A Community-driven Rural Early Childhood Development (ECD) Project, with
Emphasis on Culturally and Developmentally Appropriate Exploratory Learning
Concepts

by

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ABSTRACT

Experiential learning involves the learner being a part of the learning process. Exploratory play at the early childhood level provides psychosocial stimulation and an environment that promotes experiential learning. Research and practice recognize that young children learn best in this context. This project at Makungula village explores how a community-developed program for rural Early Childhood Development (ECD) could be a possible exploratory learning model for replication in Malawi. It brings together cultural strengths and good developmental practices, in order to provide optimal contextual learning. The project’s components involved training, constructing learning aids, modeling, and reflections with the village teachers, with a focus on exploratory learning. Another component was construction of a community-driven rural shelter designed to promote experiential learning and sustainability. Qualitative research took the form of an interview, reflection and discussions, and observation. Quantitative results were obtained from teachers’ surveys and documentation of accounting. A kit of learning aids constructed from locally available resources was assembled. Conclusions are that exploratory learning is viable and bears results in a rural context; that rural ECD is sustainable if, from the inception, traditional authorities are taking the lead, thus imparting a vision to parents and the community; and that teacher training and reflective times are essential for quality, monitoring and sustainability. Recommendations include a training manual for use in rural ECD teachers’ workshops; a sample kit of learning aids compiled from locally available materials; a building plan for construction of a contextual, cost-effective, community-built shelter; and a teachers’ guide in the local
language for teachers’ use in “informal” rural preschools. Further research may answer questions why teachers have been reluctant to use exploratory methodology in ECD interventions. Longitudinal research could reveal the impact of experiential learning on interest and retention in primary school.

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This project for the children of Makungula Village is dedicated to Group Village Headman, Chief Makungula, the late Tione Mwera, who believed in his village and his people. He inspired the village teachers and me in the project until his untimely death. We will always remember his heart for the project, and we trust the outcome will benefit many children in Malawi. The project was only possible with assistance given by the faculty and staff from Early Childhood Development Virtual University (ECDVU), University of Victoria, Canada. I thank Professor Alan Pence for his vision for ECD in Africa, and for his ECDVU team’s supervision of this project, including Dr. Veronica Pacini-Ketchabaw, Dr. Jessica Schafer, Dr. Terry Rennie, and Lynette Jackson for valuable help; and Professor Moira Chimombo, Malawi supervisor. Chancellor College, University of Malawi, Principal Dr. F. Moto and ECD students helped facilitate the project. UNICEF and the Malawi government Ministry of Gender and Community Services provided encouragement and the former, financial support making this program possible. I thank Sub-Saharan Africa Family Enrichment (SAFE), a Malawian NGO, along with concerned Christians from churches across America for their prayers and financial support for the project. Times spent with my ECDVU colleagues from 10 African countries will always be a cherished memory. We became a “community” as we danced, prayed and worked together! My love and appreciation goes to my husband, Professor Dick Day, who lovingly encouraged me and gave valuable input. Most especially, I thank the children, the Mizu teachers, and my achimwale and chief of Makungula Village, who made it “happen”!

Thanks and blessings to you all, Charlotte Day.
Chapter 1: Introduction

Project Statement

The rural community-driven Early Childhood Development (ECD) project, with emphasis on culturally and developmentally appropriate exploratory learning concepts, involved working with a local village in Zomba district, Malawi. The aim was to provide a contextual, cost-effective, replicable model. Due to the need for more participatory learning for optimal brain and social development, child-centered learning was the focus in the training, modeling, and construction phases of the project (Evans et al., 2000; Sawyers & Rogers, 1992).

The project evolved from discussion, participatory learning activities (PLAs) with the community and planning sessions with Group Village Headman, Chief Makungula, parents, village elders, and children (Greany & Elliot, 2001). Teacher training and modeling were important aspects leading to success of the project. Training workshops were conducted to integrate developmentally appropriate practices (DAP) with the community’s wishes for their children’s development.

Teachers and elders were encouraged to incorporate traditional stories, songs, and games in the project to keep the focus contextual. The local language, Chichewa, was predominantly used, with some teaching in English. The teachers also incorporated values in the form of teaching appropriate manners and Bible stories, which are contextually appropriate and were specifically requested at the community PLA meeting.

The village teachers organized an outdoor preschool under a mango tree in the chief’s yard, calling themselves the Mizu, meaning “roots” or “sources of nurture” for the children. They chose the name, Mphanje, meaning “a garden in preparation for planting,”
for the preschool. These important local words from an agricultural society sent a message of their commitment to the community. It also reflected the importance the teachers now had for the experiential approach to child development.

Unlike urban projects where ECD programs are sustained by children’s fees, this rural project needed a unique community commitment for sustainability. For all orphans and vulnerable children to be included, villagers could not be expected to pay fees; therefore, ideas for involvement, such as contributions of firewood, maize, homemade toys, local clay, and gifts to the teachers were necessary to promote sustainability (Berk, 1999; Bredekamp & Copple, 1997).

In order to encourage implementation and sustainability of exploratory, child-centered activities, teachers were met with on a regular basis, discussing and reflecting on child development and the activities of the informal preschool. Reflective times with the Mizu and interaction with the community contributed to the project’s ownership and sustainability.

The project encouraged the creation and use of toys and learning resources by the teachers. These were constructed from locally available materials (Njagi & Berluti, 1989), for use in the paradigm shift from didactic teaching methods to more experiential approaches to learning. They were compiled into a sample kit that was cost-effective to reproduce and could be duplicated by other villages. These teaching and learning resources encouraged the teachers to use more interactive learning methods, departing from the usual rote methodology.

A shelter was designed, with input from the village chief. It was then constructed to provide both a culturally and developmentally appropriate background for experiential
early learning within a rural African context. The structure also provided needed protection from the tropical sun and rains. The shelter encompasses two large activity areas for children’s activities, an office/storeroom for teachers, outside cooking area and latrines. Plans included interest centers built into the open shelter in an innovative way for exploratory play and in a rural security context (Kritchevsky & Prescott, 1977). This aspect of the project provided a cost-effective, community model for promotion of exploratory play.

**Rationale for Project**

The project is important as a community-driven ECD development project that has the capabilities for sustainability by the community. In addition, it is designed to be a model for rural ECD in Malawi that builds on traditional concepts, while incorporating experiential learning by the children. The project was designed to address the children’s needs from a holistic perspective. It provides experiential learning pedagogy as well as a meeting place for the children’s psychosocial and cognitive requirements. In addition, a structure was designed as a meeting place and training facility for parents, caregivers, and teachers. The structure will also serve as a training center for the 13 villages under the Makungula Group Village Headman’s jurisdiction. IECD (Integrated Early childhood Development) messages important for nutrition, health, parenting, and rights of the child may now be disseminated (Haddad, 2002).

The project is important because it has:

- Provided a rural model for exploratory, child-centered learning by encouraging “interest centers” which have locally made learning materials and
toys. This aspect of the project provides psychosocial stimulation promoting better child development.

- Produced a model kit of teaching and learning aids, constructed of environmental and locally available materials to promote exploratory learning for rural use.

- Documented a cost effective and replicable model for other villages. This is a community-driven and owned ECD model which can help get the needed “coverage” for IECD activities in the districts of Malawi.

- Built the capacity of the community to mobilize resources to address their children’s needs (Lanyasunya, 2001).

- Provided a location for the children to meet for early childhood activities, with protection from weather and distraction.

- Offered a physical space for fora that include dialogue and education for parents; and a training facility for neighbouring village ECD teachers.

The majority of children live in rural areas and have little access to any pre-primary learning services. The annual income per capita in Malawi is US$190 and therefore, rural children, from basically subsistence farming families, have little access to ECD services (Poverty Monitoring System, 2000; UNICEF, 2002).

Poverty impacts parents’ and caregivers’ education, thus impacting children’s development in the early years of life, and their education. The school drop-out rate in Malawi is one of the highest in Africa. Of the 82 percent of children who begin Standard One, only 34 percent continue past Standard Four (UNICEF, 2001).
Comprehensive longitudinal studies indicate the importance of early childhood learning for children’s retention in school. For over twenty years, the High Scope project followed the progress of children who had ECD interventions. It revealed the importance of ECD programming in later life such as lower school dropout rate, better marriages and job opportunities, and even less propensity for crime. Robert Myers’ and his associates’ epic study revealed early childhood interventions are more cost effective than later remedial interventions (Myers, 2001).

This project benefits the rural children by providing a play and exploratory learning environment where lack of facilities often has inhibited interactive learning (Arnold, 2002). Well planned and executed ECD projects provide psychosocial stimulation necessary for holistic development of the child (Evans, Myers and Ilfeld, 2000). This project offers, according to Erikson’s theory of social development, needed psychosocial stimulation that may promote initiative and industry in formal school (Berk, 1999; Evans et al., 2000; Arnold, 2002).

Malawi estimates there are one million orphans in the 11 million plus population (Barnett and Whitehead, 2002). Rural areas have always relied on the extended family for support, but now the most productive age group is dying. This development is due to the HIV/AIDS pandemic ravaging Sub-Saharan Africa. This trend leaves orphans to be cared for by grandmothers who have little or no source of income; or with other relatives whose resources are stretched with their own children.

Thus, parents and caregivers are likely to benefit from this project. In the African context, any family member can be involved in raising the children. This project offers them child care while they are in the fields or generating income for the family. It offers
opportunities for involvement with their children, providing them with activities to enhance their parenting and nurturing skills. It may offer evidence of the importance of play in the lives of children and for their development (Rogers & Sawyers, 1992).

For the community and nation, the project could help build social capital, keeping the children in school longer for the future advancement of society. It may help the village cope with the growing orphan situation, giving a head start to the young ones, while offering nurturing and caring skills to the older ones. Interest in children in a community often leads to better sanitation, clean water, higher health standards, and overall improvement, as evidenced by other districts in Malawi (Lanyasunya, 2001).

Specific Objectives

Specific objectives included:

- To develop exploratory, child-directed activities in the *Mphanje* village preschool by training teachers and setting up innovative interest centers in the rural setting. The Chichewa word, *Mphanje* means “newly cultivated garden” which is the name chosen by the community for their early childhood program.

- To produce culturally and developmentally appropriate toys, teaching, and learning aids out of locally available resources in order that they may be replicated by other rural ECD programs.

- To build a shelter with office/store room, encompassing a play yard, outdoor cooking area, and pit latrines.

- To document the process involved in the project for the purpose of replication in other rural Malawian contexts.
Personal Mission and Motivation for the Project

My personal involvement in rural ECD began by conviction that I had a “calling” to the children. Followed, an interview with the Group Village Headman, Tione Mwera, asking him what his vision was for his community and especially the young children. This mission evolved from an assignment for ECDVU course CYC 541. From ECDVU course to ECDVU course, I have assessed, trained, and programmed the village ECD work that has progressed to the operative informal preschool under the mango tree. It has met for two years, with the Mizu volunteering their efforts. Skills were refined and disseminated due to ECDVU leadership building content. ECDVU seminar facilitators and resources on CD ROM and web access provided inspiring and useful materials to the project.

Participants making this mission possible have been the traditional leaders, the Mizu teachers, the children, and many well-wishers who have provided encouragement and support. Chancellor College, University of Malawi ECD students have been models of good ECD practices as they participated in the village mission. They have been participants as well as benefactors as they observed, helped teach, made toys, and learned lessons for their own future parenting or professional roles.

The mission provided education for parents and caregivers as well as young children. Parents have benefited as they see their children more prepared for primary school. By continuing their education, the children will later help with family income. The children were both participants and benefactors. From the initial PLA, the children said they wanted a school where they could “dance and sing,” so that became a priority.
After reflective times, the *Mizu*, suggested the need for a community shelter, since Malawian seasons can be excessively rainy or cold. Chief Makungula called together other chiefs who were willing to move the project to a building stage. They were willing to cooperate on the project, expressing the desire for a similar ECD project in their villages. Funding for cement, hardware, and transportation costs was sourced; the chief committed the community to the labor component. Accounting was a part of the documentation process. Older men mentored younger ones, imparting skills and a work ethic.

