

## Complementary reading materials development: Successes and challenges of the Read Malawi Programme

*Misty Sailors<sup>1</sup>, James V. Hoffman<sup>2</sup>, Henri Chilora<sup>3</sup>, Davie Kaambankadzanja<sup>4</sup>, Aron Mapondera<sup>5</sup> and Florie Betha<sup>6</sup>*

### Abstract

*The Textbooks and Learning Materials Programme at the University of Texas at San Antonio collaboratively designed and developed learning and teaching materials for Malawi schoolchildren. Three goals drove our work: (a) develop learning and teaching materials, focusing on language instruction for Standards 1 – 3; (b) develop an implementation model, including teacher training, school monitoring and community mobilization; and (c) develop instruments to detail the programme feasibility. We trained Malawian teachers to teach and author new complementary reading materials in both Chichewa and English. The implementation model included supporting materials to aid teachers, such as Overview and Teacher’s Guides. An extensive school and community-based support system was set-up to monitor, analyze and report the programme’s effectiveness. There were logistical and communication challenges that hindered progress, like power-outages and delivery delays. However, there were also many successes of increased teacher self-efficacy, decreased student absenteeism and a possible model for future programmes.*

**Keywords:** learning and teaching materials, Malawi schoolchildren, community mobilization, community-based support system.

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1. Lecturer at the University of Texas at San Antonio, USA, email: misty.sailors@utsa.edu
  2. Lecturer at the University of Texas at Austin, USA.
  3. Lecturer at the Malawi Institute of Education, Malawi.
  4. Lecturer at the Malawi Institute of Education, Malawi.
  5. Lecturer at the Malawi Institute of Education, Malawi.
  6. Lecturer at the Creative Centre for Community Mobilization, Malawi.

## **Background**

The Malawi's Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MOEST) recently reviewed its National Primary Curriculum (NPC). In this review the development of early literacy (through Chichewa, the national language, and English) was given priority in the subject matrix for grades 1, 2 and 3. Also, as part of this review, one set of core textbooks (e.g., Learner's Books and Teacher's Guides) was developed for literacy development in these three classes. What this meant, however, was that learners were expected to read one book the whole year in order to acquire their literacy skills. As we all know, this is a far cry from what it takes a learner to learn to read and write. This is because learners learn to read only through reading a variety of texts such as complementary reading materials, which are currently hard to get in Malawi (Macro International, 2008; Government of Malawi, 2006).

It was for this reason that the MOEST took a bold step to approve the Textbooks and Learning Materials Programme (TLMP) – popularly known as the Read Malawi Programme. TLMP is a \$13 million development programme sponsored by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), and hosted at the University of Texas at San Antonio (UTSA), intended to collaboratively design and develop learning and teaching materials. Our work on the Read Malawi Programme has been collaborative and involved several directorates in the MOEST, including the Directorate of Inspectorate and Advisory Services, Planning, Basic Education, Supplies Unit and the Directorate of Teacher Education and Development. Implementing partners included the Malawi Institute of Education (MIE), two Teacher Training Colleges (TTCs) (Lilongwe and Blantyre TTC), the Creative Centre for Community Mobilization (CRECCOM), and local communities and schools. Key collaborators in the United States included the University of Texas at Austin (UTA) and the University of California at Berkeley (UCB), the Institute for Economic Development at UTSA, and RealeStudios. Private-public partnerships in the Read Malawi Programme included the Intel® Corporation, two designers in South Africa (Malindi Art and I.H. White Design) and two printers, one in Malawi (Kris Offset) and one in South Africa (Uniprint). We have described our collaborative efforts in other reports (Sailors, Hoffman, Chilora, Kaambankadzanja, Mapondera and Aguirre, in press).

Although there are multiple goals to the programme, this paper will only address the following goals: (a) develop learning and teaching

materials for Grades 1, 2 and 3 with a focus on language instruction; (b) develop an implementation model that includes teacher training, school monitoring and evaluation and community mobilization; and (c) develop instruments that would capture and describe the feasibility of the programme. We hope to establish, through this paper, a documentation of the work completed thus far on the programme - identifying our processes, successes and challenges.

