

“ . . . And Her Husband Beat Her Until She Was Bleeding Heavily”: School Texts and Female Oppression in Malawi

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Although it is one of the poorest countries in the world, Malawi promises children universal public access to eight years of primary education (Tietjen, 1995). In the final year, Standard Eight, students take an examination for the Primary School Leaving Certificate of Education. Their scores determine whether or not they get into secondary school. Fewer than 20% do (Maluwa-Banda, 2003), and the ability to read and especially write in English is a key determinant of their success.

Along with ChiChewa, the most widely spoken indigenous language, English is one of the two official national languages of Malawi (Matiki, 2003; Kamwendo, 2002). Instruction in Standards One through Four (U.S. grades one through four) is conducted in ChiChewa, with English taught as a school subject. Instruction beyond Standard Four, however, and all of the crucial selective examinations, are conducted in English. At higher education levels English becomes the key school subject:

If a student excels in all other subjects but fails his English paper, she or he is considered to have failed and cannot get a certificate, let alone advance to the next level of education (Matiki, 2003, p. 206).

As Alfred J. Matiki (2003) notes, this emphasis has produced a situation in which:

Malawians have come to view English as a socially and economically more viable language than Chichewa. Speaking English is equated with being educated. The use of English as a measure of intelligence in the educational system forms the basis for similar use in other spheres of life, such as in employment. [. . .] To many

Malawians economic success is predicated on one's ability to speak, read, and write English. [. . .] While Malawians accept that literacy empowers, they contend that it is only literacy in English that pays. (p. 207)

This article explores how the social situation of girls in Malawi and the gender discourses embedded in their school texts shape their school experiences and access to English, and thus their chances of educational advancement. The paper grows out of a teacher-research effort by two U.S.-based authors, Liz Barber and Connie Herman, at the time both public school teachers in Virginia, and four teachers at Domasi Demonstration Primary School in Domasi, Malawi: then School Head Teacher Alippo Ussi, and Standard Eight teachers Lucy Kapenuka, Reuthers Malembanje, and Frank Chikhasu. The work was supported through a Fulbright collaborative teacher education program partially funded by USAID and run by Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University.

We begin by providing a brief overview of the educational context in Malawi and the role of English in the educational system, with special attention to the situation of girls. After describing the teaching-inquiry methodology underlying the study, we then examine a particular instance in which representations of gender roles in textbooks intersect in problematic ways with children's efforts to write. Finally, we conclude with questions and reflections on the nature of collaboration and literacy raised by the study.

English, Education, and Gender Roles in Malawi

Although our focus is on the situation of girls, learning English is a problem for both male and female students. The Malawian education system as a whole is under-resourced. The average ratio of students to teachers is roughly 125 to 1, and much higher in rural than urban areas. Few children have schoolbooks, paper, or pens. There are no libraries except at universities and teacher training schools, and staff members remain reluctant to let children and families take books home. Although primary education is in principle extended to all, the costs of books, uniforms, and school materials are high when considered in the Malawian context. School costs are estimated to account for 13% of overall family expenditures among the poorest families. In addition, the income children can generate selling in the markets or through working for pay is needed in families to provide even the most basic level of food and life necessities. Death takes many adults during their parenting years, and heads of households struggle to bring up children of those who have died, in addition to their own. Severe poverty within the country makes it difficult to keep children in school in such situations (Kadzamira & Rose, 2003, p. 506). Further, the quality of the teaching force is low. Many teachers throughout the country teach with only a Standard Eight education and little formal preparation. As [Esme Chipu Kadzamira and Pauline Rose \(2003\)](#) report, these factors have a direct impact on literacy and language learning:

The unequal distribution is particularly detrimental for students from poorer households in rural areas who are often more likely to drop out early. . . . These students, therefore, only experience schooling of extremely poor quality, which would often prevent them from even attaining basic literacy and numeracy skills. . . . Fewer than half of the [Standard Three] children interviewed could read common words in English or Chichewa which appear frequently in textbooks. (p. 511)

Even those who overcome these difficulties and pass through the first examination filter are not

assured of further progress. Students who pass the Standard Eight exams but lack scores high enough to be selected to attend a residential government secondary school (the schools with the better-prepared teachers) can pay tuition to attend a community day school – if one exists near their village – at an expense few families can afford.