The mission included advocacy for rural ECD. The news media visited the project, providing coverage and support for village early childhood programs. Upon completion, the village has planned an “Open Day” when local merchants from town, university officials, as well as the Ministry of Gender and Community Services, SAFE, UNICEF, and other interested agencies will be invited. The children will dance and sing; the *Mizu* will sell their handiwork and display the learning resources they have created. They will proudly celebrate the accomplishment of their community project.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature reviewed is divided into two categories for the major project: play and a community-led project. First, play and its importance was reviewed, with an emphasis on exploratory play and experiential learning. Reports on research in other developing countries were noted. Besides the learning environment, literature was examined which promotes the production and use of locally made toys and learning aids. Second, the major project consisted of a community-led construction project with emphasis on incorporating interest centers. Of particular importance was the viability of a construction project with its exploratory play emphasis that could be replicated in rural Malawi. Therefore, building plans for young children's places and spaces were reviewed.

Review of “Play”: Concepts and Cultural Aspects

Isenberg and Jalongo (1997) point out: “Over the years theorists, researchers, and educators across different disciplines and perspectives have documented that play is the optimal vehicle for learning and development in the early childhood years” (p. 41). Play is a key factor in promoting psychosocial stimulation. They cite five essential characteristics:

- Play is voluntary and intrinsically motivated.
- Play is symbolic, meaningful, and transformational.
- Play is active. In play, children explore, investigate, experiment, and inquire.
- Play is rule bound—either governed by explicit or implicit rules.
- Play is pleasurable—empowers and enables children to understand the world from their experiences (pp. 41-42).
Play is a vehicle for children’s learning in the early years. It naturally follows physical development as children begin to use their five senses (Berk, 1999; Evans et al., 2000). To the child, play is a spontaneous reaction to the environment and stimuli within that environment.

For optimal growth and brain development, the environment needs to encompass nurturing and caring individuals, as well as a safe and secure physical environment. Parents and caregivers who talk to and play with their children provide an atmosphere for play leading to curiosity, exploration, creativity and brain development (Berk, 1997).

The physical environment needs to be safe, secure, and interesting to promote exploration by the child. This environment does not need to include expensive toys and television, but rather objects and activities, which encourage the child to touch, observe, and listen. Nature provides an exploratory environment. Familiar household objects also provide stimulation for visual, auditory, and tactile development.

Play is pleasurable to a child providing a foundation for the enjoyment of learning. Therefore, providing an environment for exploratory play encourages cognitive and psycho-social development (Evans et al., 2000).

The importance of exploratory learning and psychosocial development.

Exploratory play is an aspect of experiential learning in young children. The terms, exploratory and experiential learning, are often interchanged in ECD contexts. Experiential learning is defined by Kolb (1984) as “the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of the experience of the learner who is at the centre of the learning process” (cited in Torkington, 1996, p. 4). Experiential learning is
participatory learning and involves exploration. It results in more effective psychosocial development of children than the traditional didactic approaches.

In Malawi preschools and play groups, the didactic approach follows the usual school learning format of children sitting and being lectured to or “taught” by a teacher. Children memorize the alphabet and numbers by rote learning, with little conception of the sounds of letters or the meanings of them or of numbers. This pedagogy may produce knowledge but without internalization or application. Promoting experiential learning may produce more abstract thinking than didactic approaches.

Providing opportunities for creativity is an important aspect of culture as well as education. Exploratory play emphasized in early childhood may produce interest in the arts; as exploration is the first step in creativity. It empowers for “pro-activity,” and later may change the benchmark of learning from examination orientation for success to other indicators of abilities (Torkington, 1996).

The well-being of children includes the importance of emotional, social, and psychological development of the young child, as highlighted by Pollit (1998). Two studies reviewed confirmed the need to provide children with psychosocial stimulation; and the need to provide an environment conducive for the cognitive, social, and emotional development of children. One is a USAID project (1996), and the other is a UNICEF report (2002).

A survey funded by USAID and conducted in Malawi, “Children on the Brink,” relates to the psychosocial needs of children in relation to play and their environment. This study, begun in 1996 in Malawi, was continued in other southern African countries and provided the material for a USAID book and CD ROM by the same name, Children
on the Brink. Findings of the Malawi study revealed that parents lacked interaction and interest in play with their children. Table 1 indicates the percentages of parents who did not interact with their children when the survey was conducted. This research in both rural and urban Malawi led researchers Hunter and Williamson to continue their research in surrounding African nations. The data may be procured from United States Agency for International Development (USAID) on either CD-ROM or written report.

Table 1: Parents’ lack of interaction and play with their children as revealed by “Children on the Brink.”

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parents who did not tell stories to their children</td>
<td>96%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents who did not give opportunity to play</td>
<td>86%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents who did not encourage children to play</td>
<td>89%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children who did not have a stimulating environment</td>
<td>66%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents who did not respond to children’s communication</td>
<td>77%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Hunter & Williamson, 1996, p. 16).

According to the Household Baseline Survey, funded by UNICEF (2002) and conducted in nine districts of Malawi, a need for psychosocial stimulation for healthy child development was revealed, as well as the low priority given to this aspect of child development. Of the 17 “Key Practices” surveyed, only one had to do with emotional/social development of the child while the other 16 concerned the child’s physical well-being.

“Key Practice 7, Promotion of Children’s Mental Development” states: “This practice requires caregivers to promote social development by respecting the child’s needs for care, through talking, playing, and providing a stimulating environment,” but it
is given a mere two pages in the 152-page report (UNICEF, 2002, pp. 91-92). This leads to the observation that children’s social and emotional development appears to be under emphasized in society, even by researchers.

The quantitative aspect of the research focused on what parents and caregivers did for children, such as “helping children learn to talk.” Nothing on listening to children or children’s own responses was investigated. Of the categories listed, “providing a stimulating environment for the child” showed that the percentage of parents playing with and story telling to a child were 4.3 percent and 10.7 percent respectively.

Under the category of “play materials that were available to children,” the following statistics revealed the need for more understanding of play and its importance. Under this category, Table 2 shows parents’ perception of play and interaction with their children. Of those parents surveyed, the following percentages emerged:

Table 2: Perception by parents of their “play” with and materials for their children

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Play Materials</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Physical activity</td>
<td>74.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Games/creativity</td>
<td>34.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading</td>
<td>1.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know</td>
<td>3.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>19.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


There is increasing support for the view that children are born with their own potential for learning and need of stimulation for optimal development (Berk, 2000). This perspective sees the child involved in his/her learning. The child is seen as having dignity and therefore rights.
**Play in relationship to CRC.**

The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) allows our focus to move away from simply, “What are the child’s needs?” to a “rights” perspective. As Bautista (2001) says, “needs” implies the child is a passive recipient; “rights” implies the child is an active participant.

Children’s rights are about the duties of the community and family to create conditions where children thrive. Arnold (2001) passionately believes that an integrated set of actions in any community of the world, addressing physical, intellectual, social and emotional development, will make “child’s rights” a reality.

As Malawi is a signatory to the CRC, it is informative to compare CRC and some of the following proverbial messages concerning children, so as to understand the Malawian view of play and education. Messages of importance having to do with children are often communicated in an indirect way through the use of proverbs in Malawian society. By looking at Malawian proverbs in light of the CRC, we are faced with inputs of traditional and developmentally appropriate ideas. We see emerging traditional views of play and education, in contrast to rights to education and play.

In Malawian society, as alluded to previously, children are most often valued for how they perform tasks or how they are rated by the system. In a study for UNICEF, the view of children in Malawi was revealed in proverbs in comparison to the CRC (Chimombo, 2001). It said that “Mudzi ulimba ndi anyamata” means a village is strengthened by its youth (Chimombo, 2001, p. 23). By providing and empowering the young, the proverb says the village survives and is strengthened.
Much of education in Malawi is based on the premise that children need “to be taught,” and that they are not very capable when very young. Chimombo uncovers traditional and cultural aspects of child rearing and the place of children in traditional society. Many of the proverbs showed the lack of dignity with which adults treat children, seeing them “as a negative entity” (Chimombo, 2001, p. 25). For instance, one proverb says that when a reed dies, another springs up which refers to a young, uninitiated child who dies, but should not be mourned because another child will be born. Children have often been seen as “utilities.” “Mwana ndi chola” says the child is a “bag”; or “Mwana nkhumakoleko,” that is “A child is a scapegoat” (Chimombo, 2001, p. 25). It appears that children, although said to be “valued,” may be the victims of negative psychosocial input into their formative years (Hunter & Williamson, 1996).

According to Chimombo (2001), there are few proverbs concerning play, and more are negative than positive. This may be why the Household Baseline Survey showed such little interest in parents playing with or reading to their children (UNICEF, 2002).

There appears a paradox concerning children’s education and the role of play in learning. The proverb “Mwana wa ng’ona sakulira dziwe imodzi” seems to support exploration as it means, “The crocodile’s young does not grow only in one pool.”

However, Chimombo relates a proverb and its meaning that speaks of curbing play, suggesting that play is not important. It says, “Dulani kachere pumbwa anyale,” i.e. “Cut down the kachere tree so the pumbwa bird should wilt.” Pumbwa is the dove, a quiet, tender type of bird. The indigenous kachere is a popular place to see the pumbwa. The meaning is that if one cuts down the tree, the bird will have no place to “play” and
enjoy the tree. The child is like the bird and it doesn’t need, in fact, shouldn’t have time
to play (Chimombo, 2001, p. 45). This contrasts dramatically with the CRC’s message
that all children have a right to play and a right to learn.

Culture is an influential factor for determining the value of play as well as adult
involvement in play with children (Gonzalez-Mena, 1997). Gonzalez-Mena points out the
necessity for adults to understand the importance of play and to plan for it. Early
childhood educators agree that providing a good atmosphere with sensory stimulation and
manipulative resources helps development as children use their senses of feeling, hearing,
seeing, and smelling (Berk, 1999).

Gonzalez-Mena adds that creating a child-centered environment promotes
creative child play. However, “Some adults prefer children to be in an adult-centered
environment” (Gonzalez-Mena, 1997, p. 63). This is often culturally defined. According
to the author, different cultures relate differently to the amount of stimulation for a
child’s environment. Active cultures promote exploration and movement and these
activities help develop problem-solving skills that are desired (Gonzalez-Mena, 1997, p. 66).

CRC Article 6.2 states, “States Parties shall ensure to the maximum extent
possible the survival and development of the child” (Bautista, 2001, p. 16). The
developmental aspect, Bautista (2001) argues, is often overshadowed by the physical,
survival aspect in the international literature.

CRC Articles 29 and 31 call for parents and caregivers to provide education and
environments for optimal development in a child’s life. In conjunction with Article 5, the
call is to parents and families to take responsibility and seek support for children’s
development within their local custom, “To provide, in a manner consistent with the evolving capacities of the child, appropriate guidance” (Bautista, 2001, p. 16).

The Consultative Group on ECCD emphasizes that these rights to education and play include, “providing the opportunities for exploration and active learning, as well as providing the social and emotional care” (Evans et al., 2001, p. 26). Their research suggests, in agreement with most ECD educators, that significant and critical brain development occurs before the age of seven, in a process influenced not only by nutrition and physical health, but by the kind of interaction a child develops with people and objects in the environment (Evans et al., 2001).

Caroline Arnold (2001), advocating a “rights” approach not a “needs” approach, reminds us that “rights” imply duties and obligations, “by all, at all levels” (p. 36). She believes that for too long there has been an overemphasis on health and survival in ECD. And, while growth is foundational, she says, “This treatment of ECD is inconsistent with the priorities of any child rights” (p. 37). She adds that attention must be given to young children as capable human beings.

Arnold succinctly states, “Early education is not expected to be delivered primarily in formal settings; that is not necessary. Instead, the emphasis has to be on approaches which recognize respect, and build on families’ achievements” (Arnold, 2001, p. 38). She warns against too much emphasis on the physical and physiological or too much emphasis on the educational aspect that ignores the whole development of the child.

Carol Bellamy, head of UNICEF, makes clear that the CRC provides not only for the physical rights, but cognitive rights, produced by psychosocial stimulation and an
enabling environment. Bautista (2001) argues that if leaders at any level “do not provide and protect the young they are responsible to, they have failed their moral and legal obligations as set forth in the CRC” (p. 8).

