

Investigating Pre-service Teachers' Satisfaction with Being Trained as Teachers and Their Career Intentions

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Abstract

Teacher education plays a pivotal role in ensuring a competent and committed teaching workforce. In Malawi, concerns about pre-service teachers' satisfaction with their training and their career intentions have raised important policy and practice questions. This study investigates the levels of happiness among pre-service teachers regarding their being trained as teachers, explored the underlying factors contributing to their satisfaction or dissatisfaction, and examined their career aspirations post-graduation. Using an embedded mixed-methods design, the study surveyed 242 second and fourth-year Bachelor of Education students at the University of Malawi. Quantitative data, analysed using descriptive statistics, measured levels of satisfaction and career intentions, while qualitative data provided deeper insights into students' experiences and motivations. Findings indicate that 86.2% of student teachers expressed happiness about being trained as teachers, attributing their satisfaction to intrinsic passion for teaching, the perceived societal impact of education, employability prospects, and the alignment of coursework with future teaching roles. Conversely, 5.8% reported unhappiness, citing heavy workloads, low status of the teaching profession, and lack of initial interest in the field. Additionally, while 90% intended to pursue teaching careers, 10% planned to explore alternative paths due to poor working conditions for teachers, self-doubt, and a lack of passion for teaching. The study recommends curriculum adjustments to re-package content to reduce content overload, enhanced mentorship for redirected students, and policy interventions to elevate the status of teaching. Addressing these challenges is critical for attracting more students into teacher training and ensuring their retention.

Keywords: teacher education; pre-service teachers; teacher training; teacher motivation; teacher satisfaction

Introduction

Teacher education is central to the development of quality education systems, as it prepares individuals to become competent professionals capable of shaping future generations (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2019). In Malawi, teacher training programmes have been established to equip pre-service teachers with the necessary pedagogical knowledge, skills, and attitudes to effectively deliver instruction in primary and secondary schools. However, the level of satisfaction among pre-service teachers regarding their education programme and their career intentions remains a critical area of inquiry (Agyei & Asante, 2020). Understanding these factors is essential for designing policies that ensure trained teachers remain committed to the profession.

Teacher satisfaction with their education programme is a multidimensional construct that encompasses curriculum relevance, instructional quality, practicum experiences, and institutional support (Darling-Hammond, 2017). It is a teacher's self-evaluation (both in cognitive and emotional terms) of the contentment with being a teacher (Ihtiyaroglu, 2018). Research suggests that satisfaction during training influences teachers' motivation, confidence,

and long-term commitment to the profession (Ingersoll, 2018). Dissatisfaction, on the other hand, has been linked to high attrition rates and a reluctance to pursue teaching as a lifelong career (Mulkeen et al., 2017). Given the persistent challenges in Malawi's education sector—including teacher shortages, inadequate resources, and low remuneration—examining the perspectives of pre-service teachers can provide valuable insights into how teacher education programmes can be improved to enhance retention and professional commitment (World Bank, 2020).

Teacher education in Malawi has undergone significant changes over the years, with multiple reforms aimed at improving the quality of teacher preparation. Malawi has long acknowledged the importance of education in its national development strategies. The National Education Sector Investment Plan (NESIP) 2020–2030 outlines teacher development as a key strategy to improve education quality (MoE, 2020). The country primarily trains teachers through public universities, teacher training colleges, and private institutions. Many student teachers at public institutions receive government scholarships, which cover tuition and provide living allowances. These scholarships are intended to increase access to teacher education and ensure a steady supply of teachers to the public education system (Ministry of Education, 2020). The pre-service teacher education programme typically includes coursework in educational foundations, pedagogy, subject-specific content, and supervised teaching practice.

Historically, government policy mandated automatic recruitment of all graduating teachers into the civil service. This was part of efforts to address acute teacher shortages. However, in recent years, due to fiscal constraints and limited public sector wage bills, the government has moved away from this policy. Since 2014, graduating student teachers are no longer guaranteed automatic employment and must apply and compete for vacancies through the Malawi Teaching Service Commission (TSC) (Galafa & Ngoimanee, 2022; Mkandawire et al., 2018). This change in recruitment policy has contributed to uncertainty among student teachers and may influence their long-term commitment to the profession.

With reference to problems faced by pre-service teachers, most studies have highlighted concerns about overloaded curricula, insufficient teaching and learning resources, limited exposure to practical teaching, and the perceived low status of the teaching profession (Kadzamira, 2006; Kayuni & Tambulasi, 2007; Mtika & Gates, 2010). Many pre-service teachers enrol in education programmes not out of passion but due to limited alternative options, raising questions about their long-term commitment to the field (Mulkeen, 2010). Furthermore, disparities in the quality of teacher education institutions contribute to variations in the preparedness and satisfaction levels of graduates (UNESCO, 2015).

Similar challenges are prevalent across Sub-Saharan Africa. Many countries in the region struggle with underfunded teacher education programmes, large class sizes, and limited teaching practice opportunities, which negatively impact trainee satisfaction and career aspirations (Bennell & Akyeampong, 2007). Studies indicate that teacher shortages in rural areas, low professional prestige, and financial instability contribute to high attrition rates across the continent (World Bank, 2021). Addressing these challenges requires a regional approach that considers context-specific solutions and best practices from successful teacher education models within the region.

The career intentions of pre-service teachers are equally important, as they have implications for teacher retention and educational quality. In Malawi, many newly trained teachers opt to leave the profession soon after graduation due to poor working conditions, low salaries, and limited career progression opportunities (Kafumbu, 2019; Kayuni & Tambulasi, 2007). Some pursue alternative careers in the private sector, while others migrate to other countries in search of better prospects. Understanding the factors that influence pre-service teachers' career

decisions is crucial for developing strategies to retain qualified teachers in the education system.