Poverty and inequality are legacies of Malawi's colonial history and post-colonial economic policies, and extend far beyond the educational system. Dependence on wood as a primary energy source has led to rapid deforestation, ecological degradation, and a drastic reduction in farmable lands in a country where most families survive on subsistence farming. In years without sufficient rain, famine occurs, its impact compounded by economic policies that support the continued export of food even in such conditions ([Chinsinga, 2002](#)). Life expectancy was 37 years at the time of this research, and more than one child in ten (ages birth through fourteen) currently tests positive for HIV/AIDS ([Bergman & Kreis, 2005](#); [Forster, 2001](#); [Kaspin, 1990](#); [Lwanda, 2003](#); [Mtika, 2001](#)).

Females are further disadvantaged within this system by property laws (e.g., the Registered Land Act) which give land titles to “heads of households,” a term which in practice almost exclusively refers to men ([Kanyongolo, 2004](#)). Thus women rarely are able to own land themselves. Customary inheritance practices in Malawi can leave a widow ostracized from her village and her late husband's property, household belongings and lands.

This subordinate status is extended to school-aged girls, who are commonly expected to stay home from school to do chores or attend to sick relatives or small children:

Although children might initially enroll in school, they might be withdrawn from school because their labour is needed by the household. . . . Children, particularly girls, may be needed to substitute for the domestic work of adults in the household to allow them to undertake income-generative activities. This has become more severe in the context of HIV/AIDS which often means that girls are required to look after sick

relatives, and take on the roles of childcare and other domestic chores following the death of a parent. (Kadzamira & Rose, 2003, p. 507; Forster, 2001)

Schools themselves can be alienating and even dangerous for girls. Except in the most enlightened settings, girls are required to do all school cleaning (in Malawi children clean the schools and school grounds one morning each week before classes begin), including cleaning of latrines. Bathroom facilities (open hole latrines) lack the privacy and sanitary supplies needed by maturing girls. Females who must walk five kilometers from home – a typical distance separating a village from a public school – are at risk of rape. Thus “parents are even reluctant to send young girls to distant schools to prevent them from being molested” (Maluwa-Banda, 2003, p. 18; cf. Nampota & Wasili, 2000). Even inside schools, girls are not always safe:

A recent study on Improving Girls Education in Under-Resourced Community Day Secondary Schools (CDSSs) revealed that sexual abuse was one of the most pertinent problems girls were facing. The main perpetrators ranged from male teachers, male students to members of the community . . . In some CDSSs up to half of the male teachers were reported to have had sexual relations with their school-girls in exchange for better grades or extra tuition. (Maluwa-Banda, 2003, p. 19)

Given these constraints, many girls are pushed out of the system long before the Standard Eight exams: while they account for 49% of enrollments in Standard One, they make up only 39% of Standard Eight enrollments (Swainson, 2000, p. 51).

By focusing on gender representations in school texts and access to English, we do not suggest that these are the causes of girls’ school difficulties, or that remedying them will somehow alter the constraints on girls’ experiences in education and everyday life. We do, however, suggest that school literacy practices are powerful mechanisms by means of which relations of inequality are translated into educational terms and normalized as legitimate, taken-for-granted features of

everyday life, and limit not only school advancement but possibilities for “conscientization” (Freire, 1985), mobilization, and social action.

