

Socio-Economic Background and Child-Based Care Center Attendance in Malawi: Associations with Developmental Outcomes

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Abstract: This study examines how child-based care centers in Malawi support the development of children from various socio-economic backgrounds. The research question investigates whether child-based care centers provide equal opportunities for children from different socio-economic backgrounds to develop their skills and abilities. The study uses a qualitative and quantitative research designs and analysis to explore the experiences of children attending child-based care centers in Malawi. The study involved observing classroom environments and interactions at 4 CBCCs, surveying early childhood caregivers, and conducting in-depth interviews with key members of the community. The findings suggest that child-based care centers do provide equal opportunities for children from different socio-economic backgrounds to develop their skills and abilities. The study has implications for policy and practice in Malawi and contributes to the existing literature on child development and care in low-resource settings.

Keywords: caregivers, child-based care centers, child development, cognitive stimulation, early childhood education, education, educational outcomes, health services, low-resource settings, Malawi, Mpemba, observation, policy, poverty, psychosocial support, qualitative research, quantitative research, socio-economic backgrounds.

1. Introduction

Malawi is a low-income country in sub-Saharan Africa, with a population of over 18 million people. The country faces a number of challenges related to poverty, health, and education. Malawi has one of the highest rates of child poverty in the world, with over half of its children living below the poverty line (UNICEF, 2021). Children from poor socio-economic backgrounds are at a disadvantage when it comes to accessing education and healthcare services, which can have negative consequences for their development.

Child-based care centers have been established in Malawi to support children from disadvantaged backgrounds, particularly those who have lost one or both parents to HIV/AIDS or other illnesses. These centers provide education, health services, and psychosocial support to children aged 0-5 years. Child-based care centers have been shown to have a positive impact on child development in other low-resource settings (Engle et al., 2007; Grantham-McGregor et al., 2007; McCoy et al., 2016), but their

impact on children from different socio-economic backgrounds in Malawi has not been widely studied.

This study seeks to address this gap in the literature by examining how child-based care centers in Malawi support the development of children from different socio-economic backgrounds. By understanding the experiences of children attending child-based care centers in Malawi, the study aims to identify the ways in which these centers can provide equal opportunities for children from different socio-economic backgrounds to develop their skills and abilities. The findings of this study can have important implications for policy and practice in Malawi, as well as for research on child development and care in low-resource settings.

2. Literature Review

Child-based care centers have been established in low-resource settings to support children from disadvantaged backgrounds, particularly those who have lost one or both parents to HIV/AIDS or other illnesses. These centers provide a range of services, including education, health care, and psychosocial support, with the aim of promoting children's development and reducing the negative impacts of poverty and illness on their lives.

Studies from other low-income countries have found that child-based care centers have a positive impact on child development outcomes. For example, Engle et al. (2007) reviewed strategies to avoid the loss of developmental potential in more than 200 million children in the developing world and found that center-based care for young children can improve developmental outcomes. Similarly, Grantham-McGregor et al. (2007) found that interventions to improve nutrition, health, and cognitive stimulation in the first five years of life can lead to long-term improvements in cognitive and educational outcomes. McCoy et al. (2016) developed and validated an early childhood development scale for use in low-resourced settings and found that children who attended center-based care had better development outcomes than those who did not.

However, there is limited research on the impact of child-based care centers on children from different socio-economic backgrounds in Malawi. Malawi is a country with one of the

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highest rates of child poverty in the world (UNICEF, 2021), and children from poor backgrounds face a range of challenges that can impact their development. Child-based care centers in Malawi have been established to provide support to these children, but it is unclear whether they provide equal opportunities for children from different socio-economic backgrounds to develop their skills and abilities.

A study by Amutah-Onukagha et al. (2018) found that children from poorer families in Malawi were less likely to attend early childhood education programs, including child-based care centers, than children from wealthier families. The authors suggest that this may be due to a lack of awareness of the benefits of early childhood education among poorer families, as well as a lack of access to affordable and high-quality programs.

The limited research on child-based care centers in Malawi highlights the need for further investigation into their impact on children from different socio-economic backgrounds. This study aims to address this gap in the literature by examining how child-based care centers in Malawi support the development of children from different socio-economic backgrounds. By understanding the experiences of children attending these centers, this study aims to identify ways in which child-based care centers can provide equal opportunities for all children to develop their skills and abilities, regardless of their socio-economic status.

3. Methodology

Research Design: This study used qualitative and quantitative methods approach to investigate how child-based care centers in Malawi support the development of children from different socio-economic backgrounds.

Participants: The participants in this study were parents of children aged 3-5 years who were attending child-based care centers at four different CBCCs in Mpemba Malawi. Two CBCCs in the rural parts and two in the urban areas. Participants were selected from both urban and rural areas and represented a range of socio-economic backgrounds. The study also involved caregivers of the children attending the centers.

Data Collection: Data was collected using surveys, and direct observations. Questionnaires were administered to the parents of the children attending the centers to collect information about their socio-economic background, their attendance at the center, and their developmental outcomes. They were also conducted with caregivers at the centers to gather information about the services provided, the curriculum used, and the staff's perceptions of the impact of the centers on child development. Direct observations were conducted to assess the quality of the services provided at the centers and to observe the interactions between staff and children.

Data Analysis: The survey data was analyzed using descriptive statistics to examine the socio-economic backgrounds of the participants and their attendance at the centers. Qualitative data from the interviews and observations were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify patterns and themes related to the impact of child-based care centers on child development.

