# From Policy to Pedagogy: Exploring Teachers' Interpretive Frameworks of Early Literacy Policy in Malawi

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**Abstract:** *This study examines how primary school teachers in Malawi interpret and implement early literacy policies within the context of multilingual, under-resourced classrooms. Anchored in Policy Enactment Theory, Sensemaking Theory, and Street-Level Bureaucracy, the study critically investigates how educators navigate top-down policy mandates amidst complex pedagogical realities. Drawing on in-depth interviews with 18 purposively selected teachers across three regions, the study employs thematic analysis using NVivo software to trace how policies are recontextualized in daily practice. Findings reveal that policy enactment is not a linear process but one shaped by structural constraints, professional judgment, and institutional silences. The analysis highlights the significant challenges encountered by the implementation of early literacy reforms, including inadequate teacher support, ambiguous directives, and sociolinguistic misalignments. These findings underscore the need for more context-responsive policy designs and sustained professional development that aligns with the lived realities of frontline educators in Malawi and similar settings in the Global South.*

**Keywords:** literacy policy, teacher agency, policy enactment, Malawi, multilingual classrooms, education reform, Global South

## 1. Introduction

In recent years, the urgency to strengthen early literacy outcomes in the Global South has gained prominence in policy, research, and practice. In Malawi, this imperative aligns with both Sustainable Development Goal 4.1, which emphasizes the provision of equitable and quality education, and national reforms such as the National Reading Programme (NRP). While the policy's ambition to improve foundational literacy is commendable, its translation into effective classroom practice remains fraught with contextual complexities.

A critical issue in literacy reform is the persistent gap between policy design and pedagogical enactment, particularly in linguistically diverse and resource-constrained environments. Across Sub-Saharan Africa, studies have highlighted how curriculum reforms often overlook the structural and sociolinguistic realities of classrooms, leading to fragmented implementation and limited learning gains. In Malawi, early literacy reforms have been introduced amidst these tensions, yet little is known about how frontline teachers interpret and apply such policies in their daily work.

This study addresses this gap by examining how primary school teachers in Malawi interpret and implement early literacy policies. While previous research has focused on policy formulation or student outcomes, this study extends prior work by centering teacher agency and lived pedagogical experiences within the policy process. By drawing on Policy Enactment Theory, Sensemaking Theory, and Street-Level Bureaucracy, the study contributes a nuanced, context-sensitive understanding of how literacy reforms are negotiated at the classroom level.

The following research questions guide this study:
1) How do Malawian primary school teachers interpret national early literacy policies?
2) In what ways do teachers enact these policies in multilingual, under-resourced classrooms?
3) What structural and institutional factors shape the interpretation and implementation of early literacy reforms?

## 2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

This study draws on three interrelated theoretical lenses- Policy Enactment Theory, Sensemaking Theory, and Street-Level Bureaucracy (SLB)- to interrogate how early literacy policy is interpreted and operationalized by teachers in Malawi's public primary schools. While each offers distinct conceptual leverage, they converge in framing teachers not merely as passive implementers but as active agents navigating policy within structurally constrained environments.

**Policy Enactment Theory**
Ball et al.'s (2012) Policy Enactment Theory challenges linear policy transmission models by emphasizing that educational policy is interpreted and enacted in diverse, situated ways. Policies are "textually encoded" but take material form through enactment, contingent on the resources, values, and positionalities of those involved. This perspective is particularly critical in the Malawian context, where national literacy reforms, such as the National Reading Programme (NRP), encounter classrooms characterized by multilingualism, resource deficits, and institutional complexity. Policy enactment theory thus sensitizes this study to the heterogeneous ways in which teachers read, interpret, and recontextualize policy texts in their practice.