Methods: Hybridizing Instruction and Inquiry

Our approach to studying these issues is a form of teacher-inquiry that combines methods traditionally used for research (e.g., image elicitation) with inquiry-oriented teaching methods (e.g., writing workshop). The line between instruction and inquiry, between pedagogical methods and research methods, can be very thin. As Marilyn Cochran-Smith and Kelly Donnell (2006) put it, “the boundaries between inquiry and practice blur when the practitioner is a researcher and when the professional context is a site for the study of problems of practice” (p. 609). These blurred boundaries can be especially difficult to negotiate when the study spans cultures and continents.

The school in Domasi where this work unfolded was located near a small, rural village which at the time had limited internet connectivity and only difficult and prohibitively expensive phone links. Thus prior to arriving in Malawi, Liz, a fifth grade teacher, and Connie, an eighth grade teacher, were unable to effectively communicate with the Standard Eight classroom teachers Reuthers (who taught English and reading), Lucy (who taught agriculture and homemaking), and Frank (who taught math, science, history and geography). Liz and Connie therefore designed a tentative instructional-inquiry event, with the expectation that it could later be collaboratively modified with their Malawian colleagues.

This initial plan was to combine student inquiry and reflection on their environment and community, with writing practice in English. Children would take photographs of their community surroundings with disposable cameras that Liz and Connie provided. The teachers had located in a nearby city a photo shop that could develop the film and make double sets of prints. One set would be given to the children to keep, the second would be used for the project work, which would consist of the children writing in English about the individuals or scenes depicted in their photos,

using a “writing workshop” model (Atwell, 1998; Graves, 1989). The teachers would then work with the students who needed help to revise this writing into ‘publishable’ (grammatically correct and well-structured) pieces. Liz and Connie had used similar activities in the U.S., where their students had assembled images and written accounts that, for example, critiqued city planning of parks and recreational sites, and living conditions that regularly put children’s safety at risk (Barber & Herman, 2005). Aware that assumptions about language development embedded in writing workshop approaches have been critiqued (e.g., Dyson, 1993) for ignoring the socio-political contexts (and uses) of children’s writing, Connie and Liz balanced these critiques with their concerns regarding cultural differences in literacies.

The strategy of having children conduct inquiry into their lives through photography is widespread among documentarians, environmental psychologists, and planners working with young children throughout the world (e.g., Ewald, 2001; National Geographic Child Research Projects, 2003). It parallels the research technique of “photo-elicitation” in which photographs taken by children are used to structure interviews with them (e.g., Clark-Ibanez, 2004; Orellana, 1999), as well as methods of participatory action research (e.g., McIntyre and Lykes, 2004). The objective here, however, was not to conduct interviews for a research project but to construct an activity that could engage the students in what was for many the difficult task of writing and revising in a foreign language. It would embed that writing in the larger, more immediately engaging activity of exploring and representing their everyday lives and settings. As the children explored and analyzed their environments, the teacher-researchers would be assisting and studying their language practices.

It was this approach that attracted Reuthers, Frank, and Lucy to work with the project. Reuthers argued that taking students through a process of writing about topics significant to them (their photos), revising (for meaning) and then editing these writings (for surface features of English), would support the children in creating a pleasing written product (a book of student writings), and provide much-needed practice in the

use of written English that might help the students on the Standard Eight exams.

However, the Malawian teachers pointed out that disposable cameras are neither produced in nor imported into Malawi (only 9 of the 64 Standard Eight students had used a camera before) and that their scarcity would bring a price: if the cameras went home it was very possible that adults or older youth would take them away from the children and sell them in the public markets. The revised strategy was to allow the children to use the cameras on the school grounds, and ask them to draw pictures of home and community practices. In addition, each of the three Standard Eight teachers would take cameras outside school to document community life in photos the students could write about (see Harper, 2002, on photo elicitation based on photos taken by others).

Once the photos and drawings had been produced, the plan was for Liz to teach a mini-lesson using copies of writings by her and Connie’s students in the U.S. to illustrate the kinds of things the Malawi students might want to include with the pictures they had taken: names, dates and descriptions of people and places, discussions of the significance of the people, objects, places and events they had photographed. Frank and Reuthers would translate directions into ChiChewa whenever needed and students who were more proficient in English would be asked to assist those who were struggling. The students would then write.