Despite extensive global research on teacher motivation and satisfaction (Han & Yin, 2016; Watt & Richardson, 2007), there remains limited evidence on how pre-service teachers in Malawi perceive their training and how this shapes their professional intentions. Most studies in the Malawian context have focused on in-service teacher attrition (Chimombo, 2009; Kayuni & Tambulasi, 2007), with limited attention to the perspectives of teacher trainees still in the pipeline. Additionally, few studies have explored how personal motivations, training experiences, and institutional support interact to influence both satisfaction and commitment to teaching careers at the pre-service level.

This study contributes to filling this gap by examining pre-service teachers' subjective experiences of their education programme, focusing on their happiness or unhappiness with training, and their post-graduation career intentions. The research questions derive directly from this gap and are aimed at capturing both emotional responses (happiness/satisfaction) and cognitive evaluations (career intentions) that are shaped by teacher education programmes.

The research study was guided by the following questions:

1. How do pre-service teachers (student teachers) rate their level of happiness about being trained as teachers?
2. What reasons do pre-service teachers give for their happiness or unhappiness about being trained as teachers?
3. How do pre-service teachers characterise their post-university career intentions?
4. What reasons do pre-service teachers who express the intention not to join the teaching profession after graduating give for their career intention?

Significance of the Study

The findings of this study provide empirical insights that can inform ongoing efforts to improve teacher education in Malawi. By highlighting student teachers' experiences, motivations, and concerns, the study contributes evidence that can support policy dialogue, curriculum development, and institutional reforms in teacher education. These insights are especially relevant for addressing persistent challenges in teacher recruitment, preparation, and retention. The study thus offers a valuable contribution to strengthening teacher education frameworks and aligning them more closely with the needs and expectations of pre-service teachers.

Literature Review

This section presents a review of related literature about factors that influence pre-service teachers' happiness and unhappiness about being trained as teachers, and determinants of their career intentions. The review is structured around two broader themes along these focus areas.

Key Drivers of Pre-service Teachers' Satisfaction and Lack of Satisfaction with being Trained as Future Teachers

Understanding the factors influencing pre-service teachers' satisfaction or lack of satisfaction during their training is critical in comprehending the broader dynamics of teacher preparation programs and their implications for student engagement, professional development, and retention in the teaching profession. Research suggests that the experiences of pre-service teachers are shaped by various intrinsic, extrinsic, and socio-cultural factors, all of which

contribute to their overall perception of the profession and their satisfaction during training (Flores & Gago, 2020).

A key factor influencing satisfaction among pre-service teachers is their initial motivation for choosing the teaching profession. Studies drawing on Deci and Ryan's Self-Determination Theory (2000) indicate that individuals driven by intrinsic motivation—such as passion for teaching, a sense of calling, or the desire to contribute to societal development—tend to express higher levels of satisfaction with their training (Han & Yin, 2016). Conversely, those who enter the profession primarily due to extrinsic motivators, such as job security or societal expectations, are more likely to experience dissatisfaction and disengagement (Watt & Richardson, 2022). The latter group often struggles with feelings of misalignment between their aspirations and the realities of the profession, leading to stress and a diminished sense of fulfilment (Pérez-Escoda et al., 2023).

Another crucial aspect affecting pre-service teachers' satisfaction is the quality of pedagogical training and support they receive. Positive experiences arise when teacher preparation programs provide adequate mentorship, constructive feedback, and hands-on teaching practice (Hammerness & Klette, 2015). Effective mentorship and guidance help pre-service teachers develop confidence in their abilities, reducing stress and increasing engagement in the program (Leijen et al., 2021). However, when training lacks practical exposure or fails to provide sufficient supervision, many pre-service teachers report feeling unprepared and frustrated, which erodes their satisfaction (Flores, 2020).

Difficulties in classroom management and student discipline are also significant sources of stress for pre-service teachers. Research has consistently shown that student behaviour and classroom control are among the greatest challenges encountered during teaching practice, often leading to anxiety and self-doubt (Aloe et al., 2014). Many pre-service teachers feel that theoretical coursework does not adequately prepare them for handling real-world classroom dynamics, resulting in feelings of disillusionment (Bastiaens et al., 2021). The stress associated with classroom management is compounded by the expectation to balance discipline with effective instruction, a challenge that can contribute to overall unhappiness during training (Pillen et al., 2013).

Beyond pedagogical challenges, pre-service teachers' personal well-being significantly influences their satisfaction. The demands of teacher training programs, including coursework, lesson planning, and practicum responsibilities, often lead to high levels of stress and burnout (Shin et al., 2022). Many report experiencing emotional exhaustion and anxiety, particularly in high-pressure environments with limited institutional support (McCallum et al., 2017). This aligns with research suggesting that pre-service teachers' mental health is a critical yet often overlooked aspect of teacher training (Pöysä et al., 2021).

Expectations about the teaching profession versus the reality encountered during training also shape pre-service teachers' satisfaction. Many enter teacher education programs with idealistic views of teaching as a highly rewarding profession but later struggle with workload demands, resource limitations, and bureaucratic challenges in schools (Flores & Niklasson, 2022). When pre-service teachers feel unprepared for these realities, they often experience disappointment, which can erode their enthusiasm and commitment to the profession (Hong et al., 2017).

Cultural and societal perceptions of teaching further influence pre-service teachers' satisfaction. In contexts where teaching is highly respected, individuals in teacher training programs tend to exhibit a strong sense of pride and motivation. In contrast, where teaching is viewed as a low-status profession, pre-service teachers may struggle with societal stigma, leading to frustration and decreased job satisfaction (Lau et al., 2023). This suggests that

broader societal attitudes toward teaching play a significant role in shaping students' experiences and aspirations.

