What should count as worthwhile knowledge in determining a curriculum for supporting out-of-school children and youth?*

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Abstract: Due to the increasing number of children and youth dropping out of school, the Malawi government came up with a strategy to address their learning needs through non-formal means in its EFA plan. This resulted in the introduction of a three-year cycle pilot programme known as Complementary Basic Education (CBE). Funded by GTZ, a German funding agency, the CBE programme has since entered its second year of implementation. This paper reports an evaluation study of the CBE programme so far, with a view of highlighting some of the challenges affecting its implementation. Using a qualitative methodology, the study found that the programme is in many respects, potentially beneficial to various groups of stakeholders including learners, their parents and the community in general. However, the study finds that the major setback in achieving this potential lies in the differences in perception of what should count as curriculum for the CBE programme between providers and beneficiaries. There is a mismatch between "needs" as perceived by learners and community members on the one hand, and "needs" as perceived by the providers on the other hand. The paper discusses some of the issues that the providers need to respond to if CBE implementation is going to be beneficial to the livelihood needs of the learners and the immediate community.

Key words: curriculum; non-formal education; school drop-outs; poverty reduction

1. Introduction

In an attempt to reach the Millennium Development Goal of universal primary education and Education for All (EFA) goals, the Malawi Government has in the past two decades made considerable strides in improving access to primary education. One such example is the introduction of free primary education in 1994 that resulted in an increase in enrolment from 1.8 to 3.2 million (Ministry of Education, 1999). This increase is however offset by the large number of children and youth dropping out of school before completing primary education. For example, only about 50% of the children that enroll for standard 1 survive up to standard 4 and less than 20% complete the full 8-year cycle of primary schooling (Kadzamira & Nell, 2004). In addition, despite this effort, there are still school-going age children who never attend school.

With the widespread evidence on the positive relationship between education, wealth creation and realization of basic human needs (Lewin, 1993), it is not surprising that the Malawi Government has recognized the need to address the learning needs of the out-of-school children and youth in recent years. The *Malawi Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper* (MPRSP) sub-goal on basic education, for example, aims at improving the functional literacy,

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numeracy and skills of out-of-school youth (Malawi Government, 2001). This is echoed in Malawi EFA goal 3—to ensure that learning needs of all young people are met by providing an alternative form of education to youth who have dropped out of school or those who have never attended among other strategies (Malawi Government, 2005). Through consultations with different stakeholders, the Government thus came up with a programme for addressing the learning needs of such a group of people through non-formal means. Complementary Basic Education (CBE) has thus become a name of a pilot project that aims at achieving the learning needs of out-of-school children and youth in a non-formal way. Funded by a German Funding Agency (GTZ), the project is being piloted in three districts in a three-year cycle beginning in September 2006.

This paper is a result of a research study conducted in the CBE pilot centres. It was carried out with the aim of finding out the contribution of CBE to meeting the livelihood needs and therefore poverty reduction, of the out-of-school children and youth and the wider community.

2. Research questions

The main research question guiding the study was how does the CBE programme contribute towards improving the livelihood needs, and therefore poverty reduction of its beneficiaries and other vulnerable groups in the community?

Specifically, the study sorts to answer the following research questions:

(1) What does CBE aim to do?

(2) How is it operating to achieve these aims?

(3) What are the outcomes so far as perceived by stakeholders?

(4) How can CBE be improved to achieve the livelihood needs and poverty reduction of its beneficiaries?

Before answering these questions, it was necessary to first discuss theoretical issues regarding the importance of education in meeting the livelihood needs of the learners and therefore poverty reduction.

3. Education, development and poverty reduction

The concept of development has changed its meaning over the years. In the 1950s, development was associated with economic growth and was consequently measured by Gross National Product (GNP) per capita. The argument was that economic growth would result in structural and social changes in society, industrialization and consequently, improvement in the living standards of the people (Dwivedi, 1994). In the 1960s, however, it was observed that while economic growth had led to prosperity in some societies of the world, in the majority, poverty, disease and hunger had either worsened or remained unaltered. This led to the re-definition of the concept to place human beings at its centre, in the 1970s. Within Africa, a heads of state summit held in 1985 in Maseru (The Maseru Declaration, 1987) echoed the concept of development as achievement of basic human needs. The modern concept of development is therefore about raising the level of well-being of people according to the basic human needs. In this case, poverty is the negation of development meaning that “the opportunities and choices most basic to human development are denied—to lead a long, healthy, creative life and to enjoy a decent standard of living, freedom, dignity, self-respect and respect for others” (UNDP, 1997, p. 15). As such poverty reduction is similar to human development. This similarity is further manifested in the indicators. For instance, the indicators for development include the Human Development Index (HDI) and GNP. The HDI takes human development as the “objective” and economic growth as the “means” and is a composite of life expectancy, schooling, health care

