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Analysis of Best Practices on Early Literacy in Malawi:

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Analysis of Best Practices in Early Literacy in Malawi

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List of Acronyms

ACCO	Assistant Coordinator
AGLIT	Adolescent Girls Literacy Project
BLP/M	Beginning Literacy Program of Malawi
CBE	Complementary Basic Education
CERT	Centre for Educational Research and Training
CRECCOM	Creative Centre for Community Mobilization
CPD	Continuous Professional Development
DEM	District Education Manager
DEO	District Education Office
DFID	Department for International Development
EGRA	Early Grade Reading Assessment
GTZ	Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit
MBTL	Malawi Breakthrough to Literacy
MIE	Malawi Institute of Education
MOEST	Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology
MTPDS	Malawi Teacher Professional Development Support Activity
MTTA	Malawi Teacher Training Activity
MTTT	Mobile Teacher Training Troupes
OBE	Outcome Based Education
ODL	Open and Distance Learning
PCAR	Primary Curriculum Assessment and Reform
PEA	Primary Education Advisor
PPC	Program Progression Chart
PSSP: SFP	Primary Schools Support Program: School Fees Pilot
SMRS	Systematic Method for Reading Success
TALULAR	Teaching and Learning Using Locally Available Resources
TDC	Teacher Development Center
TTC	Teacher Training College
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
ZINFA	Zonal In-service Facilitators
ZOC	Zonal Coordinators

Executive Summary

Section 1.

Over the last decade, Malawi has seen the introduction of several literacy projects and initiatives to help combat the struggles with reading and writing found throughout the country. These projects have include pilots studies, full-scale programs, and localized work completed by international organizations. The purpose of this report is to consolidate these practices and provide recommendations for MOEST in their efforts to improve early grade literacy in Malawi and to revise the Primary Curriculum and Assessment Reform (PCAR).

Section 2.

Three key sources of information were used for this report. This includes a document analysis of project documents, interviews with key stakeholders, and the presentations and outcomes of the Best Practices Literacy Forum held in Malawi in July, 2010.

Section 3.

The literacy initiatives reviewed involved a wide range of goals and activities and varied in their size and scope. While some have yet to be evaluated, others show modest gains in reading and writing learning outcomes. Those included in this report include: MTTA, BLP/M, Literacy Across the Curriculum, MBTL, Tikwere, Extensive Reading, EuroTalk, CBE, AGLIT, and Literacy Boost.

Section 4.

Most literacy interventions and activities began with a problem statement or review of the current teaching and learning conditions and challenges in the target schools and standards. Some of the challenges discussed include: class size, understaffing, teacher and pupil absenteeism, insufficient time on task, poor teaching methodologies, poor use of teaching and learning materials, lack of classroom space, ineffectual head teachers, overstretched government workers, lack of a reading culture, and pupil hunger.

Section 5.

The best practices and lessons learned from each of these initiatives can be subdivided into the typical domains and components usually involved in any literacy initiative. Some of the most important recommendations for each domain are provided below; the complete list and a more complete explanation of each can be found in the full report.

Design and Structure

1. Local realities need to be taken into account when designing any program.
2. Activities should be piloted before being rolled out to all schools.
3. Regular communication between MOEST, MIE, and literacy projects is necessary.
4. Complementary support structures can ease the workload of overstretched PEAs.
5. The importance of school leadership cannot be underestimated; head teachers need proper training and support.
6. The role of head teachers needs to evolve from managerial and administrative support for literacy programs to instructional leadership.

7. Head teachers and teachers need to be shown how to concretely incorporate literacy activities into the existing time table and curriculum.
8. An extra hour of literacy should be added to every school day/New initiatives need to be formally added to the PCAR timetable.
9. Combined classrooms need to utilize all teachers.

Professional Development, Monitoring, and Supervision

1. Incremental training provides the best means to introduce teachers to new concepts; skills should be introduced progressively.
2. Trainings need to be held at a language level appropriate for participants.
3. Trainings should employ the methods teachers are expected to use in class.
4. Selected trainers should be individuals who are knowledgeable of Malawian classrooms and the realities teachers face, as well as those more familiar with the technical aspects of literacy.
5. TTC representatives should be included in the training sessions.
6. Training handbooks should be created by those who have both practical and technical experience.
7. Micro-teaching should be considered as powerful training tool.
8. Lessons should be prepped during the training sessions for teacher-use in the classrooms.
9. Alternative methods of professional development delivery should be considered.
10. School-based CPD needs to be regularly monitored by an individual with the time required.
11. A cluster-based model of CPD may be necessary.
12. TTCs should introduce module writing to student teachers during pre-service training.
13. Teachers need more training to understand PCAR.
14. Training should focus on understanding principles and concepts.
15. There needs to be a balance between teacher subject content knowledge and pedagogy during training sessions.
16. Mobile Teacher Training Troupes can provide a useful source of feedback and support for teachers.

Materials and Supplies

1. There are plenty of useful materials already developed that could be reprinted and distributed to schools.
2. Resources for teachers need to be at a level that is not too difficult.
3. In addition to being provided, resource-use should be incorporated into trainings.
4. Teacher professional development resources must be provided for teachers to use for school-based CPD.
5. Any resources created should also be pilot-tested.
6. School books should be in the hands of school children.
7. Readers must be at a level that learners can grasp/access.
8. Materials should be created with simple font and in large letters for pupils to see and understand.
9. Materials should be entertaining and interesting.
10. Stories need to have a beginning, conflict, resolution, and conclusion.
11. A list of literacy terms should be generated, translated, and distributed for common use.

Content and Curriculum

1. Every literacy initiative needs to have a clear framework and detailed approach to literacy that is consistent with PCAR.
2. More focus needs to be placed on the content and delivery used in literacy initiatives.
3. A balanced approach to literacy should be maintained.
4. The approach used to teach a regular language such as Chichewa is not going to be the same as that used for teaching English, a highly irregular language.
5. Letters and sounds should be taught in a sensible sequence.
6. New vocabulary should start simply and gradually progress to a higher level of difficulty.
7. Starting with smaller language units and building up to whole sentences might be more manageable by young children.
8. Aural and oral skills can help build reading and writing skills.
9. Teachers should be interviewed about the strengths and weaknesses of PCAR textbooks before any revision is made.

Instruction and Assessment

1. Teachers need to be taught to think about how the strategies they use relate to the essential components of literacy.
2. Children need to be active when learning.
3. Participatory teaching and learning is a hallmark of all initiatives, but it must be genuine and meaningful.
4. Groups need to be given meaningful tasks they can complete on their own.
5. The high emphasis on group work should be reconsidered.
6. It is possible to have whole-group, direct instruction that is interactive.
7. Less qualified teachers might benefit from structured lesson plans.
8. Writing needs to be a daily activity.
9. Stories should be reinforced with questions to test for listening and reading comprehension.
10. Teacher read-alouds are a key strategy that should be developed.
11. Songs and games are a good way to involve learners, but they must also be meaningful and related to literacy.
12. Teachers (and other stakeholders) need to be educated on how to recognize when learning has actually occurred.
13. Meaningful marking practices should be used.
14. The continuous assessment plan in use needs to be reviewed.
15. Teachers need more training on how to use assessment results to improve children's attainment of literacy skills.

Community Involvement

1. Community involvement needs to extend beyond 'bricks and mortar'.
2. Community members can be involved in TALULAR creation.
3. Literacy Fairs provide a way of involving communities in literacy.
4. Reading camps provide another means of introducing a culture of reading.
5. Older pupils should be paired with younger children to help them learn to read.
6. Old curriculum books should be included in school/community libraries.

Section 6.

The Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA) is a tool used to assess learners' abilities to read and write. EGRA has been used widely throughout the world, using the findings from these assessments for policy dialogue to help guide literacy programming. Some additional best practices can be derived from successful literacy initiatives that came out of EGRA, including those in Kenya, Liberia, and The Gambia. They include:

1. The literacy curriculum should be planned, progressive, and systematic to meet the developmental needs of young children.
2. Scripted programs and lesson plans may be appropriate for teachers with little experience.
3. Instruction should include continual demonstration and practice.
4. Key skills should be practiced every single day.
5. Phonemic awareness is an important skill in the process of learning to read that should be explicitly taught.
6. The alphabetic principle is another important skill children must learn.
7. Children need to first be taught skills on how to decode words automatically.
8. Choral repetition should be used sparingly and intentionally for very specific reasons.
9. There is no evidence supporting the efficacy of encouraging independent silent reading as means for improving fluency.

Analysis of Best Practices in Early Literacy in Malawi

Technical Report

Section 1. Introduction

There is little doubt that literacy levels among Malawian school children are in need of vast improvement. The numbers of children who enroll in school and progress several years without achieving basic literacy skills is staggering. A baseline survey from Zomba illustrated that 70% of Standard 2 pupils were unable to read a single word from the list of the 20 most commonly used words from their learners' books; in addition, over 95% showed no abilities to read connected text fluently or accurately (Chimombo et al., 2005). In Ntchisi, 6 months after starting school, over 85% of pupils were still unable to write their names, one of first literacy activities children usually master. Finally, on the most recent SACMEQ exam, administered to Standard 6 pupils throughout 15 countries in southern Africa, Malawian pupils scored the lowest, with over 91% being unable to demonstrate a minimum level of mastery for reading. What is more distressing is that those who took the exam likely represented the most capable readers; 56% of children who initially enroll in school dropout before reaching Standard 5.

The way forward toward remedying this situation will be difficult, but the solutions do not have to come from outside of Malawi. Both analytical and demonstration work in the area of literacy education have been ongoing in the country for many years. These literacy initiatives provide a plethora of best practices and lessons learned that can and should be adopted and adapted by the Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology (MOEST). However, the limited impact of previous efforts means that we must remain open to the experiences in other comparable contexts.

The purpose of this report is to consolidate these practices and provide recommendations for MOEST in their efforts to improve early grade literacy in Malawi and to revise the Primary Curriculum and Assessment Reform (PCAR). In Section 2 of the report, an overview of the sources and methodology used is provided, while Section 3 includes brief descriptions of the Malawian literacy initiatives reviewed and the learning outcomes associated with these initiatives. Section 4 summarizes the educational context in Malawi, focusing on the challenges faced in classrooms, schools, and communities. Section 5 is the heart of the Best Practices of report, and includes lessons learned and best practices in the areas of project design; professional development, support, and monitoring; materials and supplies; content and curriculum; instruction and assessment; and community involvement. In Section 6, further lessons are summarized from EGRA initiatives around the continent. Finally, a summary and conclusions are offered in Section 7.

Section 2. Methodology

Three main sources of information were used for this report. First, a document analysis of available program documents was conducted. Such documents included annual and final reports, internal and external evaluations, and occasionally training manuals and facilitator

guides. These documents also provided the source of information for the outcome data presented in Section 3.

Second, several interviews were conducted with various individuals who had worked on each program or were well-acquainted with them. These interviews were aimed at determining what these individuals believed were the best practices of each literacy intervention, as well as asking about for details and clarifications. A list of both the documents reviewed and interviews conducted can be found in Appendix A.

The Best Practices Literacy Forum (15-16 July, 2010) provided the final source of information. Over 40 stakeholders were involved, including representatives from various directorates at MOEST, the Malawi Institute for Education (MIE), and non-governmental organizations, as well as teachers, Primary Education Advisors (PEAs), and District Education Managers (DEMs). Participants presented on a variety of literacy initiatives in Malawi, identified best practices, and provided recommendations which are included in this report.

