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# SOFIE Newsletter

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*The SOFIE research project aims to increase access to education and learning for young people living in high HIV prevalence areas in Malawi and Lesotho, by developing a new, more flexible model of education that uses open, distance and flexible learning (ODFL) to complement and enrich conventional schooling*

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## SOFIE newsletter June 2009 - December 2010

### Foreword

The SOFIE project has had a very busy year with the final team meeting being held in Lesotho in February. The SOFIE intervention has now been trialled over one academic year in 20 primary schools in Malawi and 20 secondary schools in Lesotho. The intervention has been evaluated using a randomised controlled trial (RCT) design which is one of the first RCTs of a school-based social educational intervention in these countries. Data analysis is ongoing and no results are yet available for Lesotho, but preliminary findings from Malawi show that the overall impact has been to reduce drop out in intervention compared to the control schools.

The study period comes to an end this month and the team have been moving into a consolidation phase where research products will be finalised and the impact of the findings maximised. Further funding has been applied for to package the evidence for action as policy briefings oriented to advocate for wider uptake of the SOFIE intervention model. Further analyses of the data sets can be carried out to determine the potential economic impact of implementing the intervention on a large scale and the capacity of teacher educators and their students can be strengthened to develop and pilot self-study learner guides in core curriculum subjects for senior primary school grades. There will also be wider dissemination of the findings through journal articles, papers and a practitioner-oriented book.

Through maximising the impact of the study findings on policy, practice and professional development it is hoped that governments struggling to reach their Millennium Development Goals for Education may be able to develop alternative pathways to learning that use open and flexible learning to complement traditional schooling. In this way education systems may be more effective in



**SOFIE youth club leader and class teacher in Malawi**

reaching out to the children who are marginalised and excluded because they cannot attend school regularly.

Best wishes to all,

**Dr. Pat Pridmore**

**Principal Investigator of the SOFIE Project**

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## Recap on the SOFIE study to date

Sub-Saharan Africa is the region that is hit hardest by the HIV/AIDS pandemic. Since the virus was first identified in 1983, over 65 million people are reported to have been infected, of whom 25 million had died by 2007 (Carr-Hill et al 2002:11). According to UNAIDS, 8 per cent of people aged between 15-49 are HIV positive in sub-Saharan Africa; an estimated 8500 people in the same region are contracting HIV daily; and 12.3 million children under the age of 18 are orphaned due to the pandemic (UNAIDS: 2005 National Geographic Society). Statistics from various sources on the number of orphaned children due to HIV/AIDS in individual countries in the region are equally worrying. This problem is impacting negatively on the socio-economic activities of countries, education included. In many countries in Southern Africa, schools are visibly shaken by the impact of HIV/AIDS. Many schools experience high absenteeism rates by learners and teachers, high dropout and repetition rates, hungry and unmotivated learners and general lack of support from communities that are already ailing from the effects of the pandemic. The startling statistics pointed out above paint a very grim picture of the future of the region, especially in terms of meeting the Education for All (EFA) goals in particular and the Millennium Development Goals in general.



There are many studies that have been undertaken in order to gain better understanding of the complex dynamics associated with HIV/AIDS and schooling; several interventions have also been introduced in different countries in the region in order to try and improve the socio-economic context of schooling. Between 2003 and 2005, Health Development Africa implemented a project called Circles of Support in three SADC countries. The

project was aimed at providing basic needs and psychosocial support to children affected by the HIV and AIDS epidemic to enable them to remain in or re-enter school (Coulson, N. 2007). The project intervention tried to provide such support by building networks of support from different organisations in the communities. These networks of support enabled mobilization of resources needed to support vulnerable learners and keep them in school. Amongst other things, this intervention has managed to sensitise communities and schools of the needs of vulnerable children.

The key question guiding the SOFIE research study is: *To what extent can barriers to educational access and achievement presented by HIV and AIDS be overcome using more open and flexible models of learning as a complement to conventional schooling?* In pursuing this question, the study has sought to answer the following research sub-questions:

1. What factors influence access to conventional schooling for young people affected by HIV and AIDS?
2. What open and flexible support structures and networks are in place to deliver education to young people?
3. To what extent can these support structures be strengthened?
4. How can these barriers be addressed through strengthening and expanding existing structures and networks to complement conventional schooling and upgrade the knowledge, skills and empowerment of affected young people?

