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# Evaluating the provision of flexible learning for children at risk of primary school dropout in Malawi

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### ABSTRACT

Communities in Malawi selected 15 children deemed “at-risk” – predominantly orphans – in Class 6 of each of 20 intervention schools to receive learning materials, support from the community and a school “buddy.” An experimental evaluation found that dropout was reduced by 45% across intervention schools compared to 20 control schools. The program had spillover effects, indirectly reducing dropout among older pupils in the class not deemed at-risk. These findings imply that age, and not orphanhood, was the main indicator of dropout risk and that when targeting criteria are considered carefully, flexible learning programs can reduce dropout substantially among vulnerable children.

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## 1. Introduction

Malawi is one of several sub-Saharan African countries whose education systems are characterized by very high initial enrolments in primary schooling but with high repetition and dropout leading to low completion rates, and by falling transition rates to secondary and tertiary education (Lewin, 2007). According to survival rates calculated in 2010, approximately half (52%) of all enrolled pupils fail to reach their final year of the primary school cycle (Ministry of Education Science and Technology, 2010). Approximately 20% of children of primary school-going age do not attend school (NSO, 2000, 2005; NSO and UNICEF, 2007). Consequently, Malawi is not yet on track to reach Universal Primary Education (UPE) by 2015 and the 2011 Education for All Global Monitoring Report calls for such countries to improve school retention and progression by raising educational quality and providing ‘additional support and learning opportunities for the poorest and most vulnerable learners’ (UNESCO, 2011 p. 97).

Two questions arise: Who are the poorest and most vulnerable learners in Malawi? And what sort of additional support and learning opportunities do they need? One commonly identified group of vulnerable learners is children affected by HIV and AIDS either because they are orphans or because they live with

chronically ill parents or guardians (Pridmore, 2007; Bennell, 2005). Educational responses to the impact of HIV and AIDS on children’s access to learning include: subsidization of school-related costs to address poverty and promote demand; school feeding programs and health initiatives to encourage enrolment and reduce absenteeism; community mobilization and support; identification, monitoring and follow-up of vulnerable children, including school-based counseling and psychosocial support; open and flexible modes of delivery to reach marginalized children, as well as more general improvements in the quality of education (Pridmore and Yates, 2005; Bennell, 2005; Boler and Carroll, 2003; Boler and Jellema, 2005; Carr-Hill et al., 2002; Hepburn, 2001; Kelly, 2000; Rispel, 2006).

Among these strategies, Pridmore and Yates (2005) argues that there is much unexplored potential in open, distance and flexible learning (ODFL). In Malawi, ODFL has mainly been used to widen and support access to secondary education through now-defunct distance education study centers (Murphy, 1993), to train teachers (Streuli and Moleni, 2007; Steiner-Khamsi and Kunje, 2011), and more recently to support early grade learners through the Interactive Radio Instruction (IRI) program Tikwere (“let’s climb”), targeted at the first three years of primary school. However, Yates (2008) indicates that although some statements about ODL are integrated into mainstream education plans, Malawi does not yet have specific policies on open or distance education.

In addition to support for learning, vulnerable children living in high HIV prevalence areas also need support for living (Ishikawa et al., 2010; UNAIDS, 2001). This dual need has been addressed in

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the Circles of Support initiative developed by the Soul City Institute in South Africa and piloted in Botswana, Namibia and Swaziland. This initiative mobilizes networks of family, friends and neighbors to develop and undertake small actions to support vulnerable learners. A qualitative evaluation suggests that this initiative has been successful in supporting vulnerable children to continue with their schooling (Dlamini, 2005).

In this article we describe and evaluate the SOFIE (Strengthening Open and Flexible learning to Increase Educational access) project, which aimed to tackle problems of dropout and grade repetition in an area of high HIV prevalence by complementing government schooling with additional support for learning typical of ODFL initiatives, and with support networks more common to programs targeted at children made vulnerable by HIV and AIDS.

Despite a substantial literature on policy options and strategies to mitigate the impact of HIV and AIDS on children's access to education there is a lack of evidence from experimental studies. Indeed, such evidence is lacking for the support of orphans and vulnerable children in general (Schenk, 2009) and yet it is critical for evidence-based policy decisions.

