Improving education performance of children in Balaka and Mangochi Districts in Malawi

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CHANGE PACKAGE

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For more information on the work of the USAID ASSIST Project, please visit www.usaidassist.org or write assist-info@urc-chs.com.

Recommended citation

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I. Background

Malawi has an estimated population of 16 million. The country’s HIV prevalence rate is 10.6%, with one million people living with HIV. More than half (58%) of those infected are girls and women. The HIV pandemic continues to infect 10,000 people a year, and approximately 46% of new infections occur among young people aged 15-24 years.\(^1\) The disease impacts thousands of families, leaving a growing number of orphans and vulnerable children (OVC) children affected by HIV and AIDS, now standing at 1.8 million.\(^2\)

Almost half (49.6%) of Malawi’s girl children are married off before their 18th birthday and 10% of boys and girls aged 6-13 years are not in school.\(^3\) Orphans and vulnerable children and their families in Malawi are faced with a myriad of challenges including access to essential services such as health, education, economic wellbeing, and protection. According to United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization’s (UNESCO) institute statistics, as of March 2016, 65.75% of the adult population (aged 15 years and above) in Malawi are able to read and write. About 90% of the population still lives below the income poverty line of US$2 per day threshold.\(^4\) The country has a total of 3.6 million pupils enrolled in primary schools, leaving 11% of children of official primary school ages out of school.\(^5\) The country has made strides in improving enrolment nationally in primary schools which is currently at 97% and the completion rate in primary schools is at 74%. However there remain a number of challenges to attaining good quality education outcomes in the primary schools. The Ministry of Education in their Education Sector Plan (2008-2017) has a strategic priority objective of improving the quality and relevance of education in primary schools, a commendable and achievable objective, if primary schools embrace continuous improvement methods in how they address numerous challenges in existing primary schools.

In 2009, the USAID Health Care Improvement (HCI) project, with support from the USAID Mission in Malawi and the U.S. President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR), supported the Ministry of Gender, Children, Disability, and Social Welfare (MOGCDSW) to develop quality standards aimed at guiding the delivery of services provided to vulnerable children in Malawi. USAID HCI and its follow on, the USAID Applying Science to Strengthen and Improve Systems (ASSIST) project, had a focused strategy that relied on the following principles: 1) enhancing the capacity of MOGCDSW and the Ministry of Health (MOH) at both the national, district, and community level to facilitate subsequent continuous QI work in various service areas. The use of the QI approach promoted coordination, cost efficiency, and sustainability of quality social services; 2) creating a conducive environment at community level so that care providers were able to identify their own priorities and seek necessary support from various stakeholders providing services; and 3) facilitating further institutionalization of results, service providers focused their efforts in developing processes to align providers and decision makers at all levels in existing

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government structures such as District Implementation Plan Committees, District Executive Committees, Area Development Committees, Village Development Committees, and traditional leadership.

Starting in fiscal year (FY) 2013, with support from ASSIST, the MOGCDSW mobilized 5 community quality improvement (QI) teams to be involved in improvement work in two districts of Balaka and Mangochi. The community QI teams identified, tested, and implemented sustainable interventions to improve the welfare of vulnerable children and their families. ASSIST Malawi’s work on OVC supported the five PEPFAR agendas, particularly the agenda of promotion and protection of human rights for all vulnerable populations.

From February-March 2015, the MOGCDSW selected and supported five new community QI teams in Balaka and Mangochi Districts to facilitate improvement in care provided to vulnerable children and their families bringing the total to ten established teams supporting 151 villages in the two districts. The ten teams were trained in integration of QI and gender. During FY15, effective evidence-based interventions for improving education services were compiled in a draft change package for easy reference by other new districts and teams initiating new improvement work in education services. The community QI teams worked with 20 rural primary schools from Balaka and Mangochi districts to improve termly academic performance of vulnerable children attending primary schools. The teams found that vulnerable children face many barriers to academic success, ranging from food scarcity at the household level, lack of scholastic materials, limited parenting skills, and scarcity of positive role models in the communities for children to emulate. These barriers result in poor education outcomes among children who drop out of school, particularly girl children. The community teams identified a number of changes that led to improvement in outcomes and these changes have been compiled into a “change package,” an organized summary of changes or solutions that have been tested and lead to improved outcomes.

