

CHALLENGES AND POSSIBILITIES FOR IMPLEMENTING AN ODFL INTERVENTION FOR INCREASED EDUCATION ACCESS TO CONVENTIONAL SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN LESOTHO IN A CONTEXT OF HIGH HIV PREVALENCE RATES

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Abstract

This report reviews the results of an impact evaluation of a large-scale collaborative project on strengthening open and flexible learning for increased education access in high HIV-prevalence SADC countries (SOFIE). The study draws on a growing body of literature that indicates that open, distance and flexible learning approaches can be effectively used to fill the gap that many developing countries are faced with in their attempts to expand their educational provision¹. The design of the empirical research followed a mixed-methods approach in two distinct sequential phases. Findings from a qualitative study of factors that led to disruption of schooling for children in high HIV-prevalence areas among Basotho² secondary school children were used to design an open, distance and flexible learning (ODFL) intervention model aimed at tackling these factors. The findings show that more equitable access to education can be achieved by providing opportunities for ODFL as a complement to traditional schooling and by building circles of support around vulnerable children. The paper discusses some of the challenges to such interventions and considers how

¹ Visit the SOFIE website for various reports and the literature review: <http://sofie.ioe.ac.uk>

² This refers to people from Lesotho.

the findings might be maximised to lead to wider educational and social transformation.

Introduction

As the 2015 deadline for achieving the millennium development goals (MDGs) draws ever so closer, many countries in sub-Saharan Africa are faced with serious challenges in financing and providing educational access to their populations. Entrenched patterns of educational inequality and disadvantage are being exacerbated by the global economic crisis, coming on top of the AIDS pandemic and the recent rise in world fuel and food prices. With millions more families now being pushed into poverty, a recent research report for Oxfam by Kyrili and Martin (2010) found that governments in low-income countries responded to the financial crisis in 2009 by cutting back spending on education. The researchers warn that “the fiscal hole caused by the crisis risks becoming a ‘black hole’ into which the MDGs, and the lives and education of many of the world’s poorest citizens, will disappear” (Kyrili & Martin 2010:5).

Faced with such challenges to education, governments need to find low-cost ways to reach and teach marginalised children that go beyond enrolment and enable marginalised students to complete a full cycle of basic education (Lewin 2007; UNESCO 2008). Many of the underlying principles of ODFL – such as flexibility, responsiveness to diversity and reducing barriers to learning (Unterhalter, Hoppers & Hoppers 2000) – provide useful points of convergence with current debate that advocates greater equity and inclusiveness in education systems and schools as a means to promote education for all (UNESCO 2008). Despite this complimentary literature, there has been relatively little uptake of ODFL for the provision of basic education. Some, who argue that ever-greater emphasis on learner autonomy and independence is inappropriate for delivering basic education in developing countries, underline instead the importance of collaborative learning, calling for better integration and linkage with school-based systems (Nielsen 1991; Yates 2000).

The aim of this paper is to contribute to this call by exploring the role of ODFL approaches in disrupting the patterns of inequality and marginalisation. These

patterns are becoming entrenched in households and schools in processes of educational exclusion for vulnerable children in high HIV-prevalence areas, which include not only non-enrolment or permanent drop-out from schooling, but also irregular attendance, enforced absenteeism and low achievement (Lewin 2007). This paper also contributes by assessing the extent to which the entrenched patterns of inequality, disadvantage and marginalisation that disrupt schooling can be addressed by complementing conventional schooling with more open and flexible delivery of the curriculum and support. To achieve this aim, the paper draws on the findings from a three-year collaborative research study, called the SOFIE project, completed in July 2010.

Methodology

The study was designed and implemented in sequential phases within an overall mixed-methods approach.