**Sensemaking Theory**
Complementing this is Weick's (1995) Sensemaking Theory, which foregrounds how individuals actively construct meaning in ambiguous or changing situations. Spillane et al. (2002) extended this concept to education, demonstrating that policy actors interpret reform based on their prior knowledge, professional norms, and contextual cues. In low-resource settings, such sensemaking may be constrained by inadequate

training or misalignment between reform discourse and classroom realities. For this study, sensemaking informs both the analytic lens and coding approach, attending to how teachers frame, justify, or resist policy expectations in light of their lived professional experience.
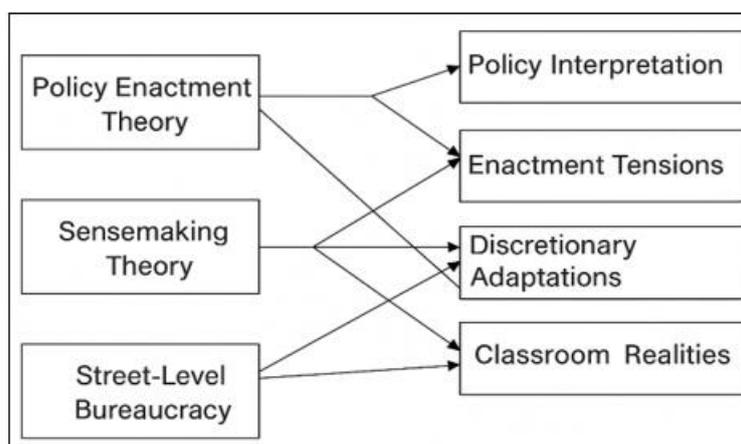
**Street-Level Bureaucracy (SLB)**

Lipsky's (2010) Street-Level Bureaucracy framework adds an institutional dimension to this analytical assemblage. It conceptualizes frontline workers- such as teachers- as de facto policymakers whose discretionary judgments shape service delivery. Their responses are often shaped by structural constraints (e.g., overcrowded classrooms and inadequate materials) and personal beliefs. SLB is particularly salient in Malawi's decentralized education system, where national directives may be filtered through bureaucratic inefficiencies and local improvisations. It offers a pragmatic lens on how structural bottlenecks mediate the fidelity of policy implementation.

## 3. Conceptual Integration and Application

Although analytically distinct, these frameworks are mutually reinforcing. Policy Enactment Theory provides the overarching logic of interpretation and enactment; Sensemaking Theory illuminates the cognitive and cultural processes through which meaning is constructed; and SLB explains how systemic constraints and frontline agencies co-determine the delivery of policy. These frameworks informed the deductive and inductive coding strategy, with codes initially developed around policy interpretation, enactment tensions, discretionary adaptations, and classroom realities and refined through constant comparison across themes.

A visual summary (see Figure 1) maps the theoretical framework onto analytic categories and anticipated coding domains, demonstrating how the three theories interact across levels of interpretation, action, and structure.



**Figure 1:** Analytical Themes mapped to theoretical perspective of policy enactment, sensemaking, and Street- Level bureaucracy

Figure 1 shows how these theories collectively inform three analytic themes:
1) Interpretive Agency- how teachers actively construct meanings from policy texts;
2) Contextual Navigation- how they adjust enactment strategies in response to institutional, material, and social constraints; and
3) Discretion and Resistance- how policy is modified, diluted, or resisted in practice.

Together, the framework captures the dynamic interplay between policy design, interpretive work, and implementation on the ground, offering a multi-layered understanding of how early literacy reforms are shaped in practice.

## 4. Design

This study adopted a qualitative research approach grounded in interpretivist epistemology, aiming to capture how Malawian primary school teachers interpret, negotiate, and implement early literacy policy within their everyday instructional environments. Drawing from Policy Enactment Theory, Sensemaking Theory, and Street-Level Bureaucracy, this qualitative framework was chosen to illuminate the

deeply contextual and discretionary practices that shape policy enactment in under-resourced educational settings.

### 4.1 Data Collection

Data collection involved semi-structured interviews, non-participant classroom observations, and documentary analysis.

This study employed a qualitative interpretive design to explore how primary school teachers interpret and implement early literacy policy within varied institutional contexts. Data were collected through 21 semi-structured interviews conducted across three districts, which were selected to reflect geographic and linguistic diversity. Through maximum variation purposive sampling strategy to ensure diversity, participants—teachers from both rural and urban government schools, spanning a range of teaching experience, resource access, and exposure to early literacy policy training were sampled to include teachers from low-performing and high-performing schools, ensuring a range of enactment environments.

Interview protocols were designed to elicit teachers' interpretations and enactments of literacy policy, including their understanding of policy intent, institutional support, and

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pedagogical alignment. Classroom observations documented how policy was enacted in practice, with a particular focus on instructional strategies, material usage, and language choice. Additionally, analysis of curriculum guides, National Reading Programme materials, and teacher training manuals provided further insight into the discursive and structural framing of early literacy policy, allowing for triangulation with participant accounts.

