Scaling Deep the Child to Child Approach to Ease Transition From Pre-primary to Lower Primary in Uganda, Ethiopia and Malawi

Godfrey Ejuu[1], Rucecerwa Adela[1], Mayeso Lazaro[2], Missaye Mulatie Mengstie[3], Nantongo Mary[1], Audo Jesca[1] & Nandera Miria[1]

[1] Kyambogo University, Uganda

[2] University of Malawi, Malawi

[3] University of Gondar, Ethiopia

Correspondence: Godfrey Ejuu, Kyambogo University, Uganda.

Abstract

Background: Children benefit more from education if they are helped to transit from one level to another. Different strategies are always suggested and sometimes implemented to novel ideas that can promote transition, but with limited effort at scaling. The Child to Child Approach is one such approach that has been used to support the transition of children from pre-primary to early grade primary school. However, limited efforts have been made to support deep scaling, as most focus on just the interventions.

Aim: This paper highlights strategies that were used to scale deep the Child to Child approach to support the transition of children from pre-primary to lower primary in selected districts in Uganda, Malawi and Ethiopia.

Setting: This paper is based on the current situation where many interventions are being implemented in specific areas but are never scaled in marginalized communities to leverage impact.

Methods: A reflective approach, field reports and a desk review were used to collect data.

Results: Different strategies are highlighted including identifying and dealing with scaling deep concerns, engagement of relevant stakeholders at community, district and national levels and working with authorities in the area to endorse the approach worked best to settle the deep cultural uncertainties about scaling.

Conclusion: Implementers need to identify scaling deep bottlenecks early and work to solve them before embarking on scaling approach.

Contribution: This paper contributes to knowledge on what stakeholders who need to scale child to child programmes have to take into consideration for sustainability of their initiatives.

Keywords: scaling deep, child to child, early learning, transition, home based

1. Introduction

Governments and development partners are investing more in early learning to ensure that all children are well prepared to move from one level to another. Movement of learners from one education level to another, also known as transition is critical for a country's educational growth and development (Werunga, Musera, Sindab, 2011), and for achieving the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 - quality education. Research now shows that early learning experiences help young children transition to primary school and make it more likely that they begin and complete primary school (Ansu, 2008). Transition into primary school from Early Childhood Development (ECD) centres is a critical period for children's development and learning (Myers, 1997). This critical period however, in many cases is not well supported by action to help harness the benefits that accrue from it, resulting in net loses.

At present, the efficiency of Uganda's primary education is low, with a survival rate to grade 7 standing at 32.1%, and repetition at 10.19% (EMIS, 2014). We have kept witnessing very high dropout and repetition rates of up to 10.19% occur during the transition from grade 1 to 2 and from grade 6 to 7 in Uganda (Uganda National Planning Authority, 2015). The proportion of out-of-school children was 8.5% or 700,588 children (UDHS 2011), with girls accounting for more than half of them (Uganda National Planning Authority, 2015). In Malawi,

although substantial progress in increasing access to pre-primary and early primary services has been made over the past two decades (i.e. from 2.63% in 2000 to 46% in 2019), only 32% transition from pre-primary to early primary school (Ministry of Gender, Community Development and Social Welfare, 2019).

Whereas many studies are available on transition rates, factors and activities for children from primary to secondary schools (Delprato & Farieta, 2023; UNESCO, 2021), those that focus on transition from pre-primary to primary or transition activities are limited, yet pre-primary is the foundation for the entire education. There are still many children who are not accessing pre-primary education. For example, up to 90% of Uganda's' children were not accessing pre-primary schools by 2014, as a result they had a wrong start with primary education they never prepared for (Uganda National Planning Authority, 2015). In Ethiopia a large number of children especially in rural areas begin schooling at grade 1 at the age of 7 and thus many face difficulty to transit to primary school (Piper, 2010). As a result, children's early reading and numeracy scores were inadequate; 34% of grade 2 students were not able to read one word in a short story in their mother tongue language (Piper, 2010). In Malawi, over half (54%) of the eligible children still lack access to pre-primary services (Ministry of Gender, Community Development and Social Welfare, 2019).