Peer support and collaboration within teacher training programs contribute significantly to pre-service teachers' well-being. Research highlights that environments that encourage teamwork, knowledge-sharing, and social connections help pre-service teachers navigate academic and professional challenges more effectively (Häkkinen et al., 2017). Conversely, when peer networks are weak or when students feel isolated, their overall happiness decreases, reinforcing the importance of community-building initiatives within teacher education.

Institutional support, including access to resources such as teaching materials, technology, and career guidance, also plays a pivotal role in determining pre-service teachers' satisfaction. Programs that provide structured mentorship, financial assistance, and professional development opportunities tend to create more positive learning environments, fostering greater engagement and well-being among students (Bautista et al., 2021). Limited access to these resources, however, often results in frustration and disengagement (Araujo, 2021).

Overall, pre-service teachers' satisfaction during their training is shaped by a complex interplay of personal motivation, pedagogical support, classroom challenges, mental well-being, societal perceptions, peer interactions, and institutional structures. Addressing these factors in teacher preparation programs is essential for improving teacher retention, ensuring professional satisfaction, and fostering the development of well-prepared educators.

Making Career Moves: Factors Influencing Teachers' Career Choices

Understanding pre-service teachers' career intentions requires an examination of their motivations, aspirations, decision-making processes, and the factors influencing their choices regarding teaching careers. Teacher career intentions refer to the professional plans teachers form, including whether to remain in teaching, transition to another profession, or seek alternative roles within education. These intentions are shaped by personal motivations, experiences during teacher training, and external factors such as job market conditions, the prestige of teaching, and societal expectations. Gaining insight into career intentions is essential for predicting teacher workforce stability and addressing retention challenges.

Motivational factors significantly influence pre-service teachers' career intentions. Intrinsic motivations, such as a passion for teaching and a desire to impact students' lives, are frequently cited reasons for entering the profession (Richardson & Watt, 2018). Many pre-service teachers value the emotional rewards of teaching, including the opportunity to contribute to societal development. However, extrinsic factors like financial security, job stability, and social recognition also play a role in career decisions (Toropova et al., 2021). While some individuals prioritize personal values and fulfilment, others emphasise external rewards, with contextual factors shaping these priorities.

Expectations about teaching careers also shape career intentions. Pre-service teachers often enter training with idealistic views, expecting a rewarding and fulfilling profession. However, exposure to classroom realities—such as large class sizes, limited resources, and behavioural challenges—can alter these perceptions (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2020). Some revise their career goals upon recognizing the profession's demands, exploring alternatives like educational leadership or curriculum development.

Teacher preparation programs play a crucial role in shaping career intentions. Positive experiences such as mentoring, hands-on teaching practice, and faculty support enhance the likelihood of pursuing a teaching career (Darling-Hammond et al., 2019). Conversely, negative

experiences, including feelings of isolation, burnout, and lack of institutional support, may deter pre-service teachers from remaining in the field (Lindqvist et al., 2020). The structure and quality of teacher education programs influence confidence, preparedness, and long-term commitment to teaching (Eren & Rakıcıoğlu-Söylemez, 2023).

The job market and career opportunities also impact career decisions. In regions facing teacher shortages, pre-service teachers may be more inclined to pursue teaching due to job availability (OECD, 2021). Conversely, in areas with oversupply or underfunded education systems, uncertainty about job prospects may prompt some to reconsider their commitment (Buchanan et al., 2022). Additionally, in contexts where teaching is undervalued or undercompensated, pre-service teachers may explore better-paying careers outside the education sector.

All in all, pre-service teachers' career intentions result from a complex interplay of personal motivations, training experiences, and external factors such as the job market.

Theoretical Framework

The study is guided by the Self-Determination Theory (SDT). This theory was propounded by Deci and Ryan (2020). The theory postulates that human behaviour is motivated by three basic psychological needs namely: competence, autonomy and relatedness. Autonomy deals with the sense of control, volition, and agency in an individual's decisions and actions. Competence is the feeling of being capable, effective, and confident of achieving desired outcomes. Relatedness, on the other hand, is the feeling of being respected, valued, and connected to others. The theory distinguishes between external motivation (doing something for external rewards or pressure) and internal motivation (doing something for inherent satisfaction). The theory also suggests a continuum of motivation called the "Self Determination Continuum". The first part of the continuum is a motivation (Zero motivation), the middle part is extrinsic motivation (controlled by external factors) whilst the third part is intrinsic motivation (autonomous and self-determined motivation).

This theory ties in well with the study since it helps to offer insights regarding reasons that explain why the pre-service teachers are motivated to become teachers or not. The theory also offers a theoretical lens through which one can understand the experiences of the pre-service teachers during training and how they impact their levels of happiness and subsequent career choices.

Methodological Approach

Research Design

The study used a mixed-methods approach with reference to the nature of the data collected as well as the type of data analysis techniques applied to the data. Tashakkori and Creswell (2007) hold the view that what qualifies a mixed methods approach is the collection and analysis of data, integration of findings, and drawing of inferences using both qualitative and quantitative methods. This implies that the mixed methods approach, because it incorporates techniques from both the quantitative and qualitative research traditions, can be used to answer questions that could not be answered in any other way (Mertens, 2005). The choice of mixed methods is supported by the nature of the research questions being addressed by the study. Research questions 1 (How do pre-service teachers rate their level of happiness about being trained as teachers?) and 3 (How do student teachers characterise their post-university career intentions?) have been answered using quantitative descriptive analysis while research question 2 (What reasons do pre-service teachers give for their happiness or unhappiness about being trained as teachers?) and 4 (What reasons do student teachers who express the intention not to join the teaching profession after graduating give for their career intention?), which require an analysis of people's perceptions have been addressed by qualitative analysis.

