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CONTENTS

**The Emotions Of University Lecturers As Root Causes Of The
Brain-Drain in Zimbabwe**

Fred Zindi & Cribert Munetsi.....1

**Early Childhood Education And Development In Malawi:
Major Challenges And Prospects**

Foster A. C. Kholowa and Dixie Maluwa-Banda.....11

**Language, Science, Technology, Mathematics (STM) and
Poverty Alleviation in Africa: A Case for Nigeria**

Uju Clara Umo.....22

Africanizing the School Curriculum: A Case For Zimbabwe

Pharaoh Joseph Mavhunga.....30

**Should Traditional Medicine Practised In Chivi,
Zimbabwe Be Included In School Curricula?**

Takawira Kazembe and Dominic Mashoko.....49

**Staff Supervision as a Tool for Organizational Success in
Ghana**

Eric Nyarko-Sampson.....70

**Students' Career Aspirations versus Occupational
Environments in The Economy of Ghana**

Frederick Ocansey.....88

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND DEVELOPMENT IN MALAWI: MAJOR CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS

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Abstract

Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) is an integral part of basic education and represents the first essential step in achieving the goals of education for all. The child's future personality is determined to a large extent by the learning capacity and value orientation of his/her first five years. ECEC enhances children's readiness for school and positively influences later school and academic achievement. This article provides an overview of the status of ECEC in Malawi and then discusses the main challenges and perceived prospects. ECEC was an initiative of Christian churches in the late 1960's. Consequently, collaborative efforts among various interested groups and organisations led to the creation of a coordinating body, the Association of Pre-school Playgroups in Malawi (APPM) in 1974. Up until the early 1990s, conventional forms of ECEC included nursery schools, kindergarten, playgroups, and crèche.

Few individuals and organisations in the urban areas mostly privately owned these ECEC Centres. The main challenges are those of access, service delivery, equity and staffing.

Introduction

International trends on the promotion of the rights of children (UNESCO 2004; Pence, 2004; Evans, 2004; UNICEF, 2002) regard education as a right for every child and hence the need to promote basic education. The

introduction of Free Primary Education (FPE) by Malawi in 1994 was a direct response to such international trends. It was considered to be a strong indication of the government's commitment to the 1990 Jomtien declaration on Education for All (MoE & UNESCO, 1996). FPE expanded access to primary school education opportunities for children although at the same time it had a negative impact on the quality of provision (PIF, 2001; Rose, 2003b; Kadzamira, *et al*, 2004).

great demand for a comprehensive Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) services which were seen as a better way of ensuring that children are well prepared for formal schooling.

It should be noted that ECEC is now being recognised far more than before in Malawi. The ECEC is being identified as a priority area in the Malawi Poverty Reduction Strategic Paper and Vision 2020 if Malawi is to fulfill its international commitments in the EFA and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). ECEC is being recognised as an integral part of basic education and represents the first essential step in achieving the goals of education for all. The child's future personality is determined to a large extent by the learning capacity and value orientation of his/her first five years. ECEC enhances children's readiness for school and positively influences later school and academic achievement.

However, HIV and AIDS threaten the attainment of the EFA goals set during the 2000 World Education Forum in Dakar. The Dakar Framework for Action adopted by the international education community draws attention to the urgent need to combat HIV and AIDS if EFA goals are to be achieved. HIV and AIDS also pose major threats to the broader goals for sustaining development and eliminating poverty.

In this article, we will provide the status of Early Childhood Education and Care in Malawi, paying particular attention to the trends, main drivers, access, participation, technical and financial support to ECEC in general. Thereafter, we will discuss the main challenges and perceived prospects.

The status of Early Childhood Education and Care

In Malawi, ECEC was an initiative of Christian churches in the late 1960's in response to the needs of a few full time employed women in the urban areas, who needed designated places for the care and recreation of their children while they were at work (Padambo, et al, 1996; Padambo, 1986). The first formal pre-school was opened in 1966 at Blantyre Mission of the Church of Central African Presbyterian (CCAP). The number of pre-schools had increased in Blantyre and other towns by 1969, but lacked proper coordination and direction. Consequently, collaborative efforts among various interested groups and organisations

led to the creation of a coordinating body known as the Association of Pre-school Playgroups in Blantyre (APPB) in 1970, which was renamed the Association of Pre-school Playgroups in Malawi (APPM) in 1974 (Padambo, et al, 1996).

External pressures and developments seem to have influenced the Malawi Government to recognise the need for ECEC, and therefore to some degree, in the 1970s the Government began to support activities related to the development of ECEC through the Ministry of Community Development and Social Welfare. In general, however, the Government played a very low key as evidenced from the relatively low budgetary support and resource allocation towards ECEC activities (Chalamanda, et al, 2001).