Firstly, the factors that disrupt schooling in high HIV-prevalence areas of sub-Saharan Africa were identified through a structured literature review. These factors were then explored further through qualitative case studies of four schools in Lesotho – informed by semi-structured interviews and participatory activities (Nyabanyaba 2009). Secondly, an intervention model was developed to tackle these factors and implemented in the 2009 school year in grade 10 (form B) in 20 secondary schools in Lesotho. The intervention was evaluated in a randomised control trial. Full details of the sampling frame and process of randomisation are given in the case studies, which are available on the project website (www.sofie.ioe.ac.uk). To inform the impact evaluation pre- and post-intervention, mathematics and English test scores were collected in intervention and control schools and data, as well as data on attendance, drop-out and promotion to next grade. Qualitative data were also collected to illuminate the process by which any change measured had taken place. These data were collected through observation of face-to-face teaching and learning, analysis of student responses to the distance learning materials and activities, semi-structured interviews with learners and teachers and analysis of teachers' diaries.

Entrenched patterns of educational inequality, disadvantage and marginalisation

The findings from the literature review confirmed that in the context of poverty and high HIV prevalence, the entrenched patterns of educational inequality, disadvantage and marginalisation that exist are highly complex and context-specific. The case studies of issues impacting on access to schooling revealed that issues such as household organisation, child migration and family disintegration were leading to loss of social cohesion, increased trauma, stress, child abuse and unplanned pregnancy.

Children miss school while looking after sick parents ... These children can hardly smile and have that faraway look in their eyes. (Lesotho, male, village chief)

There were also school-related issues such as lack of support (especially psychosocial support) from the school and anti-poor school policies that were increasing the exclusion of vulnerable children in educational activities.

There was a case of a girl who dropped out of school because she had lost her parents and was being abused by her aunt. Other children do not mix well with these children and because of our workload, we're unable to pick it up early enough. (Lesotho, schoolteacher)

These are only a few of the factors competing with schooling for orphaned and vulnerable children. A combination of in-school practices pushing out vulnerable children and out-of-school factors, including poverty, pulling out such children are making it difficult for schools to retain these children.

Working with schools to disrupt these entrenched patterns

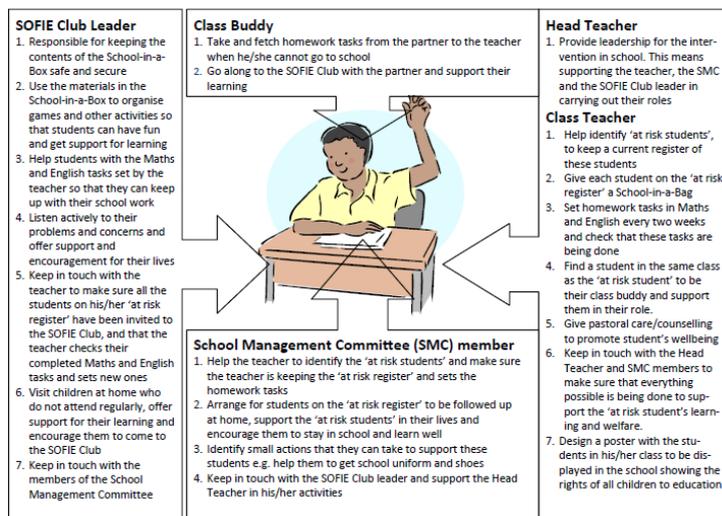
Having identified the main factors that were disrupting schooling in the study areas, the research team looked to the literature to find educational solutions. Background review papers were developed (Nyabanyaba 2009). One approach was to strengthen community cohesion and participation by developing a "Circles of

Support” initiative implemented through schools. This has been successfully employed in Namibia to mobilise networks of family, friends and neighbours to identify and carry out small actions such as helping with homework or walking with a child to schoolⁱ. A second approach was to use a more open and flexible delivery of the curriculum together with strengthening delivery and support systems and structures. An example of this approach was the Open Learning Approach used by the Namibian College of Open Learning (NAMCOL) to provide secondary education through distance learning. A third approach was to use self-study learner guides for both in-school and out-of-school youth, adapted from those developed by the Escuela Nueva Foundation in Colombia and piloted in Zambia and Uganda.

