data to capture an accurate snapshot of the overall school practices related to safety, inclusion, and equity in these schools that are seeking to improve. Gathering deep and rich triangulated data will help schools make more informed decisions to improve safety and inclusion efficiently and effectively for all learners.

2. STUDY PURPOSE & QUESTIONS

Study Purpose

MERIT: The Malawi Early Grade Reading Improvement Activity is a five-year, USAID activity designed to provide technical assistance to the MoEST to improve the reading performance of Malawian learners in Standards 1 to 4 nationwide. MERIT not only provides professional development, training, and guides in early grade reading strategies to teachers, head teachers, and others who support this activity, it has also published Standard 1 to 4 textbooks for reading and thousands of supplementary readers. MERIT also focused on the conditions under which teaching and learning reading take place, giving specific attention to assuring safe learning spaces for reading,

positive discipline for and positive reinforcement of learners, and paying attention across all aspects of the activity to gender-responsiveness and to inclusive education for children with disabilities and special learning needs.

In order to have baseline information on which to gauge MERIT's improvement related to the conditions mentioned above, MERIT conducted the NASIS baseline study in February 2017 in a nationally-representative set of 86 government primary schools. NASIS collected data from head teachers, teachers, and pupils on the four key elements of a safe learning environment addressed through MERIT activities: gender-responsiveness, inclusion, positive discipline, and school safety. Malawian research and international research provide some data on whether and how the four components (gender-responsiveness, inclusion, positive discipline, and school safety) interact with one another in practice, and how these interactions might impact children's reading. While international frameworks often suggest that the four elements work together to foster safe and inclusive school environments, the NASIS 2017 baseline study yielded some interesting findings, indicating uneven correlations within and across measures of these four elements. However, the NASIS data collection process did not allow enough time at each school site for data collectors to observe safety and inclusion practices (particularly for children with special needs), or to explore and understand more deeply the gender-responsiveness and positive reinforcement classroom dynamics and school practices that lead to some students feeling safer or more included in reading and learning processes than others.

Therefore, USAID Malawi approved this small-scale qualitative study, conducted in May and June 2018 in eight schools. The purpose of this study, *Safe Learning Environments for Reading*, is to gain insights into the earlier NASIS 2017 findings that revealed uneven correlations among the four elements of a safe learning environment, as well as to explore current school practices that create safer environments for all girls and boys who are learning to read. This study was designed to explore the four individual elements of a safe learning environment and the interactions of these elements with one another by examining the *contexts, relationships, resources, and school policies and practices* that support positive learning environments for readers, particularly for girls and children with special educational needs. This is one of the first comparative studies in Malawi of the daily classroom and school experiences of children with special educational needs in primary schools that focuses on reading, and it significantly expands the data available on the gender relations and discipline practices that Malawian pupils experience in school.

NRP, MERIT, USAID, MoEST, and other organizations can use the findings from this qualitative study to inform immediate and midterm policy, practice, and evaluation related to safe learning environments for reading. It is anticipated that MERIT—and possibly other stakeholders working to support teachers' and school officials' improved practices—will use the findings to inform future MERIT trainings for teachers, section heads, head teachers, and PEAs, as already occurred to some extent in the August 2018 section head and head teacher training. For example, this study provides insights into why incorporating issues of safety and inclusion in all activities related to improved instruction for primary grade reading outcomes activities is essential to pupils' successful learning. It shows the importance of fostering school environments that serve students as well as

they can, or at least that do not cause active harm. Findings may also be used by MoEST, District Education Offices, USAID, and other stakeholders to inform future policies and programs related to early grade reading, girls' education, special needs education, school-community relations, and school quality improvement approaches more broadly.

Research Goals and Questions

The research goal of the qualitative study was to collect data that could be used to do the following:

- Provide a comparative analysis of the relationships between school cultures and practices of gender-responsiveness, inclusion, positive discipline, and safety in relation to learning to read
- Provide insights into classroom and school practices and issues related to gender-responsiveness, inclusion, positive discipline, and reinforcement that could be incorporated into MERIT trainings, as well as inform future policy and programming aimed at fostering safer learning environments for reading for all Malawian students through school-level, low-cost interventions
- Develop school case studies that support a comprehensive analytic model of safer, more gender-responsive, and inclusive Malawian classrooms and schools.

The qualitative research study was guided by two research questions:

1. What are the perceptions and experiences of diverse school actors in relation to gender-responsiveness, inclusion, positive discipline and reinforcement, and school safety?
2. What are the practices—institutional, relational, and material—that support or constrain a safe, gender-responsive, inclusive, and positive school experience for all Malawian girls and boys learning to read?

3. PROJECT BACKGROUND

The MERIT award period is from September 29, 2015, to September 28, 2020.

MERIT has five main objectives, served through five corresponding components:

- **Objective 1:** Improved instruction for primary grade reading outcomes
- **Objective 2:** Increased parental and community engagement in supporting reading
- **Objective 3:** Safer learning environments for reading created
- **Objective 4:** Pathways for sustainability instituted
- **Objective 5:** Country Development Cooperation Strategy (CDCS) priorities for integration advanced

MWAI is responsible for Objective 3 activities, which aim to foster safer, more gender-responsive, and positive learning environments for children to read in Malawi; MWAI also leads efforts to ensure that gender, as a cross-cutting theme, is integrated into all

MERIT activities. MWAI works in close collaboration with Perkins International, which is responsible for integrating inclusion as a cross-cutting theme into MERIT activities.

4. METHODS AND LIMITATIONS

To answer the qualitative research questions, the research team systematically collected observational and interview data from teachers and students at a diverse set of primary schools. The schools were selected to represent the full range of students' experiences of the four elements of safety, gender-responsiveness, inclusiveness, and positive reinforcement and discipline in two out of three regions in Malawi, the Central and Southern regions.

Site Selection

The qualitative research study was conducted in eight of the 86 schools in which MERIT had collected National Assessment of Reading Instruction (NARI) and NASIS data in 2017.

The 2017 National Assessment of Reading Instruction (NARI) data were collected simultaneously with the NASIS data; NARI data were collected on Standard 1 teachers only, and NASIS data were collected on Standards 2 to 4 teachers only. NARI data included data from 156 Standard 1 teachers who were observed (often by two assessors simultaneously) and interviewed. NARI data showed that nearly all Standard 1 teachers observed completed the MERIT August 2016 training (10 days) and December 2016 training (five days) and scored the NRP training highly (i.e., useful or very useful).

The overall findings from the NARI (2018) indicated that the lack of books available in class was a significant impediment both to learners' practice of reading in class and to teachers' satisfactory performance of the NRP curriculum. MWAI considered these overall findings when selecting schools and designing the qualitative research study.

MWAI examined a number of variables from the NARI data in an attempt to create a holistic picture of the eight schools selected for this study. For example, NARI data from these eight schools showed how the number of students per classroom varied significantly (from 236 total students, 121 girls and 115 boys; to 28 total students, 16 girls and 12 boys). Other NARI variables showed little variation among the eight schools (e.g., how well prepared the teacher was to give the lesson, how clear/well-presented were the teachers' instructions during the lesson, how useful the NRP training was).

NARI was tightly focused on collecting data related solely to teacher implementation of the NRP curriculum; it did not collect data on school safety and inclusion variables. Data on safety and inclusion were collected only through the NASIS, which revealed important insights related to school safety that warranted further study. Thus, the variables used to select schools with diverse safety and inclusion profiles came from the NASIS data, and the qualitative study was designed to further explore the correlations (or lack thereof) revealed in the NASIS research.¹

¹ NASIS baseline findings indicated that schools had uneven levels of and correlations among measures of school safety, gender-responsiveness, inclusion, and positive reinforcement and discipline. There also appeared to be high levels of variation at the teacher level within schools. The qualitative study explored this variation and unevenness in greater depth.

To select the research sites, the research team identified the following patterns that emerged from the NASIS school data. These were as follows:

- High levels of *reported* and *observed* safety, inclusion, and gender-responsiveness
- High levels of *reported* safety and inclusion but low levels of *observed* safety and gender-responsiveness
- High levels of *observed* safety and inclusion but low levels of *reported* safety and gender-responsiveness
- Low levels of *reported* and *observed* safety, inclusion, and gender-responsiveness
- Extremely variable schools with uneven levels of *reported* and *observed* safety, inclusion, and gender-responsiveness across actors (e.g., teachers, students) and settings (e.g., school-level versus classroom level).

The following secondary criteria were then used to select schools that represented each of the patterns:

- No more than eight schools within the Central and Southern regions could be selected due to resource and time limitations.
- Schools selected had to be in different districts to have as wide a geographic coverage as possible.
- Seven of the eight schools had to be classified as rural and one as urban to mirror national enrollment rates, since 83% of the population in Malawi live in rural areas.²
- Taken together, the eight sampled schools had to display characteristics correlated with safer or less safe learning environments across all schools in the NASIS study to ensure diverse representation.

School Classification

To classify the schools for this qualitative study, researchers developed a unique SIS score.

This was calculated by clustering items from the NASIS 2017 instruments that were developed around the four elements of safe schools (gender-responsiveness, positive discipline, physical and emotional safety, and inclusion), and two additional categories (general school climate and positive learning). NASIS items were recoded to follow the general pattern below:

- -1 = for a practice that prohibits safety/learning or is harmful to students (e.g., no code of conduct)
- 0 = activity not conducted (e.g., students not assigned group leadership roles)
- 1 = best-practice behavior that enhances safety, inclusion, or equity (e.g., agreeing that boys and girls are equally capable of being leaders)

To create this SIS score, the newly coded items were summed in the following way. All items were assigned equal weight, whether collected from learners or teachers, or collected in an interview or observation. This scoring system gave equal weight to all actors' voices (i.e., learners, teachers, and head teachers) when examining the four elements related

² <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.RUR.TOTL.ZS>

to learning and reading. In addition, since the 2017 NASIS baseline data had revealed differences between and among actors, and differences between what people *said* and what they *did*, researchers also weighted interview and observation data equally. In order to differentiate between everyday experiences in classrooms and desired best practices of teaching reading in MERIT, who did not conduct a particular activity were not assigned a negative score. For example, in one 30-minute classroom observation one would not expect to see all classroom pedagogies and their associated positive behaviors; therefore, a teacher who did not display all the practices they had been taught in a MERIT training was not penalized with a negative score but rather was assigned a “0” for not including a particular strategy listed on the NASIS instrument. Finally, since the 2017 NASIS instruments were designed with the four elements of safe schools in mind—and yielded important data points regarding each of the elements—the research team included as many data points as possible in the summed score. The NASIS scores for the eight schools in this study ranged from 86 to 13. **Table 1** shows the region, district, and SIS score for each school that participated in this study.

Table 1: Qualitative Research Study School Sites and Characteristics

Region	District	SIS score for selected school in the district
Central	Lilongwe Urban	86
Southern	Machinga	79
Southern	Blantyre Rural	69
Southern	Mulanje	67
Southern	Thyolo	60
Central	Dedza	35
Central	Ntcheu	35
Southern	Mangochi	13

Thus, this study provides qualitative insights into the quantitative patterns revealed through the NASIS baseline data collection by closely examining the school contexts and relationships that underlay the NASIS outcomes. It is important to note that only the team leader had information about the school’s NASIS data to ensure that research team members did not expect to encounter a positive or negative school environment when collecting data at a particular school.

Data Collection Methods

To design the study, Dr. Nancy Kendall reviewed existing qualitative and mixed-methods research in the region and globally for each of the four elements (**Annex III** provides a list of works cited, including some these studies; a full listing may be found in the 2017 NASIS study bibliography). She brought together previous studies, the qualitative research questions, and lessons learned from NASIS 2017 data collection to design this multi-method, multi-actor study. The study was designed to do the following:

- provide triangulated data on each of the four elements;

- consistently collect information on the perspectives and experiences of head teachers, Standard 1 to 4 teachers, and diverse pupils (including girls, boys, and learners identified as having disabilities); and
- explore school-wide and classroom processes and practices related to the four elements.

Seven data collection protocols were developed for this study:

1. School observation protocol
2. Classroom observation protocol
3. School administrative data protocol
4. Head teacher interview protocol
5. Teacher (group) interview protocol
6. Student focus group discussion protocol
7. Student interview protocol

The MERIT research team reviewed and revised each of these protocols. The research team comprised Dr. Kendall, Dr. Kara Janigan, Ms. Florie Chagwira-Betha, Mr. Augustine Kanyendula, Ms. Dolica Chiyembekeza (research assistant), and Mr. Lloyd Ngwira (research assistant). The protocols were piloted on the first day of data collection and then revised based on feedback from the team.

The research team collected data over a two-week period, from May 28 to June 8, 2018. Dr. Kendall was the team leader for the first week of data collection, while Dr. Janigan was the team leader for the second week. The team spent one day collecting data at each of seven schools, and two days at one urban school in the Central region. Each day, the team arrived at or close to the start of school, observed classes and activities within the school compound, conducted interviews throughout the school day, and conducted additional teacher interviews after learners went home. Due to the long distances between schools and the poor condition of some of the roads, the team left their lodgings each day at about 5 a.m. to reach each school by 7:30 a.m. and returned no earlier than 5 p.m. each night. This was followed by a one- to two-hour debriefing discussion.

Data collected at each school included the following:

- School observations (minimum of two)
- Standard 1 to 4 classroom observations (minimum of eight)
- School administrative forms (two)
- Head teacher interview (one)
- Standard 1 to 4 teacher interviews (minimum of two)
- Standard 4 pupil focus group discussion (minimum of two discussions with four girls each, and two discussions with four boys each)

- Standard 4 pupil interviews (minimum of three girls, three boys; minimum of one girl and one boy were identified as having a disability or special education need)
- In the two schools with Resource Centers for children with disabilities and special education needs, at least two observations and one Resource teacher interview

Each evening, the team members discussed their perceptions of the school's performance in relation to the four elements. Team members identified school- and classroom-level analytic themes associated with each of the four elements and with the overall concept of a learning environment that supports or constrains children's reading.

Head teachers at two schools were absent on the day of data collection. The head teacher at one school was absent because she had to travel to an urban center to meet with the District Education Manager to transfer official bank signatures before the end of the month.³ The deputy head teacher was not able to provide the needed information because the head teacher was newly appointed, and transition was still occurring. At another school, although the head teacher was absent, the deputy head teacher was able to provide all necessary information.

At most schools, all Standard 1 to 4 teachers present on the day of data collection were interviewed.

Researchers conducted interviews with Standard 4 pupils, where possible, with one academically high-performing girl and boy, one average-performing girl and boy, one low-performing girl and boy, and one girl and boy identified as having a disability or with special education needs. Where time did not allow, interviews were only conducted with the high- and low-performing students and the students with disabilities/special education needs.

Focus group discussions were conducted with groups of four students. To conduct the discussions, a second set of high-, average-, and low-performing girls and boys were selected as the lead participants; each of these students was then asked to select three friends to participate in the discussion with them. Where time was short, only focus group discussions with high- and low-performing students were conducted.

The head teacher and class teachers helped the research team identify the students to be selected to participate in this study in part by using teachers' books, which indicated the ranking of students from high to low achievers. This process allowed the research team to note if and how schools were keeping records on individual student performance, if and how schools supported the teachers in identifying students representing both ends of academic performance in their classroom, and it often provided insight into which students were absent on a given day. The head teacher and Standard 4 class teachers were asked to identify students with special education needs or disabilities in their classroom. In some cases, it appeared that students identified only as low-performing

³ According to other teachers at the school, the head teacher tried to complete this task earlier in the week so that she would be at school during data collection, but the lines at the bank were so long that she had to turn home. She bicycled in and out of town to complete this task—a trip of about 17 kms each way. As noted, this was one of a number of absences caused in school by expectations that teachers come to urban centers to handle financial transactions.

students also had mild, noticeable, special education needs that school staff had not identified.

Over the two weeks, the team was able to collect almost all planned data points. In most schools, the team collected more than the minimum number of data points. The total number of data points for each school and copies of each instrument are included in **Annex II**.

Data Analysis

After data collection was completed, the research team members compiled their data, expanded their field notes, and sent them to Dr. Kendall. She analyzed the data using inductive, theoretical, and comparative coding techniques to explore similarities, differences, and emerging themes across data sources, groups of actors, and schools. The initial analysis was organized around the two research goals for this study, while the second round of analysis was organized around the emerging case study categories.

Unique SIS scores were created for this study by Dr. Nancy Pellowski Wiger to reflect the study's hypotheses about how to capture and analyze most effectively information about the contexts, relationships, and practices that make schools more or less safe, inclusive, gender-responsive, and positive (i.e., using positive reinforcement and discipline). The initial analysis of the qualitative data from each school learning environment was then compared to the SIS scores of the eight schools. Dr. Kendall then constructed composite comparative case studies to illustrate the key themes or components that differentiated higher- and lower-scoring schools' contexts, relationships, practices, and resources. The findings in the rest of the report continue to build on the comparisons between the NASIS 2017 primarily quantitative baseline findings and this study's qualitative findings. In this way, the analysis illuminates current and best existing practices for improving the four elements of school safety, inclusion, gender-responsiveness, and positive reinforcement and discipline in relation to girls' and boys' learning to read in Malawi.

Study Limitations

The results of the qualitative study were limited in several ways. First, resource and time constraints reduced the school protocol to one day, which had implications for the depth and quantity of information researchers could gather from each site. For instance, the NASIS 2017 data highlighted differences between teachers' and head teachers' perceptions of issues related to the four elements, and learners' perceptions of the same issues. Differences in perceptions between teachers and learners tended to increase as the school's NASIS score lowered. The research team attempted to learn more about these differences in perception through this qualitative study. Learners' perceptions, especially regarding issues of safety and discipline, tend to mirror "reality" as the researchers observed it more than did teachers' reports. This is not surprising, as the NASIS data revealed that the majority of teachers knew what should be said (according to official government policy) about safety, discipline, and gender-responsiveness (though less regarding inclusion). It is likely that teachers' responses to the researchers reflected this knowledge. In contrast, learners' accounts tended to reflect their own reality, as observed during data collection. However, more time would be needed at each school site to gather additional information about differences in responses between teachers and learners and to form deeper insights into issues of the four elements

related to reading, particularly for the middle-scoring schools. Resource constraints also led to the decision to conduct research only in the Southern and Central regions of the country, which limits the geographical coverage of the research and the extent to which the study addresses the socio-cultural, economic, and ecological diversity of the country.

5. FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

Findings

The findings are divided into three sections:

1. Section 1 answers the first research question: What are the perceptions and experiences of diverse school actors in relation to gender-responsiveness, inclusion, positive discipline and reinforcement, and school safety?
2. Section 2 answers the second research question: What are the practices—institutional, relational, and material—that support or constrain a safe, gender-responsive, inclusive, and positive school experience for all Malawian girls and boys learning to read?
3. Section 3 consists of composite case studies that compare three school profiles.

