**Developing the right conditions for quality childhood development and school-readiness in rural Malawi**

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**Early childhood development, education and disability**

Early childhood development (ECD) is a major phase of growth and development that influences outcomes across an individual’s entire life, providing a crucial window of opportunity to prepare the foundation for life-long learning and participation (WHO, 2012). Overwhelming international evidence shows that high-quality ECD programmes benefit all children’s development (motor, cognitive, psycho-social and emotional well-being, life experiences and life chances (Blatchard & Woodhead, 2009). Since 2014 the UN, through its Sustainable Development Goals, (Goal 4) has begun to prioritise early childhood development internationally. The UN Goals seek to achieve improved quality education by ‘ensuring inclusive and equitable education and life-long learning opportunities’ (this includes persons with disabilities).

However, children with disabilities may not be considered ‘school-ready’, especially when they are expected to comply with rules, routines and subject-based curricula. Many do not always follow the same pathways as ‘typically’ developing children; they often require support and guidance that address the more practical skills needed for their daily environment.

**Early childhood development in Malawi**

ECD in Malawi is primarily the responsibility of the Ministry of Gender, Children, Disability and Social Welfare (MoGCDSW) which is expected to play a pivotal role in facilitating policy and strategy development and provide oversight for national monitoring and implementation of a multi-sector programme. The model of Community Based Child Care (CBCC) has been developing for over 30 years in response to national demands and has been widely adopted across the 34 districts. The main objective of this model is to create a self-sustaining childcare system, initiated, managed, and owned by the communities themselves (Neuman et al. 2014). Children attend these centres which are usually located within the same or neighbouring village as the child for 3 hours a day (usually from 8am to 11am, Monday to Friday). The structures vary enormously from dedicated, child-friendly rooms to borrowed buildings (e.g. a local church, a villager’s home) or outside under a tree. Parents tend to regard the existence of the CBCCs as mainly a means of preparing their children for primary schooling.

Evidence from recent studies in Malawi have demonstrated how, despite the strong interest to improve quality of ECD programmes, one of the main challenges encountered is providing adequate support for parents and their children with disabilities (ICED, 2014). Sadly, many children with disabilities do not attend school despite governmental policies and few are attending early child development programmes such as CBCCs (Neuman, et al., 2014). Furthermore, carers of children with disabilities have concerns about different elements of ECD provision including safety and protection of children in the centres, feeling satisfied that the volunteer caregivers know how to look after their child and are not going to neglect their child and having to either carry or physically support their child to the CBCC by carrying them on foot (Lynch & Wazakili, 2014).

**School readiness**

‘School readiness’ is associated with many important developmental outcomes, including academic success, completion of high school and eventual gainful employment and the ability to contribute to society (Barrington & Hendricks, 1989; Doherty, 1997; Trembley & Masselink, 1992). Over the past 15 years there has been increased emphasis by governments, parents and educators on the promotion of school readiness in young children (Janus & Offord, 2000).

Definitions of school readiness vary in their emphasis. A child is considered ready for school when she has the basic skills and knowledge in a variety of domains that enable the child to be successful at school (UNICEF, 2012). These minimum standards set the bar for what children should know and be able to do, so they enter school ready and ‘eager’ to learn, enabling a successful transition into primary school learning environment (Lara-Cinisomo et al. 2004). Success in school is often focused on the child’s knowledge, in literacy and numeracy, and behaviour, such as follow directions, work well with other children and engage in learning activities (Rouse, Brooks-Gunn and McLanahan, 2005). Comparatively parents typically stress pre-academic skills and knowledge (Diamond, Reagan and Bandyk, 2000), whilst primary school teachers tens to stress social and emotional aspects (Dockett and Perry, 2002). These maturational perspectives, where the child achieves a certain level of cognitive, socio-emotional and psychomotor development rest on the notion of ‘natural processes that cannot be hastened…’ (McDowall Clark, 2017).