There were many limitations to this methodology that are worth noting. Because many projects are old, few documents could be found on them and most project staff had left the country. There were also several issues of documents being lost, destroyed, or not documented electronically, which raises serious questions about sustainability. Furthermore, most discussions of 'what worked' are based on the opinions of those involved. While evaluations often existed, they assess programs as a whole rather than the individual elements of a particular program. Thus, it is impossible to tell which components led to a project's success and which had no impact.

Section 3. Overview of Key Literacy Initiatives

Several key projects and programs were examined for this report. The following provides a brief description of each. Furthermore, before evaluating the best practices and lessons learned that can be determined from these previous interventions, it is necessary to review any evidence that shows whether each project or program has been successful at improving the learning outcomes of children in reading and writing.

Malawi Teacher Training Activity (MTTA): MTTA was a USAID-funded project conducted from 2004-2008 in Kasungu, Machinga, Mzimba South and Phalombe. The main focus was to provide in-service training to 6,300 primary school teachers (with a particular focus on improving content knowledge), develop and disseminate learning materials, and train more than 800 head teachers, 50 PEAs, and 300 mentor teachers to support these classroom teachers. Mobile Teacher Training Troupes—comprising groups of retired teachers—also provided support for teachers through weekly school visits.

In terms of outcomes in the area of English, teachers who could show mastery of English increased from 10.7% to 21.5% between 2004 and 2007. Standard 3 pupils also improved their understating of English. In 2004, 11.1% of pupils possessed partial mastery of English, and only 5.4% were assessed to have full mastery. By 2007, these percentages had increased to 15.9% and 11.3%, respectively. While these gains are modest given the duration of the project, they are moving in the right direction.

Basic Literacy Program of Malawi (BLP/M): BLP/M was an early literacy program that targeted Standard 1 teachers and pupils in all of the 226 primary schools in Dowa. It was conducted as part of the Primary Schools Support Program: School Fees Pilot (PSSP: SFP) initiative, which was funded by USAID between 2006 and 2008 in Dowa. BLP/M provided extra literacy training to teachers, produced lesson plans for teachers and a detailed facilitator's guide, monitored and supervised teachers (including the creation and use of a new Mobile Teacher Training Troupe in Dowa), and introduced school-based in-service training. It also injected numerous materials into Standard 1 classrooms, including song posters, big books, poem posters, alphabet charts, and leveled readers of locally-generated stories. An extra hour for literacy instruction was also added to each school day.

In 2006, 25.1% of children in Dowa and 27.1% in Dedza (the comparison district) were able to pass a Chichewa literacy test. By 2008, this had increased to 64.4% for the BLP/M schools, but had decreased to 9.2% for Dedza (likely due to the introduction of PCAR). In BLP/M schools, this represents a 39.3 percentage point increase in the number passing. Pupil absenteeism in Dowa between 2006 and 2008 decreased from 23.5% to 9.5%, while teacher absenteeism fell from 25.0% to 11.3%. Finally, the percentage of teachers using participatory methods effectively increased from 30.3% at baseline to 72.6% in 2008.

Literacy Across the Curriculum: Funded by GTZ, Literacy Across the Curriculum was a literacy intervention that began in 2003. It was piloted in six schools each in Rumphu, Ntcheu, and Mangochi. The focus of Literacy Across the Curriculum was to see the impact of using the 'language of play' as the language of instruction, as Chitumbuka is the native language in Rumphu and Chiyao is the language spoken in Mangochi. English and Chichewa were only taught as subjects (focusing on oral skills) until Year 3 when literacy in these languages was also introduced. Teachers were trained at the beginning of each term at MIE by tutors and language specialists. Local trainers also provided school-based support. The program lessons typically began with whole class work such as songs or stories, then shifted to the use of rotating group work, in which four groups rotated through a teacher's corner, reading corner, writing corner, and numeracy corner. Group leaders were used to assist pupils with activities when not with the teacher. Classes were taught on a shift system to reduce class size to no more than 60 (parents monitored children who were not in class with the teacher). Learners' books and teachers' guides were provided in the mother tongue. Initial letter charts were also provided.

At the end of year 1, while improvements were shown for those in Rumphu (35.70 vs. 25.50 for the control schools) and Mangochi (32.02 vs. 18.32 for the control schools), there was no difference in Ntcheu where Chichewa already is the language of instruction (20.20 vs. 20.50 for the control schools). One possibility for this finding is that the methods introduced by Literacy Across the Curriculum were no more effective than status quo, but all of the benefits gained in the other districts were driven by the mother-tongue usage. The gap between experimental and control schools continued throughout the course of the program, and by the end of Year 3 the experimental students were even doing better in English and Chichewa, despite having less time learning literacy in these languages. However, results were not disaggregated by district in these later assessments, and no further conclusions can be made about the fruitfulness of the instructional approach used.

Malawi Breakthrough to Literacy (MBTL): MBTL, funded by DFID and supported by Molteno (South Africa), was another literacy pilot that began in 2004. MBTL was piloted in Standard 1

classrooms in 135 schools in Ntchisi and 18 schools in Zomba. Over 600 educators were provided with in-service training as part of the program, including Standard 1 teachers, head teachers, and infant section heads, in three sessions (before each stage of the program). They were provided with school-based teacher support as well. A number of materials were provided, including posters, sentence makers for pupils and teachers, phonics flip charts, storybooks, and sets of word and letter cards. Again, group work was a focus, as children participated in different activities (such as using the phonics flip chart or library corner) while rotating through working with the teacher during an hour-long literacy lesson. Group work was always preceded with a whole class introduction of the phoneme of the day.

Results of MBTL show gains in literacy when compared to control schools. In MBTL schools, 79.1% and 74.4% of boys and girls, respectively, could write their names after one year of MBTL, compared to 53.3% and 50.0% of boys and girls in control schools. Furthermore, 21.4% of boys and 18.6% of girls in MBTL could write 6-10 Chichewa words at follow-up, compared to 12.5% of boys and 12.5% of girls in comparison schools. Children were also asked to read a short passage from the Standard 1 textbook. At follow-up, 40.5% of boys and 34.9% of girls in the MBTL schools demonstrated full mastery of the text, compared to 25.0% of boys and 10.0% of girls in control schools. Similar trends were shown for comprehension.

Tikwere: Funded by USAID, Tikwere began in 2007 and has currently been extended to 2012. Tikwere develops nation-wide radio programs for Standard 1-3 learners, and is currently in the process of expanding to Standard 4. Tikwere and MTPDS are contractually obligated to collaborate on future work. Programs last 28 minutes, 5 times a week, and are led by a 'radio teacher' who directs the teacher and pupils in the class. Each lesson covers the areas of Chichewa, English, and Life Skills in 5-8 minute sessions. Over 150 lessons have been developed in each standard. Radios are provided to each primary school and shared among the classes. Radio guides are also provided which include instructions on radio use and maintenance, lesson plans in order to prepare materials for each radio lesson, and extension activities for use after the radio program has finished each day.

The mid-term evaluation of PCAR, conducted after 1 year of Standard 1 Tikwere usage, found greater learning gains in math and English. Those using Tikwere, as opposed to the control schools, performed 10.9% greater in math and 14.9% greater in English. However, there was no difference in Chichewa performance at that point in time.

Extensive Reading: The Malawi Extensive Reading project originated in 1994, implemented by MOEST with the support of DFID. The Extensive Reading project was a supplementary reading initiative that aimed to improve English among Standard 4 and 5 pupils. A technical team selected 50 different titles per standard, plus two English dictionaries, that were considered appropriate for the Malawian context, with high-frequency vocabulary and non-complex writing. After piloting, 16,750 book boxes were delivered to all government schools across Malawi, with one box delivered per 50 children in Standards 4 and 5. A cascade model of training was used, and included sessions on the purposes of Extensive Reading, roles of teachers, and procedures for recording student reading and borrowing of books. In classrooms, pupils were to select books for themselves, read them individually in class, and take them home. Students could optionally write about the book after reading it.

A summative assessment was conducted on the successfulness of Extensive Reading. Standard 6 pupils who had completed two years of Extensive Reading (as of 1999) were compared to the 1996 scores of Standard 6 pupils who had had no Extensive Reading. Over the course of 2 years, students' overall English scores had actually dropped (from 23.67 to 20.58), indicating that initiative was not successful.

EuroTalk: While not directly targeting literacy, EuroTalk is a unique intervention that uses hand-held devices to teach children in the areas of English, geography, numeracy, science, life skills, and social studies. Schools are provided with 10 devices each, a computer for downloading lessons onto the device, and solar panels. Lessons are user-friendly, audio-based, and include cartoons to explain the buttons. Pupils listen to a lesson and are immediately tested on the information taught, using multiple choice. If the questions are answered correctly, they progress. If not, pupils are given the same teaching point and asked again. The devices are usually used in groups; while the ideal is 4-5 pupils per device, in reality it is often 8-10. As of 2008, EuroTalk had been scaled up to 50 schools, including schools in Karonga, Mulanje, and Phalombe.

EuroTalk was evaluated in 2 schools. Unlike typical schools, those being evaluated were provided with 20 hand-held devices, rather than 10 like most schools were given. Comparing these schools to controls, it was found that: (1) although increased attendance was reported by teacher, they were unable to verify this, (2) overall improvement in math was 1.5%, and (3) overall improvement in life skills was 3%. Because students were randomly selected, and there are well over 60 lessons on each device, it was not possible to know which students had completed which lessons. Thus these estimates of improved attainment are likely lower-bound estimates, as the effect is being washed out by those who did not use the device for certain lessons.

Complementary Basic Education (CBE): MOEST, with the support of GTZ, began the CBE program in 2006; it currently covers six districts. CBE targets out-of-school children aged 9-13 who have been out of school for over a year. CBE is a three-year course, covering two standards of education per year. Classes occur for three hours a day, five days a week. There are nine terms of twelve weeks each spread out over the three years. The main emphasis is on literacy and numeracy. Closely aligned with PCAR, 30 books have been developed for learners in the core subject areas, as well as 12 supplementary readers; 9 facilitators' guides (one per term) have also been created. In a CBE community, a learning center is established along with a management committee. CBE facilitators—often out-of-work school-leavers—are selected and trained in a 15-day induction, with a 5-day training session before each term as well. Supervisors provide regular visits and feedback.

While specifics are not available at this time, results so far show that CBE learners can perform at the standard to which their curriculum has been matched. They can read and write by the end of year one in their mother tongue. For comparison, the typical Malawian pupil performs at a level two standards below the one to which they are enrolled (example Std 1 performance for a Standard 3 pupil). Improved behavior and self-esteem are also cited as benefits.

Adolescent Girls Literacy Project (AGLIT): AGLIT, a UNICEF-sponsored project, is a combined health and literacy education program that originated in Chikwawa in 1997. It targets girls aged 10-18 in rural communities who do not attend school because of the need to work. The course

is 36 weeks long and conducted during the dry months. Lessons are held for two hours a day, five afternoons per week, near the village center. The only materials used involve chalkboards, pens, and exercise books. No evaluation of AGLIT was available at the time of writing.

Literacy Boost: Save the Children's Literacy Boost initiative began in 2008 and is still continuing today. The Literacy Boost toolkit involves three key components: reading assessment, teacher training, and community action. In terms of teacher training, eight sessions (typically administered in six training cycles) are provided to teachers which include coverage of the key literacy components as well as lesson plans, assessment schedules, and recording schemes. In terms of community action, workshops are provided to parents to sensitize them about the importance of reading and for creating locally available resources (often called TALULAR, Teaching and Learning Using Locally Available Resources) for schools use. Book banks are also established in each community, and reading camps are held after school at least once per month by camp leaders.