A composite case study is created by blending various aspects of different actors' perceptions and experiences, illustrating these various realities in a compelling way while maintaining anonymity. Each composite case study is composed from data collected at the different schools visited; since data are combined from multiple schools in one composite, the cases do not individually represent any one school. The three composite case studies illustrate the full range of learners' experiences from the eight school sites, highlighting a range of practices from the best to the worst, as well as the most common. These composite case studies highlight the key elements shaping safe, gender-responsive, inclusive, and learning-rich school environments identified through this study.

Section 1: Findings Related to Gender-Responsiveness, Inclusion, Positive Discipline and Reinforcement, and School Safety

In this first section, qualitative data from the study are used to illustrate the range of practices associated with the four key elements that reflect the goals of Malawi's NRP and international consensus and best practice related to gender-responsiveness, inclusion, positive reinforcement, and school safety. Each of these elements has an essential role in determining the quality and quantity of learning opportunities at each school. While higher-scoring schools tended to exemplify more of the safe, gender-responsive, and inclusive practices described below, all schools contained a complex mix of practices that were either more aligned or less aligned with the aim of creating safe, inclusive learning environments for readers.

Gender-Responsiveness

The NASIS 2017 data had indicated that classes generally provided equal participation opportunities for girls and boys. Aside from the issue of gender-segregated seating, there did not appear to be significant issues related to gender-responsiveness in

Standards 1 to 4. However, the qualitative data from this study indicate that, as with issues of inclusion and positive reinforcement, there was a great deal of unevenness between and within schools, revealing more complex aspects of gender-responsiveness.

The research team observed that many, though not all, teachers displayed gender parity when they called on learners in a lesson. In these gender-equal patterns, teachers would most often call on a girl, then a boy, then a girl, and so forth. For many of these teachers this appeared to be a customary practice, one with which the students were also familiar. Most teachers who followed this even calling pattern also displayed parity in positive reinforcement to both girls and boys. However, in a number of classrooms, teachers displayed an evident bias towards either boys or girls. They consistently called on either more boys or more girls, or they provided more positive reinforcement to more boys or girls. Also, even in classrooms with equal calling patterns, boys were more likely to be involved in particular instructional interactions, such as reporting out from groupwork and presenting their opinions. In other words, gender parity in calling patterns did not always equate to gender parity in other instructional interactions.

While calling patterns are one important component of students' opportunities to learn, a number of other classroom and school practices appeared to be equally or more indicative of gender relations at the school. For example, and as was visible in the NASIS 2017, some schools had gender-segregated seating patterns. Boys and girls might be seated on opposite sides of the room, clustered at the front and back, or clustered in gender-segregated groups of five to 12 students in rows or sections. In classrooms without enough desks for all learners, girls would sometimes be sitting in clusters on the floor at the front of the class, with both boys and girls seated in the desks behind the clusters of girls on the floor. Such patterns were always classroom-specific (that is, not all classrooms in one school had this division), and they often appeared to result in unequal opportunities to learn. For example, because many teachers did not or could not move freely around their classrooms, when students of one gender were clustered in certain areas, they were systematically more or less likely to receive direct teacher attention. Similarly, some schools had gender-segregated distribution of chores (e.g., boys sweep, girls clean toilets), though this again was often classroom- or teacher-specific.

Schools in which the distribution of chores and seating arrangements in multiple classrooms were gender-segregated also seemed to have less interaction between girls and boys overall, and this was reflected in other school practices. For example, researchers asked the Standard 4 students involved in focus group discussions to select three friends to accompany them to the discussion. In the four schools where gender segregation in classroom practices was less visible, girls selected boys and boys selected girls to attend the discussion group with them. This did not occur in any of the schools with more visible gender segregation patterns in seating and chores (wherein students selected only friends of their same expressed gender).

The sexualization of female pupils also arose as an issue that impacted many students' learning. Standard 4 girls in a number of schools said that they were uncomfortable spending time with boys because people would say that they were in a sexual relationship with the boys, and they did not trust the boys to dispute this. Girls also said

they preferred not to be put in groups with boys because accusations could be leveled against them later for things they had not done. Furthermore, boys repeatedly tried to touch them sexually. Adults (teachers and parents) also sometimes punished girls for their purported sexual misdeeds. In these same schools, girls were also more likely to report that girls and boys were given unequal school chores to do.

Many teachers and students mentioned latrines and changing rooms as essential infrastructure for girls' safety and comfort at school, yet few schools had adequate facilities of this sort. Water availability at the school or near the latrines was also uneven. This particularly impacts older girls, but it was already an issue for some Standard 4 girls. This also impacts women teachers, when teacher utilities are not available or are in bad repair.

Finally, gender relations among teachers and between teachers and head teachers, while not a focus of this study, is an area to be further explored. The NASIS 2017 quantitative study identified clear gender inequities in school leadership patterns, with women holding many fewer leadership roles than men. And in the eight schools observed for this study, complex gender dynamics also appeared to characterize relations in many schools, though the consequences and forms of these dynamics differed significantly across schools. For example, at one school, the deputy head teacher was a woman. The head teacher was gone, so the deputy head teacher should have been in charge of the school, welcoming the research team. It quickly became clear, however, that a male teacher—the husband of the head teacher—had taken over the duties of the head teacher in her absence. At times he appeared almost to menace the deputy head teacher. At another school, women and men teachers alike appeared to ignore the head teacher entirely and do what they wished. Smaller teacher social groups then became essential in determining teachers' daily experiences.

Inclusion

The NASIS 2017 report showed it was difficult to collect data on inclusion since there are not good tools for measuring many core components of inclusive practices. This qualitative study revealed the importance of particular kinds of data in order to begin to grasp inclusion practices, including the following:

- data from learners with disabilities or special educational needs about their experiences at school (in class and on the school compound), including how they are treated by peers and teachers, during class time and also during break times;
- data about how teachers identify whether a learner has special educational needs and what this means for their interactions; and
- data about the kinds of resources available for children with special educational needs at the school (e.g., resource centers and special needs education teachers).

The research teams observed that some schools have made solid progress towards inclusion, and the system overall shows significant changes occurring. First, many more children with visible disabilities and special educational needs are present in schools than was the case in the past decades. This was particularly true at the schools with special needs resource rooms and special needs education teachers. Second, most teachers agreed that they had received some training to support children with special educational needs—especially those with hearing and vision problems—and that the training was

useful.⁴ Many teachers displayed a range of teaching approaches that improved and supported inclusion—from using multiple modes of instruction to present the same material, to having students get up in pairs to respond to a question, to group work that incorporated all pupils effectively. And at some schools, students with special educational needs and their peers agreed that these students were fully incorporated into school and social activities.

Two of the eight schools in this qualitative study had resource centers and special needs education teachers for students with disabilities and special education needs. In both schools, students attended lessons in the resource centers. If learners were able to do so, they would then join their appropriate grade-level classroom for part of the day. The resource rooms and special needs education teachers were observed to be effectively providing support to students with disabilities and special education needs, though they had few additional resources. In both of these schools, researchers also observed higher levels of students with disabilities or special educational needs being socially integrated into the school. At one of the schools, during the school break the students with special educational needs came out to the school grounds and joined various games with friends from other classrooms. Other students with special educational needs clustered around the researchers' cars and were joined by students from other classrooms.

Qualitative data also revealed a variety of challenges related to inclusion. Students with special education needs described how they faced difficulties in the mainstream classrooms. For example, one student whose special educational needs were neither diagnosed nor physically evident reported that he faced constant discrimination. He was bullied a lot: his peers called him “madboy,” threw stones at him, whacked him, and grabbed pens and books from him.⁵ He stopped telling his teachers about these incidents because he was tired of doing so, and they seemed tired too, he said. The boy's teacher said that she was not happy with the inclusion of children with special needs in the classroom, as these students struggled when they came into class. In this boy's case, he had speech problems and, as a result, it was very hard for people to understand him. At this school, students, teachers, and the researchers also noted that inclusion issues were significant: peers made fun of learners who were orphaned or wearing very worn or dirty clothes; learners who did well academically self-segregated and did not associate with lower-performing students, and so on. Thus, while the school had generally positive teacher-learner relations, learner-learner relations were less positive and were not managed by teachers. Similarly, teachers were not well-managed by the head teacher, who was accused of being biased and not able to do the job. These types of constraints to inclusion were common across many schools.

⁴ This supports the NASIS 2017 baseline findings: almost all teachers responded the same way when asked what they knew about supporting students with special needs: seat learners with vision impairments or with hearing impairments at the front of the class; speak in a clear, loud tone; face learners; write in big letters on the chalkboard; and use multiple teaching methods.

⁵ In three schools, a student with special educational needs was violent towards other students. In each school, this student received a great deal of teacher time and attention and appeared to play a key role in making other students not want to engage with students with special educational needs more generally. One student, for example, threw a stone at another student (it missed), and said that he wanted to see her bleed and to have the girl's mother to have to stay home from work to nurse her wound. Another had physically attacked other children before. Teachers generally told students to not provoke the violent student, but otherwise there appeared to be little management of the situation.

The qualitative data also revealed important opportunities and challenges related to identifying students with disabilities and special education needs. Specifically, students who were identified as having disabilities and special educational needs appeared to have more opportunities to learn and to be more socially supported in schools with special needs education teachers and rooms. Though time did not allow for a careful analysis, it was not obvious from observations or interviews that these schools had a significantly clearer process for identifying students with disabilities or special educational needs than the other schools visited. In all cases, only children with visible disabilities were identified as having special educational needs, even though some students whom teachers identified as “low-performing” also appeared to the researchers to have special educational needs. For example, at one school in which four Standard 4 students were identified as having special educational needs, one of the boys identified as “low-performing” did not understand the directions given to him by the researcher and seemed to have communication difficulties. He also laughed inappropriately during the focus group discussion. These possible developmental delays may have been exacerbated by what appeared to be the child’s poor socioeconomic condition; he was dressed in very dirty rags and he was shy to talk about what or whether he was going to eat when he returned home.

Each school in Malawi is expected to have access to a special needs education teacher, who operates at the zonal level. In most schools, teachers reported that they had received at least one training from the zonal special needs education teacher, and that this training was generally useful. However, teachers felt this level of support did not allow them to respond effectively to the needs of children with disabilities. The special needs education teachers interviewed agreed that they were not able to provide enough support to schools across their zone to really support students’ full inclusion. Also, the special needs education teachers played a key role in daily teaching activities for the students at their school. When they were away supporting other schools, they could not teach the students at their own school.

Finally, in schools that did not have resource centers, children with special needs appeared to have less access to resources. For example, at one school without a special needs education teacher, a child with significant educational needs had not been connected to existing schools with resource centers for children with particular categories of disabilities. The school had tried various means of communication to contact the school with a resource center but had given up. At another school with an active special needs education teacher at the zonal level (but not at the school), a child with low vision would have greatly benefitted from the large print resources available at the district, but getting these materials to the school and to the learner appeared to be difficult because of a lack of communication. It may be that schools without special needs education teachers face significant hurdles in connecting students to existing resources at the district and national levels, though these hurdles may also be related to the extreme demand already placed on these limited resources.

Positive Reinforcement

In safe learning spaces, all learners are free from experiencing, witnessing, or being threatened with violence, including violence associated with their gender and abilities. Inclusive,

learning-friendly classrooms are marked by positive discipline approaches, free of corporal and emotional violence, which support and encourage all learners to achieve to the best of their ability (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization Bangkok, 2015). One key mechanism for creating safe classroom environments for learners is to provide teachers with alternatives to negative discipline approaches and to provide them with support so that they can provide positive reinforcement to learners when they participate in the classroom and push their own learning forward. Opportunities to participate in class, coupled with positive reinforcement from teachers, supports individual learners and social learning processes (Maag, 2001; Partin, Robertson, Maggin, Oliver, & Wehby, 2009), and creates an educational environment marked by learners' excitement and eagerness to push their intellectual development, instead of an environment marked by fear.

Across all eight schools, most teachers used the positive reinforcement techniques of praise in their classrooms, and many said that they had learned these techniques in the MERIT training. Their knowledge and use of the techniques largely focused on peer-led positive reinforcement through clapping or making other noises for a learner who had answered correctly. These techniques ranged from a simple clap to complex clapping and whistling routines. Teacher positive reinforcement for learners usually took the form of quick verbal praise such as "Very good, clap hands for her!"

In some cases, positive reinforcement techniques mirrored a broader ethic of care that was reflected in teacher interactions with students that were consistently calm and gentle. For example, researchers observed a teacher who organized her students in rows, so that she could move more easily around the classroom. As she read to students, she moved around the classroom, observing students and gently correcting them if they needed support to stay on-task. She praised students often and her tone and actions were consistently measured, calming the students and allowing her to maintain order without having to raise her voice.

In other cases, teachers utilized a more traditional teacher-centered manner to encourage every student to succeed. In one Standard 4 classroom, the teacher used what might be termed a strict demeanor. He was formally dressed, did not smile, and allowed no distractions from students. This was one of the classes in which researchers observed an exceptional use of the "I do, we do, you do" approach. As this teacher released responsibility to the students, he explained what they were doing and why. He stopped the class at two points to note to the students that if they were not following along in their textbooks during the "I do" section, they would not be able to follow and participate in the next two steps. He then explained what active text following should look like, explaining where their eyes and fingers should move, for example, to make sure that students were able to connect his sounding of the words to the written form in their textbook. He actively redistributed textbooks from one group of students to another to assure that at least every group of three students had a textbook. He also regulated students' engagement with the textbook, which included pushing students into the correct position to read the book. This man had over 30 years' teaching experience and a well-developed teacher-centered style that he utilized effectively in this lesson. While he did not appear to be "kind" to the learners, he evidently cared deeply about their learning, and he understood the content and the pedagogical demands the NRP made of him. He

seemed to communicate this clearly to the learners, and it impacted the quality of their focus on learning to read throughout the lesson.

While teachers across all the schools commonly praised learners for correct answers, they used a range of techniques to respond to incorrect answers. Some teachers used brief verbal praise, such as “thank you for trying,” some had peers clap hands briefly for the learner’s effort, and some did not respond to incorrect answers and just moved on. A few teachers used negative reinforcement in these cases. For example, one teacher told learners to do groupwork. Four of the five groups got the right answer, one got it wrong. The teacher declared “All groups got it right except for this lazy group!” Some learners at middle- and low-scoring schools similarly reported that when they gave an incorrect answer, teachers said things such as, “You stupid fellow, sit down” and that fellow learners sometimes laughed at them. Some teachers responded harshly to learners who laughed at their peers, while others joined in; teacher responses to peer behavior played a significant role in shaping the classroom environment and peer interactions.

Responses to incorrect learner answers differed systematically across the eight schools. In the highest-scoring schools, teachers did not use harsh verbal or physical punishments in the presence of researchers, and learners reported that they were not punished for mistakes in classroom responses. Instead, they received support from the teacher to learn more or to correct their mistake. At one higher-scoring school, learners reported that if a student answered incorrectly, “The teachers help the student do well by correcting them nicely.” In contrast, in lower-scoring schools, more learners reported that they were punished for answering a question incorrectly or the teacher or their peers laughed at them. For example, one boy’s focus group reported that if they answered questions incorrectly, “We are sent to clear bushes around the toilets with our bare hands. The teacher also shouts at us, whips us, or abandons the class.” A girls’ focus group discussion at another school reported that when they answered incorrectly, “The teacher does nothing, but our friends laugh at us. When we are correct, the teacher asks our friends to clap hands for us.”

Thus, while all schools had multiple teachers who provided positive reinforcement in response to learners answering questions correctly, learners at schools with lower scores related to the four elements being researched were more likely to face negative teacher and peer reinforcement if they answered incorrectly. Such reinforcement is not only a missed opportunity for the teacher to deepen the learners’ knowledge and understanding, but it also makes learners scared to try to take risks in their own learning for fear of being punished or demeaned. Such behaviors have evident consequences for opportunities to learn and for learner confidence.

Discipline

Closely related to positive reinforcement is the notion of school discipline. School discipline has been a key concern for Malawian teachers, head teachers, parents, and education officials since at least the Banda era. One of President Banda’s four cornerstones, the notion of discipline has been linked to that of high moral standards, hard work, and following prescribed rules. The introduction of multiparty democracy in 1994 and people’s common early understanding of democracy as absolute freedom destabilized Banda-era understandings of discipline. The radical notion of *ufulu weni-weni*—absolute

freedom, each human's right to do exactly what they wanted—conflicted directly with notions of discipline related to holding one another to particular standards and rules, and the notion that one person could have power over another and “discipline” them in practice (Kuthemba Mwale, Hauya, & Tizifa, 1996).

The notion of discipline plays out in many different ways in Malawian schools. Positive discipline methods involve teachers and education officials teaching learners how to behave appropriately (positively) without using violence or the threat of violence (including physiological violence, such as humiliation). This study explored some of the most prominent notions and practices related to discipline, including how schools conceptualize and respond to learner tardiness, learner misbehavior, and peer bullying. Schools at the higher and lower ends of the scale differed in their responses to issues of discipline, though there was also a great deal of variation across teachers, classrooms, and other school settings at almost all schools.

Learner Tardiness

According to all actors or stakeholders in the study, a key component of school discipline relates to maintaining school schedules and responding to learner tardiness. School responses to learner tardiness had a direct impact on tardy learners' opportunity to learn, as well as on their sense of whether their teachers were fair to them.

Schools had different norms about school start times and about how to respond to learners who arrived late. According to MoEST rules, learners are not to receive punishments that remove them from class time, and they are not to receive corporal punishment. In higher-scoring schools, these rules were largely practiced. Students were, for the most part, present when the school day started, and teachers and learners agreed that learner tardiness was noted and addressed in a way that (usually) did not interrupt learning. For example, at one higher-scoring school, Standard 3 teachers described their response to lateness as follows: “They (learners) are given a punishment, for example, sweeping the classroom. Latecomers have their names recorded and they are punished after class. Absentees are also asked to bring their parents to school to discuss.” Learners at the same school described punishments as follows: “Learners who arrive late are asked to explain why they were absent. Latecomers are punished at the end of the day.”

At schools that fell towards the middle of the scale, teachers and learners were more likely to have uneven and at times contradictory accounts of how learner lateness was addressed at the school. For example, one teacher noted, “For minor offenses like coming late to school, noise making, and eating in class, students are given sweeping or watering flowers.” Learners at the school, however, said that lateness is punished with “drawing water (from far away), cleaning toilets, sweeping the grounds, bringing hoes from home to clear the school ground, and sometimes being sent back home.” Another student noted, furiously, “This term our teacher told me to sweep from school to home as a punishment for coming late. Unfortunately, he did not check whether I had worked or not. In the end, he convinced himself that I did not work. As a result, he did not allow me to attend his class.”

Lower-scoring schools appeared to have more capricious practices related to start times, and learner lateness often drew harsh punishments that removed students from the

classroom. At one school, for example, students and teachers were milling around the school more than 20 minutes after the official start time. Some teachers were still preparing lesson plans, even as some learners were sent home for arriving late to school. Teachers and learners gave very different accounts of how lateness was addressed at the school. For example, one teacher said “Those who stay very far from school, when they arrive late, they are not punished. They are just advised to be coming to school early. Those who live closer, latecomers are asked to sweep and mop the classrooms after school.” Students, in contrast, reported much more serious punishments. As one girls’ focus group explained, “We are told to mop the toilets and classrooms or sweep the grounds. Latecomers are sent back home, and absentees are told to go and call their parents, and if they don’t they are given transfers. These are not good punishments.” A boys’ focus group discussion added: “We are told to ferry sand or bricks from very far away. This is a bad punishment.” Another student reported: “We are told to bring hoes, we are beaten by the teacher, and we are sent back home until tomorrow.”