### 1.1. The SOFIE project

The SOFIE project took place in Phalombe and Mzimba South districts in Malawi. Case studies in these districts (Jere, 2008) found that irregular attendance and dropout was common among vulnerable children (Pridmore and Jere, 2011) whose high aspirations and recognition of the opportunities afforded by education were often overwhelmed by competing household demands for resources and children's time. The case studies found that school children, especially girls, were required to care for siblings and chronically sick parents, which contributed to poor school attendance. Impoverished households were often dependent on children's work or on petty trading to bring in food or income. Intra-household discrimination resulted in a lack of encouragement for orphans, especially double orphans, to attend school. Girls suffered disproportionately from this discrimination, being required to do chores instead of going to school, or being pushed into early marriage. Such problems were exacerbated by a community-wide loss of social cohesion in HIV-exposed communities, which left some orphans uncared for and open to abuse.

At the school level, policies were found to be unsupportive of orphans and poor children. Pupils were often sent home if they were unable to buy a uniform, or were poorly dressed, or did not have adequate notebooks or pens. No systematic attempts were made to identify vulnerable children, beyond that required for donor-supported school feeding programs. The few initiatives present to assist with the welfare of vulnerable children were piecemeal, limited in scope and largely community-led; guidance and counseling were not provided.

In this context, there is clearly great potential to increase support for the education of vulnerable children and this was the aim of the SOFIE project intervention. The intervention is described in detail elsewhere (see Pridmore and Jere, 2011) and summarized here. Communities were asked to select 15 pupils whom they considered at-risk of dropout from school. Each at-risk pupil received a 'school-in-a-bag' that contained English and Mathematics national curriculum textbooks and supplemental self-study learner guides. School buddies (mentor pupils) were recruited to support at-risk pupils' learning, to follow them up when they were absent and if required, to carry self-study guides to class teachers for grading. Local secondary-school leavers were recruited as volunteers to run clubs for vulnerable children identified as at-risk. The purpose of the clubs was to provide additional learning opportunities and support outside of school, in a friendly and informal environment. Each club leader received training, a club

leader's manual and a portable resources kit (a 'school-in-a-box') to set up club activities. Teachers also received training and were responsible for keeping a register of all pupils identified as at-risk and for regularly monitoring their progress and participation in class activities.

Each school had a SOFIE sub-committee including School Management Committee (SMC) and Parent Teachers Association (PTA) representatives, the school's headteacher, the class teacher and club leader. The committee identified vulnerable children for inclusion on the at-risk register based on criteria they developed in training workshops (see Appendix). Criteria were emphasized that reflected the Government of Malawi's (2005) definition of a vulnerable child and included family and household characteristics (living with elderly, infirm or chronically ill adults or in child-headed households), school-related factors (grade repetition, irregular attendance, poor performance and participation in class) and general welfare (socially isolation, experiencing hungry and/or poor health, being poorly dressed, lacking schools materials).

An examination of the community's process of selecting vulnerable children in this project has the potential to inform our understanding of the concepts of orphanhood and vulnerability more broadly. Both of these concepts have both evolved over time (Sherr et al., 2008) in part to reflect a recognition that children living in areas of high HIV prevalence are often most vulnerable when their parents are sick and in need of care (Foster and Williamson, 2000) as well as in the aftermath of a parental death. Revised definitions also acknowledge the greater risk for orphans living in female-headed and child-headed households. However, the use of the term vulnerability remains problematic because community perceptions frequently differ from those used to target programs (Schenk, 2008; Skinner et al., 2006) and may relate more to a perceived lack of basic needs than to visible indicators of vulnerability such as orphanhood. Understanding of vulnerability also rarely focuses on educational outcomes, although it is recognized that continued school attendance can mitigate against poor psychosocial outcomes for vulnerable children (Jukes et al., 2008a,b; Ishikawa et al., 2010; Bhargava, 2005). One aim of our research is to understand how perceived vulnerability in an educational context relates to observed risk of dropout, in order to understand how programs to support vulnerable children can best be targeted (Andrews et al., 2006).

Given the relatively small number of target beneficiaries, we were also interested in how benefits of the program may spill over to other children in the same school. There is documented evidence in experimental evaluations of materials and approaches introduced by education programs finding their way from intervention to control schools (Crouch et al., 2009). If spillover can take place between schools, it seems more likely that such a spillover effect could take place within a single school to benefit children not targeted by the program.

In sum, this paper presents an evaluation of the SOFIE project in Malawi that aims to contribute to the evidence base on supporting learning of the poorest and most vulnerable pupils. The intervention complements face-to-face classroom delivery of the curriculum with distance learning resources and psychosocial and welfare support. The primary research questions addressed by the evaluation were:

- (1) What is the impact of the SOFIE flexible learning model on school dropout (the primary outcome), educational achievement and grade promotion (the secondary outcomes)? To what extent does this impact extend to children in the same school who are not targeted by the SOFIE program?
- (2) What criteria do communities use to identify vulnerable children and to what extent do these criteria match those predictive of dropout risk?

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