Literacy Boost has shown gains in literacy achievement after one year of implementation when compared to control schools. In Standard 2 Chichewa, fewer children scored zero on posttests of fluency, accuracy, and comprehension than did control schools. For example, while 91% of comparison schools scored zero in fluency, only 66% did in Literacy Boost schools. At pre-tests, 95% of pupils were scoring zero in both kinds of schools. For Standard 4 pupils, Literacy Boost children were reading an average of 38 words per minute after one year of intervention, compared to only 34 words per minute in comparison schools. Literacy Boost children scored 85% accuracy compared to 75% for their comparison peers, while the contrast was 73% compared to 63% for Chichewa comprehension questions. Again, substantially fewer children were scoring zero in Literacy Boost schools than in comparison schools in each of these areas.

An important caveat must be made when reviewing the outcomes. Several initiatives, such as Literacy Across the Curriculum and MBTL, were conducted in situations which were manipulated in such a way that they did not represent the reality of most classrooms. In particular, class size was reduced in both pilots; teachers only worked with a class of 60 pupils at a time. Managing 4 groups of 15 children is not nearly the same as managing and instructing 4 groups of 50 children (or 10 groups of 20 children), which is the case in many schools. In the case of MBTL, extra teachers to reduce class size were recruited from the upper standards, leaving those classes without a teacher. Even the success that BLP/M witnessed may not have been possible without the additional hour of a school day that the program added. Thus, while the gains may be impressive, they likely cannot be expected when a project is scaled up to more realistic conditions.

Section 4. Situational Analysis

Most literacy interventions and activities began with a problem statement or review of the current teaching and learning conditions and challenges in the target schools and standards. In general, these reviews produced several chief areas of concerns, briefly outlined below.

Class size: By and large, the chief challenge cited by most activities was the number of pupils per teacher. The national primary school average of 85 pupils per teacher (UIS, 2010) masks the fact that in the lower primary standards, classes of 200 pupils and a single teacher are not uncommon. Class size affects the ability to provide whole class, group, and individual

instruction, to control and manage the class, to properly assess each and every learner, and to understand the needs of individuals. It also creates a noisy, distracting environment in which pupils may find it difficult to hear the teacher or concentrate.

Understaffing: Teacher shortages are chronic in many areas; this is due to issues of teacher shortages as well as deployment and allocation issues. MOEST hopes to add over 18,000 additional teachers through traditional means and 12,000 Open and Distance Learning (ODL) teachers in the next four years (MOEST, 2009). Furthermore, MOEST estimates that as many as 42% of teachers are assigned to their posts randomly, rather than based on pupil enrollment. In addition to exacerbating the problem of class size, this also limits the number of individuals available for key participation in literacy activities (for example, to mentor other teachers in the school).

Teacher and pupil absenteeism: Teacher absenteeism from schools prevents lessons to be delivered in a structured, timely, sequenced manner. Children who miss lessons are unable to build upon the previous skills which should have been learned during these missed periods. Overall instructional time, a large predictor of pupil achievement and success in school, is dramatically reduced. Furthermore, understaffing means that there are no substitute teachers to fill in when teachers are absent. As a result, classes must be combined, increasing class sizes further.

Insufficient time on task: In Standards 1 and 2, pupils only attend class on average of 3-3.5 hours a day. However, due to teacher and pupil tardiness, extra time needed to manage and instruct large classes, time needed for breaks and school feeding, and time needed for the administrative tasks required of teachers, the actual time available for instruction is severely limited. This time available is further diminished by the addition of complementary programs like Tikwere (which requires five learning periods a week yet is not accounted for in government schedules). While undoubtedly beneficial to children, these programs limit the time available to complete the PCAR syllabus. According to forum participants, in some classes, actual learning time is reduced to one hour a day to teach all subject areas.

Poor teaching methodologies: Many teachers are reported to not be using participatory methods during instruction, such as discussion, group work, role play, or demonstration. Poor lesson planning and preparation is also an issue.

Poor use of teaching and learning materials: The lack of teaching and learning materials is a challenge cited by most baseline analyses. TALULAR is infrequently used by teachers as a substitute. Other concerns include the storage of materials as well as theft. Finally, there is the issue that materials that are provided are sometimes not used.

Lack of classroom space: Insufficient space in schools can lead to teachers holding classes outdoors, which can be noisy, distracting, and unsafe. Furthermore, it is unfeasible during the rainy season. As a result, classes are often doubled up, with multiple teachers and classes working in the same classroom space. As teachers sometimes do not co-teach or assist each other in these conditions, it leads to even larger classes sizes as one teacher must assist twice as many pupils.

Ineffectual head teachers: Many head teachers have had no form of orientation or training as to their roles and responsibilities and how to effectively lead and manage schools. In Dowa district, for example, 75% of head teachers had had no orientation before PSSP:SFP began.

Overstretched government workers: In particular, PEAs were identified as a key individual whose time is demanded for too many tasks and activities.

Lack of a reading culture: In communities, homes, and schools, everyday use of reading is often uncommon. Newspapers, books, magazines, and other reading materials are infrequent, as is sufficient lighting for reading after dark. Thus, in some cases, teachers struggled to use the resources provided to them due to their own limited familiarity with reading materials and their structure. Reading for pleasure is rare.

Pupil hunger: Pupil hunger leads to the inability to concentrate during lessons and to master the content learned, or to skip class altogether. Furthermore, children are unable or unwilling to stay after school for additional instruction due to hunger.

Section 5: Best Practices and Lessons Learned

The section on best practices is loosely divided into six domains that are involved in most literacy interventions: design and structure; professional development, monitoring, and support; materials and supplies; content and curriculum; instruction and assessment; and community involvement. There is substantial overlap across domains. In particular, it is sometimes hard to separate the content of literacy lessons from the way it is taught in the classroom.

A. Design and Structure

Each literacy intervention employs a certain design and organization that can impact its effectiveness. This includes systems for the design and evaluation of program components, stakeholder involvement, implementation issues, and the organization of key delivery structures.

Caution must be exercised when adopting foreign programs.

Foreign programs and research-based findings are often looked to as models and sources of information for designing initiatives in Malawi. While this is a good starting point, one must remember that the situation and conditions where these interventions worked before might not be the same as in Malawi. Flexibility is key, as is the ability to adapt programs in ways that are effective. Developers must be local to enhance understanding of the education system, local contexts, and language structures and its use. However, also worth considering is whether a program would still be as effective once key elements are adapted.

Local realities need to be taken into account when designing any program.

In the case of CBE, for example, flexible time tables mean low opportunity costs for participation from out-of-school youths. Because classes only meet for 3 hours a day, pupils are still able to participate in farm work or income generating activities.

Implementation should be quick enough so as not to lose momentum, but slow enough to ensure it is of high quality.

Several project reports noted that because trainings were provided frequently, the momentum of the project was sustained. However, in the case of a few initiatives (such as MBTL and Tikwere), this meant that materials were sometimes not ready in time for the next training or were produced with errors.

Activities should be piloted before being rolled out to all schools.

Although this may slow down the implementation process, piloting key activities is essential. In the case of BLP/M, validation meetings were held with over 50 teachers to make sure that the early literacy components (including the techniques and materials) were understood properly, were appropriate, and were well-received. This tactic also provided opportunities to start introducing the new project, build enthusiasm, and gain some initial feedback. For example, one recommendation that stemmed from these meetings was that activities needed to be fit into the time frame allotted.

Systems for feedback need to be built into any program or project.

For most programs, bi-directional feedback is provided during teacher training, continuous monitoring, and support. However, in the case of Tikwere, training occurred late, after nearly a year of radio use. Currently, it is provided via radio programming, which also does not allow for dialogue between the teachers and trainers. A communication channel is necessary for any project such that questions and comments can be passed along.

Regular communication between MOEST, MIE, and literacy projects is necessary.

Built into the Tikwere model is a regular system for communicating with both MOEST and MIE. This helps to ensure that each stakeholder is kept informed and that activities are aligned with PCAR. MOEST support for projects is also shown by making such communication a priority, which encourages buy-in from local stakeholders. Mutual learning was also cited as a benefit of this frequent communication.

Complementary support structures can ease the workload of overstretched PEAs.

Most interventions attempted to work within the structures that were already in place, such as the use of PEAs and TDCs (Teacher Development Centers). By using existing structures, this ensured the sustainability and scalability of each project. However, as noted, PEAs are often over-extended. In the case of MTTA and PSSP: SFP, Zonal In-service Facilitators (ZINFAs) and Zonal Coordinators (ZOCs), respectively, were created as a complementary support system. These positions proved to be a great asset to support the PEAs. By working together with PEAs and developing joint action plans with clear articulation of roles and responsibilities, they were seen as partners to assist PEAs in many activities. Their responsibilities included working as facilitators during cascade models of training, designing and implementing their own in-service sessions, and monitoring and supervising teachers. Because their position was voluntary, the only cost was the provision of a bicycle. It would be worth exploring ways of institutionalizing roles such as the ZOC or ZINFA through providing career path incentives.

Involving numerous layers of stakeholder involvement can help reinforce the aims of a literacy initiative.

Another best practice from BLP/M is the depth of stakeholder involvement, such as PEAs, ZOCs, MTTTs, and DEOs. By involving so many players, there was less chance of information distortion as it moved across levels. However, having so many stakeholders required close coordination to ensure that conflicting messages were not being given and that there was not duplication of efforts. Debriefing village headmen and local members of parliament also helped to garner support for the literacy activities.

The importance of school leadership cannot be underestimated; head teachers need proper training and support.

In the case of many initiatives, such as BLP/M and MTTA, the schools that performed best and which implemented reforms with the most success were those with effective leadership. The support of head teachers is necessary to ensure the dedication and participation of teachers, which in turn ensures that learners are engaged. Overall, a shared vision helped to unite schools and carry the momentum of new initiatives.

The role of head teachers needs to evolve from managerial and administrative support for literacy programs to instructional leadership.

In BLP/M and many other programs, head teachers participated in the training. However, this did not often translate into strong leadership at the school level. This needs to occur in order to ensure compliance with the concepts and practices introduced by the initiative and to provide guidance and support.

Head teachers and teachers need to be shown how to concretely incorporate literacy activities into the existing time table and curriculum.

Many programs, such as EuroTalk, Extensive Reading, and Tikwere, faced challenges in that teachers were unsure about how to incorporate the program elements into the existing schedule and program of activities. Even when these programs complement PCAR, no extra time was allotted in the schedule for these additional elements. Without additional time, many programs are viewed as supplemental, rather than complementary, and are eventually abandoned. Another issue to consider is the scheduling of radio broadcasts in line with the school time table to make sure the best fit is achieved.

An extra hour of literacy should be added to every school day/New initiatives need to be formally added to the PCAR timetable.

Unfortunately, no program reviewed seemed to successfully incorporate the additional literacy activities within the existing curriculum structure, and thus no model exists of the best practice. The only program reviewed that has successfully found time to incorporate the literacy initiative activities along with PCAR is BLP/M. However, this was possible through the addition of an extra hour of literacy at the end of every school day.