**4.2 Data Analysis**

Thematic analysis was conducted using a hybrid inductive-deductive coding strategy. Initial codes were developed based on the research's conceptual framework, focusing on sensemaking, policy enactment, and discretionary practices while also remaining open to emergent patterns. NVivo software was used to manage and code the data, offering efficient handling of large textual datasets, streamlined retrieval of coded segments, and support for code co-occurrence analysis. Themes were developed inductively but sensitized by the conceptual framework, particularly around constructs of interpretive agency, discretion, and contextual navigation.

To ensure reliability, coding was conducted collaboratively: two researchers independently coded a subset (20%) of the data using a shared coding framework, then met to resolve discrepancies and refine the codebook. Cohen's Kappa coefficient was calculated to assess agreement, yielding a value of 0.81, indicating substantial reliability. Analytical memos and cross-case comparisons were employed to identify recurring themes and contextual divergences, particularly regarding how professional identities, resource constraints, and linguistic ecologies influenced policy enactment.

Throughout, the researchers maintained reflexive awareness of their positionality and its impact on data collection and interpretation. The lead researcher, a Malawian educator with professional ties to the sector, balanced insider access with reflexivity measures, including journaling, peer debriefing, and triangulation, to ensure analytical rigor and minimize bias.

The qualitative design provided the necessary depth and flexibility to address the study's objectives: exploring how teachers make sense of literacy policy, analyzing enactment in diverse classroom contexts, and investigating the discretionary strategies teachers employ in response to contextual constraints. The integration of interviews and observations enabled robust triangulation, enhancing the study's validity and contextual accuracy. The interpretive orientation remained consistent with the study's theoretical emphasis on meaning-making, cognitive framing, and discretionary action—dimensions that cannot be fully captured through quantitative methods alone.

**4.3 Ethical Clearance and Procedural Integrity**

The study adhered to the principles of ethical research, as outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki and local research governance norms. National Committee on Research in the Social Sciences and Humanities. Informed consent was obtained from all adult participants, and no minors were involved in this study. All participants were assured of confidentiality, anonymity, and their right to withdraw without penalty. Interviews were conducted with cultural sensitivity, and identifying information was de-identified during transcription and analysis.

## 5. Findings

Thematic analysis of interview transcripts, focus group discussions (FGDs), and classroom observations revealed three major interrelated themes that correspond to the study's conceptual framework: (1) Interpretive Sensemaking of Literacy Policy, (2) Situated Enactment through Recontextualization, and (3) Discretionary Practices and Coping Strategies. These themes resulted from hybrid coding, which incorporated deductively informed and a priori coding, along with inductively generated coding that emerged from the content of the data corpus.

### 5.1 Interpreting Literacy Policy: Sensemaking Practices

Teachers' understandings of early literacy policy were profoundly mediated by their prior professional experiences, individual pedagogical orientations, and the multilingual realities of their classrooms. Rather than perceiving the policy as a rigid directive, most participants engaged with it as a loosely defined set of aspirations—ambiguous in form and open to subjective reinterpretation.

As one teacher noted, "Sometimes I read the documents, but I still ask myself what exactly they want us to do with these English and Chichewa books- they don't explain how to balance them" (Teacher A, Female, 38 years). This response illustrates the interpretive ambiguity particularly salient in relation to the language of instruction, where teachers struggle to reconcile competing literacy demands across English and Chichewa. Such ambiguity reinforces the view that formal policy texts alone lack the discursive clarity or contextual adaptability required to guide pedagogical practice meaningfully.

Instead, teachers appeared to rely more heavily on socially embedded interpretive communities, such as Continuous Professional Development (CPD) sessions and peer discourse. As one participant emphasized, "We make sense of it during CPDs. That's when you hear how others are managing. The documents alone can confuse you" (Teacher D, Male, 44 years). This highlights the inherently social and negotiated nature of policy interpretation, aligning with Sensemaking Theory, which posits that individuals construct meaning through shared dialogue and collective experience.

