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Evidence Based Programming in Improved Quality of Education to Children in the Developing World: A Review of Selected Documentation in Africa.

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Abstract

This paper sought to explore the institutional commitment to the welfare of children to access quality education as a basic right and hence let the sector work in the best interest of the child. Its scope covered the linkages between quality education as an inalienable right to the child, increased enrolment, life transformation, sustainable development and the role of monitoring and evaluation in the promotion of evidence-based management of the sector. This paper therefore delved into the prevalent practices in sub-Saharan Africa with the intent to bring to the fore the extent to which evidence-based planning might have been used to influence practice in delivering education as an indispensable nurturing service to the child. It is a desk review paper spanning the predominant practices reflecting on cases drawn from a number of selected countries in sub-Saharan Africa. It is noted that every civilization tends to be in a perpetual quest for its preservation through inherent procreative endeavour and hence in zest embrace deliberate nurturing systems, structures and processes for its posterity and legacy. One of the pivotal pillars in propelling a people into their appropriate, enviable socio-economic growth and development in pursuit of their preferred civilization is formal education to its budding population, the children. Persons who acquire ample art and science of learning availed through formal education also broaden their prospects for better living. Nevertheless, the pursuit of knowledge, skill and capacity enhancement in a large proportion of the less developed nations of the sub-Saharan Africa is obscure, rudimental and inaccessible to the majority of children in both the urban and rural poor. Similarly, the quality of education is too basic to make a difference in the lives of the millions of the affected children. Equally perturbing is the absence of evidence-based education sector management where results from monitoring and evaluation exercise does not seem to inform policy and practice. Such gaps may often push the stakeholders into a state of disillusionment and apathy which denies the child quality education, which is a right for all children.

Key words: Quality, education, developing countries, programming

Introduction and Background

Humanity from time immemorial has tended to be preoccupied not only with its preservation through innate procreative endeavour, but it is also deeply immersed in socializing its progeny in perfecting survival excellence (Long-Crowell, 2016). This commitment may be responsible for its often spirited efforts to create an enabling environment for nurturing and sustaining the desired resilience to defy all odds and preserve the next generation and its heritage. Consequently, every culture adopts either a single or multiple forms of education which are fundamental vehicles through which the life skills for quality life are chiselled and engrained into the life patterns of the young ones (Hewlett Foundation, 2016). Whether systematic or haphazard, the platform provides avenues through which values and practices are propagated. The adopted form of education in any civilization is therefore considered critical in the holistic character formation of the children; hence its unfettered access is bound to work to their best interest.

Formal education as a sector is one of the fundamental systems of capacity building widely perceived as a vital ingredient in propelling any society into its contextual, enviable socio-economic growth and development in pursuit of its preferred civilization (Burchi, 2006; Krishnaratne, White, & Carpenter, 2013). Persons or children who acquire the essential life skills embedded in both the art and the science of literacy, algebra, arithmetic, calculus, critical thinking, conceptual framework and the associated predispositions of formal learning/education tend to also widen their opportunities for better incomes, higher agricultural output, healthier offspring and better quality of life (Long-Crowell, 2016). Studies have shown that a child who has received quality education is well positioned to take up responsibilities and be more successful than the contemporary who either has poor education or no

education at all (Krishnaratne, White, & Carpenter, 2013). The power in formal education seems undisputable in preparing generations in their respective societies to acquire the essential framework to successfully function and be appropriately adjusted members of their respective societies. This notwithstanding, the pursuance of knowledge, skill and capacity in the developing countries of sub-Saharan Africa is elusive and tends to be a mirage to millions who have limited access to quality formal education.

The status of quality education in sub-Saharan Africa is grossly complicated by the duality of the appreciation that access to this commodity is both a basic human right and its pursuit is regarded as a crucial ingredient in the societal commitment to the best interests of the child, leading to full realization of the individual's potential (Krishnaratne et al., 2013; UNICEF, 2014). It is indeed the right of every child to access quality education and thus every effort to make education available to children is for all purposes perceived as an integral milestone in the walk to secure and safeguard the best interests of the child (Krishnaratne et al., 2013). Consequently, education is viewed as a pivotal haven to anchor and launch the child to face the challenges of life. Any education system, public or private, not working to make the process of learning more successful is thus treated as being ill-fated and counterproductive to the inalienable rights of the child. It is against this view that this paper explores the utilization of evidence availed through monitoring and evaluation to influence access to quality education, the right of every child and hence work in the best interests of the child in sub-Saharan Africa and beyond.