While some teachers have argued that additional instruction is already provided after school to struggling pupils, (1) the frequency of this practice is unclear, (2) given the literacy levels of Malawian children, it can be easily argued that nearly all pupils are struggling and need extra support, and (3) research suggests that additional instructional time must come in the form of formal instruction time to be effective, rather than tutoring after school or extra work sent home with children. While this suggestion may not be feasible in schools without school feeding

programs, it is a goal to work towards. Forum participants similarly recommended increasing the number of periods of literacy from 7 to 10 each week.

Combined classrooms need to utilize all teachers.

With a shortage of classroom space, classes are often combined into one room with two teachers. It is critical that teachers collaborate and assist each other in teaching during these situations, rather than remaining idle until it is their turn to teach.

Double-shift teaching should be considered.

Due to large classes, one suggestion that came from the forum was the use of double-shifting, which was used during Literacy Across the Curriculum and MBTL to reduce class sizes. In schools where a double-shift is possible, teachers can teach one class from 7am-10:30am, and the other from 10:30am-1pm. However, it would require the necessary classroom space and likely additional allowances for those teaching a double shift.

B. Professional Development, Monitoring, and Supervision

Systems of professional development of teachers, as well as how they are monitored and supported once in the classroom, are another important component of all literacy initiatives. While continuous professional development (CPD) and in-service training were the main focus, some initiatives also touched upon the pre-service training that teachers receive at teacher training colleges (TTCs).

Centre-Based Professional Development

“Flattened” cascade training models help to avoid message diffusion and inconsistencies during centre-based training.

In PSSP: SFP, a flattened cascade model was used, in which PEAS, ACCOs (Assistant Coordinators), and ZOCs were trained to directly facilitate trainings at the cluster level. Half the teachers targeted were invited to the cluster-level trainings, while the other half was trained during school-based in-service. Because of this structure, some teachers were able to have direct contact with the trainers.

Incremental training provides the best means to introduce teachers to new concepts; skills should be introduced progressively.

Most projects, such as PSSP: SFP, Literacy Boost, MTTA, Literacy Across the Curriculum, and MBTL used an incremental training approach. What was learned during the first session was practiced over the term; challenges were discussed and feedback was provided during the next training session, where the next new skills were introduced and demonstrated. Flexibility was also often a key component of this approach, as different clusters and schools faced different challenges, or new issues worth addressing might be identified by PEAs in between training sessions. Because of the progression of new skills and ideas from one cycle to the next, teachers could slowly come to understand the new material and to execute it effectively without being overwhelmed. Progressive cycles also gave opportunity for facilitation to improve with each cycle.

Trainings need to be held at a language level appropriate for participants.

In MTTA, this was a chief goal of all in-service trainings and ensured that content was accessible to all participants.

Trainings should employ the methods teachers are expected to use in class.

In BLP/M, the training was very participatory. Teachers practiced what they were taught, provided feedback to each other, practiced free-writing, discussed, and engaged in activities and games. They shared their group work results, had discussions, and asked questions. Facilitators were directed to move around the room and assist groups as they were working, as well as to check for understanding. What was learned was reinforced in a variety of ways. Literacy Boost, MBTL, MTTA, and other programs used a similar approach that involved demonstration by the facilitator, then practicing and discussion.

Similarly, other project components should reflect and model what is expected of teachers. In the case of EuroTalk, lessons provided on the device served as models for teachers for structuring their own lessons in the classroom. In Tikwere, the radio teacher demonstrates effective teaching practices, such as appropriate pausing or how to ask questions. She also models the PCAR approach which teachers are supposed to be using in class every day. In BLP/M, as noted, training facilitators utilized the skills that teachers were being asked to use with their own pupils and showed how to do so effectively.

Selected trainers should be individuals who are knowledgeable of Malawian classrooms and the realities teachers face, as well as those more familiar with the technical aspects of literacy.

Many programs utilized individuals such as PEAs, TTC tutors, curriculum writers, etc as facilitators during training sessions. Often, pairing someone with technical expertise with someone with recent experience in classroom situations proved to be a good balance. MTTA also found that using a larger number of trainers during each training session helped to make sure there were no problems due to conflict schedules and absenteeism during subsequent trainings. In the case of MBTL, unfortunately, trainers came from South Africa and were unfamiliar with the Chichewa language, and thus could not provide examples of what they were teaching in Chichewa. Such a situation should be avoided. On the contrary, Literacy Across the Curriculum, provided both the learners' books and teachers' guides in the mother tongue.

Select teachers should be considered as trainers for other teachers.

In addition to school-based in-service, teachers might make good trainers to be used during cascade models of training, as occurred in MTTA. Star performers were selected as trainer heads; they participated in the district-level training of trainers and then helped to facilitate cluster-level trainings. According to MTTA documents, this practice greatly increased project "ownership" by teachers in the country, and won the support of the Teachers' Union of Malawi. However, the continued presence of representatives from MOEST, MIE, and District Education Offices (DEOs) at trainings gives weight to initiatives and encourages all of those who are involved. One concern about this suggestion is ensuring consistency of information and appropriate delivery; however, the teachers work as part of a team with ZINFAs and PEAs which can help for quality-control.

Peer-to-peer training should be considered as a training model.

In Tikwere, due to time and funding constraints and the large-scale nature of the program, peer-to-peer training was introduced. Because Standard 1 teachers had been trained during a large-scale training cycle, they were used to train the Standard 2 and 3 teachers as the program

expanded. These skills could be developed during in-service sessions for all teachers. By developing these (and facilitation skills in general), teachers will be better equipped to assist new teachers moving into their schools as shifting occurs.

TTC representatives should be included in the training sessions.

Involving TTCs in the sessions allowed them to see the challenges that teachers faced, providing them with information to review and revise their own content. Furthermore, trainers from the TTCs are particularly skillful at imparting new knowledge effectively to those in training. This also increases the chances that best practices will be incorporated into pre-service training.

Training handbooks should be created by those who have both practical and technical experience.

In MTTA, training handbooks were created mostly by those who had taught primary school. Primary school teachers provided information about teachers' and pupils' needs based on their experiences. Also, their participation ensured sustainability at school level. Having secondary school participants also helped to improve the content of materials.

During cascade models of training, facilitators notes should be included with the modules.

BLP/M included these notes to assist facilitators during the training sessions. Notes were detailed and highly scripted, ensuring consistent delivery of content. Examples of the kinds of discussions to have and questions to ask were also included. The notes not only educated facilitators as participants, but showed them how to take what they had just learned and facilitate it themselves during the next round of training.

When attempting to enhance teachers' content knowledge during in-service training, pre- and post- test should be considered.

In MTTA, one of the chief goals was to improve content knowledge of English, math, and science. Thus, trainings were outcome-focused and included pre- and post-tests. Results were used by facilitators to develop the next series of training cycles, and they helped to demonstrate to teachers what they had learned. Low achievers received remediation at the zonal level. The use of pre- and post-tests also kept participants alert during trainings.

Teachers need to become accustomed to identifying their own strengths and weaknesses.

As part of many teacher training components reviewed, in particular those with an incremental approach, participants were asked to identify what they did well, and where they continue to need practice. Being able to monitor one's own performance is an important skill that should be modeled and reinforced; it is the basis for school-based in-service.

When trainings are provided, extra individuals should be trained to act as substitutes.

As noted, PEAs are often pulled in many directions at once. In BLP/M, ACCOs and ZOCs were also trained so that they could step in if the PEA was busy. In Literacy Across the Curriculum an extra teacher was trained (in addition to the target teacher in each school) so that she/he could act as a resource person when there were questions about the program. In Literacy Boost, all teachers were trained in order to account for constant shifting of teachers. In the case of EuroTalk, there were difficulties in that the teacher who was trained in using the device sometimes shifted schools, leaving no one remaining who was trained.

Standards beyond the target classes should be trained on the project’s approach as well.

Both MBTL and BLP/M recognized the need to train teachers in the next standard beyond the program’s target. For example, MBTL trained Standard 3 teachers to continue what was learned in the previous years. Even though these teachers were not the target of the intervention, they helped to carry on the principles and project components so that learners had consistency in their education. However, such an approach should only be considered where funds permit.

Micro-teaching should be considered as powerful training tool.

One innovation introduced during in-service training workshops in MTTA was micro-teaching, in which a group of pupils was invited to the training session. Teachers were asked to practice their new skills and teach actual topics to these pupils. Participants noted that they found the experience very enriching and illuminating. The experience provided practical exposure and insight into the real issues embedded in the processes being advocated.

Lessons should be prepped during the training sessions for teacher-use in the classrooms.

Some programs, like BLP/M and Tikwere, provided teachers with lesson plans that they could use directly in the classroom. Others, such as Literacy Boost, incorporate lesson planning into part of their training cycles, such that teachers leave the training with the new lessons ready for use in the classroom. MBTL provided lessons during the first stage, but only a sample lesson plan for the second stage. Teachers seemed to enjoy having lessons prepared for them in advance of the term; it saves them time and likely helps them to feel more confident in the classroom. Furthermore, it provides a means of quality control as well in terms of lesson content, pacing, and delivery.

Alternative methods of professional development delivery should be considered.

In MTTA, DVDs were created and provided to TTCs (along with DVD players) to help educate aspiring teachers on teaching life skills. In Tikwere, 15 radio programs on assessment, instruction, child-centered learning, PCAR integration, lesson structure, and radio care and management are broadcast for teachers. While the timing of these programs is currently not ideal (as teachers cannot listen because they are busy teaching), the mode of delivery is one that should be considered for reaching teachers on a large-scale (perhaps on Saturdays or after school hours). In addition, for both DVDs and radio programs, the messages provided are consistent as it does not get diffused through cascade models. Forum members also suggested the use of video to demonstrate good teaching practice during trainings.

Trainings should not occur just before a holiday.

This ensures that teachers do not forget what they have learned and have time to practice it in their classes.

Teachers can become accustomed to the lack of allowances.

In PSSP: SFP, very few allowances were provided for attending trainings. While this may have caused dissent at first, over time teachers became accustomed to the lack of allowances or extras. They were continually reminded that CPD was part of their professional responsibilities.

School-based Professional Development

Regular school-based CPD can build a culture of professional development.

With the recent drive toward school-based CPD by MOEST and MIE, it is important to recognize the elements that best make it work. Weekly, 1-hour meetings were used as part of BLP/M to help ensure that it became a regular part of school culture. An in-service coordinator can help to make sure that meetings occur regularly. She/he should record activities, lessons learned, challenges, and successes at each session. However, forum participants suggested monthly, 3-hour meetings as opposed to weekly ones.

School-based CPD needs to be regularly monitored by an individual with the time necessary.

In the case of BLP/M, ZOCs monitored most school-based training sessions. This was necessary to ensure that these sessions occurred regularly and that the information passed along was correct. ZOCs were able to provide feedback on facilitation skills as well and to answer any questions that remained. However, given that in reality, PEAs are overstretched, it may be necessary to create a complementary structure such as the ZOC or ZINFA to assist in this. The monitoring of such meetings provides encouragement and can help PEAs/ZOCs identify areas that are in further need of development across the cluster/zone. However, one concern about school-based training, as revealed during MTTA, was the heavy emphasis on definitions of teaching methods and principles (such as “child centered learning”) rather than applications for how to use these in classrooms. Monitoring and support of school-based in-service training can help curtail this.

A cluster-based model of CPD may be necessary.

Due to understaffing in many schools, a cluster-based model of CPD may be a more appropriate approach rather than school-based.

TTCs should introduce module writing to student teachers during pre-service training.