These findings underscore that teachers' policy enactment is not linear or prescriptive but rather a dynamic process shaped by their professional biography, collegial networks, and contextual pressures. In this sense, the abstraction of policy goals becomes pedagogically actionable only when refracted through the prism of teachers' lived realities.

## 5.2 Enacting Policy under Constraints: Adaptive Strategies

Teachers engaged in the active recontextualization of the literacy policy, implementing, modifying, or selectively omitting aspects of the official curriculum in response to classroom-level dynamics, learners' linguistic repertoires, and contextual demands. This enactment was far from mechanical; somewhat, it was shaped by the practical exigencies of multilingual settings and pedagogical responsiveness.

As one teacher explained, "I don't follow the guide step by step. Some days I switch to local stories because they understand better and participate more" (Teacher B, Female, 29 years). This practice illustrates how policy texts were adapted—or bypassed- in favor of instructional strategies that resonated with learners' linguistic and cultural contexts. Such enactments reveal how teachers exercise professional discretion to achieve engagement and comprehension, particularly when scripted lessons prove misaligned with learners' lived realities.

These adaptations were especially prominent in schools serving linguistically diverse populations. Teachers reported modifying prescribed materials to incorporate vernacular languages, locally resonant stories, and visual aids, thereby bridging the gap between policy design and pedagogical feasibility. "These materials are designed for urban schools. Learners speak other languages in making their entry in the village. So, I use pictures and translate for them" (Teacher G, Male, 35 years). Observational field notes corroborated these accounts, capturing systematic deviations from the official NRP sequence, particularly in linguistically heterogeneous classrooms.

These findings affirm the role of teachers as situated policy actors and "recontextualizers" (Ball et al., 2012) who mediate top-down reforms through bottom-up practice. The flexibility exhibited in their enactment strategies underscores the disjuncture between national standardization efforts and the realities of pedagogical work in resource-constrained, multilingual environments.

## 5.3 Exercising Discretion: Teachers as Street-Level Actors

Consistent with Street-Level Bureaucracy theory, Malawian teachers in this study exercised considerable discretion to bridge the gap between prescriptive literacy policies and the daily realities of their under-resourced classrooms. Severe resource constraints and ambiguous policy directives compelled teachers to adopt adaptive roles, where they prioritized pragmatic solutions over strict policy adherence. Many educators described how, when faced with unclear guidance and insufficient materials, they focused on ensuring foundational literacy skills were taught- even if that meant deviating from official procedures.

One common discretionary strategy was improvising with whatever resources were at hand. For instance, Teacher F (Female, 41 years) recounted, *"When there are no books, you just use the blackboard and write your phonics. That's better than doing nothing."* Here, the teacher transforms a scarcity of textbooks into an opportunity for blackboard-based instruction, illustrating how discretion becomes a feasible response to structural limitations. Rather than allowing the lack of books to halt instruction, Teacher F's choice reflects a proactive commitment to student learning under constraint.

Another prevalent coping mechanism was peer-supported learning, which helped compensate for material shortages. Teacher C (Male, 33 years) explained, *"The learner guides don't reach all pupils. So I write the key points and give the better readers a task to help the slow ones."* In this scenario, the teacher mitigates the shortfall of official workbooks by enlisting stronger students to assist their peers, effectively extending instructional capacity through classroom collaboration. This discretionary practice not only addresses resource gaps but also underscores the teacher's agency in reconfiguring instruction to maintain learning momentum.

Teachers also adapted curricular content in policy response–practice misalignments. Given the ambiguities in policy guidelines- for example, unclear directives on balancing English and Chichewa instruction—teachers often relied on their professional judgment to simplify or localize lessons. Teacher B (Female, 29 years) admitted, *"I don't follow the guide step by step. Some days, I switch to local stories because they understand better…"* This conscious departure from the scripted curriculum demonstrates how educators recontextualized policy content to fit their learners' linguistic and cognitive levels. Such content adaptation is a deliberate form of discretion, enabling teachers to meet policy goals (improving literacy outcomes) through methods attuned to their classroom context.