**Dr. Pat Pridmore**

**Institute of Education, University of London**

## Volunteerism and the development of the SOFIE Study Guides

The SOFIE Study Guides were developed by a team of Institute of Education MA Education and International Education (Master of Arts degree in Education and International Development) students and associated others on a voluntary basis. Over 60 people were involved working in four teams one each for the subjects of English and Maths offered in Malawi and Lesotho). This short piece explains some of the thinking and reasons behind how and why the SOFIE Study Guides were developed using voluntarism.

A number of political philosophies argue that to build good citizenship it is important to develop and support voluntarism, especially community focused voluntarism. Voluntarism in this sense involved students associated with the MA EID giving up a period of time (circa 20 hours) and deploying personal skills associated with teaching and learning in order to try to develop a part of an emerging support system known in SOFIE parlance as a 'Circle of Support'. The 20 hours was basically spent developing a study unit, to guide a student in Malawi or Lesotho studying on their own through a text book which provided the basis of an English or Maths course. The main aim of the SOFIE project was to try to develop and test a multi-component support system designed to ensure children living in high HIV-AIDS prevalent areas who were vulnerable to dropping out of school didn't drop out, but continued on and completed their year of schooling. So the Study Guides and subject textbooks were a key part of the School in a Bag which was given to each child included on a SOFIE vulnerability list. The Study Guides hence formed an element of the SOFIE Circle of Support.

Now we know that when children living in low income environments are faced with the loss of a parent or a major family crisis like prolonged illness and the deepening poverty it brings, they tend to de-link from school. It is at this time that such children are at their most vulnerable and are most likely to permanently drop out of school. Such children in Rawlsian terms are amongst the 'least advantaged' (see John Rawls books 'Justice as Fairness' and 'A Theory of Justice'). The Rawlsian doctrine of 'Justice as Fairness' argues that it is permissible to allow differences in primary goods like income and wealth, provided such inequalities are in the best interests of the least advantaged. I argued to those who were considering volunteering to write the SOFIE study guides that the rationale for helping write the study guides for free was a Rawlsian one. That as the potential volunteers were amongst some of

the people who could be considered the most advantaged – it was just that they should work to help those who were least advantaged. And that in addition, in return for their time and expertise, I would teach the team members how to write distance learning study guides and manage the team processes – as best I could. I also argued that once one person had written a study unit for SOFIE their reward would not result in them getting another study unit to write. All too often in capitalistic systems - when one does something for free and well, one enters into a regressive cycle of personal exploitation – such that one's reward for giving time and effort to something is to then be asked to give more time and effort to the same thing – hence a regressive cycle of 'voluntary' exploitation. I was determined that this kind of exploitative cycle would not become grounded in this SOFIE exercise. So the principle of volunteering to write one unit and one unit only, was a key one in terms of minimising personal exploitation. (Though I must say some people did end up writing more than one study unit as it wasn't possible to identify and recruit all the volunteers we needed to develop all the materials in the time available). All the study guides needed were eventually developed with the support of teams coordinated by IOE MA volunteers, who in turn were supported by another circle of volunteers who provided 'critical peer review' on drafts – some of whom lived in North America.

I believe the model and experience could be replicated in other Faculties of Education and Teacher Training Colleges in other places in the world and could form a minimally exploitative approach that all who participate in can feel good about. Rawlsianism may not become the utopian ideal system of justice its founder hoped (see for example Amartya Sen's recent tribute and critique of Rawls's ideas in 'The Idea of Justice' 2009), but in this case it provided an important theoretical springboard from which to energise a practical, goal focused, rationale for effective voluntarism.

**Mr Chris Yates**

**Institute of Education, University of London**

## Implementation of the SOFIE model in Malawi: successes and challenges

In January 2009, school and community-level participants who would be responsible for implementing the SOFIE model (school heads and staff, SMC representatives and youth volunteers) attended training and capacity building workshops in the two target districts (Phalombe and Mzimba South). During the training action plans were drawn up and key activities agreed (see text-box...). Immediately following these training sessions, participants returned to their respective schools to set things in motion.