### **Materials development**

For classrooms in countries such as Malawi, access to learning materials is limited (Alidou et al., 2006) even though these materials have proven effective in raising achievement (Lockheed and Verspoor, 1991), especially when teachers use Teacher's Guides (Craig, Kraft and du Plessis, 1998: 16). We set out to create high quality, complementary reading materials that would be accompanied by guides for teachers.

Because most materials that come into countries such as Malawi (sometimes as donated books) are poorly designed, contain factual inaccuracies, do not support higher-level thinking, do not represent the lived experiences of the children using them and reinforce gender stereotypes (Baine and Mwamwenda, 1994; Montagnes, 2000, p. 6), we sought to create books that supported gender sensitivity, science and technology (linked to culture and environment), the language of the learners, life-long learning, leadership skills (African Union, 2006; Montagnes, 2000; UNESCO, 2005; World Bank, 2002) and texts that were appropriately levelled (Craig, Kraft and du Plessis, 1998; Sailors, Hoffman and Condon, 2008).

During the first year of the Read Malawi Programme – and specific to the request for a follow-up project under the TLMP as well as a specific request from the MOEST – the UTSA facilitated the development of complementary reading materials intended to support the literacy acquisition of primary school aged learners. During the development process, we focused on the quality, authorship and instructional value of the materials as well as supporting teachers in the implementation of the materials. We explain each in the section below.

### ***Quality***

We developed two sets of reading materials in Chichewa and English: Read Aloud (which teachers read to learners) and Guided Reading books (which learners read with the help of their teachers). During the

development process of the Read Aloud books, we were attentive to qualities such as making sure every title carried a message or theme for learners. We ensured the books were appropriate and relevant through our authoring process. We ensured the books drew an aesthetic response from learners. We also made sure that the books represented various genres and were crafted following our design parameters.

During the development process of the Guided Reading books, we were attentive to the representation of various rhetorical forms so that learners would have access to a wide variety of text types. We were also attentive to multiple forms of support for word identification and fluency (heavy support at Grade 1 moving to less in Grade 2 and even less in Grade 3). We controlled for the number of words per page spread and used words similar to those in the core textbooks. We were attentive to sentence patterns and ensured that the images matched and supported the text in the books.

### *The authoring process*

The development team followed a development process in which classroom teachers served as authors of the books. Through a series of writing workshops at two TTCs, authors of books (in-service and pre-service teachers, MOEST officials, TTC Lecturers and MIE curriculum specialists) learnt how to write high quality complementary reading materials that focus on connecting to subject areas. We elected for teachers to author materials as we had seen in our previous work that teachers can author books and it is motivating to them (Sailors, Makalela and Hoffman, 2010). These materials were authored in both Chichewa and English, and were based on both narrative text and expository text styles. Authors used a combination of their lived experiences and topics that interested learners as a basis for the books. The images for the materials were developed and designed by local artists. Typically, each book had between seven and 10 images. All images were full colour. The authorship was part of the inherent motivational plan with the authoring team and teachers maintained authorship of the books they wrote, as did the illustrators.

In the first workshop, teachers learnt how to document and describe experiential events and expert self-knowledge of interest to children. The books were authored in Chichewa and versioned in English for further development, and the authors revised their Chichewa versions recursively. During the second workshop, authors continued to

revise their books and were encouraged to keep their audience in mind through crafting mini-lessons. Included in these mini-lessons were the topics of content, word choice and imaging decisions. In the third workshop, the stories were field-tested with learners in classrooms. From this field-testing, the development team was able to account for the comprehension of the story, the engaging qualities of the story (with illustrations) and the word choice within the text regarding the accessibility factor. Authors received certificates of participation at the end of the third workshop.

Because accessibility is essential, the books were carefully levelled for learners in ways that balanced the decoding demands of the text (e.g. word difficulty and regularity) and support features of the text (e.g. repeated phrases and picture support). Each of the learning materials passed through a rigorous review and development process that ensured the highest standards for content, language, design and accessibility features. Colleagues at MIE, UTSA and UTA served as members of the development team, and assisted teachers in the development process.

### ***Supporting materials for teachers***

Research has demonstrated that in order for teachers to successfully implement materials, they must have proper support. We created several supporting materials for teachers as part of the programme, including Teacher's Guides and an Overview Guide.