Relationship of child-centered learning to development.

There is growing evidence from research that for optimal development, a child-centered, exploratory play environment is preferred to a teacher-directed, didactic teaching style (Berk, 1999; Bredekamp & Copple, 1999; Evans et al., 2000). The greatest risk for young children is a repressive environment that blocks creativity and lacks conditions for healthy physical and mental development (UNICEF, 2001).

Child-centered methods give children choices from a number of options, whereas adult-centered ones emphasize the adult role and promote imitation and rote memorization. Many parents across cultures think teachers should be in control, believing that child-centered methods do not promote “learning,” and are chaotic (Gonzalez-Mena, 1997). At the same time, there is a need to be sensitive to children’s differences that are valued and are beneficial in culture (Gonzalez-Mena, 1997).

Berk (1999) includes the theories of Vygotzky and Erikson as important to psychosocial and socio-cultural development of children. According to Vygotzky, a “Zone of Proximal Development” (ZPD) constitutes the varying degrees or amount of assistance a child needs for optimal learning. If more observation of children were to occur contextually in the household and educational arenas, there would be a greater understanding for assistance in the learning process. “Teaching moments” often occur in a social context and when there is psychosocial stimulation such as talking and interaction and exploration between the child and caregiver. Vygotzky believes this helps
move a child from concrete thinking processes to more abstract thinking (Berk, 1999, pp. 28-29). Similarly, Erikson sees initiative being built when there is trust in the caregiver and a stimulating environment of exploration is available (Berk, 1999, p. 17).

Locke’s theory of child development considered children as *tabula rasa*, or a “blank slate,” rather like a vessel to be filled. This conception is common in Malawi; and still prevalent is the belief that the child should be seen, but not heard. A performance mentality is built into child rearing practices such as giving “sweets” for obedience and emphasis on being “number one” in class.

Learning in Malawian context is most often considered, as Coleman (1976) describes, “information assimilation”; while experiential learning is almost the opposite. The sequence of assimilation learning is:

1. Receiving information through symbolic methods, i.e. books and lectures, then
2. Assimilating and organizing the information, leading to
3. Information becoming knowledge, then
4. Ability to apply the knowledge, and lastly
5. Movement from cognition to action.

Coleman describes the opposite in experiential learning pedagogy:

1. A progression of actions and the effects of the actions, leading to
2. Understanding of the actions in a particular sense, which
3. Develops principles that govern the actions, and lastly

Promoting exploratory methodology not only is necessary for optimal child development, it is important to incorporate in ECD teacher training workshops and parent
support groups. “Training is concerned not only with knowledge, understanding and skills development, but with values and attitudes as well” (Torkington, 1996, p. 26).

Experiential learning produces individuals who think for themselves, are imaginative, creative and have learned the value of the interactive process. Experiential learning is a change from adult-centered talking with mechanistic type participation to exploration, questioning, and investigation by the children. It is “doing,” rather than just “seeing” and “hearing.” “Practice” must set the pace, not “theory.” “The result may be children who learn better because their developmental needs are met” (Torkington, 1996, p. 20).

*Categories and stages of play.*

Many ECD educators believe play should be the centerpiece of good early childhood development programming and curricula; however, there is a tendency to “justify” the use of play. The phrase often heard is, “Play is children’s work.” This statement gives the impression that work is “serious” but play is “trivial.” Isenberg and Jalongo (1997) believe it is a misconception that equates work with “real school” and sidelines the value of play. They cite ideas of Piaget (1962) and Smilansky (1968) to describe the stages of cognitive play:

- Functional play uses repetitive muscle movement (needed for gross motor development).
- Constructive play is the manipulation of objects (for fine-motor development).
- Dramatic play uses imagination and pretending (for affective development).
- Games with rules help children to recognize, accept and adapt to predetermined rules (Isenberg and Jalongo, 1997, p. 54).
Characteristics of socio-dramatic play, important in exploratory learning are:

- Imitative role play where children assume make-believe roles.
- Make-believe with objects where children substitute materials or movement for real objects.
- Verbal make-believe where children substitute verbal descriptions for action.

Persistence in role play is an indication is that children stay with socio-dramatic play longer than other types of play. Interaction is important to socio-dramatic play, and involves two or more children. Verbal communication takes place more than in other types of play (Isenberg & Jalongo, 1997, p. 55).

There would be something missing in a discussion on play if the work of Parten (1932), a pioneer in studying children at play, was not mentioned. She categorizes play into six types:

- Unoccupied behaviour, where a child is not “engaged,” aimlessly wanders about.
- Onlooker behaviour, where the child observes, even asks questions, but doesn’t engage with other children.
- Solitary play, where there is a beginning of play, although independently (about ages 2-3).
- Parallel play, where play is along side another child, near, but still independent.
- Associative play, that is playing with others in a loosely engaged fashion.
- Cooperative play involves complex social arrangements, uses negotiation, and is often organized around themes (Isenberg & Jalongo, 1997, p. 60).
Knowledge of the stages of play can help teachers to understand children and to provide appropriate environment and responses. Emphasis on the centrality of social and cultural development is foundational in the curriculum literature, according to Vygotsky’s theory (Isenberg & Jalongo, 1993). His belief is that pretend play is a leading factor in development, acting as a mental support and encouraging free thinking and problem solving. His theories suggest that play is a critical scaffold that enables children to advance to higher levels in all their development.

Teaching and Learning Aids for Rural ECD

There is an obvious lack of play materials in rural ECD centers in Malawi. Traditionally made counters, educational and play items formerly used effectively are considered “old fashioned.” Globalization and media presenting plastic and mechanical toys overshadow the value of the traditional learning media. Since the former store-bought toys are not available or are too costly, rural ECD has succumbed to learning by what the teacher draws or writes on a chalkboard. Very few play resources are evident in rural ECD centers. This project, drawing on literature reviewed and local resources, has provided interactive teaching and learning aids. These locally made resources have been put into a kit that can be replicated for rural exploratory play.

Lasky and Mukerji-Bergeson (1995) point out that the first step in the creative process is exploration. Exploration is important in early child development as the first building block to abstract thinking processes. Next comes focusing, then producing, then stopping or reworking. Using this pattern, we can deduct that providing opportunities for exploratory play will promote further cognitive development. “For most young children under four years of age, the creative process begins and ends with exploring” (Lasky &
Mukerji-Bergeson, 1995, p. 19). It is the age to emphasize this naturally curious and imaginative time of development.

Specialists in children’s creativity say that, “The best media and materials are those that are the least structured and can be used by children in many ways” (Lasky & Mukerji-Bergeson, 1995, p. 31). Raw materials are best; also ones which children can assemble on their own. When children learn through exploration and art media, there occurs physical-perceptual development, cognitive development, and social-emotional development (Lasky & Mukerji-Bergeson, 1995).

By providing and promoting exploratory-type learning, “children develop physically in areas of tactile and kinesthetic awareness; visual and spatial awareness; eye-hand coordination; shape, size and color discrimination; and fine motor control. They develop cognitively by association of information and ideas, sequence of events, problem-solving, beginnings of cause and effect understanding, and decision-making. Social-emotional aspects developed include sense of trust, sense of autonomy and independence, expression of emotions in positive ways, sharing and cooperating, sense of identity and individuality, and acquisition of new interests and discovery” (Lasky & Mukerji-Bergeson, 1995, p. 108).


The Kenya Preschool Teachers Guide Series (n.d.) gives sound advice when it challenges readers to return to the locally available resources for developing creativity.
The series published under Kenya Institute for Education (KIE) contains many booklets specifically designed for rural ECD. For rural ECD teachers in Africa, they offer practical subject matter and ideas for making resources in order to lead children into interests such as the environment, hygiene, art, and pre-math.

_ECD Programming and Play in Other Cultures_

Literature reviewed from various cultures around the world reveal interesting facets of child-rearing. From Kenya to the Philippines, families have mores and values that they place as important in their children’s development. A thread that appears through most majority world cultures is the importance placed on teaching manners and respect for others. Also, many of the cultures valued the part of the extended family and input of the community in child-rearing. These significant cultural and traditional values provide a valuable contribution to programming for effective ECD.

Two Kenyan villages, Embu and Machakos, represent Kenyan rural communities in transition, caught between traditional ways of life and the impacts of urbanization and globalization (Swadener, Kabiru & Njenga, 2000). The strong leadership of the local government officer generated good programming. The local Social Welfare Officer (SWO) was innovative in mobilizing efforts for the benefit of street children, children in hospitals, as well as village ECD groups.

In a discussion at Embu, Swadener et al. (2000) asked the “good things the community is doing” for their children. The most frequent answer was, “We’ve put up a preschool on a harambee (a village-driven and organized project) basis” (Swadener et al., p. 177). Other things the surveyed Kenya villages found “good” were planting trees around the preschool, making toys and assisting in a feeding program.
Bautista (2002) summarizes a two year community-driven, family initiative in the Philippines. In partnership with the Bernard van Leer foundation, Community of Learner Foundation (COLF) worked on this Effectiveness Initiative (EI) experience with an indigenous group in Pinatubo and their community. The report underscores the importance of children’s experiential learning in any cultural situation. The question often asked, is whether young children’s participation in ECD programs makes a significant difference in their lives and for how long? This Pilipino project has made a contribution to the “multi-cultural evidence pool” about children’s benefits in later life from early childhood experiences (Bautista, 2002).

The early childhood preschool segment in the Philippines with the concept of community participation was central to the success, and offered an entry point for community development. The Pinatubo study focused on community and family involvement, not reliance upon center-based programs that needed school financing (Bautista, 2002).

There was importance placed on the Aetas (the indigenous people) narrating events and folktales to the children. The tribe and the extended family grouping are central to traditional child-rearing in the Aetas of the Philippines. Respecting elders, being obedient, and good manners were seen as important traits to be encouraged, as well as appropriate behaviour and positive values.

Rural young children in the Philippines, however, were getting less support from the traditional “village raising the child” (Bautista, 2002). This was due to the impacts of what Bronfenbrenner (1989) calls the meso-system and exo-system, made up of family and community-related segments of society. The wider macro-system of political and...
cultural change appears also to be impacting the traditional family micro-system, which is the primary learning environment for children (Berk, 2000; Bautista, 2002). Early childhood interventions can reverse these trends and are cost-effective to governments (Myers, 1993).

One problem to be overcome in the Pinatubo project was that parents who, themselves, were uneducated did not initially see the relevance of early education for their children. When they first visited villages, COLF staff noticed that the children were almost treated like “free-range chickens,” with barely any interaction between children and adults. After the intervention, COLF parents became involved in creating playthings, using recyclable and indigenous materials (Bautista, 2002).

“One of the most prominent issues emerging from all the different data sets is how parents now view play as important for children and understand its role in the lives of their children” (Bautista, 2002, p. 19). The parents’ attitude towards children’s play changed as a result of their participation in the program. After the EI, COLF parents in Pinatubo identified the following: “Through play children learn physical and motor skills; they learn to interact well with other children; their cognitive skills are developed; they learn many skills; play develops a child’s personality, interaction skills, healthy minds and bodies. Playing makes children happy” (Bautista, 2002, p. 19).

Among the Yoruba, sending a child on errands within and outside the home is one way of building in responsibility (Oguyomi, Ogunnaike & Houser, 2002). Errands can provide the African child, especially the rural child, opportunities to learn to interact with others, to obey, to follow orders, and to learn about his/her environment. Parents in the Yoruba study tended to assess their children’s level of competence and responsibility by
the way they could perform errands successfully. More research is needed to link errands with potential cognitive development.

In Africa, intelligence is often equated with social skills and relationships. “Super and Harkness (1997) lend credence to the centrality of social skills, such as responsibility, obedience, helpfulness, and using initiative, in the African definition of intelligence” (Oguyomi, et al., 2002, p. 2). Child-rearing practices such as these, including respect for elders, are central to the African context (Nsamenang, 1992; Zeitlin, 1995).