In spite of the popular notion that sound formal education is one of the crucial prerequisites to better living, far too many children in the developing world and especially the poorest of the poor in Sub-Saharan Africa either miss out completely or

access a quality of education which is too compromised to deliver the desired results for transformative development and self-advancement (Hewlett Foundation, 2016; UNICEF, 2014). Both private and public institutions feel obliged to enhance access to education, hence the myriad pro-access policies and approaches pushed in most of the developing countries of sub-Saharan Africa. It is appreciated that most of these countries focused mainly on enrolment with minimal attention to retention, completion and attainment of quality learning (UNICEF, 2007). Nevertheless, the efforts have led to increased enrolment rates and thus the number of children accessing education has increased tremendously.

While to some extent the push might have been spontaneous, international pressure like the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) have necessitated adoption of styles such as free primary education, cost sharing in secondary schools, public provision of scholastic materials and other support systems (UNICEF, 2010). These approaches have had mixed results in most of the sub-Sahara African countries. In some of these countries, the education infrastructure and the support system is too poor to promote quality education even as the enrolment numbers have continued to rise (UNECA, 2015; UNICEF, 2010). It is lamentable that despite the push for improved access and increased enrolment in both primary and secondary schools, between the year 2000 and 2007, the sub-Saharan region saw the share of total government education expenditure dedicated to basic education decline from 49% to 44% (UNESCO, 2010).

The above scenario puts into jeopardy the progress in the sector and the welfare of the children, accessing to them a quality of education which is too low to prepare them for the challenges in life. The emerging trends show that the bulk of the pupils leaving primary school are ill-prepared and hence hardly have any capacity to

read, write or engage in any numeracy skills (Krishnaratne et al., 2013). Accruing evidence on disconnect and the gaps as presented by diverse monitoring and evaluation efforts does not seem deliberately used to inform practice in the struggling education sector in sub-Saharan Africa. Such compromises could lead to a diminished actualization of their potential, a factor not working in their best interest.

Methodology

This paper was based on information generated through desk review. The author went through existing literature on the emerging trends on access to education to children in sub-Saharan Africa. The scope of the paper covers enrolment patterns, quality of education offered, and its transformative nature. The author further explored the existing literature to assess the role of monitoring and evaluation in informing practice in the education sector in sub-Saharan Africa. The United Nations (UN) and its primary agencies such as UNICEF; UNESCO; and UNDP formed an important source of data on education both in sub-Saharan Africa and beyond. The paper is therefore descriptive in nature and thus presents the prevalent patterns as informed by the available literature.

Findings and discussion

The Status of Education in the Sub-Saharan Africa

Access to education in sub-Saharan Africa has remained unreachable to many children, a factor which forces a multitude of them to either have a delayed entry or no entry at all (UNESCO, 2015). The situation is worsened by the persistent high level of poverty whereby the percentage of persons who live on less than US$1.25 per day only dropped marginally from 56% to 48% in the two decades between 1990 and

2010. Overwhelmed by such palpable poverty, millions of children in sub-Saharan Africa do not get enrolled in basic education level until they are way past the country specific formal entry age (FHi 360, 2011; UNESCO, 2015).

In about half of the region, it is estimated that around 20% of the primary school pupils are overage and the cadre of the overage hardly complete the elementary level of education enrolled into. The fact is that, late entry exposes the children to other competing forces such as the pressure to fend for themselves, provide for their siblings, and take care of their parents and other kin. These extra-responsibilities often lead these children to underperform and hence repeat classes, causing further delay into completion and thus becoming more liable to drop out of school before completion (UNESCO, 2012). Such disadvantages to the vulnerable children deny them the opportunity to acquire the requisite skills and capacity accessible through quality education, hence not working to their best interests.