With the shift toward school-based training, teachers are being relied on to identify their own needs, develop modules, and facilitate training sessions. They also must know how to use resources and guides to help write these modules. Each of these skills needs to be introduced to teachers during their pre-service training at TTCs.

Star performers should be used both to help instruct and supervise others as well as to act as motivation.

PSSP: SFP identified several “star performers”, or teachers who excelled in the classroom. Such teachers were able to influence others to change their attitude towards their work. In addition, incorporation of ideal teachers in CPD and in-service training proved to be a motivation for those selected teachers, as well as their peers. MTTA used a similar practice; mentor teachers were selected for their outstanding performance and helped to supervise teachers in their classrooms. They also helped to facilitate workshops at the school and cluster levels, as noted. Having locally-based mentors was useful for providing immediate feedback to teachers. However, one repeated concern was that these teachers have to teach their own class at the same time and have little time for additional tasks. Furthermore, removing them from the classroom means that there is one less “star performer” teaching in class.

Exchange visits between schools should be promoted.

Using exchange visits has several benefits. First, they are useful for the exchange of ideas and learning of best practices. Second, PSSP: SFP found that they motivated schools to improve and do well so they could be part of an exchange. Third, they are sustainable and cost-effective. However, of concern is finding the time to engage in such visits. With time to teach already

limited, exchanges should be used sparingly, or scheduled to occur in holidays not shared by all schools (for example, Catholic schools can visit on a day they are closed but government schools are open).

Topics and Content

The literacy strategies targeted during training should be practiced during the training itself.

In BLP/M, teachers were asked to practice the new skill or technique on other participants. Those participants in turn could monitor and provide feedback. Practicing these new techniques at the training session helped to identify misunderstandings immediately and to rectify them as soon as possible. Participants also practiced literacy skills such as skimming when they explored the teachers' guides, familiarizing themselves with the text.

Teachers need more training to understand PCAR.

One issue that was discussed at the forum was the concern that teachers still do not understand the PCAR approach to literacy and how they should be teaching in their classrooms. Inconsistency and lack of clarity in messages is contributing to the problem; even MOEST officials sometimes struggled defining the PCAR approach to literacy. In particular, there is a need for additional, intensive training on how to integrate whole word and phonics.

Some training topics should be identified using a needs assessment prior to development, and some topics should be chosen by MOEST/MIE.

Many programs utilized both approaches to identify topics that needed to be addressed during training. Allowing teachers and school leaders to identify topics gave participants the opportunity to address which issues they felt they struggled with the most. In programs like PSSP: SFP, teachers were asked to identify the areas they struggled with; lists were compiled and the top areas addressed. However, it is also essential that key topics fundamental to teaching and learning are covered. Teachers may not always be aware of what the gaps in their knowledge base are, or be up to date on what research has identified as the best practices for literacy instruction.

Training should focus on understanding principles and concepts.

In the case of Extensive Reading, training sessions often only focused on procedures, such as opening book boxes, storing them and keeping them clean, or using the record chart. While important, teachers must be taught the principles, concepts, and skills that form the foundation of the initiative they are taking part in.

There needs to be a balance between teacher subject content knowledge and pedagogy during training sessions.

It is critical that teachers understand the topics they are expected to teach. For example, teachers should be familiar with the basic components of literacy (phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension) as well as an array of various methods that can be used to teach each of these.

Additional topics that need to be addressed include handling large classes, supervision, codes of ethics, and participatory teaching and learning methods.

The topics noted above were those that BLP/M teachers found to be most useful during training.

Monitoring and Supervision

More supervision and guidance is necessary/ Teachers need to be monitored at least once each term.

A frequent recommendation provided by forum participants was that teachers need strict supervision in classes to ensure they are executing their literacy lessons properly. In most programs, such as Literacy Across the Curriculum and BLP/M, teachers received feedback about their teaching at least once a term. This usually involved lesson observations and interviews. The results of this monitoring not only assist the teacher individually, but can be compiled to determine what common areas need to be addressed during the next training cycle.

Mobile Teacher Training Troupes can provide a useful source of feedback and support for teachers.

MTTTs were used in both MTTA and BLP/M; retired teachers or recent graduates without jobs were recruited to act as specialists in particular subject areas, such as English or literacy. The MTTTs received training on their roles and how to assist teachers. The MTTTs would spend a week in a particular school, observing and assisting teachers. The long contact with teachers meant that they were more comfortable getting feedback from the troupers. All teachers were visited at least once per term with this method. Teachers were given feedback on strengths and weaknesses and strategies for improvement. Teachers in these schools stated that they found it very easy to discuss with a trouper the challenges they had in content knowledge and pedagogy because they had sufficient contact hours with each other, which helped to build trust. The typical schedule for the week of MTTT visits (during MTTA) was as follows:

Monday and Tuesday: Observe lessons and identify gaps; interview teachers and community members on levels of learning

Wednesday and Thursday: Demonstrate pedagogical skills with micro-lessons; teachers incorporate what they have learned while being observed

Friday: Feedback and discussions; develop action plan to continue implementation

An expanded support base for teachers strengthens teacher confidence, competencies, and commitment.

One best practice cited as part of BLP/M was the need for an extensive support base. In BLP, this included PSSP: SFP project staff, MTTTs, ACCOs, DEMs, coordinating PEAs, chiefs, and community members.

Both teachers and children should be monitored during observations.

PSSP: SFP developed a teacher observation instrument to ascertain teacher performance, particularly in participatory teaching methods. It also looked at pupil involvement in various teaching methods. This was a lesson learned from the USAID funded MESA project where teachers' participatory methods improved significantly, while pupils' learning gains remained relatively low. To better understand this potential disconnects, PSSP: SFP decided to record the pupils' learning responses as well.

C. Materials and Supplies

Issues related to materials and supplies relate to the quantity and types of materials provided in literacy initiatives, the method and mode of delivery, and usage and maintenance.

Resources for Teacher Professional Development

There are plenty of useful materials already developed that could be reprinted and distributed to schools.

PSSP: SFP used materials already created by USAID, which were distributed during cycle trainings so that each teacher had a set. These included:

- *TALULAR: A Users Guide*
- *Continuous Assessment: A Guide for teachers*
- *Teaching English in Malawian Primary Schools: Reading and Writing*
- *A Resource book on Professional Ethics for Teachers and School Managers*
- *Effective Use and Care of Textbooks: A Resource Book for Schools and Colleges.*
- *Resource Centre Guide: A Guide for Schools and Colleges.*
- *Towards Effective Teaching and Learning: A Resource Book for Self and Peer Monitoring*

MTTA also created a guide for head teachers called *Instructional Leaders: Becoming an Instructional Leader Handbook* which focused on instructional leadership, record keeping in relation to outcomes-based education (OBE), supervision, coping with challenges in the school, and school improvement activities. MBTL and Literacy Boost have also created materials which would be helpful, including activity guides and methods for community participation.

Resources for teachers need to be at a level that is not too difficult.

As many teachers only possess only a Junior Certificate of Education, it is important that the resources created are easy enough for them to read and to understand the concepts. Teachers reported that the resources created in BLP/M were easy to follow, helped put theory into practice, and that they enriched the training sessions. Furthermore, as noted above, created guides in the local language (such as Literacy Across the Curriculum did) would also greatly benefit teachers and the project overall.

In addition to being provided, resource-use should be incorporated into trainings.

In PSSP: SFP, the topics taught were supported with these resources and teachers were introduced to them at the same time. During group work, teachers were asked to search through these materials to find answers, which also helped to get them acquainted with using them. Examples were given from the resources, and teachers were encouraged to use them when lesson planning. The resources were thoroughly integrated into trainings to illustrate their usefulness.

Teacher professional development resources must be provided for teachers to use for school-based CPD.

All of these materials can provide a useful source of information for teachers when planning school-based CPD. As teachers are expected to find their own solutions to their problems, it is necessary that they are properly equipped with tools which make that possible. In BLP/M, these resources were used for planning teacher conferences at the cluster level.

Any resources created should also be pilot-tested.

In MTTA, one key resource created was the *English Resource Manual: Teaching English in Malawian Primary Schools*. To create this guide, materials for teaching English were reviewed, a workshop was held, the manual was drafted, and then it was pilot-tested in the field. Revisions were made based on the feedback provided by teachers. Without this step, there is the risk of mass producing a product that is not useful to teachers, wasting limited resources.

Resource materials at the TDC, such as library books, should be decentralized to the cluster or school levels.

This enables pupils, teachers, and community members to access and use them more than they do when the resources are TDC-based.

Resources for Pupils and Schools

Classroom should be rich in teaching and learning materials.

In BLP/M and MBTL, one of the best practices cited was the influx of teaching and learning materials in schools. Song posters, big books, storybooks, alphabet charts, literacy strategy posters, sentences makers, word and letter cards, and phonics flip charts are examples of some of the many resources created by these programs. Considering the lack of a reading culture in homes and communities, it is important that children have ample opportunity to see written language and interact with it. Having lots of books also gives children the opportunity to hold them, get used to the orientation of readers, flip their pages, and explore the structure of books, in addition to practice reading skills.

TALULAR use should be encouraged and promoted.

Nearly every intervention encouraged the creation of TALULAR. In PSSP: SFP, teachers who were using TALULAR in their participatory teaching and learning were reaching more learners by providing alternative ways of learning the same thing. The chance of learners understanding what they are teaching was enhanced. In some schools, teachers were holding weekly TALULAR-making sessions to exchange ideas with their fellow teachers. Developing local resources is a sustainable way to build excitement for education. Old curriculum books, newspapers, and pamphlets can also be used for reading corners and clubs. However, the level of vocabulary used on the materials needs to be taken into consideration; newspapers may not be appropriate for the level of reading of most learners.

Local stories provide a valuable source of content to incorporate into any literacy initiative.

Literacy Boost and BLP/M used locally-generated materials as part of their projects. In BLP/M, a competition was created that generated over 300 submissions. These were then sorted into themes (such as my home, my family) and were published into leveled readers. As several projects have already created such stories, it is worth considering reprinting and using those which have already been written and validated for use across Malawi, rather than creating new ones (saving time and funds).

Children and teachers need to be educated on proper material care.

Many initiatives included components on the care and proper use and care of materials. For example, as part of MBTL, children were shown how to hold books, turn pages, wash hands before holding books, and how to carry books. However, it is important that teachers practice

the same principle in class, as they are the chief models for book use that children have. When learners' books are distributed, teachers need to be careful that they do not throw or drop books (a habit often used given the large number of pupils, difficulties moving around the class, and because children are often seated on the floor).

School books should be in the hands of school children.

One concern from forum participants was that school books are often not sent home with pupils or are locked away to prevent theft and damage. MOEST needs to enforce a policy where children are allowed to have access to their learners' books, particularly in their homes where there is a dearth of reading material. Evidence from Literacy Boost has shown that children who bring home their learners' books tend to have higher literacy achievement.

Materials should be shared across institutions and organizations.

PSSP: SFP distributed the Standard 1 BLP/M materials to 19 TDCs, 8 TTCs, and other educational institutions such as MIE, Center for Educational Research and Training (CERT), National Library Services, National Archives, CRECCOM, and MOEST and its directorates. This was done as part of an advocacy approach and for the sharing of skills in literacy teaching and learning.

Readers must be at a level that learners can grasp/access.

