INTRODUCING FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT IN MALAWI: Challenges and Opportunities

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ABSTRACT This paper explores the use of formative assessment strategies as a tool for improving the quality of teaching and learning in Malawian classrooms. It began with the intention to investigate and recommend methods and strategies for the successful implementation of formative assessment techniques in secondary classrooms. Investigation of an attempt to introduce formative assessment in primary classrooms with limited success, however, led to the exploration of the implications of a larger issue within international education policy: that of direct policy transfer/borrowing without considering the contextual relevance of such actions.

Chapter 1 – Introduction to the Study of the Attempted Integration of Formative Assessment Techniques in Malawian schools since 2000

During a recent 6 month period working as a volunteer teacher at a secondary school in the Malawian city of Blantyre, it came to my attention that the quality of teaching provided there differed greatly from that which I had experienced in England, where I gained my teaching qualification in 2009. Lessons that I observed often appeared structured around the writing of notes on the chalkboard by the teacher, which the pupils were expected to copy and learn before the examination period. There was little involvement of the pupils in their own learning, often little further explanation of the intended learning beyond what was written in chalk and most lessons progressed to the next without establishing whether or not the pupils had accurately understood the intended teaching. I witnessed two sets of school based end of term examinations, during which many of the pupils performed poorly and failure of exams seemed to be a widely accepted outcome for many of the pupils (though this is only from my observations and I did not have access to the school’s data). There seemed to be a disconnection within the classroom between what the teachers were teaching and what the pupils were understanding, learning and able to use in answering examination questions.

Throughout the MAIED programme, the importance of providing education of reasonable quality has been approached in many discussions and seminars, particularly within the Teachers: policy and practice in International contexts module. It became apparent to me, during the past academic year, that some sub-Saharan African countries have recognized that a move towards student-centred education and away from traditional teacher led methods may promote positive education reform (Chisholm and Leyendecker, 2008) and I wondered how this was relevant to the Malawian context. This is, of course, an infinitely large area for further study – too extensive for this project. I developed a particular interest, however, in the role of ongoing formative classroom assessment in providing teachers with a way to engage students during lessons and gauge the effectiveness of their own teaching in order to inform further lesson planning. It seemed to me that this might provide a
pathway towards the seemingly desired improvement in the quality of education provision (Kadzamira and Rose, 2001).

1.1 Contextual Background: A focus on Malawi

At this point it is worth providing a brief introduction to Malawi and the Malawian education system. Malawi is a landlocked country in south-eastern Africa with a population of about 16 million people (World Bank Data, 2013). Pre-1964 the country was under British colonial rule and the first democratic multi-party elections were held in 1994, the year which also saw the introduction of the universal free primary education project (Kadzamira and Rose, 2001). Malawi’s economy relies heavily on agriculture with the majority of the population living in rural locations, despite increased urbanisation during the past decade (Johnson, Hayter and Broadfoot, 2000), and remains one of the World’s poorest nations with a gross national income per capita of $870 (WHO, 2013a). Malawi has a high prevalence of HIV/AIDS (almost 12 times the global average, WHO, 2013b) and a low life expectancy (57 years, WHO, 2013a), relative to high-income countries. These statistics indicate that there is a need to improve overall quality of life.

Malawi strives to achieve Universal Primary Education, despite a 2010 report stating that the current status is at 83% and the 100% target is unlikely to be met before the 2015 Millennium Development Goal deadline (MoDPC, 2010). The number of secondary school places is limited and enrolment hovers at around 28% (UNICEF, 2013), with even fewer pupils progressing to higher education.

This project will make the assumption that the quality of education provision in Malawi needs to be improved. It is a bold statement to make and far beyond the scope of this project to explore further, though further exploration is indeed an important and worthy cause. Providing education of an acceptable standard has become a much written about area of development studies since the 1990s (Pryor and Lubisi, 2002). Within Malawi, 1994 is a key turning point as it marks the beginning of an ambitious programme of free primary education, following democratic elections, which has led to a decrease in educational quality (Kadzamira and Rose, 2001). Questions of how quality is measured and what comprises an education system considered to be of high (or low) quality are both of utmost importance and, as highlighted earlier, beyond the scope of this project. Whilst it is important to recognise that many factors may contribute to perceived low levels of educational quality, such as inadequate resources, untrained and undertrained teaching staff, high levels of absenteeism, there is a body of evidence highlighting the central role assessment can play (Eisemon, 1990; Kellaghan and Greaney, 2001; Pryor and Lubisi, 2002; UNESCO, 2005).
1.2 Exploring the Links: Assessment and Education Quality

Kellaghan and Greaney (2001) explain in detail how assessment systems can be used to improve the quality of education with a focus on the accountability of national and local school systems. They discuss the use of result data as indicative of successes and failures within education systems. This emphasizes the importance of assessment as a tool for improving education quality on a national scale; however, they do not dedicate much time to assessment at the classroom level, which is where my interests lie.

Part of the problem of educational quality within Malawi is that Malawian secondary school leaving exams are high-stakes exams, to the point that the ‘stakes associated with the tests include starvation versus prosperity’ (Chakwera, Khembo and Sireci, 2004, p.12). High-stakes tests, according to Madaus (1988), are described as:

those whose results are seen – rightly or wrongly – by students, teachers, administrators, parents, or the general public, as being used to make important decisions that immediately and directly affect them (p. 87).

Research has shown that where pressure to perform well in exams is very high, as it is in Malawi due to intense competition for limited higher education and employment opportunities, the quality of education provision can become questionable (Lewin, 1990). Increased pressure to perform well in high-stakes examinations can lead to the backwash effect, as outlined below, and steer the focus of learning towards the memorization of simple facts in order to pass exams (Lewin and Dunne, 2000). This limits the holistic and humanistic functions of education as a tool to improve understanding of important health issues, such as HIV/AIDS, amongst children and young people (UNESCO, 2005). The intention of my study is not to attempt to reduce the significance of high-stakes summative testing (though this is indirectly touched upon in Chapter 5 when looking at continuous assessment), nor question methods of examination design, but to look at the use of assessment strategies in classroom situations to inform future teaching and learning, thus making it more relevant.

Formative assessment, as will be explored in greater detail in the following chapter, provides a potential pathway to improving the quality of classroom interactions and moving away from didactic teaching methods. Didactic teaching methods are considered to be commonplace in many sub-Saharan African education systems, despite efforts to move towards learner-centred teaching methods (Chisholm and Leyendecker, 2008). Teacher-centred methods, also known as transmission teaching (the idea that pupils should all be able to learn when teachers provide them with information), are considered to be less demanding of pupils and responsible for ‘stifling critical and creative thinking among pupils’ (Mtika and Gates, 2010, p. 396). I will present formative assessment
as playing a key role in introducing learner-centred, social constructivist methods of teaching and potentially moving away from teacher led, rote-learning styles to a higher quality of education provision.

Formative assessment may also help to prevent the backwash effect present in many classrooms. Backwash is the name given to the processes involved in teachers teaching to the test, rather than developing knowledge independently of examination techniques (Lewin, 1990; Somerset, 1996), a phenomenon linked to the high-stakes nature of summative assessments. In the words of Somerset:

Backwash effects are strongest...in the period when pupils are being actively prepared for the examination. Depending on how high the stakes are, this period may last for a semester, a year or several years. But the shadow of the coming examination is often apparent throughout the preceding school cycle (1996, p. 275).

From Chakwera, Khembo and Sireci’s study (2004), it can be deduced that Malawian secondary school leaving examinations are extremely high-stakes and conclusions can begin to be drawn about the extent to which examination backwash probably occurs in Malawi. In order to tackle the problems associated with examination backwash, the problem should be broached at the source: the summative test itself. Again, this is beyond the scope of this project. However, as Somerset (1996) explains, examinations that result in the backwash effect often ‘embody a view of pedagogy as transmission rather than construction’ (p. 276) and, as has been outlined above, formative assessment may assist in deviating from those traditional and stifling teaching methods. It will also be important to consider the contextual implications of formally introducing formative assessment programmes into Malawian school systems.

1.3 Overview of Chapters

As outlined above, the aims of this project were to explore the role formative assessment plays in secondary education in Malawi with the view to present methods and ideas for improving its use. I had intended for this to be an innovative study so I begin with a literature review of the implementation of formative assessment in countries where it is generally considered successful, this is Chapter 3. Chapter 4 examines the role international development agencies, represented by the World Bank and UNESCO, play in applying indirect pressure on low-income countries to adopt apparently successful assessment strategies from developed, high-income nations, making the connection between formative assessment in the Global North and South.
However, when I began searching for documents supporting the use of formative assessment beyond a few high-income, developed countries in the Global North, namely the UK and USA, I found very little literature with which I could work (with only one document making indirect reference to secondary education and formative assessment in Malawi). This is not evidence alone that formative assessment does not exist in Malawi or other sub-Saharan African countries but added a different dimension to my project. It also led me to question reasons behind the lack of formative assessment in official documentation, such as Government of Malawi plans for improving the provision of education, and the transferability of formative assessment from developed countries. This project has become a fairly extensive review of an attempt to implement a continuous assessment project a decade ago in Malawian primary schools. The title of continuous assessment given to that project is somewhat misleading as it appeared to have, as its roots, a stronger affiliation to formative assessment than what is most commonly referred to as continuous assessment, a method for reducing the pressure of end of learning summative assessment. The origins of this project, its successes and failures along with any evidence of a lasting legacy are explored further in Chapters 5 and 6.