Across these examples, the exercise of discretion is portrayed not as defiance but as necessity-born innovation. Each quote exemplifies teachers' contextual coping strategies: writing phonics on blackboards in place of textbooks, leveraging high-performing pupils to support slower learners, and reshaping lesson content—all aimed at upholding fundamental literacy objectives amid systemic constraints. These frontline adaptations reveal how teachers act as policy mediators, making on-the-spot decisions that reconcile broad directives with the "messy realities" of overcrowded, multilingual classrooms. In line with Lipsky's framework, teachers' actions illustrate that policy implementation at the chalkface is an inherently interpretive process. By engaging in pragmatic problem-solving under resource scarcity and policy ambiguity, teachers assert their agency and moral responsibility to their students, even as they navigate and quietly reshape the boundaries of official directives.

It is these discretionary actions that bring to the fore the policy practice gap and how teachers address their own accountability in low-resource environments. A summary of these findings is presented in Table 2.

**Table 2:** Summary of Analytic Themes, Subthemes, and Illustrative Quotes

| Theme | Subtheme | Representative Quote |
|---|---|---|
| Interpretive Sensemaking | Policy Ambiguity | "Sometimes I read the documents, but I still ask myself what exactly they want us to do with these English and Chichewa books..." – Teacher A, F, 38 |
| Interpretive Sensemaking | Socially Mediated Interpretation | "We make sense of it during CPDs. That's when you hear how others are managing..." – Teacher D, M, 44 |
| Situated Enactment | Local Adaptation | "I don't follow the guide step by step. Some days I switch to local stories because they understand better..." – Teacher B, F, 29 |
| Situated Enactment | Cultural Recontextualization | "These materials are designed for urban schools. In the village, learners come speaking other languages..." – Teacher G, M, 35 |
| Discretionary Practices | Pedagogical Discretion | "When there are no books, you just use the blackboard and write your phonics..." – Teacher F, F, 41 |
| Discretionary Practices | Coping Strategies | "The learner guides don't reach all pupils. So I write the key points and give the better readers a task to help the slow ones." – Teacher C, M, 33 |
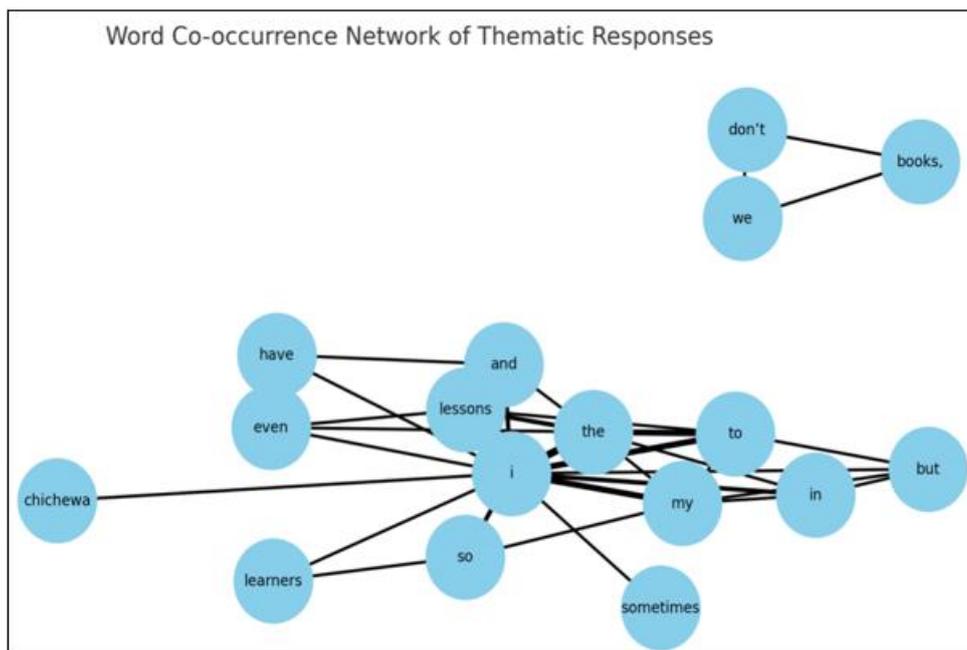


