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and social research
Institute of Education
University of London

SOFIE Newsletter

Issue 3

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Sharing information on the progress of the research, key events, publications, and other news

Foreword

The past six months have been a challenging time for the SOFIE research team because the study has moved onto the intervention phase. The new, more flexible model of schooling that is now being implemented through 20 schools in each of the two participating countries - Malawi and Lesotho - is presented elsewhere in this newsletter. The model, was developed in response to the findings from the first two phases of the study (the literature reviews and case studies) and to the feedback received from extensive consultation at all levels in each participating country. The intervention is being evaluated using an experimental design to find out whether an educational intervention can increase access to learning for vulnerable children living in high HIV prevalence areas.

Preparations for implementing the new model at the start of the school year in January this year were hindered by a series of unforeseen events. Firstly, the world financial crisis lowered the value of the GB Pound and created a shortfall in the budget for buying learning materials and making copies of the learner guides; this shortfall was exacerbated in Malawi by having to pay import tax on the wind up radios sourced from South Africa. Secondly, writing the learner guides turned out to be very time consuming and a new approach (described elsewhere) had to be used. Thirdly, changes in senior Ministry of Education officials in Lesotho lead to the need for further advocacy and information sharing which together with heavy workloads slowed progress. These challenges were met through additional fundraising, good communication and supportive teamwork.



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The SOFIE team now enters the third and final year of the study stronger than ever with an additional researcher in each country to help with ongoing monitoring. The researchers in Malawi and Lesotho are to be congratulated on overcoming all challenges and successfully conducting the training workshops and getting the intervention up and running in the schools. The intervention started at the beginning of February in Malawi and in March in Lesotho and the first monitoring visits have now been carried out.

Pat Pridmore, Principal Investigator

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SOFIE school-based intervention

Two years has now passed since the launch of the SOFIE project. In the first phase of the project five background review papers were prepared to provide background and policy context to the study and to identify factors that influence access to schooling in high HIV prevalence areas of Malawi and Lesotho. In the second phase, case studies were conducted in Malawi and Lesotho in contrasting communities severely affected by HIV and AIDS to further identify barriers to education for children made vulnerable by HIV and AIDS. The five background review papers and the two case study reports are available on the SOFIE website (<http://sofie.ioe.ac.uk/publications.html>). In the current third and final phase, school-based interventions are being implemented in 20 schools in both Malawi and Lesotho and evaluated using an experimental design.

Intervention model

The SOFIE intervention model is shown in *Figure 1* below. The model illustrates how a circle of support is being formed around each pupil who is 'at risk' of falling behind or dropping out. The actors in this circle are the head teacher, the class teacher, the class buddy, the SOFIE club Leader and the school management committee.

The Role of Class Teacher

In each school a small committee including the class teacher is identifying 'at risk' pupils and entering their names into an 'at risk register'. The teacher is then identifying a class buddy to help support the learning of the 'at risk' pupil and encouraging them both to attend the SOFIE club.

The teacher is giving each 'at risk' pupil a 'School-in-a-Bag', which has been supplied by the SOFIE project. The bag contains items like textbooks, English and Mathematics study guides prepared by the SOFIE team, notebooks, pens and other items designed to help the child keep up with the school curriculum when he or she is not able to attend school.

The teacher has been asked to check the progress of the 'at risk pupil' every two weeks as they work through the English and Maths study guides as well as set additional home work tasks as appropriate. The teacher has been asked to keep in touch with the SOFIE Club Leader and also with the school management committee members who may be able to offer further support.