II. Change package development process

In 2015, 10 community QI teams in Balaka and Mangochi Districts were supported by the MOGCDSW at national and district level to facilitate formation of multi-sectoral community improvement teams to work in a coordinated way to improve social services as illustrated in Figure 1 below. ASSIST consolidated evidence-based interventions for improving education performance services through a series of three harvest meetings with the teams. During these meetings, teams shared how they tested and implemented changes in their targeted primary schools to improve education performance of children enrolled in the schools.

In FY16, MOGCDSW, with support from ASSIST, compiled a list of effective changes that the community QI teams found could improve education performance in primary schools in the ten communities. This change package documents the process the ten communities took to improve education services for boys and girls and what specific interventions were tested to address numerous challenges in education service area.
III. Intended use of this education change package

This education performance change package is intended to be used by community based organizations (CBOs), implementing partners working in education, primary school staff, district stakeholders planning to improve education performance in primary schools and providers working in other social services at the community level. The stakeholders can benefit from actual experiences and results achieved by the ten communities that underwent the process of improvement using the skills acquired during the trainings, field mentoring visits, and quarterly learning sessions.

IV. Roadmap to improve education performance

The MOGCDSW, with support from ASSIST, guided the teams through the roadmap illustrated in Figure 2 to improve education performance of children in 20 primary schools. The first two steps on developing OVC service standards and training of improvement team members are described in other documents.

Figure 1: Overview of the multi-sectoral community team involved in improvement work
A. Conducted Child Assessments

After receiving trainings in QI, ten CBOs mobilized stakeholders in their communities to form quality improvement teams. The community improvement teams reviewed their OVC registers to assess whether the list of vulnerable children was current. The teams updated their registers to incorporate all other vulnerable children in the communities. After updating the OVC register data, the teams systematically selected 25% of the registered vulnerable children from the list in the registers. Every fifth registered child in the list was selected.

The team members were trained in assessing children using the Child Status Index (CSI). After the teams conducted the assessments, they came together to share experiences of how the process went in different villages and consolidated the findings using simple tally sheets as shown in Figure 3.
B. Problem Analysis

Based on the scores of the CSI assessment summary, the ten QI teams ranked the three priority problems for vulnerable children in their community based on the findings of the assessment summaries. At first teams were tempted to work on all the priority problems but knowing the data demands required from the teams, the QI teams were encouraged to select only one improvement area and learn from the process of how community improvement of social services can be done and then ramp up other improvement aims once they know and are confident of the process of improvement. ASSIST helped the teams to consolidate the simple summaries from the tally sheets and compiled some graphs for the QI teams as shown in Figure 4.

The ten QI teams were taught several QI tools for brainstorming root causes of social problems such as the 5 Whys, problem trees, driver diagrams, flow charts, and fishbone diagrams. One of the tools that teams preferred was the fishbone diagram. This analytical tool helped the community teams to systematically analyse the root causes of social challenges they faced to achieve quality of education services in primary schools in the community.

C. Testing changes and collecting data

The teams were trained in how to apply the model of QI in identifying what problems the team was going to focus on, how they would tell if the solutions tested led to improvement and how they would brainstorm possible solutions as a multi-sectoral team. The teams were guided by three key questions to kick-start improvement work as illustrated in the Model for Improvement shown in Figure 5.

After the community teams brainstormed the potential solutions that could address the root causes they had discovered in their problem analysis, the teams developed improvement plans with specific objectives and to address the social challenges seen in the district. After listing the changes, the teams proceeded to test changes one at a time even though some changes were tested concurrently with other activities. For example, the teams may have agreed to use continuous assessments of children to improve their performance in school as well as boost the community involvement in primary schools’ activities. The QI team documented these activities in their QI journal.
To sustainably encourage the teams to report on their improvement work for vulnerable children to the existing government structures like the District Social Welfare Office (DSWO), they were given data collection forms to track and collect education performance data for children in primary schools for each term. The primary schools would provide the termly academic performance data and submit to the QI team for consolidation and validation before submitting to the DSWO for consolidation and submission to the MOGCDSW offices at the national level.