One problem with using locally-created stories is that the level of language used to generate the stories often outpaces that of beginning readers. Considering that children in the first few standards possess very few literacy skills, it is important that readers are created with simple enough words and sentences for these children to read without getting discouraged. Several projects noted problems with having readers that were too challenging for the reading levels of young pupils. One of the chief reasons for the failure of Extensive Reading was that the readers were at too difficult for pupils to grasp. MOEST prepared a list of the words children struggled with from the readers, which in the end totaled over 700 words. While it was understandable that some words were too difficult for children in Standards 4 and 5 (acquire, jealous), many words had been part of the English curriculum since Standard 3 (young, angry, to buy, early). It is also critical that their learners' book are likewise at an appropriate level, as they are often the only reading material children have access to.

Materials should be created with simple font and in large letters for pupils to see and understand.

Materials should be entertaining and interesting.

In EuroTalk, the lessons utilized were of high-interest, encouraging children to share the content with others and even improving attendance. Tikwere similarly uses interesting and imaginative characters and story lines. While there is a push to make stories relevant to the daily lives of children, this should also be balanced with making stories exciting in order to improve learner motivation to read.

Stories need to have a beginning, conflict, resolution, and conclusion.

It is important to use stories for teaching children that have a clear beginning, conflict, resolution, and conclusion. A series of loosely connected sentences is of less interest to pupils, and provides less opportunity to ask higher-order questions. Tikwere adapted passages from PCAR into full, more interesting stories for use in their radio programs.

A list of literacy terms should be generated, translated, and distributed for common use.

During material creation for BLP/M, in preparation for translation, a list of key literacy terminologies used in the lesson units was compiled. This was translated into Chichewa to facilitate effective translation of lessons. This practice would ensure that the same terms are being used in all materials (and throughout trainings) so as not to confuse teachers.

D. Content and Curriculum

Another important area of concern is *what* is taught regarding literacy in each of these initiatives. Issues of concern might include the scope and sequence of the material covered, or whether a whole language or phonics-based approach is used. Of note, there is some crossover and overlap with the previous section, Materials and Supplies as well as next section, Instruction and Assessment, due to the integrated nature of materials, curriculum, and their delivery.

Every literacy initiative needs to have a clear framework and detailed approach to literacy that is consistent with PCAR.

A National Literacy Framework would help to ensure a common understanding of the PCAR approach for the development of assessment, curriculum, and materials, and as a guide to program selection, teacher development, and education policy. As illustrated through visits to schools and even the literacy forum itself, there is much confusion about the approach used in PCAR; the messages that are being received are unclear and inconsistent. This document could be easily distributed to all relevant stakeholders to make sure that all are working in similar ways toward common objectives.

More focus needs to be placed on the content and delivery used in literacy initiatives.

After reviewing countless annual reports, evaluations and other project documents, it has become apparent that most of the focus is placed on the delivery approach used for teacher training or the materials generated, rather than the actual content of the initiative. While general points are noted, initiatives need to be more explicit in the content and instructional approaches that are used.

A balanced approach to literacy should be maintained.

Nearly every program utilized a balanced approach that focused on both phonics and whole language learning; forum participants were likewise favored a balanced approach. A typical method is suggested by CBE, where phonics is taught but in a meaningful context. First, pupils participate by discussing topics through picture prompts; this allows them to bring in their own experiences and background knowledge. Next they are introduced to texts that are related to these pictures and which introduce key words. The key words incorporate target letters and sounds that are explicitly taught, yet in the context of that word which helps pupils remember it. As noted by CBE: "Learning reading consists of a double process: the active search for the meaning of a text and efforts for mastering the code of the written language in order to understand the text."

Children should learn literacy in their language of play before transitioning to a second language.

While this best practice is already in use by MOEST for Chichewa speakers, it has not yet reached children who speak other languages in Malawi. In Literacy Across the Curriculum, children performed better who were taught in their language of play (Chitumbuka or Chiyao, for which they already had basic oral skills) rather than in Chichewa, the typical medium.

Interestingly, over time, these children eventually outperformed their peers in Chichewa and English, even though neither language was native to them. This illustrates how the skills and competencies learned in one's mother tongue can easily be transferred to learning to read in new languages. Rigorous, international evidence supports this point ().

The approach used to teach a regular language such as Chichewa is not going to be the same as that used for teaching English, a highly irregular language.

English is a confusing language because of the inconsistency in sound-grapheme representations. However, words in Chichewa often take the CV (consonant-vowel) structure and include regular spellings. Thus comparisons across languages should be made with caution.

Letters and sounds should be taught in a sensible sequence.

In CBE, letters are not introduced alphabetically, nor are vowels and consonants taught separately. Instead, letters are taught in a sequence according to frequency. However, also worth considering is not just frequency, but distinctness in sounds and ability to combine these letters into short words. In English, for example, the letters s, m, c, a, and t are often introduced first because of their distinctness from each other as well as the ability to combine them into a variety of short words (cat, mat, sat, Sam). Thus children learn how to blend sounds into words early on. Easily confusable letters, such as p and d, or q and p, are rarely taught together. The same principals are worth examining among Chichewa letters and words.

New vocabulary should start simply and gradually progress to a higher level of difficulty.

PCAR materials are often cited as too dense and difficult, with vocabulary that is too challenging for children. The immediate introduction to long words is also a common complaint. Vocabulary needs to be introduced in a clear, reasonable sequence. The most frequently used words should be targeted first and repeatedly. Furthermore, there are some concerns that the number of new vocabulary words introduced in Standards 1 and 2 is too much; the learners' books assume the children know much more than they actually do.

Starting with smaller language units and building up to whole sentences might be more manageable by young children.

Similar complaints about PCAR included the immediate use of whole sentences. Teachers who had been exposed to Literacy Across the Curriculum preferred that children were first introduced to letters and syllables and built up to whole sentences. Those who had worked with MBTL also disliked that complicated sentences were provided by PCAR directly, rather than being generated by the children themselves as they had been in the MBTL approach.

Only small letters should be taught at first.

Many letters have two grapheme representations, which can be confusing to young learners: the lowercase version and uppercase version. For CBE, only the lowercase version is used for the first 2 terms of Standard 1; in term 3, capitals are introduced.

Aural and oral skills can help build reading and writing skills.

In MBTL and CBE, aural and oral skills were a primary focus at first. These skills were developed through the use of pictures, which also helped to develop vocabulary. Developing these skills first is necessary for switching to the development of decoding skills, as children will already have a command of basic vocabulary and can properly pronounce words.

Because of the lack of a culture of reading at home for most children, any literacy curriculum must begin with pre-reading and pre-writing skills.

For CBE, this includes learning how to handle a book, how a book is structured, holding a pen, appropriate sitting posture for writing, etc.

Teachers should be interviewed about the strengths and weaknesses of PCAR textbooks before any revision is made.

Because PCAR was not piloted before being rolled out, there was no opportunity for teachers to express their concerns, provide feedback, and to incorporate that feedback into textbook development. MTPDS can remedy this concern before the next revisions are made.

E. Instruction and Assessment

In addition to *what* is taught, literacy initiatives often contain a particular approach in terms of *how* this content is delivered in the classroom. The instruction and pedagogy used play a critical role in whether children can access and understand the curriculum they are to learn.

Assessment is also a crucial component of what teachers do in class that must be considered.

Instruction and Pedagogy: General Points

A variety of activities should be used for teaching speaking, listening, reading, and writing skills.

In CBE and other projects, typical activities are varied and numerous. For example, CBE uses activities for speaking and listening such as picture description, storytelling, sharing experiences, and aural discrimination. For reading, activities such as visual discrimination of syllables, word recognition, matching words to pictures, and following a text read by the instructor are all used. Finally, for writing, pupils copy letter patterns, fill in missing syllables, combine syllables, and reorder words to make sentences. The various activities help to meet the needs of pupils with different learning styles, mutually reinforce one another, and keep children interested and engaged.

BLP/M reinforces these core skills in a series of 'literacy strategies' which have also been beneficial, even in a large class setting. The core strategies used by BLP/M include teacher read aloud, teacher think aloud, story star, character map, creating a class big book, theme web, interactive writing, games, and think-pair-share. These research-based strategies often focus on teaching literacy within the context of a story, and thus also contain a large focus on comprehension. They can also be transferred to other subject areas.

Teachers need to be taught to think about how the strategies they use relate to the essential components of literacy.

As part of the BLP/M training process, teachers were introduced to a strategy and then asked to identify which of the basic elements of reading and writing were involved in that activity. For example, asking questions about a song relates to the skill of comprehension, a skill that is essential for using reading to learn about other subject areas. Teachers need to view what they do in class as being driven by the need to teach children these fundamental skills.

Just like the curricular contents, instructional methods should also have a clear sequence.

For example, in the case of CBE, activities are introduced in a progression that aligns with the sequence of skills learned. For example, they might begin by dictating words and sentences for the teacher to write, before moving on to recognizing shapes of letters and writing them legibly. Next they focus on copying short familiar words they can read, adding letters and syllables to complete a word, and finally writing words on their own.

Children need to be active when learning.

Whether in groups, pairs, or even as whole class, children need to be active. This should involve ample opportunities to speak, as well as activities like listening to tales, dictating short stories, reading aloud, silent reading, writing that is not just copying, and demonstrating.

Teachers need to engage with learners.

Teachers need to actively focus on what children are doing and saying. They need to listen to them, consider their reactions, adapt materials to suit their needs, and understand how well they are following the lessons. Teachers need to recognize when learning has occurred or where there still are gaps.

Participatory teaching and learning is a hallmark of all initiatives, but it must be genuine and meaningful.

Every initiative reviewed made sure that children were active participants in their own learning, through group work, pair work, discussion, demonstration, and the like. However, it is necessary to make sure children are genuinely participating in meaningful ways during each of these methods; sitting quietly in a group and not doing anything cannot be considered participatory.

Groups need to be given meaningful tasks they can complete on their own.

In MTTA, such group activities might have included forming vocabulary words from a box of letters or fill in the blank to complete sentences. In MBTL, children matched word cards to those in the sentence maker. However, it is crucial that these tasks are not only about copying, memorizing, matching or other busy work and that they actually engage learners in using real skills.

Classroom teachers should be flexible in terms of number of groups.

One suggestion stemming from the forum was that teachers should be reminded that they do not have to maintain 4 groups for group work. The concern is that in large classes, groups can have 30-50 learners. While this suggestion may be appropriate in certain conditions, one issue that must still be considered is that if groups are rotating through direct instruction with the teacher, more groups will mean even less time with the teacher (as 6-8 groups will have to each

take a turn, rather than only 4). Combining groups during 'teacher time' might be necessary so as to not reduce instructional time even more than it already is.

The high emphasis on group work should be reconsidered.

One recommendation stemming from the forum was to lessen the focus on group work. The principle rationale of using group work is to better instruct and monitor students in a large class. However, in the early standards in particular, the usefulness of groups is questionable. The amount of time a student spends in direct instruction with the teacher is reduced; in an hour lesson, a child will only spend 15 minutes with the teacher if there are four groups (and even less if there are more groups). In actuality, teachers are often unable to meet with all 4 groups in one lesson, meaning students go several times a week without any direct contact with their teacher for literacy. Teachers are unable to manage what goes on in the independently working groups at that time, and because children possess few basic skills in the early primary school years, they are unable to work independently and/or carry on discussions (for example). Most work done by these groups involves copying from the board, which has limited utility. Group leaders are difficult to identify due to so few children who can read in Standards 1 and 2; often the group leaders are the best memorizers. Furthermore, expecting group leaders to teach their classmates at such a young age may be putting too high of expectations on them and may not be developmentally appropriate.