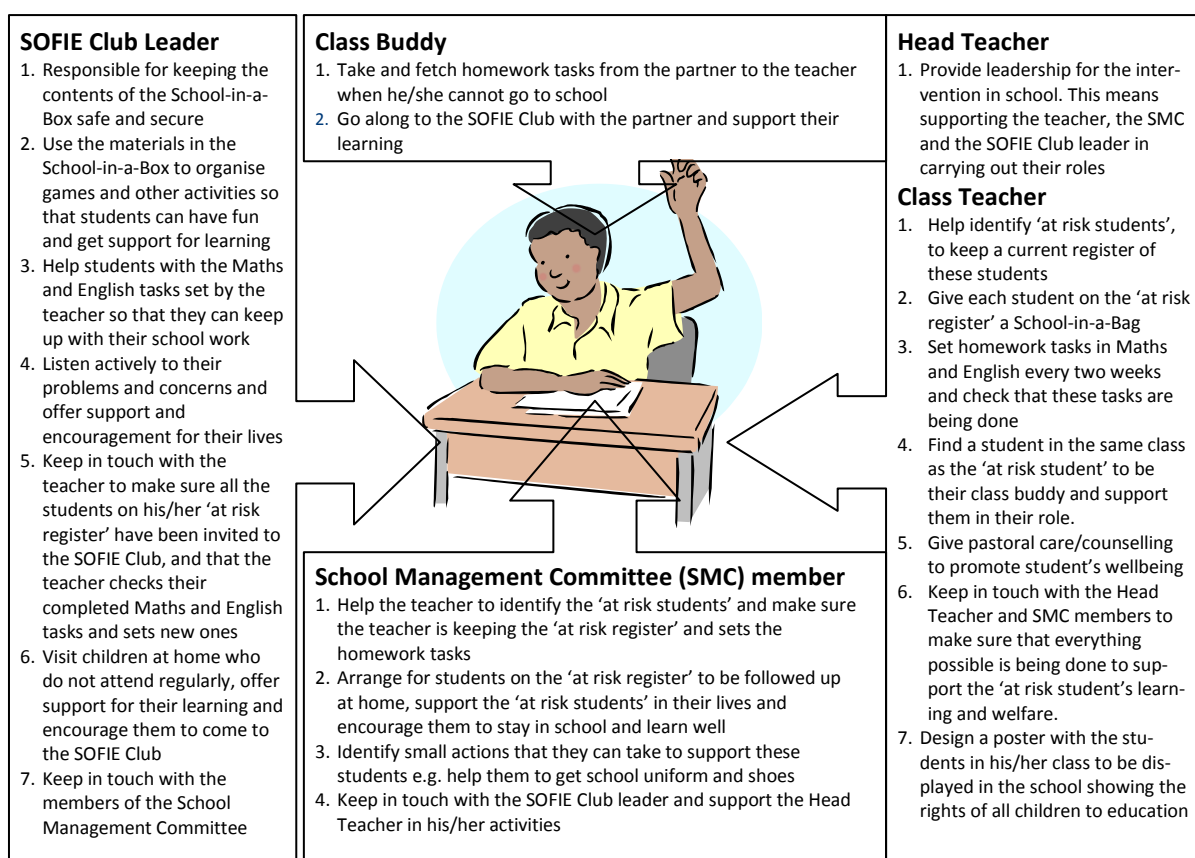


Figure 1 SOFIE intervention model

The Class Buddy

The teacher has been asked to appoint a class buddy for each pupil on the 'at risk register' to carry homework in English and Maths and communications to and from 'at risk pupil' to the class teacher. The class buddy has also been invited to attend the SOFIE Club with the 'at risk pupil' and support their learning.

SOFIE Club Leader - A local voluntary support worker

A SOFIE Club has been set up for each participating school. In Malawi, the leader is from a local Community Based Organisation (CBO), and in Lesotho the leader is the class teacher with support from a local CBO. The leader is organising regular study group meetings to motivate and support the 'at risk pupils'. Each SOFIE Club Leader has been given a 'School-in-a-Box', which include locally available learning materials as well as study guides in English and Mathematics prepared by the SOFIE team and a wind up radio. The School-in-a-Box is being used by the Club leaders to organise games and other activities so that the pupils can have fun and get support for learning. The SOFIE Club Leader has been asked to help the pupils with the Maths and English tasks in the study guides set by the class teacher.

The School Management Committee (SMC)

The role of the School Management Committee is to help the class teacher to identify the 'at risk pupils' as well as to monitor the operation of the scheme at the school level. SMC will liaise with the Parent Teacher Association and/or other enthusiastic and active community members to follow up each 'at risk child' and come up with ways to overcome the barriers and help them stay in school and learn well.

The Head Teacher

The Head Teacher's role is to provide leadership for the intervention in the school. This includes supporting the class teacher, the SMC member and the SOFIE Club leader in carrying out their roles. Alongside the SMC, the Head Teacher should sensitise the community on the progress of the SOFIE project. The Head Teacher should also support the monitoring of the pupils by checking that the attendance registers are being filled in on a daily basis as well as liaising with the SMC that the absent pupils are followed up.