**Developing appropriate assessment tools**

Currently, there are no ‘specifically dedicated’ assessments to measure school readiness of children attending CBCCs in Malawi, including children with disabilities. It is possible that some children attending the centres are missing out on important ‘windows of opportunities’ in early years development to increase their chances of being ‘school-ready’ such as providing them with opportunities to communicate their needs and solve problems. We are seeking to address the assessment and development of children with disabilities as part of part of a 3 year ESRC/DFID, ‘Raising Learning Outcomes’ funded project seeking to promote the inclusion of children with disabilities through the adaptation of assessment measures and scales as well as teaching curricula and teaching methods in Southern Malawi. We are seeking to gain a better understanding of the complex dynamics that can enable or inhibit quality ECD for children with disabilities and in turn their access to school.

Some key questions have arisen whilst conducting a review of tools and measures that measure child development as well as teacher-caregiver response to children’s learning caring needs as part of a three year ESRC/DFID project:

1. How do we develop a tool that is culturally sensitive to measuring children’s school readiness?
2. How can this tool be inclusive of children with disabilities?
3. What tools can be used to see children with disabilities in more positive light?
4. How do we develop assessment tool/s that are able to quickly inform the assessor and subsequent practitioners that a child is experiencing difficulties in specific domain areas and raise the necessary ‘red flags’ so that these delays are addressed in terms of interventions or development activities?

Over the 3 years of the project we are generating an evidence base through a mixed methods research design (qualitative case tracking of children and a trial) to try and help answer these questions as well as identify and test effective strategies to promote and secure the inclusion of children with disabilities in ECD provision in Malawi and thereby increase their chances of attending school.

**Assessing the children**

In terms of assessing ‘school-readiness’ skills, we developed a curriculum-based tool which was based on the Early Learning and Development Standards (ELDS) developed by UNICEF and the Ministry of Gender, Children, Disability and Social Welfare in Malawi (2015) as it was hoped this would be culturally sensitive and appropriate to the participants in the research. We focused on the domains of ‘language, literacy and communication’ (including emergent reading skills and ability to communicate effectively) and ‘mathematical and numerical knowledge’ (including numerical operations and measurement) with approximately 920 children in 48 CBCCs in a rural district in Southern Malawi. However the current ELDS have not been validated for a Malawi child population, and subsequent questions have been raised about the appropriateness and relevance of these standards.

Whilst conducting the assessments, it quickly became apparent that many of the children assessed (aged 3-5) were unable to even perform the most basic tasks e.g. holding a book in the correct way. In terms of the Early Learning and Development Standards (ELDS), many of the children (of a range of abilities) are not performing according to their chronological age. When children were assessed on the item below (see box below), this relied on the children having had exposure to print, pictures and books. This was because very few CBCCs had access to any reading materials thus reducing their exposure to written print and pictures, although the MoGCDSW expects children to be able to interact with these media. Without essential reading materials, the CBCCs are unable to play a crucial role in supporting children and families to become ‘school ready’, as children are not evolutionarily conditioned to expect and respond to reading. This is experience dependent, in comparison to language, socialisation and physical development which would be considered to experience expectant.

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| 1. ***Talks about pictures in books and handle books correctly (3-4 yrs)***   Give the child the book either upside down or back to front. It is important to observe the child turning the book so that it can be read in the correct way. Ask the child about pictures in the book. In order to get the child’s attention you can say - “Look, a book. What do you think it is about?’ or ‘Look, a book, what can you see?” See if child makes any comments about the pictures. The child can only pass if he/she is able to do both tasks successfully. |

**Moving to a new model of school readiness**

Today, school readiness is recognized as a multi-faceted construct (Scott-little et al., 2006) comprising several dimensions. One of these dimensions is children’s readiness for school, therefore focusing on learning and developmental outcomes. A second dimension is the schools’ readiness for children, which focuses on school-level outcomes and practices that foster and support a smooth transition into primary school and promote the learning of all children. A third dimension refers to families’ readiness for school, which focuses on parental and caregiver attitudes and involvement in children’s early learning as well as development and transition to school. (Nonoyama-Tarumi and Bredenburg, 2009, p.40)

UNICEF (2012) proposes a model with two characteristic features - transition and gaining competencies and the three dimensions; children’s readiness for school, schools’ readiness for children and families and communities’ readiness for school. The term ‘transition’ can be interpreted in different ways, depending on the setting, the nature of the cultural and psychological adjustments involved and the role of the actors in shaping their transition (Vogler et al., 2008). Looking more closely at the three dimensions, we can see that the model places importance on all three working together ‘in tandem’. This is because school readiness is a time of transition that requires the involvement between individuals, families and systems, with all developing expectations of the three dimensions;

What do schools expect of children and their families?