There is a multiplicity of mixed-methods designs. These designs are “defined by the ordering of the application of the quantitative and qualitative methods (simultaneously or sequentially), as well as at what point the mixing of methods occurs, qualitative and quantitative data collection can occur in parallel form or sequential form” (Mertens, 2005, p.297). This study employed an embedded mixed methods design. According to Creswell (2012), an embedded design is one of the forms of mixed methods designs in which quantitative and qualitative data are collected simultaneously or sequentially, with one form of data playing a supportive role to the other form of data. In this study, the primary quantitative data collected quantified student teachers’ levels of happiness about being trained as future teachers. Qualitative data was collected to shed light on the students’ levels of happiness by uncovering the underlying key reasons. Additionally, quantitative data was also collected to quantify the number of pre-service teachers with the career intention to join the teaching profession after graduating, and those who would go for other professions. Further qualitative data on career intentions were collected to understand pre-service teachers’ underlying reasons for their envisaged career trajectories.

Participants demographics

The study purposively sampled a total of 242 second- and fourth-year students studying the Bachelor of Education programme at the University of Malawi. All the sampled students were purposively sampled because they shared a key attribute of being Bachelor of Education students. Apart from the purposively sampled students being conveniently available to the researchers, the researchers also targeted a balance of juniors and seniors. Juniors were represented by the second-year students who have at least had substantial experience with the education programme than the first years. Seniors were represented by the fourth years, who were closer to the exit line and more likely to be making decisions about whether to remain teachers, hence they were chosen over the third years. The seniors, at this stage in their teacher training, had undergone some teaching practice through micro-teaching, unlike the juniors. Out of the 242 respondents who completed and returned the questionnaire, 214 (88.4%) were second years, while 28 (11.6%) were fourth years. In terms of gender, 130 (53.7%) were males while 112 (46.3%) were females. In terms of entry into the Bachelor of Education Programme, 211 (87.6%) put education among their choices during NCHE selection, 21 (8.7%) were redirected into the Education Programme, and 9 (3.7%) switched to the Education Programme from other programmes.

Data collection tools

The study used a questionnaire with 28 items on a five-point Likert scale. The items were adapted from internationally recognised questionnaires used to capture what motivates pre-service teachers to enrol for the teacher training. One Likert-scaled item (At this stage in your Bachelor of Education Programme, how happy are you about the fact that you are being trained to become a professional teacher?) had a follow-up question which required respondents to give brief reasons for their level of happiness or unhappiness. Another dichotomous item (required respondents to answer Yes or No on whether or not they planned to join the teaching profession after graduating) also had a follow-up question, which required respondents to explain reasons for their specified career intention (joining the teaching profession or opting for a different career). Students were given the questionnaire to complete and return.

Data Analysis

The quantitative data were entered and analysed in SPSS. The 28 items on the questionnaires were rated on a five-point Likert scale (Strongly Agree=5, Agree=4, Neither Agree nor Disagree=3, Disagree=2, Strongly Disagree=1, Very Happy=5, Satisfied=4, Neither Happy nor Unhappy=3, Unhappy=2, Very Unhappy=1). The analysis in SPSS mainly dwelt on computing relevant descriptive statistics to answer the questions. The qualitative data from the questionnaires were analysed using the constant comparative method (i. e., thematic analysis). According to Thomas (2009), this method involves going through the data again and again, comparing each element. From the constant comparison, themes emerge that summarise the content of the data.

Operational Definition of Teachers' Happiness

In this study, teacher satisfaction refers to the degree to which pre-service teachers feel content, fulfilled, and positive about their experience of being trained as future teachers. This encompasses emotional reactions (such as happiness), cognitive evaluations (such as perceived relevance of training), and motivational alignment with career aspirations. Operationally, teacher satisfaction was captured through a five-point Likert-scale item asking respondents to rate their level of happiness about being trained to become a teacher, followed by open-ended responses elaborating on their reasons. This definition is consistent with prior literature that positions satisfaction as a multidimensional construct encompassing personal, institutional, and professional factors (Darling-Hammond, 2017; Klassen & Durksen, 2022). Teacher happiness, as used in the questionnaire, serves a proxy for satisfaction. Although we asked participants how “happy” they were about being trained as teachers, this phrasing aligns with broader constructs of affective satisfaction used in educational research (Flores, 2020). For analytical purposes, we therefore treat “happiness about being trained as a teacher” as a direct indicator of teacher satisfaction.

Ethical Considerations

Informed consent was obtained from all student participants, who were clearly informed that their participation was voluntary, with no impact on their academic performance or standing in the courses taught by the researchers. They were assured of their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. To ensure confidentiality and anonymity, no personally identifiable information was collected, and all data were securely stored. Special care was taken to minimize potential power imbalances, given the researcher's dual role as lecturers and investigators, by fostering a non-coercive and respectful research environment.

Study Findings

Preservice Teachers' Rating of their Happiness with the Education Programme

This question aimed to gauge teacher students' level of happiness (satisfaction) or unhappiness (dissatisfaction) at being trained as teachers. Table 1 below reports how teacher students rated their level of happiness when asked how happy they felt about the fact that they were being trained as future teachers.

Table 1: Student teachers' level of happiness at being trained as future teachers

Level of Happiness	Frequency	Percent
Very happy	128	53.6 %
Happy	78	32.6 %
Neither happy nor unhappy	19	7.9 %
Unhappy	4	1.7 %
Very unhappy	10	4.2 %

On their sense of happiness about being trained as teachers, as shown in Table 1, the respondents demonstrated varied levels of happiness or satisfaction. 53.6% felt very happy, 32.6% felt happy, 7.9% felt neither happy nor unhappy and 1.7% indicated that they were unhappy, and 4.2% said they were very unhappy. Overall, these figures imply that the majority of student teachers (86.2%) felt happy to very happy about being trained as future teachers. Furthermore, only a minority (5.9%) of the sampled felt unhappy to very unhappy about being trained as teachers.