Figure 2 also shows how a circle of support is built up around each 'at risk child' and how this intervention model meets the stated purpose of the SOFIE Project by strengthening and expanding existing support structures and networks.

The SOFIE Team

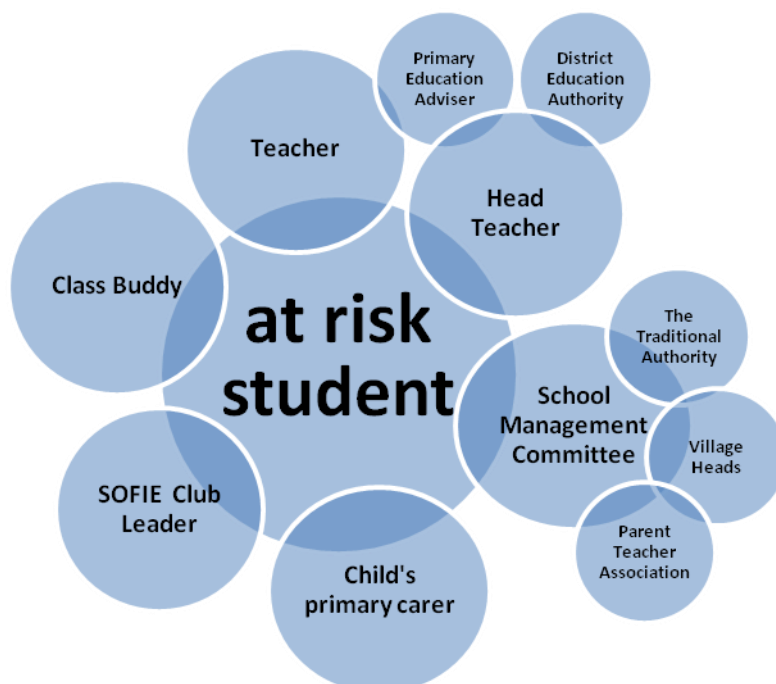


Figure 2 Venn diagram showing how the circle of support built up around the vulnerable child strengthens and expands existing structures and networks.

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Implementing Open and Flexible Learning strategies in Malawi

The range and multi-factorial nature of the barriers to schooling and learning emerging from the case studies conducted in Malawi suggested that any school-based intervention package would require a holistic approach, supporting the learning, social and emotional needs of children affected by HIV and AIDS. The case studies also suggested that general changes in school policy and practice to increase the accessibility and inclusiveness of schools for all vulnerable groups would greatly benefit those affected by HIV and AIDS. Collaboration and links with communities, especially parents and guardians, need to be strengthened. While most parents and guardians who took part in the case studies expressed satisfaction with the schooling received by their children, a significant number said they had little or no contact with teachers. Schools need to be seen to be reaching out to communities, so that linkages become more of a two-way process. Teachers and school management, working together with parents and guardians and traditional leaders, can be more aware of and respond better to the needs of children affected by HIV and AIDS. School Management Committees (SMCs) and other village-based committees are ideally placed to negotiate and maintain links with communities.

In Malawi, 20 primary schools in two districts (Phalombe and Mzimba South) were randomly selected to host the SOFIE intervention package. There is some research to indicate that older vulnerable children, especially girls, are at greater risk of dropping out of school. As

such, the SOFIE intervention currently targets Standard 6 pupils. The intervention will be trialled for one academic year, starting in January 2009.

The Interventional Model

The focus of the SOFIE intervention is to increase inclusiveness of schools and improving access to learning for vulnerable children, especially those from households affected by HIV and AIDS. It aims to work with a range of stakeholders at school and community level and develop 'circles of support' around vulnerable children at risk of dropping out of school or failing their grade. The intervention includes the recruitment of local youth as volunteers to run clubs for vulnerable children identified as 'at-risk'. The SOFIE club leaders will be assisting these vulnerable children to do their homework and help with other academic related problems in a friendly and informal environment. However, during training it was stressed that they will not usurp the roles of the teachers, who will be responsible for monitoring the progress of 'at-risk' children. The intervention also aims to assist schools to make improvements in the identification, monitoring and follow-up of all vulnerable children. Self-study guides specifically developed for the intervention will support continued access to learning for those vulnerable children for whom attendance is often erratic. When such children are facing difficulties in getting to class they can continue their studies using the guides, which are linked to the national curriculum, and mentor pupils ('class buddies') will be encouraged to carry completed self-study guides to class teachers for marking.