Several studies have been conducted to determine the situation of the children in Malawi and they have established that children's welfare was at risk due to poor health, poverty, huge domestic and farm demands, lack of education among parents and unfavourable childcare practices. Furthermore it was found that there were 1.4 million under-five children in Malawi, and that out of these 1.2 million lived in rural areas without access to ECEC. Consequently in order to improve childcare, the Government through UNICEF launched the Community Based Child Care (CBCC) Program in 1989 in three districts of Mzimba, Salima and Chikwawa. These child care centres were not sustained due to among other things, lack of meaningful community involvement in terms of how to run the child care centres (Chalamanda, et al, 2001).

Due to the increased negative impact of HIV and AIDS on Malawian communities and the escalation in numbers of orphans and other vulnerable children (OVCs), the Government's main strategy in handling the problem of OVCs has been to promote and support community based programmes. Therefore the government by 1992 adopted a communal approach to orphan care (MoGCS, 2003). The CBCC were revived and became an important strategy for orphan care as communities and individuals began to establish their own CBCC centres.

In 1999, UNICEF introduced a new approach to ECEC called Early Childhood Care for Survival, Growth and Development (ECC-SGD). The focus of this new form of ECEC was "promoting household and community child care practices using community dialogue strategy where caregivers are taught good child practices" (Chalamanda, et al, 2001). The project was piloted in rural areas of Mzimba, Kasungu Lilongwe, Mwanza and Blantyre, where various stakeholders including government departments, NGOs, private individuals and the communities in the districts were working together to implement the programme.

Up until the early 1990s, conventional forms of ECEC included nursery schools, kindergarten, playgroups, and crèche. These were mostly privately owned by few individuals and organisations in the urban areas (Padambo, 1986). The private owners charges fees in order to run the pre-schools. By 1992, the Malawi Government's adoption of the Community Based Child Care (CBCC) as strategy for the care of orphans and other vulnerable children, which eventually became a form of pre-schooling in the rural areas (MoGCS & UNICEF, 2003b, d), meant that the financing of this new form of pre-school was to be different from the more conventional ones in the urban areas bearing in mind the prevailing poverty in the rural setting. Although generally formal fees were not charged, for children's attendance of the CBCCs, communities were expected to mobilise resources for the pre-schools.

The local and international trends in Early Childhood Education and Care seem to have led to the adoption of a new understanding of ECEC in Malawi: an integrated model called National Integrated Early Childhood Development (NIECEC) (MoGCS & UNICEF, 2003a, d). The model is holistic in addressing children's needs as it consolidates all the services meant for the development of the child under one major programme. The rationale is that the needs of the child go beyond education (preparing children for formal schooling in primary school), which is often considered to be the major preoccupation of mainstream pre-schools. The Ministry of Gender and Community Services (MoGCS) therefore adopted the following definition of Integrated Early Childhood Development:

...an integrated set of programmes that provides synergy of care, protection, development and participation for

children and other caregivers for their adequate health, nutrition, psychosocial, and cognitive development. IECEC combines elements of infant stimulation, health and nutrition, early childhood education and early learning, community development, psychology, sociology, anthropology, child development, economics, spirituality and cultural development (MoGCS & UNICEF, 2003a, p.11)

It should be noted that this definition is also advocated by large international organisations in the ECEC discourse (Evans, 2000; OECEC, 1998, 2001). Following the adoption of the holistic approach, the ECEC system has a wide range of programmes all claimed to be part of ECEC. It is now a known fact that Malawi uses two approaches to providing ECEC Services. The first strategy is *Early Childhood Development (ECEC) Centres*, which includes Pre-school, Nursery Schools, Creches, Day Care Centres, and Playgroups.

The second approach, *Community Based Childcare Centres (CBCC)*, is informal ECEC Programme or rural pre-school care. According to the MoGCS & UNICEF (2003d), the CBCC “is a community-based parent-childcare service administered by parents ... [and] is designed to address childcare problems and needs in the rural communities where pre-school/ECEC services are not available” (p.21). It is claimed that this CBCC approach utilises strategies of Survival Growth and Development (SDG) and Integrated Management of Childhood Illnesses (IMCI) (MoGCS & UNICEF, 2003d, pp.6, 21-22), and that communities take an active role in the initiation, establishment and implementation of the CBCC centres. Within the CBCC there is also provision of pre-school elements to cater for the cognitive development of children (often called ‘early stimulation for learning’ in the MoGCS discourse).

Major Challenges in the provision of ECEC

One of the major challenges is that of access to ECEC services in Malawi. It is estimated that by 1999 Malawi had 1,631 ECEC Centres (MoGCS, 2003a). However most of these were concentrated in urban

areas, and as a consequence, the majority of the children in rural areas did not have access to these facilities and hence very few children have the opportunity to attend ECEC before enrolling in primary school (MGCS, 2003a: 6). By 2004, with the advent of CBCC programmes, the number of ECEC centres at national level increased to approximately 3,625 almost 50 percent increase from the 1999 estimates. Estimates in the number of ECEC centres as of September 2005 showed an overall national increase of 27%. By 2006 there were 6240 CBCCs enrolling 615,478 children. Despite such increases, the reality is that the available ECEC centres cater for only a small percentage of the total population of 2.2 million rural children eligible for ECEC services.