Learners judged teachers’ punishments for tardiness as unfair in most middle- and low-scoring schools. In schools where learners judged the punishments to be unfair, they were more likely to report other negative behaviors by teachers and were more likely to say that the school was not a safe space for them. In schools where learners felt punishments were fair (higher- and some middle-scoring schools), learners even told the researchers that the teachers were right to punish them as they did, and they felt punishments were for their own benefit and improved their educational experiences. For example, one learner at a higher-scoring school said, “Teachers here care about children; they discipline us in a positive way, and so learners listen to the teachers and always make sure that we are not threatened.”

Learner Misbehavior

While teachers and learners identified learner lateness as the most common discipline issue at schools, school actors also identified a range of learner misbehaviors that required disciplinary responses. The most commonly identified “serious” misbehavior across all eight schools was fighting. A range of other behaviors, such as using bad language or snatching things from other learners, was identified at subsets of schools.

As with responses to learner tardiness, school responses to learner misbehavior varied across schools, with higher-scoring schools generally following MoEST regulations about disciplining learners, and lower-scoring schools more often using corporal or extreme punishments (such as adults using physical force to move learners) that directly and negatively impacted learners’ opportunities to learn.

School discipline practices had a significant impact on learners’ school experiences, both directly (if they received a harsh punishment), and indirectly, through the consequences of disciplinary norms on teacher-learner and learner-learner interactions. For example, in one lower-scoring school, a teacher said that sometimes you have to slap a learner in class to set an example for the other learners. Teachers’ expectations that regular physical violence was necessary and acceptable to control students’ behavior were in turn mirrored in students’ behavior with each other. The students at this school reported that they often received physical punishments for minor infractions (e.g., being late). The

team witnessed learners being much more physically aggressive and harsh to each other both inside and outside the classroom when compared to all other schools. This occurred between girls and boys as well as boy-to-boy and girl-to-girl. All research team members saw learners punching and/or slapping each other with force, whipping each other with their school bags, harsh roughhousing, and other acts of physical violence at this school.

When teachers consistently displayed caring, calm, and supportive behaviors for students, students often responded with more focused attention on learning activities, and more supportive interactions with each other (e.g., in groupwork activities). For example, in a high-scoring school, a Standard 3 teacher set the classroom tone with her approach to a student getting off-task. She would start a song, then tell students to clap all together; then, having regained their full attention, she would begin the lesson from where she left off. At this school, Standard 4 students in focus group discussions defended teachers who disciplined students, explaining that teachers were very caring and only punished students who were deserving of punishment.

Bullying

Some learners at every school reported bullying, with children with disabilities or special educational needs reporting particularly high rates of bullying at most schools. Who was bullied, by whom, how serious the bullying appeared to be, why learners were bullied, and how teachers and the head teacher responded differed across schools. In some schools, learners identified older learners as the bullies whom they feared the most, while some learners at each school identified age-group peers as those who bullied them most.

The consequences of bullying on learners' safety and opportunity to learn cannot be understated. While the negative effects of bullying on learners' experiences and educational outcomes are well-established in the U.S. (Hong & Espelage, 2012; George Lekunze & Strom, 2017), less is known about the consequences of bullying on learners in Malawian schools. However, what data exist indicate that bullying has significant and negative consequences on learners' sense of safety and on various emotional, social, and learning outcomes; that bullying and its consequences may be more pronounced among already-marginalized learner groups; and that the gendered social norms associated with many acts of bullying and violence must be addressed through school policies and practices (e.g., Chimombo et al., 2000; Leach, Fiscian, Kadzamira, Lemani, & Machakanja, 2003; Kadzamira & Moleni, 2008). The study data similarly indicate that bullying was widespread and viewed by learners as a significant threat to their safety and comfort.

The forms of bullying did not differ significantly across the eight schools. Learners reported being beaten and being called names as the most common forms of bullying. At one school, girls said they feared "[o]ur friends in the upper classes who threaten us." This was a widely reported fear on the part of female and male learners across schools, and older learners' bullying was generally viewed as more threatening to younger learners' safety. Indeed, though sometimes called bullying, learners often described instances of agemate-to-agemate violence as "fighting" rather than "bullying," except in situations where the behavior was directed towards children with special education needs or

disabilities, or boys towards girls. Girls across multiple schools also reported concerns related to boys behaving in violent, sexualized ways towards them (e.g., grabbing breasts and buttocks).

School responses to bullying differed across schools. Higher-, and some middle-, scoring schools were more likely to describe bullying as a serious infraction that required teacher intervention. Teachers would counsel the bully about their behavior, telling them that if the behavior continued, they would face punishment. In these schools, learners were more likely to say that they could tell teachers about bullying behaviors and their teachers would intervene. One male student at a middle-scoring school explained that he was scared of being beaten by older boys, but he also said that telling teachers about this behavior resulted in action against the bullying: "One day a friend brought his new ball to school during break time and he passed the ball to me. Then an older boy came and asked me to pass the ball to him. When I refused, he hit me. I reported to our teacher and he was punished."

In lower-scoring schools, in contrast, bullying and threats of bullying were described by learners as serious threats to their safety, and they generally reported that teachers did not protect them. A male student at a lower-scoring school said, for example, "I don't feel safe. Some friends threaten to beat me." A female student agreed, stating, "I don't feel safe. I am threatened; someone once beat me up, but I did not report it to the teacher, only my mother, who advised me not to take the matter further." Most teachers at this school said there was no bullying; those who recognized it existed described punishments for bullying that were often less severe than for tardiness. For example, one explained: "We advise learners to calm down and focus on school. If a learner bullies a friend, the bully is given punishment to make him or her not to do it again. Mostly the punishment is to do mopping or sweeping." At this same school, learners were regularly sent home from school for tardiness.

Bullying became particularly important in understanding the experiences of learners with disabilities or special educational needs. These learners were more likely than their peers to report experiencing bullying. In our observations at most schools, these learners also were regularly physically and socially isolated by peers. At a high-scoring school, for example, a boy with special educational needs reported that the difficulties he faced at school included:

[B]eing beaten by fellow learners. One time I was mocked by some learners saying that I belong to the resource center, they followed me up to the market shouting and saying to me all sorts of things just because I learn at the resource center. This made me feel bad and I reported to the teacher, who advised the perpetrators not to do it again.

At a school that scored in the middle, a boys' focus group was asked how children with special needs or disabilities are treated at their school. They responded:

Children with disabilities should attend school, but they should attend their own school. The one [student] we have here is always bullied by some pupils, they grab whatever she can have. She is always scared of fellow pupils because of this. [Would you be friends with them?] We would be friends with them because they are also human beings.

At the same time, at five of the eight schools, teachers and/or learners identified a student with special needs as being violent towards other learners (and sometimes teachers). In these situations, teachers and head teachers consistently reported that because the child had a disability, they were not sent home for this behavior, even when they put other learners at risk. It should be noted that when a learner who was not identified as having a disability behaved similarly, they were punished and often sent home.

School Safety

School safety is an essential component of learners' daily experiences and opportunities to learn. Previous studies in Malawi and the region have shown that low levels of school safety impact learning through multiple pathways, including increasing dropout, decreasing accessibility for girls and learners with disabilities, and impacting rates of learner repetition and achievement on the Primary School Learning Examination (United Nations Children's Fund Malawi, 2017).

This study provides insights into how school infrastructure (such as school blocks, classrooms, and latrines) matters for safety, inclusion, and equity. School infrastructure determined who could attend school, who could attend it comfortably, and who had the best opportunities to learn at school. The physically safest schools in this study were those where all school buildings were visible to the other buildings (as opposed to having rows of buildings one behind another and out of sight of the central school grounds). Gender-responsive schools had clean, functioning latrines and changing rooms for girls, all of which were sheltered from easy view. Inclusive schools had functional access to all school buildings, including latrines; had classrooms with good lighting and ventilation and enough space for learners to easily come in and out; and had resources that met the particular needs of learners with disabilities (e.g., a plastic chair).

Learners attending schools with very limited school blocks and/or latrines (including infrastructure that was difficult to navigate) faced constraints to their safety and inclusion. Evidence to support this included the following:

- Outdoor classrooms under trees from which insects fell on learners during classes
- Outdoor classrooms in which learners were sitting under the hot sun for hours
- Chalkboards in such poor condition that learners were unable to read what was written
- High levels of noise outside the classroom that made it difficult for the teachers to be heard
- A school with more than 2,000 learners and only three working latrines
- A school with more than 800 learners with no water source
- Schools with no properly designed ramps (some schools had ramps with very steep and short slopes that were not safe for use by someone in a wheelchair or crutches and were even problematic for able-bodied people)
- Large steps up to the buildings that were inaccessible to children with certain physical disabilities.

School safety was often undermined by partially completed projects in which development plans did not appear to have addressed safety implications. For example, in one school, the government had provided resources to construct a new school block. However, according to the head teacher, they had not provided enough cement to finish the block. As a result, children were learning on a stubbled cement floor with exposed rebar and unfinished steps up to the classroom. As uncomfortable as everyday sitting was in this environment, the unfinished classroom posed serious hazards. It was reported that one child had broken his arm trying to climb into the classroom. Many schools also had unfinished latrines, or latrines that were collapsing but that were not barricaded to learners.

In many of the classrooms observed, physical dangers (such as piles of broken furniture, iron sheets, etc.) posed risks to young children's safety. For example, in one school in which the teacher was present but not in the classroom for about 15 minutes, some learners were climbing on a pile of iron sheeting precariously tilted up against the wall. The teacher, upon re-entering the classroom, yelled at the learners to stop climbing at once, preventing what could have been a serious injury had the iron sheets collapsed. In some schools, classrooms were used to store large quantities of school materials (such as broken desks requiring repairs or materials such as sheet metal to fix roofs), which were not only unsafe but also took up valuable floor space in already overcrowded classrooms.

Section 2: Findings Related to the Institutional, Relational, and Material Practices that Support or Constrain a Safe School Experience

This section describes the institutional, relational, and material practices that support or constrain a safe school experience that encourages reading and learning for diverse students and teachers. Analyses of the qualitative data revealed how the institutional and relational aspects of school culture (including the norms of classroom interactions and school leadership) and student supervision, and the material provision of textbooks, greatly affected (both positively and negatively) safety, inclusion, and equity in the classroom and school. Each of these practices has been identified in studies regarding measures of educational quality and school effectiveness in Malawi and worldwide:⁶

School Culture

School culture consists of the norms, beliefs, and values held by school members concerning the nature and desired outcomes of teaching and learning, as well as the symbols, traditions, and daily practices through which norms and values are embodied. One of the greatest differences between the safest, most gender-responsive, inclusive, and learning-focused schools in this study compared to those that were the least so was the school culture.

Head teachers', teachers', and students' norms, beliefs, and practices related to teaching, learning, and teacher-student relations appeared to play a key role in shaping students' daily learning experiences, which aligns with findings from studies of the impact of

⁶ See Fuller & Clark, 1994, for a review of international findings associated with textbook availability, teacher qualities, and instructional time and demands on learners; and Kendall, 2007 for a review of findings associated with school culture in Malawi.

school culture on school quality in Malawi (e.g., Kendall, 2007).⁷ Two key components of school culture appeared to significantly impact safety, inclusion, gender-responsiveness, and, thus, opportunities to learn: norms regarding classroom interactions and school leadership. These components varied systematically across schools.

Norms Regarding Classroom Interactions

MERIT aims to improve Standard 1 to 4 learners' reading skills, with a focus on reading instruction in classroom environments. Exploring classroom interactions is essential for understanding learners' school experiences and their opportunities to learn to read in safe, inclusive, and gender-responsive environments. Previous studies have indicated that girls' education is particularly affected by teachers' attitudes, behaviors, and practices (Chimombo et al., 2000; Odaga & Nevelde, 1995).

Classroom interactions in the eight schools of the study differed systematically and significantly. Differences included the following:

- The extent to which teachers called on learners
- How teachers responded to learners' successes and mistakes (discussed under positive reinforcement above)
- Teachers' general disposition towards learners
- How teachers maintained learners' focus on lessons
- How teachers organized the classroom
- How learners were (or were not) allowed to move freely in and out of the classroom
- How teachers organized learners' access to the lesson's materials.

In schools ranked as safer, more inclusive, and more gender-responsive in the NASIS scoring system and by the researchers, teachers generally interacted in a positive manner with learners. Teachers did not threaten students physically, yell at them regularly, and/or insult them. These teachers deliberately sought out struggling learners. This ranged from learners from very impoverished families, those who were crying or otherwise visibly upset in class, or learners struggling to learn. Teachers' positive relationships with learners were reflected in school practices. For example, most of these schools distributed resources to needy learners, including uniforms to orphans, and porridge to learners through school feeding programs. Researchers also observed parents visiting the schools to ask questions of the head teachers.

In these schools, learners and teachers talked about their relationships as being caring. In one school, a male learner identified a male teacher at his school as being his friend, explaining that this male teacher would chat with learners and help them if they did not understand something. At another school, learners reported giving a present to their teacher on her birthday, as a way of expressing their care and thanks to her. Learners at another school described how they felt cared for and encouraged by a teacher who had bought a present for a girl with a physical impairment who took the Standard 8 exams

⁷ Because researchers did not speak directly to community members, they are not included in the list of educational actors, but as noted later in the report, their importance is recognized in school culture and practices.

after struggling to stay in school. At another school, learners said they knew teachers cared about them because when there is a funeral, their teachers raise money and go to the house of the bereaved to console them. In these schools, most learners reported that everyone felt safe and that their teachers really cared for them, with the exception of some learners with special educational needs who said that they were being bullied by their peers.

Teachers' care for learners was also evident in classroom practices. In these schools, teachers were more likely to be physically engaged in the classroom (for example, circulating to different parts of the classroom), calling on learners and conducting diverse learning activities, and being animated in their tone of voice and gestures. Their pedagogical and classroom management choices aimed to keep learners on task through practices that reengaged students in an excitement to learn. For example, at one school, the teacher circulated through the classroom while having learners read in pairs. When he saw a learner not attending to the textbook, he would gently move their head back to the book and watch them reengage with the text. In another classroom, the teacher used songs to call learners back to order when they were getting off-task. Because teachers in these classrooms generally did not need to spend a great deal of time on classroom management, they were able to spend a greater proportion of class time actively engaging with the day's lesson.

While the culture of classroom interactions at these schools was largely shaped through teacher-learner relationships, resources also played a role in shaping these relationships. Learners in these schools were generally learning in classrooms in which they could all easily fit. They were most commonly organized in mixed-gender rows that allowed the teacher to move easily throughout the classroom. Some of the classrooms had benches, and students stated that the benches improved their comfort to participate in class because they could keep their uniforms clean. Female pupils also stated that the benches helped increase their comfort and safety because they were free to stand up and they did not worry about boys "peeping" up their dresses (as they worried when struggling to stand from sitting on the floor).

Teaching in these schools was often marked by teachers' thoughtful engagement with the day's materials (and often attempting to utilize the "I do, you do, we do" approach), using TALULAR (Teaching and Learning Using Locally Available Resources) materials and approaches, facilitating individual and group participation, and engagement with textbooks and exercise books, which most learners had available to them.

In contrast, the majority of teachers in lower-scoring schools did not interact with learners in a consistently positive manner. Some of these teachers stood at the front of the class, interacting primarily with the chalkboard and speaking in harsh tones to learners to direct them back on task. Other teachers sat in class with a bored expression, not moving, and calling out orders to the learners from their desk. Other teachers would come and go from the classroom during the lesson, with some leaving the learners for long periods of time, especially when learners were copying what the teacher had written on the chalkboard.

Peer interactions in classrooms in lower-scoring schools often mirrored teacher-learner interactions, with learners scuffling and shouting at each other. Often many of these

learners were ignoring their teachers' directions. Classrooms in lower-scoring schools often felt disorganized or on the edge of being out-of-control, with the teacher spending a great deal of time on negative discipline-focused classroom management techniques. Learners in lower-scoring schools were more often seated in clusters than rows, with no apparent order to the seating arrangement. In a number of classes, it appeared that learners had self-segregated into boys' and girls' clusters.

In lower-scoring schools these difficult teacher-learner and peer relationships were often reinforced by resource limitations. Classes observed in lower-scoring schools often had more than 100 learners per teacher. (Sometimes two teachers combined classes to share teaching responsibilities and lessen their workloads.) Some of these schools had small classroom blocks that could not accommodate learners comfortably. Some teachers had no classroom at all – their classes sat outside, and there were many distractions from the outside surroundings during class. Learners at these schools were much less likely to have textbooks, which may in part have explained these teachers' more common practice of writing on the chalkboard and having students repeat together and then copy the information into their exercise books.

A number of teachers in these schools were observed slapping, grabbing, or twisting the ears of learners and/or laughing—along with peers—at mistakes learners made when answering questions. When asked whether teachers cared about them, girls in a focus group at one of these schools responded:

No, they do not. They ill-treat us. When we ask for permission to go to the toilets we are given [it], but when we come back they punish us even when we explain that we were granted permission to go out! And they whip us. When we fail [to answer] a question, the teacher counts one to three and if we do not give a correct answer we are sent out.

Another learner responded that teachers care for learners “because they do not harass us in class.”

However, limited resources were not determinate of school experiences. For example, one Standard 1 teacher at a school that fell towards the middle of the scale managed a classroom of over 120 learners with joyful exuberance, endless patience, and a range of TALULAR materials that he used to keep learners engaged throughout the class period. At the same time, the teacher's classroom was very dark and airless, had almost no materials on the walls, had a chalkboard that was almost illegible, and was filled with broken furniture and iron sheets (part of the reason the classroom was so crowded). This context made it harder for him to engage learners equally throughout the classroom and reflected to some degree the broader infrastructural problems faced by the school that negatively impacted learner safety and inclusion.

School practices in middle-scoring schools often reflected an inconsistency in the school's emphasis on safe, equitable, and learning-rich classrooms. Learners therefore often experienced quite uneven interactions with teachers and peers in the classroom. As one boy at a middle-scoring school explained, some teachers taught, but others did not; some teachers whipped students while others did not. This kind of uneven experience led learners to often identify “good” and “bad” teachers. It also seemed to create more space for learners to experience bullying or unsupportive interactions with their peers.