It is possible to have whole-group, direct instruction that is interactive.

Group work should not be considered synonymous with participatory teaching, for the reasons highlighted above. Similarly, direct instruction should not necessarily be considered teacher-centered, as it can be interspersed with question and answering, individual activities and demonstrations, and even short pair work. Direct instruction to the whole class also ensures that all pupils are getting ample time learning from their teacher, rather than only a few minutes every other day as groups rotate. Direct instruction is necessary as children cannot be expected to construct their own knowledge without any form of guidance or intervention from the teacher. The lack of a literacy environment at home means that they have little background knowledge in literacy to construct their own knowledge from.

Less qualified teachers might benefit from structured lesson plans.

In CBE, Tikwere, and BLP/M, teachers are/were given scripted lessons to use in their classes. Arguably, with the lack of training and education in Malawi, it can be said that most teachers are under-qualified and could benefit from structured lesson plans, which ensure the curriculum is administered fully and consistently. However, there is concern that this might limit teacher's freedom. Thus, it is recommended that scripted lesson plans are provided, with full consideration of the typical classroom, not the ideal classroom. However, this should be accompanied with the understanding that these are suggested lessons and that teachers can alter them as necessary, with the expectation that only those teachers who feel (and are) competent enough to produce their own lesson plans will actually do so.

Instruction and Pedagogy: Specific Strategies

Wearing name cards helps children to practice reading and writing their own names.

One innovation produced by schools in BLP/M was the use of name cards, which are worn around the child's neck. Learning to read and write one's own name is often one of the first

literacy tasks undertaken by young children; young children are often highly motivated to learn this. Without parents able to assist them at home, name cards worn at school provide an opportunity to work on this skill. It also helps teachers learn their pupil's names in large classes where that is often difficult.

Children's own words can be used to build vocabulary and knowledge of literacy.

Several programs, such as MBTL, focused on using the words and sentences generated by children as the jump-off point for learning additional skills. Using pictures to start a meaningful discussion, the words and sentences that children generated were written down and used to teach particular phonics skills.

Children should generate their own writing.

One focus in classrooms is often copying what has already been written. While this might help to develop motor skills, copying is not the same as writing, which involves knowing the letter/sound relationships. Furthermore, this helps to focus on the fact that writing has a purpose and is not just a mechanical process. In BLP/M, Literacy Fairs are held in which children write invitations to their parents, illustrating a purpose of writing (although it is important that children are not just copying the invitation from the chalkboard).

Writing needs to be a daily activity.

All too often, writing is seen as a process that comes after reading. But writing involves scribbling, drawing, or even writing one's name. Daily writing is needed to practice holding a pencil, for developing motor coordination, for developing speed in writing, and especially for practicing emergent writing skills.

Stories should be reinforced with questions to test for listening and reading comprehension.

It is important that questions are not just factual, but also inferential or predictive so that they encourage higher-order thinking skills. Wrong answers should be corrected and explained. Generic and/or sample questions of each type can be provided and explained to teachers.

Teacher read-alouds are a key strategy that should be developed.

In BLP, one of the main strategies promoted were teacher read-alouds. This involved reading to a child and asking questions that fostered comprehension and critical thinking. It also allowed teachers to demonstrate concepts about print, such as how to read properly, and to teach comprehension strategies, such as what can be predicted from the title and cover. Children were asked to predict, explain, and discuss.

Guest readers also provide a valuable resource.

In BLP/M, guest readers were invited to read to the class. These readers were asked to practice the story first, and encouraged to use gestures and expression. Children were asked questions to keep them engaged and comments were elicited. Guest readers provided a way to involve the community and to motivate children.

Reading clubs provide another option to create a culture of reading.

In BLP/M, reading clubs were created for after school. These clubs brought together children of all ages. They had a regular schedule during which children could play learning games, read stories together, or engage in a read aloud.

Creating class books is also a useful literacy strategy.

Another BLP/M strategy was writing books together as a class. Each child was given a page and wrote their name at the top. They were then asked to write a sentence or draw a picture related to the chosen topic; one child was selected to create the cover. The pages were then bound as a book, and children were shown how to use it properly before reading it together as a class.

Songs and games are a good way to involve learners, but they must also be meaningful and related to literacy.

Teachers sometimes complained that time is wasted on non-academic singing and dancing. However, BLP/M song charts were used to teach children how to read from left to right, to practice rhymes, and to show that letters and words convey meaning. After introducing and singing a song, children can draw a picture that relates to the song and label it.

Teachers should display learners' work on walls and notice boards at schools.

This practice helps to encourage pupils to perform well and gives them a sense of pride in their accomplishments.

Assessment and Evaluation

Teachers (and other stakeholders) need to be educated on how to recognize when learning has actually occurred.

One common error revealed by many informal evaluations was the belief that a program has induced children to read or write without any evidence to support this claim. For example, exercise books filled with sentences do not necessarily mean that the child can write; the pupil may have just copied the sentence from the chalkboard. Similarly, repeating passages or sentences numerous times in chorus and then having a child read it individually does not necessarily mean the child can read; he or she may have just memorized the sentences.

Children should see evidence of their learning.

Children will only remain in school if they are progressing; thus it is important that they learn skills quickly and experience success. Starting with basic skills that are easily learned (such as writing one's name or learning how to write a few basic letters) can help to make sure this is possible. Showing children progress of their learning visually also helps. In EuroTalk, start charts are used to reward children who successfully complete each lesson.

Meaningful marking practices should be used.

With large classes, it is often easy to resort to merely marking exercises as right or wrong. In BLP/M, teachers substantially improved their marking skills by indicating where the problem was. This assisted learners to know when they made a similar mistake. Another suggestion is to have teachers learn to identify common errors and to explain those to the whole class. A shift toward explaining the errors pupils make and how to correct them is necessary and is rarely practiced.

The continuous assessment plan in use needs to be reviewed.

Forum participants reported that currently, the assessment activities required of teachers as part of PCAR are so demanding that teachers are busy compiling these records of learning at the expense of teaching and concentrating on learners. According to teachers, children should be receiving a mark about once a week as part of PCAR; recording these for over a hundred

children is time consuming, let alone the time required for the assessment. However, the participants also recommended that children need to be assessed more frequently to determine what skills struggling learners have acquired and where they are in need of further remediation. Learners should receive a mark once a month.

Assessment notebooks should come ‘pre-lined’.

In the notebooks where teachers record the assessment outcomes, teachers spend a substantial amount of time drawing lines. Forum participants recommended that notebooks that are used for recording assessments should come already lined.

Teachers need more training on how to use assessment results to improve children’s attainment of literacy skills.

As suggested by the forum members, teachers need more assistance in learning how to incorporate assessment findings into their literacy schemes and future plans. Assessment needs to be viewed as part of the teaching and learning process, rather than a separate, independent activity.

F. Community Involvement

Finally, most literacy initiatives reviewed contain elements of community involvement and creating a culture of reading overall. However, the degree and depth of community involvement can vary greatly across projects.

Literacy should be visible and publicly accessible.

In AGLIT, adolescent girls met in public places, such as under a tree in the village center. Because their classes were visible to all, what was learned became ‘common property’ of the whole community and quickly garnered local support. This spread to a greater culture of literacy and health throughout the communities.

Community involvement needs to extend beyond ‘bricks and mortar’.

In many projects, community involvement is often limited to construction activities (building libraries) or providing materials (such as mats for classrooms, or donating old books). While these contributions should not be underestimated, they can be extended to focus on establishing a culture of reading in communities. In addition to community sensitization of any project, communities can create library committees to help establish and care for libraries (as occurred in PSSP: SFP). They can also assist in creating materials such as poems, riddles, and stories, which as noted were compiled and edited as part of the BLP/M program.

Community members can be involved in TALULAR creation.

One workshop held by Literacy Boost had parents help create materials for use in their children’s classrooms, such as labeled pictures or alphabet charts. A side benefit of these workshops was that some parents reported creating similar materials to use at home with their own children as a result of the workshop.

Literacy Fairs provide a way of involving communities in literacy.

As part of BLP/M, literacy fairs were held at the school at the end of every term and community members were invited. These fairs provided a way to display books, stories, and drawings that children created, and to demonstrate reading skills using the displayed charts and posters.

Children also wrote invitations to their parents inviting them to the fair, demonstrating their writing skills. Community members in turn read stories to children at the fair.

Village book banks can provide a collection of literacy materials for community use.

As part of Literacy Boost, book banks were established in 85 communities in the impact areas (as well as 1 per school). These banks included: double-sided Aesop's fables on single page handouts that were laminated for durability, a complete collection of Aesop's fables (all 40 in spiral bound), primer books for each letter of alphabet, adapt-a-story books (adapted to Malawian context and Chichewa), and guidelines for reading to children. Communities identified an individual to keep the book banks safe.

Reading camps provide another means of introducing a culture of reading.

Literacy Boost also utilized reading camps in every village. These camps met after school about once a month, although some villages desired weekly camps. At the camps, community camp leaders (a volunteer position) introduced a variety of activities, such as story reading, playing games like letter bingo, singing songs, and buddy reading. Children often went home from the camps with a story to practice with a reader near their home (a strong reader was paired with a weaker one). However, these camps are time and resource intensive and may have limited scalability potential.

Older pupils should be paired with younger children to help them learn to read.

Given that many parents are illiterate, older school children should be utilized as a tool for assisting younger learners.

School libraries should be used as community libraries.

Forum participants suggested that school libraries be made into fully functioning libraries accessible by the communities. All too often, schools have books but they are stored away for safekeeping and not well utilized.

Old curriculum books should be included in school/community libraries.

As noted in the forum, Literacy Boost uses the old curriculum books in the school libraries and book banks as they still provide a useful source of reading material that is age-appropriate for pupils.

Section 6. Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA)

EGRA is a tool used to assess learners' abilities to read and write. While it does not advocate a particular approach toward teaching literacy, the findings from EGRA can help guide literacy interventions. While EGRA is typically used for policy dialogue, teachers can also be taught how to use EGRA to directly assist them in their own classrooms. To date, EGRA has been used in 43 countries and 58 languages. In every case, it is specifically adapted to the language and context of that country, and has been used for higher level policy dialogue, as well as for school and class-room based training interventions

At its core, EGRA focuses on oral reading fluency. Children must achieve a certain level of fluency in order to comprehend what they are actually reading. However, fluency alone is not sufficient to comprehend; children must also understand the meaning of the text. As the main

goal of learning to read is reading to learn, it is essential that children can read quickly and accurately. However, as many pupils in developing countries are far from reading fluently, other components of reading that are necessary to become fully literate are also assessed. These include: concepts about print, letter recognition, phonemic awareness, vocabulary, decoding, listening, and the alphabetic principle. EGRA is administered orally and individually, with a typical assessment taking 15 minutes per pupil.

The data produced by EGRA is easy to understand and available quickly following data input and analysis. This information can be used to help identify weaknesses in student knowledge and skills that can be targeted in nationwide approaches to literacy development, such as EGRA-Plus in Liberia or the Systematic Method for Reading Success (SMRS) in South Africa. Some additional best practices stem from these successful literacy initiatives, many of which echo the recommendations provided in the previous sections.

The literacy curriculum should be planned, progressive, and systematic to meet the developmental needs of young children.