Reasons for Happiness or Unhappiness for Being Trained as a Teacher

This question addresses the reasons student teachers have for happiness or unhappiness regarding their being trained as teachers.

Reasons for Happiness

The responses of students who were happy or very happy at being trained as teachers revealed a variety of underlying reasons. A noticeable overlap in the reasons of some student teachers indicates that they felt happy or very happy because of what their encounter with the education programme content had done to them. They reported experiencing a transformation in thinking and their worldviews after learning about educational foundations modules. Some respondents put it as follows:

I am happy about being trained as a teacher because Education has opened my mind to what real life is, the nature of people, and how to approach different problems that I will face personally in the community and country at large. (#TS -005)

The teaching training is interesting in such a way that I am not just learning about how to understand others, but rather I am beginning to understand myself better which has a positive impact on me as an individual. (#TS-060)

I am happy because some courses (education foundations courses) have changed my way of thinking and the way I look at society. (#TS-017)

I am very happy because the training I am going through sees beyond teaching in the sense that I am also introduced to some courses, such as philosophy of education, that enable me to understand the world around me. (#TS-028)

Beyond feeling happy about being trained as teachers because of the transformative impact of the exposure to education content, some students felt happy about being trained as teachers because this had been their dream in life. There was a broad agreement among some student teachers that teaching is a dream they had always envisioned themselves pursuing in life:

Since I was in primary school, I have always intended to be a teacher one day. So, now that I am doing education, I feel that my dream is becoming a reality. So, I am fully happy with my education programme. (#TS-025)

I am happy because I have always wanted to be a teacher since my childhood, because I developed an interest in serving young ones. (#TS-030)

I am really excited about being trained as a teacher. This is because I have been doing the programme I wanted since my secondary school days. Hence, I am happy that my dream will be fulfilled in my life. (#TS-045)

I am studying a programme I am passionate about. Teaching is my passion. (#TS-050)

A recurring reason for being happy about being trained as teachers among some student teachers was that education would help them contribute positively and meaningfully to the advancement of their society:

I am really excited that I am being trained as a teacher because my educational career will shape my life and help me to shape the future generations (#TS-040)

I am happy that I am doing a Bachelor of Education because I will be able to assist less privileged learners to rise and shine in society (#TS-055)

I am very happy because my dream to support society positively is about to be fulfilled (#TS-025)

Teaching will allow me to raise the ambitions of less-privileged youths (#TS-046)

Across the responses of the student teachers, there was also a shared view regarding the employability of teachers as a contributing factor to their happiness about being trained as future teachers:

The teaching profession provides more chances for employment opportunities in various industries, not only teaching in schools. A teacher by profession has more skills relevant to the real world (#TS-002)

I know that I will be employed in disciplines other than education after completing my programme (#TS-100)

I am happy because soon after graduating, I will not stay long before I get the job, since the government will employ me soon after graduating (#TS-075)

An examination of responses of student teachers regarding the employability of teachers reveals that the employability of teachers is seen by them in two ways. First, some student teachers felt that the training they received equipped them with knowledge that make them employable in other fields outside education. Second, some student teachers view the employability of teachers in view of the government teacher hiring policy that prioritises trained teachers.

A consensus also emerged among some student teachers that what contributes to their level of happiness about being trained as teachers is a sense of alignment between the kind of content they are learning as teachers, especially in the education component of their training, and their envisaged roles as teachers in the future:

I am very happy because the knowledge I am getting will be useful when I enter the teaching industry. (#TS-035)

I am happy because now I know more about humans, and how I am going to be able to handle students when I become a teacher. (#TS-060)

I have learnt courses like philosophy, sociology and psychology of education, which have made me to know a better learner, the best methods of teaching and learning, critical thinking, and how society operates. (#TS-075)

My training has made me realise that I can be a good teacher. I have been taught psychology, philosophy and curriculum theory, all of which have equipped me with the tools I need as a teacher. (#TS-080)

Reasons for Unhappiness

A small percentage of student teachers (5.8%) expressed unhappiness about being trained as future teachers. An exploration of possible reasons for this unhappiness or dissatisfaction reveals a variety of reasons. Some student teachers concurred that the structure of the education programme itself is what makes them unhappy about being trained as future teachers:

Education programmes demand a lot of time as compared to other programmes. A lot of time is spent in lab sessions, especially in the case of science students. (#TS-090)

The education programme is four years, but it takes almost five years to complete due to teaching practice. (#TS-120)

Not fully happy due to teaching practice, which takes a lot of time to complete. (#TS-220)

Six courses are not easy to handle, but I am figuring out better ways to help myself. (#TS-078)

I am not happy because I feel like we have a lot of courses as a programme. Therefore, the content is just too much for one to cover per semester (#TS-066)

Some student teachers also echoed the view that what makes them unhappy about being trained as teachers is the low prestige associated with the teaching profession and the disrespect that, as student teachers, they receive from other students:

Education is a programme that is looked down upon by many people. Even here at the university, education students are looked down upon by other students. (#3TS-073)

Students from other departments consider education students inferior to them. They think it is a waste of time to spend four years at university only to become a teacher. (#TS-028)

I grew up wanting to study pharmacy, so that was the only option I had in mind. So, being placed to do education made me unhappy. (#TS-0123)

Honestly speaking, teachers are not respected here in Malawi. The working conditions are poor, and the salary is low. One can just die poor trying to educate others. With this demotivation, where do you start motivating students? (#TS-044)

Teaching as a profession in Malawi is not considered to be important because those who are teachers in society are not considered to be of value compared to other professions. (#TS-056)

There was also a recurring sentiment among some student teachers that their unhappiness at being trained as future teachers could be traced to how they got into the Bachelor of Education in the first place. Student teachers who did not choose the Bachelor of Education programme during their university application attributed their unhappiness to the fact that they were just redirected to study Education.