School Leadership

Though difficult to quantify, the importance of school leadership to students' opportunity to learn in a safe, responsive, and inclusive environment was evident within and across the schools. The difficulties that the head teachers in the eight schools confront are complex, and historically have not been accompanied by adequate training for school leaders in Malawi (Kayuni & Tambulasi, 2007). The head teachers at these schools described receiving little administrative or training support for the new NRP curriculum, and even less training on school leadership and management generally. Indeed, the MoEST's administrative budget has shrunk considerably since the 1990s, even as the complexity of the education system has increased (Kayuni & Tambulasi, 2007). While to date head teacher training on the new NRP curriculum has been the same as the training provided to Standard 1 teachers and section heads, the issues that head teachers face when creating school policies, processes, and practices that support learning are in some ways unique. They include, for example, the following:

- How to address teacher absences
- How to support all teachers in managing large classroom sizes to support active and inclusive student learning
- How to supervise teachers
- How to organize, store, and distribute school resources
- How to identify children with disabilities and special educational needs
- How to support teachers in effectively utilizing gender-responsive, inclusive, and positive discipline practices to benefit all children
- How to manage school-community relations to better support students' learning (e.g., by increasing student attendance and students coming to school with textbooks)
- How to prioritize student safety and inclusion in decisions about resource management (e.g., using School Improvement Plan [SIP] funds).

Head teachers who were weak in these areas struggled, as did their teachers and schools. As one teacher noted about their head teacher, who was perceived to be weak and inexperienced, "Teaching as a job would be enjoyable if we had good supervisors."

Head teachers are also expected to be the primary contact point and manager of the relationship between the school and various educational, community and private entities. These include PEAs and other education officials, parents, community leaders, religious institutions, private businesses, and NGOs. Though not discussed further in this report, the study data—and other studies of Malawian school effectiveness—indicate that the quality of these institutional relationships has an impact on students' learning experiences. For example, at one school that shared its campus with a church but did not have a good relationship with it, the school had only two working latrines and held multiple classes under trees, even as the church buildings and latrines sat empty during the school week. Some head teachers and teachers in the study schools expressed concerns about the quality of these relationships. They also indicated they were not confident they had the necessary skills to improve these relationships.

School leaders might struggle with these issues for a variety of reasons. At two schools (one low- and one middle-scoring), the head teacher appeared unable or unwilling to say anything to teachers about their behavior, including their lack of engagement in their teaching responsibilities, while the research team was present. At one of these schools, a Standard 4 boy reported that if he felt unsafe at the school, he could talk to the head teacher. When asked why, he responded, “He punishes learners, unlike our teachers who seem not to care; even when they see learners fighting, they do not stop them.” In other words, the head teacher would intervene in fights, but he did not lead his teachers in behaving similarly.

Other reasons include head teacher selection and deployment. For example, one rural school had become a mega-school with thousands of children and over 50 teachers. The school had recently been assigned a new head teacher—a person with no previous experience as a head teacher, for whom this was his first leadership posting. He said he had received no training before the assignment, and he had quickly become known by others at the school for playing favorites and being harsh to some teachers. Because of this, teacher morale and learners’ opportunity to learn appeared to be slipping. Some teachers (the favored teachers, according to some staff members) were observed outside of their classrooms, lounging for most of the day while their students were left unattended. Other classrooms, however, had extremely active and effective teachers present all day, and researchers observed some of the best teaching in their observations of these classrooms.

Generally, head teachers said they felt under-trained and unsure of how to improve their schools significantly. This finding reflects the results of other studies in sub-Saharan Africa (e.g., Bosu, Dare, Dachi, & Fertig, 2011), which have indicated that the increased decentralization of Anglophone education systems has not always been accompanied by increased empowerment of or support for head teachers. As the school’s primary administrators and the managers of daily school practices, head teachers’ knowledge, skills, and investment in creating safe, inclusive, high-quality learning environments appeared key to creating an effective school culture.

Supervision of Students

In addition to school culture, the supervision of students was an important institutional and relational practice that affected safety and students’ abilities to learn and read. Across the schools, one of the most striking findings from the research was that many young children spent a significant amount of time with no adult supervision. In most cases, as the time spent without supervision increased, there was also an increase in, student movement and time off-task, opportunities for physical and emotional harm, and roughhousing. At all of the schools observed, adults appeared generally comfortable with young students spending long periods of time in classrooms without adult supervision. This cultural norm appeared to reflect a sense that young children’s and older children’s need for physical (as opposed to academic) supervision did not differ significantly.⁸

⁸ Cultural norms about the head teacher’s inability to reassign teachers (or to address unapproved teacher absences at many schools) restricted the range of potential school responses to students being unsupervised for long periods of time, as do the legal, social, and administrative structures within which Malawian schools operate.

Researchers observed the consequences of a lack of adult supervision clearly in one high-scoring school, from which a Standard 3 student was taken to the health clinic for an injury to his eye after the classroom had been left unsupervised for a full class period. In a Standard 2 classroom at the same school, a child with a disability was left entirely isolated for the two class periods where there was no adult regularly present (teachers were moving in and out of the classroom to write brief assignments on the board or to scold children for making noise); a teacher placed this child with peers for a groupwork activity later in the day, thus providing the child with some of the only student interaction he experienced that day.

Unsupervised children appeared to face more threats to their physical safety than those with a teacher present. Young children in unsupervised classrooms also had significantly fewer structured opportunities to learn than those in supervised classrooms.

In some cases, researchers observed that young students were unsupervised because teachers were absent for the day. At least one teacher was absent in each of the schools visited. In the most extreme case, half of the teachers and the head teacher were absent. Common causes for absences were teachers having to travel to town to collect salaries at the end of the month, illness, and caregiving responsibilities. At three of the eight schools (high- and lower-scoring), teachers were present but were not in their classrooms during class hours.

Head teachers noted that they did not have a system for addressing teacher absences as they arose. Thus, students' schedules depended almost entirely on whether their teacher(s) showed up on a given day, and whether and how teachers agreed to step in for one another. Learners viewed this as an issue of teacher care for them. As one Standard 4 learner in a higher-scoring school explained when asked if teachers at the school care about children: "Only our class teachers do. Others do not. For example, when our teacher is present we learn all subjects, but when they are absent we spend the whole day without learning or we only learn one subject."

Teachers explained that they would sometimes fill in for a missing colleague, but how such fill-ins were arranged differed by school and was decentralized to the section level or to groups of teachers. For example, in one school, teachers explained that if their colleague who taught the same standard were absent and classroom size permitted, they would combine classrooms so that all children were taught by the remaining teacher. Members of the research team observed at least two classrooms where this approach was taken. At one middle-scoring school, teachers said that responses to a teacher absence were coordinated within sections—thus, if a Standard 1 teacher was absent, the Standard 2 teacher might be asked to check in on the Standard 1 classroom, but the Standard 8 teacher would not be asked or expected to step in. At a low-scoring school that used this approach, one Standard 2 teacher was outside in very dusty, uncomfortable learning conditions with over 80 students from the three different Standard 2 sections. The other two Standard 2 section teachers had gone into town to get their salaries; he would go to town the the next day, while they covered his students. Multiple other upper section teachers lounged outside the school office throughout this time, pointing to the extensively different workloads faced by teachers in the infant and upper sections at this and many other schools.

Interestingly, teachers were least likely to cover for each other at higher-scoring schools during our observations. At one school, although there was a serious teacher shortage that day, the deputy head teacher took regular breaks throughout the day, not filling in for absent teachers. At another school, one Standard 6 classroom did not have a teacher present or filling in, and the students created loud and disruptive noises for other learners throughout the school day. At another, some teachers lounged outside of their classrooms leaving their students unsupervised with no response from the head teacher or other teachers.

The issue of student supervision appears to be widespread and serious. As in other studies (e.g., Kadzamira & Moleni, 2008), learners indicated that teacher absence was a direct threat to their safety. It leads to peer interactions that are at times gender-inequitable and non-inclusive; and teacher absences always significantly decrease learners' opportunity to learn.

Teacher absence (like teacher distribution and teacher retention) is a well-known issue in Malawi, and one that has complicated causes and difficult long-term solutions (Volunteer Service Organisation, 2002; Kayuni & Tambulasi, 2007).⁹ It is not a new phenomenon; the World Bank estimated in 2010 that 20% of instructional time in Malawi is lost, most of it due to teacher absences (World Bank, 2010). In the day-to-day operation of schools, however, this study's findings underscore that it is an issue that has significant consequences for children's learning, safety, and inclusion.

Textbooks

In addition to institutional and relational practices, one of the important material practices identified in this study was the provision of textbooks. While previous studies on the importance of textbooks (and books more generally) to student literacy learning have focused largely on the relationship between the number of textbooks and individual student learning (Lockheed & Verspoor, 1991; Elley, Cutting, Mangubhai, & Hugo, 1996; De Grauwe & Varghese, 2000), this research revealed how having textbooks impacts classroom practices related to the elements of gender-responsiveness, inclusion, safety, and positive reinforcement and discipline. Classes in which most learners had a textbook (i.e., not more than three learners per textbook) were more gender-responsive, inclusive, and generally safer than classes where there were only a handful of textbooks. This finding is further supported by NASIS 2017 data, where schools with the lowest SIS scores consistently had fewer textbooks than schools with higher scores.

In classrooms with sufficient textbooks (at least 1 for every 3 learners), children were more likely to be focused on the textbook during lessons than in classrooms with only a handful of textbooks. During activities that required the use of textbooks, learners in classrooms with few textbooks often became unruly, and they could not follow the teacher's instruction to look at and/or to read the textbook. In such classrooms, teachers often grouped learners together in groups as large as 8 to 12. As a result, many learners in each group had to try to read from the textbook either upside-down or sideways; this had

⁹ Kunje, Selemani-Meke, and Ogawa (2009) found that school location (rural/urban) and teacher: pupil ratios strongly impacted students' learning in Malawi's Southwest region. Large class sizes, also mentioned below, appeared to be a significant problem for teacher management and student learning; they also made it much more difficult to effectively respond to teacher absences as each teacher and each classroom were more likely to be overloaded.

evident negative implications for inclusion and learning. In classrooms with few textbooks, girls and boys sometimes physically struggled with each other to hold the textbook or be near enough to read it, which had negative implications for girls in particular (i.e., for gender-responsiveness). To accommodate an insufficient number of textbooks, teachers often reverted back to whole class call-and-response teaching practices rather than using best-practice learning approaches, which reduced the effectiveness of their teaching.

Teachers in classes with few textbooks commonly said that learners were given the textbooks but did not (or could not) bring them to school each day. Head teachers and teachers ideally wanted enough textbooks so that learners could have a book both at home and in school so that students could learn inside and outside the classroom. However, since resources are limited, it would be important to determine which schools have been successful at having learners bring textbooks back and forth to school each day, and which are successful at maintaining a minimum number of textbooks (at least one for every three learners) in the classroom. The conditions under which the different approaches are successful could then be shared with schools that are struggling in this regard.

Section 3: Composite Case Studies

Analysis of the qualitative data yielded rich information about the contexts, relationships, and practices that foster more and less safe, protective, and gender-equitable school experiences for learners. The following three composite case studies are designed to illustrate the full range of learners' experiences from the eight school sites. These composite case studies do not represent data collected from a *single* school site—instead, the composite case studies include data collected from a *variety* of schools and represent profiles of a range of practices in the schools: the best, the worst, and the most common.

The first composite case study illustrates the contexts, relationships, and practices identified with the safest, most gender-responsive, inclusive, and learning-focused school experiences in the qualitative study. As such, it reflects a comprehensive analytic model of safe, gender-responsive, and inclusive rural Malawian classroom and school practices,¹⁰ as identified through the qualitative and the unique SIS scores created from the NASIS 2017 data. No single school in this study embodied all of these best practices, but schools that received high SIS scores and were judged by the research teams to be the safest, most gender-responsive, inclusive, and positive displayed more of these characteristics and displayed them more consistently across classrooms and school settings.

The second composite case study draws from the study data from all eight schools to illustrate the contexts, relationships, and practices most often identified with unsafe, inequitable, non-inclusive, and low-quality school experiences. This composite case study highlights

¹⁰ MWAI conducted research and observations at one urban school but did not include best practices that could only be readily accomplished in an urban setting, with the learner population, community, and teacher resources that are only usually present in urban settings. For example, at the urban school almost all teachers were women, and the community hired extra security guards (in addition to the one provided by the MoEST) for the school. Neither of these best practices could be adopted by the majority of rural schools in Malawi and were hence excluded from the composite cases presented.

common threats to safety, protection, and gender-responsiveness identified through the data. As such, it reveals how contexts, relationships, and practices can work together to result in learners' experiences that are very ineffective from a learning perspective, and at times also harmful.

As with the first composite case study, no individual school in this study embodied all of the worst practices, and this case study was developed from data collected at multiple schools. However, schools that received low NASIS scores and were judged by the MWA research team to be the least safe, protective, and gender-equitable displayed more of these characteristics, and showed them more consistently across classrooms and school settings.

The third composite case study aims to capture the varied mixture of safe and unsafe practices commonly seen across schools. This third case study focuses on two aspects of learners' experiences in schools that were towards the middle of the SIS scoring scale. First, in most of the eight schools in this study, teachers displayed neither best nor worst practices. This third composite case study provides examples of *common* relationships and practices that were evident across study schools. Second, this third composite case study explores the *greater variability* that learners experienced at these middle-scoring schools—between school settings; in their relationships; in school practices related to gender-responsiveness, inclusion, positive reinforcement, and physical and emotional safety; and in their opportunity to learn. While all schools displayed this variability, it was particularly marked in schools that were towards the middle of the SIS scoring scale.

Composite Case Study 1: Most Safe, Gender-Responsive, Inclusive Practices

Alima, a Standard 4 student, walks to school each morning with a group of her friends. Though her parents did not go to school, the Village Head, Mothers Group, and head teacher at her school all work closely together to encourage parents to send their children to school, and they talk to parents about how to support their children's learning. As a result, Alima only does light chores in the morning before school—she only sweeps her home's compound and draws water. Her mother lets her wait to wash dishes and help with cooking and caring for her younger siblings until after school. Her mother also checks each morning to make sure that Alima and her siblings have packed their textbooks, exercise books, and pens for class, and, when she can, she sends them to school with small snacks.

Alima's walk to school is an easy one, along a well-worn, flat, dusty road that bicycles usually use. The walk takes about 15 minutes if she walks quickly. Alima and her friend, Mary, both dress smartly in their uniforms each morning. Mary lives with and cares for her grandmother, ever since her mother passed away. Their household is very impoverished, but the school gave Mary a uniform, notebooks, and pens at the start of the year, and this made Mary feel that the teachers really cared about her. The teachers' care and her grandmother's encouragement assure that she attends school every day that she can, unless her grandmother is ill. Mrs. Londa, Alima and Mary's classroom teacher, also counsels Mary and asks her how she is doing, which makes Mary try her best to be at school each day. The girls and their families are also motivated to be at school and to be on time by the porridge they receive each morning. The school feeding program receives some outside assistance, but it is coordinated and maintained by the

community, so it continues year-round. For Alima, it assures two full meals a day. For Mary, it is sometimes her only meal of the day. Mrs. Londa is aware of this, and at times she has given Mary groundnuts or roasted maize at the end of the school day.

When the girls arrive at school, they and their fellow students enter their classroom and sweep it clean. Their classroom is large, easily accommodating the 84 learners enrolled in their Standard 4 section, and it is bright and well-organized. Learners sit on benches facing the front chalkboard, which was rehabilitated and is in very good condition. The walls are hung with teaching and learning materials that Alima and her friends like to review while they settle in for class. Alima and Mary usually sit with George and Suzgo on a bench at the front of the class. George has difficulty seeing the chalkboard, so Mrs. Londa asked him and his friends to move to the front of the classroom so that he would have an easier time in class.

Mrs. Londa enters the classroom just after the bell rings, walking in behind two learners who arrived late. She has noted down their names and counseled them to leave for school earlier. One of the girls reported that she has to travel very far. Mrs. Londa commiserates and asks her how long the walk is, if she is safe on the walk, and what chores she does before school. She then tells the girl that she will not be punished for being late, but that she should do her best to leave even earlier in the morning to arrive in good time. Mrs. Londa also tells the girl that she will talk with the school feeding coordinator about allowing latecomers who live far from school to receive their porridge, since the girl rushed straight to class this morning. The other learner lives close to the school. After checking to make sure that he does not face constraints to arriving late to school that are related to doing chores, Mrs. Londa counsels him that if he is late twice more, he will have to stay after school to help sweep the compound with other latecomers.

Once the learners are settled, Mrs. Londa begins the day by taking attendance and writing it on the board. As has been the case all week, there are more girls than boys in class, and today, there are also fewer learners overall—only 67. Mrs. Londa asks the learners where their friends are, and they reply that it is market day, and some of their friends have been told to do chores related to market day. Mrs. Londa begins the morning by counseling learners about the importance of attending school each day so that they do not miss the new material their friends will learn, and she reminds the learners that if they are facing problems to attend school, they can talk to her, the head teacher, or the Mothers Group members, who are regularly seen at the school and in their communities.

Mrs. Londa then begins her English lesson. She has brought in TALULAR materials to support the day's unit, which is on sizes. She holds up a medium-sized stone and says, "This is a big stone—can you repeat—big." The learners enthusiastically repeat "This is a big stone!" while Mrs. Londa walks up and down the left-side row, allowing learners to touch and look at the stone. Mrs. Londa then holds up the next stone, which fills her hand—"This is a bigger stone. This is bigger. This is bigger." The learners repeat, "This is bigger", while Mrs. Londa walks up and down the right-side row. Then, with a grin at the learners, she hefts a large stone that requires both of her hands to lift. With an exaggerated voice, as if she is struggling to lift the stone, she declares, "This is the biggest stone! This is the biggest stone!" The learners eagerly repeat "This is the biggest

stone!" yelling the term loudly and giggling as Mrs. Londa pretends the stone has gotten too heavy and puts it back down on the desk. The stones are in order, from smallest to largest, at the front of her desk. Mrs. Londa says "Very good! Now, who can come up to my desk and tell me the size of this stone?" she asks, pointing to the smallest stone. Almost all learners in the room eagerly raise their hand. Mrs. Londa points to a boy at the back right of the class and asks him to come up front. "Can you tell me the size of this stone?" The boy points to the stone and says, "This is bigger." "Can you try again?" "This is bigger." "No, that is a good try, but this is the bigger stone." Mrs. Londa says, pointing to the middle stone. "Can you call your friend to help you?" The boy turns around to look at the class, most of whom have their hands up. He calls on a girl, who comes up, points at the stone and says, "This stone is big." "Very good, Jonas and Samira! Class, please clap for them!" The entire classroom claps twice for them as they return to their seats, smiling. Mrs. Londa repeats this process, having one more boy and girl come up to the front of the class to name the size of the rocks. When they correctly identify the sizes of the stones, she has the class repeat the correct answer and then clap for them.

Then, Mrs. Londa goes to the chalkboard and writes in large letters:

BIG

BIGGER

BIGGEST

"Who can come here and write with me?" she asks the class. She calls on three pupils from around the classroom to come up and write the word below where she has written it. Each of them does so, in one case with coaching from Mrs. Londa. The girl who requires coaching has a physical disability that makes it hard for her to grasp chalk or pencil. Mrs. Londa is aware of this and has been working with her on writing exercises. Today, when she comes to the chalkboard, Mrs. Londa publicly praises her for her writing.