An example is from the A-Chewa people of Zambia, who define intelligence, “nzelu,” as a combination of social responsibility and cognitive sharpness (Serpell, 1993, as quoted by Oguyomi et al., 2002, p. 2). The dimension of social responsibility is referred to as “tumikila.” This Chichewa word connotes reliability, cooperation, obedience, and helpfulness.

Child development practices differ in various parts of the world. However, basic human needs know no cultural boundaries, but have varying cultural expressions.

Spatial Environment for Optimal Learning

The ideal for optimal learning in an ECD learning environment is to provide spaces with a variety of materials and opportunities in order for children to have firsthand, meaningful experiences (Bredenkamp & Copple, 1997, p. 17).

Kritchevsky and Prescott (1977) agree, adding that a room’s or a yard’s effectiveness is measured by the activity and interest of the children and the teachers who are using it; and that it “can be found primarily in teachers’ and children’s behavior” (Kritchevsky & Prescott, 1977, p. 42).
Two books, specifically written for planning early childhood spaces are *Planning Environments for Young Children, Physical Space* (Kritchevsky & Walling, 1977) and *Places and Spaces for Preschool and Primary(Outdoors)* by Vergeront (1985).

Well-planned structures are designed with program goals in mind. The overall goal should be to provide a safe environment for learning and psychosocial stimulation to enhance early childhood development. Emphasis on experiential learning and exploratory play determines the type of play structures and play spaces to be incorporated. They support dramatic play, provide for practice of large motor skills and coordination, and give new perspectives to the children (Vergeront, 1985). All of these are important for the promotion of exploratory and experiential learning. Planning is the first step toward safety which is an important consideration in a rural context.

Vergeront (1985) identifies the following principles that good play structures should include:

- **Safety:** As children are naturally curious and constantly explore, the environment must be conducive and safe, built to child-size scale and incorporating appropriate safety measures.
- **Complexity:** Diversity will provide new challenges and problem-solving opportunities. Indoor or outdoor areas need to be planned with spaces for quiet as well as active play.
- **Challenge:** A structure gives challenge to children if it tests their ability, yet does not provoke risky play.
- **Creativity:** A good play space will encourage children to use their own ideas and imaginations.
• Durability: Structures and equipment should be provided that will last, not rust, and are well constructed.

• Maintenance: Easy maintenance is necessary for children’s safety and teachers’ responsibilities.

• Comfort: A comfortable structure will have good air circulation and lighting (pp. 2-4).

The outdoor “spaces” refer to activity areas within the play area, which will promote social interaction and development of gross motor skills. Play “spaces” may be found in interior settings and provide “interest areas” for encouragement of exploratory play.

In planning, limitations of space and resources should not limit the goals for exploratory play. Creative use of space and teachers’ abilities, warmth and involvement can compensate. However, the relationship of goals to space available needs to be defined. If program goals are clear to the teachers and builders, then it is easier to see how space available can be developed to achieve the goals. When teachers see that use of space can severely limit the amount of choice children have, “They begin to see a relationship between a clear understanding of the influence of physical space and clarity of goals” (Bredekamp & Copple, 2000, p. 7).

It is crucial that the goals for each program be stated in specific and concrete terms, therefore emphasizing a unique purpose rather than in vague global terms that emphasize a similarity to all other programs (Kritchevsky & Prescott, 1977). Goals for any program are unique in order to meet the children’s developmental and cultural needs.
Thus the context of the project and the parents’ expectations are important considerations.

“Children’s physical growth and maturation during the primary years interact with their experiences to produce changes in gross and fine-motor development” (Bredenkamp & Copple, 1985, p. 146). Physical and psychosocial developmental relate to exploratory play spaces in addition to construction plans for an environment conducive to experiential learning.

Play units “may or may not have visible and/or tangible boundaries” (Kritchevsky & Prescott, 1977, p. 11). In a rural setting, this is a challenge not found in urban ECD centers. Play units are sometimes classified in two major ways. One category is according to differing activities that invite the child’s participation. The other is according to the differences of relative complexity, meaning the extent that they “contain potential for active manipulation and alteration by children” (Kritchevsky & Prescott, 1977, p. 11).

Some are simple, that is, with only one use, such as swings and tricycles. Some are complex with sub-parts, providing opportunity to manipulate and improvise, such as a sand area with digging equipment or a pretend area with supplies. Bredekamp and Copple (1999) as well as Berk (1999) and Evans et.al. (2000), highlight manipulation as an important way that preschoolers learn. Some are super complex with additional play materials providing additional challenges. These include a sand pit with play materials, plus water; or a tunnel with crates and moveable climbing boards (Vergeront, 1985).

Complex and more complex play areas accommodate a number of children at a time, while a simple play equipment tends to encourage solitary play. The more complex
areas hold children’s interest longer, because they invite different types of play activities, in addition to providing psychosocial stimulation.

In planning play space for optimal exploratory learning, the success is measured by the children’s interest and the teachers’ ability to use the spaces effectively.

Chapter Summary

The literature provided a basis for exploratory learning concepts within a rural African context. Literature reviewed included the need for play, developmentally appropriate practices, ideas for construction of play materials and a rural ECD shelter. Insights and ideas gained, such as importance on moral values and practical aspects of life, were incorporated in the training and reflective times with the village teachers. Insights gained from the literature review included the ways the various majority world cultures value learning. These contextual values differ from the minority or “western” world view of cognitive development. African societies, like other developing societies reviewed, are more holistic in their perspectives. The connotation of learning includes the practical aspects of life. This important aspect needs to be considered in cross-cultural child development programs, especially relating to rural African society ECD interventions.
CHAPTER 3: PROJECT DESCRIPTION

The project was a rural, community-driven early childhood development program with emphasis on exploratory, experiential learning that encompassed culturally and developmentally appropriate practices. The goal was to work with a community on an exploratory learning project that could be easily replicated in rural Malawi. Project activities included interviews, a participatory learning activity (PLA), modeling, observation, coupled with reflective times, and teacher training sessions. Other aspects of the project included the compilation of a kit of experiential teaching and learning aids and supervision of the construction of a shelter.

Project Outline and Content

Form of project.

The project form took four phases, requiring activities unique to each phase:

- Assessment of village ECD needs
- Training of teachers and modeling exploratory learning practices
- Creation of a kit of teaching and learning aids, made from locally available resources, and
- Construction of a rural, cost-effective, community-driven shelter

Activities performed to accomplish the project entailed:

- Interview with Group Village Headman, Chief Makungula
- PLA with traditional leaders, parents, and children
- Visits by ECD students from Chancellor College, University of Malawi who modeled best practices with emphasis on traditional games, songs, and stories
Activities of the Project

Interview with Group Village Headman.

An interview with the village chief was the starting point for the project. This interview revealed his interest in the well-being of the village children. I conducted it at his home in Makungula village. Chief Makungula was told this was part of an assignment for a post-graduate course in early childhood development. He agreed to his statements being reported. Throughout the continuation of the project, he spoke openly to visiting representatives from UNICEF, Ministry of Gender and Community Services, university
officials, and the press about the project. Relevant excerpts of the initial interview can be found in Appendix I.

*PLA with traditional leaders, parents, and children.*

The suggestion of a village ECD program generated a meeting of parents, children and traditional leaders from other villages. The meeting resulted in an interactive PLA which provided the interest and future involvement of the community (see Appendix II). Chief Makungula called together local chiefs, Makungula village parents and children. I joined them with university ECD trained students who helped facilitate the meeting in Chichewa, the local language.

As an analogy, I drew a maize garden to encourage discussion of children’s needs in the community. The parents identified the need for a program that would provide growth and knowledge to keep their children in school longer. Next, desires and capacities were identified. Children’s voices were heard; their desire was to sing and dance. Grandmothers’ capacities were heard; they wanted to teach songs and tell traditional stories; fathers said they would dig clay for creative activities; young women said they would teach numbers and letters. Other desires expressed were to teach culturally appropriate manners, and Bible stories and songs.

*Visits by ECD students from Chancellor College.*

The progression of the project led to university students modeling culturally and developmentally appropriate ECD practices. They worked with the teachers showing them ECD “best practices” and encouraging them. This became part of the “practicals” in their coursework, as I was their lecturer in the course. They went to the village several
times a week for six weeks, playing traditional games; conducting creativity times, using local clay and materials; teaching counting and pre-reading skills in creative ways with environmental resources. Three grandmothers in the community became very committed to the children, telling both traditional and Bible stories, teaching traditional songs and showing the children *masanje*, which is learning household skills in the context of pretending. Observation of this aspect allowed me to take notes for use in future teacher training sessions. I began putting together a format for a village teacher workshop.

*Regularly scheduled reflective times with teachers.*

Concomitantly, observation of the teachers took place, with resulting reflective times in order to discuss and interact on arising issues. I observed them interacting with the children during the Mphanje preschool as well as with each other in the reflective times. I chose to make notes after reflective times as I found it gave a greater freedom of discussion. As the weeks passed, it became evident that the *Mizu* village teachers’ understanding of exploratory play concepts was increasing. For instance, when discussing the importance of a “pretend area,” a sudden recognition that what I was talking about was, in fact, a common practice in child rearing in Malawian households.

These reflective times became important and valuable, both for the teachers and for me. The teachers enjoyed sharing with and encouraging each other. Their leadership skills and initiative became apparent as they decided on their roles and responsibilities. These results were an encouragement to me and evidence of the sustainability of the project.

The format was not focus group discussions, but rather valuable informative, interactive times, reflecting the teachers’ views of their new ECD responsibilities. At
times, there was a specific focus on an activity that provided discussion, such as making resources for counting and sorting. However, many of the more valuable times were more spontaneous and spawned cultural ideas built on developmentally appropriate practices, such as the Masanje pretend area. Since many of the teachers are semi-literate, consent was given verbally.

Teacher training.

The teachers’ desire for training emerged from the reflective times, as requested by them. Funding was provided through SAFE, a local non-governmental organization (NGO) and by the Bernard van Leer foundation. I was joined by a colleague in the Early Childhood Development Virtual University (ECDVU) program; and together we facilitated the training. The result was a two week ECD course on basic theory and hands-on preparation of teaching and learning aids, taught in an interactive context at Chancellor College, Zomba. Appendix III provides the training course content sample. Upon completion of the initial training, the Principal of Chancellor College, participated in presenting the certificates at a village celebration.

After the initial two week general ECD training course, there was need to facilitate additional training specifically focusing on exploratory play for experiential learning. A day seminar was conducted within the village context.

Surveys from teachers’ questionnaires.

The natural progression of events led to surveying the teachers’ knowledge of developmentally appropriate practices, with emphasis on exploratory learning concepts.
This was in the form of questionnaires with teachers surveyed after trainings. See Appendices IV and V.

Appendix V provides a sample of the questionnaire on concepts of exploratory play was given to Makungula teachers who had received the general ECD training. After several months, with continued modeling and reflection, accompanied by additional teaching on exploratory learning, another questionnaire was given. The findings are presented in Chapter 4, with results discussed in Chapter 5. Teachers verbally agreed to participate in this project. They discussed the results of both questionnaires; and were told that their answers were recorded anonymously. I facilitated the surveys and interaction with the teachers, through a translator. Because some of the teachers are more verbally oriented, we verbally presented the questions; and some teachers helped others to tick their answers. The eight questions were simply stated. The participants were asked to agree or disagree.

The sample was small, only the eight current Makungula village teachers were asked to participate. This small sample was used to determine the effects of the training and modeling of the new concept of exploratory learning within a rural context.

Creation of a teaching and learning aids kit.

In this part of the project I researched, then created and compiled a selection of games, manipulatives, and visuals that could be replicated locally. Many of my ideas came from reviewing literature by African early childhood educators, as recorded in the literature review. This activity caused me to evaluate developmentally appropriate early childhood practices within the African context. It challenged me to use environmental
and locally available resources that could be easily accessed and duplicated in rural Malawi.

I used maize flour bags from the local markets for “posters” and weather charts, with bamboo poles for tripod easels. African type abacuses were made of bamboo sticks and sisal plant twine for children’s counting. Parents became involved in creating these counters for their children.