What do children and families expect and understand about schools?

McDowall Clarke (2017) states that ‘ready schools are those prepared for a diverse range of children and able to respond to their varied developmental levels by providing environments that capitalise on the skills young children bring with them (p.106). Children who are ‘genuinely ready for school are independent, self-motivated and intellectually curious and this may be at odds with the universal, fixed measures of achievement that are assumed by a focus on curriculum outcomes’ (p.106).

If we change the focus to ‘ready schools’ we are able to shift the focus away from the ‘child’ who is often seen as the problem to the school context. We can ask the question;

**‘What extent are schools ready for the varying developmental levels and needs of all children,** particularly for those who do not follow similar developmental or learning trajectories as **‘typically’ developing children’?**

To answer this question, the role of families, parents, the community and pivotally the CBBCs in the transaction of getting children ready for school must be examined. Further questions can be asked:

* How are all children supported and enabled to become school ready?
* How are child carers/parents in CBCCs being made aware of schools expectations of children?
* How can CBCCs, parents and families and communities work with schools to prepare the diversity of families and their children for school and schools to be ready for a range of children and their families?

To help us to answer these questions, we need to look at the nuanced complexity of the tripartite relationship (between the child, child-carer-community and school) by proposing a dynamic model of readiness developed by McDowall Clark which looks at how the three distinct actors – child, school and community. This links with the socio-cultural approach to learning (Vygotsky, 1978) and the bio-ecological model based on Bronfenbrenner’s bio-ecological systems model examining the interplay of the family group, community and wider society (1994). Like Vygotsky, Bronfenbrenner argues that the most proximal influences on development are those processes set within the microsystem, which he defines as; ‘a pattern of activities, social roles and interpersonal relations experienced by the developing person in a given face-to-face setting (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). These foundational theories can help us to frame the different perspectives and policies and young children’s cognitive, socio-emotional and behavioural outcomes in relation to school readiness.

Rather than the school and community staying within their own boundaries, there is a need for both actors to cross into each other’s boundaries to develop the necessary relationships and information sharing which will support a smoother transition for the child with disabilities into primary school.

**School readiness for children with disabilities**

***Figure 1: Dynamic model showing the inter-connecting of child, school and family/community (McDowall Clark, 2017)***

**Conclusion**

The dynamic model shows that rather than the school and community staying within their own boundaries, there is a need for both actors to cross into each other’s boundaries to develop the necessary relationships and information sharing which will support a smoother transition for the child with disabilities into primary school. So if school readiness is conceptualised as in Figure 1, and was focused on literacy in Malawi as above, it is dependent upon many factors including the following;

* developmental approaches to understanding and developing literacy skills that are inclusive of children with disabilities;
* the quality of ECD programmes;
* the opportunities for children to develop literacy skills at home, in the community and at CBCCs;
* access to appropriate resources and spaces for literacy at home and in the CBCC;
* participating within an environment such as a CBCC that is conducive and supportive of developing these skills;
* the quality, intensity and duration of the learning and teaching;
* the skills/literacy levels of staff in the CBCC;
* parent and carers’ own literacy levels;
* the ECD standards around literacy being inclusive of diverse needs, and the validation process.

Finally, to help answer some of the questions posed in this paper, we will be conducting a small number of case studies of children with disabilities at CBCCs over the next 6 -8 months. It is hoped that by tracking children’s involvement in the centres, we will be able to better understand the complexities of supporting children with disabilities in rural communities and identify ways of utilising existing structures to ensure these children receive the appropriate care and development.

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