and average income levels (UNDP, 1997), factors which are aligned with poverty reduction.

Human capital theorists, such as Schultz (1971), have postulated two assertions that connect development to education. The first is that education is a form of investment that results in profits that could be recouped later in life. Primary education has been associated with high social returns compared to secondary and tertiary education, and this has been found to be good for socio-economic development of a country (Burnett, 1996). The second rests on the assumption that "formal education is highly instrumental and even necessary to improve the production capacity of a population" (Fagerlind & Saha, 1989, p. 47). The argument is that the knowledge and skills of the workers, which are acquired through education, are important for increased productivity of those individuals (Woodhall, 1997; World Bank, 2003). Lewin (1993) related this to uptake of agricultural innovations. He argued from empirical evidence that a person with knowledge and skills easily accommodated innovations than one who was ignorant.

The relationships among development, poverty reduction and education discussed have implications for programmes aiming at achieving poverty reduction. For example, if the CBE programme is a strategy for poverty reduction, it should be seen to address negation of the basic human needs. In what ways for example would CBE help improve the life expectancy, health status, food security, etc. of its beneficiaries? This question can be answered after considering the aims of the programme, the nature of the curriculum, and how it is being implemented. These issues are the focus for the study reported in this paper.

4. Methodology

Basing on the research questions that the study aimed at exploring, a qualitative methodology was seen as appropriate. This was chosen because of its strength in obtaining in-depth information from target groups. A number of participatory methods were used to collect data including:

(1) Focus group discussions (FGDs): These were conducted with members of the Learning Centre Management Committee (LCMC), parents and learners.

(2) Key informant interviews: A semi-structured interview guide was developed to guide discussion with key individuals in CBE implementation. These included community leaders such as village or group village heads, chairpersons of the LCMC at the local level and the supervisor, service provider, primary education advisor (PEA), and district education manager (DEM) at the district level.

(3) Document analysis of CBE facilitator guide and prior evaluation studies on the implementation of CBE.

The sample of the study included five learning centres in one of the three pilot districts. In these centres, three FGDs were held for parents, LCMC, and learners. One village headman or group village headman and LCMC chair were also interviewed at each centre. In addition, each of the following groups was interviewed for the district: PEA, DEM, supervisor and service provider.

5. Findings and discussion

5.1 Purpose of CBE

A document analysis revealed that the purpose of CBE is for "out-of-school children and youth to acquire the essential knowledge, skills, and values to promote self-reliance, encourage life-long learning and enable them to participate fully in society and its development" (Ministry of Education, 2005). This purpose can be thought of as having two components. On the one hand, CBE aims at promoting learning as an academic exercise so that learners continue to learn for its own sake, to understand issues around them and participate in democratic

discussions in their community. On the other hand, the aim is to meet the basic needs of the learners so that they are self-reliant for their livelihoods. The implications of the former could appear more attractive to the younger learners of 9-13 years. for example, who could easily rejoin formal schooling. The older learners (14-17), most of whom were young mothers or had a wife to take care of, would get more attracted to the latter aim. Indeed these views were evident in the needs analysis survey, as will be discussed later.

5.2 Implementation of CBE

CBE was conceived as a three-year programme that targets those children and youth aged between 9 and 17 years who had dropped out of school before completing standard 5. Successful completion of the three-year course could lead to re-entry into standard 6, if desired. Furthermore, re-entry was also conceived to be possible into standards 3 and 5 at the end of standards 1 and 2, respectively.