From 2013, the ten communities started collecting academic performance termly data up to July 2017, the final quarter of the project. Figure 6 is a summary of results of 14 primary schools that were supported by the 10 QI teams in Mangochi District (ASSIST phased out its support in Balaka district that had six schools supported by QI teams in 2016). In the first term, there was an overall decrease in the performance of pupils in 2016-2017. Some of the reasons for the decrease in school performance included the onset of rains, causing flooding and cancellation of classes that meet outside, which affected the attendance of pupils towards the end of the term. In addition to these factors, most schools had challenges in performance due to the shift into new classes, particularly in the first term while children get acclimatized to new class teachers’ teaching methods. During terms 4, 7, and 11 it was noticed that the performance of these first academic terms (September – December) would drop the performance across the years. ASSIST engaged the teams to address the challenges that led to poor performance by identifying changes that led to improvement. Across all the terms, it was observed that the schools were still struggling to improve the performance of the learners as the overall performance dropped further particularly in Term 11. Some of the reasons for the poor performance included: low participation of school teachers and head masters in improvement activities that affected the testing of changes in the schools. In schools where the head teachers were active in QI activities, they motivated the school teachers to engage in QI activities unlike in schools where a representative of the head teacher was a member of the QI team. In term 11, ASSIST worked with the newly established district QI teams, particularly representatives from the District Education Office, to specifically support the teams to select changes that really improved primary school performance.
D. Implementation of successful tests of change

The ten communities tested a number of changes targeting the primary schools’ management, children in schools, and communities as well as the vulnerable families themselves. Table 1 provides a list of all the changes tested in the 20 primary schools.
Table 1: Summary of effective changes tested to improve education performance of children in rural primary schools in two districts of Malawi