The Teacher's Guides were linked directly to the national curriculum and provided teachers with innovative ways of developing literacy and subject area skills. The Teacher's Guides were developed in both English and Chichewa. This was done so that the English Teacher's Guides would coincide with the portions of classroom lesson time spent on English, while the Chichewa Teacher's Guides would coincide with the portion of classroom lesson time spent on Chichewa.

Teacher's Guides for English complementary books were written to support Second Language practices. They were also written to support teachers in the teaching of reading strategies, including word identification/knowledge, fluency strategies and comprehension strategies. The Teacher's Guides used a patterned step-by-step approach; once teachers grew accustomed to the patterns in the Teacher's Guides, they could implement them in ways that are helpful to their learners.

The Overview Guide was designed as an overview of the programme and spelled out the key components of the programme.

These key components included six main ideas, such as (a) the teacher uses a variety of tools to scaffold understanding between oral and written language; (b) in Guided Reading, the teacher gradually releases responsibility to learners; (c) the teacher uses the literate environment to scaffold connections between home/school and life skills subject area; (d) the teacher uses Read Aloud as an instructional practice to purposefully scaffold the comprehension of text; (e) the teacher provides learners with opportunities to respond to Read Alouds and Guided Reading books in creative ways; and (f) the teacher promotes independent reading and a culture of reading.

### **Programme successes**

Through our collaborative efforts (Sailors, Hoffman, Kaambankadzanja, Chilora and Mapondera, in press) our tri-national development team successfully designed 180 titles (Read Alouds and Guided Reading), one Overview Guide, 90 Teacher's Guides, two Alphabet Books and four posters (all in both Chichewa and English). A grand total of 5,260,548 materials (books, Teacher's Guides and posters) have been published and printed. We also developed capacity at different levels through various workshops, including development workshops (with MIE), authoring workshops (with authors), illustration workshops (with artists), design workshops (with layout and typesetting team) and print management workshops (with printers).

### **Programme challenges**

Our tri-national team faced challenges during our development process. One of the biggest challenges was convincing teachers that they could write. Although all teachers had positive attitudes during the authoring process, we had to convince them that they too could author materials for young children. This was not an uncommon challenge (Sailors, Makalela and Hoffman, 2010), and one that we overcame with our authoring workshops. We also encountered international challenges associated with the clash of cultures in programmes such as this one. For example, there were numerous discussions within our international development team around the appropriateness of some topics for young children. There was also a book that compared Christian and Muslim customs. We had many conversations about the factual correctness of this book, seeking the advice of experts from outside our development team.

Other challenges were more logistical and were due to working across different time zones. Still others were because of our restricted time frame available for development – we developed all of our materials in less than 18 months. We also encountered challenges with the harmonization of the official Chichewa orthography rules. Finally, power outages and internet interruptions caused significant delays in the timeline.

### **Programme implementation**

Realizing that the complementary teaching and learning materials could stand alone, we developed a model for programme implementation, including teacher training and school and community-wide support for implementation. We describe each in the section below.

#### ***Teacher training***

Effective teachers are essential elements of effective instruction. Many teachers in Malawi began their career in teaching eager to contribute to the growth of their societies. For some, that eagerness continues throughout their careers. For others, de-motivating factors (such as large class sizes, low pay, increased workloads and the uneven implementation of credit schemes) impede their aspirations. The Read Malawi implementation model addressed teachers' motivation through professional development gained from their participation in the authoring of high quality literacy materials, as well as through training in the implementation of the complementary reading materials.

In a series of two workshops, teachers learned methodologies of implementing language and literacy lessons using the complementary books. Training is an important component of any programme and the teacher-training model capitalized on lessons learned in the other workshops our team conducted in Malawi, other African countries and in the USA. Our team took a holistic approach to these workshops, recognizing that the materials used were part of a larger movement toward outcomes-based education and learning achievement. We based our workshops on the premise that the most effective learning takes place when teachers engage in 'Active Teaching', and learners are thus actively involved in lessons. We used the premises of Active Teaching in the model of professional development we presented to teachers in our implementation workshops.