Training and capacity-building

In Malawi, training workshops were held in January 2009 in both of the target districts prior to the start of the intervention. The aim of the workshops was to familiarise school and community level stakeholders with the SOFIE Project, their roles and responsibilities in implementing and monitoring the intervention activities, as well as improving capacity amongst teachers and youth volunteers. In each district, the workshops were run as (1) an initial one-day workshop for stakeholders with the aim of familiarising school and community-level stakeholders from participating schools with the SOFIE Project intervention package and (2) a 3-day training and capacity-building workshop for Standard 6 teachers and club leaders (youth volunteers) in order to train them on various aspects of the project implementation, counselling skills, monitoring and evaluation and use of intervention resources.



Training workshop at Migowi, Phalombe for teachers and club leaders © Catherine Moleni

Participants of the initial one-day workshop for stakeholders included, from each school:

- Head of School
- Representative of the School Management Committee (SMC)
- Standard 6 teacher
- Club leader (youth volunteer)

Resources

A School-in-a-Box was given to each youth volunteer at the January workshops. The School-in-a-Box will assist the youth volunteers to set up SOFIE after-school clubs to provide extra support and motivation for vulnerable children. A SOFIE Club Leaders manual has also been developed. The School-in-a-Box the box contains various resources to support independent learning and fun activities.

These include:

- *Self-Study guides (English and Maths) Club leader manual*
- *Textbooks (English and Maths)*
- *Book on child labour and child rights*
- *Leaflets on gender violence*
- *Game (Interactive HIV and AIDS board game 'Choices and Decisions')*
- *Ballpoints (3)*
- *1 ruler*
- *Football*

A School-in-a-Bag is being given to vulnerable children selected to attend the SOFIE clubs. The bag will contain the following;

- *Self-study guides (English and Maths)*
- *Textbooks (2, English and Maths)*
- *Notebooks and pens*

The teachers were provided with their own copies of the Standard 6 textbooks and self-study guides for reference purposes, as well as specifically developed monitoring tools.

Identification, Monitoring and Follow-up

A key issue in the design of any school-based intervention package is how to identify those children who are vulnerable and in need of support. The case studies indicated that orphan

SOFIE intervention in Lesotho

The intervention model in Lesotho differs only slightly from the model in Malawi. In Lesotho 20 secondary schools have been selected to host the intervention. The SOFIE clubs are attached to the intervention schools and are run by the teacher as the Club Leader. Four local NGO's are also providing support to the clubs. Each NGO has five schools/clubs to cover. The Club Leaders have been given a school-in-a-box, which includes maths and English textbooks, the SOFIE maths and English study guides and



A Standard 6 teacher and a club leader for a Phalombe school packing up resources to carry back to the school © Catherine Moleni

status alone is not always a useful criterion for targeting children affected by HIV and AIDS, as this excludes other vulnerable groups such as children who are primary carers for adults living with HIV and AIDS. Ten 'at risk' children will be identified from each intervention school. Children's family background, school-related issues and personal factors will be considered. The vulnerable children selected will be those considered to be at risk of dropping out of school and/or failing their grades. Selection of these vulnerable children will be the responsibility of a small SOFIE committees set up at each school to oversee the selection process and monitor SOFIE intervention activities. As well as a register of 'at-risk' pupils that will help schools monitor attendance, teachers and club leaders are encouraged to complete monthly monitoring forms and personal 'diaries' to assess the progress of the intervention and its impact on vulnerable children. In addition, a comprehensive monitoring visit was conducted by the Centre of Educational Research and Training (CERT) in early May.

Catherine M. Moleni, CERT, Malawi

a radio. The progress in Lesotho towards Universal Primary Education has led to a growing demand of secondary education. The secondary school enrolments have greatly increased this year and the high student numbers have made it a challenge for teachers to apply the criteria for selection of 'at risk' students. Another challenge is that the schools are using different maths and English textbooks. The intervention in Lesotho will be featured in the next SOFIE newsletter.

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Report from a School Head

Mzimba South SOFIE Club, Edingeni, Malawi

The stakeholders around the school have warmly welcomed the SOFIE project intervention. The project is supporting vulnerable learners to sustain retention in school and reduce class repetition and dropout. It is encouraging to see that the community members are supporting the project.