**Figure 1:** Word Cloud of Teacher Discourse on Early Literacy Policy

Figure 1 visualizes the most frequently used terms by teachers during interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs), highlighting dominant themes such as "policy," "learners," "books," "classroom," and "adjust." These recurring terms underscore how teachers consistently refer to pedagogical discretion and contextual adaptation in their interpretation of policy texts, resonating with Street-Level Bureaucracy Theory (Lipsky, 1980) and sensemaking processes (Weick, 1995).
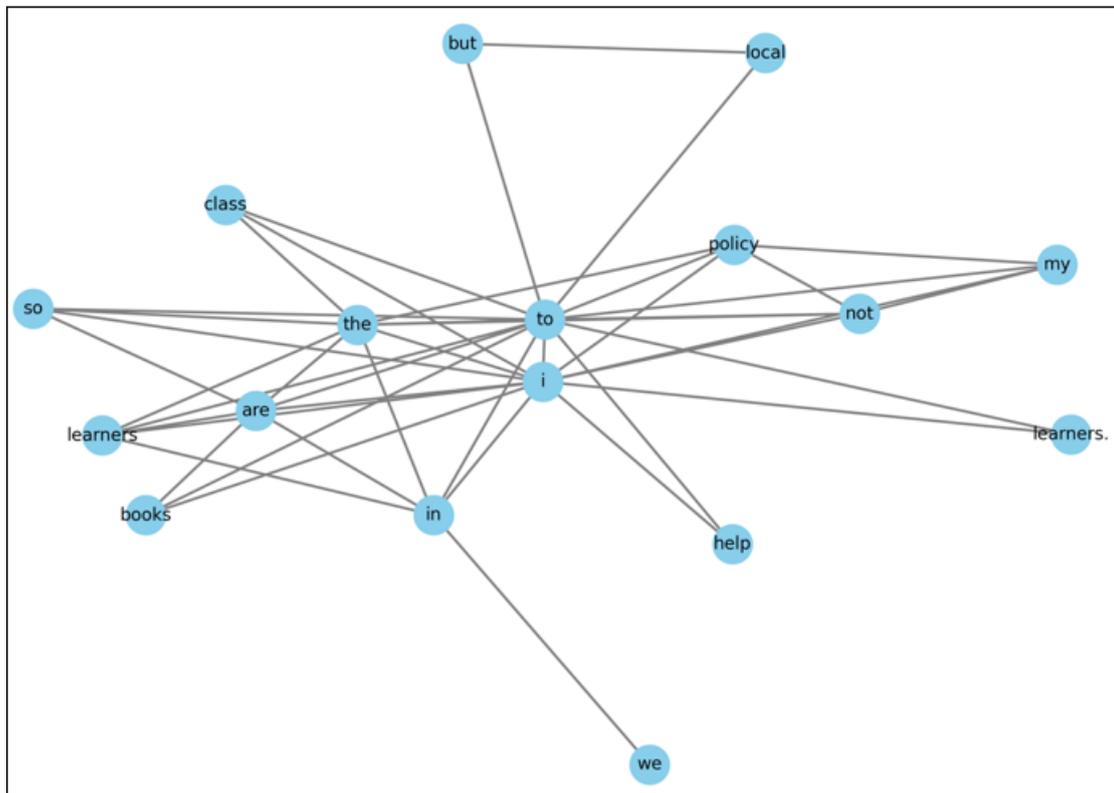
**Figure 2:** Co-occurrence Map of Key Concepts in Teachers' Interpretive Discourse

Figure 2 is a network graph displaying conceptual linkages in teachers' language based on word co-occurrence in the data. Notably, connections between terms such as "policy," "learners," "books," "classroom," and "local" suggest that teachers' interpretations and enactments of early literacy policy are relational and situated. These patterns validate the hybrid coding strategy employed, linking deductive frames (interpretation, enactment, discretion) with inductively emergent patterns of local mediation and adaptation.

## 6. Discussion

The objective of the study was to examine Malawian teachers' perceptions of and practices related to early literacy policy in multilingual and resource-limited classrooms. Framed within Ball et al.'s (2012) Policy Enactment Theory, Weick's (1995) Sensemaking Theory, and Lipsky's (1980) concept of Street-Level Bureaucracy, the findings underscore the non-linear, interpretive, and contingent nature of policy translation at the classroom level.