I used large bamboo sections for counting and sorting containers, collecting the many colored soda bottle caps, found in Malawi, for counters. I designed lotto type games for matching. Using banana bark and sisal twine, I made a “calendar” for teaching the days of the week. Teachers made flash cards from cardboard cartons; and dolls from scraps of fabric. They used the local clay for sculpting teaching aids. The teachers and I sanded off-cuts from the local lumber yard for blocks. All the items in the pretend interest area were locally made, such as clay pots, miniature mortars and pestles, and baskets for the dolls (see Appendix VIII). The teachers cut up old zitenje, the local wrap-around cloths, for children to tie their “babies” on their backs.

Planning and supervising an ECD shelter.

As part of the project to encourage more exploratory play, a shelter was designed in cooperation with the Group Village Headman. His desire for a contextually and traditionally constructed shelter fit with my desire for a rural type structure that would be sustained easily by the community. The resulting design was cement flooring, local brick half walls, and a well-thatched roof supported by locally grown poles. The short walls provided necessary light and air, without having the building expense of windows or the monthly expense of electricity. The heavy thatch was designed with an extended
overhang to provide shelter in the rainy season. The aesthetics of the chief provided the African traditional “feel,” a departure from the usual ECD center of metal roofing, which is noisy, and brick walls that prevent a light interior.

The L-shaped floor plan provided two wings with sufficient space for interest areas that would promote exploratory play and freedom of movement by the children. An office and storeroom connects the two wings; and the plan provides for the perimeters on two sides, enclosing the outdoor play yard. Rural enclosed and secure latrines were accessed by back gates from both wings in the building.

The interior of the structure, being “open air,” posed a challenge for setting up shelves and displays. Locally woven baskets are fitted into bamboo frameworks for counting and sorting games and manipulatives. The children procure the baskets from the store room and slot them into bamboo frameworks against the low walls; then put them away at clean up time. Bamboo is usually not desired, as it is not good for firewood and is easily replaceable if it should get taken. Visuals on maize bags are hung by wires and locally made sisal twine during the teaching time and rolled up for storage later. Spatial needs had to be uniquely conceived for promotion of exploratory play. Locally woven mats define interest areas and the group time activities.

An event which impacted the construction phase, as well as the spirit of the community in this project was the untimely death of the chief. He had led his people in the community efforts for ECD. The enthusiasm and interest he generated in his life and the void of that energy had a definite effect. From a vibrant beginning, all building came to a halt during his extended illness and during the village grieving process. The frequent deaths occurring in African communities impact all segments of the rural society,
especially the children. Many African children are now orphaned and reared by the extended family and community. There are psycho-social and socio-economic impacts on the community. This was evident in this community. It caused a six month project to become a year long effort. With the untimely death of the chief who provided the initiative for the project to begin and who gave leadership by involving the community and identifying resources, the construction of the shelter lagged behind projected completion. After a grieving period of one week by the whole village, the Mphanje began again with the same commitment of the teachers. However, for the construction to begin again after the death of the chief, I needed to assume more management skills. I identified builders; I purchased needed materials such as cement and hardware items and paid local workers for transporting bricks and sand by wheel barrow or lorry. With the Mizu director of the Mphange rural preschool, I supervised the use of materials and progress of the construction.

Weekly, for six months, I met with the builders and thatchers to pay them and to secure needed materials for construction. I kept the computerized records, and all expenditures and labour were signed for. Reports were sent regularly to donors from SAFE, a registered non-governmental organization (NGO) in Malawi who sourced the funding for the construction.

Limitations of and to the Project

An issue in the project emerged similar to a problem faced in the Pinatubo project. This was that parents who, themselves, were uneducated needed to be convinced of the value of early education for their children (Bautista, 2002). This original limitation was mostly overcome by the Chief calling together the elders and parents who
participated in the PLA and saw the model of the ECD college students with the children. This is still a general limitation to early childhood developmentally appropriate practices. The challenge is to show positive results to experiential learning over the didactic style so embedded in education in Malawi. The children themselves have shown their enjoyment in learning experientially.

The same COLF Pinatubo report (2002) states that, “One of the most prominent issues that emerged from all the different data sets is how parents now view play as important for children and understand its role in the lives of their children” (Bautista, 2002, p.19). This change of view came after many months of parent fora and focus group discussions. A limitation to the Makungula community’s view of play in learning was that the project did not build in regular parent/caregiver meetings. This will be recommended.

Another limitation was my lack of conversance in the local language, Chichewa. This was partially overcome by efforts to spend time with them; with the director, Gloria Mwere, the late Headman’s sister, translating. Through the months of reflective times, modeling ECD exploratory learning practices, and training workshops, I established a relationship. As relationships are built on a time component, I believe this time spent was important to the success in the lives of the teachers and my personal fulfillment in the project. Commitment overcame limitation.

An obvious limitation to the project was the completion of the planned construction phase. There were valid reasons for this occurrence. With the extended illness and subsequent death of Chief Makungula Tione Mwera, the local leadership faltered. The village needed time also to mourn, and for motivation to return.
Then a neighboring chief whom the community and I trusted proved dishonest. The work that he supervised needed to be redone. When a suitable replacement was found, he did not have enough grass to complete the thatch roofing. With the rainy season upon us, there was no more grass until new growth could be harvested five months in the future. Wire and cement have been purchased for the future completion; the area to cut the needed grass has been identified; and the expert thatcher will complete the job.

With the set backs, the construction phase became more costly, however, the funds to complete it are sourced. The cost will be over the proposed budget, and therefore this shelter may not be a viable option for replication of the same size. It is projected that a shelter half the size would be adequate. Also, local thatching or metal roofing should be used instead of the “professional” thatching which required special grass.

Summary

The first phase of the project embodied the experiential learning approach which included teacher training, modeling, reflections, and surveys all which focused on exploratory play. It provided the rationale for the project. The final two phases of the project were the compilation of a replicable kit of teaching and learning resources, and the planning and supervision of a cost-effective shelter for rural Malawi ECD programs. These aspects of the project helped the implementation of exploratory play in the project, supporting the rationale and goal. Limitations emerged as the project progressed.
CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

The Makungula rural ECD project uncovered substantive findings which may contribute to more effective ECD programming in rural Malawi. The results can be categorized in four phases:

- Assessment
- Learning and exploratory play
- Creation of learning aids
- Village ECD shelter

Foundational for the project was an interview with the Group Village Headman, Chief Makungula. This provided the protocol for further development of a community-based ECD project. The next step involved the chief calling a gathering of elders, leaders, parents and children from surrounding villages. At this meeting, I did a Participatory Learning Activity (PLA) with facilitation by Chancellor College students. This led to formation of the Mphanje informal ECD activity, with teachers being chosen by their peers.

Taking teams of college students from my ECD course to the village proved to model a more interactive and experiential type of learning than the village teachers were accustomed to seeing. The students and village women, some of the latter uneducated formally, cooperated, gleaning ideas and learning from each other.

An initial two-week training covered theory of child development and appropriate practices for ECD. An additional teacher training workshop was designed to reveal the teachers’ understanding of experiential learning in children. Training proved to be a key component for teacher commitment and community sustainability. Surveys were taken in
the form of questionnaires answered by the teachers. Teachers were also observed when interacting with the children.

Concomitantly, I was having weekly “reflective times” in the chief’s yard, under a mango tree. Sitting on locally woven mats, the village teachers were relaxed and interactive. Prayer, singing and snacks accompanied the discussions and reflections. These reflective times proved to be a key factor in the teachers’ and chief’s sustained interest in the ECD project.

A kit of teaching and learning aids was designed and samples created. These were trial tested in the *Mphanje* preschool at Makungula Village, an open air, informal ECD centre.

As a part of the project, a contextually appropriate shelter was designed and construction begun. The shelter was designed to provide a child friendly environment for exploratory play. The structure was planned by the community with the desire that it could be replicated rurally, extending more ECD services to village children.

Assessment

*Interview.*

The findings show a cascading effect that began by an initial contact with Makungula Village. As part of an ECDVU assignment, I interviewed Group Village Headman, Chief Makungula. This assignment was documented by excerpts from the interview, which may be found in Appendix I. The interview took place in the village, with the chief’s elderly father and mother present. The mother is also a chief of the single Makungula Village, which is one of 13 villages under the Group Village Headman.
The Group Village Head was fluent in English, an accomplished artist and musician. He had dropped out of secondary school, feeling unchallenged. His creative talents took him to nation-wide recognition, until he felt a “call” to go back to the village as a leader. He became very nationalistic, and vocally supported the traditional authority when it was marginalized politically.

In the interview, I asked him what his vision was for the villages under his authority. His responses provided an insight into his caring spirit for his people. When asked about the children; he wanted an inclusionary, contextual situation where traditional and spiritual, specifically Christian, values were promoted. One interesting quote from the interview was, “I was searching for meaning to life. When I found faith in Christ, I found meaning in many ways, especially in my ‘Africaness.’” He became a nationally acclaimed artist and authority on traditional musical instruments. He not only played the instruments, they were the most popular subject of his paintings, thus providing a valuable documentation of Malawian culture. See Appendix I for excerpts.

Another comment relating to the devotion to the chief, as well as indication of one teacher’s commitment was, “I am committed to this project because of Tione and his Christian faith and faith in this project.” This proved an emotional moment for me as I reflected on the depth of commitment that this project for rural children has already had in lives of the teachers.

The chief was not inhibited by protocol for “protocol sake.” Probably because of his creative bent, he was not constrained by the “system” and wanted to see an innovative approach to a village preschool situation. This set the tone and the freedom to work
towards a project that would benefit the children’s psycho-social and creative
development.

His creativity provided the plans for the ECD model shelter that would have a
“traditional African” design, in his words. The extended thatching provides that “feel”; and it provides shelter from the sun and a place for people to sit and “chat” which is such a part of village life. The thatched roof is cooler and absorbs more sound than a metal roof; and the low walls provide light and air.

According to traditional protocol for initiation of the project, Chief Makungula called a “sensitization meeting” of village elders, parents and children. Chiefs from other villages within the Headman’s authority joined Makungula villagers. Two Chancellor College ECD students participated with me and acted as my interpreters. The meeting was characterized by interaction and contribution by the villagers, with singing and praying. Over 100 men, women and children assembled.

*Participatory learning activity.*

A PLA was held in the village setting. Photo documentation is seen in Appendix II. This also was a segment of an ECDVU assignment on “programming.” The PLA took the exercise to a “point of action” which was to set up an intervention which would help keep the village children from dropping out of school. An informal preschool was proposed. When asked what they wanted for their children, a parent commented, “We want something happening to help our children stay in school.”

An “appreciative” type inquiry took place, where rather than a needs assessment, a capacity revealing assessment occurred. The exercise “rippled” to an inclusionary time when the capacities of the village became apparent. Several grandmothers offered to tell
traditional stories. A young mother, with more education, was heard to say, “I will help teach ‘letters and numbers.’” A neighboring village chief said, “We’ll organize digging clay from the river for the children”; this resource gave us media for the children’s creative endeavours. Children spoke up saying, “We want to sing and dance” in the preschool. A priority that emerged was the village’s desire to teach “manners” and cultural ways of conduct to the children. One comment was, “We want our children to learn our traditional ways of showing respect.” From this beginning by the village grew a project for the village, sustained with resources from the village.

*Learning and Exploratory Play*

*Chancellor College student component.*

Students from nearby Chancellor College, University of Malawi became an integral part of the project. From their initial participation in the PLA, they proceeded to visit the project weekly during their ECD course of study. They were able to take the theory and rationale for exploratory play learned in class work and apply it in the village. They brought a sense of adventure and excitement they promoted children’s involvement and as they taught traditional games from their childhood to the children. As part of their course work, each did a project. Some constructed musical instruments out of “throwaways”; others wrote books; others constructed teaching aids. This aspect of the project not only benefited the Makungula children and teachers, but may prove to have longer term benefits in the lives of the students as they become parents. It has already built leadership and advocacy as the students initiated a society for promotion of child development on the campus.
Teacher training.

Training was actually requested by the community. A two week course was outlined and village teachers assembled at Chancellor College for lessons covering both theory of child development and appropriate practices for ECD. It was interactive and facilitated with the help of an ECDVU colleague. All twelve teachers completed the course and departed with teaching and learning aids they constructed. An additional teacher training was designed focusing on exploratory play approaches. Surveys were conducted by means of questionnaires after both training times to reveal the teachers’ understanding of experiential learning in children. Appendices IV and V contain samples of the questionnaires.