Low elementary level completion and poor transition into intermediate and secondary school level seem widespread in sub-Saharan Africa. In Mali for example, where elementary school enrolment is estimated at less than 60%, only a small fraction of the children advance from grade 6 to complete grades 7-9 (Mali DHS, 2006; MEABED, 2007). Furthermore, only a paltry 19% of the 13-18 year olds attend secondary school (Mali DHS, 2006). In the same age group, 22% of males compared to 16% of females attend secondary school. The situation is not any better in Senegal where with a seemingly good gross enrolment rate of 90%, barely 50% successfully complete grade 6 (UNICEF, 2015). It is therefore apparent that the enthusiasm in mass enrolment at the commencement level does not reflect an equally impressive completion rate. The failure to complete primary school and the subsequent inability to progress into secondary school tend to lock out millions of children from acquiring

the requisite skills, capacity, makes it impossible for them to reap the benefits which would accrue from formal education. This kind of poor performance in the education sector experienced in the primary school level may also be linked to the quality of education accessible in pre-primary or early childhood education.

By global standards, enrolment at the pre-primary level in sub-Saharan Africa has remained very low over the years. In the period between 1999 and 2012, pre-primary enrolment in the region was reported to have risen from almost zero to 20% in 2012 (UNESCO, 2015). While the overall average enrolment rate remained very low, it was also noted that the range was extraordinarily wide. In countries such as Mali, Burkina Faso, Democratic Republic of Congo, and Niger, the pre-primary enrolment was less than 2% compared to the better endowed nations such Ghana, Mauritius and Seychelles which posted an impressive rate of around 100%. It is also noteworthy that the quality of pre-primary education was heavily dependent on both the teacher-pupil ratio and their capacity. Despite this common knowledge, the pre-primary teachers in the region are often too few and untrained. For example in 2012, the average pre-primary pupil/teacher ratio in the region was about 28:1, stretching from 12:1 in Swaziland to an astounding 57:1 in Tanzania (UNESCO, 2015).

It is indeed worrying to note that in more than half of sub-Saharan Africa since 1999, the pupil teacher ratio has continued to rise. In some of the resource poor countries such as Congo, Mali, Niger and Togo the rise has been more than ten pupils per teacher. It is therefore evident that as a result of the continued increase in enrolment and the declining budget allocation to education, the trained teacher-pupil ratio has a sustained fast negative escalation. In countries such as Eritrea, Mali and Sierra Leone, the proportion of trained teachers has continued to decline. In 2012, the percentage of trained pre-primary teachers ranged from 15% in Senegal to 100% in

Mauritius. Sub-Saharan Africa has thus remained a region of great contradictions and the divide between the marginalized and the well-endowed nations extremely wide.

In spite of the seemingly positive increase in school enrolment rates in Sub-Saharan Africa, there is hardly any evidence that the quality of schooling has been bettered (UNICEF, 2010). This indictment is evident in the bulk of the millions of children dropping out of school mid-stream or even released by the ill-equipped education system after the completion of the elementary level without having acquired basic literacy and numeracy skills. This state of affairs tends to demonstrate the often ignored disconnect between quantity and quality in the education sector. It is apparent that the absolute levels of achievement are extraordinarily low in the region. This reality may be amplified further by a close look at an assessment conducted for both language (French) and mathematics capacity in five countries as shown in Table 1. Barely 50% of the 5th grade pupils returned a correct response in these two subjects (Clasby, Diallo, & Cryer, 2013). In the same table, it is apparent that the dropout rate was very high in all the countries except in Cameroon which had at least 77% retention at the 5th grade. On the basis of these trends, it is apparent that both the high dropout rate and dismal performance in French and mathematics were a reflection of a poor quality education.

Table 1: Level of Learning Achievement and Enrolment-Retention in 5 sub-Saharan Countries

Average rate of correct response on key subject matter by 5th grade					
Country	Burkina Faso	Cameroon	Cote d'Ivoire	Madagascar	Senegal
Mathematics	46% (0.33%)	50% (0.37%)	40% (0.31%)	58% (0.33%)	38% (0.40%)
French	44% (0.33%)	55% (0.39%)	50% (0.35%)	42% (0.34%)	34% (0.40%)
Combined grade	45% (0.30%)	53% (0.34%)	45% (0.29%)	51% (0.31%)	35% (0.39%)
Share of Children Reaching Minimum Learning Achievement (MLA) and enrolment rate by 5th Grade					
Country	Burkina Faso	Cameroon	Cote d'Ivoire	Madagascar	Senegal
MLA	20%	59%	34%	25%	20%
Enrolment retention by 5th grade	34%	77%	54%	33%	55%

Source: Clasby et al. (2013)