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Target</th>
<th>Change idea and # of sites testing the change</th>
<th>How the change was tested</th>
<th>Results</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Guardians and the community</td>
<td>Using mother groups to encourage girls and boys to regularly and consistently attend school</td>
<td>QI teams identified and oriented the selected volunteer mother groups’ volunteers in the primary schools on their role as volunteer mothers and how they would be contributing toward improving education performance of children in primary schools.</td>
<td>All schools that tested this change observed improvement in education performance.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>4 out of 20 primary schools tested this change. The primary schools included Toleza, Kabango, Kwilembe, and Nakanyanja.</td>
<td>Linking the primary schools and the guardians of children enrolled in the school, at the end of each week, the women collected lists of absentees from the primary school's head teacher and followed these children into their communities.</td>
<td>Toleza from 47% to 61% (Oct 2014-Feb 2017)</td>
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<td>During follow up visits to the absentees’ households, the volunteers found out from the guardians why their children were absent from school and relayed messages from the schools to the parents and the children.</td>
<td>Kabango from 49% to 80% (Oct 2014-February 2017)</td>
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<td>The volunteer mothers encouraged the parents of children that were absent to provide time for children to study and attend primary school regularly and consistently because it contributes to the good education performance of children.</td>
<td>Kwilembe from 60% to 67% (Oct 2014-Feb 2017)</td>
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<td>The guardians were encouraged to take time to reflect with their children on what they have learnt in school each day and track the performance of their children in school.</td>
<td>Nakanyanja from 49% to 70% (Jan 2015-Oct 2016)</td>
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<td>Parents were sensitized on the economic benefits of education so that they encourage their children to get educated.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>The volunteer mothers counseled the children on the importance of education, attending school regularly and dangers of early sexual relationships.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>At Kwilembe and Nakanyanja, the women also made their own initiative to support some ultra-poor children. They contributed K100/month and</td>
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<td>Strengthening linkages between community and school management</td>
<td>5 of 20 schools tested this change. The schools were Mpapa, Lusalumwe, Nakanyanja and Kwilembe and Kankao primary schools</td>
<td>QI team, through class teachers, interviewed children to find out their views on some of the reasons why they were experiencing challenges in academic performance in the termly exams. QI team conducted meetings with parents and guardians to share with them the performance of children in the primary school and to share some of the reasons why children were not performing well in their termly exams. QI teams conducted meetings with teachers to explore the reasons why children were failing in their termly exams. To understand the perspective of local leaders from the area, the team shared the results of the targeted primary school with the local leaders and agreed on some ways forward on how chiefs could help in improving the performance of children in school. During existing community forums when they talk of other community development issues, local leaders encouraged parents to educate their children so that communities would benefit QI teams conducted meetings with the PTAs and School Management Committees to understand their perspective on the reasons why many children in their targeted primary school were not doing well academically.</td>
<td>All schools that tested this change observed improvement in education performance. Mpapa from 51% to 57% (Jan 2015 - April 2015) Lusalumwe from 17% to 33% (Jan 2015 - April 2015) Nakanyanja from 36% to 45% (Jan 2015 - April 2015) Kankao from 48% to 70% (Oct 2014 - July 015) Kwilembe from 60% to 67% (Oct 2014 - Feb 2017)</td>
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| **Children** | Using youth mentors in the community | QI teams presented the academic termly test results to all the relevant stakeholders to appreciate the level of the education performance at the school.  
The QI team presented recommendations and proposed solutions with the support of the teachers in the QI team.  
Bylaws were established to restrain local business video shop owners from opening their video shows during school hours since it was distracting for children going to school.  
Parents worked together with the PTA, teachers and school committees to encourage their children to attend school regularly.  
Chiefs committed to ensure bylaws were enforced in the catchment area. | After testing this change, Jiramu Primary School observed improvement in pupils’ performance from 63% to 70% (Oct 2014-July 2015) |
<p>| <strong>Using Children Corners sessions to promote extra-curricular activities</strong> | QI teams established or revamped already existing Children’s Corner Centres in the communities. | | After testing this change, 2 of 3 schools observed improvement in performance. |</p>
<table>
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<td>and psychosocial wellbeing among children in primary schools.</td>
<td>QI teams targeted children with extracurricular activities after school or during the weekend in Community Children’s Corner Centres. QI teams worked with the school committees, PTAs, and village development committees to identify caregivers who are usually secondary school leavers to facilitate sessions with children and other vulnerable children QI teams oriented the Children’s Corner caregivers on their roles and how to facilitate the children corner sessions. QI teams were provided Ministry of Gender draft guidelines on managing community Children’s Corner centre activities. The Children’s Corner activities included playing sports activities such as football, netball, skipping, running, focus group discussions on particular health topics, child rights and responsibilities awareness, resilience topics, quiz sessions, debates, sharing experiences of role models from the community, role playing, storytelling, memory books, journey of life, accessing HIV sexual reproductive health education messages, and discussions on any social challenges faced in school. The Child Protection Worker supported the Children’s Corner facilitators particularly in handling child protection cases identified from the centres.</td>
<td>Lusalumwe from 45% to 55% (Oct 2015-Jan 2016) St Ignasio from 67% to 43% (July 2014-Oct 2014) Nakanyanja from 49% to 50% (Jan 2015-April 2015)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>School</td>
<td>Conducting regular continuous assessments in schools</td>
<td>QI team conducted regular continuous assessments on bi-weekly basis and the results of the exams were posted on the school notice boards. Pupils were told well in advance of the upcoming tests and the subjects to allow time for them to prepare for the exams. After bi-weekly exams the teachers reviewed each of the exams with pupils to ensure they understood topics and difficult questions before the final exam.</td>
<td>All the schools that tested the change observed improvement in education performance. Chingwenya from 30% to 55% (Oct 2014—July 2015) Masongola from 57% to 63% (Jan 2015-July 2015)</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Masongola I Primary Schools</td>
<td>Using improvised teaching materials</td>
<td>Teachers had a meeting with the guardians and PTA to discuss problem that teachers didn’t have copies of teaching guides. Guardians and PTA agreed to contribute towards the photocopying of the teaching guides. The head teacher and the QI team were only allowed to borrow the guide and make copies and return the original copy to the Division.</td>
<td>Nsanga from 72% to 77% (Jan 2015-July 2015) Chilore from 45% to 62% (Jan 2015-July 2015)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Masongola I Primary Schools</td>
<td>Using school competitions to improve education performance of children in primary school</td>
<td>Class competitions held for standard 5-8 classes. Teachers pledged rewards to the pupils that got the highest marks on the exams. Pupils that did well were rewarded in the presence of their colleagues with exercise books, pens, hardcover books and mathematical instruments boxes. Guardians or parents were advised to bring gifts to encourage the children to continue performing well in academic tests.</td>
<td>After testing this change, the three school schools observed improvement in the performance of pupils Chilore from 67% to 68% (Oct 2015-Jan 2016) Chingwenya: 28% from 30% (Oct 2014-Jan 2015) Mpapa from 76% to 77% (Oct 2015-Jan 2016)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Using supervision of teachers in primary schools</td>
<td>This change was tested at Chingwenya, Masongola 1, and Chilore Primary Schools</td>
<td>The Head, the deputy head teachers, and mentor teachers supervised the teachers during classroom sessions as they were teaching. All teachers were notified that they will randomly be selected for the supervision and a schedule was developed allocating the supervisors to classes every week. School staff meetings were held once a week. During the meetings, challenges noticed were discussed, where teachers that delivered lessons appropriately were recognized and the other teachers were encouraged. Teachers were allocated to other classes to supervise their colleagues and provide positive feedback to the observed teachers.</td>
<td>After testing this change, the three schools observed improvement in the performance of pupils. Chingwenya from 55% to 74% (July 2015-Jan 2016) Masongola from 63% to 70% (July 2015-Jan 2016) Chilore from 43% to 45% (Oct 2014-Jan 2015)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Establishing mathematics and science clubs in primary schools</td>
<td>This change was tested at Mpapa, Kankao, Wanje, and Jiramu Primary Schools</td>
<td>School clubs were established to encourage participation of students that had problems in mathematics and science. Pupils were engaged in various activities such as mathematics competitions, math exercises, and quizzes for mental calculations. The pupils were divided to work and solve problems in groups that are usually formed during each club session. This is done to encourage peer learning. The schools allocated one or two teachers to support and manage the pupils during club sessions.</td>
<td>The education performance improved for all the schools that tested this change. Mpapa PS performance improved from 76% to 77% (Oct 2015-Jan 2016) Jiramu PS improved from 61% to 64% (Jan 2016-July 2015) Kankao PS performance improved from 50% to 60% (Jan 2015-July 2015) Wanje PS performance improved from from 39% to 53% (Oct 2015-Jan 2016)</td>
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</table>
V. Lessons Learned