CBE is a pilot programme operating in three districts selected based on large numbers of learners who dropped out of school. The pilot was designed to help determine the best means of implementing such a system at national level at a later stage. A total of 5 learning centres were opened in selected target areas in each district, managed by community-based management committees (LCMC) under the supervision of local service providers. The latter are non-governmental organizations which had been operating in the areas before. Representatives from district education offices, mainly PEAs responsible for those areas, are also involved in the management of the learning centres.

Instructors for the learning centres are facilitators recruited locally and trained by CBE management and service providers. The facilitators had a two week initial orientation session followed by one day weekly training in their own districts and at the end of the term, they get further one week training in their districts.

The implementation of the programme follows a somewhat flexible timetable to accommodate other competing demands on the learners. However, the curriculum is centralized, implemented through detailed lesson plans that are provided as facilitator guides to be followed everyday. Since the curriculum is central to achievement of the purpose of CBE, it was important to explore how it was developed and the extent to which it could be judged to lead to achievement of its purpose and therefore poverty reduction.

5.3 Determining a curriculum for CBE

A curriculum has been defined variably by different educators and researchers. There are, however, common elements in the definitions in that they all refer to some form of “way of ordering content and purposes for teaching and learning in schools” (Walker, 2003, p. 5). At a broader level, the content could refer to a list of school subjects offered where the purposes are the goals for that level of education. In more specific terms, the content could refer to a list of topics, themes, concepts or works to be covered with specific objectives as the purposes. Other researchers have distinguished different types of curriculum including total, planned and received curriculum (Kelly, 1999) and intended and experienced curriculum (Nampota & Thompson, 2007). The latter was seen as important in the present study to the extent that both the written knowledge areas and what the learners perceived of the curriculum formed the basis of analysis.

In order to determine a curriculum (intended) for CBE, a needs analysis survey was conducted with different stakeholders including school dropouts, parents and traditional leaders at local level and district education personnel and NGOs at district level. Employing qualitative research methods, the needs analysis survey found that the first set of priority needs for learners and their parents were literacy, farming/agriculture skills, numeracy and business skills in descending order. Literacy was meant to include English, so that the learners could communicate with foreigners as well as get employment (Moleni, et al., 2005). The second set of priority needs involved vocational skills. The ranking of vocational skills was gendered in that boys favored tailoring, carpentry, bricklaying, mechanics, etc.,

while girls preferred the handcraft and domestic skills of knitting, sewing, cookery and baking. Among the least frequently mentioned and ranked needs were health issues including family planning, HIV/AIDS and general health education and disease prevention. Interestingly, psychosocial skills, such as good morals, that have relevance to health issues, were mentioned a little more frequently than the health issues. However, recreational activities were mentioned less frequently, and when these were mentioned, the respondents linked them to motivation aspects.

The needs identified by district level stakeholders including local NGOs and DEMs (Moleni, et al., 2005) were slightly different although with many shared similarities to the views of the local beneficiaries. Among the similarities were rankings on literacy, numeracy and vocational skills. Literacy for these stakeholders also included English. However the stakeholders, more importantly the NGOs, realized the need to include HIV/AIDS in the CBE curriculum. Among the other curriculum areas mentioned were agriculture skills, moral issues, business management skills and cross cutting issues of gender, health and hygiene and recreational activities. Again it is observed that it is largely the NGO stakeholders that recognize health and hygiene as well as gender issues for the CBE curriculum. The NGO stakeholders in addition mentioned other knowledge areas that perhaps may have been remote in the thinking of most of the other stakeholders including proposal writing and how to access funding, marketing, local governance and democracy and human rights.

What emerges from the identified needs is that they are in line with the purpose of CBE. Both the beneficiaries and relevant stakeholders saw the need to develop functional literacy and numeracy. This is not unique to CBE as a non-formal education programme but is common among such programmes especially when they are targeting those people who did not benefit much from formal schooling (Hogg, et al., 2005). It is also clear that agricultural skills are important in order to maintain food security. This could be seen from the perspective of learning good agricultural practices but also from the perspective of being enlightened so that the concerned children and youth can easily take up new initiatives in the agricultural sector (Lewin, 1993). The argument in this case is that if the children and youth become literate, they would easily take up agricultural innovations in their communities and therefore contributing to their self-reliance and societal development.