Observation of teachers' interactions.

I observed, over time, that the teachers gained increased self-confidence in their teaching. In their new capacities, they gained respect from the community. Leadership became evident in a natural way as teachers found the activities with the children that they enjoyed and accomplished well.

For example, the grandmothers took the lead in story telling, dancing, and singing. This was a delight to the children and an example to the younger teachers, in addition to building self-worth and leadership in the agogo (grandmothers). Other teachers, who had more formal education took leadership in teaching letters and numbers and some elementary English. The one illiterate, but very committed, grandmother took charge of the interest area where children counted and sorted bottle caps. An energetic young teacher gleefully led the children in marching and exercises. One young mother developed visual teaching methods for stories from the Bible. Another teacher wanted to
teach the cultural practices of respect and manners. These spiritual and value based aspects came from the desire of the community and are very appropriate and contextual in Malawi.

As the Mizu teachers became involved in using locally available resources to make teaching and learning resources, they encouraged parents to make counting frames for their children. The teachers began to realize that they did not have to have imported toys, but their own contextual and traditional resources were applicable and interesting to the children, producing learning.

An interesting and innovative observation was the contribution the children themselves made. As the chief and Mizu had decided not to charge fees in order that all Orphans and Vulnerable Children (OVC) could attend the Mphanje, the Mizu encouraged the parents to send a stick of wood with the children. This was used by the women to cook the phala, a type of maize porridge. The children proudly bring their “school fees,” placing the sticks on the growing pile of firewood.

Children are feeling more “free,” and are much more expressive since the emphasis on exploratory play. When the Mphanje began, the children deposited their sticks, then went and sat on a mat, waiting for something to begin. With the emphasis on interest areas and the production of learning aids, the children now move to an interest in building with blocks and bamboo, or counting and sorting, reading or pretending.

Malawian children know how to sit quietly and for a considerable time. This would not be seen in most “western” style preschool situations. They do enjoy reciting, which may be part of the traditional oral communication. Both of these contextual aspects need to be exercised to a degree, since these children will be moving into a more didactic
teaching situation in primary school, with emphasis on rote learning still very prevalent. I have observed that the children respond to both the group times and yet enjoy the new aspect of exploratory play.

The reflective times offered a relaxed, informal atmosphere, with Mizu teachers nursing their babies and village children playing about, stimulated conversation and reflection on children and family issues. The three grandmothers and the young mothers who regularly met looked forward to the reflective times; a collegiality developed. While not a part of the project design, the Mizu formed a netball team. One teacher remarked to me that this project had brought younger and older women together and that they enjoyed being with each other.

*Reflective times.*

At some reflective times, we accomplished projects that would help the women in their teaching or benefit them personally. Some small items were produced for sale which provided a small amount of money for the Mphanje and for them personally. They enjoyed learning new skills. An observation to me of their commitment was that the first money they generated, they used to buy a large pot in order to cook the phala, the enriched, warm porridge for the children.

An example of a project to encourage exploratory type teaching was to sand wood off-cuts from the local lumber yard for use in the block interest area. Other projects included making yarn dolls for the Masanje pretend interest area and sock puppets for teaching aids. As this informal preschool meets under a huge mango tree until completion of the structure, the interest areas were “defined” by locally woven mats, scattered around the tree. These were decorated to denote specific activities. The women became more
communicative verbally as they worked on projects. The combination of working with their hands and dialoguing allowed freedom of expression in the reflective times. The weekly times became meaningful to the Mizu teachers as well as me.

Survey of teachers’ knowledge of exploratory play.

Surveys were accomplished by teachers answering questionnaires. Refer to Appendices III and IV for samples of the questions. Two questionnaires were given to Makungula Village teachers. The first (Appendix IV) was presented after the initial training where all respondents had been trained; the second (Appendix V) was given later when additional teachers had joined the Mizu, but who had no training, except what they observed from the previously trained teachers.

The early one, after initial training and before exploratory learning-specific training, showed that teachers’ knowledge of exploratory play did not match their teaching practices. When asked the question about the meaning of “child-centered play,” 100 percent “strongly agreed” or “agreed” that it meant allowing the child to choose his/her activity. However, when asked if they thought a child learns more if the teacher directs the activity, there appeared a contradictory response, as the majority indicated that children learn more in teacher directed activities. This seemed to reveal what they had learned theoretically, they did not practice; or the concept was not internalized. The question on “choice” by children was purposely kept simple to see if the concept was understood. It also served as a contrast to the question on “teacher directed” activities. The question showed that they understood, “choice” by a child; while as noted the majority believed in teacher directed pedagogy.
In the same survey, the question, “Children are more interested in art and creativity if they can choose the type of activity” correlates positively to the teachers’ knowledge of choice and child-centered play.

*Table 3: Makungula teachers’ perception of children’s learning styles.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Children learn more in teacher-directed activities</td>
<td>58.3%</td>
<td>17.7%</td>
<td>8.9%</td>
<td>16.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child-centered play is choice by the child</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choice increases a child’s interest in creativity</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>41.7%</td>
<td>8.3%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1 below reveals the difference between knowledge and practices. A majority believed in child-centered play, however, the indication is that they still practiced teacher-directed activities.
Figure 1: Bar graph showing teachers’ perspective of child-centered play.

C-CP = Child-centered Play

After Chancellor College students and I began more modeling of ECD appropriate practices; and after creation of exploratory learning resources, another survey was taken. This questionnaire was specifically designed to survey further understanding or misunderstanding of children’s experiential learning. These were very simply designed questions, short, and easily translated into Chichewa, the local language. Teachers’ response to similarity or dissimilarity of teaching methods for preschool children versus primary school pupils showed the teachers who had been trained understood the difference. Of the trained teachers, 33.3 percent indicated teaching methodology should not be the same, where as 66.7 percent of the untrained helpers indicated methodology
should be the same. This latter figure could reveal that the helpers having no ECD training used the prevailing primary school didactic style and their own school experience to answer the question. It has been observed since the questionnaire, that these helpers are learning by observing the modeling of the trained teachers.

Another question was on masanje. Masanje is the common household practice of teaching children cultural household customs by pretending. When information on this tradition surfaced in a reflective time, I was able to relate it to the importance of the Pretend Interest Area for children’s development. See photo in Appendix VI. When asked on the questionnaire about masanje, respondents all agreed it was a “way of learning” for children. However, 75 percent of the trained teachers indicated it should be played “at home” over “at preschool,” whereas 25 percent said “at preschool.” All the untrained teachers indicated it should be played “at home.” As the question could have been phrased better, this response could have resulted from misunderstanding the question. In practice, the teachers all enjoy using masanje and see the children’s positive response in the Mphanje. Note further discussion in Chapter 5.

Table 4: Perception of teaching practices in preschool and primary school

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Type of answer</th>
<th>Trained respondent</th>
<th>Untrained respondent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ways of teaching should be the same for preschool children as for</td>
<td>“No”</td>
<td>33.3%</td>
<td>66.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
primary children

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Masanje is a way of learning</th>
<th>“Yes”</th>
<th>71.4%</th>
<th>28.6%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Masanje should be played at home, not at preschool</td>
<td>“Yes”</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Creation of Teaching and Learning Aids

The third phase of the project was to compile samples of teaching and learning aids, created from locally available resources. These have been designed to promote exploratory, active learning by the children. They have been compiled into a kit that could be replicated by other rural ECD projects or which could be constructed by villagers.

Using local materials, I compiled aids that will promote developmentally appropriate practices within a rural context. The materials consist of maize flour bags from the market, banana bark, bamboo, charcoal, locally woven baskets, discarded cartons and plastic bags, soda bottle caps, twine from the sisal plants, and locally available inexpensive “flip-flop” sandals, called pata-patas.

The maize bags provide a surface for drawing posters that are hung from trees or on bamboo. The four examples in the kit consist of a game designed to identify shapes and colors as well as promoting counting; a weather chart and posters on the body written in the vernacular and English. Refer to Appendix VII. See Appendix VIII for a photo showing a shapes game to some of the village orphans.
Large pieces of dry banana bark, hung by sisal, provide a calendar for learning
days of the week. Flash cards of letters and numbers were made from cardboard cartons,
cut and printed with markers. Locally available clothes pins and sisal rope strung between
bushes provide a place to hang calendar and magazine pictures for eye-level viewing by
the children.

The soles of pata-patas, available in the market for 75 cents a pair, provided
durable washable material for cut-out numbers and letters for kinesthetic learning aids.
Oversize “dominoes” were made and laminated, providing “matching” opportunities. The
many colored soda bottle caps found in Malawi were collected from bars and restaurants,
so that children could have many to count and sort. The sorting containers are split
sections of mature bamboo that have the natural segmentation.

Bamboo was cut in small pieces and marked with alphabet letters for
identification and for spelling names and simple words. Small sticks of bamboo were cut
and strung on sisal, then attached to a bow of split bamboo, making an African abacus for
counting and pre-math concepts. See a photo in Appendix IX. Discarded empty toilet
paper rolls have been cut into smaller cylinders and upper and lower case letters printed
on them.

Chancellor College students made examples of musical instruments, although
they are not part of the kit. Creative use of cast off square and round cans provide guitars
and drums. Flattened bottle caps strung on sisal and wire provided shakers and
tambourines.

_Village ECD Shelter_
The construction phase of the project was to build a rural ECD shelter that would provide an experiential learning friendly environment in order to promote exploratory learning methods. The idea for the shelter was community initiated, encouraged by the Group Village Headman. Funds became available from Christians in southern California who gave through SAFE, a registered NGO in Malawi.

I accompanied four chiefs in a planning session in the village. One chief gave up her garden land for the location of the proposed shelter. Another person, a welder, offered to weld old car springs to hold the roofing poles. Chief Makungula’s artistic and contextual perspectives were evident, as he firmly indicated the shelter would have a thatch roof and a traditional African “feel.” See Appendix X for photo of shelter under construction.

The budget for a double shelter was US$1200 seemed adequate, as the chief expected much of the work to be done by the villagers. Men cut eucalyptus trees, which were properly treated against termites. I took the Chief to a village on the river where we contacted a Thatcher with expertise in the long-lasting South African type of thatched roof. Grass was cut from along the river and transported to the location, as was river sand. The bricks were locally moulded. School leavers were identified to help the builders. Unforeseen circumstances that occurred made changes in the original plan. These will be discussed in Chapter 5.

The L-shaped design encompassed a play yard and was designed to promote exploratory play in a rural context. An office/store room was built. Pit latrines were built for boys and girls behind the shelter. Upon completion of the building, the villages will
design six various outdoor contextual gross motor-promoting play areas within the play yard. For color-coded record of expenses, refer to Appendix XI.

Summary

Main findings related to the key concepts of the project were an inclusionary philosophy, a developmentally appropriate and culturally appropriate pedagogy, and an overall relational mode of leadership which provided a departure from a “top-down” prevalent type of hierarchy. The reflective time spent with teachers provided insights to both the teachers and to me. These included greater understanding of “why” we do and say and teach and act the way we do.

A successful inclusionary philosophy was achieved from the outset with the PLA and the commitment of the group village headman’s initiative in sensitizing parents. He also understood the concept of inclusionary capacity building for ECD in the community from the inception. However, the key factor that followed was the relational time spent with the village teachers, which resulted in building trust and commitment. This was accomplished by regular reflective times in the village, coupled with ongoing teacher training on experiential learning and modeling of developmentally appropriate practices contextually.

The four phases of the project have complemented each other in the overall theme of experiential learning and exploratory play opportunities. Assessment took the forms of an interview and a PLA allowing the community to decide what they wanted for their children. The exploratory learning phase included teacher training, modelling of best practices, observations, and reflective times. Creation of a kit of teaching and learning resources compiled of locally available materials comprised the third phase of the project.
The fourth phase was the design and construction of a village ECD shelter for the promotion of experiential learning. These were interrelated as the pedagogy used the kit and the shelter was designed to promote experiential learning.
CHAPTER 5

Outcomes of the Project

Definitive outcomes, projected outcomes, and implications of the outcomes became apparent as the project progressed. In the lives of teachers, village leaders, as well as children, new interest in early learning was perceived. Outcomes proliferated in the community when they saw the children’s interest, the construction of the shelter, the teaching and learning aids which they could make, and the commitment of the Mizu.