To be honest, I am not happy doing this programme. I was just redirected, and I don't know if I can become a good teacher for the discipline I didn't apply for. (#TS-127)

The education programme was not one of my programmes. I was just redirected. I am not comfortable doing Education. (#TS-180)

For some student teachers, their unhappiness emanated from their belief that they cannot make a good teacher.

I feel unhappy because I don't believe that I can become a good teacher. (#TS-014)

Preservice Teachers' Characterization of their Post-university career intentions

This question aimed to explore the post-university career intentions of students studying the Bachelor of Education programme. Typically, student teachers have two career options after graduating from the Education programme: they can join the teaching profession or pursue other professions. **Table 2** shows that as high as 90% of student teachers expressed the intention to join the teaching profession after graduating. On the other hand, 10% did not intend to join the teaching profession after graduating, indicating an interest in pursuing other careers outside teaching.

Table 2: Student teachers' career intentions after graduating from the Education Programme

Intention to join the teaching profession	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	188	90 %
No	21	10 %

Reasons Pre-service Teachers Give for Intending not to Join the Teaching Profession After Graduation

This question explored the underlying reasons for career intention after graduation among student teachers.

The responses of teacher students who indicated that they would opt out of joining the teaching profession after graduating reveal a multiplicity of reasons. The responses of some student teachers reflect a shared understanding that they are put off by the poor working conditions associated with the teaching profession. Some respondents expressed this sentiment in the following fashion:

Teaching has many drawbacks, especially the pay that teachers get. It is just peanuts. (#TS-001)

I will not join the teaching profession because currently, teachers are receiving a salary that cannot cover all their basic needs. (#TS-040)

The government does not take the challenges and welfare of teachers seriously. For instance, teachers are the lowest-paid civil servants among civil servants of comparable qualifications. (#TS-035)

I need a well-paying job. The salary that teachers get is not enough for them to meet their basic needs and live a happy life. (#TS-019)

For some student teachers, the intention not to join the teaching profession after graduation arose from their self-doubt, believing that they would not make a good teacher. Some student teachers expressed this in the following ways:

Teaching is a good career, but it is not for everyone. I do not think I will make a good teacher because I have low self-esteem in a lot of things, and I am failing to improve that. (#TS 015)

No, I would not want to become a teacher because I have little skill in the transmission of content to students in class. (#TS 025)

I do not plan to join the teaching profession because I have realised that I cannot be a good teacher. (#TS 030)

Related to self-doubt as a reason for not planning to join the teaching profession after graduating, some student teachers cited a lack of passion for teaching as a reason for not wishing to join the teaching profession after graduation. Some respondents who shared this sentiment expressed it in the following manner:

It is because education is not my passion. Hence, I will join just because I have a degree in education. But to say the truth, I am not really passionate about it. (#TS0-30)

I am not interested in teaching. (#TS-013)

Teaching is not to my liking. So, I will go for another career. (#TS-123)

Across the responses of the student teachers, there was also a clear alignment in the opinions of some student teachers who saw the Bachelor of Education simply as a means to an end, a degree that would open doors for them in other career pathways:

I will not join the teaching profession because education is not limited to teaching, but also in other fields that deal with young people. (#TS 010)

After graduating, I want to venture into business. (#TS009)

Being trained as a teacher can provide open doors for careers that I had longed for, apart from teaching. (#TS 011)

I want to be a back-end programmer. (#TS 050)

Education is not all about teaching. (#TS 023)

Discussion

Student Teachers' Level of Happiness about Being Trained as Teachers and their Underlying Reasons

According to the descriptive statistical analysis of the findings, as high as 86.2% of the student teachers rated themselves as being happy to very happy with the education program. A subsequent question on the reasons for their level of happiness or satisfaction provided further details on this finding. An analysis of the findings of the underlying reasons for student teachers feeling happy about their being trained as future teachers revealed four key reasons: transformative impact of education content, employability, belief in education as an equaliser of opportunity and a catalyst for societal advancement, and alignment of content learnt in education with future teacher roles.

Many respondents reported that exposure to educational foundations, philosophy, and psychology courses expanded their understanding of the world, themselves, and their future roles as teachers. This suggests that teacher training is not just about learning pedagogical skills

but also about developing critical thinking and self-awareness (Flores & Day, 2006). The emphasis on personal growth aligns with transformative learning theory, which posits that education fosters shifts in worldviews and self-perception (Mezirow, 1997). Another key reason for happiness is that many pre-service teachers had long aspired to join the profession. Several respondents stated that teaching had been their dream since childhood, suggesting that intrinsic motivation plays a central role in their satisfaction. It can therefore be pointed out that these participants have higher levels of autonomy, competence and self-determination in line with the Self-Determination theory. These student teachers are likely to have benefited from an earlier study by Watt & Richardson (2007), who suggest the notion that intrinsic motivation, particularly a passion for teaching and working with students, is a strong predictor of teacher retention and job satisfaction. This finding underscores the importance of career guidance in early education to support students in pursuing professions that align with their passions.

Additionally, many students expressed happiness about their future ability to contribute to societal development. Respondents indicated that they viewed teaching as a way to positively impact future generations, particularly by educating underprivileged learners. This perspective is consistent with the concept of altruistic motivation in teaching, where individuals enter the profession out of a desire to serve and uplift others (Kyriacou & Coulthard, 2000). The emphasis on social contribution aligns with the capabilities approach (Sen, 1999), which highlights education as a means of expanding individuals' opportunities and freedoms.

Employability also emerged as a critical factor in pre-service teachers' happiness. Some respondents believed that a teaching qualification provided them with skills applicable beyond education, making them employable in various industries. Others were optimistic about job security, particularly due to government hiring policies that prioritise trained teachers. This dual perspective on employability aligns with studies that highlight how teacher education imparts transferable skills such as communication, leadership, and problem-solving, which are valued across multiple sectors (Ingersoll & Smith, 2003).