Mrs. Londa's interactions with all of the learners reflect a warmth, kindness, and familiarity to which the learners all respond with attention and focus. They seek opportunities to participate in class, even when they are not confident in their answer, because they know that if they answer incorrectly, Mrs. Londa will praise their effort and help them learn what they did wrong. They also know that their fellow pupils will support their learning. Mrs. Londa does not tolerate anyone laughing at their fellow pupils and has created a classroom environment in which learners eagerly vie for opportunities to support one another's learning.

After learners have completed the public writing lesson, Mrs. Londa asks each learner to take out their textbook and their exercise book. She says, "Please turn to page 41. Page 41. It should look like this." She holds up a textbook for the learners to see the pictures on the page. "Is everyone there? Page 41." Learners are rifling through the plastic bags in which they carried their textbooks and exercise books to school, pulling them out from under the benches and organizing these materials in their lap. Almost everyone in the classroom has a textbook, but there is one bench without any textbook. Mrs. Londa asks two groups of learners who all have textbooks if she can borrow one for their friends, and then takes one book from each group to share with the bench of learners who did not have textbooks. Each group of four now has at least two textbooks. "Very good. You are all now on page 41 [she holds up the textbook open to page 41 again]. Check in the corner, is this 41? [She writes 41 on the chalkboard]. Good. Now I am going to read

page 41 to you. Then, we (she puts out her arms as if to hug the entire class) are going to read together. Then you will read with your friend.”

Holding the textbook up, she runs her finger along the text as she reads and speaks in a clear and carrying voice: “This stone is big. This stone is bigger. This stone is biggest.” She turns to the class and says, “Now, we will all read together. Please put your fingers on your textbooks and move your fingers as we read together. It is very important that you follow with your finger, so that you know what the word sounds like and what it looks like.” The learners all do so, and the class choruses together “This stone is big. This stone is bigger. This stone is biggest.” “Again,” says Mrs. Londa. The class repeats the exercise twice more, before Mrs. Londa says, “Now in pairs, I want you to read to each other. First, one of you will read. If you have any problems, your friend will help you.” The learners turn to each other, obviously familiar with working in pairs, and begin to read to one another. Mrs. Londa circulates as this is occurring, gently redirecting small fingers to the correct place on the page, stopping to support learners who are struggling over words. After about 5 minutes she asks if the first learner in each group has finished. Then she directs the second learner to begin. The class is filled with a low hum as the learners continue to work together and Mrs. Londa continues to circulate. Five minutes later, Mrs. Londa says, “you have all read very well! Please do chief clap for one another!” The learners cup their palms and do a slow, deep clap for each other.

Mrs. Londa then directs the learners to get out their exercise books and pens. While they are doing so, she erases the board. “Now, I want you each to write these three words in your notebook.” In large letters, spelling them aloud as she writes them on the chalkboard, Mrs. Londa writes:

BIG BIGGER BIGGEST

Learners’ heads are bent in concentration as they begin the exercise; Mrs. Londa circulates throughout the classroom, weaving between benches and talking quietly to learners who are struggling. Once everyone is done she says, “Now, I want you to remember what these words mean. You all saw stones that were big, bigger, and biggest [she points to each stone as she says this]. Let us draw these stones in our notebooks to remind us of the words. First, I will draw them on the chalkboard.” On the chalkboard, Mrs. Londa draws a circle next to the word “big,” and then larger circles next to each additional word. The learners then copy this into their notebooks. “Good. Who can come to the front and show your friends?” Mrs. Londa calls on four more learners, two girls and two boys, to come to the front and show their notebooks. One of the learners appears to have great difficulties in writing and has written only some letters of the words in the notebook, along with the three circles. Mrs. Londa notes that the learner has shown the different sizes of the stones very well. All learners receive praise from the class for coming to the front. Mrs. Londa then asks the pupils to turn in their notebooks so that she can mark them.

As the class comes to an end, the bell rings for break. Learners finish putting their textbooks away and line up to deposit their exercise books on Mrs. Londa’s desk. They spill out into the central school ground while Mrs. Londa begins marking. Some learners begin to play jingle together, while others find a shady spot to sit. Others run over to the borehole pump to take a quick drink. Still others walk to the latrines, which are set back from the

school but are easily accessible from all classrooms. The latrines have a grass divider between the girls' and boys' latrines, as well as a grass fence in front of the entire structure. There are six girls' latrines and four boys' latrines. To the side of the girls' latrines is a changing room, while the boys' latrine has a urinal to the side. There is a bucket of water for hand washing behind the grass fence, which is filled each morning by learners who have come late to school, and which learners use faithfully after a sensitization by the head teacher about the importance of hand washing.

A number of the learners from Alima's class play football together each break. The group includes one boy who attends the school's special needs resource center in the morning and whose breaks are coordinated with the other infant classes to facilitate friendships. One of the girls from the resource center is Alima's neighbor. Although she is often absent from school because one of her parents has to bring her to school in her wheelchair, when she is present, Alima picks her up from the resource center and brings her over to join their friends playing jingle.

Midway through the break, a group of Standard 1 learners begin to tussle over some roasted maize that one of them has grabbed from another. Two teachers and the head teacher have been sitting on the *khonde* (porch) outside of the head teacher's office, and one of them gets up, comes over, and separates the group. He bends down to ask the learners why they were fighting, listens to both sides of the story, returns the maize to the learner who originally had it, and sends the other boy out of the group with a warning that if he again snatches someone's belongings, he will mop the latrines.

The school grounds are easy for teachers to watch, as they are organized in a large U-shape and learners tend to stay in the front area. During break, a mother walks onto the school grounds and asks to speak to the head teacher. They settle down to discuss her son's absences from school. He was sent home for fighting, after repeated warnings, and then did not return. The mother explains that she did not know how long he was supposed to stay away from school, that he does not seem to be learning well or listening well. She shares that they are having difficulties with his behavior at home. The head teacher asks the mother to wait and goes to check with the special needs education teacher to set a time when she can meet with the mother and child to try to determine whether there are underlying special education needs in this situation. They agree that the mother will come the next morning with her son, and she leaves after thanking the head teacher.

When the school bell rings, learners head back into their classrooms quickly and settle down onto their benches after picking up their exercise books from Mrs. Londa's desk. She calls them back together with a song and then launches into the day's Chichewa class.

While learners are settling in to their second period, the head teacher begins his daily rounds, checking in with each teacher to make sure that the day is going well, before conducting one of his regular classroom supervisions for one of the teachers. The school has enough teachers that he can normally focus on administrative and supervisory duties instead of on teaching, which allows him to provide more extensive support to individual teachers. Having taught for over 10 years and having worked as a deputy head teacher for 5 years, the head teacher feels confident that he can successfully support his 15 teachers; engage constructively with the local church, the local mosque, and local leaders; and help manage parent-learner relations at the school. His deputy head

teacher is a woman, and he makes sure to equally distribute opportunities to attend trainings so as to assure that teachers feel they are treated fairly. He holds all teachers to the same standards, he says, in order to assure that they can all participate in making the school a better learning environment. He asks for and incorporates their ideas into school policies and practices, and he expects them to do the same with learners in their classrooms. He wishes that all teachers had received the same type and length of NRP training that the Standard 1 teachers received on the new curriculum. He has been asking the Standard 1 teachers to conduct continuous professional development sessions for their fellow teachers so that everyone can feel more comfortable with the new curriculum.

Two classes at the school are being held in temporary shelters; the head teacher is hoping that a community mobilization effort, coupled with the SIG, will allow the school to begin construction on at least one more classroom this academic year. In the last year, they used SIGs to build ramps to all classrooms, build an accessible latrine, and buy uniforms for all orphans at the school. Though the head teacher wants to prioritize learning environments and learner access, he is also very concerned about improving teachers' terms of service. The school is located in a very rural area and has only two teachers' houses. Both are in good repair and have electricity, as the zonal Teacher Development Center (TDC) is located at this school, but the other 14 teachers have to stay a long distance from school. Those who can afford them have purchased bicycles to help with the commute, but their rents are high and the trip is long from the nearest small town where they can easily rent homes. As a result, some teachers arrive late. It has also posed a problem in ensuring female teachers are continuously deployed at the school. Coupled with low and often delayed salaries, the head teacher is concerned that, over time, fewer and fewer people who are dedicated to teaching are entering the profession. While training and support, as well as clear regulations about lateness and absences, can significantly improve teachers' performance, he notes that the best teachers are people who care deeply about learning and about children and youth. This, he says, cannot be taught, but is a calling. Like many of the teachers at the school, he says that teachers are doing "God's work," and he is proud of the role he views his school playing in raising the next generation of Malawian citizens and in providing an example to the surrounding communities of the benefits of education. His goal, he says, is to have a school in which "each and every child loves learning."

Composite Case Study 2: Least Safe, Gender-Responsive, Inclusive Practices

Fifteen minutes after school is scheduled to start, teachers and learners at Mipango School are still streaming into the campus. The school has rows of classrooms piled behind one another on a piece of flat land bordered by a hill on one side. The football pitch, borehole, office, and latrines are on the other side of a dirt road that cuts through the school grounds. The area is extremely dusty; a fine coat of red soil covers everything, including the school classrooms and furniture, and many learners have runny noses and coughs. A group of five girls is sweeping the front yard, while a large group of older boys plays football. Many younger children mill around in the front courtyard to the school, some kicking and hitting one another, others playing tag and laughingly running away from each other, including dashing across the road.

The head teacher and three teachers are clustered on the *khonde* of the school office chatting.

A fourth teacher appears from behind the school office, wielding a long stick. He walks towards the football pitch, yelling at students to get to class. When some of them ignore him, he tells them that they cannot attend class and will go home for their disobedience. He then strides across the road and begins threatening the younger children with the stick. They scatter quickly and begin to head to class. As students begin to enter classes, he walks back to the office, leans the stick against the wall, and begins chatting with his fellow teachers. Five minutes later, the teachers begin dispersing to their classrooms, with the same teacher now using the stick to hit learners who are still outside of their classrooms. He orders the first group he meets to go to their class, and then he tells learners who are just now arriving at school that they are too late and must go home. Some of them argue with him until he threatens them with the stick; they then disperse, either to play football or to walk back home.

About 90 Standard 2 students are sitting outside behind one of the classroom blocks, facing a chalkboard that is leaning against the outside wall of the classroom. Some of them are sitting under a tree in the shade, but most are sitting in the sun. There is no apparent order to their tightly packed bodies, though many of the girls are sitting towards the front and right-hand sides of the space. Their teacher, Mr. Lemani, begins to write the day's lesson on the chalkboard. He writes:

ENGLISH

Road Safety

Road

Crossing

Stop

Lorry

Danger

He then reads each word aloud, using a long ruler to point to the word on the chalkboard as he does so. Midway through, he stops and brandishes the ruler at a group of boys who are making noise towards the back of the classroom, yelling "*Iwe!*" ("You!" – informal tense) at them as he does so. When he turns back around, two of the boys sneak off and begin to play. When Mr. Lemani finishes reading the words, he orders the learners to take out their textbooks. He tells them to turn to page 55, where they will see the day's exercise that he has written on the chalkboard. Only about one in 10 learners has their textbook; writing the words on the chalkboard was therefore essential to providing all learners with this information. He tells the learners to read the exercise on page 55—an order that results in a rapid scramble as many learners try to find a textbook from which they can read. One older-looking boy grabs a textbook from a smaller girl; when she protests, he pushes her and sits down with the book. Similar scuffles occur across the classroom while Mr. Lemani looks on with an annoyed expression. He yells at the learners that they need to bring their books to school every day.

A few minutes later, while learners are still struggling to read the assignment on page 55, Mr. Lemani orders them to take out their exercise books and pens. They are to write the

words on the chalkboard in their exercise books. He waits while the learners begin to pull out their exercise books, watching without taking action as two girls fight over a pen. A number of the learners are missing a pen or their exercise books.

After a minute, Mr. Lemani yells at the class that if they have not completed the assignment by the time he comes back, they will be punished. He then strides over to the office and disappears inside. Most of the learners settle down to the task at hand; those who cannot complete the assignment because they are lacking materials begin to look around, get up, or begin to bother their fellow learners. One student seated towards the back of the class, who appears to have a severe learning disability, has not responded to Mr. Lemani's order. Two boys begin to tease him; this is the boys' first interaction with anyone in the class.

About 10 minutes later, most learners have completed the exercise. Mr. Lemani is nowhere in sight. The two boys who sneaked off to play have begun to throw small rocks at their fellow learners. One of them gets hit in the head and begins to cry. Another group of learners gets up and yells at them to stop, and then begins to chase them. Some of the learners remain seated quietly, poring together over a shared textbook or writing in their exercise book. However, 25 minutes into the class period, about one-quarter of the students have disappeared. In the minutes that follow, those who remain begin to talk more loudly, get up and chase each other, and play.

About 30 minutes into the class period, Mr. Lemani reappears. He yells harshly at the learners, saying, "Who told you that you could make noise? Sit down, you dunces!" He asks who will read each of the words on the chalkboard; very few hands go up to volunteer. He points at one girl, who comes up to the chalkboard and stares silently at it while Mr. Lemani becomes increasingly angry at her lack of response. He pulls the girl's ear and pushes her back to her seat. He then calls on a boy, who comes up and tries to sound out the first word. He fails to do so, and the other learners laugh at his attempt as Mr. Lemani pushes him roughly back to his seat. He then asks a third boy to come up to the chalkboard. Like all of the other learners he has called on, this boy is seated at the front of the class. The boy walks up confidently and reads the first word on the chalkboard with ease. "Very good, Jacob!" says Mr. Lemani. "Clap for him," he orders the class. The class gives one half-hearted clap and Jacob walks back to his seat.

Mr. Lemani then tells the learners to take out their exercise books for marking and he begins to circulate through the class to mark the books. Some of the learners who do not have exercise books wait until his back is turned and sneak away. The others sit with the exercise books in their upraised hands. Mr. Lemani shoves students aside, almost stepping on some of them as he tries to move through the very crowded classroom area. When learners get the answers right, he says nothing, tossing the notebooks back to them as he moves on. When they get it wrong, he sometimes yells at them about their mistakes, calling them lazy or stupid. The grading takes up the rest of the class period; when the break-time bell rings, most of the students rush away from the classroom area, though a few wait to have their exercise books graded. The boy with the learning disability gets up and walks towards the school ground; as was the case in the classroom, no one speaks to him, approaches him, or touches him other than to tease.

Most of the boys rush to the football pitch during break, while the girls gather in small groups to play games or chat. Gender segregation is obvious. The girls say this is due to their fear that teachers and male peers will say that they are involved in sexual relationships with boys, or that boys will try to grab them or beat them. As a result, girls' mobility on the school campus is limited primarily to the classroom side of the school. Few girls venture over to the office, football pitch, and latrines.

Few learners have snacks to eat. A number of them need to use the toilet; however, they do not cross the road to use the school latrines. Instead, they walk around to the back of the school and into the school's forest. Though they are afraid of the snakes that they sometimes find there, they also sometimes can find some fruits in the trees, and the forest is a much better place to use the toilet than the latrines. It is more private, and it is not as filthy. The school has a set of four latrines for boys and four latrines for girls, along with a urinal for each. In practice, however, the latrines are not functional. They were built a year ago by a nongovernmental organization and are designed to work with piped water. The water pipes stopped working about six months after they were installed, and now the urinals are a cesspool, attracting mosquitos and letting off a terrible stench.

Over the course of the break, a number of fights occur on the school grounds. In one of them, a boy wearing extremely torn and dirty clothes is pummeled by three older boys, who are laughing as they hit him. The smaller boy ends up crying on the school grounds, left alone by his fellow learners as he struggles to get back up. Six of the teachers and the head teacher are sitting on the office *khonde*; they do not intervene in the fights. At one point, a fight spills over into the road and a child is almost hit by a passing motorcycle. At this point, a teacher gets up, grabs the stick leaning against the office wall, and comes down into the road where he swipes at the learner who was almost hit.

When break is over and learners slowly settle back into class, Mr. Lemani's class has shrunk to about 50 learners. It is time for Creative Arts; Mr. Lemani draws three pictures on the chalkboard and tells learners to copy the drawings in their exercise books. He then marches back to the office, from which he cannot see the classroom, and does not appear again until 10 minutes are left in class, when he again grades learners' exercise books.

Composite Case Study 3: Varied Mixture of Safe/Unsafe, Gender-Responsive, Inclusive Practices

This composite case study represents the most common situation at schools: a mix of safe and unsafe, gender-responsive, inclusive and non-inclusive practices. The mixture often occurred within and between classrooms, with individual teachers sometimes displaying partially positive and partially negative practices, often with large differences among teachers.

Isaac and his sister, Lita, are in Standards 4 and 1, respectively. They travel together to school usually about three days a week; the other days, Isaac usually does *ganyu* (piecework) for their neighbors who farm onions. The school is a 40-minute walk through hilly terrain. If they arrive at the school on time, Lita often joins her friends sweeping out her classroom, while Isaac finds his friends and plays football for a few minutes. Today, however, they are about five minutes late, and the school bell has already rung. They

are hoping to sneak into their classrooms, but unfortunately, Mr. Chewe sees them and, brandishing a stick, he orders both of them to sweep the school grounds as punishment. They both rush to the head teacher's office to pick up brooms and begin sweeping. After about 10 minutes, they are told to report to class. Lita's class is held outdoors under a tree; she slips in to class while her teacher is writing and sits on the ground with a group of friends in the back-right section of the class.

Lita's teacher, Mr. Maseko, is an energetic young man, just two years out of the teacher training college. Although he is not using the NRP teacher's guide during his lesson, he has prepared an activity for the learners in his class. He has propped a chalkboard up against the tree, and after writing the day's Chichewa lesson on the chalkboard, he pulls out strips of papers from his pocket and lays them on the chair next to the chalkboard. "We are going to read some what? Some syllables together. First, I will read them. Then we will read them, then you will come up to read them. Are we together?" "Yes!" reply the pupils. Mr. Maseko holds up one strip at a time and reads in a loud, clear voice, while turning the paper slowly from side to side so that all learners can see it "Sa, Se, Si, So, Su." He repeats this, then holds up each paper in a row and has pupils say the syllable. Two of the papers have become mixed up, and when the learners become confused, he says "Ah-ah! You must be reading the papers, not saying from memory. What is this one?" as he points to the paper he is holding up. The learners giggle and, led by a few vocal and quite confident learners, correctly identify the syllable. When the learners have finished with all of the papers, Mr. Maseko says, "Now, let us write together! Sa!" he says, tracing the letters in the air. The learners enthusiastically do the same, tracing letters in the air as he goes through each of the papers again. Then, he dramatically places the papers face-down on the chair and mixes them. "Now, who can come and pick a paper and read it?" he asks. A number of learners raise their hands, mostly boys sitting in the front row. He calls on three in a row, each of whom comes up, picks up the paper, and reads it correctly. After each learner reads, Mr. Maseko has the other learners praise them in various ways – clapping, calling them "leaders," or throwing "flowers" (flicking their fingers) at the respondent. For the fourth piece of paper, Mr. Maseko declares "Ah, no, I want a girl now!" He looks around, finally calling on a girl who did not have her hand up. She rises slowly from the ground and shuffles forward, coming to the side of the chair and not moving. "Come on now, pick one of the papers!" says Mr. Maseko, urging her forward with a gentle hand on her shoulder. The girl finally bends down and picks up a piece of paper. She holds it up and looks at it but does not say anything. Mr. Maseko smiles and makes a quick humming sound. "Who can come to help your friend?" he asks the class. A boy at the front of the class is called on; he comes up, takes the paper from the girl's hand, and reads it correctly. "Very good. Now, Violet, it is your turn." The girl takes the piece of paper and says the syllable very quietly. "Speak up, your friends cannot hear you!" She repeats the syllable more loudly, and Mr. Maseko says to the class, "Very good. Clap for them." Both learners return to their seat, and Mr. Maseko calls on one more volunteer, another boy who answers correctly.