The requisite for quality education such as teacher-pupil ratio reflects a major shortage whereby in sub-Saharan Africa the pupil-trained-teacher ratios stand at over 80:1 compared to the best practices in developed countries which post a ratio of 16:1 (OECD, 2011; UNESCO, 2015). In some of the countries in sub-Saharan Africa, the pupil-teacher ratio has continued to increase as the enrolment numbers increased. For example in Malawi, the situation deteriorated massively and the ratio increased in an already alarming high level of 63:1 in 1999 to 74:1 in 2012 (UNESCO, 2015). In Central African Republic, an equally gloomy scenario of a pupil-teacher ratio of 80:1 is reported, and worse still, pupil-to-trained teacher ratio of 138:1 was reported in 2012. In Guinea-Bissau, the ratio rose from 44:1 in 2001 to 52:1 in 2010 (UNESCO, 2015). These deplorable learning conditions compare very badly with the globally set standard of 40:1 and the best practices of 16:1 in the developed nations.

In such a poor learning context it is therefore not uncommon to find children who have gone through eight years (elementary) of formal learning and yet they are

unable to read and write, leave alone having the capacity to conceptualize and interpret their socio-economic environment with the intent to influence their contemporary production paradigms. Many are devoid of any skills to manage their lives as literates and thus lack the basic capacity to learn a vocation, hence do not have a skill to sell to the job market (UNESCO, 2015). Their incapacity precipitated by a poor education system leave both the learner and the guardian/parent disillusioned not just about the quality of education but the entire education process which does not work to the best interests of the child.

When an education system is seemingly unable to deliver on quality, the stakeholders can easily resign to apathy. Such lethargy may not just be localized among the consumers but can easily permeate the educationists and other policy makers who in the absence of systematic tracking systems may not be in touch with the inherent disconnect. The education sector in sub-Saharan Africa is further compromised in many parts by the biting effects of climate change, a population explosion outpacing resources, poverty, and unending armed conflicts, glaring inequalities based on gender, caste, ethnicity, geographical location, and disease burden (UNICEF, 2015). Faced with these challenges, there is a growing need for the various stakeholders to be deliberate in linking quantity and quality of the education offered.

In keeping with best practices, the education sector in sub-Saharan Africa has to commit to accessing to the children sound teaching and appropriate learning facilities; synchronized curricula which respond to their learning needs and building the requisite life skills; qualified teachers to drive the process; and gender equity for both the boy and the girl child (UNESCO, 2015; UNICEF, 2015). It is the persuasion of the author of this paper that, the more evidence is adduced to the various

stakeholders that both quality and quantity education are in tandem with sustainable development, the more the resources will be allocated to the sector. More so, there is the need to maintain consistent monitoring and evaluation to ensure that as the different approaches are embraced, the desired skills and capacity are sustained.

Unfortunately, available literature shows a persistent decline in resources devoted to the education sector in sub-Saharan Africa (UNESCO, 2010). This paper therefore asserts that running an education system without constant tracking in a comprehensive monitoring and evaluation is like flying an airbus without any reference to the radar. Both the public and the private sectors involved in enhanced access to quality education must be committed to not only embrace innovative approaches but through monitoring and evaluation, engage in practices which are tested and tried. The future of the children which is put into jeopardy by any lustre, lethargic and laid-back approach to the education system is most crucial and calls for urgent exploration of ways and means of ameliorating it.

Parental involvement in children's education has been found to have a positive effect in enhancing better performance in the academics and such children were more likely to complete their school compared to their counterparts whose parents were not involved in their school lives (Noel, Stark, Redford, & Zukerberg, 2013). This notwithstanding, parental involvement in children's learning process tends to decline as they grow, with fewer parents participating in primary and elementary levels than in high school and college. Studies have further shown that parental involvement in children's school life had a higher correlation with better academic performance than merely walking with them through their assignments. Teachers of children whose parents were more involved also tended to reciprocate by giving such children personalised attention which enhanced the possibility of early detection of deviant

traits as well as timely correction and nurtured a more acceptable character. The collaboration between the parent and the teacher tended to build a more positive image of the latter and thus enhance a better self-image and job satisfaction (Lukalo, 2006).

The level of parental involvement in children's school life may not be a spontaneous flow but a practice with a number of predisposing factors. For example, studies in countries such as the US indicated that parents with college degrees were more likely to be involved in their children's school life (85%) compared to 45% of the children whose parents did not have college education. Other factors which were an impediment to the parental involvement included high poverty levels, and insecure and rigid working conditions of such parents. In a study conducted in the US in 2011-2012, a paltry 27% of children living below the poverty line had parents who volunteered or served on a committee at their children's schools, compared with 45% of children living above the poverty line.