There are implications of the study which could have a very positive influence on future programming for rural ECD. These implications could include changed attitudes of teachers and parents concerning how young children learn. In addition, there could be change of focus and pedagogy for teacher training.

For children, mores and values held by the community have been upheld, therefore implications are that traditional values, songs, and stories will retain a place of importance, thus preservation of ethnicity.

Impact on the lives of the Mizu village teachers.

Reflective times and teacher training workshops were a priority for the project. They proved to be key factors toward the introduction of a more experiential, child-centered pedagogy. The success of the teacher training was due in part to the time spent in reflective times. However, the synergy that developed fueled the project. The teacher training aspect produced teachers with newly acquired skills and understanding of developmentally appropriate ECD practices. The reflective times provided a forum for the teachers to talk about play and to create learning materials for interest centers.
This led to a greater confidence in their teaching practices. They assumed new responsibilities, exhibited more initiative and creativity. They produced teaching and learning aids from local and environmental resources; and encouraged the parents to do likewise. This provided the needed parent involvement. Their commitment to the Mphanje grew exponentially.

Specific outcomes included a visibly new sense of self-confidence and increased self-esteem. They became less inhibited interacting with the children. They seemed to gain a more purpose-driven lifestyle. Many times, I thought I was taking them away from other responsibilities; however, it was obvious by the singing and lively interaction that they enjoyed the times together.

The teachers are not paid, hence the remaining eight from the original twelve trained, exhibited a proven record of commitment. I observed a collegiality that developed. Another observation was that rather than jealousy which can be prevalent, the Mizu became accepting of the leadership of their group appointed director and appreciative of the skills unique to their peers.

A direct outcome of this project was that the older and younger women working together, enjoyed learning from one another. The director remarked that this is not common in the villages of today. There was a sense of camaraderie and purpose that developed over the months of the project. Even when not working together with the children, they formed a netball team for recreation together.

Most of the communication in the Mphanje is in Chichewa, however the teachers less fluent in English have improved their English by working with the children. They have taken on a project to teach one of the illiterate agogo who is helping them.
Outcomes resulting from this project were similar to those insights from the First Nations’ Canadian project of Pence and Ball (1989). The “dimensions of positive change” listed by the Canadians similar for the African ECD teachers included:

- Increased self-confidence
- Better communication skills
- Feelings of being respected by others
- More clarity of cultural identity
- More connection with the community
- Effectiveness on advising others on child rearing practices (Pence & Ball, 1989, p. 27).

Conditions that enabled the First Nations community-based project to begin and be sustained involved processes parallel to the Makungula community-based project. Noticeable outcomes were very similar.

*Table 5: Processes and outcomes of the First Nations project.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Processes</th>
<th>Outcomes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Community involvement from inception</td>
<td>Realization of ECD concepts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Importance of leadership at all stages</td>
<td>Leadership developed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Co-construction of content and methods</td>
<td>New concepts and designs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Integrated teaching and learning</td>
<td>Restoration of traditional songs and elder</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>participation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Pence & Ball, 1989, p. 40).
Impact on the children.

While remembering the positive role of teachers in supporting developmental outcomes, it is important to remember the valid point of view from the children’s own perspectives. The natural and normal way a child develops is through play experiences. This project provided the environment for exploratory play in a rural group context. Children in Makungula Village, Zomba district have had an opportunity to learn through a stimulating experiential learning experience, not commonly found in preschool projects in Malawi. From the initial interview, one of the prerequisites of the Chief was that no child should be stigmatized or excluded for lack of finances or because he/she was orphaned. The *Mphanje* rural ECD learning center has given all children from two years to five years the benefit of a play and learning time that had not been available to them previously.

Children were a part of the generative process, establishing the philosophy for the *Mphanje* and involved from the first parents’ and community leaders’ meeting. When asked their opinions during the PRA, they said they wanted “to sing and dance.” That contribution has produced an outcome in the daily schedule of traditional songs and dances. This is in contrast to most preschool situations in Malawi where children are found seated, memorizing the alphabet and “Western” songs. From the inception of this project, all children felt welcome and were considered important by the teachers.

It has been interesting to observe the “child-to-child” caring that is so characteristic in Africa. The older ones help the younger. Likewise, the *Mphanje* has not pointedly separated the children according to age. The teachers believe that the young
ones, even the two year olds, will learn faster from the example of the older ones. The teachers’ beliefs have been supported through observation.

Impact on the community.

This project brought a new life to the Makungula community. The *Mphanje* meets in the chief’s yard until the shelter is completed. The Group Village Headman and the local chiefs played a vital part. One chief organized digging clay from the local river for the children’s creative activities. Another chief tells the traditional stories. More importantly, their involvement said to their villages that this ECD project has their endorsement and support.

Women in the community carried water for cementing the construction phase. They also cooked the *phala* in their outdoor “kitchen.” Men made counting frames of bamboo and sisal twine for the children’s use in learning pre-math concepts.

The project provided a non-threatening atmosphere for the parents to learn the importance of play. After the Effectiveness Initiative of the COLF project, Pilipino parents’ attitude towards children’s play changed as a result of their participation in the program (Bautista, 2002). Attitudes toward play also changed in the Malawian project.

The principal of the primary school remarked that the children, as well as their primary school siblings, were observed to be cleaner and neater in appearance. This may have been due to the fact that “hand washing” was emphasized; and that the children are “proud” to be going to a preschool. It showed the parents’ interest in providing for their children.
Outcomes from the surveys.

The first survey revealed what the teachers knew and didn’t know about exploratory play, then the follow-up survey revealed that the trained teachers were beginning to grasp the concept. The response of the yet-to-be trained teachers revealed the importance of training specific to exploratory play.

In the first survey, taken after the general training, the survey results indicated that when children are given “choice,” their interest increases. However, the teachers indicated that children would learn more from “teacher-directed” activities. It appears that in the beginning they did not understand “experiential learning,” even though all trained teachers indicated they knew that “child-centered” play meant the child choosing the activity. However, in the graph, on “teacher-direction of art activities” showed a difference, in that the vast majority “strongly agreed” to teacher-direction, with a minority disagreeing.

This is seemingly contradictory. What teachers had learned in theory in a workshop, did not produce the change in practice or methodology. But, change did take place over time. This indicates the successful use of visuals, child-centered methods, modeling, and hands-on training put theory into practice. These foci and the promotion of exploratory learning discussed in reflective times, proved to be the key ingredients for the success of this experiential learning project.

After the second training, trained teachers’ understanding of exploratory play grew. Knowing that primary school methodology does not focus on exploration learning, the question was asked whether ways of teaching should be the same for ECD and primary situations. It was encouraging that about one-third of the trained teachers
indicated that they should not be the same. However, the ones designated as “untrained” who had not had the general two week training, thought the methods should be the same.

Outcomes from the question on masanje revealed that all agreed it was good for the children. However, when asked if masanje should be played at home over playing at preschool, the majority of “trained” indicated positive responses. “Untrained” unanimously agreed “at home.” This is puzzling, since they took initiative to set up the masanje, using maize bags for walls, complete with miniature local baskets, pots and mortar and pestle for pounding the maize.

When the word first surfaced in a reflective time, it was an enlightening moment, accompanied by enthusiasm to use a household child-rearing practice in the Mphanje. There could have been a misunderstanding to the question, due to limitation in translation. Whether the question was understood on the survey, the outcome has been a regular use of masanje. The grandmother teachers especially enjoy singing and pounding with the children, teaching them the traditions of a Malawian home.

Outcomes from the construction phase.

According to Bredenkamp and Copple (1985), “Children’s physical growth and maturation during the primary years interact with their experiences to produce changes in gross and fine-motor development” (p. 146). The developmental aspect of exploratory learning connects with the construction of the building in this project as the physical structure provides the interest areas where exploration can occur. Interest areas planned for the new structure included:
• Pretend area ("playing house" in Chichewa, is "masanje"). This pretend area reinforced traditional domestic practices, encouraged social and interpersonal skills, and may promote decision-making and cause and effect thinking.

• The block and building area where children have locally made wooden cars and lorries. This area helped develop motor skills, hand to eye coordination, spatial and interpersonal skills.

• The reading and alphabet area needed close teacher supervision, as rural children are not accustomed to a print rich environment. Teachers were encouraged to translate stories into the vernacular. Creative ways of making visuals were explored and assembled. Upper and lower case letters were printed on cut toilet rolls for alphabet identification.

• The manipulative area used locally made rectangular basket trays that were then slotted into bamboo shelving built into the shelter. Creative ways to use environmental objects for counting, sorting, and matching have been explored in order to provide developmentally appropriate practices.

The progression to a shelter was interesting. The Mphanje had been meeting for over a year. After the teachers had been trained, they wanted a shelter for use in the rainy and cold seasons. The Group Village Headman concurred enthusiastically. Being an artist, he drew the design for a well-thatched shelter.

A problem arose which impacted the outcome of this aspect of the project. The Village Headman died, causing grief, a void in leadership, loss to the community, and consequently delays. This will be discussed further in “Limitations.”
During the construction that took place, the teachers were involved carrying water to the site and helping to feed the workers. This aspect, in addition to their continued work with the children, allowed them to see the construction as their project. This sustainability of this project was not only built on the physical structure, but more importantly on the commitment and leadership shown by the teachers and community. This is an important aspect to consider when embarking on rural projects, as many projects funded from “outside” terminate when resources dwindle. The construction phase proved to be a result of the successful ECD work with the children, rather than the beginning point. The ECD work was not built upon construction of a building, but on commitment of people and content of a program.

*Cultural outcomes.*

With television and other globalization impacts, many traditions and values are being lost. From the beginning, teachers expressed the importance of “teaching manners and respect.” The project provided the vehicle to encourage these important Malawian social mores. In Africa, intelligence is often equated with social skills and relationships, as related in Chapter 2. Child-rearing, which includes respect for elders, is central to the African context (Nsamenang, 1992; Zeitlin, 1995).

The emphasis on exploratory play which led to setting up the masanje (pretend) interest area promoted Malawian traditional social and relationship skills. As in the Yoruba study by Oguymoi, Ogunnaike, and Houser (2002), sending children on errands was considered important. The newly set up interest areas provided by this project, offered the Makungula children opportunities to learn to obey and interact with others.

*Advocacy outcomes.*
The project has proven an advocacy for rural ECD on local and national levels. Other local chiefs from nearby villages have either came or sent representatives to observe the children. They wanted teacher training by the *Mizu* so that they might begin a similar project for their children. One chief contrasted the activities of the Makingula children with his local children, when he remarked that the children in his village just have “nothing to do” and aren’t “learning.”

Nationally, the project evoked some advocacy for rural ECD. The *Mphanje* has been written up, with pictures, in the national newspaper. Malawi TV filmed twice on location. They did a segment on the *Mizu* distributing food items to orphans, some of whom had been in the *Mphanje*. The channel has expressed a desire to do a more comprehensive piece, dedicating it to the late Group Village Headman, Chief Makungula Tione Mwera.

*Implications of the Outcomes*

*Implications for the teachers.*

Experiential learning emphasized in teacher training produced workers who are thinking for themselves, are imaginative, creative and have learned the value of the interactive process. Experiential learning was a change from teacher-centered talking with mechanistic type participation.

Projected outcomes from the surveys and trainings are that teachers will come to understand and practice child-centered learning more and more. This may be a reality since changes from emphasis on teacher-directed methods have already been observed.

Implications of the outcomes for the teachers in their personal lives will build on outcomes they have already realized as a result of this project. These could include:
• Capacity built for IGA, with possibility of regular income in the future
• New skills learned which could encourage acquisition of more skills
• Becoming Trainers of Trainers and Teachers (TOTs) for rural ECD
• Further household assessment of children’s needs conducted for IECD
• Further sense of purpose developed
• Increased sense of self worth

Implications for the children.

