

Education Drop-in Centers: Communities promote learning and school attendance



PHOTO BY MEGAN COLLINS FOR CRS

A volunteer drop-in center mentor helps a student learn math.

“Before I joined EDC, I was not a regular class attender but now I’ve realized the importance of school. I’ve stopped deserting classes.”

—Student, Chilambe EDC, Zomba district (Emmanuel International)

Our children have improved in school performance and behavior!

Children and their parents and caregivers are convinced that educational drop-in centers (EDCs) are having a positive influence on both behavior and school performance. In less than two years, the EDC concept has evolved from a relatively low-key, experimental response to alarming rates of student drop-out to a thriving activity in more than 340 communities with over 70,000 children registered.

There is a broad consensus that EDCs, supported by the USAID and PEPFAR-funded IMPACT program, are more than just a safe place to “hang out” on Saturday mornings. While children love the sports, games, traditional dances, singing and practical skills (e.g., cooking and craft-making) offered by EDC mentors, they also value the time spent on academic subjects such as English, Chichewa, mathematics and reading. Many students report that attending EDCs has helped them improve their grades and obtain better examination results. Children also perceived a difference in their own behavior, recalling that before attending EDCs they would misbehave at school or skip classes. They had believed that no one cared about their educational progress; as a result, they placed little value on their own learning or progress in school. Interestingly, enrollment records show that EDCs attracted more girls (56%) than boys (44%).

“I thought my son was dull but he was not because when he started attending drop-in sessions, he has improved his grades.”

—Parent, Namputu EDC, Mulanje district (Africare)



PHOTO BY MEGAN COLLINS FOR CRS

Drop-in centers are far more popular than anticipated.

An innovative response to an identified need

EDCs were not part of IMPACT’s initial mandate; rather, they were a response to poor academic performance and high drop-out rates among orphans and vulnerable children (OVC) in IMPACT catchment areas. EDCs have proven, however, to be unexpectedly popular, demonstrated by rapidly escalating enrollment rates and the enthusiastic pride of students, mentors, teachers and parents alike. A recent qualitative study¹ revealed: (1) a consensus that children attending the EDCs were performing better in school and were better behaved at home; (2) that parents and caregivers of children in EDCs became more engaged in their children’s educations and were more likely to make sure basic school needs were met; and (3) that volunteer mentors were committed to their roles and believed they are making a difference. Unfortunately, efforts to support qualitative findings and anecdotal program reports with quantitative data from school records failed, revealing very poor record-keeping in rural primary schools. This also indicates that there was likely very little connection between EDC mentors and primary school teachers. This represents a missed opportunity to jointly monitor the progress of poor performers and devise a deliberate, consistent response.

The unanticipated popularity of EDCs demonstrates clearly how much education is valued. Although originally designed to support students failing to progress in school, higher-performing students also enrolled in EDCs via either parent referral or (more commonly) self-referral. Because this overwhelming popularity of EDCs had not been anticipated, IMPACT had not created any guidelines to limit enrolment or retain the focus on the children in greatest need of support. While most mentors noted that the inclusion of high-performing OVCs brought a positive influence to student performance and behavior, IMPACT’s OVC coordinators expressed concern that low-performers were routinely overshadowed by their high-performing peers. Higher-than-anticipated student/mentor ratios brought unforeseen challenges with regard to classroom management, classroom space, teaching resources and the increasingly sophisticated learning needs of the more capable students.

Mentors volunteer without remuneration

Community members selected EDC mentors based on their willingness to make a commitment to voluntary service and a minimum educational achievement of JCE

¹ Available on request from CRS

“We want to develop our area. We want to help prepare children for the future to become good citizens and even become presidents.”

—Drop-in mentor,
Lifani EDC, Zomba district
(Emmanuel International)



PHOTO BY JOLLAM CHOMBO FOR EMMANUEL INTERNATIONAL

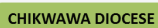
A community fish pond provides ongoing support to drop-in centers and targeted vulnerable children.

(equivalent to U.S. grade 10). Efforts were made to achieve gender balance in selection of mentors. IMPACT partners then provided a three-day training in the basic concepts underpinning the role of the mentor, management of learning environments, child development in relation to learning and psychosocial needs, child rights and child protection and record-keeping and data submission. Following their training, mentors began holding weekly sessions (2–3 hours), generously volunteering their time without remuneration. Their reasons for volunteering varied. Some saw it as a means to promote community development, good citizenry and child protection. Others were interested in self-development and acquiring new skills. Many mentors, especially male mentors, progressed to primary teacher education programs or entry-level positions with NGOs.

Communities are determined to sustain their drop-in centers

Students and families in Machinjiri in Zomba District have benefited from the introduction of the Lifani EDC. Since the opening of the EDC, parents have noted tremendous improvements in their children’s academic performance. Impressed by the results, the community established a committee to manage the center.

Community members realized that in order to sustain the EDC, they needed to make a plan before the IMPACT program phased out. The EDC committee looked at various income generation options before settling for fish farming because of the nutritional and economic benefits that might be derived from it. To jump-start the fish pond project, the committee raised K22,000 (equivalent to US\$50) toward the cost of construction. The proceeds from the sale of the fish are now being used to support the EDC as well as other needs of the most vulnerable children in their community.



Tips for implementation

Define the target beneficiaries carefully. While it is encouraging that high-performing students want to attend EDCs, low-performing OVC can be easily overshadowed by their peers. The sheer number of attendees and their varied grade levels does not allow for enough personalized attention. IMPACT recommends setting clear targets to keep the numbers of students in EDCs and the student/mentor ratio at a manageable level. To realistically implement such a gate-keeper policy, however, mentors, teachers, parents and OVC committees must understand how to set, define and maintain targets and referral methods.

Improve coordination between teachers, mentors, OVC committees, parents and other key players to ensure that fewer students fall through the cracks and more receive the personalized educational attention they need. Mentors and teachers need to meet more regularly to provide consistent guidance and monitor performance. Encouraging more positive parenting around schooling (e.g., assisting and encouraging children with homework, ensuring children have the school supplies they need, praising school successes) will inspire OVCs to reach their potential at school and at home.

Draw on traditional leadership to ensure EDCs are functional and aligned with other OVC initiatives.

Harness the energy and potential of high performing and older students. Instead of having high performing students attend EDCs as learners, consider using them as peer tutors or small-group leaders to provide more learning differentiation within mentoring sessions. These high performers and secondary school students can also serve as role models and promote community volunteerism.

Increase the number of mentors per EDC to allow for areas of specialization such as sports, reading and crafts at age-appropriate levels.

Ensure mentors are regularly exposed to child protection training and referral mechanisms. Mentors should be able to respond to child protection issues as they arise.

Provide school materials such as text books, readers, pens, pencils, chalk, notebooks and educational games. Materials for sports, crafts and life skills are also needed.

Train teachers, mentors and headmasters to collect data and keep records and to be diligent with tracing the progress and whereabouts of low-performing OVC. These children are often forced to switch households and get passed through different guardianship arrangements. In the process, their names in school registries may change, and schools can lose track of individual students.

The importance of maintaining and expanding educational drop-in centers

The unbridled success and popularity of EDCs suggests that they are a gateway to building strong, educated communities. However, mentors are overwhelmed by the response from children wanting services. A larger and longer-term solution is required to address the needs of low-performing students as well as higher performing students who simply desire a safe place to learn and play outside of school hours. Children love the sports, games and craft activities provided by EDCs, and mentors should use these “fun” activities as entry points to academic learning. Psychosocial health skill development should not be overlooked as a critical part of childhood development; this is especially important for OVC.

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