A close look at these inhibitions, would show that if these challenges exist in the developed world, worse handicaps may be the normative in the less endowed economies where low-income parents may not even afford the basic scholastic requirements such as books, pens, pencils, textbooks, school uniform, and shoes, not to talk of transportation to attend interactive meetings with teachers, or even afford the luxury of time to meet with the teachers. Many struggle to subsist; hence interactive meetings with teachers might be viewed as time wasters. Another impediment may be the literacy level of the parents themselves. In sub-Saharan Africa adult literacy is as low as 59%, the lowest compared to other regions of the world (UNESCO, 2013). The participation of non-literate parents may thus be almost negligible in terms of value addition to the student.

There is need for a deliberate effort to draw the causal connection between the various socio-economic and education variables. A thorough investigation and therefore a detailed exploration into the inequities is imperative. It is crucial as much as it is possible to invest in educational programmes which would ease parental pressure to eke a living and be able to create an enabling environment to nurture and thus better quality education sector.

On the face value, the number of children in the developing world attending primary school has improved tremendously in the last fifteen years. It is reported that the numbers increased from 83% in 2000 to 90% in 2012 (Figure 1). It is also noted that still in 2012; 58 million of school going children were out of school. High dropout rates therefore remain a major impediment to universal primary education. An estimated 50% of out-of-school children of primary school age live in conflict-affected areas. Other challenges highlighted include pupil teacher ratio and access to scholastic materials. Countries in the region have however attempted different approaches to ameliorate the situation.

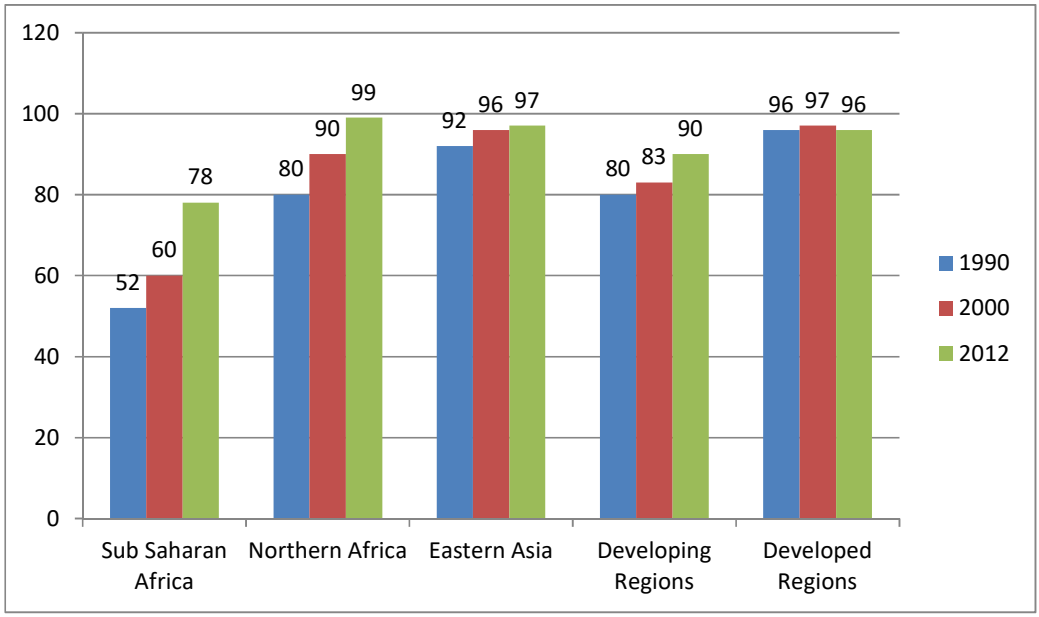

Figure 1: Net Enrolment Rate in Primary School 1990; 2000; 2012

Source: United Nations (2014)

Use of innovative way like contract teachers has been tried in a number of countries with varying degrees of success. It has tended to be more effective where parental or community involvement is strong. In Kenya, for example, positive effects from hiring contract teachers were observed only in communities where parents were trained to monitor teacher absenteeism and time on task, and relatives of local civil service teachers were prevented from being hired as contract teachers (Duflo et al., 2012). In Mali, language and mathematics scores of grade 2 and 5 students were consistently higher under contract teachers closely monitored by the local community (Bourdon et al., 2010).