The Child-to-Child Model has been shown to promote a smooth transition from preschool to primary school as older children help younger children to acquire school readiness skills, literacy, numeracy and social and emotional skills in communities where formal preschools are either unavailable or not well equipped and later socialize them to primary once they join them. The Child-to-Child Approach views children as a resource to help meet the psychosocial and learning needs of other children and families living in difficult circumstances. Child-to-Child's core principle of meaningful participation maintains that children have agency, hence can and should be actively involved in improving their own situation and that of their family and neighbors.

LABE Uganda had been implementing the Child to Child Approach for several years in northern Uganda as part of their home-based model. In their approach, they worked with children from grade 5 to 7 who would find time away from their school schedule to become young facilitators for the children in the centres in their neighborhood. This model however had challenges in that the children from the primary schools needed more support from their teachers on what they should teach the learners in the centres. Also, some of them started modelling the primary school teaching approach and routines they go through that were not compatible with young learners in the centres and their choice of young facilitators was not directly linked to early childhood.

While Child to Child approach is seen as a model that can be used to promote transition, there are still limited studies on how it can be scaled, especially scaling deep. It is at this point that Kyambogo University, in collaboration with University of Gondar in Ethiopia and University of Malawi, in Malawi decided to modify and scale deep the child to child model in home based centres facilitated by both grade 1-3 learners and other learners from the home centres themselves in Uganda, Ethiopia and Malawi.

2. Aim and Objectives of the Study

The main aim of this study is to identify and elaborate the strategies that can be used by implementing agencies to scale child to child intervention sustainably in marginalized communities in Uganda, Malawi and Ethiopia. The study was guided by the following objectives:

1. Identify scaling strategies being implemented in child to child intervention sites in Uganda, Malawi and Ethiopia
2. Establish lessons learnt from the scaling process that can inform future scaling process of similar interventions.

3. Research Methods and Design

A reflective approach, field reports and a desk review were used to collect data and develop this study. This study was based on a child to child intervention that is being scaled in selected rural communities in Uganda, Malawi and Ethiopia to promote early learning through play in home or community based centres. The idea was that you can help the community to develop their own strategies to support an initiative they understand. However, the actual scaling process followed desk reviews to identify different scaling options and then used action research to try out different options, doing trial and error till settled on specific strategies being reported below.

The intervention is the scaled child to child model that was adopted from Literacy and Adult Basic Education (LABE) Uganda. The model was modified as follows: The curriculum content was modified to include local and common games that pre-primary children play in their communities. A total of 200 culturally appropriate games were collected and aligned to different curricula areas like literacy games, numeracy games, socio-emotional

games, physical education games, science games, health and hygiene among others. These games were put together in an activity pack book as pictures for children to easily see and recognize them. A teachers' book was also developed to support the teachers on how to help the young facilitators when needed to lead the play activities. The facilitation of learning content was also modified from instructions to play leading of games identified from the activity pack. The facilitators who had been from grade 5-7 were abandoned with preference for those from grade 1-3 and 1-2 for Malawi, who are nearer the pre-primary school age level for better bonding at play. Parents were also brought on board to support their children who had been identified as young facilitators to help them prepare and follow their schedules and also provide moral and material support to other children being mentored. Local structures at the community and district levels fully participated in the Child-to-Child Approach activities to ensure sustainability.

For the purpose of this study, data was collected using in-depth interviews with a total of 15 participants across Uganda, Malawi and Ethiopia. They include 9 parents, three from each country, and 6 district officials, 2 from each country. We also did reflection as the implementers based on what we had experienced to inform the study.