Another challenge is on the delivery of ECEC services. It appears that over time, the original idea of pre-schooling is being replaced with a more generic understanding of 'pre-school', which takes into consideration health and other social issues in the rural communities (MoGCS, 2003a, MoGCS & UNICEF, 2003a, d). This multi-dimensional approach to ECEC might entail complexities in the way the programme is delivered, and hence implications for preparation of children for school as was originally intended. As noted earlier on, most of the ECEC centres are fully operational in the urban areas where true ECEC services are provided. The rural areas have CBCCs which focus on child care. As a result, this has huge implications for the development of real ECEC in the rural areas. The extent to which such an approach is realistic to the rural communities is an interesting debate which needs more attention.

Another related challenge is that of equity in the provision of ECEC. The concept of CBCC as an approach to pre-schooling raises interesting issues about equity in the provision of ECEC services between the urban and rural contexts. While the creation of CBCCs seems to provide a safety net (school preparation in some ways) for disadvantaged children in the rural areas, especially in a situation where there was almost no provision previously, there also seems to be the question of whether rural children are being provided with the same quality of ECEC as those from the urban children through their ECEC Centres. It may be necessary to consider whether by having the two approaches certain groups of children in rural communities are not being further put in a disadvantaged position (marginalised) in terms of socialisation and preparation for formal

schooling, which seems to be realistically central in a context where quality of education is at stake, as well as where education is often regarded as a determinant to children's future socio-economic status.

In addition, the problems of community capacity in promoting the development of the child, such as lack of training for the majority of caregivers and pre-school teachers, lack of infrastructure as well as lack of basic resources (Mpinganjira & Chimombo, 2004; Chalamanda, et al, 2001), are key factors which may increase inequalities in the promotion of children's development between rural and urban ECEC centres.

When all these factors are taken into consideration, the need to address quality of provision in the promotion of ECEC in Malawi seems to be as critical as the issue of access. The provision of ECEC experiences that will promote children's development of early literacy skills is one such area that needs more attention. Given that illiteracy is very high in the rural areas, it can be argued that any model of ECEC adopted should realistically aim at addressing related issues which are at stake in the context of ECEC provision.

Potential Prospects

The goal of Malawi Government's ECEC policy is to help communities in making ECEC widely available and accessible particularly among the more disadvantaged groups, and to enhance the quality of ECEC. One way of achieving this goal is to encourage the participation of non-governmental organizations and other partners in extending early education to children in various forms.

According to officials from the Ministry of Women and Child Development (MoWCD), part of the explanation for the increase in the number and enrolment of children in the ECEC centres is due to the fact that some organisations and government departments are also supporting the introduction of ECEC centres at community level. The Malawi National AIDS Commission (NAC) is one such major organisation. Another explanation is that in order to have more reliable data from ECEC centres, the (MoWCD) was reported to be continuously making efforts to do some systematic surveying of the centres at district level

instead of just relying on figures provided by the District Social Welfare Offices.

Based on current enrolment data, there is generally an indication that at national level more female than male children are participating in ECEC in Malawi. This increase in female children's participation in ECEC centres seems to be a way forward for Malawi's education system especially at a time when girls' education needs to be promoted (Kadzamira & Chibwana, 2000; Chimombo et al, 2000; Maluwa-Banda, 2003). Furthermore, mechanisms of retention should be put in place by the Ministry of Education so that the majority of these children do not eventually drop out later. It is also extremely important to consider whether these female children in ECEC are being provided with quality learning experiences and appropriate life skills to propel them to the next levels of their education.

In general therefore, financing of ECEC is done in partnership between government and other interested partners, mainly major international organisations such as the World Bank, UNICEF, UNESCO, USAID, UNDP, UNFPA, and Save the Children-USA (MoGCS & UNICEF, 2003a). For the National ECEC programme, a detailed action plan and budget were developed to facilitate its implementation, with the possibility of substantial financial support from the international organisations (MoGCS, 2003a, and pp.46-62). Such international support should sincerely be appreciated especially bearing in mind that pre-schooling in Malawi has not made much headway in the past, with the majority of the children in the rural areas having to suffer the consequences. However, as has been reiterated elsewhere, given that these major international organisations make such substantial financial and material contributions to the development of ECEC in Malawi, the possibility of their huge influence on the designing and running of the National ECEC programme cannot be ruled out.

Conclusion

In general, the gross enrolment in early childhood programmes is still on the lower side compared to the importance of early education in enhancing a child's lifelong achievement. The MoWCD will need to

collaborate with interested partners in improving access and participation of children in ECEC. Additionally it is critical that quality issues are also addressed.

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