Nevertheless, the challenge of quantity versus quality remains a perennial hurdle in sub-Saharan Africa. Ghana, one of the countries with fairly promising returns in other socio-economic indicators is still unable to raise the number of qualified teachers needed in the country's education sector (UNESCO, 2015). Consequently, the sector has had to lower entry requirements to the profession. While this increased by 60% the number of primary school teachers and thus a sustained pupil-teacher ratio (PTR) of below 40:1, the proportion of trained teachers dropped from 72% in 1999 to 53% in 2013. It is apparent that while recruitment of untrained teachers may get more children into school and even keep the PTR low, the quality of education tumbles and hence the desired outcome of empowered learners nosedives too.

Owing to the push for free primary education (FPE) initiative, a rapid rise in enrolments at the primary school level has been realised. However, this sector of education is facing serious problems in both qualitative and quantitative growth in terms of access and the fact that the retention, completion and attainment rates are

declining, while geographical and gender disparities are becoming even more marked. It is important to note that the sector has not responded adequately to population growth and continues to lag behind in terms of infrastructure, teaching staff and other support services for quality education. The learning centres are further characterized by inadequacies such as: crowded classrooms; insufficient and or untrained teachers; and thus grossly overworked and demoralized.

On the face of declining and inadequate supply of scholastic materials by the public sector, parents are obliged to provide funds for desks, uniforms, books, and construction of buildings. The burden of cost sharing between the parents and the public sector often overwhelms the impoverished parents and guardians. When they have to choose between scholastic materials for their children and food, the latter tends to carry the day and many may drop out of school. Countries in sub-Saharan Africa have tried different strategies in the efforts to improve the quality of education. One such move has been made by deliberately phasing out untrained teachers and enhancing opportunities for in-service teacher training, accessing funds for instructional materials, paying teachers' salaries and employing quality assurance staff. Sadly, none of these efforts have focussed on parental involvement beyond the role of providing funds for schools. The Education Act, Cap. 211, Part III, 9(2), Legal Notice 190/1978 provided for parents to be represented on the School Management Committee (SMC). Nevertheless, only a few parents are legally involved in school management activities. The effective role of parents in school has therefore not been recognised.

Conclusion and Recommendations

It is increasingly clear that across sub-Saharan Africa, there is increased student enrolment in schools, enabling more students to get into the classroom. Nevertheless, most African nations are unable to sustain the momentum of rapid enrolments amidst the scarce support resources. Consequently, learning outcomes have immensely suffered. Governments in collaboration with their partners must therefore be deliberate in investing reasonably in innovative educational policies, objectives and strategies to improve the quality of education at all levels. There is need to deliberately track the outcomes of the education efforts in the region and ensure that the strategies adopted deliver in terms of transformative learning. Consequently, the individuals going through the system should follow through successfully and acquire the necessary life skills courtesy of an effective system.

The bulk of the sub-Sahara African governments hardly invest in making technical and vocational education and training a game changer in terms of equipping children with skills and capacity for self-reliance. Economic crunches often constraint governments to cut down or even shelve Technical Vocational Educational and Training Authority (TVETA) programs in their education systems. Such moves are counterproductive and especially given that the huge numbers of youth who drop out of school are unable to pursue tertiary level of training i.e. college education. TVETA will not only be good for the children/youth but is likely to provide much needed technicians in the budding economies and support the construction industry with the relevant workforce.

All the efforts in the education sector must be guided and closely woven with monitoring and evaluation. This would ensure that the sector gets value for its investment and that obsolete approaches are weeded out in a timely manner. Hence,

the underlying principles should be guided by a serious interrogation of the nature of conditions under which the children are learning. While the intentions by the various players may be driven by the best interests for the child, due diligence must be applied in all aspects. It is critical to ensure that the efforts in accessing education in quantitative terms are leading to quality education, an outcome which speaks to socio-economic transformation of the child and holistic environment.

This paper recommends the following actions:

1. An explorative study in the sub-Saharan region to look into the major inhibitions to the use of monitoring and evaluation results in planning and implementing education programmes which could enhance the capacity of the learners in life skills

2. A correlational study in sub-Saharan Africa to assess the causal connection between an enabling learning environment and the acquisition of life skills and thus inform planning and implementation of education programmes which would work for the best interest of the child

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