Finally, many pre-service teachers expressed satisfaction with the alignment between their training and their future professional roles. They appreciated learning about psychology, philosophy, and curriculum theory, as these courses equipped them with the necessary knowledge and skills to facilitate learning effectively. This finding reinforces the importance of a well-structured teacher education curriculum that prepares students for the realities of teaching (Darling-Hammond, 2006).

A previous study by Ingersoll et al. (2018) supports these findings by highlighting several factors that contribute to pre-service teachers' happiness and satisfaction with their education programme. Among other factors, the study supported perceived quality of the curriculum, the relevance of the content to their future teaching roles, the adequacy of mentorship, and the opportunities for practical teaching experience. In agreement, Eren (2019) also suggested a supportive learning environment and positive relationships with peers and faculty as critical to ensuring a pre-service teacher's happiness. Furthermore, Skaalvik & Skaalvik (2015) study suggested that personal factors, such as self-efficacy, coping mechanisms, and resilience, play a significant role in how pre-service teachers rate their happiness with their programmes.

Consequently, 5.9% of respondents, which represented a minority of the sample, expressed unhappy to very unhappy. This value is considered minor as it is below 10% of the respondents. A further interrogation of the findings on the underlying reasons for student teachers feeling unhappy about being trained as future teachers was summarised into four key reasons. These reasons are responsible for the reduction of the levels of motivation in preservice teachers, which ultimately would result in lower levels of motivation in the Self-Determination Continuum. The main reasons that emerged were: programme structure (content overload and

long duration), low prestige of teaching as a career, lack of passion for teaching, and self-doubt. These factors are highlighted in detail to describe student teachers' unhappiness with their training, aligning with broader research on teacher preparation and professional identity.

One key issue was the demanding structure of the Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) programme. The extended duration of study and the heavy course load, particularly in science-related fields, place significant strain on students. Research indicates that teacher education programmes often require extensive practical training, which, while essential, can be overwhelming when not adequately supported (Darling-Hammond, 2017). Similar findings have been reported in studies from sub-Saharan Africa, where prolonged training periods and intensive coursework contribute to student burnout and dissatisfaction (Akyeampong et al., 2011).

Another major source of unhappiness among student teachers is the low social status of the teaching profession. In many contexts, teaching is often perceived as a fallback career rather than a prestigious or desirable profession (Bennell & Akyeampong, 2007). The perception of inferiority compared to other academic disciplines and concerns about low salaries reinforce negative attitudes toward teaching. Research in Malawi and other developing countries has shown that teachers often struggle with low morale due to inadequate financial rewards and a lack of professional recognition, which affects both their motivation and job satisfaction (Mulkeen, 2010). Such societal attitudes toward teaching have been linked to teacher attrition, as individuals who feel undervalued are less likely to remain in the profession long-term (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017).

Additionally, some student teachers experience dissatisfaction because they were placed in the B.Ed. programme without having initially chosen it. This misalignment between personal aspirations and actual career paths has been observed in other studies, where individuals who enter teacher education reluctantly tend to exhibit lower levels of commitment and professional identity development (Flores & Day, 2006). A lack of intrinsic motivation for teaching can result in disengagement during training and reduced enthusiasm for the profession post-graduation (Watt & Richardson, 2007). In Malawi, structural issues in university admissions and programme placements may contribute to this problem, leading to students feeling trapped in a career they did not intend to pursue.

Finally, self-doubt emerged as a notable concern, with some student teachers expressing uncertainty about their ability to be effective educators. Self-efficacy is a crucial determinant of teaching success, and individuals who lack confidence in their teaching abilities are more likely to experience stress and anxiety (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2001). Research indicates that teacher preparation programmes play a critical role in building self-efficacy through mentorship, practicum experiences, and positive reinforcement (Klassen & Chiu, 2010). However, when students enter teacher training without sufficient support or passion for teaching, they may struggle with confidence, further exacerbating their unhappiness.

Pre-service Teachers' Post-University Career Intentions and Reasons for Opting out of the Teaching Career Path

Regarding how the pre-service teachers characterise their post-university career intentions, 90% willingness of teachers to join the teaching profession aligns with the Self-Determination Theory in that the teaching profession addresses their innate psychological needs, namely autonomy, competence, and relatedness, in line with the Self-Determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Studies have shown that individuals who enter teacher education programs do so for a variety of reasons, including intrinsic, extrinsic, and altruistic motivations (Richardson & Watt, 2010).

Research has shown a number of reasons pre-service teachers are often drawn to teaching, some of which include passion for education, desire to make a difference in students' lives, or a personal interest in subject matter (Han & Yin, 2016). Bennell & Akyeampong (2007) pointed out that in many developing countries, job security and guaranteed employment opportunities also serve as strong motivators for joining the profession (Bennell & Akyeampong, 2007). The high percentage of pre-service teachers intending to join the profession in this study may reflect a combination of these motivating factors.

Although the majority of the respondents expressed their willingness to join the teaching profession, the researchers were interested to know the reasons why 10% of the pre-service teachers did not plan to join the teaching profession. This is a critical area in teacher education, especially in developing countries, where there are teacher shortages and loss of skilled educators and underutilization of investment well well-trained teachers. Research indicates that dissatisfaction with teacher salaries, working conditions, and the social status of teaching can lead to career redirection (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017). In Malawi and other low-income contexts, concerns about job insecurity, large class sizes, and limited professional development opportunities contribute to teacher attrition (Mulkeen, 2010). Additionally, some pre-service teachers enter teacher education programs due to limited alternative options rather than a genuine interest in teaching, leading to eventual career shifts (Flores & Day, 2006).