- Testing of changes in primary schools should be linked to the identified underlying challenges from the problem analysis process.
- It was a particular challenge for teachers of large classes to improve education performance in such classes.
- Community cultural factors and norms are deep rooted and can require a lot of sensitization and mindset changes for the children to start regarding education as having a potential for economic benefits in their future. Improvement was limited in such communities.
- The multisectoral community teams brought together expertise from within the communities and they collaborated to work together and used the available local resources to achieve better outcomes for vulnerable children in primary schools and in the communities.
- Primary schools and QI teams adopted the improvement approach of using evidence to solve social problems that existed in the communities and to share with other potential stakeholders in the area.

VI. Recommendations

- The Ministry of Education at district, division, and national level should intensify systematic monitoring of primary schools to ensure positive outcomes for children particularly in rural areas.
- Student teachers should be given all the necessary teaching materials and guides when allocated to primary schools to ensure quality education is achieved.
- The Ministry of Education needs to have a system of monitoring education performance data in primary schools for classes that are not exam classes so that schools are encouraged to collect, compile, analyze, and use education performance data to improve the academic performance of children particularly vulnerable children in the schools.
- Some primary schools need construction of additional blocks to reduce the number of classes learning outside the classes where children are easily distracted by surrounding activities.
- Schools that maintain quality education records for primary schools should be rewarded and recognized to encourage teachers to maintain accurate education records in primary schools.
- Government should explore suitable ways of supporting local leaders in discouraging video shows in the communities particularly during school hours.
VII. References