This exploration of formative assessment in developed, high-income countries, low-income countries and the apparent failure of the continuous assessment project to have any lasting effect in Malawi led me to consider the reasons that formative assessment might not become a successful assessment strategy in Malawi. My initial assumption that formative assessment could (and indeed should) be transferred into the Malawian context is considered in Chapter 7. In conclusion, I have seen that my initial belief that transferring formative assessment techniques, which I have myself used successfully in English classrooms, to the Malawian context as a tool for improving the quality of education provision is fraught with challenges. Many of these challenges relate to a perceived ease of direct policy transfer from one context to another an mentioned above.


Chapter 2 – Methodology

2.1 Aims

- To explore the theories supporting implementation of formative assessment as a teaching and learning tool.
- To examine how these theories might be applied to the introduction of formative assessment in Malawi.
- To identify methods to support implementation of formative assessment in Malawian secondary school classrooms as a tool for improving the quality of teaching and learning.

2.2 Objective

1. To provide a critical review of formative assessment as an education tool
2. To identify methods for introducing formative assessment into Malawian secondary schools

2.3 Research Questions

1. How is formative assessment conceptualised?
2. What evidence exists in the literature of the successful implementation of formative assessment in resource-constrained countries?
3. Using available policy documents, identify how agents of Malawian secondary education are engaging with ideas of formative assessment, in terms of policy and practice.
4. What changes/recommendations can be made to improve the use of formative assessment in Malawian secondary school classrooms, in teacher education, policy or classroom practice, for example?

2.4 Rationale

The quality of education provision is a current policy priority in international education discourse (UNESCO, 2007). To use the globally influential example of the UNESCO Education for All Global Monitoring Report (2005), the opening statement of the first chapter (Understanding education quality) states that:

Although some of the international treaties, by specifying the need to provide education on human rights, reproductive health, sports and gender awareness, touched on educational quality, they were generally silent about how well education systems could and should be expected to perform in meeting these objectives (p. 28).
In other words, there has been little qualitative support and guidance given to low-income countries, including Malawi, who have felt the strain of a sudden surge in enrolment figures resulting from the *Education For All* movement launched at the 1990 *World Conference on Education for All* in Jomtien, Thailand (Little and Wolf, 1996; UNESCO, 2013). The result of this is that large numbers of children are now able to access basic education but there are some suggestions that the quality of education provided to a percentage of these pupils is sub-standard (UNESCO, 2005). DFID’s quality report (Johnson, Hayter and Broadfoot, 2000), with a focus on Malawi and Sri Lanka, citing Tizora (1999) and Moleni (1999), ‘claims that enrolment rose from 2 million to over 3 million following the introduction of free primary education’ (p. 9), which is an increase of 50%.

In order to support the aims and objectives outlined above and make recommendations for the implementation of formative assessment in Malawian schools, I must first understand the origins and theories of, and successes and challenges faced by, formative assessment’s evolution in the Global North. In an attempt to restrict my search criteria, I have chosen to consider the experiences of countries which have adopted some form of formal formative assessment education policy, with a strong focus on the English school system.

3.1 Formative Assessment: a Definition

In order to reflect upon the introduction of formative assessment as a teaching and learning tool, it is important to produce a working definition of the term formative assessment. That this is not straightforward is evidence of the existence of the extensive research surrounding formative assessment discourse. Black and Wiliam (2009) provide a definition (and supporting clarification) which I will use for the remainder of my discussion of formative assessment:

Practice in a classroom is formative to the extent that evidence about student achievement is elicited, interpreted, and used by teachers, learners, or their peers, to make decisions about the next steps in instruction that are likely to be better or better founded, than the decisions they would have taken in the absence of the evidence that was elicited (p. 9)

Their page long elucidation of some features of this definition highlights the complex nature of precisely defining formative assessment – even the meaning needs further explanation and clarification. This should raise alarm bells for policy makers hoping to import strategies and techniques of formative assessment into educational systems globally. It is of paramount importance that policies introducing aspects of formative assessment do need leave understanding of their intention open to interpretation if they are to successfully promote ideas of assessment across national education systems. In overly simple terms, my understanding of formative assessment is the use of pupil performance (which can be established in many ways) to inform future lesson planning, teaching and learning – the process that appeared absent during my observation of lessons in Malawi.

3.2 Early Developments in Formative Assessment

Formative assessment made its educational debut in the middle of the last century. Wiliam (2011) gives a brief overview of the history of its early development, attributing its initial introduction to Benjamin Bloom and his graduate students at the University of Chicago. Sadler (actively researching the subject during the 1980’s) is regularly cited as providing some of the early building blocks for
understanding the successful implementation of formative assessment in education in some high-income countries (Black and Wiliam, 2009; Cowie, 2005). It is relevant to this study to note that this early exponent of formative assessment was conducting research in a wealthy country with an established education system: Australia.

Turning to Bloom, Madaus and Hastings (1981) some understanding can be drawn of the motives behind the intensification of attention given to formative assessment in the wealthy countries. It is around this time that education researchers were starting to question the role of assessment as simply a selection tool and recognise the potential for assessment to contribute to and improve the learning process (Bloom, Madaus and Hastings, 1981; Black, 1986; Torrance and Pryor, 1998). The establishment of the Assessment Reform Group in 1988 in the UK underlines the growing recognition given to assessment at that time (ARG, 2010). One of their stated aims clearly shows their dedication to the use of formative assessments:

The focus has broadened to the use of assessment to advance learning as well as to summarise and report it (ARG, 2010).

From the Assessment Reform Group’s website and publications as well as other published works from assessment researchers during the 1980s and early 1990s, it can be deduced that the intended aim of reducing dependency on summative assessment was to raise standards of student attainment (Broadfoot, et al., 1999; Gardner, 2006; ARG, 2010). It is important to recognise that the introduction of formative assessment was not intended as a replacement for summative assessment, rather as a tool to enhance performance during summative tests, which continue to act as a selection tool in most education cultures (Torrance and Pryor, 1998).

3.3 From Formative Assessment to Assessment for Learning

Over time the formal title Formative Assessment has evolved into the more useable and descriptive working title Assessment for Learning (Gardner, 2006). Most authors seem to choose one term or the other, without providing explanation for their choice – perhaps because this might add an element of unnecessary confusion (Torrance and Pryor, 1998, stick with formative assessment, for example). Other authors use both terms interchangeably without providing any explanation of differences (Black, et al., 2003; Cowie, 2005; OECD/CERI, 2010). Gardner (2006) provides some explanation for the existence of two separate terms, saying that formative assessment may be used to refer to on-going in-class assessments that contribute to a final summative assessment that do not ‘contribute to the students’ learning’ (p. 2) and are therefore not considered assessment for learning, in other words the two terms should not be used interchangeably.
Bennett (2011) supports Gardner’s chronological development of the terminology and provides an extensive explanation of the complications caused by the double meaning of formative assessment, reporting that one education expert has stopped using the term altogether in order to avoid confusion. Two important points can be drawn from the ‘definitional issue’ highlighted in Bennett’s (2011) critical review. Firstly, the point is raised that resolving the issues of definition are integral to the progress of formative assessment as an educational tool. In his words:

Definition is important because if we can’t clearly define an innovation, we can’t meaningfully document its effectiveness. Part of that documentation needs to be an evaluation of whether the formative assessment was implemented as intended, which we cannot accomplish if we don’t know what was supposed to be implemented (p. 8)

It is clear from the above quotation that a consensus about the meaning of formative assessment needs to be reached before there can be any agreement amongst educationalists about the extent to which it is occurring. This statement speaks of the intention for a general, presumably international, accepted definition being utilised, which is particularly relevant in low-income countries. Considering the cultural and linguistic differences between countries, it is possible that this will never be achieved (see Sadler, 1989, for a brief discussion on the American use of the word ‘assessment’). Supporters of formative assessment, however, overcome this hurdle by providing their own clearly defined interpretation of the term formative assessment before they embark on any analysis (see, for example, Black and Wiliam, 2009; Gamlem and Smith, 2013).

The second point to come from Bennett’s review (2011) is that, regardless of how others try to define it as a test or a process or as occupying a state in opposition to summative assessment, we should consider it an amalgamation of all of those components.

Formative assessment then might be best conceived as neither a test nor a process, but some thoughtful integration of process and purposefully designed methodology or instrumentation (p. 7)

Alongside this statement, he has produced the following table to highlight the inseparable nature of summative and formative assessment.
For the purposes of this study, the nuanced understandings will not be explored in further detail and formative assessment and assessment for learning will be used interchangeably, without entirely excluding ideas of Summative Assessment or Assessment of Learning.

### 3.4 Formative Assessment: the Theoretical Framework

During the last decade, proponents of assessment for learning have increasingly realised that providing theoretical support for assessment in their writing gives it greater standing in the international assessment debate. In fact Black and William (2009) record that they are attempting to ‘unify the diverse set of practices which have been described as formative’ (p. 5).