Indeed the intervention had had a number of impacts on the learners. Vulnerable children have developed a lot of interest in school as most of them report for lessons regularly. The club meetings have also improved the learners' performance in class, as buddies regularly keep in touch with them to discuss tasks from the class teacher and club leader. Some vulnerable children no longer feel shy to contribute to discussions of solutions to assignments and are freely interacting with their class mates. In most cases the learners are kept busy with the SOFIE activities.

Also the provision of materials like the Life Skills game, school bags, textbooks and ballpoint pens, study guides and football has tremendously empowered the vulnerable children to excel in their studies and develop a vision of achievement.



Standard 6 teachers, club leaders and district officials, who attended the workshop in Mzimba South © Catherine Moleni

I therefore convey a lot of gratitude to CERT , University of Malawi and not forgetting those in partnership, such as the Institute of Education, SADIE and the University of Lesotho, for the effort to come up with the intervention.

Govern Mbenuka Nyirenda, Head Teacher, Edingeni FP School

Report from a Club Leader

Mzimba South SOFIE Club, Edingeni, Malawi

It was on 30th January 2009, when myself, the headteacher, the Standard 6 teacher and a member of the school management committee were called to attend training on how to guide and counsel vulnerable pupils at our school. Here we were introduced to a project known as SOFIE, which is targeting Standard 6 vulnerable pupils who are at risk of dropping out of school or repeating the grade. The project is working in collaboration with the University of Malawi – Chancellor College – through the Centre for Education Research and Training (CERT). The project is geared at helping these 'at-risk' pupils to cope with their education as it provides learning materials for English and Mathematics to allow them to enjoy learning just like other pupils.

When we came back from the training we used all the steps and information according to the training received on how to identify the vulnerable pupils. A SOFIE committee was

elected and pupils were identified. On 20th of February, club activities commenced. At the club a lot of activities are being done, for example life skills activities and games. The club is run and maintained by the club leader, with assistance from the Standard 6 teacher and not forgetting all stakeholders.

Signs of improvement in these vulnerable children have been seen. They are now able to read and write and do other skills learnt at the club. At the end-of-term examinations this first term some of them have done better.

In conclusion, I urge you to expect positive fruits from this project here in Edingeni. If possible, extra materials for the clubs should be provided to further improve learning.

Gladson Malinga, Club Leader

What can 'education' do to respond to the HIV/AIDS pandemic?

This article is concerned with the development of supported self study guide for the Lesotho English Course trends in English 2 – as part of the SOFIE project.

Soon after the word of mouth spread among Masters in Education and International Development (MA EID) students and an inviting appeal appeared on the walls of the Institute of Education, an eager bunch of students met in Gordon Square London one winter evening in late January 2009. A wide range of people were in the room, some already familiar with each other and others very new to the group. However, all were there for the same reason: help the SOFIE project to write the English and Math student guidebook for the 'School in a Bag' initiative.

After Chris Yates had introduced the project and explained the task, two teams were formed on the spot and the units were allocated to different writers without further delay. Time was ticking and the process had to be started immediately. Our efficient Group Coordinator Katshuiro Kaneko set up a yahoo group where members could to keep in touch, exchange information and support each other, while Catherine Gladwell (Joint Team Leader) coordinated the English team and Jackson Nyagaka (Joint Team Leader) supervised the cultural relevance of the writing for African students. Thanks to Karima Shajani and the Canadian network a language supervisory team of reviewers were set up in a blink of an eye to review the drafts and support the writers, while Mirella supported the editing of the writing and the final layout.

Each student was in charge of transforming one unit of the English textbook used in Lesotho into a distance-learning self study unit. For most of us it was a completely new

