# ADOLESCENTS' WORK AND SCHOOLING IN MALAWI

Satvika Chalasani

Research Fellow, Population Council, New York

schalasani@popcouncil.org

**Abstract**

In 2007, almost 50% of adolescents in rural Malawi aged 14-17 were engaged in paid and unpaid labor other than household chores. If work takes away from schooling significantly, that 50% figure could be considered excessively high and undesirable. Consequently, I propose to examine the actual extent to which work affects the schooling outcomes of male and female adolescents. Using data from four rounds of the Malawi Schooling and Adolescent Survey, I apply a dynamic switching model and a fixed-effects model to disentangle the simultaneous nature of the work-school decision. This research has the potential to shed light on the effectiveness of programs that aim to improve educational outcomes by offering financial and other incentives to delay premature and detrimental work responsibilities.

## Adolescents and Work

Entrance into adult work roles is a crucial event in the life of adolescents and a marker of their entry into adulthood. In low-income countries however, young people often begin work early, even as children, and continue to work either exclusively or in conjunction with school until they finish their education. While there has been an immense amount of scholarly interest and international concern surrounding child labor, less attention has been paid to the issue of adolescent work, particularly in the African context. Work can take many forms — working on the family farm, doing domestic chores, caring for other children, wage work, or operating a small-scale business (NRC and IoM, 2005). Children's and adolescents' participation in work is generally regarded as being positive if it does not impact their health or personal development. In fact, the skills and experiences developed from both work and school can serve in the preparation for adulthood (ILO, 2008). Work can ensure continuing enrollment by furnishing the money required for school expenses. However, to the extent that work displaces schooling, early entry into work may be harmful. Full-time work can rule out school attendance. When part-time work is combined with school attendance, it may still affect academic performance and attainment — either because of irregular attendance or insufficient time or energy for studying (NRC and IoM, 2005). In this paper, I propose to explore the interactions and conflicts between work and schooling in the lives of Malawian adolescents.

## Adolescents' Work-School Decisions

The International Labor Organization Declaration stipulates a minimum age of 12–14 at which children in developing countries can start light work. While most studies of young people's work focus on children younger than those ages, in Malawi, even adolescents are economically productive in one way or the other while still being of school-going age. Malawi has an 8–4–4 educational system: eight years of primary, four years of secondary, and four years of tertiary education. Malawian children are supposed to start primary school at age 6 and finish at age 13; secondary school would then extend until age 17. However, as is the case elsewhere in Africa, delayed entry and grade repetition are common and it often takes considerably longer than the prescribed ages to complete primary and secondary education. Thus, in such settings, the mid-to-late teen years are an even more consequential transition period for adolescents who have to decide whether to continue/complete primary school, and, if possible, start/complete

secondary school. Many adolescents cannot afford to pursue schooling exclusively. Evidence from several developing countries shows that the longer young people stay in school, the more likely they are to combine work and school (NRC and IoM, 2005). The question then arises, how do adolescents at the cusp of adulthood make work-school choices in a society where the labor market rewards are slowly changing to favor those with formal education?

Furthermore, young men and women face significantly different work burdens, potentially affecting their schooling outcomes differentially. In Malawi, the work burden of young women tends to exceed that of young men because of the greater amount of time that women spend in noneconomic household activities (Nankhuni and Findeis, 2004). In fact, in many low-income settings, girls report more total work hours than boys, whether or not they are students (Ritchie, Lloyd, and Grant, 2004). This is especially relevant in light of the reality that even as the gender gap in school attendance narrows in Malawi, girls remain more likely than boys to leave school before completing primary. Of course, taking up formal work is not the only adult role competing with schooling — there are also the potential roles of spouse, parent, household manager, community leader, etc. These other roles also compete with schooling to varying degrees for young men and women, and may thus affect their work-school decisions differently.

Two key research questions emerge from this discussion: (i) How does work affect school progress? and (ii) How does the answer to this question differ for young men and women? The challenge here arises from the fact that decisions about work and school are made jointly and it is hard to know how much better an adolescent's schooling outcome would have been if only he/she were not working, or working less. If adolescents that are working are doing so because they would not fare well at school anyway or would not benefit from school as much as other adolescents that are in school, then it may make more economic sense for them to be working. Answering this complex question laden with counterfactuals requires the use of special analytical tools and estimation techniques that can be applied due to the availability of longitudinal data.

**Significance of the Study**

The questions posed here speak to the important policy issue of whether and to what extent adolescent school outcomes can be improved by programs that provide financial and other

incentives to poor youth and their families with the aim of delaying detrimental or premature work responsibilities. There is limited evidence on the effects of work on school for adolescents in developing countries. Most of the literature focuses on children below the age of ten. As children get older and become adolescents and the opportunity cost of their time increases, the work-school decision takes on a very different dynamic.

**Data**

I use four rounds of data from the Malawi Schooling and Adolescent Survey (MSAS) to answer our questions. Starting in 2007, the MSAS interviewed 2,652 in-school and out-of-school adolescents aged 14–16 in two Southern districts of rural Malawi (note that approximately 85% of the Malawian population lives in rural areas). The study adolescents were then interviewed once a year, providing in-depth data on their educational and work histories, as well as socioeconomic and demographic information about themselves and their households. After three rounds of data collection, the response rate has been 90%. In the most recent round of data collection, the adolescents were between 17-19 years old.

The education and work histories give us our key variables. For education, we have the age at which the adolescent started in standard 1. We know whether or not they completed primary. And finally, whether or not they made it to secondary. For work, we have the age at which they first started work. And whether or not they worked during primary or during secondary school. Knowing the schooling and work statuses of the adolescent in stages like this enables us to construct a dynamic model as discussed in the next section.

**Methods**

The methodological challenge in answering my question lies in the simultaneity of the work/education decision, with adolescents choosing between options that both compete substantially for their time. With the exception of a few studies — none on Africa— the sparse literature analyzing the relationship between labor, schooling and their respective household and adolescent-level determinants generally does not account for adolescent's self-selection into the work process. Adolescents (from households) with certain traits that usually go unmeasured (innate ability for example) may have different propensities to attend school, even when work is

not an available alternative. Failure to account for this selection can lead to incorrect inferences about the trade-offs between work and schooling, thus injecting bias into estimates of program and policy effects.

I propose to address this selectivity by using two different analytical strategies, both of which exploit the repeated measures of work, schooling status, and sexual behavior available in this rich, longitudinal data. Following Canals-Cerda and Ridao-Cano (2004), I first use a dynamic switching model for the sequence of school and work outcomes where each year, adolescents can switch into and out of work and school. This model uses simultaneous equations to capture the underlying two-stage decision process — in the first stage, the adolescent makes a schooling decision *conditional* on his/her work history up to that point, and in the second stage s/he makes a work decision *conditional* on the utilities generated by the potential school outcomes defined for each possible work history. The selectivity is accounted for when we model the adolescent's decision about school conditional or dependent on the work decision and vice versa. A second strategy is to use a fixed effects model that controls for the biasing effects of unobserved, time-invariant characteristics of adolescents and households on the parameter estimates.

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