### Planned SOFIE activities for schools:

- Election of SOFIE sub-committee and regular meetings held.
- Sensitisation of community to the aims and objectives of the SOFIE project.
- Identification of pupils in grade 6 to be placed on 'at-risk' register and join SOFIE clubs.
- Distribution of 'school-in-a-bag' to identified pupils.
- Selecting mentor pupils as 'buddies'
- Set-up and running of SOFIE clubs
- Procedures to mark self-study guides and review progress of 'at-risk' pupils agreed between class teacher and club leader.
- Regular monitoring of attendance of 'at-risk' pupils
- Actions to support vulnerable pupils (e.g. fundraising, counselling, home visits)

At the majority of schools, meetings were called with parents to inform them about the SOFIE project and, according to participants, the project's presence was warmly welcomed by communities. At all 20 schools SOFIE sub-committees were quickly put in place and members set about identifying vulnerable pupils to be placed on an 'at-risk' register and join SOFIE clubs. Each pupil was given a 'school-in-a-bag', containing self-study guides and other school materials. In all, 259 'at-risk' pupils were selected. Despite agreeing to fairly flexible criteria with which to identify 'at-risk' pupils, many schools found this a challenging process. Larger schools complained that the maximum number of 15 pupils per school was not sufficient to reach all vulnerable pupils in grade 6; other, often smaller schools struggled to reach that number. In addition, participants from several

schools were under pressure from parents and guardians to include their children. Even amongst those with children who were selected, false expectations of monetary or material gain led to dissatisfaction. Concerns that the identification process would further stigmatise those chosen – many of whom were orphans and children from HIV and AIDS-affected households – was not realised, however. Conversely, participants spoke of greater cooperation amongst pupils in general and a subsequent reduction in discrimination and exclusion of those 'at-risk'.

A key reason for this was the use of the 'buddy' system whereby other pupils were recruited to mentor those on the 'at-risk' register, follow them up when absent and accompany them to the SOFIE clubs run by youth volunteers. After-school clubs were held weekly, with an average of 30 meetings over the year. They provided a safe, less formal environment where pupils met, worked through their study-guides - getting additional learning support if necessary – shared problems and had fun. According to club leaders, alongside the provision of 'school-in-a-bag', games, sports and other club activities were a strong motivating factor for pupils, renewing interest in their schooling. The self-study guides were also seen as an important component of the SOFIE model, providing additional opportunities for learning and improving basic skills in English and Maths, although several participants recognised that pupils still required support to benefit fully from them. Although attendance at club meetings was problematic for some - and absenteeism from both clubs and class remained a challenge throughout- those that did attend regularly appear to have benefited greatly from their participation. In general, youth volunteers were motivated, often with a strong sense of civic service and were viewed as sympathetic, approachable and supportive by pupils. All but one of them completed a full year with the SOFIE project. Some faced challenges from community members who mocked them for working without pay, but they had the respect of the teachers and school management, with whom they worked closely.

The level of teacher support was varied. In only 12 of the 20 schools (just 3 in Phalombe), teachers regularly marked pupils' self-study guides as agreed. Many were conscientious in up-dating registers and forms monitoring the attendance and progress of the 'at-risk' pupils; a few were not. One reason for this might have been the frequent transfer of teachers and school heads, initiated at both district and school level. In Phalombe, the problem was particularly acute. Five of grade 6 teachers trained under SOFIE were transferred away from their classes during the course of the school year. Of greater success was the follow-up of absentee pupils. Under the SOFIE project, 8 of the 10 Mzimba South schools had put in place comprehensive strategies to follow-up 'at-risk' pupils when absent, including home visits by club leaders, SOFIE committee members and school staff. Opportunities were taken to talk to parents and guardians. Unfortunately in Phalombe, follow-up was given less of a priority. At several schools, community members got involved in 'counselling' of 'at-risk' pupils and others, although generally limited to providing advice on behaviour and the importance of education. Although SOFIE committees met regularly, not all members were active and other actions to support vulnerable pupils (e.g. fund-raising activities), were limited.

In terms of benefits to 'at-risk' pupils, although the project evaluation showed no significant results in overall improvement in attainment, participants noted that many of their pupils were now confident, more capable learners able to participate actively in class activities. Evidence also suggests improved self esteem and stronger social networks amongst 'at-risk' pupils, which hopefully will support their personal motivation to continue schooling. Certainly the significant reduction in dropout seen in participating schools has, at least in part, been attributed to a renewed interest in schooling strengthened by 'encouragement' received from teachers and club leaders in particular. In schools, staff members have benefited from skills that improve their capacity to support vulnerable pupils. In addition, an improved awareness amongst staff of the needs of their more vulnerable pupils has, in some cases, promoted greater inclusiveness in school-level policies and practice. What remains is to translate the lessons learnt into sustained action to support the wider body of vulnerable pupils within schools, not just those targeted by SOFIE project.