It is clear from the reasons provided in the preceding section that some student teachers have diverse reasons for not wanting to join the teaching profession after graduating. One of the most frequently cited reasons for avoiding the teaching profession is dissatisfaction with working conditions, particularly low salaries. This aligns with research indicating that poor remuneration is a major deterrent to teacher retention in many countries, especially in low-income contexts like Malawi (Bennell & Akyeampong, 2007). Studies have consistently shown that low salaries, job insecurity, and lack of government support contribute to teacher dissatisfaction and high attrition rates (Mulkeen, 2010; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017). The financial struggles associated with teaching often lead individuals to seek alternative careers that offer better financial stability.

Several pre-service teachers also expressed self-doubt, believing they would not make good teachers. This is consistent with previous research that highlights how low self-efficacy among teachers can lead to career dissatisfaction and eventual exit from the profession (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2001). Self-doubt can stem from inadequate preparation during teacher training, lack of mentorship, and perceived inability to manage a classroom effectively (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011). Self-Determination theory attributes the low self-efficacy and self-doubt to the inability of the teacher education program to meet the three psychological needs of the student's autonomy, competence and relatedness. This, therefore, calls for the need for interventions such as mentorship programs and confidence-building strategies during teacher training; otherwise, self-doubt may continue to discourage individuals from entering the profession.

Some pre-service teachers acknowledged that they lacked passion for teaching and were only pursuing the degree as a means to an end. Research suggests that individuals who enter teacher education programmes without intrinsic motivation are more likely to leave the profession early or struggle with job satisfaction (Watt & Richardson, 2007). Passion for teaching has been linked to teacher effectiveness, job satisfaction, and long-term commitment (Han & Yin, 2016). These teachers rank lower on the Self-Determination continuum of the Self-Determination Theory. If student teachers pursue teaching purely for financial or circumstantial reasons, they may struggle with motivation, leading to poor performance.

Conclusion

This study examined pre-service teachers' levels of happiness with their education programme and explored the underlying reasons for their satisfaction or dissatisfaction. The findings indicate that the majority of student teachers (86.2%) expressed happiness about being trained as future teachers, while a smaller proportion (5.8%) reported unhappiness. Among the primary reasons for happiness, many students cited their passion for teaching and their long-held aspirations to become educators. Additionally, students appreciated the knowledge and skills gained through foundational education courses, which they believed prepared them for both professional and personal growth. The belief that teaching is a means to contribute positively to society was another critical factor in their satisfaction. Furthermore, employability played a role in their happiness, as some student teachers viewed their training as equipping them with skills applicable beyond traditional classroom settings, while others felt assured by government employment prospects for teachers. The alignment between the education programme's curriculum and their anticipated roles as teachers also reinforced their sense of fulfilment.

Conversely, students who reported unhappiness at being trained as future teachers and those (10%) who indicated that they would not want to join the teaching profession after graduating highlighted several challenges, including the demanding structure of the programme, which they perceived as overly long and academically intensive. The low social prestige of teaching in Malawi, coupled with negative perceptions from peers and broader society, further contributed to their dissatisfaction. Additionally, some students were placed into the Bachelor of Education programme without initially choosing it, leading to a lack of motivation and uncertainty about their future roles as teachers. Finally, self-doubt about their teaching capabilities emerged as a significant source of unhappiness for some students.

Implications for Teacher Education Policy and Practice

The findings of this study hold significant implications for teacher education policy and practice. To sustain and nurture the motivation of pre-service teachers, it is essential to promote passion-driven learning within teacher education programmes. This involves integrating hands-on experiences, reflective practice, and structured mentorship into the curriculum. Additionally, the continuous review and refinement of teacher education curricula are imperative to ensure that they remain practical, contextually relevant, and responsive to the evolving demands of the teaching profession.

Moreover, enhancing the employability of pre-service teachers requires the deliberate inclusion of high-value, transferable skills in the curriculum, informed by regular feedback from employers and other stakeholders in the education sector. Accordingly, the study recommends the institutionalisation of mentorship programmes, expanded opportunities for practical experience, strengthened partnerships with schools and educational institutions, and the provision of systematic career guidance. These interventions can contribute meaningfully to sustaining high levels of motivation among pre-service teachers.

For those students who exhibit lower levels of motivation or express unwillingness to enter the teaching profession upon graduation, targeted interventions are necessary. Addressing structural issues within teacher education—such as excessive course loads and the limited duration of teaching practice—can significantly improve the student experience. In addition, elevating the public image and status of the teaching profession through policy advocacy and improved working conditions may help counter negative perceptions and enhance motivation.

Students who are redirected into teacher education programmes without initially choosing the profession may particularly benefit from tailored mentorship and career counselling aimed at

fostering a sense of purpose and professional identity. Finally, ensuring a stronger alignment between curriculum content and the practical realities of the teaching profession can enhance pre-service teachers' preparedness and confidence, thereby strengthening their long-term commitment to the profession.

Limitations of the Study and Areas for Further Research

The first limitation of this study lies in its cross-sectional design, which offers only a snapshot of student teachers' satisfaction and career intentions at one point in time. As a result, the study does not capture how these perceptions may evolve throughout the training programme or after transitioning into the teaching profession. Future research should employ longitudinal designs that track pre-service teachers throughout their training and into their professional practice to better understand changes in motivation, satisfaction, and career decisions over time.

A second limitation is that the study did not analyse the two student cohorts separately. As a result, possible differences in perceptions and experiences between earlier- and later-stage student teachers were not explored. Future studies should disaggregate data by year of study or cohort to better capture these variations and provide more targeted insights into the evolving needs and expectations of student teachers at different stages of their preparation.

In addition, the study sample included very few fourth-year students. This limits the representation of views from those nearing the completion of their training, who may have more developed reflections on the programme. Subsequent research should ensure a more balanced representation across year levels to strengthen the reliability and comprehensiveness of findings.

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