While already noted above, this is a best practice worth reiterating. In SMRS, teachers are guided on which letters, decodable words, sight words, read-alouds, and independently read stories to use in each lesson through an SMRS Program Progression Chart (PPC). This chart begins with single-syllable words before moving on to multisyllabic words. Stories used in class include the progressively more difficult vocabulary.

Scripted programs and lesson plans may be appropriate for teachers with little experience.

Again, this suggestion was generated based on Malawian literacy initiatives; however, it is important to note that countries using EGRA often employ the use of scripted lessons as well. In SMRS, clear detailed lessons are provided along with the Program Progression Chart to guide teachers. Specific, scripted lessons were also developed for the Kenya pilot.

Instruction should include continual demonstration and practice.

In South Africa, lesson plans often included a pattern of ‘my turn, your turn’ in which teachers showed pupils how to do a certain activity (such as deconstructing a word) before asking children in the class to do the same.

Key skills should be practiced every single day.

Phonemic awareness is an important skill in the process of learning to read that should be explicitly taught.

Children should be taught phoneme segmentation and blending, as both are predictive of reading success. These skills should be modeled by teachers then practiced by students. Such lessons might include identifying the common sound among a group of words; determining if a target sound is heard at the beginning, middle, or end of a word; or blending and segmenting phonemes to produce (or decode) words. However, it is also important to note that phonemic awareness development should not become the majority component of any literacy lessons; it should be quickly taught and immediately used.

The alphabetic principle is another important skill children must learn.

The alphabetic principle is about mapping the sequence of printed letters in a word to their respective sounds. Reading the alphabet, rhyming, repetitive books, and letter bingo all help to teach and reinforce this skill. Finding other words with the same target sound is another option.

Names should be the first sight words children learn.

Children need to first be taught skills on how to decode words automatically.

While some words are sight words and can be memorized, pupils need to learn skills in breaking down words so they can be read. Using a reading approach that is based on 'look and say' focuses only on memorizing and not on teaching children genuine skills. Pupils need practice sounding out and blending words, as well as breaking down and analyzing previously learned words. Common sounds and letters should be taught first.

When teaching literacy in English, begin with simple words with regular spelling.

Because of the irregularity of English spelling, it is important to begin with those with a regular letter-sound correspondence that reflects the skills children are learning in their mother tongue in Malawi.

Vocabulary instruction should be taught both prior to and during a lesson.

In addition, students need multiple exposures to words in different format.

A random approach when checking for understanding helps to ensure children do not memorize.

For example, when reviewing a list of words or alphabet chart, teachers should select words and letters out of order.

Choral repetition should be used sparingly and intentionally for very specific reasons.

Choral repetition is good for practicing pronunciation and giving every child a chance to participate. However, it does not give teachers a chance to hear errors. Furthermore, it encourages memorization and does not focus on reading for meaning.

There is no evidence supporting the efficacy of encouraging independent silent reading as means for improving fluency.

On the other hand, there is evidence to support the practice of children reading aloud. Reading aloud helps children to monitor what they read and whether or not they understand it.

Pupils should be taught metacognitive skills to monitor their reading.

Pupils should be taught strategies for monitoring unfamiliar words. They should ask themselves if they can sound it out, if it helps to read on, do pictures help give clues, or does the word look like one read before. Prediction, using prior knowledge, summarizing, and self-questioning are also important strategies to teach children.

Section 7. Summary and Conclusion

The work of previous and current literacy initiatives in Malawi provides a wealth of information about how best to improve the reading and writing skills of young learners. The best practices and recommendations identified above are numerous and cover a large range of programmatic areas.

Literacy instruction must be systematic, covering basic skills in a sensible, progressive manner that focuses on decoding and blending words but also on understanding the larger purposes of reading and writing in the Malawian context. In order to provide such instruction, teachers need a concrete understanding of the basic principles of readings, why they are important, how they should be taught, and how they can be assessed. Progressive, incremental, teacher training can provide these necessary skills and content. At the heart of all of these suggestions, however, is the need for the development of a clear and comprehensive national literacy approach, which can serve to guide not only MOEST and their affiliates, but all stakeholders endeavoring to improve literacy in Malawi.

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Appendix A

Documents and Interviews

Below is a list of documents reviewed and interviews that were conducted when compiling the findings found in the report, which were supplemented by informal communication with project representatives and other stakeholders not listed here.

Documents Reviewed:

AGLIT

1. Hogg, A., Makwiza, B., Mlanga, S., Broadhead, R., & Brabin, L. (2005). Finding a curriculum that works under trees: Literacy and health education for adolescent girls in rural Malawi. *Development in Practice*, 15(5), 655-666.

CBE

2. *CBE Literacy Framework, Concept Note*
3. *CBE Literacy Methodology*
4. *CBE Summary*, March 2010

EGRA

5. *Integrated Education Program: Impact Study of SMRS: Using Early Grade Reading Assessment in Three Provinces in South Africa*, Dr. Benjamin Piper
6. *Integrated Education Program: The Systematic Method for Reading Success (SMRS) in South Africa- A Literacy Intervention Between EGRA Pre- and Post-Assessments*, Dr. Sandra Hollingsworth
7. *Mid-term Assessment of the Liberia Teacher Training Program*, Luis Rodriquez, Stephen McLaughlin, Patrick Cummins
8. *Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA) PLUS: Liberia- Project Summary*
9. *The Gambia Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA): Results from 1,200 Gambian Primary Students Learning to Read in English*, Liliane Sprenger-Charolles
10. *Improvements in Reading Skills in Kenya: An Experiment in the Malindi District*, Luis Crouch and Medina Korda

EuroTalk

11. *Tiphunzire Limodzi: Report on using technology in Malawi primary schools*, MOEST
12. *The potential role of portable interactive learning technology in basic education in Malawi*, Paola Masperi and David Hollo

Extensive Reading

13. Williams, E. (2007). Extensive reading in Malawi: Inadequate implementation or inappropriate innovation? *Journal of Research in Reading*, 30(1), 59-79.

Literacy Across the Curriculum

14. *Piloting children's language of play in selected languages in Malawi: A presentation of a pilot study conducted by the Malawi Institute of Education (MIE) with support from GTZ*, Elke Tiede and Dr. Hartford Mchazime, Ph. D

Literacy Boost

15. *Literacy Boost Toolkit*, Amy Jo Dowd, Elliott Friedlander, Carol da Silva
16. *Malawi Literacy Boost 2009: Year 1 Report*, Amy Jo Dowd, Karen Wiener, and Francis Mabeti

MBTL

17. An Internal Evaluation of the Malawi Breakthrough to literacy (MBTL) Pilot Study
18. Training of Standard 1 teachers, Infant section heads, Head teachers, PEAs and Support Team Members for Stage 2 Implementation of the MBTL Approach

MTTA

19. *MTTA Annual Report 2004*, American Institute for Research
20. *MTTA Annual Report 2005*, American Institute for Research
21. *MTTA Annual Report 2006*, American Institute for Research
22. *MTTA Annual Report 2007*, American Institute for Research
23. *MTTA Final Report 2008*, American Institute for Research
24. *Achieving Our Goals and Transforming Our Schools: Best Practices in the Malawi Teacher Training Activity*, Dr. Nancy Kendall, Ph. D

PSSP: SFP/BLP/M

25. *PSSP:SFP Annual Report 2006*, American Institute for Research
26. *PSSP:SFP Annual Report 2007*, American Institute for Research
27. *PSSP:SFP Annual Report 2008*, American Institute for Research
28. *PSSP:SFP Final Report 2009*, American Institute for Research
29. *Pupil Assessment Baseline Data Report 2006*, American Institute for Research
30. *Pupil Assessment Baseline Data Report 2007*, American Institute for Research
31. *Pupil Assessment Follow-up Data Report 2008*, American Institute for Research
32. *Comparative Study of Recent Literacy Programs Piloted in Malawi & Mid-Term Evaluation of the Beginning Literacy Program of Malawi*, Dr. Grace Chiuye
33. *Together for Change: The Story of How PSSP:SFP's Methods and Practices Improved Education in Dowa District*, American Institute for Research
34. *Let's Read, Malawi!*, American Institute for Research
35. *PSSP: SFP Catalogue of Training Materials and Publications*, American Institute for Research

Tikwere

36. *USAID/Malawi Tikwere Interactive Radio Instruction (IRI): Mid-term Evaluation*, Frank Method, Stuard Leigh, Joseph Abisa, Hartford Mchazime, and Bismarck Sakunda-Ndhlovu

Interviews Conducted:

Mr. Raphael Agabu, Deputy Director, Educational Methods and Advisory Services, MOEST
 Dorothy Matiti, Principal Education Methods Advisor, Educational Methods and Advisory Services, MOEST

Dr. William Susuwele, Director, MIE

Dave K, MIE

Cecelia Kamlongera, MIE

Henri Chilora, MIE (formerly the literacy coordinator of MBTL and Literacy Across the Curriculum)

Foster Gama, MIE
Carrie Lewis, Project Director, Tikwere
Patricia Luhana, Writer, Tikwere
Julie Kachasu, Writer, Tikwere
Andrew Malisaw, Literacy Boost, Save the Children
Godfrey Kalamula, Literacy Specialist, Literacy Boost, Save the Children

Phone and email correspondence was also conducted with representatives from BLP/M, AGLIT, CBE, and EuroTalk.

Appendix B

Resource Compendium

Below is a (non-exhaustive) list of a variety of resources and learning materials created by past and current projects and organizations related to literacy, continuous professional development, and other relevant areas. Many of these resources might be reproduced for use in future literacy initiatives as they are not specific to a particular project, while others might serve as a source of inspiration. Teachers' guides for specific interventions were not included (e.g. the Tikwere Radio Guide).

Project/Organization	Title
MESA	<i>Teaching And Learning Using Locally Available Resources (TALULAR): A User's Guide</i>
MESA	<i>A Resource Handbook on Professional Ethics for Teachers and School Managers</i>
MESA	<i>Participatory Teaching and Learning: A Guide to Methods and Techniques</i>
IEQ	<i>Continuous Assessment: A Practical Guide for Teachers</i>
MTTA	<i>Teaching English in Malawian Primary Schools: Reading and Writing</i>
PSSP:SFP	<i>Effective Use and Care of Textbooks in Schools</i>
PSSP:SFP	<i>Using School Level Data to Improve Teaching and Learning</i>
PSSP:SFP	<i>Towards More Effective Teaching and Learning: A Resource Book on Self and Peer Monitoring</i>
PSSP:SFP	<i>A Resource Center Guide for Schools and Colleges</i>
Literacy Boost/Save the Children	<i>Community Strategies for Promoting Literacy</i>
MIE	<i>Journeys through PCAR (Teachers' Orientation Manual)</i>
MIE	<i>Continuing Professional Development of Teachers: Introduction to School Life and Learning</i>
MIE	<i>Continuing Professional Development of Teachers: Managing CPD in Your School</i>
MIE and GTZ	<i>Learning is Fun: Games and Activities for the Teaching of Literacy and Numeracy</i>
BLP/M	16 big books, 30 song posters, 4 poem posters, 4 graphic organizers (story star, character map, theme web, alphabet chart), 3 series of leveled readers (see <i>PSSP:SFP Catalogue of Training Materials and Publications</i> for details)
Literacy Across the Curriculum	Initial letter chart, letter cards, memory and domino games, laminated pictures of letters of the alphabet in all 3 languages
MBTL	Phonics flip chart, word cards, sentences strips and holders for both teachers and pupils, Learner's Activity Books (LABs), readers, and 4 discussion posters.