Formative assessment, according to Torrance and Pryor (1998), might be better understood if more attention were paid to ‘theoretical discussion of the different models of learning which might underpin’ the discourse (p. 14). Dysthe (2004) also recognises the need to address the theoretical background of assessment practices since ‘a new learning culture is emerging and...it needs alternative assessment forms in order to develop’ (p. 15). In recognising the intricate relationship between assessment and learning, we can understand the importance of learning theory when considering which assessment strategies to use for what purpose. It is appropriate therefore to ask the question of what it is that the learning is to achieve in order to use the assessment strategies successfully (Gipps, 1996, p. 252). Situating formative assessment outside theories of learning is contradictory to its role as a teaching and learning tool. Trying to define a theory of learning without including assessment is problematic for the entire assessment for learning movement, for if assessment can exist independently of learning then what is the rationale for formative assessment?

It is not within the scope of this project to conduct a thorough interrogation of the theoretical background put forward in support of formative assessment, though it is important to consider the role that emerging ideas of learning as a social construction have played (Bennet, 2011). Making a
simple statement that formative feedback supports constructivist learning theories, which might be useful for the purpose of this section, is fraught with controversies and, therefore, impossible (Phillips, 1995). What can be offered, however, is a brief explanation of the evolution of constructivism in relation to education and an overview of the role assessment can play.

It is widely documented that educationists’ current understanding of how learners learn has progressed from the empty vessel (behaviourist) notion that the learner is ‘a passive absorber of information/facts and skills provided by the teacher’ (Gipps, 1996). However, turning to Freire (1985), it is clear that criticisms exist of this empty vessel method of teaching and it is more accurate to consider that the act of studying is ‘not to consume ideas, but to create and re-create them’ (p. 4). Based on Vygotskian notions of ‘the nature of learning being socially constructed’ (Dixon, Hawe and Parr, 2011), it is now believed that ‘learning is tuned to the situation in which it takes place’ and that information can be open to interpretation (Gipps, 1996, p. 257). More specifically, the same author also goes on to say that students are ‘active constructors in their own world view’ and they ‘learn best by actively making sense of new knowledge’ (Gipps, 1996, p. 257). Torrance and Pryor (1998) take this one step further and explicitly highlight the role formative assessment plays in a constructivist classroom. Using Bruner’s ideas of scaffolding (developed from Vygotskian theories of learning being supported by an expert (Turner and Berkowitz, 2005)), they state that ‘the purpose and focus of assessment’ should be ‘to identify what children could achieve next’ (p. 15). This is crucial in understanding the connection between learning as a social construction (learners bring their own unique experiences and interpretations) and assessment as a teaching and learning tool (teachers need to ascertain the experiences brought to the classroom and the interpretations made).

There should be some concern surrounding the promotion of formative assessment without a solid understanding of the learning theories it supports/is supported by. As Dixon, Hawe and Parr (2011) point out there is already a danger of teachers adopting some formative assessment strategies but not ‘making substantive pedagogical change’ (p. 367), which may limit the potential of assessment for improving learning. This limitation may be reduced if assessment for learning techniques are introduced as grounded in learning theories in order to enable teachers to fully grasp the intended outcomes and reasons for implementing such new strategies. Pryor and Crossouard (2008) cite Hargreaves’ (2005) study to highlight teachers’ different understandings of formative assessment, equating it either with measurement or as a ‘process of co-enquiry’ (p. 2). The variation of interpretation implied here considered alongside the above discussion of definitional issues
illustrates the potential for a wide range of understandings of what is meant by formative assessment and how to implement strategies.

3.5 Formative Assessment: The Limitations

It does not take a thorough search of available literature to recognise the extent to which formative assessment is a topic in current education discourse. For example, a search of literature available at www.scopus.com using the search terms “Formative assessment” AND education, returns 745 document results, of which 446 are related to the Social Sciences subject area (accessed on: 10th June 2013). Another indicator of the academic support for this movement are the 934 acknowledged citations (www.scopus.com) of Black and Williams (1998a) influential text ‘Assessment and classroom learning’, a comprehensive literature review including analyses and collation of numerous formative assessment study results. There seems to be an overreliance on Black and Willam’s review amongst researchers and policy makers alike (UNESCO, 2005; OECD, 2005; Pearson, 2008; Wylie, 2008; Clarke, 2012a) indicating that this is the only document providing reasonable evidence of the benefits of using formative assessment practices. This point has not gone entirely unnoticed and there has recently been a switch towards recognising the evolution the terms assessment for learning and formative assessment have undergone in the past 15 years and the need for more up-to-date studies (McMillan, Venable and Varier, 2013; Lysaght and O’Leary, 2013).

One reason for the current apparent non-existence of a modern day equivalent of Black and Willam’s (1998a) study, may be linked to the definitional minefield that is the international discourse of formative assessment. Black, et al. (2003), in their position as strong supporters of formative assessment, suggest that strategies supporting assessment for learning include self- and peer-assessment by students, feedback, questioning, the formative use of summative tests. Studies do exist which take one of the strategies mentioned above and analyse its contribution to improvements in student achievement (Gamlem and Smith, 2013). This indicates that it is perhaps no longer relevant to consider formative assessment as a tool for increased educational achievement without being more specific about to which strategy reference is being made (Cowie, 2005). This can be considered a limitation of the terminology of formative assessment: it is too broad to be considered a pedagogical tool without deeper clarification of the term, as highlighted above in the discussion of Bennett’s (2011) ‘Definitional issues’ (p. 6).

One other major limitation of the assessment for learning movement, which mostly lies beyond the scope of this project, is the issue of the measurement of the success of formative assessment strategies. Many studies have been carried out which measure interventions against control groups...
and rate the effectiveness of the strategy in statistical terms (for example: Butler and Lee, 2010). There is undoubtedly some irony in their use of summative assessment data to provide evidence for the beneficial use of formative strategies, however this also highlights the complex relationship that exists between summative and formative assessment. Progressing beyond the simple task of measuring academic interventions of groups of school children, is evaluating claims that formative assessment contributes to skills involved with Lifelong Learning (Black and William, 1998b; Broadfoot et al., 1999; OECD, 2005). Questions surrounding the precise meaning of the term lifelong learning/learners and how it might be measured are potentially extensive (see Istance, Shuetze and Schuller, 2002, for an overview) and there are implications of this uncertainty for implementing effective assessment for learning strategies. In other words, if an education system is introducing formative assessment measures in order to promote lifelong learning skills, yet there is no clear definition of what constitutes a lifelong learner, nor any ways to measure whether or not it succeeds, how can that education system really be claiming to achieve its goal? These issues are particularly pertinent in low-income countries where there may be a heavy dependence on external aid and accountability becomes a major issue, as will be discussed in the following chapters.

One final criticism of documents supporting formative assessment is the tendency to impart advice about helping pupils become more involved with, and responsible for, their learning by highlighting the responsibilities of the teacher (Torrance and Pryor, 1998, p. 14). Much of the work of the main contributors to the assessment for learning drive of the late 1990’s and early 2000’s focused on making changes in ‘teachers’ classroom practice’ (Black, et al. 2003, p. 1). This does not seem to entirely fit in with the idea that formative assessment is part of a constructivist classroom where the learners ‘are actively engaged in constructing their knowledge’ (Thurlings, et al., 2013, p.4). It is understandably this way: books can be written for teachers in order to help them improve their practice, alongside skills and theories accumulated during pre- or in-service training provision (where training is provided), but how could large groups of students be reached? The answer, of course, is through classroom practice, which is led by teachers who have developed skills in formative assessment. It is this very argument that has led to recent studies being focused on student perceptions of formative assessment strategies and the importance of their understanding of the roles played by themselves, their peers and their teachers (Cowie, 2005; Gamlem and Smith, 2013).

3.6 Chapter Summary

Formative assessment has been greeted with enthusiasm, by educationalists and policy-makers alike, as a teaching and learning tool of high quality in some parts of the developed world. From a review of the literature, we can see that issues of definition and theorisation may cloud successful
implemenation of assessment for learning strategies in many contexts and that further development of these two areas is needed. Other limitations include an overdependence of both educationalists and policy-makers as indicated in Black and Wiliam’s (1998a) seminal text. There exist few up-to-date studies providing as definitive a link between formative assessment and improved student learning outcomes. Could this be an indication that formative assessment is a strategy of pedagogy that has seen some success in the past but now run its course? Without current data supporting the positive influence of this assessment strategy, it seems that it should be adopted and shared with more caution than is being shown. In the next chapter I will review the use of formative assessment strategies in resource constrained countries, specifically Malawi.
Chapter 4 – Formative Assessment: the International Policy Agenda

From the previous chapter, it is evident that there is a large body of literature supporting the implementation of formative assessment as a pedagogic strategy in the Global North. As a result of this extensive and persuasive network of literature there are many international aid and development agencies with an interest in the potential contribution of formative assessment in raising educational quality. Two of the largest and most influential agents are the World Bank and UNESCO, some of whose contributions to the international discourse of formative assessment are deconstructed below.

4.1 Formative Assessment within International Education Discourse: The World Bank

An early World Bank paper by Kellaghan and Greaney (1992) makes a fleeting mention of the formative use of assessment data. Considering this was published 6 years before Black and Wiliam’s seminal paper (1998a), it is not surprising that it did not dedicate more of its 98 pages to the notion of FA than:

Assessment procedures could be used in a formative way to guide instructional and learning processes in schools to reduce dropout rates and grade repetition (p. 12).