Mr. Maseko then has the learners sit together in pairs. He writes:

SA SE SI SO SU

and then tells the learners to work together in pairs to write the syllables in the dirt near where they are sitting. The learners eagerly engage in this activity; some get up and move a bit to the side so that they have more space in which to write. Most of the partners have turned to the learner next to them, resulting in both same- and mixed-sex pairs. A few of the learners, including one very quiet boy and a girl with a physical disability are not partnered; Mr. Maseko does not say anything as they each work alone on the assignment. He circulates throughout the learning space, checking on learners' work and providing feedback during this time, then whirls around as he hears some learners yelping and sees them jumping up from where they were working. There are caterpillars in the tree, and they fall on some of the learners. Mr. Maseko goes over to inspect the learners and then the tree, and then orders the learners to move out from under the tree. It is almost break time, and Mr. Maseko says that for the next period they will relocate to another space in the sun to avoid the stinging insects.

Isaac's teacher is less forgiving of lateness; Isaac kneels outside of his classroom (a shelter with a roof and floors, but no walls) for almost 10 more minutes before he is allowed entry. He weaves his way over to a group of football friends and sits down with them. Mr. Gondwe, who has been teaching for over 30 years, is following his usual routine. He writes the day's lesson on the chalkboard, has everyone read it together, calls on a few learners to come up individually and read what is on the chalkboard, and then asks all learners to write in their exercise books what he has written on the board.

Isaac and his friends usually chat in the back of the classroom, largely ignoring the lesson, until they get caught and yelled at. If Mr. Gondwe only yells, they stay in class. If he begins to make his way back towards them, then the learner who is being yelled at often jumps up and runs out to the schoolyard, returning to the classroom once Mr. Gondwe has calmed down.

Mr. Gondwe's class is almost entirely gender-segregated, with girls sitting largely on the left side and boys largely on the right side of the classroom (on the side of the classroom where they can slip out to the school grounds). Ziona is an exception. She is visibly the oldest girl in the class and is deaf, mute, and intellectually disabled. She sits towards the center of the class, with space all around her. Neither Mr. Gondwe nor her peers directly address her until the writing exercise begins. Then one of the girls sitting next to her takes out Ziona's exercise book and pen from her bag and hands them to her. About one-third of the learners in Mr. Gondwe's classroom have textbooks. While the lesson that Mr. Gondwe has written on the chalkboard is also written in the textbook, very few learners are looking at their textbooks, as Mr. Gondwe did not direct them to the page on which they could find the same information.

While other learners are writing in their exercise books, Isaac gets up and walks to the latrines. They are set far from the school, providing privacy for learners, and they are in good physical condition. There is a very large bucket of water in front of the latrines, which learners who are being punished are often forced to fill. As there is no water source at the school, they have to walk a long distance to fetch the water. Isaac takes his time coming back to class—enough time, in fact, that the break bell is rung before he returns. He waits on the football pitch for his friends, who soon arrive. They play exuberantly throughout the break, while Lita and most girls cluster near the school buildings or move

around to the back of the school blocks to find a shaded seat and a safe place to share snacks and stories with one another. Zion stays standing near her classroom until her sister comes over and pours some maize in her hand; she then stands alone again while she eats it. All of the pupils return quickly to class when the bell is rung, and Mr. Chewe begins to search for children he considers laggards.

Mr. Jumo, the head teacher, observes the activity from inside his office, where he has been working on transfers, meeting with a parent, and completing some paperwork for the district office. He runs a tight ship at the school; teachers who are present know that they are expected to be in class and teaching, just as learners know the same. He feels that he is constantly busy trying to get the resources that the school needs to maintain or to improve learning. They lost five teachers last year to transfers, and none have been replaced. This has strained the school and led to learners remaining unsupervised when teachers are absent. He successfully petitioned the government for funds to build a new school block last year, so that only two classes would remain outdoors. However, the construction funds were not sufficient, so the classroom remains roofless. It serves as a playground for learners during break instead of a functional school block. Mr. Jumo also tried previously to contact a non-governmental organization that was supposed to help schools with special needs learners like Zion, but the organization said that Zion and her parents would have to travel to Blantyre so that they could review her situation, and Zion's parents do not have the funds to make the trip. In so many ways, he says, he and his teachers feel that they have been deserted by the government, left to fend for themselves, and educate learners in conditions that make it so much more difficult than it should be. Despite this, he feels strongly that he must set an example for all. He is always impeccably dressed, he supervises his teachers regularly, he tries to distribute equally the limited resources that come his way, and he tries to strengthen the school's influence over parents who, he says, are mostly uneducated and "do not understand the importance of school." "And how can we convince them," he asks, "when onion farmers are dressed better than teachers?"

Conclusions

Conclusions Related to Promoting Gender-Responsiveness, Inclusion, Positive Reinforcement, and Safety

The first research question guiding this study was: what are the perceptions and experiences of diverse school actors in relation to gender-responsiveness, inclusion, positive discipline and reinforcement, and school safety? Using data collected from diverse actors and schools, this report provides evidence to support the construction of best practices and school models that provide safe, gender-responsive, and inclusive learning environments with positive discipline and reinforcement for all Malawian children learning to read. The first case study displays how gender-responsiveness, inclusion, physical and emotional safety, and effective positive discipline and reinforcement can work together to build a culture of quality learning for all.

Higher-scoring schools were more gender-responsive, mixed girls and boys around in the classrooms, and had teachers moving around the classroom overseeing that all students had opportunities to learn. Gender-responsive classrooms and schools also had both

girls and boys actively engaged in school leadership, had adequate latrines for girls and boys, and did not assign gender-segregated chores to learners.

Higher-scoring schools were also aware of and responsive to different learners' needs. They provide targeted resources (e.g., uniforms, porridge, special furniture) for disadvantaged learners such as orphans and children with disabilities, utilizing SIGs. Resource rooms and special needs education teachers provide more academically and socially supportive environments for children with disabilities or special educational needs, and they work to change other teachers' and learners' norms concerning inclusion and disabled children's capabilities.

In schools where children reported higher levels of safety (and schools that researchers observed were safer), learners were not affected or distracted by a lack of infrastructure, or by poorly maintained infrastructure. Safer schools had functioning latrines and school buildings where learners could be seen with ease, with indoor classrooms. Classrooms were accessible to all (with ramps), and there were no partially completed projects with safety implications such as exposed rebar or unfinished steps to classrooms.

In schools where children were having positive learning experiences, not only were learners safe from physical harm, but the teachers used positive reinforcement well, and they tended not to use much negative discipline. Effective positive reinforcement approaches also took many different forms, from teachers excitedly praising students by their names to teachers who used a group approach to student errors that allowed students to take a risk in trying to answer a question, even if they were unsure. It did not include teachers hitting children, chasing them from the classroom, punishing them in ways that removed their learning opportunities, or being extremely verbally harsh to students. In these negative situations, it was not only that learners became demoralized, scared, or angry; but they also then modeled this behavior in their interactions with each other, creating an unsafe and non-inclusive environment inside and outside of the classroom.

Interviews with teachers indicated that teacher training to support such school practices (e.g., Early Grade Reading Activity, NRP) did have an impact in the schools observed. The NRP (MERIT) training addressed some of these components of school culture, and the trainings were perceived by teachers as having a positive effect on student learning. For example, one teacher spoke of how the head teacher came back from an NRP training saying that learners could no longer be whipped or sent home for having come late to school. The staff at this school clearly were in the process of learning about positive discipline—a list of positively phrased school rules that had been created in an NRP training were on display—and how to change harsh daily school and classroom practices.

A teacher at another school mentioned National Education Standard 13 when speaking about inclusion. This school had a TDC adjacent to it, and chart paper was hanging in the TDC referring to this Education Standard—again, quite likely as a result of a previous NRP training session. At this school, learners with special educational needs were generally fully included in classroom activities, though peer interactions continued to segregate many of them.

One of the schools that was highly ranked in the NASIS, had been part of the Malawi Early Grade Learning Activity prior to MERIT, and there was evidence of good teaching and

school practices being implemented by more than one teacher. This indicated a shared understanding of what to do and how to do it well across different classrooms. One such practice related to correcting learners' errors. When a girl made an error, she would remain standing while the teacher called on a boy to answer the question. The teacher continued to call on learners (alternating between girls and boys) until a learner answered correctly and then all the other learners repeated the correct answer and sat down. The teacher did this in a matter-of-fact, non-judgmental way so that learners were not embarrassed to try to answer. At this same school, the head teacher and community members had worked together to construct benches for all learners—an intervention that particularly supported girls' increased participation in class.

Conclusions Related to Institutional, Relational, and Material Practices That Support or Constrain a Safe School Experience

The second research question guiding this study was: what are the institutional, relational, and material practices that support or constrain a safe school experience (as defined by international best practice and Malawian education experts) that supports reading and learning for diverse students and teachers? In addition to the elements of gender-responsiveness, inclusion, safety, and positive reinforcement, this study identifies important institutional, relational, and material practices that support or constrain a safe school experience to promote reading and learning. School culture (specifically the norms at school and school leadership), student supervision, and textbooks all proved to be critical components of school safety and inclusion in this study. The study data indicate that schools with the most systematically safe and inclusive learning opportunities are marked by a head teacher who sets an example as someone who engages caringly and consistently in the art and science of teaching. The teachers in turn adopt a culture of seriousness around inclusion, safety, and pedagogical quality. Teachers' seriousness is reinforced and shaped by sound institutional norms and practices and good infrastructure. The school has a positive and engaged relationship with the community and other actors involved in children's education. Children have access to textbooks, to teachers, and to each other through well-structured, teacher-led instruction and learners' groupwork, and to quality TALULAR materials.

Class sizes are relatively smaller (i.e., under 100 learners per teacher), students can be seated easily in an engaging classroom environment, and teachers do not judge learners' capabilities in a publicly demeaning way. School culture supports active and caring teacher engagement with learners; a strongly held norm to not use harsh, negative punishments with learners; and a general focus on each child being able to learn and deserving the chance to learn.

Head teacher-teacher-learner relationships and school context (including infrastructure) were two key differentiating factors among schools that received higher and lower scores. When head teachers and teachers created a learning space in which children were given the opportunity to learn, to try and to get things wrong and try again, and to support each other in learning, exciting learning opportunities existed. These classes had teachers who were confident in both the content and in the pedagogy they were employing. And beyond this, the teachers and the head teacher were investing in children's learning. They expressed the shared belief that every child has the right to

learn and can learn something, and they were supported by school leadership that professed the same understanding of teachers' jobs.

Children have a good sense of whether their teachers care for them—and their sense of teachers' care and fairness towards learners plays a key role in determining learners' engagement in the classroom and its learning activities. As with children throughout the region (Bajaj, 2009), children's notions of care included both teachers' affect and teachers providing the physical support students at times need to survive in school. Learners reported recognizing their teachers' care through the teachers' provision of food and pens, their attendance at funerals in the community, and their efforts to assure needy children received resources when their school distributed them.

Every school in the study had at least one teacher who embodied this approach to teaching and to the students in their classrooms. In some schools, however, this teacher stood out from the others, as opposed to being the norm. In the schools in which this was not the norm, researchers saw widely dissimilar treatment and experiences across the school, even within one day. For example, one of the most talented teachers observed was a Standard 1 teacher at a middle-scoring school. His 100+ learners were all captivated by his teaching approach, which included excellent use of "I do, we do, you do" and TALULAR. The other classrooms in this school, however, for the most part did not display these characteristics. Students regularly moved in and out of classrooms with impunity; teachers did the same. Most teachers utilized the "I do, you do, we do" approach, but some did so without deeply engaging with the content or methodology. This resulted in rote teaching approaches, and in many learners appearing to be off-task during the lesson. These classrooms often appeared chaotic, with both teachers and students confused or disagreeing on next steps. For example, in a Standard 4 classroom at the school, the class was led by two teachers who at times coordinated well in leading the class. As one researcher described in field notes, however, at other times the class was quite chaotic, and students were blamed for teachers' confusion or missteps:

There were also times when there was no proper coordination. For example, before one of them could conclude an English lesson that he was teaching, the other one just rubbed off the board and wrote "Chichewa." When the English teacher protested that it was not yet time, the other one insisted and took over the class and started teaching while the learners were still busy with the English exercise. He shouted at them, commanding them to stop writing. The teacher told them to get their exercise books out; the learners said the teacher had them, the teacher told them to get the books from the front. This created a chaotic scene where the learners scrambled for books, even ripping them, until the other teacher came in and yelled at them to sit down.

Other teachers used the reading methodology competently but were stymied by infrastructure and resources. For example, one Standard 2 teacher was teaching behind the school under a tree. Students were divided into three different groups: one group was directly in front to one side of the teacher; the other two groups were about six feet below the teacher, sitting behind the wall that supported the "classroom" grounds. They were clustered on either side of a large cement gutter that ran parallel to the wall. This

arrangement made it impossible for the teacher to see or to engage all students equally. Though he generally did a good job of keeping students on task, he was unable, for example, to redistribute textbooks among the students who were not directly in front of him. This was problematic because the class was organized around textbook-based activities, yet only every four or five students had a textbook.

Though textbook material resources are broadly limited, several schools in this study were observed to be more successful at maintaining a minimum number of textbooks (at least one for every three learners) in the classroom, and this also corresponded with a greater number of observed supportive experiences for students' reading and learning. It is therefore important to identify and draw lessons from these schools in the future to share with and to improve corresponding practices in schools that are struggling.

Teachers are, for the most part, teaching under conditions that are considered extreme in Malawi and around the world. For example, Standard 1 and 2 classrooms regularly enroll over 80 children, who are packed into small learning spaces. Except for Standard 1 teachers, teachers had received limited training on the new NRP curriculum, and they often did not receive their salaries on time. Similarly, students are learning under conditions that are considered extreme globally. Outside of students attending the urban school, the majority of students observed in the study were rural, living in families under the global poverty line of \$1.25 a day. Child hunger, malnutrition, illness, and disability rates were high, and resources available to address these issues were limited, including at schools. The Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SACMEQ) data identified teacher training and terms of service, and student household characteristics, as key to learning outcomes (Mulera, Ndala, & Nyirongo, 2017). These underlying issues, while not the focus of the study, evidently have important consequences for children's safety, gender-responsiveness, inclusion, and learning.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

This recommendations section offers suggestions that emerged from the findings to support Malawian schools in using best practices to provide gender-responsive, inclusive, and safe learning environments with positive reinforcement and discipline. This section also offers recommendations for schools to strengthen institutional, relational, and material practices that support a safe school experience by strengthening school culture and school leadership and investing in school materials. This section identifies practices and issues that can be incorporated into MERIT trainings and through low-cost interventions at the school level. It also outlines issues to be considered in future policy and programming aimed at creating a safe, gender-responsive, inclusive, and positive learning environment for reading for all Malawian students.

MERIT Trainings

MERIT Teacher Trainings

Generally, the teachers who appeared to be most comfortable and effective in implementing the new content and pedagogies embedded in the NRP curriculum were teachers who had received the Standard 1 NRP training, which included training on gender-responsive and inclusive teaching practices, as well as positive discipline and reinforcement, through three cycles of training in one year. Standard 2 through 4 teachers repeatedly told the research team that their training was too short to support their use of the new NRP curriculum. One Standard 3 teacher at a high-scoring school said, “They [supervisors] come expecting that we do a perfect job on the NRP methodologies when in actual sense we had a few days of training and we failed to grasp much of what is required of us.” If resources were to be made available, an increase in the shape and scope of Standard 2 to 4 teacher training would be one way to effect positive change in learners’ reading on a large scale. Meanwhile and in addition, teachers who have received the Standard 1 NRP training may serve as examples to colleagues who have thus far received less training on gender-responsive and inclusive teaching practices, and on positive discipline and reinforcement.

In addition to expanding the MERIT training for Standard 2 to 4 teachers to match the training for Standard 1 teachers, almost all teachers expressed very limited knowledge about how to identify and support students with disabilities or special educational needs, and they were dissatisfied with the level of training they had received to support such students. Expanded training on these topics could be provided to the zonal special education teachers; however, these resource teachers are already struggling to complete existing tasks and expectations. Providing each teacher with additional knowledge and skills gained through centralized training under NRP or other national programs, and/or providing tools for a more standardized initial screening for disabilities (particularly those not physically visible), could therefore be appropriate next steps in improving inclusion.

Schools with special needs resource centers were observed making important strides towards inclusion. More learners with special needs were attending school, were incorporated into school and social activities, and were learning from teachers who used multiple modes of instruction. Positive lessons learned through the special needs resource

centers should be shared widely through the media, MoEST communication mechanisms, and social media (e.g., WhatsApp or Facebook groups for special needs education teachers at the zonal level). By creating communication spaces, teachers can share resources, ask questions, and brainstorm ideas to help special needs learners succeed in school.

With regard to positive reinforcement, one of the main, underlying goals of positive reinforcement practices is to make students feel comfortable to take risks, make mistakes, and, as a result, to deepen their learning. All teachers were observed praising students either by verbally praising students and/or by having the whole class clap for a student, group of students, and in a few instances, for themselves. In addition, professional development opportunities would be beneficial that would allow teachers to share their successful experiences of positive reinforcement practices and how to incorporate them effectively into daily classroom practice to foster safer, more inclusive, gender-responsive learning environment. For example, in only a few of the classes did teachers call regularly on both students who gave correct answers and on those who did not, using a simple, effective method to have other students support the student who answered incorrectly without humiliating that learner. In these classes, the teacher was sending the message that it is okay for a learner to participate even if their answer might be incorrect, thus achieving the main goal of positive reinforcement. These teachers and their reinforcement pedagogies can serve as good-practice examples to colleagues. Teachers using successful positive reinforcement techniques could also be highlighted in Ministry communications or asked to help deliver future trainings to share best practices. Additionally, in Teacher Learning Circles, teachers can discuss how they model good teaching practices by physically circulating through the classroom as a means of effective classroom management, positive reinforcement, inclusion, and safety.