### ***School-based support for implementation***

In order for an innovative programme to be fully implemented, teachers needed support from the Head Teachers at their schools. Our team created a model of school-based support for teachers as they learned to implement the complementary reading materials. We employed a set of workshops based on the logistics of the resourcing model, the creation of a climate conducive for the ongoing professional development of teachers and of a culture of reading in the school. These school leadership workshops also engaged school leaders in creating effective in-service education for teachers (INSET) that were data-driven. We also involved the external support mechanisms currently in place in Malawi; the Primary Education Advisors (PEAs) were not only part of our workshops but were key stakeholders in the implementation and monitoring of the programme during its implementation phase.

As a way of supporting the school-based team, we designed a set of forms that would capture and operationalize the major components of the instructional model. We created an instrument that measured the stages of the concerns of teachers, following the work of George and his colleagues (George, Hall and Stiegelbauer, 2006). We created an instrument that documented the levels of use of the innovation as a way of describing the implementation based on the work of Hall and her colleagues (Hall, Dirksen and George, 2006). We also created an instrument that documented the key components of the model based on the work with innovation configurations (Hord, Stiegelbauer, Hall and George, 2006). We also created an Artefact Analysis form that captured and described the level of print in the classrooms (as this was a key component of the innovation) and a student interview form that would capture the use and understanding of the print environment by the learners in the classroom. All school leaders were trained on the use of these forms.

### ***Community-based support for implementation***

A programme that draws from the expertise inside the community is a programme that will succeed. For the community component, our team drew from expertise and experiences in implementing community-based and mobilizing programmes in Malawi as part of our implementation model. The majority of this work was conducted by CRECCOM, a local Non-Government Organization which supported the programme through community-mobilization. The goal of this component of the model was



to strengthen community involvement and participation towards the promotion of a reading culture. This organization assisted in sensitizing the community to the books and pedagogy of the instructional model. Community based activities within the model included (a) Theatre for Development; (b) awareness/sensitization meetings; (c) Mother Groups; (d) volunteer assistants; (e) Role Modelling; and (f) school incentive packages, to name a few.

### **Programme successes**

Through our collaborative efforts the programme was successfully implemented. This was evident across the various monitoring site visits our team conducted. We saw school-wide, classroom and learner-based evidence of implementation.

For example, time tables in the schools showed time slots dedicated to the Read Malawi programme. Trained teachers had trained other teachers at their school; in some cases, the PEAs assisted in cluster training, which allowed teachers to share successes and challenges. Head Teachers were visiting classrooms and providing feedback to teachers. In addition, Head Teachers and their teachers met to share their school successes and strategize on the challenges experienced at the school. Head Teachers reported that they 'saw' different teaching as a result of interacting with the monitoring teams. Books were monitored from Head Teachers to classrooms (registers and locked areas for the safety of books). Communities were sensitized about Read Malawi.

We also documented lowered absenteeism in the schools (according to the teachers) because the children wanted to come and hear the stories. Print was beginning to show up in classrooms. The monitoring team began to identify teachers as high-implementers; these teachers would be used as core trainers in the programme rollout. Finally, teachers reported that learners enjoyed the books (animal stories were popular) and teachers reported that learners were starting to point at the words in the books.

### **Programme challenges**

Our monitoring team faced challenges during our development process. For example, the delivery of books to schools was delayed, causing some confusion in the training process. The printing partners delivered the first set of books after teachers had been trained to use them. Other implementation problems were identified through the monitoring

process. One of the easiest remedy to these challenges was proper book storage. In some cases, schools were storing books in the maize closet; in other cases books had not been taken out of their boxes.

Other challenges were not so easy to remedy, such as the misunderstanding between the various methodologies the teachers were learning (Guided Reading and Read Aloud practices). To that end, these issues were addressed in the ongoing workshops with the pilot schools. PEAs and Head Teachers worked together to correct some of the misunderstandings at local workshops (Teacher Development Centres) with the support of the curriculum experts at the MIE and the UTSA/UTA teams.