In keeping with the writing workshop approach, at the end of the writing session the teachers would analyze the students’ drafts to identify areas of strengths and need, and then use this analysis to produce an “Author’s Checklist” – a chart identifying usage and structural issues that students should check for as they revised their works. The checklist would be taped to chalkboard, walls, and windows to guide the children’s revisions and editing in the next day’s class meeting. To facilitate the revision process the teachers organized the children into groups of six students each, grouping the more proficient writers with the less proficient to provide assistance to the latter and allow the former to share and expand their knowledge. Once the groups had been sent to their

revision and editing tasks, all five teachers would move from group to group to clarify expectations and assist the children in their efforts to polish the writing for “publication” in a class-authored book.

Borrowed Authorship

Some of the students’ writings about their homes and lives were not so different from the writings of their American age-mates:

Our Neighbor’s House

I would like to tell you about what our neighbor does. Our neighbor likes farming. Our neighbor likes keeping ducks and chickens, and also likes growing fruits and crops like maize, millet, cassava, ground nuts, mangoes and pawpaws. In our country people all over like farming, even at our school we learn different types of methods of farming, like rotation of crops. This means when you plant one crop this year, the other year you will plant another crop. That’s what rotation means. And farmers do this because other crops fix the soil. . . .

Such texts were atypical, however, and for reasons of space, we focus here on some unanticipated features of the writing the children did for the drawings they made of their lives at home in their villages. Most of the Standard Eight students had significant difficulty writing in English, and our emphasis here is on the strategies they employed to create texts.

A number of the children had written the very same stories. Pieces existed in varying stages of completion, but were identical otherwise, word-for-word copies of stories from their English textbook. A story appearing often in the boys’ writing, “A Lion’s Tail for a Bride,” featured a young male hero besotted by a beautiful girl. Her father, however, wishing to avert the marriage, had sent the young suitor on an impossible task: to fetch a lion’s tail in exchange for his bride. One Standard Eight boy copied the story in its entirety, but others had copied only to the part in which the boy first attempts to cut off the lion’s tail: “When all the lions were asleep he crept quietly

towards the biggest lion” (Malawi Primary Education, *Activities With English*, Std. 8, 1996, pp. 125-127).

In this context the “writing conference” that forms part of the writing workshop approach became an occasion for inquiry as well as instruction. When Liz sat down on the classroom door stoop to conference with Rennie, one of the boys who had copied the Lion story, she first suggested that he must have really liked that story “to use part of it in [his] own writing.” Rennie agreed that this was so. Then Liz asked Rennie how his own version of the story was going to end. Rennie looked confused. Could a story end differently from the way it had in the English textbook? A small crowd of students gathered around. Liz explained again that Rennie, as author, could finish his own story in any way that he chose. Rennie glanced about conspiratorially, then dictated to Liz:

This boy, he will have a conclusion about how to find a tail. A lion got his tail caught in a trap. Lanzunguzeni [lead character from the story] found the tail and took it to Ligowe [father of the bride]. He gets the girl for his bride. They will be very, very happy!

Rennie’s initial puzzlement at the request that he supply his own ending to a story he has partially copied suggests he is operating off a different understanding of the task than the one intended. He can readily supply one, however, maintaining the narrative trajectory of the story.

While the story most often borrowed by the Standard Eight boys featured heroic deeds with animals to gain a bride, the story most often copied by the girls, by contrast, was a tale about a wife who had failed to cook the nsima (corn or cassava-based porridge that is a staple in the Malawian diet) properly, and whose husband then “beat her until she was bleeding heavily.”