In contrast, in the majority of classrooms observed, teachers called on students who were most likely to answer correctly and who were thus praised for being correct. These students were most likely also to raise their hands and to be sitting closer to the teacher. Students at the back of the class often were not as likely to be called upon, compared to students sitting in the first few rows, especially in very large classes. In some cases, a teacher called on a very small number of students repeatedly in the same lesson—to the extent that in a few cases the researcher came to know these students' names after observing only one lesson. These were clearly high-achieving students on whom the teacher called regularly and expected them to answer correctly. When a teacher only calls on students who know the correct answers, the teacher is able to move through and deliver the content of the lesson at a steady pace. However, by calling only on students who know the correct answers, a teacher reinforces the message that only those who can answer correctly should put their hands up and/or will be called upon. This counters and undermines the underlying goal of positive reinforcement. Most students will not actively engage in classroom activities when they expect that only a handful of their peers will ever be called upon. Thus, professional development that encourages teachers to enable more students to participate actively in class by specifically focusing on how to support students who give incorrect answers (including those who do not raise their hands and those with special needs), and how to call on a diverse group of students

over the course of the class period would be beneficial. These actions could make the classroom more inclusive, more participatory, and more gender-responsive.

As with positive reinforcement, many teachers were utilizing gender-responsive teaching practices to a certain extent. They were calling equally on girls and boys, achieving the goal of ensuring that all students would have an equal chance to participate in the lesson. Many teachers used an effective alternating pattern, some alternating each time they called on students, others alternating after a couple of students were called upon. While these were promising advances in providing gender-responsive opportunities to participate, nuanced attention is warranted with respect to gender-responsive opportunities to learn (e.g., opportunities to be engaged and challenged). Calling on girls/boys equally or using alternating patterns were most successful at achieving the underlying goal when 1) the gender distribution in the classroom was about 50/50 boy and girl, and 2) the teacher called on many different girls and boys in the classroom. Some teachers, for example, called equally on girls and boys, but they called on only a very small handful of girls and boys repeatedly. This practice defeats the underlying goal of gender-responsive teaching practices. It also provides a clear example of how coaching and professional development can help teachers reflect on and improve their practice and, relatedly, the safety and inclusion of their classrooms. Raising teacher awareness with a few contextualized examples of differences between gender parity in opportunity to *participate* (e.g., calling on equal numbers of girls and boys) and gender equality in opportunity to be *intellectually challenged* (e.g., equal distribution of questions requiring critical thinking and analysis) may offer a low-cost opportunity to leverage and build upon promising advances observed through this study regarding gender-responsive teaching practices at the classroom level.

In regard to positive discipline, head teachers and teachers at many of the schools observed could benefit from professional development opportunities that enable them to come together to identify common student behavioral issues, discuss the roots of these behaviors, and then ensure they develop shared discipline approaches that are not physically and/or psychologically harmful and that do not require students to miss class (unless the student misbehavior is putting themselves or others at risk). For example, at most schools, a high percentage of disciplinary actions are taken in response to student lateness. Teacher responses to lateness were often extremely uneven (within and across classrooms), indicating a lack of school-wide agreement on how to respond to lateness fairly and effectively so that learners do not miss more class time due to punishments for their lateness, and so that learners already struggling to attend school do not become discouraged by punishments. Additionally, it will be useful to raise teacher awareness of the potential harm of segregating school chores by gender, as observed and discussed in this study, and to encourage rotation of all appropriate school chores between girls and boys.

Teachers who recognized that many students were late because they lived very far from the school or because they had significant household responsibilities before school tended to discipline students in a more positive manner that did not remove them from the classroom during teaching hours and that did not involve harsh physical punishments. Other teachers, however, said that lateness was simply a sign of student lack of discipline or bad behavior. These teachers often sent students home from school, had

students do punishments during class time, and/or assigned harsh punishments to students. Students who underwent such punishments expressed deep frustration with teachers' actions, and in some cases expressed a strongly held feeling of being misunderstood or not listened to by the school. In contrast, in schools in which students felt teachers' punishments were fair and designed to support their improvement, students actively supported teachers' discipline practices and expressed the feeling that they were cared for at the school. Schools observed to have more desirable responses to lateness and discipline (e.g., not removing students from the classroom during teaching hours and not issuing harsh punishments) can serve as best-practice examples to other schools within and between districts.

Future teacher trainings and discussions facilitated through Teacher Learning Circles can build on the qualitative study findings to deepen teachers' understandings of why certain pedagogical and disciplinary practices are recommended and how teachers themselves can judge their success. It is important that teachers have time during professional development activities to discuss good teaching practices, sharing their thoughts and experiences, including fears and apprehensions. Through this, teachers deepen their understanding of how to create positive changes in their teaching practice to make classrooms and schools safe for all learners.

Finally, the issue of school and classroom culture can create a powerful framework for professional development approaches. Teachers could spend time together analyzing their own school culture in relation to the four elements and to specific issues that arose from this study, such as how teacher behavior influenced and shaped student practices. For example, when teachers discuss the use of corporal punishment, the ways in which the learners follow the practices of the teachers is a critical issue to be discussed. Teachers (together with the head teacher) can work together to identify aspects of school culture that can strengthen student safety, inclusion, and learning and that are low-cost and easy to share with one another. A Teacher Learning Circle activity might be a debate and brainstorming about the issue of student tardiness to school, with an empathy-based and/or participatory approach used to identify what might be the key drivers of student tardiness, followed by a brainstorming session about what support or solutions could be offered at a systems level to mitigate or address those underlying drivers.

MERIT Head Teacher Trainings

The study data indicate that head teachers would benefit from training on and support in managing teaching and learning resources. The two areas of greatest immediate importance in improving students' learning appear to be helping head teachers manage teacher absences in ways that better support young students' opportunities to learn (and that at a minimum assure that young children are not spending significant amounts of time without direct adult supervision), and helping head teachers manage learning materials, particularly textbooks. Head teacher trainings could include the following:

1. Sensitization of head teachers to the dangers of having large groups of young children unsupervised for long periods of time. This could be addressed through introducing some of the literature on child development and on appropriate levels

of supervision for different ages, as well as on parental expectations for the school to care for and to supervise their children.

2. Mobilize head teachers to brainstorm and devise solutions to managing teacher absences, and in particular the effects of these absences on students' opportunity to learn and on student safety. Some of these solutions are likely to require PEA, District Education Manager (DEM), and MoEST input into or following the training.
3. Review NRP guidelines with head teachers and teachers about the need for a low student: textbook ratio, which allows the NRP curriculum to be taught as it is intended and reduces the impact of high student: textbook ratios on inclusion, gender-equitable teaching, discipline, and safety. Head teachers and teachers can be encouraged to implement the solutions they have already devised to manage textbooks, including ongoing work with learners and their parents to understand the importance of learners bringing their textbooks to school and to class every day.

In cases where sufficient textbooks are distributed to schools, head teachers and teachers could work with the school management committee or other community organizations to identify and to deal with the core reasons why learners are not bringing their textbooks to school every day or why all the books kept at school for a particular class are not distributed for use when needed.

Although textbook material resources are limited, the research team observed that some schools had at least one textbook for every three learners, which correlated with observed successful environments for reading. Schools or classrooms observed to have sufficient textbooks (e.g., one for every three pupils) could share successful tactics for ensuring textbooks are brought to school each day, and these best practices could be shared at head teacher trainings, via Ministry communication, or through teacher groups (e.g., WhatsApp).

In cases where not enough textbooks are distributed initially, where textbooks are torn, or where learners do not bring textbooks to class regularly, head teachers, teachers, and PEAs can meet to discuss the consequences (on teacher pedagogy, safety, inclusion, gender-responsiveness, and student learning) of having few textbooks in each classroom. Together they can strategize how to advocate for sufficient textbook provision, as well as how to work with learners and their families to ensure that textbooks made available are present for every lesson where they are to be used.

In cases where old textbooks and other learning materials are stored in schools, stakeholders could discuss how stockpiles of old textbooks and other learning materials stored at the school (e.g., in the head teacher's office) might be equitably distributed to and shared among students so as to provide more reading materials for students beyond their textbooks and outside of classroom hours.

4. Review with head teachers and PEAs alternatives to storing school materials (e.g., desks in need of repair) in overcrowded, lower primary classrooms, and have them share innovations in which they have taken part that have improved the safety and quality of learning at their schools. For example, some schools that participated in the Early Grade Reading Activity created low-cost, space-saving benches on which all students sat. This technology and its positive effects on students' comfort and teachers' ability to move around crowded classrooms could be shared with other MERIT head teachers.

Learner Supervision

Head teachers in most of the eight schools recognized that currently there was not a school-wide system for addressing teacher absences or shortages. This issue is discussed above under head teacher training and it is also included here to note that there may be other responses to teacher shortages that head teachers may want to consider adopting. For example, head teachers might meet with community leaders to discuss the possibility of parent or adult volunteers coming to the school to watch over students whose teachers are not in attendance. Such a system could, for example, free up the teachers who are present to circulate more freely among classes without teachers present because the adult volunteers can help assure that students participate in the activity assigned by the circulating teacher. Currently, when a teacher fills in for another, they most often assign individual work to students and then move to the next classroom. With a volunteer present, it may be possible to expand the pedagogies used in classrooms without teachers, because the volunteer can help support classroom transitions. Or, head teachers might want to hold meetings with their teachers about if and how to combine classrooms, and when and how older versus younger students are left unsupervised in classrooms. Such conversations would greatly benefit from the involvement of PEAs, DEMs, and MoEST school management and human resources experts providing feedback on low-cost responses to daily teacher management and assignment issues. Such feedback could be gathered and disseminated through the NRP.

Community-School Relations

The study data indicated that, when schools have open and good communication and partnerships with local leaders, the community, and religious institutions, they are often able to leverage additional resources and support for the school that can positively benefit children's reading and learning. In schools that had a more positive relationship with the community, religious institutions were sharing their infrastructure with the schools (e.g., church buildings to be used as classrooms, church latrines to be used by the school); parent organizations (e.g., mothers' groups, school management committees) were working with teachers to follow up on student absences; head teachers reported that local leaders mobilized parents to support student attendance and to support infrastructure development at the school; and parents felt comfortable coming to the school to talk with the head teacher and teachers about concerns they had about their children's learning. Strong community-school partnerships can thus have multiple, positive impacts on children's school access and achievement.

On the other hand, the qualitative data revealed schools in which structures that could potentially be used for classrooms were not being made available to the school because of “tensions” with community institutions. Learners often did not bring their books with them to school, and teachers and head teachers spoke negatively about parents and their involvement in school. Children reported that their parents asked them why they should bother going to school and did not give them enough time to walk to school.

While MERIT is not involved in large-scale, community-school relationship-building, head teacher and PEA trainings might successfully incorporate some information about effective approaches to working with school management committees, mothers’ groups, and community sensitization and mobilization, to provide school leaders with tools that they can use to work with communities to improve school infrastructure, learner practices, and the issue of learner supervision. For example, community sensitization and mobilization techniques could be used to increase community involvement in building temporary shelters for learners who have no shelter currently or building benches for all classrooms, to improve the number of students who regularly bring their textbooks to school, to decrease student absences, to learn about and respond to particular barriers faced by groups of students attending and learning comfortably in school, and to potentially create a cadre of volunteers who could assure all classrooms have an adult present throughout the day.

School-Based, Low-Cost Interventions

Reinforcing the importance of particular conversations in which the NRP has already been engaged, the qualitative study data also pointed to some potential school-based, low-cost interventions that could improve the safety of reading environments for all learners.

While large-scale infrastructural changes are often outside of the resource capacity of individual schools, small changes can significantly impact school safety, gender-responsiveness, and inclusion. For example, most schools visited did not have changing rooms for girls, even though teachers at most schools recognized the need for such structures. Changing rooms can be easily constructed out of low-cost (or no-cost, if students collect the materials and parents donate their labor) grass thatching and bamboo, as can additional urinals at schools with limited latrines. Low-cost latrines that incorporate key gender-responsive and inclusive elements could be constructed by schools with their SIGs. Temporary shelters, which assure that students have some cover from sun, insects, and other outdoor distractions and dangers, can also be constructed with community mobilization and support and with limited SIG funds. SIG funds, particularly if paired with community mobilization and support, could be used to build benches for all children (as some Early Grade Reading Activity schools have done), and to buy plastic chairs or other necessary furniture that meet the needs of children with disabilities who attend the school. Lastly, schools could use SIGs to construct ramps to their classrooms, and, in some cases, even a resource room. All of these infrastructural elements would make a significant contribution to improving school’s safety, gender-responsiveness, and inclusion, and would require relatively few financial resources.

Finally, regarding storage of materials at the school and classroom levels, as noted previously in this report, low- or no-cost school-based interventions can help ensure that 1) classrooms are not used to store construction, infrastructure, and maintenance materials

or broken furniture, etc.; and 2) that stockpiles of dated textbooks and learning materials are distributed among classrooms and students to ensure that all available reading and learning materials are circulated rather than stored.

Inclusion

Ongoing and increased support for the implementation of inclusive education to ensure that all teachers are prepared to support children with low to moderate disabilities will strengthen Malawi's enactment of education for all children. In an environment with very few resources available to diagnose learners, MERIT's focus on every child's right to an education that meets their needs (i.e., a learner-centered approach to education) becomes even more important. While individualizing learning in a class of over 100 children is extraordinarily difficult, MERIT's learner-centered reading strategies that focus on inclusive teacher classroom management of all children can be an effective first step.

Where resource centers exist, support for their continuance and their sustainability will ensure that there are adequately trained personnel and sufficient resources to support learning for children with special educational needs. Currently, most special needs education teachers operate at the zonal level, providing occasional support to teachers and students at all of the schools in their zone. While researchers heard from teachers who worked in a zone with an active special needs education teacher that they received helpful support and training, the students who benefitted directly from daily interaction with and support from the special needs education teachers had very different, and much better, learning experiences. Thus, expansion of special needs education teacher training and careful placement of the teachers to assure that each zone has equitable coverage could improve learning opportunities and quality for many students.

Table 2: Overview of Identified Issues and Recommendations to Improve Safety in Malawian Schools

Identified issues	Recommendation
Standard 2-4 teachers stated their training was too short to support their use of the new NRP curriculum.	Expand MERIT teacher trainings for Standards 2-4 to match Standard 1 training; continue to review and reinforce training content in Teacher Learning Circles.
Teachers expressed limited knowledge on how to identify and support learners with special needs.	More in-depth training/professional knowledge sharing on how to identify and support students with disabilities or special education needs.
Not all schools have a special needs resource center – which helped schools make significant strides towards inclusion.	Use media, Ministry communication, and social media to create communication space to share positive lessons from schools with special needs resource centers, ask questions and brainstorm ideas to help special needs learners. Expand special needs education teacher training and place teachers to maximize equitable coverage in each zone.
Few teachers called on and praised students who answered incorrectly.	Professional reflection activities and deeper training on successful positive reinforcement techniques, such as praising learners for incorrect answers.
Some teachers called on only a very small number of high-achieving students.	Professional development on how teachers can enable more students to participate actively in class.

While many teachers gave girls/boys equal opportunities to participate, few gave equal distribution of questions regarding critical thinking and analysis.	Sharing in Teacher Learning Circles and additional training on how to give girls and boys gender-responsive opportunities to learn (be engaged and challenged).
Teachers assigned gender-segregated school chores and responded differently to pupil tardiness within and across classrooms; also, there was a lack of school-wide responses to pupil issues of lateness and misbehavior.	Head teacher and teacher discussions, training, and spaces to identify common student behavioral issues; identify equitable and safe pupil chores; and discuss shared discipline approaches that are not harmful or cause students to miss class.
Large groups of young pupils were unsupervised for long periods of time.	Head teacher training and support on managing teacher absences. Work on alternatives such as parent/adult volunteers or combining classrooms.
Identified issues	Recommendation
There was a high student: textbook ratio (or a complete absence of textbooks) in many classes.	Head teacher training and support on managing teaching and learning resources, particularly textbooks. Review NRP guidelines with teachers and head teachers on need for low student-textbook ratio. Share effective solutions for managing textbooks. Strategize how to advocate for sufficient textbook provision and work with learners/families to ensure textbooks are available for every lesson.
Overcrowded and unsafe classrooms.	Review with head teachers and PEAs alternatives to storing school materials in classrooms (e.g., rebar or broken furniture) and low-cost alternatives to increase safety (e.g., space-saving benches).
Tensions with community institutions resulted in community structures going unused (which could be used for classrooms or to support safer learning).	Head teacher and PEA trainings on effective approaches to school management committees, mothers' groups, and community sensitization and mobilization to improve school infrastructure, learning practices, and issues of learner supervision.
Infrastructure issues such as classes held outside, limited seating in classrooms, few ramps for pupils with disabilities, lack of changing rooms for girls, and limited working latrines.	Mobilize community to support/donate time and resources for low-cost interventions such as benches, ramps, grass thatching bamboo structures, temporary shelters, and additional urinals.

Research on Safe Learning Spaces for Reading

A number of recommendations for future research on safe, gender-responsive, positive, and inclusive schools can be derived from the NASIS scoring processes used here and from the qualitative research study. These include the following:

- The results of the NASIS 2017 and the qualitative data collection on inclusion point to the need for more time talking with teachers and learners with special educational needs, and more directed observational time, to identify issues related to inclusion in schools. Of the four elements, this appears to be the area with the least effective quantitative data collection procedures developed currently.

- School observations should systematically capture the time period from about five to 10 minutes before to about five to 10 minutes after the official start time; this is an effective way to get a sense of issues related to school discipline.
- Learners' accounts of school discipline and of teacher-learner relationships tended to align more closely with researchers' observations than did teachers' accounts. This was particularly true for schools that received middle-level scores, and it points to the importance of collecting data directly from diverse learners in all research aiming at understanding the four elements and daily school practices related to learning.
- The qualitative research study confirmed that the variability among actors, data points, and data types first observed in the NASIS 2017 data reflects real variability in school practices. This variability was particularly high in middle-scoring schools. At most schools, but particularly middle-scoring schools and very large schools, a large number of data points are needed to capture an accurate snapshot of overall school practices related to safety, inclusion, and equity. Even more data would be needed to capture an accurate snapshot of any one of the four elements on its own.

As exemplified in this qualitative study, further research can be structured to simultaneously leverage existing research and selectively pursue more nuanced examination of emerging issues that affect the four elements (of safety, gender-responsiveness, inclusiveness, and positive reinforcement and discipline)—and, thus, learners' abilities to read.

ANNEXES

Annex I: Detailed Narrative on Data Collection

During the first week of data collection, Dr. Kendall organized the research team, including creating a data collection schedule, assuring that all data points were collected from each school, conducting quality control checks of the data, leading end-of-day discussions about the day's findings, consolidating daily research findings, shifting data collection plans as required, and revising and managing data collection instruments. During the second week of data collection, Dr. Janigan served as the team manager and organized these activities.

During each day of research, the team drove to the school in the morning, in time to see the start of classes. The team spent the entire day at the school conducting research (with a focus on observations in the morning), and generally continued data collection for about two hours after the end of the school day (with a focus on interviews with teachers after school hours). The team then returned to their lodging and debriefed on the day's data collection, including by identifying school-level and classroom-level analytic themes associated with each of the four elements and with the overall concept of a learning environment that supports or constrains children's reading. Only the team leader had information about the school's NASIS rankings; this assured that team members were not primed to expect a positive or negative school environment.

During the first week, the team collected data in the following districts: Blantyre Rural (pilot testing the instruments), Thyolo, Mulanje, Machinga, and Mangochi.