The findings demonstrate that teachers are not merely passive transmission points of policy specially devised by the center but diversely act as filters who inflect orders through the lens of their existing knowledge, school contexts, and their own constructed realities of teaching. This aligns with the sensemaking literature, which emphasizes that meaning is constructed locally and collectively, particularly in ambiguous or under-resourced environments (Coburn, 2005). For instance, the reliance on "common-sense" pedagogy and the adaptation of materials not initially designed for multilingual learners reflect a pragmatic orientation shaped by resource scarcity and linguistic diversity.

Teachers' enactments varied widely across the sampled schools, consistent with Ball et al.'s (2012) categorization of policy work as interpretive, material, and situated. For example, while some educators actively resisted the "one-size-fits-all" early literacy benchmarks due to learners' limited oral proficiency in the language of instruction, others recontextualized policy through supplemental vernacular scaffolding—an act of pedagogical brokerage rather than outright defiance. These enactments are not deviations but situated responses to what Ball et al. (2011) refer to as the "messy realities" of schooling, where policies are "fabricated" in practice rather than implemented wholesale.

The observed disconnect between policy documents and actual classroom practice also reinforces Lipsky's (1980) contention that frontline implementers exercise considerable discretion under constraints of time, material availability, and institutional pressure. Teachers' prioritization of examination preparation over foundational literacy skills, while seemingly contradictory to policy aims, reflects a rational response to accountability regimes centered on high-stakes testing. That strain highlights how a measure of performance can misrepresent the purpose of pedagogical changes, especially when educators are held accountable for outcomes without equivalent restructuring.

Moreover, the "symbolic compliance" observed- where teachers nominally reference policy language without deep curricular integration- speaks to a performative culture fostered by top-down accountability and donor influence. This performativity is compounded by the lack of embedded professional development, echoing findings from Sayed et al. (2016) on the fragility of policy implementation in under-resourced African settings. Another problem is the so-called policy ambiguity described in interview transcripts, which

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introduces the element of improvisation but, to the same extent, the lack of consistency. This reaffirms Honig's (2006) claim that the coherence and usability of policy documents are critical determinants of successful enactment. Notably, the research entails a tacit epistemological abuse: the relegation of local language ecologies to donor-embraced standards based on Eurocentric discourses of literacy. Teachers' selective translations of these models reveal not just resistance but also a deeply intuitive pedagogy informed by their understanding of learners' sociolinguistic realities. This requires that the design of literacy policy should be revisited to reflect the sociocultural environments and the cognitive patterns of development among children who study minority languages.

Collectively, these findings highlight that early literacy policy in Malawi does not necessarily follow a unified path but is instead selectively implemented through a web of professional arbitration, structural limitations, and ideological standpoints. Teachers' interpretive work constitutes a form of policy "translation" rather than a mechanical application shaped by competing logic of care, accountability, and survival. This has profound implications for how policymakers conceptualize "implementation success"- it is not merely fidelity to prescribed standards but the degree to which policy is rendered meaningful and adaptable in the lived pedagogical space.

## 7. Conclusion

This paper has shed light on the interpretive complexities of implementing early literacy policy in Malawi, demonstrating that teachers are not passive implementers of policy but rather situated actors who filter policy requirements through the lenses of context, constraints, and professional judgment. Using Policy Enactment Theory, Sensemaking Theory, and Street-Level Bureaucracy, the results indicate that policy is not linear or homogeneous in practice but is selectively taken up, negotiated, and occasionally opposed as a reaction to constraints and the pedagogical realities of the structure.

The study also contributes to the growing body of knowledge in the Global South, which challenges the universalist premises of literacy reforms by prioritizing the voices of educators working in multilingual and resource-poor classrooms. It introduces an empirical richness to the discussions of teacher agency, how discretion, improvisation, and symbolic compliance are both a means of survival and an indictment of disjointed policy design. Practically, the findings highlight the urgent need for context-responsive policy instruments that recognize linguistic diversity, resource inequalities, and the moral economy of teachers' work. To fill the policy-practice gap, there must be an investment in long-term, school-based professional learning, co-design of policies, and flexibility in the curriculum. In the future, longitudinal research on policy adoption patterns should be conducted, the outcomes of students in policy-based classrooms should be investigated, and the effects of transnational policy discourses on teacher enactment and its development over time should be considered.

Finally, a more dialogic and less grounded view of literacy reform, in which teachers are viewed as co-creators of the policy's meaning, is necessary for the development of equitable education systems in postcolonial African settings.

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