There are at least two issues to address: Why did the students copy? And what do the gender differences in choices of borrowed authorship mean? When Liz and Connie mentioned the wife-beating reading selection to Lucy, Frank and Reuthers, they responded that, yes, husbands in Malawi sometimes used violence against their wives. According to

traditional Chewa views, women are expected to maintain and project for the people in their villages the characteristic of *ulemerero wa umunthu*, roughly translated as human dignity. For a female to display human dignity, she must place herself in service to males and accept their wrath as a reasonable reaction to such things as a chair that is misplaced in the home, or maize that has not been properly pounded for the family's *nsima* (Ribohn, 2002).

A background of competing cultural and textual discourses set the stage for the drama that unfolded as Lilian, the first girl invited for a writing conference, sat down beside Liz.

Liz: You must have really been interested in this story to use part of it in your own writing.

Lilian: Yes, I was.

Liz: There is a way authors can use other people's writing. I will show you how, if you can find for me the book that you got this from.

Lilian went to her desk, came back with a copy of her English textbook, and thumbed through the text to find the right page: “. . . and her husband beat her until she was bleeding heavily” (Malawi Primary Education, *Activities With English*, Std. 8, 1996, pp. 3-35).

As with Rennie, Liz showed Lilian how to cite the text she had “borrowed” in her piece. As none of the girls had finished copying this story, Liz then asked Lilian how she wanted hers to end. The crowd of students on the doorstep was growing steadily. It was considerably more transgressive for a girl to alter a story about gender relations than for Rennie to think up a shortcut to help his character gain a bride. Lilian thought for a moment, then dictated:

About the woman, she began cooking in her home, sweeping the floor, washing clothing and sewing. She got healed from her wounds. The woman's husband goes to work every day.

Liz interrupted Lilian to inquire whether she thought that this woman and this man could live together in peace after this incident. Lilian nodded

that she thought so. Liz slowly re-read the line, “and her husband beat her until she was bleeding heavily,” and looked once again at Lilian. Could this woman so easily forgive this man? Other girls in the crowd huddled around Lilian began to murmur dissent.

Lilian dictated:

Then he apologized. They might now be a happy family together.

Liz then asked Lilian if she thought the woman would want to keep living with that man after he had beaten her so badly. Students, both males and females, crouched in close. Lilian's bewildered look suggested she didn't understand. Liz asked Anna, a student who had more facility with English, to sit down beside Lilian and translate for her. Lilian now warmed considerably to the task and dictated:

We think it is good for a wife to do her jobs at home, but we do not think it is right for someone to beat a wife.

Girls in the group giggled and looked at each other as Lilian strode off triumphantly.

Buoyed by Lilian's bravura, the next girl to conference with Liz, Umodzi, fearlessly dictated a more forceful ending:

The wife took a pole and beat the husband bad. The husband says he is sorry, and the wife says she is sorry. Now the family is happy because the wife and the husband help each other with the work.

What can we make of the students' writing and such exchanges? Consider the phenomenon of copying from the text. Among the potential pitfalls of importing western pedagogical ideas into non-western settings, Croft (2002) suggests that western practices emphasize the visual and individual at the expense of the oral and collective, and argues that “indicators and interpretations of learner-centered teaching that derive from Western cultures may not be relevant in Malawi, particularly the rural areas” (p. 321). Yet by Standard Eight the ideologies of language and pedagogical structures of the school system inherited from the British colonial administration may have produced a set of understandings and expectations that are more

constraining than the extra-school language and learning practices of the students. In Malawian classrooms, especially by Standard Eight, when preparation for the crucial examinations becomes the pressing concern, English is taught using textbook exercises that look much like what students might be expected to do on the exams, leaving the children to rarely (if ever) write original or creative compositions. Part of what seems to have happened when students were asked to write drafts about their drawings (suspending the expectation of perfect spelling, grammar, and form, encouraging personal and autobiographical reflection) is that the proposed task failed to register as meaningful schoolwork, and students instead struggled to produce a good product for the teacher in the form they had been taught to produce. Copying examples of a good product from the English textbook suggests on the one hand a form of what [Bloome, Puro, and Theodorou \(1989\)](#) label “procedural display”:

Procedural display can be compared to a group of actors who have memorized their roles and who enact a play for each others’ benefit without necessarily knowing what happens in the play or what the play means. . . . Procedural display occurs when teachers and students are displaying for each other that they are getting the lesson done, constructing a cultural event within a cultural institution – which is not at all the same thing as substantive engagement in some academic content. (p. 272)

At the same time, the copying suggests that these students conceived of the academic writer role as that of an “animator,” in Erving Goffman’s (1981) terms – the person the words come out of – rather than an “author,” the person who “formulated and scripted the statements that get made” (p. 167).

Liz’s line of questions prompting Lillian to assume the author’s role and provide an alternate conclusion moves along a thin line between encouraging Lillian to engage in creative re-telling and scaffolding the discourse to push the narrative in the direction preferred by the American teacher (e.g., [Michaels, 1985](#); [Cazden, 1983](#)). Yet an awareness of the plight

of girls was hardly limited to Liz and Connie. Head teacher Alippo Ussi, who had made photographs of the community for the children to write about, had also written her own accounts to go with them. All dealt with the problems of girls and women.

Buying and Selling

A young lady selling sweet potatoes with her baby on her back is a mother of five children. She has to do that business to earn her living. . . . Most Malawian ladies marry very young. As the result they have big families to look after.

Girl Child in Malawi

Why should girls be victims? Malawian girl child is a victim, because she has to do a lot of chores at home after coming from school. Some of the work that they do includes washing plates, sweeping the house, pounding nsima, cooking and looking for the little baby who is at home. Girls have no time to revise school work at home. Boys have nothing to do after school. Most of them, they just play football waiting for their supper . . .

Gender

It is interesting to see a man pounding [nsima] because it is not common in our Malawian culture. . . . There are some men who do not want to help their wives with home chores, thinking it’s for women. Look at Beston [Alippo’s husband, pictured pounding nsima while he watches after his granddaughter], he is a man as you are. You better change your attitude and help your loved wife.

Given this context, the question of why students chose stories to copy by gender is more difficult to answer. If they simply chose stories featuring people of their own gender, why these particular ones? One problem is that our study of necessity departs from some common features of teacher inquiry: it was limited to one month in length (although it has been recreated in successive summers) and it depended on the presence of an artificially large number of teachers and hence lower student-teacher ratios than most Malawian teachers enjoy.

Yet if this arrangement leaves us with unanswered questions, it is hard to see how practical inquiry can proceed without such tentative initial efforts. At the least, work such as ours is key in two ways: it identifies questions to be addressed more systematically in future work, and it creates networks of association connecting teachers on two continents.

In terms of the first, we can ask how Domasi Demonstration Primary avoids the national pattern of attrition (Tlou et al., 2004) and instead retains almost as many girls as boys in the Standard Eight class. At the same time, we need to understand better the processes that lead over 80% of these students to fail the Standard Eight exam. For both boys and girls we need to know how the constructions of gender embedded in the language of power, English, shape students' understandings of the relation of education to everyday life. The Malawian government's Gender Appropriate Curriculum Unit was to revise textbooks "to make them gender sensitive and to portray girls and women in more positive roles" through equalizing illustrations showing men and women, for example, but "not all teachers . . . received [training] . . . on how to effectively teach the new curriculum in a gender sensitive approach" (Maluwa-Banda, 2003, p. 13). However, the most recent edition of the Standard Eight English textbook retains the selection quoted by the girls in the Domasi Standard Eight classroom. As Michael Apple argues:

Texts are really messages to and about the future. . . . They participate in creating what society has recognized as legitimate and truthful, . . . [they] help recreate a major reference point for what knowledge, culture, belief and morality really are (1993, p. 49, as cited in Ndimande, 2004.)