### **Feasibility of the programme**

Parallel to the development and implementation work that was carried out by the programme was the development of research component. The goals of this component included (a) describing the benchmark performance of a representative sample of classrooms (including teachers and learners) so that we could (b) evaluate whether the schools that had been randomly assigned to treatment (experimental and control) were equivalent at the outset of the pilot in terms of the distribution of learner achievement, classroom practices and the perceptions of teachers and Head Teachers about teaching and learning issues; (c) determine the relative magnitude of the impact of the intervention; and (d) assess the validity of the various assessment tools created by the Read Malawi programme. We describe the instruments, their development and preliminary findings in this section.

### **Instruments**

Our international research team consisted of partners at the MIE, UTSA, UTA and UCB. Across this team, we revised existing instruments and developed new ones to meet the specific needs of the programme. The table below lists each instrument and provides a brief description of each instrument.

**Table 1: A description of the research instruments**

<b>Research instrument</b>	<b>Intended to Measure</b>
Learner assessment	Learner literacy achievement in both Chichewa and English (Standards 1, 2 and 3)
Learner interviews	Literacy practices of learners at home and at school (Standards 1, 2 and 3 in Chichewa only)
Observations of teaching and teaching environment protocol	Instructional practices of primary teachers (including environmental and engagement in Active Teaching pedagogy)
Perceptions survey	Teachers' and Head Teachers' perceptions about their learners' capacities, their own language and pedagogical skills, and the overall culture of the schools in which they work

### **Data collection**

We collected pre-implementation measures (Learner Assessments, Teaching and Teaching Environment Protocol and Perceptions Survey) at the beginning of the school year (mid-September through mid-October 2010). Fifteen researchers (three teams of five researchers) were involved in the exercise. Each team visited one school per day with three schools visited each day. In total 42 schools from 14 zones were visited during the exercise. At each school, researchers administered questionnaires to the Head Teachers and Standards 1, 2 and 3 teachers and learners. Ten learners (five boys and five girls) were identified randomly from each class to participate in the study. Two classes at Standard 1, two classes at Standard 2 and two classes at Standard 3 were chosen for the evaluation. The total number of learners assessed at each school was 60. For those schools that did not have two streams per Standard, all 20 learners (per Standard) were identified from one class. In total, the researchers interacted with 2,520 learners, 193 teachers and 42 Head Teachers. In addition, the researchers were involved in the observation of teaching and text inventory for all participating classrooms. Learners were assessed on their literacy skills in English and Chichewa using instruments developed in year one's activities.

After the data collection exercise, data were coded in preparation for entry. Learners' assessments were scored. In order to improve inter-rater reliability, a reliability check was done on a sample of learner assessment forms. The percent of agreement ranged from 73% to 100% with the mode of 100%. In the case of the writing section (which was the point at which the lowest inter-rater reliability occurred), retraining was conducted with that scorer. The issue was resolved and the team

reached 100% inter-rater reliability. Then the forms were scored and were later entered into an Excel package.

Post-implementation data were collected in similar ways at the end of the school year (late June 2011). The researchers interacted with the same learners, teachers and Head Teachers. Those participants who were not available during the school visits were replaced. Researchers collected data similar to those collected during the pre-implementation data collection exercise. This was done for comparison purposes. The researchers interacted with 2,516 learners, 176 teachers and 42 Head Teachers.

### **Consent to participate as human subjects**

All members of the research team were trained using international ethical standards for research with human subjects through the UTSA. Before collecting the end line data, learners, teachers and Head Teachers were asked for their consent to participate in the study. The participants were provided with information about the study. In addition, they were informed that their participation was entirely voluntary, and that they could refuse to participate or withdraw from the study at any time if they wished to do so.

### **Data analysis**

For our baseline data, we used independent t-tests to make group comparisons between treatment and control schools. Multilevel modelling, specifically, Hierarchical Linear Modelling (HLM), was employed to examine the degree to which characteristics of the school context explain differences in learner achievement and the classroom environment. Additionally, a more complex analysis of learner achievement was conducted. In this, classroom level variables were used to predict variation in learner achievement. Finally, for all classroom and school level comparisons between treatment and control groups, Standard (primary school level /year, similar to grade) was used as a mediating variable to evaluate whether effects held across the standards.

Regression analyses were conducted to determine whether there were differences in the student achievement, teacher questionnaire and observation variables as a result of the intervention, and whether classroom level variables were associated with student achievement. Linear regression was employed to determine whether there were mean

differences in achievement by group, and logistic regression was utilized to determine whether there was an association between the percentages of zero scores on each measure and group. To account for the nested structure of the data on variance estimates, robust standard errors were used throughout.