The intervention package included a “School-in-a-Box” containing text books, self-study learner guides, reading books, pens, notebooks, a wind-up radio and an HIV board game, which was given to each SOFIE Club youth leader. Each “at-risk” student was given a “School-in-a-Bag” containing self-study learner guides and text-books linked to the national curriculum for Maths and English, pens and notebooks, and a set of mathematical instruments.

Figure 1 presents a model of the key players in the intervention: the class teacher, mentor pupils (buddies), youth volunteers and school committee members. It also shows how these key players were interlinked through their tasks to form a circle of support around each vulnerable child. Clubs and buddy systems were designed as an integral part of schools’ activities and class teachers and youth volunteers were expected to work hand-in-hand with them. Overall leadership and supervision was provided by the school principal.

Figure 1: A model of the SOFIE intervention showing the key players and their tasks



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Teachers, school management committees and volunteer SOFIE club leaders were trained in delivering the intervention package, in guidance and counselling, in promoting inclusiveness, in community support for pupil welfare, in running the SOFIE club and in record-keeping (i.e. maintaining the “at-risk” register and monitoring and following up student attendance and achievement). Class teachers gave each “at-risk” student a School-in-a-Bag and invited them to attend weekly meetings of the SOFIE Club run by the youth leader.

Implementation challenges and possibilities

In spite of the overall rationale for this model, the challenges in implementation were massive and almost exasperating. Numbers of orphans and vulnerable children have increased considerably since the children who graduated from fee-free primary schools reached secondary schools in 2007. Therefore, the process of identifying and selecting learners to be on the “at-risk” register was very challenging, with the project unable to reach out to all needy learners and, on occasion, open to accusations of favouritism, even when a narrow criterion of double orphanhood was used for selection. This was exacerbated by high expectations from the community for project “handouts”. Although many schools put in place comprehensive strategies to monitor and follow up “at-risk” learners when they were absent, including home

visits, a large number of teachers were not very conscientious in their record-keeping and marking.

A major challenge was that school principals and teachers were initially resistant to participating, despite the project having strong support from the Ministry of Education and the teachers' unions. This resistance came from principals fearing that participation would lead to lower student achievement, and from teachers having low awareness of the vulnerability and special educational needs and rights of vulnerable students. With subject-specialist teachers at the secondary school level, there was also tension between the mathematics and English teachers and the class teachers who were implementing the intervention, which included mathematics and English self-study guides. Resistance to participation from principals and teachers decreased somewhat following the training provided by the project, which raised awareness of the special educational needs of vulnerable students and of the national policy on inclusive education, which endorses the right of all children to education. Attendance at the SOFIE clubs was erratic, but they worked best where the learning support activities were piggy-backed onto other activities – such as running the school tuckshop – which provided a common purpose and strengthened social cohesion. Despite these challenges, the research team member in Lesotho has received many requests for the intervention to be extended, and in particular for the learner guides to be made more widely available.

Despite these massive challenges and constraints in the implementation process, quantitative data indicated that there were positive educational outcomes of employing the SOFIE model. The study indicates that the mathematics study-guides really made a difference to the level of teacher engagement and student outcomes. The self-study learner guides were highly valued by the teachers, who argued that they helped them manage their large class sizes and militated against the scarcity of learning materials. Students in the intervention schools, and particularly those in the SOFIE clubs, significantly outperformed similar students in the control schools. Unfortunately, these guides were not available until halfway through the school year and some of the impact was lost.

Implications for policy and practice

This paper has examined the factors influencing the educational access of vulnerable learners in rural areas of Lesotho governed by poverty and a high prevalence of HIV and AIDS. It has shown that it is possible for patterns of educational disadvantage to be disrupted by a low-cost educational intervention designed to complement conventional schooling with more open, distance and flexible models of learning and learner support, leading to a reduction in absenteeism and also, in Malawi, to a reduction in school drop-out. What remains a challenge outside the project is for governments and their development partners to implement policies, along with enabling funding, to support the implementation of ODFL practices in order to disrupt the pattern of inequalities and disadvantage being aggravated by the growing poverty and vulnerability among communities in such countries as Lesotho.

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Notes

ⁱ see <http://www.cominit.com/en/node/220960/2781>