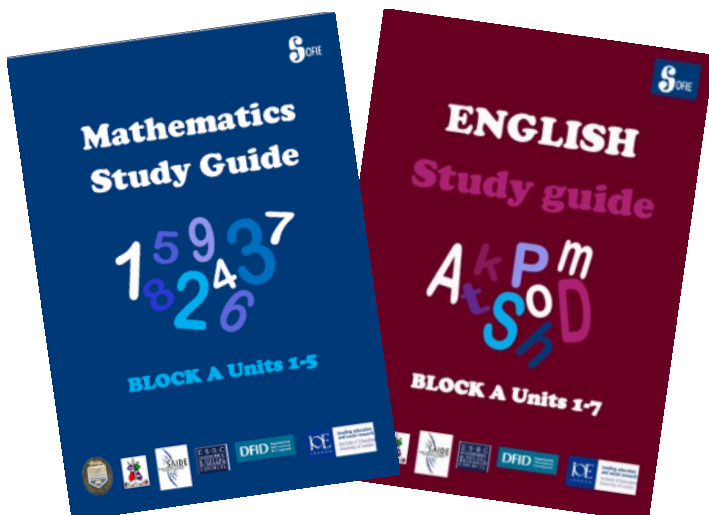
experience and we did not know what to expect. Soon we learnt that our task demanded a good amount of concentration and focus in order to write coherent learning guidelines tailored to pupils living in a challenging environment unfamiliar to us. The task was culturally challenging and to be truthful quite time consuming. A task which had to be balanced with MA study, work and family commitments.

So why did we do it? Why did the IOE students and others from outside the university volunteer to help with this task? Clearly there are many possible answers to this question, probably different to each member of the team. Nevertheless, the strong team spirit that took place from the first meeting had a 'superglue effect' and motivated the members throughout the months so that by the end of March the English team had produced the first draft of the English student guidebook; a task that a consultant would have not been able to achieve in such a short time and at zero cost (as everyone involved were volunteering their time and skills).

Secondly we all knew that in Lesotho the 'School in a Bag' should help to counteract the high dropout rate of secondary school pupils, who cannot attend school either because they are the primary carers of parents who are ill or because they have to provide for their younger siblings, was probably also a highly motivating factor for many in the team. Many of us knew that simply being able to stay in school reduces children's vulnerability to HIV infection. And if children can stay in school this contributes to the achievement of the EFA goals.

However, what happened during the SOFIE exercise was something much stronger and highly motivating. The strong spirit of volunteering (to freely offer to do something for a common cause) transformed concepts like 'social cohesion' and 'social capital' into practice, simply because we all shared the same belief in the 'power of education' and we were not afraid to take up the challenge of making access to good quality education possible for All.

Miresi Busana, MA in Education, Health Promotion and International Development student, Institute of Education



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SOFIE is a 3-year research project launched in April 2007. The aim of the project is to investigate the potential role of open, distance and flexible learning (ODFL) in Malawi and Lesotho in overcoming barriers to educational access and attainment presented by HIV and AIDS. It seeks to do this by developing and trialling a more flexible model of education that uses ODFL strategies to support and enrich conventional schooling and meet learners' needs more effectively. The research focuses on vulnerable children and young people at risk of repetition or dropout from schooling, with emphasis on those affected by HIV and AIDS.

Latest publications in the SOFIE Opening Up Access Series (available at <http://sofie.ioe.ac.uk>)

Moleni, C. (2008) Factors influencing access and retention in primary schooling for children and young people affected by HIV and AIDS: Case studies from rural Malawi. *SOFIE Opening Up Access Series no.6*

Nyabanyaba, T. (forthcoming) (2009) The use of Open, Distance and Flexible Learning (ODFL) initiatives to overcome barriers to education: Exploratory case study of four high HIV and AIDS prevalence rate contexts in Lesotho. *SOFIE Opening Up Access Series no.7*

SOFIE website

The URL to the SOFIE website has changed. The new URL is <http://sofie.ioe.ac.uk>

SOFIE Study Guides for Maths and English in Malawi and Lesotho

I would like to thank everybody who has been involved in helping to prepare the four study guides for the Maths and English courses in Malawi and Lesotho for the tremendous work that has been done. This includes those who have drafted study units; those who have reviewed the drafts and provided comments and those who have coordinated the whole process. We have now finished the two study guides for Maths and English for Malawi and these have been distributed and are being used by the pupils in the intervention schools in Malawi. We have also completed the 14 unit Study Guide for English course and 22 unit Study Guide for Maths course in Lesotho (except for one final unit). These have been sent to Lesotho for use in the school in a bag. We understand students in Lesotho are also making use of the study guide materials we have sent.

A big thank you from all of us on the SOFIE research team to all those involved in the development of the study guides for all the efforts made. This was a great bit of social networking and volunteerism. I am confident the children involved will gain from your efforts to help them.

Chris Yates

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