### **Programme successes**

The research team (MIE, UTSA, UTA and UCB) documented several successes during the evaluation and research process. The first one involved the ethics training of all researchers from the MIE who participated in data collection. Both baseline and end line data were collected according to plan. All the schools that were chosen for the survey were visited and data were successfully collected from the target participants that were present on the day of data collection. Both baseline and end line data were entered and cleaned to ensure that the data were put to best use. Finally all but two teachers agreed to allow us to use their data as part of this study.

We noted several findings worth mentioning in this paper. First, the intervention showed a degree of success with teachers' attitudes as measured through the teacher questionnaire. For example, teachers in the 'Read Malawi' programme schools were more comfortable with their command of the English and Chichewa languages (reading, writing and speaking in both). The self-efficacy of these teachers was higher, too. The programme teachers reported that they felt more effective at promoting learning and teaching in their schools and seeking ways to improve their teaching of reading. By the end of the pilot, teachers in the treatment group had grown to appreciate the quality of their core textbooks as well as the quantity, quality and availability of their complementary reading materials. Finally, teachers in the 'Read Malawi' treatment schools reported that there was a strong culture of reading in their communities, and that parents supported their children's reading at home. These are important findings as our baseline data indicated there were no significant differences between schools (treatment and wait-list control) at the onset of the study, making our findings significant.

As we had expected, students in treatment schools were more engaged with texts by their classroom teachers. On average, 7% more learners in the treatment classrooms were observed with their eyes on print when compared to non-treatment classrooms. Observations also indicated that the treatment classrooms were holistically richer in the

texts teachers provided to learners. Likewise, there were more imported texts in the treatment classrooms (posters and books).

### **Programme challenges**

Although we documented several successes in the programme related to research, we also noted several challenges, as indicated earlier. Some were logistical while others were more study related. For example, there was a delay in baseline data collection due to a late transfer of research funds between implementing partners. Second, we suffered from teacher and learner attrition between our baseline and end line data. Intermittent power supply and irregular access to the internet delayed data entry and cleaning exercises. Finally, as noted earlier, communication across several time zones and team sites caused some problems within our team. Subsequently, at the time of this report, our findings centred on student achievement had not been completed.

### **Concluding thoughts: Working together on a collaborative, multi-site programme**

We believe the work our international team has completed thus far in the life of the programme has much to offer to early literacy development in other countries.

First, our findings suggest that a programme, such as ‘Read Malawi’, that focuses on (a) the provision of high quality materials that engage learners and teachers; (b) the adequate training of teachers on how to use those materials; and (c) the proper support of the school administration and their community, may be effective in improving the attitudes and instruction of teachers of early grade reading instruction. Our team faced many stumbling blocks during all three phases. However, in the end it was because of the hard work of the teachers who helped us author and implement that we were able to see results. Additionally, the communities that our schools served were committed to successful implementation. Communities and parents want their children to learn to read, and with high quality materials, trained teachers and school/community support, children in Malawi can do just that.

Second, we believe that this programme was seen in its entirety as a learning experience for all involved. In addition to our more ‘formal’ capacity building workshops and meetings, we also interacted with each other in more ‘informal’ venues. When we were physically in the presence of each other, we often scheduled ‘team building’ activities

that would not only strengthen our professional capacity but also build personal knowledge of each other's cultures and beliefs. It was through these team building activities that we grew to learn about and trust one another. These are necessary in a programme of this magnitude. We had a tight timeline to keep and, through our dedication, commitment and a growing understanding of each other's cultures, we were able to meet our timeline and deliver a quality product to those who needed it most: the children of Malawi.

Finally, we believe that our progress thus far is due to the dedication and commitment of all our team members. Our international team is large, and often with large teams comes conflicting opinions and visions. This has not been our experience, as the institutions and organizations that participated in this programme and the individuals inside those institutions and organizations had a shared vision for the outcomes of this programme. In addition to the required material development, our international team shared a commitment to improving the literacy education of very young children in Malawi. We believe this programme might serve as a model for other programmes with similar commitment, dedication and human interest.

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