Since the late 1990’s, however, it has not taken long for formative assessment to become a commonly referred to element within international education discourse. UNESCO and the World Bank are both strong advocates of the positive influence formative assessment methods can have on raising standards of education quality (Clarke, 2012a; UNESCO, 2005). A World Bank paper, outlining the most important factors for student assessment systems (Clarke, 2012a), refers to Black and Wiliam’s seminal paper (1998a) as documenting a ‘strong link between high quality, formative classroom assessment activities and better student learning outcomes’ (p. 3). The same paper goes on to describe formative assessment as an on-going, classroom-based process, which ‘provide ‘real time’ information to support teaching and learning’ (p.7). It is not a secret that the World Bank’s interests lie predominantly in economic development (the human capital and rates of return approach) and how education provision can be improved to increase an individual’s ability to contribute to this by becoming a ‘productive participant in society’ (Liberman and Clarke, 2012a). This notion of collective national economic development seems to be a very different motive for implementing formative assessment systems than that upon which it was originally conceived: as a teaching and learning tool to support individual students (Sadler, 1989; Wiliam, 2011). It may be argued that improving the attainment of individual students will of course raise the performance of an education system overall but this raises questions about the transferability of formative
assessment, as will be discussed in more detail later. Can strategies designed to help students at the classroom level be transferred to low-income countries as a way to boost struggling education systems (and economies)?

Another World Bank publication, Clarke (2012b) makes bold statements about assessment being linked to ‘growing evidence that learning drives prosperity’ and that there is a body of research proving that an increase of ‘one standard deviation...in scores on international assessments...is associated with an increase...in GDP’ (p. 1, citing Hanushek and Woessmann, 2007). This claim, however, does not provide insight into the effect an improvement in scores gained in international assessments may have on the lives of individual students. It might be an indication that a country is becoming more affluent in general but does not give any insight into personal income levels nor can it be considered an indication of improved humanitarian conditions, which it is hoped would be the result of an increased GDP. It is a possibility that whilst GDP is increasing, poverty levels remain the same. This could mean that the perceived improvements in quality of education (the evidence for which has been seen in the international assessment results) are not benefiting the poorest people within a country. It could be argued that in order for a low-income country to provide a better system of education for poor people, there must first be an increase in the country’s overall income in order to financially support the improved system.

Here it is may be relevant to consider important questions such as: what are the overall goals of education? For what purpose(s) does education quality need to be improved? Which groups of people will benefit from these improvements and how will this be measured? These questions cannot be answered lightly or easily, nor should they be influenced by external agents. In the case of Malawi, for example, the Ministry of Education (and other key ministries) should aim to create a framework for developing the education systems based on the countries own targets, goals, aims and desires. They should avoid being misled by statements that simplify the role of education and efforts required to improve it. It is important, however, to remember that the World Bank often finances such projects and so they are implicitly involved to a certain extent.

4.2 UNESCO

The Education For All Global Monitoring Report: The Quality Imperative (UNESCO, 2005) provides further insight into the benefits of utilising formative assessment strategies alongside the traditional summative tests. This document states that ‘regular, reliable and timely assessment is key to improving learning achievement’ (p. 158). However, the same section goes on to say that:
...effective formative assessment requires adequate resources, teachers trained in assessment techniques and relatively small class sizes – requirements which do not fit the realities in many countries (p. 157).

Whilst it is important to consider the real life situations faced by severely resource constrained countries, this statement is somewhat contradictory to the previous claims and dismissive of formative techniques being attempted or implemented. It is most likely that this was not the intention of the authors and it is very important to consider the limiting factors of Malawian classrooms (and other low-income countries), such as large class sizes and lack of teacher training, which will both be considered later.

The same document provides further potential for confusion or misinterpretation as it states in its conclusions that governments should:

> Support reforms that focus on teaching and learning outcomes: appropriate goals and relevant content; values as well as skills; sufficient and effective instructional time; structured teaching in child-centred classrooms; assessment for learning improvement (p. 185).

Having said previously in the same document that taking these measures is most likely beyond the capacity of low-income countries, the authors are now implying that, in order for education quality to be improved, these reforms need to be put in place. This highlights the paradox presented by the need/desire to make improvements to education quality: in order for a country to have the resources in place to support implementation of new strategies, they first need to build a strong economy which comes about as a result of improvements being made to education systems within the country. This document is of course all encompassing. It is writing about the quality of education on a global scale and cannot be considered relevant to any one country in particular.

### 4.3 Chapter Summary

From the point of view of a low-income country, the ideologies of both the World Bank and UNESCO cannot be ignored when it comes to making decisions about education policy. The World Bank and UNESCO represent here the network of international agencies that support, both financially and professionally, what are considered to be struggling economies and education systems worldwide. There is very little, if any, unconditional donation (or lending of large sums of money, in the case of the World Bank) of aid on the international scale and extensive research supports frameworks for aid activities (Holvoet and Renard, 2007). Countries that are recipients of aid donations and/or World Bank lending, therefore, are subject to extensive ideological influence from the agencies
providing them with financial support. It is for this reason that it is relevant to include a review of some publications from these two large and influential agents.

In terms of the message provided by the *Global Monitoring Report*, UNESCO (2005) draws its narrative to a close on a relatively positive note:

> The scope for improving the quality of education is vast and the technical understanding is there. Urgently needed now are the political will and the resources to make it happen (p. 185).

It should not be assumed, however, that the UNESCO document, which is written very broadly in an attempt to be relevant and accessible to governments of a vastly diverse group of nations, can provide a model for quality education that can be used successfully in any context globally. It is the responsibility of individual countries to scrutinise the information provided by this document, and the World Bank publications, in light of their own educational requirements, define and conceptualise the terminology, question the transferability of the suggested improvement strategies and develop context relevant policies. The following chapter will consider the use of formative assessment in Malawi and the role played by the World Bank and UNESCO.
Chapter 5 - Formative Assessment in Malawi and the Role of Continuous Assessment

As reported in the third chapter, extensive discourse surrounds the use of formative assessment in some high-income, developed countries, namely the UK and USA. Also documented, in Chapter 4, is the international policy agenda for encouraging the use of formative assessment as a tool for the improvement of education quality. International support for the transfer of formative assessment policies appear to support my aims and objectives to implement formative assessment systems in Malawi. Evidence of actual implementation or use of formative assessment systems in resource constrained countries, however, is much less written about. This chapter explores the relevant literature that I encountered, including a project of continuous assessment in primary schools.

5.1 Formative Assessment and Malawi: Gaps in the Literature

A literature search using the terms “formative assessment” OR “assessment for learning” AND Africa, yields just 5 results in the Social Science subject group (www.scopus.com, 10th June 2013), of which just 2 are related to compulsory education. Needless to say, on replacing Africa with Malawi in the above search, no literature results are returned. Whilst this is not conclusive evidence that formative assessment does not exist in Malawi, it indicates that very little time and research has been dedicated to the formal study of formative assessment usage in Malawian schools.

My own experiences inside a secondary school in Malawi support these findings as there was little obvious interaction between students and teachers during lessons, and rote-teaching methods dominated the structure of the school day. This is consistent with many recently published articles focusing on the attempted introduction of learner-centred teaching methods in various sub-Saharan African countries (see, for example, O’Sullivan, 2004; Chisholm and Leyendecker, 2008; Vavrus 2009; Mtika and Gates, 2010, for a Malawian perspective) which report that teacher-centred methods have traditionally dominated and remain prevalent in many classrooms. It is not necessarily true that wherever learner-centred education has failed to take root, we can absolutely say that no formative assessment techniques exist. However, if rote teaching methods are dominant there is a good chance that there is little or no on-going teacher assessment because the knowledge and understanding of the pupils is insignificant to the teacher whose teaching methods will not change depending on influences within the classroom.

The large gap in the literature surrounding formative assessment in Malawi cannot, however, tell a complete story of assessment strategies in that country. An analysis of the Teacher Handbooks developed for the Malawi Integrated In-service Teacher Education Programme (MIITEP) shows that there was an intention to use pupils’ assessment data formatively as long ago as 1997, when the
course and materials were developed (Kunje, 2002). Interestingly, the second book in the Student Teacher’s Handbook series in a unit dedicated to the ‘Purposes and types of tests’ explains to student teachers that:

Testing is exposing a person to a particular set of questions (items) in order to obtain a score. That score is the end product of testing (p. 426).

This implies a very summative approach to testing: the score obtained is the final point and there is no further use for this score.

However, the very same page provides some further clarification of this point which indicates that my interpretation is not entirely accurate. There are at least three stated uses of this end product of testing:

1. Feedback (though it is not clear who gives/receives this feedback or what form it takes)
2. ‘Pretests’ allow teachers to investigate what pupils already know so that they can begin their teaching at the correct level
3. ‘Formative evaluation during instruction in order to know how pupils’ learning is progressing and therefore assist the teacher to modify and direct instruction and learning’ (p. 426)

These formative intentions were, at that time, very progressive. To add some chronological perspective, these Handbooks were developed at about the same time that Paul Black and Dylan Wiliam were compiling their extensive and highly influential ‘review of the literature on classroom formative assessment’ (1998a, p. 1) upon which most current research on formative assessment is based.

The progressive element of the MIITEP course, however, was often lost on its trainers and participants and there appeared to be a lack of distinction between traditional behaviourist teaching methods and the preferred learner-centred approaches (Stuart and Kunje, 2000). It is suggested that the course and handbooks (which were written by local teams) were designed and implemented too quickly for full internalisation of the major shift from behaviourist to constructivist pedagogies (p. 16). It is not possible within this project to determine whether the bold statements of the 1997 Handbooks in support of formative assessment had any influence on the quality of teaching and learning in Malawian primary schools at that time but it is interesting to note that formative assessment was an intended aspect of this ambitious teacher training programme.