Currently in Malawi few students graduate from Form Four (the last year of secondary school) with a School Certificate, and only a tiny percent are females. Our look at the educational and social context for girls suggests that the shortage of secondary schools, the sorting-out testing system modeled on British colonial practices, and laws and institutions that discriminate and endanger girls and women are reinforced by school texts that

unproblematically reproduce images of violence against women. Never before had we as fully understood "curriculum as a political act involving negotiations, contestation and conflict in which dominant groups have the power and privilege to determine the kinds of knowledge taught in school" (Ndimande, 2004).

Messages to the Future

Perhaps as important as the knowledge gained and the questions raised through inquiry is the demand it generates for association, participation, and action. As the American teachers were saying good-byes on their last day at Domasi Demonstration Primary, a Standard Eight boy slipped a note into Liz's hand addressed "To Anyone U.S.A.," a plea for association, contact, the "space time expansion" (Katz, 2004) promised by new global connections. For Connie and Liz this meant a new sense of "responsibility at a distance," an obligation to maintain contact and collaboration with their Malawian colleagues whose working conditions and lack of resources, in addition to the problematic health and environmental infrastructures of their communities, place enormous constraints on their teaching. Lucy wrote about the conditions for teachers in Malawi:

Education in Malawi

Due to overpopulation, teachers in schools have problems with large classes. One class may have 60 to 100 pupils. Can you imagine how busy a teacher can be, in order to assist each and every pupil, in a class like the one below which is partly shown? Although this problem is there, teachers try their best in order to achieve their goals. . . .

In the teacher workroom at Domasi Demonstration Primary there is a hand-lettered sign that reads:

God saw my work, He smiled.
Saw my salary. He wept.

Bekisizwe Ndimande (2004) argues that we must challenge any form of education that reproduces racial, class, gender and cultural oppression of one group over the other, and that decolonizing education takes place when educators and curriculum developers

begin to evaluate and examine the nature of the curriculum and textbook content to determine if it is truly liberatory. Textbook content in Malawi upholds practices such as wife beating. Girls wanting to create successful texts for their American teachers employed this textbook content to do so. From what competing discourses on gendered relations can young people choose as they attempt to write their lives?

Yet we, concluding here in the voice of Liz and Connie, must ask as well how our own practices in the U.S. are complicit in forms of colonizing education. Recognizing that we are outsiders to the Malawian culture, in all of our cross-cultural endeavors we are striving for an “I don’t know” status, to avoid approaching life and circumstances in Malawi with yet another colonizing perspective. In this paper we are attempting to make our findings available in relevant ways to local stakeholders in the Domasi site, and we continue to participate in that community in an ongoing way. In between our yearly summer returns to Malawi, we send funds to support instruction and regularly correspond with teachers and students via email and letters. At home in the U.S. we are attempting to interrogate the privilege we enjoy and the myths of meritocracy, while we strive to strengthen our alliances to nudge at the centers of power to which we have access. As we draw on the students’ and their teachers’ writings, drawings and photography, our own photos and fieldnotes, and our continued email and postal correspondences with students and teachers in Malawi, we constantly remind ourselves of our positionings within the “power sensitive conversations” (Bhavnani, 1993) we share with our informants. We continue to explore how photography and writing for authentic audiences allow children not just to engage in English literacy, but to make sense of themselves and their worlds. The meanings and messages they craft and help us craft, we hope, will act as messages to a better future.

Postscript

In April 2008 a teacher at Domasi Demonstration Primary informed us of the untimely death of co-author Reuthers Malembanje at age 35. Reuthers had written to us in January 2008, jubilant that after four

years of attempts he had finally been accepted in the Bachelor of Education program at Domasi College. Once there, however, his health worsened until he succumbed March 18, leaving two young sons and a daughter. We have since developed a Bachelor of Education day student scholarship in his memory: the North Carolina A&T Malembanje Scholarship at Domasi College of Education.

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