The vocational skills on the other hand consolidate further the arguments on self-reliance. Learners and other stakeholders perceived this as one way of enabling them generate some income to fend for basic needs that require money. Although mentioned less frequently by the learners and their parents, issues of health are of equal importance to poverty reduction. This could help reduce the incidence of preventable diseases such as cholera, malaria, etc., leading to a healthy society.

The findings of the needs analysis survey were presented to a group of stakeholders including the CBE programme providers at a workshop whose aim was to synthesize the needs and come up with curriculum areas. During discussions, it was made clear by the programme providers that some of the “needs” were actually “wants”. By “wants”, the providers meant all perceived needs that could lead to income generation or as a source of employment for the beneficiaries. A “need” to the providers meant something that relates to cognitive learning such as reading, writing and relates to everyday activities such as farming, living a healthy life, and improving their everyday skills like making brooms. This is seen in the final choice of learning areas which include agriculture and environment, Chichewa, citizenship, English, healthy living, livelihoods and numeracy. An analysis of the intended curriculum shows that the learning in Chichewa, English and numeracy is largely cognitive emphasizing reading, writing and addition and subtraction. However, the other subject areas in addition include practical aspects such as making manure in agriculture, cleanliness and disease control in healthy living and making of everyday items such as brooms, wooden spoons etc in livelihoods. The whole area of vocational

skills was considered as a “want” and therefore left out. This thinking seems to have had a justification from the name of the programme itself. Complementary Basic Education means that the learners should be taught concepts befitting the primary education cycle, not tertiary cycle, as vocational education is usually taught at the latter in Malawi. However, as will be discussed later, this discrepancy has posed a challenge on CBE implementation.

5.4 Outcomes of the CBE programme

Interviews and discussions with different stakeholders including beneficiaries revealed what could be referred to as successes or strengths of the CBE programme as implemented so far. Among the successes are issues of community participation and relevancy and practicality of the curriculum. Emphasis on community participation has progressively enabled community ownership of the programme. Community members especially LCMC have benefited a lot in terms of gaining knowledge and skills inherent in the curriculum since they attend learning centres everyday. In their discussion, the LCMC said they learnt the practical issues such as good health practices and some agricultural techniques as the facilitators are teaching the learners.

> …we have learnt some skills, we know how to make manure, how to calculate profits and loses, we learn these when we are attending the learning centres to monitor and help the teen-age mothers with children (LCMC FGD).

In addition, the community members said CBE has helped to reduce the number of illiterate children in their village and employed some as facilitators and generally improved the status of the community. Typical sentiments by the community members were as follows:

> CBE has raised he status of our villages…. It has increased the number of literate children in our community. And also, CBE has provided employment to our children (LCMC FGD).

Most of the benefits however have been attributed to the learners. One of the successes of the CBE curriculum is an aspect that it links to the prior knowledge and skills of the learners that has been found by research to be conducive to meaningful learning as argued by advocates of constructivism (Driver, 1983). As a result, the learners have gained different skills and competencies. In line with the expectations during the needs analysis, all respondents pointed out that learners could now read and write although this is limited to Chichewa. The learners are able to read and write their names, sentences, short stories, and compose a letter, something that they could not do before. Reading and writing in English however remain low partly due to the fact that it is a foreign language and the facilitators do not possess the necessary skills for teaching English as a foreign language, let alone speaking it fluently. This is an area that could be improved in future. The learners described their benefits from CBE as follows:

> We can write our names, some sentences and some of us can write letters in Chichewa…. We have learnt faster than our friends do in normal (formal) school (Learner FGD).

With regard to business management skills, the stakeholders explained that older learners have acquired entrepreneurship skills and expressed interest to start small scale businesses, should they find a loan to do so? The skills included calculating correct amount of change during transactions, costing goods, calculating profits and losses. Other outcomes from CBE include knowledge of some practical aspects such as making manure for growth of crops, learners coming to class with clean clothes and good health and hygiene habits.

> We can make manure for our gardens, we take care of our surroundings and we go to class with clean clothes (Learner FGD).

In addition, there is an observed good behavior among learners which is attributed to social and good citizenship skills that they learn in class, as well as a result of spending time that would otherwise have been spent

on some delinquent behavior on learning. In this way, poverty reduction is interpreted to mean freedom from violence and crime.