5.2 Continuous Assessment in Malawi: a Tribute to Formative Assessment?
Under continued influence from external sources, Malawi introduced a programme of continuous assessment in primary schools in 2001 (Miske, 2003). It was led by the USAID Bureau for Economic Growth, Agriculture and Trade/Office of Education’s Improving Educational Quality (IEQ) Project, after discovering what they believed to be poor quality teaching and learning in many Malawian primary schools (Mchazime, 2003). Due to the lack of prominence given to the issue, it is somewhat difficult to gauge the dominant driving forces behind the introduction of the continuous assessment project but it can be assumed that the USAID funded IEQ (www.ieq.org) had significant influence during the initial stages (the original empirical study being carried out by the American Institute for Research). However, it was not long before local stakeholders joined the project as Miske (2003) reports that:

...in 2001 IEQ team members began meeting with representatives of six educational organizations in Malawi to plan an intensive classroom-based intervention to improve teaching and learning (p.1).

From this we can deduce that, whilst the initial push may have come from external sources, the local experts became involved in the early stages, providing an insider’s perspective and giving the project more credibility. The same report provides a list of participating organisations, which includes: the Malawi Institute of Education, the Malawi National Examinations Board and two Malawian teacher training establishments, amongst others.

At the time IEQ led the Continuous Assessment Feasibility Study in Malawi, continuous assessment systems were becoming established within international assessment discourse. Originally conceived as a response to criticisms of the potentially high-stakes nature of summative leaving examinations, continuous assessment (particularly in Malawi) is shrouded in a mist of confusion and definitional issues (Nitko, 1995).

5.3 What is Continuous Assessment?

It is useful to consider the cases of implementation of continuous assessment (CA) in Ghana, South Africa and, more recently, Zambia (Kapambwe, 2010) when trying to understand the successes and failures CA faced in the Malawian context (as the cases of both of these countries is relatively well documented in comparison to Malawi: for example Pryor and Lubisi, 2002; Lumadi, 2011). Writing about uncertainties surrounding CA in South Africa, Lumadi (2011) defines it citing the World English Dictionary (2009) and the Cambridge dictionary online (2010). His definition emphasises that CA is an:
assessment of students’ progress based on work they do or tests they take throughout the term or year rather than a single examination” and ‘the system in which the quality of a student’s work is judged by various pieces of work during a course and not by one final examination (Lumadi, 2011, p.27).

This widely accepted definition for CA (see also Pennycuick, 1990; Lewin and Dunne, 2000; Pryor and Lubisi, 2002) does not exactly fit with the Malawian IEQ definition of CA and it is likely that this has been problematic for its success.

The IEQ definition, which was, and probably still is, used in Malawi, states, somewhat vaguely, that ‘continuous assessment is a way of finding out what pupils know, understand and can do’ (Mchazime, 2003, p.4). Without conducting an empirical study, it is difficult to say unequivocally that Malawi’s Continuous Assessment project of 2001-2 has been a failure but there is little evidence reporting on any long term successes of the project. According to Psacharopoulos (1989) there are many factors contributing to why education reforms, such as this, may fail. Reasons that might be relevant in this case fall under the ‘No implementation’ heading, such as ‘the policy intention was too vague’, the ‘Partial implementation’ heading, such as ‘a prerequisite factor was ignored’ or the ‘Implementation but no effect’ heading, such as ‘the policy was based on insufficient information/evidence’ (p. 190). This is something of an oversimplification as it does not take into consideration the cultural nuances involved in transferring policies from one context to another, as will be discussed in Chapter 6. Psacharopoulos appears to be writing from an assumed starting point that there are no contextual reasons for the reform not to be successful, though these are perhaps briefly touched upon under the umbrella term ‘prerequisite factor being ignored’ (p. 90). It is not the intention of this report to fully investigate the failures of the IEQ Continuous Assessment project, though the transferability of education reforms will be looked at in more detail later, but some valuable lessons may be learned from the IEQ literature.

Firstly, the vague definition of continuous assessment as ‘a way of finding out what pupils know, understand and can do’ (Mchazime, 2003) provides little insight into the specific objectives or methods of the continuous assessment programme. The Training Manual (IEQ/Malawi, 2003) draws out this explanation a little by saying that:

Continuous assessment refers to making observations periodically to find out what a student knows, understands, and can do. Specific tasks are given to the learners based on what has been taught. We observe the learners performing these tasks and make a judgment about how well they are doing. Continuous assessment is ongoing and helps the teacher find out what the learners have learned (p. 4).
Though this longer explanation fails to make the intentions of the continuous assessment project any clearer.

This section of the training handbook indicates that some time is taken to position assessment structures within the teaching and learning process, which is probably a reconceptualisation of assessment for many of the Malawian teachers who tend to teach as they themselves were taught (Mtika and Gates, 2010) and probably see assessment as having a highly summative function. What is not clear, however, from this statement or the rest of the training manual, is how Malawian primary school teachers are expected to avoid the undesirable process of ‘continuous testing’ (du Plessis, 2003, p.2). From the three main IEQ documents (Miske, 2003; Mchazime, 2003; du Plessis, 2003) and the training manual (IEQ/Malawi, 2003), it is clear that this version of continuous assessment is intended to be a process of ongoing assessment, with record keeping and analysis, from which there is an assumption that teachers can and will ‘take action to find out what the obstacles are and find ways to help the child learn what is required to move to the next level’ (du Plessis, 2003, p. 12). This outlines one of the major limitations of the IEQ project, as discussed in the following section.

5.4 Limitations of the IEQ Continuous Assessment Project

As has been reported in Ghana (Akyeampong, Pryor and Ampiah, 2006), in Malawi’s version of continuous assessment the formative function of this assessment system has lost some importance and the focus lies more heavily on the summative nature of the assessments, namely the recording of the results. This can be seen in the case study of Mr Carter who, it is noted, ‘was puzzled about how to integrate what he learns about pupils from the assessments into his lessons’ (Miske, 2008, p. 8). The report goes on to clarify that Mr Carter was given advice on how to record the ‘assessment information more effectively’ as if this were a suitable response to his puzzlement. What is not made explicit, however, is the formative function of the use of the assessment data to inform future lesson planning. It appears to be, as stated above, assumed that the teacher is capable of making this connection himself. Without appropriate training or guidance in this area, however, it is likely that the intended formative function of the CA programme will be lost amidst the time-intensive bureaucratic and summative recording of results as is reported to have happened in Ghana (Akyeampong, Pryor and Ampiah, 2006).

Another potential contextual limitation for the implementation of the IEQ CA programme in Malawi is the large class size reported across Malawian government run primary and secondary schools. Despite some attention given to this in the literature (Miske, 2003; IEQ/Malawi, 2003) there appears to be little consideration given to the fact that teachers may have up to 100 pupils in their class
whom they are expected to continually assess on an individual basis (see IEQ/Malawi, 2003, for information regarding testing techniques). During the mathematics level testing, for example, the teacher asks each individual student 10 questions per level, including time for student transfer, settling them in and preparing them for the test, time allocated must be more than 5 minutes per student – no indication of time is given, teachers are simply told not to ‘spend too much time with each learner’ p. 67). If we take the average number of students per primary school classroom – because this programme is designed for primary schools – 66 (SAMCEQ, 2011), the teacher will need a minimum of 330 minutes simply to complete one round of testing – assuming that all pupils only get one level test. This equates to 5 and a half hours of teaching time dedicated to testing for just one subject.

One further limitation of the Malawian continuous assessment project is the lack of clarity surrounding the use of the results. The Training Manual (IEQ/Malawi, 2003) designed to accompany the workshop sessions attended by teachers learning about using these methods describes the use of ‘Rainbow Charts’ to record and monitor progress. Rainbow charts are large coloured charts with faces stuck on to show the progress of individual students. See figure 1.

Figure 1. Source: du Plessis, 2003, p. 6

Whilst there is some autonomy in this system it is only useful if the teacher keeps up to date and accurate records of the names of each pupil in the level and then shares this information with the appropriate people: the pupil and their parents or guardians. It is however, quite summative in nature and encourages pupils to compare their progress with that of their classmates, which is contrary to the aims of formative assessment and could have a negative impact on the learning of a pupil.

The rainbow chart allows a teacher to see, at a glance, the progress and distribution within the levels of the pupils in their class, which must be considered a useful tool in a classroom of upwards of 50
pupils. What is again missing, however, is the formative connection: between the assessment results and future teaching and learning. From the training manual (IEQ/Malawi, 2003) two major assumptions appear to be made. Firstly, it is confidently stated that pupils will fall into 2 categories: ‘those who need remediation’ or ‘enrichment exercises’ (p. 80). This tends to homogenise pupils and indicates to teachers (who may have little or no formal teacher training) that their class will divide nicely into a group of pupils who need ‘remediation activities’, which ‘are given to children who have not yet mastered certain concepts that other children have mastered’ (p. 80) or ‘enrichment activities’, which ‘are given to children during the time that the teacher is giving remediation activities’ (p. 80). This oversimplification of variations within pupil progress could lead to teachers misunderstanding how to help pupils working at each level. It may also encourage them to spend their time supporting the students performing in the lower levels and rely on the students in the higher levels working through the enrichment activities on their own and essentially unsupported. Some recognition that all pupils work at different levels indicates a step away from rote teaching methods towards a more learner-centred and interactive pedagogy but cannot be responsible for raising standards of education provision as an isolated factor.