Data collection continued the next week in schools of three additional districts: Ntcheu, Dedza, and Lilongwe.

During the second week of data collection, Dr. Janigan led a team consisting of Ms. Chagwira-Betha, Mr. Kanyendula, and Ms. Chiyembekeza. The team spent one day in each of two smaller, rural schools, and they spent two days collecting data from the larger, urban school.

Where possible, all Standard 1 to 4 teachers were interviewed. Many of the schools that were visited had multiple teachers staffing each standard. In some of these cases, the interviews became group interviews because all of the teachers wanted to participate. This generally yielded very rich data, but in some cases appeared to cause teachers to be wary of sharing criticisms about fellow teachers or the head teacher.

Standard 4 pupil interviews were conducted, where possible, with one academically high-performing girl and boy, one average-performing girl and boy, one low-performing girl and boy, and one girl and boy identified as having a disability or special education needs. Where time did not allow, interviews were conducted with the high- and low-performing students and the students with disabilities/special education needs only.

Focus group discussions were conducted with groups of four students. To conduct the discussions, a second set of high-, average-, and medium-performing girls and boys were selected as the lead participants; each of these students was then asked to select three friends to participate in the discussion with them. Where time was short, members of the research team conducted discussions with high- and low-performing

students only. All of these students were identified with the help of the head teacher, the class teachers, and their grade books, which we requested be used in the selection process. This allowed us to note if and how schools were keeping records on individual student performance, supported teachers in identifying a set of students who represented both ends of academic performance in their classroom, and often provided us with insight about which students were absent on a given day. Lastly, and importantly, it should be noted that we deliberately asked the head teachers and Standard 4 class teachers to identify students with special education needs or disabilities in their classrooms. In some cases, it appeared that students who were identified as low-performing also had mild, but noticeable, special education needs that had not been identified.

Annex II: Data Collection Points and Instruments

Table 3 below indicates how many interviews and observations were collected at each school from the different actors.

Table 3: Number of Interviews and Observations at Each School

SCHOOL	# Classes observed	# School observations	# Head teacher interviews	# Teacher individual interviews	# Teacher participants in group interviews	# Student individual interviews	# Student participants in group interviews	#Resource room/ special education teacher interviews
1	12	2	1	2	2	3	12	0
2	10	3	1	4	4	5	8	0
3	12	4	1	5	17	6	8	3
4	17	3	0	4	4	8	12	0
5	10	2	1	5	7	4	8	0
6	11	3	1	3	3	8	24	0
7	7	2	1	4	6	6	20	0
8	13	2	1	4	6	7	16	0
Total	92	21	7	31	49	47	108	3

This annex also includes the following data collection instruments:

1. School observation protocol
2. Classroom observation protocol
3. School administrative data protocol
4. Head teacher interview protocol
5. Teacher (group) interview protocol
6. Student focus group discussion protocol
7. Student interview protocol

Protocols have been resized for readability.

1. School Observation Protocol

District		School Name	
Date of Visit		Name of Researcher	

1. Describe what happens when teachers and/or learners ARRIVE LATE to school. _____ _____
2. Do you SEE or HEAR anything that is GENDER RESPONSIVE OR GENDER UNRESPONSIVE ? If so, what? _____ _____
3. Do you SEE or HEAR anything that is INCLUSIVE or not? If so, what? _____ _____
4. Do you SEE or HEAR any evident SAFETY ISSUES , or anything happening that makes the school safer? If so, what? _____ _____
5. Do you SEE or HEAR any examples of POSITIVE OR NEGATIVE DISCIPLINE OR REINFORCEMENT ? If so, what? _____ _____
6. How are students interacting with the SCHOOL INFRASTRUCTURE ? (E.g., round gender segregation, accessibility, safety, etc.) _____ _____
7. How are TEACHERS AND STUDENTS INTERACTING ? _____ _____
8. How are PUPILS INTERACTING WITH ONE ANOTHER ? _____ _____

9. Are there **COMMUNITY MEMBERS** at the school? If so, what are they doing? Are they welcomed at school?

10. Please describe any behaviors that are not described above, but that you feel influence school safety, inclusion, gender-responsiveness, or discipline.

2. Classroom Observation Protocol

District			School Name			
Date of Visit			Name of Researcher			
STD	1 2 3 4	Class Subject Observed				
Teacher Name:			Pupils Enrolled:	No. of Girls:		
				No of Boys:		
				Total		
			Pupils actually present	No. of Girls:		
				No of Boys:		
				Total		
Classroom observation key: (check) = student is correct						
P = teacher uses positive reinforcement		X = student is incorrect		N = teacher uses negative reinforcement		
			Girl		Boy	
Who does the teacher call on?						
Are most girls wearing shoes?			<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No	N/A	
Are most boys wearing shoes?			N/A		<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No
Are most girls wearing uniform?			<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No	N/A	
Are most boys wearing uniform?			N/A		<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No
Draw a general map of the classroom						
Does the teacher ask the children for their Questions/opinions?			<input type="checkbox"/> Yes		<input type="checkbox"/> No	
Describe the walls/floors/furniture:						
11. Please describe how the teacher moves during the class period: do they stay in one place? Move around? Pay attention to some pupils but not others? <hr/> <hr/>						

<p>12. Please describe the teachers' PEDAGOGY: what activities are done? Are pupils engaged?</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>
<p>13. Please describe the teacher's DEMEANOR: friendly, angry, caring, rude?</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>
<p>14. Does it feel like pupils are LEARNING? Why or why not?</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>
<p>15. Please describe as many examples as possible of teachers using POSITIVE OR NEGATIVE DISCIPLINE OR REINFORCEMENT.</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>
<p>16. Please describe PUPILS' INTERACTIONS with one another. Does this differ for groups of students?</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>
<p>17. How are pupils SEATED? Are GIRLS and BOYS sitting together?</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>
<p>18. How are pupils interacting with the CLASSROOM SPACE AND TEACHING AND LEARNING MATERIALS used during the class time?</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>
<p>19. If pupils engage in groupwork, what is the groupwork like?</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>
<p>20. Do you SEE or HEAR any examples of interactions that make the classroom more or less SAFE? If so, what?</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>

21. Do you SEE or HEAR any examples of interactions that make the classroom more or less GENDER-RESPONSIVE? If so, what?

22. Do you SEE or HEAR any examples of interactions that make the classroom more or less INCLUSIVE? If so, what?

23. Is the classroom and its activities regularly interrupted during your observation? If so, by what?

24. Please describe any behaviors that are not described above, but that you feel influence school safety, inclusion, gender-responsiveness, or discipline.

3. School Administrative Data Protocol

District		School Name	
Date of Visit		Name of Researcher	

Please collect the following data from the Head Teacher:

Which students are enrolled in and which teachers are assigned to each Standard?

	STD 1	STD 2	STD 3	STD 4	STD 5	STD 6	STD 7	STD 8	TOTAL
# Girls									
# Boys									
# girls w/special needs									
# boys w/special needs									
# girl orphans									
# boy orphans									
# Male teachers									
# Female teachers									

1. How long have you been teaching at this school?

2. How long have you been a head teacher?

3. How many teachers are at this school in total?

4. During this past academic year, did any teachers leave the school? (If yes, why?)

a. Yes|No

	5. Did any teachers join the school? (if yes, how many?) (If yes, how many?) Yes No _____
	6. How many of the teachers are qualified? #total_____, #male_____, #female_____
	7. How many of the teachers have been at this school for three years or less? #_____
	8. Have any teachers at this school received training on: <div style="margin-left: 20px;"> a. Making the school safer for all learners? (who went? Was it useful to the school?) <div style="border-bottom: 1px solid black; height: 1.2em; width: 100%; margin-top: 5px;"></div> </div> <div style="margin-left: 20px;"> b. Inclusive teaching practices (who went? Was it useful to the school?) <div style="border-bottom: 1px solid black; height: 1.2em; width: 100%; margin-top: 5px;"></div> </div> <div style="margin-left: 20px;"> c. Gender-equitable teaching practices? (who went? Was it useful to the school?) <div style="border-bottom: 1px solid black; height: 1.2em; width: 100%; margin-top: 5px;"></div> </div> <div style="margin-left: 20px;"> d. Positive discipline? (who went? Was it useful to the school?) <div style="border-bottom: 1px solid black; height: 1.2em; width: 100%; margin-top: 5px;"></div> </div> <div style="margin-left: 20px;"> e. How to identify and support learners with disabilities or special needs? (who went? Was it useful to the school?) <div style="border-bottom: 1px solid black; height: 1.2em; width: 100%; margin-top: 5px;"></div> <div style="border-bottom: 1px solid black; height: 1.2em; width: 100%; margin-top: 5px;"></div> </div>

3	Gender in School Leadership Please indicate the gender of school leaders and number of teachers in Standards 1-4 <u>by gender</u> .	13.1 Deputy Head Teacher M F	13.2 Infant Section Head M F	13.3 Junior Section Head M F	13.4 Senior Section Head M F	
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4. Head Teacher Interview Protocol

District		School Name	
Date of Visit		Name of Researcher	
Name of Head Teacher		Gender of Head Teacher (circle)	M F

# of Years as Head Teacher at this School:	
Did you interview the Head Teacher?	Y N
Did you interview the Head Teacher?	
1. What makes a classroom and school safe for children? (If they focus on infrastructure, probe them about other kinds of safety for learners)	
2. How do teachers discipline learners here at this school, for example if they are late or misbehave?	
3. As leader of this school, please describe the steps you take to make sure that school discipline supports learning	
4. If you have some discipline issues with a teacher, what do you do?	
5. Are some learners being bullied at this school? Y N	
f. a. What do you, as the head teacher, do about bullying?	

6. In your school, what problems do the girls face?	
a. What problems do the boys face?	

7. Are there any pupils in your school with disabilities/special educational needs? Y N	
g. a. What disabilities do they have?	

h. b. How did you know that these learners have disabilities?	

- i. c. What challenges do they face in succeeding in school?

- j. d. What do you do in your school to support learners with disabilities?

- k. e. Do you face any challenges in supporting learners with disabilities? If yes, which ones?

- l. f. How do other children behave towards learners with disabilities?

- m. g. Do you ever hold meetings with the parents/guardians of learners with disabilities?

- n. h. If yes, what do you discuss?

8. If a child from the community is not enrolled in school, are you able to identify them?

- o. a. If so, how, and what do you do to try to enroll them?

9. At this school, do learners participate in school governance? Y N

- p. a. If yes, how do they participate and who participates?

- q. b. If not, why not?

10. At this school, do teachers participate in school governance? Y N

- r. a. If yes, how do they participate?

<p>11. As leader of this school, please describe the steps you take to improve school safety</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>
<p>12. As leader of this school, please describe the steps you take to assure every student has the chance to learn and every student is included?</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>
<p>13. As leader of this school, please describe the steps you take to make sure that that the school serves girls and boys equally</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>
<p>14. Do you receive any support from the PEA? If yes, what kind?</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>
<p>15. Have you received training from NRP on:</p> <p>s. a. School safety (if yes, what did you learn?)</p> <p>_____</p> <p>t. b. Inclusive teaching practices (if yes, what did you learn?)</p> <p>_____</p> <p>u. c. Gender (if yes, what did you learn?)</p> <p>_____</p> <p>v. d. Positive discipline? (if yes, what did you learn?)</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>
<p>16. Is there anything else you would like to tell me?</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>

Thank you kindly for your time.

5. Teacher (group) Interview Protocol

District		School Name	
Date of Visit		Name of Interviewer	
Name of Teacher		Subject Observed	
Standard + Stream		Teacher Gender (circle)	M F
Time Observation Began			

<p>1. Kwa inu, what makes children feel safe at school and in class?</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>
<p>2. In your classroom and school, what common problems do the girls face?</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>
<p>2a. In your classroom and school, what common problems do the boys face?</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>
<p>3. Are there any learners who struggle to make friends at this school? (If yes, who?) Y N</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>
<p>4. Are some learners being bullied at this school? Y N</p> <p>4a. If yes, what do you, as teachers, do about the bullying?</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>4b. If no, what have you done to make sure there is no bullying?</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>
<p>5. How are learners disciplined here at this school, for example if they are late or misbehave?</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>

6. Do you know which of your learners are orphans? Y N
6a. If yes, what problems do orphans face?

7. Who is more likely to be absent, girls or boys? Why?

Now I would like to ask you some questions about your own experiences as a teacher
1. Do you enjoy being a teacher? Why/why not?

2. At this school, do you feel that male and female teachers are treated equally? Y N
2a. Why or Why Not?

3. Do you feel that your opinion is heard when there is a decision made at school? (If yes, give an example).

4. Do you feel that you have support for your teaching from your fellow teachers and from your head teacher? Why/why not? (If yes, give an example).

5. In the NRP training, did you learn about:

6. (For all questions, if the teacher answers yes, probe what they learned. If anyone mentions National Education Standards, please probe what they learned).

6a. Inclusive education? Y N

6b. Gender? Y N

6c. Positive discipline ? Y N

7. How often do you have CPDs? Who gives them?

8. How often do you have CPDs? Who gives them?

9. Are there any pupils in your classroom with disabilities/special educational needs?
Y N.

9a. What signs do you see in learners for you to know that they have a disability?

9b. What challenges do they face in succeeding in school?

9c. What do you do in your classroom to support learners with disabilities?

9d. Do you face any challenges in supporting learners with disabilities? If yes, which ones?

9e. How do other children in the classroom behave towards learners with disabilities?

9f. Do you ever hold meetings with the parents/guardians of learners with disabilities?

9g. If yes, what do you discuss?

9h. According to the Government of Malawi, every child should be able to succeed in school. Thinking about your school and your classroom, do you think this is a realistic goal? Why or Why not?

10. Is there anything else you would like to tell me?

Thank you kindly for your time.

(Please write any notes about the interview—was the teacher free to speak, etc.)

6. Student Focus Group Discussion Protocol

District		School Name	
Date of Visit		Name of Researcher	
Name of Teacher		Teacher Gender (circle)	M F

Number of Students in this Focus Group discussion (should be 5 or fewer students from Std 4):

Number of Boys ____ Number of Girls ____

Thank you for joining me today. I want to ask you about being a student at this school, especially your experiences in and out of class. Please feel free. There are no right or wrong answers to these questions. Our discussion today is private. No one except for us will know what you said: not your teacher, not the Head Teacher. You are free to agree or disagree with each other in giving your opinion. Let us begin.

Tathokoza kuti mwabwera. Khalani omasuka. Ngati mwana wa sukulu wa pano ndikucheza nanu nkhanzi zokhudza moyo wanu wa pa sukulu pano. Yankho lililonse lomwe mungapereke lokhoza. Zimene tikambirane pano ndi za chinsinsi, sitiiza wina aliyense. Aliyense ndi oloedwa kupereka maganizo ake pa funso lililonse limene mungafunsidwe. Tsopano tiyeni tiyambe.

1. Are the teachers at this school caring/kind to pupils? (Ask them to give examples).

2. What happens if a pupil arrives late or is absent or misbehaves? Is that a good punishment?

3. What happens when a learner makes a mistake when answering a question? How does this make you feel about learning?

4. What happens if a pupil is upset or crying? (Probe: how does the teacher react? How do other pupils react?)

<p>5. Do you or your friends <u>ever</u> feel unsafe or frightened of being hurt at your school? If so, why? <u>Kodi mumakhala mwa mantha pa sukulu pano?</u> If so, why ? _____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>
<p>6. If a student feels unsafe, is there someone at this school that the student would feel comfortable to speak with about this problem? Who would it be? <u>Ngati mwana wa sukulu ali pa chiwopsezo pa sukulu pano, angakadandaule kwa ndani?</u> Who would it be?</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>
<p>7. Do girls and boys support each other at this school?</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>
<p>8. Do you think that children who have disabilities should attend school? Why/why not?</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>
<p>9. How are children with disabilities supported by the teachers?</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>
<p>10. If a learner in your classroom has a disability, would you play with them? Why/why not?</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>
<p>11. If a learner in your classroom has a disability, would you be good friends with them? Why/why not?</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>
<p>12. Would you rather be friends with a girl or a boy? Why?</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>
<p>13. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about learning at this school?</p> <p>_____</p>

<hr style="border: 0; border-top: 1px solid black; width: 80%; margin: 0 auto;"/>

7. Student Interview Protocol

District		School Name	
Date of Visit		Name of Researcher	
Class Teacher		Teacher Gender (circle)	M F
First Name of Student being Interviewed			
Is the interviewee:	high medium low disabled	(which: _____)	
Gender of interviewee	M F		

Thank you for joining me today. I want to ask you about being a student at this school, especially your experiences in and out of class. Please feel free. There are no right or wrong answers to these questions. Our discussion today is private. No one except for us will know what you said: not your teacher, not the Head Teacher. Let us begin.

Tathokoza kuti mwabwera. Khalani omasuka. Ngati mwana wa sukulu wa pano ndikucheza nanu nkhani zokhudza moyo wanu wa pa sukulu pano. Yankho lililonse lomwe mungapereke lokhoza. Zimene tikambirane pano ndi za chinsinsi, sitiiza wina aliyense. Tsopano tiyeni tiyambe.

1. What do you enjoy doing at home (and who do you live with?)	<hr style="border: 0; border-top: 1px solid black; margin-bottom: 5px;"/> <hr style="border: 0; border-top: 1px solid black; margin-bottom: 5px;"/> <hr style="border: 0; border-top: 1px solid black; margin-bottom: 5px;"/>
2. What do you enjoy doing at school?	<hr style="border: 0; border-top: 1px solid black; margin-bottom: 5px;"/> <hr style="border: 0; border-top: 1px solid black; margin-bottom: 5px;"/> <hr style="border: 0; border-top: 1px solid black; margin-bottom: 5px;"/>
3. Who are your friends at school and what do you enjoy doing with them?	<hr style="border: 0; border-top: 1px solid black; margin-bottom: 5px;"/> <hr style="border: 0; border-top: 1px solid black; margin-bottom: 5px;"/> <hr style="border: 0; border-top: 1px solid black; margin-bottom: 5px;"/>
4. Do you feel that teachers at this school care about children?	<hr style="border: 0; border-top: 1px solid black; margin-bottom: 5px;"/> <hr style="border: 0; border-top: 1px solid black; margin-bottom: 5px;"/> <hr style="border: 0; border-top: 1px solid black; margin-bottom: 5px;"/>
5. How are learners punished at your school? Why?	<hr style="border: 0; border-top: 1px solid black; margin-bottom: 5px;"/> <hr style="border: 0; border-top: 1px solid black; margin-bottom: 5px;"/> <hr style="border: 0; border-top: 1px solid black; margin-bottom: 5px;"/>

6. Do you feel safe here at school? Why/why not?

7. If you felt unsafe at school, is there a teacher you can talk to? Y N

8. What are some difficulties you and your friends face when you are at school?

9. How are children with disabilities treated at this school? (Give examples)

10. Are teachers biased towards girls or boys? (Give examples)

11. What would you want to be changed at this school to make it better for you?

12. Is there anything else you would like to tell me?

Thank you for your time!

Annex III: Sources of Information

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