Considering these outcomes, it is reasonable to conclude that CBE is a worthwhile programme that is equipping learners with cognitive skills both for re-entry in the formal schooling as well as livelihood skills.

5.5 Challenges with the CBE programme

CBE implementation is however facing a number of challenges. The most notable of this is poor attendance that sometimes results in withdrawal (Moleni & Nampota, 2007). In some cases, facilitators reported that less than half of the learners attended the learning centres. When asked why this was the case, a number of reasons emerged. The most frequent was the lack of emphasis on vocational skills in the CBE curriculum. For example, a typical view from parents was as follows:

> You know some of the learners are old, they cannot go back to school. In addition, some have children. So to expect them to go to school just to learn how to read and write and skills they already know like making brooms, mats, weaving baskets, is not good. Such youth need to sustain themselves somehow and would have benefited from training in vocational skills so that they can get employed somewhere (FGD with parents).

Traditional leaders expressed similar sentiments:

> You know people here think that when you grow up you should find means of getting money so that you can take care of your family. So for these youth to come to school and just learn to read and write…aah, people think it is a waste of time. It is better for such youth to go and get paid employment in rich peoples' homes so that they can bring home something (Group village headman).

The older learners gave similar sentiments. A typical argument was as follows:

> One of our expectations was to learn vocational skills but also get some loans so that we can start small businesses to feed our young families' (FGD boys).

Opportunity costs also seem to have influenced learners' attendance. In families where there is no food and other basic needs for example, children would rather work for these than go to learn how to read and write. Obviously, the parents and the learners could not see the importance of the health skills since these do not bring the immediate needs of food, clothing, soap, etc. Other learners mentioned the lack of feeding programmes in the CBE centres unlike in the formal schools and the lack of provision of uniforms, factors that are aligned with incentives for going to the CBE centre.

The mismatch between identified needs and the curriculum are not unique to CBE. Hogg, et al (2005) observed the same with the Adolescent Girls Literacy (AGLIT) project in Malawi and many other non-formal education programmes aiming at supporting the needs of indigenous communities. The question is whether or not academic learning, which is largely cognitive, should take precedence over vocational skills for such communities. Cognizant of the fact that elsewhere research has shown that relevance of learning activities to learners' current and prospective vocational identities is more important than formal learning (Shiohata & Pryor, 2008), one would suppose that the CBE learners would learn better if reading and writing were taught in the context of vocational activities as desired.

Secondly, somewhat similar challenge arises from one of its strengths—community participation. Much as community participation enabled ownership of the programme, the extent of the involvement has brought some problems. The LCMC members are expected to monitor the learning centres everyday, check facilitators and assist learners with children. Despite this huge task however, there are no incentives to the members:

> There is no benefit to us… our clothes get dirty when we help the learners with children but in the end there is

nothing to help us buy soap. There are no seminars. Allowances, training… they just ask us to do the jobs (LCMC, FGD).

Opportunity costs could also be seen to play a part here. The LCMC members leave their everyday activities some of which involve income generation in order to monitor learning centres. Perhaps there might be a need to streamline the activities of the LCMC and re-sensitise the community on the formal education component of CBE.

6. Strategies for consideration

The purpose for CBE is to help out-of-school children and youth to acquire the necessary knowledge and skills for lifelong learning and to live productive and self-reliant lives in their communities as part of poverty reduction efforts. An evaluation of the programme shows great potential in this area in that the learners have acquired a number of skills and techniques especially relating to reading and writing and some practical skills.

Among the challenges that CBE implementation is facing learner absenteeism and withdrawal and LCMC un-attendance. Against the background of the arguments in this paper, the author puts forward, quite speculatively, strategies that could be considered by the Malawi Government and CBE providers in order to promote the goals of CBE. Firstly, there may be a need to review the curricula to incorporate some vocational skills. Formal learning could be undertaken in the course of learning these skills. Secondly, there might be a need to re-sensitize the community in order to bring out the gist of the purposes of CBE. Thirdly, facilitators need a little more training both in the various subject areas and in English language skills. Fourthly, there might be a need to streamline the activities of LCMC members after the second year so that they should not expect too much from the programme.

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