A further assumption here, similar to that noted above, is that teachers somehow seem to know what constitutes a remedial or enrichment activity. The training manual has a strong focus on making materials for testing pupils and recording data but lacks the substance which would support the stated aim of using ‘pupil performance to inform instruction’ (du Plessis, 2003, p. 1). Many Malawian primary teachers have little or no formal teacher education and it should not be assumed that they are able to make the important transition from continuous assessment results to improved and informed teaching practices.

As with any assessment system, continuous assessment can have a range of functions (Pennycuick, 1990) and it is perhaps in defining the specific aims for a particular system that its meaning can be removed from confusion. Nitko (1995), for example, provides some explanation of different interpretations of continuous assessment that it:

...sometimes means a summative ‘mark’ that is passed forward to educational authorities and combined with leaving examinations to certify or select a student. To others, continuous assessment means using the pages in exercise books which students complete as part of their lessons. To yet others, continuous assessment is a diagnostic and formative evaluation of student learning (p. 322).

As outlined above, the meaning of continuous assessment can be interpreted anywhere along a continuum between formative and summative assessment and, depending on how it is interpreted,
can take on an infinite number of different guises. This, I believe, has been a contributing factor in leading to some confusion in the case of continuous assessment in Malawi.

5.5 Outcomes of the Feasibility Study: Perceived Success

Despite these limitations, however, the IEQ Continuous Assessment Project reports some successful outcomes from their feasibility study, including the following:

1. Improved pupil – teacher relations
2. Improved pupil achievement
3. Increased teacher confidence (Mchazime, 2003)

It is relevant to note that this report states that ‘preliminary results seem to show’ the above success criteria, apparently acknowledging that credit for these visible improvements may only dubiously be attributed to the CA project. There exists a strong possibility that the positive outcomes of the feasibility study came about as the result of three important but indirect influences: an influx of cash, providing the teachers with access to some training and placing this group of teachers and pupils in the limelight. It could be argued that, given the nature of teacher training experienced by this group of teachers prior to the study, any form of training would lead to some improvement in teaching and learning within the classrooms studied.

5.6 Chapter Summary

This chapter has introduced the only documented attempt to implement formative assessment systems in Malawian classrooms: the poorly named Continuous Assessment Study. Plagued by definitional confusion and assumptions that teachers were able to adapt their teaching according to the results of the classroom assessments, it now appears that the 2001 study has had little lasting influence and that formative assessment strategies have failed to find a place in Malawian classrooms. Though improvements in pupil performance were noted as a result of this project, further exploration would be needed before these changes could be entirely attributed to the continuous assessment project.

Chapter 6 - Assessment Policies in Malawi post-2003

The previous chapter explored the role of the IEQ continuous assessment project in introducing formative assessment strategies in Malawian classrooms. There is no academic literature providing evidence that this project has had any lasting effect on Malawian teaching strategies at the classroom level. However, the project seems to have left a small legacy and may be, in part,
responsible for the Malawian Government’s growing commitment to education and assessment reform as explored in this chapter.

6.1 Lasting Influences of the Continuous Assessment Project

The 2001-2 IEQ Continuous Assessment Project within Malawi was a dedicated attempt to instill a culture of formative assessment in a country with a heavy focus on the high-stakes nature of summative testing. However, the lack of clarity of meaning caused confusion (and other issues outlined in the previous chapter) during its implementation and there exists in the literature little evidence of its continued use and no evidence of any success within Malawian schools. This does not provide conclusive evidence that formative assessment is absent from all schools in Malawi but it can be deduced that it has not become fully integrated within the education system, as was the intention of the project (Mchazime, 2003, p. 8). Three isolated references of CA made in Malawian government documentation are worth mentioning here. Firstly, the 2001 Malawi Education Sector: Policy and Investment Framework (MoESC) states in its key policy changes that:

Secondary examinations will be reformed. School-based assessment will replace the JCE. The MSCE will be revisited and reformed in order to improve management (reduce cheating and reduce marking/reporting time) and to make it more responsive to the needs of the public and private sectors (p. 4).

Whilst not directly referring to continuous assessment, this statement refers to Pennycuick’s (1999) more commonly used interpretation of the use of continuous assessment in developing countries as a means of reducing the magnitude of end of learning examinations. This, however, as outlined in the previous chapter, did not appear to be the stated aim of the IEQ continuous assessment project in Malawi, which was being carried out at about the same time that the Policy and Investment framework received its latest revision, 2001. More recent documentation shows no evidence of a move towards the phasing out of the Junior Certificate Examination instead using the data from those exams to highlight, for example, the deteriorating quality of education in Malawi (MoEST, 2009).

The second and third references speak more directly of continuous assessment. The 2004 Education For All National Action Plan (GoM) report uses the ‘number of schools with and implementing continuous assessment’ as an ‘objectivity verifiable indicator’ of the extent to which ‘quality assessment tools at school level’ are developed (p. 49). This means that the Government of Malawi is using the number of schools with continuous assessment in place as a measure of improved quality in assessment. Without further supporting documentation, it is of course impossible to gauge the extent to which CA is being utilized or what specifically is required in order for a school to be
included in the total number showing evidence of CA. What is interesting, however, is that continuous assessment is seen as a benchmark of assessment quality within Malawian schools, despite relatively little evidence supporting its benefits within Malawi.

More recently, the 2008 National Education Sector Plan statement (MoEST) includes an aim to improve ‘teaching and learning which reflects successful continuous...assessment’ (p. 27). Both of these documents speak briefly, and quite vaguely, of continuous assessment as a tool for improving education quality in terms of current and future goals, yet no evidence exists of its successful implementation within Malawi beyond the IEQ project which, as discussed in the previous chapter, is somewhat questionable as a piece of supporting evidence. It would be reassuring to see some form of critical review of the lasting influences of the CA programme within Malawian classrooms before it becomes part of the government’s discourse for improving education quality.

6.2 Curriculum and Assessment Reform

The apparent limited success of the CA project appears not to have deterred the Malawian government who continue to be influenced by aid agencies (World Bank, 2012) and continue to put in place interventions for assessment (and curriculum) reform. The acronym PCAR, standing for Primary Curriculum and Assessment Reform, is used frequently in Malawian Ministry of Education documents (Government of Malawi, 2004; MoEST 2009; MoDPC, 2010) indicating an enthusiastic recognition of the scope for improvement of education quality and the role assessment can play. Interestingly, however, the less common acronym SCAR (the secondary version of the same reform) is mentioned in one document and then only in the explanation of abbreviations (MoEST, 2009, p. 7). This highlights the intention to carry out a nationwide programme to improve the quality of provision of secondary education and, more importantly for the purposes of this report, the recognition the role of assessment can play. However, the lack of any mention of this reform programme within the body of that particular text shows that substance is seriously lacking.

Supporting this theory is the 2008 National Education Sector Plan statement (MoEST) reporting that SCAR is still in the planning stages and ‘should be initiated by 2011’ (p. 17). This clarifies that whilst secondary education reform might be an intention of the Malawian government in the future, it was not high on their list of priorities in 2008/09.

It is also apposite to note that all of the Government of Malawi documents accessible online are supported, financially and technically, by UNESCO, the World Bank and a selection of other international aid and development organisations (MoEST, 2008, p. iv; GoM, 2004, p. v). From the 2005 Education For All: Global Monitoring Report (UNESCO) it is clear to see the importance UNESCO
places on assessment for learning and other interactive, learner-centred pedagogies (p. 185). Whilst
the document takes care to recognise the difficulties faced by low-income countries in implementing
these reforms, such as large class sizes and inadequately trained teachers (p. 158), it is not difficult
to imagine the link between the influence of UNESCO’s ideology and the continuous assessment
focus (albeit minor) within documents created by the Government of Malawi. It would be interesting
to see how the results of an independent, Malawian led review of the impact of continuous
assessment in schools would influence government publications and their attitude towards CA. It
appears, from the above citations, as though there has been a quiet acceptance of the successes of
the CA project and it has now become integrated into the Primary Curriculum and Assessment
Reform, though perhaps in name only as there is no recorded evidence of CA within schools since
2003.

6.3 Chapter Summary

There is evidence that high-stakes summative assessment still dominates the pedagogies of all levels
of schooling, though reform of primary education is more advanced than secondary (MoDPC, 2010).
Documentation indicates recognition that curriculum and assessment reform go hand in hand (as in
the cases of the Primary and Secondary Curriculum and Assessment Reform: MoEST, 2008; 2009)
which potentially implicitly implies understanding of the role formative assessment can play in
improving educational quality. It is perhaps over simplistic to assume that the potential connection
between formative assessment and quality education has been made, however. It might be a case
that the assessment reform of the PCAR project is focusing on improving the design and delivery of
summative testing with no intention to examine the role of formative assessment. It is also
important to recognise that formative assessment may not be a suitable tool for improving the
quality of teaching and learning in the Malawian context, as outlined in the following chapter.