4. Results

The study results are explained as follows:

4.1 Scaling Strategies Employed

The young facilitators from the centres lead their peers in the play activities when their teachers are not around and also every playday that is gazetted for child-led learning in the centres. The young facilitators from the primary school come to the centres every Saturday when they are free from their school routines and in the afternoon during weekdays to play with those in the centres and also lead in some of the play activities selected from the activity pack.

The modified model is making learning more engaging in the centres as it is deeply rooted in Bandura's Social Learning Theory, where children learn by observing the behavior of others, friends or their peers. The theory emphasizes the reciprocal relationship between social characteristics of the environment, how they are perceived by individuals, and how motivated and able a person is to reproduce behaviors they see happening around them (Bandura, 1971).

The modification of the Child to Child Model lasted for about one year for us to come to the final product. However, since we had made modifications including making changes that were not known to the original users, we now had to embark on scaling deep to deal with the cultural beliefs, meanings and practices of people, and the qualities of their relationships, to bring about change (Moore, Riddell & Vocisano, 2015). Many children who had been identified as young facilitators for learning were imitating what teachers do. They also asked for what to teach. Since we wanted to infuse play based approach into the learning, we decided to collect and compile local games usually played by children from Uganda, Ethiopia and Malawi. We described the games and identified skills developed when one played each of the games. These games were then categorized into themes that match the curriculum learning areas. For example, we had the literacy games, mathematics games, socio-emotional learning games and science games among others. We then compiled the games into a booklet called the child to child activity pack.

Teachers expressed the need for clarity on the expected roles of young facilitators who had transitioned into teaching positions. To solve this problem, we developed a teachers' guide that outlines the roles of teachers in supporting young facilitators during play sessions. This also helped to make it clear for the teachers not to overtake the activities being led by the young facilitators as was the case in the beginning. Their role was now support supervision, mentor, and doing continuous observation and assessment of children while at play. The book solved the problem of what to teach and made the content to be culturally relevant to support the scaling deep since most of the games in the pack originated from the communities.

Parents too had reservations about the approach. They wondered whether a pre-school child could be capable of leading others in a lesson activity. Other parents thought that if their children were made to become 'teachers', then at what time would their children learn. Others wanted to know how their children would be paid since they had taken over the role of the teachers. In order to deal with this issue, we organized training for parents about the model. In the training, we brought to their attention key facts about children and how they learn including through play. For example, we showed them that children play together and learn different games from each other. We also showed them that some children are freer with their peers than teachers, and so can learn better. We also showed them that some children are freer with their peers than teachers due to absence of a hierarchy of authority that usually typify teacher-child interactions, and so can learn better if led by their peers rather than

teachers. All the learning activities are in the form of games that children have been playing and those who do not know can be taught by their peers. We also showed them the skills their children learn from each other and made them play some of the games. They were convinced and many volunteered to help as some of the games they themselves had played in their childhood.

After sorting out those stakeholders, we now brought in the district education officers to show them the approach and how it works. We engaged them as monitors and support supervisors for the teachers. We also developed monitoring tools that they were using to monitor and support the teachers. At the end of the monitoring, they would report to the district office for further engagement. All these processes supported the scaling deep of the modified child to child model in the three countries.

4.2 Discussion of Scaling Lesson Learnt

Scaling is a learning process that allows both the implementers and beneficiaries to learn from each other and from the process, with each stage presenting a different learning task (Korten, 1980). Aware that contextualists and universalists approaches to scaling are competing (Hancock, 2003), we chose to follow the contextualist approach which stresses that interventions or practices need to be tailor-made to address local context-specific conditions when scaling (Do, 2019). We chose the approach because of our unique history with interventions that fail and also the challenge of uptake of early learning innovations that had raised concern among different stakeholders (IDRC, 2021). Since we were just initiating the child to child model in pre-primary centres in the three countries, we wanted to do more to make the model more acceptable, and challenge some cultural biases, hence the need to do scaling deep and later up as the scalability process takes place in a hybrid way (Moore, Riddell & Vocisano, 2015). This strategy helped us to focus more on cultural changes, personal transformations, changes of beliefs related to implementation of the child to child model and the people affected (Riddel & Moore, 2015).