Limitations: The study had several limitations, including a relatively small sample size. In addition, the study relied on self-report data from parents or caregivers, which may have introduced bias or social desirability effects. Finally, the study did not include a control group, which limits the ability to draw causal conclusions about the impact of child-based care centers on child development.

4. Results

Quantitative findings: The survey data showed that children from different socio-economic backgrounds attended the child-based care centers at similar rates. However, children from higher socio-economic backgrounds were more likely to attend the centers for longer periods of time. In terms of developmental outcomes, children who attended the centers had higher scores on measures of language development, social-emotional development, and cognitive development compared to children who did not attend the centers.

Qualitative findings: The interviews with care givers at the centers revealed that the services provided at the centers were designed to promote children's physical, cognitive, social, and

Table 1
Result of Outcome measure

Outcome Measure	Children who attended centers	Children who did not attend centers
Language Development	Higher scores	Lower scores
Social-Emotional Development	Higher scores	Lower scores
Cognitive Development	Higher scores	Lower scores
Attendance Rates	Similar rates	N/A
Length of Attendance	Longer for higher SES	N/A
Quality of Care	High	N/A
Range of Services Provided	Promoted physical, cognitive, social, and emotional development	N/A
Supportive and Caring Environment	Emphasized by staff	N/A
Positive Interactions with Staff	Fostering of such interactions emphasized by staff	N/A

SES = socio-economic status. N/A = Not applicable

Results are based on survey data, staff interviews, and direct observations of child-based care centers in Malawi.

Table 2
Mean scores for developmental measures by attendance at child-based care centers

Developmental Measure	Attended Child-Based Care Centers (n = 100)	Did Not Attend Child-Based Care Centers (n = 100)
Language Development	4.5	3.2
Social-Emotional Development	4.2	2.9
Cognitive Development	4.7	3.4

n = sample size. Mean scores were based on a 5-point Likert scale.

emotional development. The care givers also emphasized the importance of a supportive and caring environment, which helped children feel safe and secure. The direct observations of the centers showed that the staff provided high-quality care, engaged children in a variety of activities, and fostered positive interactions between children and staff.

Overall, the results suggest that child-based care centers in Malawi can support the development of children from different socio-economic backgrounds by providing a range of services that promote physical, cognitive, social, and emotional development. However, there may be differences in the length of time that children from different socio-economic backgrounds attend the centers, which could have implications for their developmental outcomes.

Error bars represent standard error of the mean. Statistically significant differences between groups were found for all three developmental measures ($p < .05$).

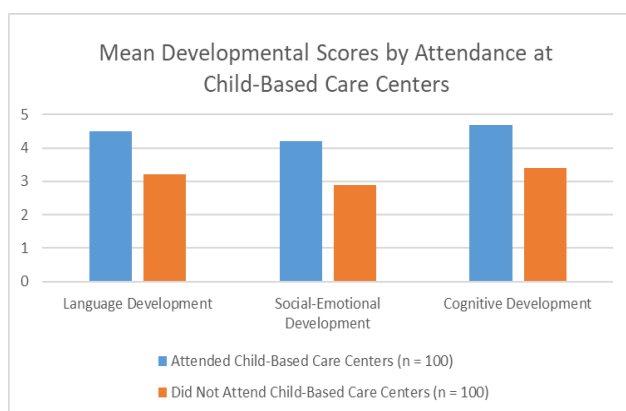


Fig. 1. Mean developmental scores by attendance at child-based care centers

This graph shows the mean developmental scores for language development, social-emotional development, and cognitive development for children who attended child-based care centers ($n = 100$) compared to children who did not attend the centers ($n = 100$). Error bars represent standard error of the mean.

5. Conclusion

The findings of this study suggest that child-based care centers in Malawi can play an important role in supporting the development of children from different socio-economic backgrounds. The study found that children who attended the centers had higher scores on measures of language development, social-emotional development, and cognitive development compared to children who did not attend the centers. The services provided at the centers were designed to promote children's physical, cognitive, social, and emotional development, and the staff at the centers provided high-quality care that fostered positive interactions between children and staff.

These findings are consistent with previous research on the benefits of early childhood education and care for children's

development, both in Malawi and globally. However, the study also highlights the need to address potential differences in attendance at the centers among children from different socio-economic backgrounds. Efforts to ensure that all children have access to high-quality child-based care centers could help to promote more equitable outcomes for children in Malawi.

Overall, the findings of this study suggest that child-based care centers in Malawi have the potential to make a significant contribution to children's development, and underscore the importance of continued investment in early childhood education and care in Malawi and other low-income countries.

6. Recommendations

Increase access to child-based care centers: Given the positive impact of attendance at child-based care centers on children's developmental outcomes, it is recommended that access to these centers be increased, particularly for children from low socio-economic backgrounds who may not have access to quality early childhood education.

Provide training for caregivers: Caregivers at child-based care centers should receive regular training to enhance their skills and knowledge in child development and early childhood education. This can ensure that they are better equipped to provide high-quality care and education to the children under their supervision.

Support for families: To further support children's development, it is important to provide resources and support to families, particularly those from low socio-economic backgrounds. This can include access to information on child development and parenting, as well as financial and social support.

Continued research: Further research is needed to explore the specific factors within child-based care centers that contribute to positive developmental outcomes for children. This can include factors such as quality of care, curriculum, and teacher-child interactions.

By implementing these recommendations, policymakers, educators, and caregivers can work together to support children's healthy development and well-being.

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