Chapter 7 – Transferability of Formative Assessment Techniques

Chapters 3 to 5 have outlined the evolution of formative assessment as a teaching and learning tool,
drawn attention to the role it may play in development agencies’ ideologies and reviewed the only
documented attempt to implement formative assessment within the Malawian context. Throughout
this project, I have alluded to the importance of considering the contextual background when
introducing an education policy borrowed from elsewhere. As this project progressed, it became
apparent that the notion of the transferability of policies plays a crucial part in fulfilling my original
aims and objectives and will be explored in this chapter.
7.1 Transfer of Education Methods

As discussed previously, formative assessment is a pedagogic movement which is strongly advocated in some parts of the Global North and, as a result of this, is becoming an influential factor in international education and assessment discourse. It is given significant attention in recent publications from the World Bank and UNESCO (see Chapter 4), which is likely to encourage governments of low-income countries to adopt formative assessment strategies. There has been some discussion of the problematic nature of attempting to directly transfer education policies from one culture to another with specific references made to teacher training, resources and large class sizes (Miske, 2003; UNESCO, 2005). The transferring of Western models of teaching to low-income countries is not a recent phenomenon and, depending on each individual context and pedagogic strategy, requires extensive critical engagement if it is to be successful (Vulliamy, 1987).

Transferring models of education from one context, where it has been deemed successful, to another, where it is considered to have the potential to make a positive impact, is a practice of policy-makers worldwide (see Vulliamy, 1998, for an example of Taiwan to England transfer). The cross-cultural transfer of knowledge is coming under increased scrutiny, though perhaps to a lesser extent than the apparently unrestricted sharing of policies and ideas. When new policies fail to take hold in a new context or face challenges in their implementation, it is relatively easy for educationalists and policy-makers to blame concrete factors, such as lack of teacher training and resources or large class sizes (UNESCO, 2005). Instead, more focus should be given to considering the contributing contextual social and cultural factors as reasons why, not only past and current reforms have failed but future policies and reforms may also fail to take root. Ball (1998) raises the important point that:

Most policies are ramshackle, compromise, hit and miss affairs, that are reworked, tinkered with, nuanced and inflected through complex processes of influence, text production, dissemination and, ultimately, re-creation in contexts of practice (p. 126).

Here Ball is explaining the importance of avoiding direct policy transfer and instead recognizing the need to recontextualise any borrowed policies and adapt them in order to allow them to take root in an alternative education system.

Crossley and Broadfoot (1992) point out that there has been ‘an emerging commitment to learning from other countries’ experience’ (p. 99) during recent times as globalization has seen an opening up of national boundaries and greater sharing of cross-cultural information. It is inevitable, since the inception of international performance tests, such as PISA, that countries will look to others for guidance and support in improving their own education provision (see Webb, et al., 2004, for a
A comparison of primary teacher professionalism in England and Finland. Many scholars (Vulliamy, 1987, 1998; Dyer, et al., 2004; Kanu, 2005; Courtney, 2007) warn policy-makers, governments, and other agents involved in the transfer of education methods of the dangers of ignoring social and cultural contexts. Vulliamy (1998) states that ‘the experience of schooling in other countries and cultures are more complex than policy-makers often recognise’ and that ‘what works in one culture is unlikely to work in another’ (p. 5). From a Malawian point of view, Kunje (2002) supports this and states that ‘donor enthusiasm for new pedagogy…associated with best practice in rich countries, has sometimes sat uneasily with the realities of…different cultural and professional expectations’ (p. 305). The warning signs are there: it cannot simply be taken for granted that ‘classroom contextual factors’ are similar and ‘that all school contexts can process the inputs in the same way’ (Nagaraju, 2000, cited in Dyer, et al. 2004, p. 41 – 42). Simply put, this means that it cannot be assumed that the positive influence on quality attributed to formative assessment in some high-income countries can be easily and directly transferred to a Malawian context due to various political, economic, social and cultural differences. Instead it is important to consider local and indigenous knowledge. An example of a paper examining culturally appropriate teaching methods is Croft’s (2002) investigation into teachers’ use of singing to support learning. It would be interesting to explore further the use of contextually relevant pedagogies as an alternative to direct policy transfer but is a vast area for further research and beyond the scope of this project.

When designing new approaches to any aspect of education, local contexts must be taken into consideration (Courtney, 2007). It should not be assumed that what works in one country will work in another, for a vast number of reasons. Kanu (2005), citing the work of Zadja (2004), explains that...international academic relations in the postcolonial and global era are characterized by a new orientation to curriculum as an international activity comprising western universities transferring educational ideas and practices to the developing countries, often without taking into consideration factors such as the political climate, traditional beliefs and cultural values, the economy, and social class (p. 494).

Kanu here lists four key factors contributing to the potential failure of the direct transfer of educational ideas. The same article then goes on to discuss the experiences of two educationalists, McLaughlin and O’Donoghue (cited: 1996 and 1994 repectively), as teacher educators in Papua New Guinea. The observation here is that there is a:

need for serious cultural analysis to be undertaken in the countries at the receiving end of cross-cultural knowledge transfer because, though the incoming theories and models may be eminently suitable for their country of origin, they are questionable, sometimes even outright failures, in the developing countries (p. 495).
It is interesting to return to Psacharopoulos (1989) at this point who reviewed a number of East African educational policies and reforms, which were considered unsuccessful. In the concluding remarks of this paper, Psacharopoulos fails to mention the contextual factors outlined above and says that, ‘in order to avoid past pitfalls...a policy statement should be concrete and feasible in terms of objectives’ (p. 193). This, he states, should include ‘a timetable, source of financing...and institution responsible’ (p.193), as though simply writing a longer policy document with more information in it will by-pass the cultural, political and social limitations. I would suggest that Psacharopoulos’ advice should not be considered independently of Kanu’s words outlined above. Simply writing a more detailed and thorough policy statement, which is more ‘concrete and feasible’ (Psacharopoulos, 1989, p. 193), can be likened to the analogy of meeting someone with whom no common language is shared and simply raising one’s voice and speaking more slowly in the hope that they might somehow understand. The cultural differences remain too great for complete communication to be achieved but at least some parts of the message might be understood.

A major contributing factor in the continued cross-cultural borrowing of successful policies (Vulliamy, 1998) is the influence of the aid culture. According to Higgins and Rwanyange (2005),

> The rate of progress in achieving the goals by African countries will, according to the World Bank, depend on the scope and effectiveness of investments in education (p. 7-8).

This statement proposes that the financial inputs into a system far outweigh the professional expertise and, within any donor-recipient relationship, there will be questions of accountability. Vocabulary such as targets, performance indicators and timeframes (Higgins and Rwanyange, 2005) become commonplace in projects funded by external agencies and, in order for further funding to be secured, evidence of progress towards global targets (such as the Millennium Development Goals) needs to be seen. Preece (2013), speaking specifically of lifelong learning but still relevant in this case, provides an interesting view of international aid priorities as having the ability to negatively affect government choices, despite conflicting information regarding local needs. The paradox, in the case of formative assessment is that evidence showing the use of FA strategies is likely to be difficult to produce, unless lesson observations can be undertaken. Much more easily accessible to donors wanting to see positive impacts of their funding are data from summative assessment sources. How can the positive impacts of formative assessment be shown without embarking on an expensive and time consuming longitudinal study of classroom practice?

### 7.2 Teacher Training and Education

Dyer, et al. (2004) carried out a case study in a selection of teacher training institutes in India to examine the responsiveness of teacher training to meet local needs. The results are interesting and
very relevant to this discussion. Firstly, they highlight the tendency of teacher training institutions to focus strongly on providing trainee teachers with knowledge skills rather than pedagogy skills (in countries, such as India and Malawi, where teachers tend to have few professional qualifications). There are implications within this for the space in teacher training curricula to approach innovative teaching and assessment strategies, such as formative assessment. In these instances, then, at what point are teachers (both in training and employment) expected to learn the extensive skills required to begin utilizing formative assessment strategies, as well as the supporting theories?

The study also point out that the culture of the teachers is fundamental to the successes and failures of the teaching and assessment strategies within any given institution. It is stated that:

The nature of teachers’ knowledge and skills, and how they are applied, are embedded in and shaped by teachers’ attitudes and beliefs, and those attitudes and beliefs themselves reflect contexts in which teachers have grown up, taken their professional training, and now practice. (p. 40 – 41).

This statement focusses on one particular area of social and cultural differences between contexts and highlights how important teacher culture is in contributing to the successes or failures of a specific intervention, such as formative assessment. In summary, it can be said that teacher practices often reflect the teachers’ own schooling and making major changes to this requires more than just a few days training, as was provided by the IEQ Malawian Continuous Assessment project (IEQ, 2003). As Pryor and Lubisi (2002) explain that:

...what is needed above all is the knowledge and awareness that might enable teachers to reconceptualise the purposes and functions of assessment (p. 684).

From this statement, we understand that a few workshops or a relatively small amount of training is not sufficient to support the large transition needed for teachers (in South Africa, in the above example) to completely readdress their understanding of assessment. If there is not scope for this, within the cultural restraints, then many education reforms developed in high-income countries (including formative assessment) may never transfer to developing countries.

It is also important to consider the methods used in transferring teaching and assessment strategies. As Courtney (2007) points out (citing Knamiller, et al., 1999), that:

one of the dangers of importing training programmes is that they can be reduced to standardized, teacher proof activities and a list of skills (p. 324).

This is particularly pertinent in the discussion of educational quality, since it is highly likely that in a determined attempt to implement an education intervention, the processes involved may be
simplified in order to make them fit in a context which might otherwise not support them. This can be considered the case in the IEQ Continuous Assessment Feasibility Study in Malawi where the intention of using continuous assessment to encourage pupil involvement in developing future teaching and learning became an exercise in testing pupils and recording results. As mentioned in Chapter 5, evidence supporting the existence of the crucial step between recording the results of each pupil and using that information to inform future lesson planning was missing. During teacher training workshops, priority appeared to be given to the administration of testing and recording results, rather than how to use pupil responses formatively.