If you are to scale, you need to first identify the fears, superstitions or underlying cultural factors and existing norms about what you are to scale. In our case, there was a strong feeling among community members, including education officials that children, especially those in pre-primary know nothing and cannot be teachers or leaders of their peers. To them, it is only experienced adults who can lead and control any meaningful learning. This belief is grounded in the apprenticeship model that is commonly used in many African communities for training learners. Bearing this in mind, we had to systematically make them watch children at play and tried out giving some children academic content to teach their peers. When they realized that many children learnt more comfortably from their peers, they started trying out the same style and were convinced to give the approach a try.

We also learnt that if you are to scale, the implementers need more knowledge about the intervention in a structured format for them to implement. Doing this helps sort out fidelity issues and brings clarity where there is misconception. We did this by developing the activity pack and the teachers' guides to support both children, teachers and parents.

We learnt that beneficiaries need to be shown how they benefit more indirectly from the project even when they are not given physical cash rewards. This arose from the fact that we had noticed that some participants had higher monetary expectations from the model with less interest in learning about or implementing it. For example, some parents collected all their children including those who are not part of the programme to come and register as members expecting each child to be paid some money. To them, their children had replaced teachers, so they need to be paid salary as young facilitators like the teachers. When we got to learn of this, we started to show them how they can use the knowledge they were gaining to make their children's learning easier for better outcomes. They even started noticing improved interest by their children in regularly attending school, more interest in class work so as to be a facilitator the following day stimulated more parents' interest.

Another key lesson we learnt was to do with prior endorsement of the model by local and district authorities for community acceptability. In the communities, we also noticed that many other organizations had come earlier and implemented some activities and left. On leaving, communities would go to their local authorities to find out what had happened. Also, as new organizations come to the communities, such communities would seek advice from the local leaders on whether they should cooperate or not. In this case, if the local authorities endorse the programme, then the communities would participate. In our case, we only succeeded when we engaged the local leaders to be part of the centre management committee to help in decision making and enforcement of bylaws passed by them. Also, we had to engage the district officials as trainers and monitors as part of the system strengthening.

5. Recommendations

Success in scaling deep can be done if we put in place some of the following mechanisms:

Identifying community concerns that can make scaling of a given intervention a challenge. In our case, we identified reservations about children becoming teachers, usurping roles of teachers, and how young facilitators would benefit from the approach. We had to deal with this first by showing them that children can be facilitators of learning, teachers will be monitors and young facilitators will become better leaders, learn more in order to teach others and be a shining example of better self-esteem.

Another important thing that one needs to do to promote smooth scaling deep is to provide content for scaling. Here we had to develop child to child activity pack and teacher guides that made content, roles and activities clear and readily available for those scaling it.

It is also important that if you are to do scaling deep successfully, you need to get the endorsement of relevant authorities who became part of the scaling process to make what you are doing to be acceptable. For our case, the district education officials who are in charge of education quality standards at local levels came in to support the teachers and parents to promote the Child-to-Child model. They also participated in some of the games with the parents and children, thus endorsing it as relevant for learning.

6. Conclusion

Scaling deep in this project as explained by Moore, Riddell and Vocisano (2015) was based on the fact that we recognized that culture plays a powerful role in shifting problem domains and that change must be deeply rooted in people, relationships, communities and culture. The home based centres we are working in are controlled by communities and influential parents whose words are taken as the law. Working to change their mindset was key in starting the process of scaling deep. Once they embraced the concept, they quickly took it up and it became the new culture and norms of the centres. Ultimately, this approach has enhanced learning through play among children and promoted their transition from pre-primary to early-grade primary school.

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