**Ms Kate Jere, Co-investigator**

## The challenges and rewards of organizing an international team meeting: reflections from Lesotho

In this article, I share some reflections on hosting the final team meeting for the SOFIE project held in Maseru, Lesotho, from the 1<sup>st</sup> to the 5<sup>th</sup> February 2010. Not surprisingly, I had some trepidation as the event drew closer. Unexpected occurrences such as changes in the school calendar in Lesotho threatened to unsettle my preparations for the planned school visit by the team. In addition, the Lesotho intervention had experienced some delays in implementing the intervention and it was worrying to consider how there would be full benefits from hosting such an important event with not all the knots tied up. However, working in a team meant that one did not have the luxury of changing plans merely on the basis of any one event such as the changes in the school calendar.



**SOFIE team meeting in Maseru**

Once the meeting got underway, I had to keep focus on the important discussions emerging from the meeting while managing stressful moments of ensuring that the entire team benefited from their visit to Lesotho. Fortunately, the support that emerged from the entire team made me feel more like a guest than a host. One of the highlights of the week for me was a dissemination seminar that involved a joint presentation by the SOFIE team and members of the Institute of Education (IE), National University of Lesotho. Presentations included both the Lesotho and Malawi briefings on the SOFIE project as well as a presentation by members of the IE on their investigations into UNICEF's bold initiative to make primary schools friendlier for Basotho children. The seminar was well attended and included a wide variety of stakeholders from teacher educators, members of various teacher associations and unions, to officials from the Ministry of Education and Training. Participation was lively and Lesotho participants were enthralled by the similarities of educational issues in Lesotho and Malawi, particularly the growing vulnerability among school-going children as a result of HIV and AIDS and declining school

attendance among affected children. Concern was raised about the quality and relevance of education in Lesotho and appreciation was expressed about the skills imparted to teachers through projects such as SOFIE and UNICEF's bold initiative.



**Dr. Pat Pridmore introducing SOFIE in a seminar in Lesotho**

The team was also able to visit a school which had participated in the project. Students in the school shared their experiences, some of which highlighted the challenges that had been experienced in the implementation of the project in Lesotho. The late arrival of some of the items in the intervention package resulted in an uneven distribution of items, including the study guides. But children generally expressed their appreciation of the establishment of the club. Overall, for me, the whole experience was very rewarding and it is hard to believe that the project, with the bond between team members growing stronger each moment, could be coming to an end sometime this year.

**Dr. Thabiso Nyabanyaba, Co-investigator**



**SOFIE team meeting club members**

## Building on experiences of supporting children's schooling in the African Region

Sub-Saharan Africa is the region that is hit hardest by the HIV/AIDS pandemic which has exacerbated the impact of the global food, fuel and financial crises. In these countries many schools are experiencing high student and teacher absenteeism rates as well as high student dropout and repetition rates, hungry and unmotivated learners and general lack of support from communities that are already ailing from the effects of the pandemic. To address these problems several interventions have been made to mobilise communities to strengthen social support for vulnerable children. For example, from 2002-2005 the Health Development Africa implemented a project called Circles of Support in three SADC countries. The project aimed to provide basic needs and psychosocial support to children affected by the HIV and AIDS epidemic to enable them to remain in or re-enter school (Coulson, 2007). The intervention tried to provide such support by building networks of support from different organisations in the communities. These networks of support enabled local resources to be mobilised to support vulnerable learners and keep them in school. Amongst other things, this intervention managed to sensitise communities and schools to the needs of vulnerable children.

In high HIV prevalence areas of Malawi and Lesotho, the SOFIE Project built on the circles of support experiences to strengthen local support systems and structures. It also built on experiences from open schooling initiatives to harness the power of open, distance and flexible learning (ODFL) through developing self-study learner guides linked to the national curriculum in Maths and English linked to the national curriculum to support children's learning. In this way it sought to reduce student drop out and grade repetition.