7.3 Contributing Cultural Factors

Many authors discuss the influence of political, social, cultural and economic factors under an umbrella term, such as ‘milieu’ (Kanu, 2005, citing, Schwab, 1973) or ‘local knowledge’ (Dyer, et al., 2004). Of course there are many different potential combinations of social factors that can influence pedagogies within any given institution and no two are the same, which highlights the need for context specific research based education interventions rather than simply transferring knowledge from elsewhere. A striking example of this comes from Vavrus’ (2009) study of teacher education reform in Tanzania, where there was a push to introduce learner-centred teaching methods as a way of infusing social constructivism into the curriculum. The student teachers she worked with showed some hesitation in accepting the learner-centred methods, pointing out that:

“But Madam, if we start a lesson by asking students what they already know about a topic, they will think we don’t know anything about it ourselves” (p. 303).

Vulliamy (1998) speaks of comparisons between two high-income countries both with relatively (on a global scale) high performing education systems: England and Taiwan. In describing the lessons England intended to learn from Taiwan, which was considered a more effective primary school system, he highlights the pitfalls of this method of trying to emulate other systems. It appears that where England may have hoped to learn some quick fixes for their relatively poorly performing pupils in comparison to Taiwanese pupils (Vulliamy, 1998, p. 6), it instead became apparent that the differences between the two countries’ education systems took root in culture far beyond that which was apparent at the classroom level. Teachers are held in high esteem and revered in Taiwan in a way that would be completely alien in an English context (p. 9). Along this same vein, it can also be said that teachers in many sub-Saharan African countries are held in even lower esteem than in England (Coultas and Lewin, 2002). This fact, alongside poor working and pay conditions, mean that
teachers in Malawi lack the knowledge, training and spare time required to implement new and innovative teaching and assessment strategies, such as formative assessment. Even if Malawian educators did receive adequate training and were provided with enough support and spare time in their schedules to begin formative assessment programmes for their classes, it is likely that the pupils would not be able to respond appropriately. Closely linked to learner-centred education in its social-constructivist theoretical inception, formative assessment strategies might be greeted with similar caution amongst pupils. O’Sullivan (2004) points out the challenges faced by learner-centred education in a society with dominant hierarchical relations between teachers and pupils. Formative assessment involves a certain amount of direct communication between teachers and pupils (rather than from teacher to pupil), which is questionable in such a society. It was evident from my experience in Malawi that pupils are expected to kneel respectfully in front of teachers with whom they wish to speak and are not expected to hold discussions with teachers. This raises questions about whether the culture could support a system whereby student input informs the future classroom teaching and learning.

7.4 Chapter Summary

The question of the transferability of educational models (including formative assessment) is a very important one in this project. It is not correct to assume that formative assessment could or should be directly transferred to Malawi as a tool for improving educational quality. The political, social, cultural and economic background should be taken into consideration before any new education policies are made, especially if they are borrowed from another context where they have been deemed successful. Black and Wiliam (2005), who are two of the most influential formative assessment scholars, sum this up accurately in their examination of ‘how policies, politics and cultures constrain and afford assessment practices’ (title). They state that:

...not only is there no ‘royal road’ to an assessment system that effectively serves both formative and summative functions that each country could follow, but it seems likely that the idiosyncratic road that will be taken in each country will also be very hard going (p. 260).

For a new policy to be successful, it needs to be wholeheartedly accepted into an education system, or at least have the potential to be embraced by all the key players. Is there a place for formative assessment in Malawian schools as a revolutionary pedagogic strategy to increase the quality of education provided? This is not an easy question to answer without extensive consideration of the contextual background of the Malawian education system and individual schools.
Chapter 8 – Conclusion

8.1 Introducing Formative Assessment in Malawian Classrooms: More Challenges than Opportunities

It had been my aim at the beginning of this project to critically examine the role of formative assessment in Malawian secondary schools as a tool to raise standards of quality of education provision and make suggestions for its improvement. Instead what I found out, from the little literature available, is that there is no evidence that Malawian secondary schools have any formal systems of formative assessment in place. From my experiences working at a secondary school in Blantyre, Malawi, I had thought that implementing a programme of formative assessment, involving pupil interaction, would begin to reduce the tendency of Malawian teachers to utilize entirely didactic teaching methods and teach to the test. It is now the case that I would question the suitability of implementing formative assessment in the Malawian context and seek to explore further the cultural implications of introducing a social constructivist interactive teaching and learning tool such as this.

Black and Wiliam (2005) draw interesting conclusions of their own, when considering the role of contextual relevance in selecting appropriate strategies for assessment:

Assessment methods provide tools that can be used in a variety of ways. The choice and deployment of these tools, and the interpretation and use of their results, are subject to a range of educational, public and political influences (p. 258).

They then go on to list eleven examples to highlight the complex nature of the influential factors, including observations of gravity, such as ‘beliefs about what constitutes learning’ and ‘trust in the objectivity of formal testing’ (p. 258). I have highlighted throughout the latter chapters of this assignment the importance of the Malawian contextual background in implementing a programme of formative assessment. Factors such as the large class sizes and economic constraints carry importance as well as the hierarchical nature of the teacher-pupil relationship in schools. Formative assessment, to be successful, requires a certain amount of open dialogue and, in a culture where pupils are still, in certain situations, expected to kneel before a teacher, with whom they speak, and avoid eye contact, I wonder how the open dialogue could be established. Education, including assessment, is still seen as a form of social control in Malawi, where large classes dictate that some sort of order needs to be established.

It will continue to be argued, however, that progress needs to be made towards an improvement in the quality of education provided at all levels of education in Malawi. As Chapter 4 highlighted, development agencies, resulting partly from the relatively recent surge in international comparisons
of education systems and the ease of sharing information on a global scale, will continue to exert pressure on the education systems of small and financially insecure nations.

Malawi has succumbed to international interest and, a decade ago, became the focus of an American led (and funded) project attempting to introduce formative assessment strategies. There is no readily available literature pursuing any long lasting effects or influences of the 2001-2 feasibility study of the continuous assessment project, which was targeted at the primary school level. It is likely that exploration of any lasting legacy of this project would be a good place to start if an in depth study into the use of formative assessment in Malawian schools were to be carried out.

In order for a formative assessment programme to be implemented in Malawi, it would first need to be established, as in the early life of formative assessment in the developed world, whether assessment has a role beyond that of a selection tool. It may be that the potential for assessment to contribute to and improve the learning process is limited in this context, though this would need to be thoroughly investigated before conclusions could be drawn.

8.2 Research Questions

1. How is formative assessment conceptualised?
2. What evidence exists in the literature of the successful implementation of formative assessment in resource-constrained countries?
3. Using available policy documents, identify how agents of Malawian secondary education are engaging with ideas of formative assessment, in terms of policy and practice.
4. What changes/recommendations can be made to improve the use of formative assessment in Malawian secondary school classrooms, in teacher education, policy or classroom practice, for example?

Returning to my original research questions, I can see how the reading I carried out deviated from my original plan due to the availability (or lack) of appropriate texts. Questions one and two began with a relatively straightforward review of the theoretical framework for formative assessment in parts of the developed world and the support given to it by two large and influential development agencies, the World Bank and UNESCO. It was harder than I had anticipated, however, to uncover literature which would enable me to make inferences about the actual, recorded use of formative assessment in resource constrained countries.
Again I deviated slightly from my plan to investigate formative assessment in secondary education as a result of a personal email from a contact in Malawi who told me that there may not be any policy documents relating to formative assessment in secondary schools as they still rely on summative assessment (13th June 2013). Instead I investigated the implementation of formative assessment in primary schools in a 2001-2 US led project called Continuous Assessment and considered the successes and limitations of this project with respect to the Malawian context. I was also able to access some Government of Malawi (GoM) documents online and examine these for any mention formative assessment and assessment reform. At this point, it did not surprise me to find no direct mention of formative assessment in any GoM documentation, though there were some references made to continuous assessment and assessment reform.

In answer to the fourth question, I have seen that my initial belief that transferring formative assessment techniques to the Malawian context as a tool for improving the quality of education provision is perhaps not appropriate. Beyond the more obvious measurable difficulties such as economic limitations, resource constraints, lack of teacher training and large class sizes, questions are raised surrounding the cultural, social and political appropriateness of transnationally introducing interactive (social constructivist) pedagogies. As Ball (1998) explains:

National policy making is inevitably a process of bricolage: a matter of borrowing and copying bits and pieces from elsewhere, drawing upon and amending locally tried and tested approaches, cannibalising theories, research, trends and fashions and not infrequently flailing around for anything at all that looks as though it might work (p. 126).

The responsibility for raising the standard of education in Malawi, as with all other nations across the world, lies ultimately with its own citizens, who are the only people with the requisite cultural, social and political understanding. This, of course, raises the all-important questions of who has the economic and financial understanding to support any reforms or improvements and how to develop relationships among stakeholders to ensure that all parties are represented appropriately. It is perhaps this delicate issue which now requires ever more recognition from development, economic and education researchers to ensure that the proposed improvements to education quality are made without compromising a country’s autonomy in decision making.
References