To strengthen local support structures the intervention used existing social capital in the communities to build a school buddy system and mobilise members of the school management committee and local youth leaders to support the learning of vulnerable children. Together with the learner guides these actions served to reduce the distance between the learner and the teacher and separation of the learner from the physical school for children who could not attend school regularly.

The SOFIE intervention was unusual in that it was very rigorously evaluated using a randomised controlled design. Preliminary results are most promising showing that the intervention has reduced student absenteeism in both project countries and also reduce drop-out in Malawi. The main message from the project is that providing vulnerable students with well designed self-instructional materials and linking them to community support can go a long way in assisting them achieve academic success. The notion of learning without being at the foot of a teacher or confined within the four walls of the classroom needs to be appreciated by both policy makers and communities. However, for the SOFIE model to be successful it has been important to ensure, as Moore (1997) points out, that learning from self-study guides need to be mediated through conversation and dialogue. The SOFIE intervention presents a unique and pedagogically sound way of bridging the learner's distance from the school – providing learning materials, linking the learner to existing social capital in the community, and creating an opportunities for the learners to discuss with peers. This 'bridging of the distance' makes distance education a viable approach to providing education to learners who are on the verge of dropping out of the school system. The SOFIE intervention now needs to be taken up and implemented on a large scale.

**Dr. Ephraim Mhlanga, Co-investigator**

### References

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## Forthcoming SOFIE publications, meetings and activities

The final country reports will be available on the website shortly.

Dr. Pat Pridmore attended the Second International Conference on Education, Economics and Society from July 21-15th in Paris, France. She presented a paper entitled: *Reaching and teaching marginalised children in Malawi and Lesotho*

Dr. Pat Pridmore and Ms Kate Jere attended the 2010 conference of the British Association of International and Comparative Education (BAICE) at the University of East Anglia, UK, from September 9-12th and presented a joint session on the SOFIE Project.

Dr. Pat Pridmore's paper was entitled: *Disrupting patterns of educational inequality, disadvantage and marginalisation in Malawi and Lesotho*

Ms Kate Jere's paper was entitled: *The potential of open, distance and flexible learning (ODFL) to improve educational access and retention of vulnerable children in high HIV prevalence areas of Malawi*

Dr. Ephraim Mhlanga presented a paper at the National Association of Distance Education and Open Learning in South Africa (NADEOSA) Conference in South Africa, in September 2010. Ephraim presented a paper jointly authored by himself and Ms Kate Jere entitled: *Adapting open, distance and flexible learning (ODFL) strategies to support the educational access and retention of vulnerable children: working with primary schools in high HIV prevalence areas of Malawi*

### Looking forward to 2011

Dr. Thabiso Nyabanyaba will be presenting a paper at the 45th Distance Education Association of Southern Africa (DEASA) conference in Malawi in 2011 on the theme of 'Propelling strategic novelty in ODL for the region'. The provisional title of the paper is: *Giving at-risk children a chance: ODFL initiatives to support children at risk of dropping out of school in Lesotho*.

The research team are planning to attend the 55th annual meeting of the Comparative and International Education Society (CIES) Conference in the USA in March 2011 on the theme: "Education is that which liberates", from the Sanskrit, "Sa' vidya' ya' vimuktaye") Provisional titles of the papers to be presented are:

- (i) *Reaching and teaching vulnerable children in Malawi and Lesotho: Evidence for Action from a RCT* (Dr. Matthew Jukes, Ms Kate Jere and Dr. Pat Pridmore)
- (ii) *Maximising the impact of research on policy development, practice and professional capacity building: Lessons learned from the SOFIE Project in Malawi and Lesotho* (Dr. Pat Pridmore)
- (iii) *Using voluntarism for developing study guides: Case Study of the SOFIE Project* (Mr Chris Yates)
- (iv) *Reaching and teaching vulnerable children in Lesotho: fieldwork challenges* (Dr. Thabiso Nyabanyaba)

At this CIES conference the SOFIE team members have also been invited to participate in a panel discussion on the conceptualisation of vulnerability and the provision of education to vulnerable children in Malawi.

In addition to disseminating the findings from the SOFIE study through conference presentations and journal articles, the in-country researchers are planning to further maximise the impact of the findings by facilitating capacity building of teacher educators and their students in the teacher education colleges to develop and pilot self-study learner guides in all

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