In Malawi, social skills are important attributes for children to learn. The focus of these, foundational for the Makungula project, will preserve Malawian traditional teaching. Emphasis on manners, caring, and gentleness may insure a continued peaceful Malawi. The work of Oguyomi et al. (2002) in Zambia with the A-Chewa authenticates the Chewa tribe of Malawi’s interest in social responsibility for child-rearing. These dimensions are known as tumikila in Chichewa, the language common to both Chewa groups. It is projected that an outcome of the emphasis on social skills will help parents to retain important traditional aspects of child-rearing.

Experiential learning is participatory learning and involves exploration. This emphasis of the project may result in more effective psychosocial development of children. As reviewed in the ECCD Psychosocial Briefs, exploratory activities in early childhood promote psychosocial stimulation which evokes healthy development (Consultative Group on ECCD, 1999). A projected outcome is that the Mphanje children would be more likely to move from concrete thinking to more abstract thinking (Berk, 1999)
The emphasis on exploration and the inclusion of creativity in the project may have significant outcomes. According to authors reviewed, exploration is the first step in creativity. Creativity empowers for pro-activity. When children learn through exploration and art media, there occurs physical-perceptual development, cognitive development, and social-emotional development (Lasky & Mukerji-Bergeson, 1995). Creativity in Malawi may gain its important place, if exploration and creativity is valued in early childhood. Possibly, one of the Makungula children playing with river clay could become a Malawian Bernini!

An early childhood project such as this one which places pre-eminence upon experiential learning may have outcomes of Makungula children staying in school longer, with less repeating of grades. In Malawi, of the 82 percent of children who begin primary school, according to PMS (2002), only 34 percent proceed past fourth grade. Early childhood education that is developmentally appropriate may reverse these statistics. According to Torkington (1996), “The result may be children who learn better because their developmental needs are met” (Torkington, 1996, p. 20).

*Implications for the community.*

The importance placed upon story-telling in the vernacular may be an encouragement to these children to value and retell the traditional stories, thus keeping alive their cultural heritage. Another implication of the outcome could be more importance placed upon the values and beliefs of the parents and community as the elders see the positive response of the children to cultural and spiritual teaching.

Implications or projected outcomes which would naturally follow the *Mphanje* project could be a community-driven and sustained Orphan and Vulnerable Children
(OVC) project and a move toward a more Integrated Early Childhood Development (IECD) program. An IECD program addressing health, nutrition and parenting could help rural families who are caught between traditional ways of life and impacts of globalization.

The community involvement in Makungula gave parents and caregivers a greater challenge as to their role in child-rearing. This may prove even more significant to the family structure, since parenting roles are being impacted by needed dual incomes, AIDS, and impacts of globalization. Gonzalez-Mena (1997) points out the necessity for adults to understand the importance of play and to plan for it. As a result of the exploratory play aspect of this project, parents may provide a more conducive household play environment and realize the importance of reading to their children. For additional information, please refer to negative results of parents with their children from a Malawian study, *Children on the brink*, reviewed in the literature (Hunter & Williamson, 1996).

For the future of the village, there could be more social capital built as parents realize the importance of early education for their children’s future. Social capital in this context is providing an environment for children which will help them to contribute more to society from the microsystem to the macrosystem. These *Mphanje* children may become more competent and committed community leaders, thus sustaining rural culture.

Since this project was not funded by an international agency or government, the community realized the power they have to produce and sustain more projects in the future. A visible outcome is the constructed shelter. Less measurable is the change in the children. Both may produce greater outcomes in more services for the children and community.
Implications resulting from the kit of play materials.

The *Kenya Preschool Teachers’ Guide Series* (n.d.) consists of many small books pertinent to the subject of exploratory play, and contextual for Malawi. The series proved especially relevant to this project, as it is built upon the premise of using locally available materials. These ideas, written from Africa and for rural Africa, offer a wealth of innovative ideas and well-described directions for ECD projects. A projected outcome from the kit of materials assembled could be a series of booklets similar to the Kenyan series, made available to social welfare officers and rural teachers.

An anticipated result is that rural teachers and communities will realize they have environmental and local resources available for making teaching and learning aids. By seeing these used and the active response by the children, it is projected they will have a new appreciation for contextual resources which are readily available and appropriate technology for rural ECD.

The kit was designed with the intention of replication for use by other districts in training their ECD workers. The kit would be cost effective to replicate. It would also serve as a tool to teach workers and ECD teachers the value of exploratory play and experiential learning. What has occurred in the Makungula project could be duplicated, within all the 28 districts of Malawi, by an experiential learning workshop for social welfare officers (SWOs) and ECD directors.

Implications resulting from the construction phase.

As the project shelter took on greater dimensions than the size originally planned, an outcome was that the *Mizu* and builders began calling it, “The ECD College”! The *Mizu* seriously do believe it will be a training center for Zomba ECD, and that they are
prepared to act as trainers. This would have significant implications and outcomes throughout rural Malawi for perpetuating what has proven successful for rural ECD in Makungula.

A projected outcome, significant to perpetuation of rural ECD, is the group of Makungula village teachers who have gained skills, confidence, and leadership ability to train other rural, informal ECD projects. This would be a contrast to urban or outside groups training workshops.

Another project implication outcome of the construction phase by the community is that the shelter will be used for village meetings. It will serve as a location for women to gather for IGA. Built into the plans was a secure office area where teachers want to have a computer and sewing machine to help them in their activities. A vision of the late chief was to have a village skills center. This construction could be the beginning of such a project.

*Implications for ECD in Malawi.*

According to Myers and his associates in the monumental High Scope longitudinal study, investment in early childhood education can be seven times more cost effective to a country than repetition and dropout costs (Myers, 1993). In *Toward a Fair Start for Children*, Myers (1993) contrasts “State of the Art” ECD interventions with “State of Practice” ones. The latter are prevalent in Malawi at present. This project endeavoured to embrace the concepts of Myers’ “State of Art” concepts. Care was taken not to “import” solutions, but to link good developmental practices to culturally relevant child rearing practices. A projected outcome of this project could be a move toward more
“State of the Art” programming. Several differences described which relate to this project are provided in the following table:

*Table 6: Contrast of “State of Art” and “State of Practice” ECD interventions according to Robert Myers.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>“State of Art”</th>
<th>“State of Practice”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Development is interactive</td>
<td>Development is one-way stimulation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indigenous child rearing practices used</td>
<td>Solutions are imported disregarding local ones</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Development is affected by both nature and nurture</td>
<td>A maturational approach dominates with measurement of development</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Myers, 1993, p.30).

In *Does the Village Still Raise the Child?* (Swadener et al., 2000), ECD in Kenya is studied. There appears a likeness in the national culture to that of Malawi’s culture in family structure, type of land holdings and livelihood from agriculture. In regard to Early Childhood Development (ECD) issues, they are alike in that they exhibit community mobilization and retain active participation in ECD. However, they are dissimilar in that the Kenyan villages studied have a more “integrated” approach to ECD. They have integrated health and nutrition issues in their ECD advocacy and implementation. This was a limitation in the Makungula project.

Embū village in Kenya enjoys a focus by the district social worker and government, unlike Makungula. In Malawi, only nine districts are targeted by government for Integrated Early Childhood Development (IECD). This targeting benefits the children and families as there are funds for surveys and interventions available
through government. Zomba district ECD programs rely on scarce funding by NGOs and other well-wishers.

The lack of leadership from local government personnel and major funding from international agencies has limited the integration of services to the children and rural households. The discouragement of the rural communities when they have sought help from health, agriculture and social services and did not receive it, has been a limitation in itself. Makungula has sent representatives to the district seeking expertise on agriculture and an increase of health and social services, but to no avail.

This project possibly limited integration by focusing on the social, educational and psychosocial aspects. There was some attempt of integration with tree planting by an agricultural NGO which was to be followed up by the late Chief. His plan to use the tree planting as a learning experience for the children was hindered due to his death. Another attempt at integration ceased when the doctor who had begun a de-worming project was transferred out of the area. A first-aid kit was compiled; however, use has been limited due to lack of primary health care instruction.

Even with the limitations due to death and other unforeseen circumstances, the successes overshadowed the problems. The outcomes prove that the project aspects of teacher training, the contextual nature of the project, and the importance given to experiential learning were successful. The project has proven sustainable and able to promote additional involvement in early childhood projects.

In the COLF Pinatubo study, Bautista’s findings reveal the challenges to rural areas in their child-rearing activities. This Pilipino project has made a contribution to the “multi-cultural evidence pool” about children’s benefits in later life from early childhood
experiences (Bautista, 2002). A foundational projected outcome to children, parents, teachers and community is knowledge of the benefit of early childhood experiences to later life. This is becoming an increasing reality in Makungula Village where the community is realizing, “The village can still raise a child.”
CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSIONS

Of special interest to this paper and ECD in the Malawian rural context is the fact that this project has produced evidence for community capability and sustainability. The outcomes may be attributed to an inclusionary philosophy, training of village teachers, modeling of developmentally appropriate practices (DAP) and relational and reflective times with community leaders, parents, and teachers. These key concepts not only led to a successful project for children, but built initiative, self-confidence, and leadership in the teachers. The community gained a new sense of purpose for their children.

The environment for this project was dynamic, diverse, and somewhat uncontrollable, as opposed to the initiator going in as a controller and with a “program.” From the inception, Chief Makungula himself shared a “vision” for the children of the village. My meeting with him producing his significant input was important rather than an “outsider” proposing a “program” per se. Thus, a sort of paradigm shift from the usually found ECD projects. *Whose Reality Counts?* (1997) confirms that the points of departure, as well as reference between the controlled deductive and the uncontrolled inductive paradigms are mode, goals, methods, flows and outputs among other variables (Chambers, 1997).

Mode of launching the project was inductive. Methods were a departure from the didactic mode of teaching, both in training the teachers and in their resulting pedagogy. Outputs in the lives of the children and the teachers are yet to be fully realized, however, the interest and enthusiasm predicts positive flows.

Goals and objects have been achieved as seen in the following outcomes and potentially in the projected outcomes.
Results of the objectives desired are:

- A working model of experiential learning in a rural context.
- Examples produced for exploratory play, which were constructed of locally available and cost-effective materials and were village tested.
- A shelter appropriate in the African rural context under construction.
- This paper, with accompanying appendices, documenting the project.

Foundational factors in the outcomes have been observed. In addition to the community-driven and chief-initiated aspects, key factors were the frequent reflective times and modeling of best practices which followed trainings. The reflective times spent with the Mizu village teachers provided informal fora allowing theory and culture to be translated into practical ideas. These times built confidence within the teachers, provided collegiality, in addition to offering opportunities to hone their new ECD skills. Modeling of contextual DAP by university ECD students helped creativity and initiative to surface.

The samples of teaching and learning aids included “posters,” weather and other “charts” made of maize flour sacks which were hung between bushes or trees in the outdoor setting. Numbers were cut from the soles of plastic “flip-flops,” the pata-patas, worn by Malawians and found in the market. These proved effective for kinesthetic learning tools. Local bamboo was cut and made into counting receptacles, African abacus, and alphabet tiles. Bottle caps in various colors were collected and used in many ways. Teachers made dolls and set up a traditional masanje pretend area, with local baskets, pots, complete with miniature mortar and pestle and real maize to pound! Men dug river clay for the children’s creativity times.
The presence of the *agogo* (grandmothers) and the chief was important for various reasons. They told traditional stories, led dances, and taught songs. The important "messages" of their presence consisted of respect for the elders gained by the children, the passing down of culture to the younger women, and the resulting dignity and purpose in their personal lives.

Construction of the shelter was begun, and interrupted by the untimely death of the Group Village Headman who had been so instrumental from the beginnings of the project. Although not yet completed, it is under construction and will be operative shortly. In addition to the daily ECD center, a projected activity is used as a training center for IECD to the parents and surrounding communities. Also, teachers are feeling confident that they can conduct classes to train rural preschool teachers. They have made contacts for that activity in order to build capacity of ECD in villages and in the local prison, the latter where there are children born to inmates. They are fondly calling the shelter, "The ECD College"!

Projected outcomes include a community-driven orphan and vulnerable children (OVC) work, targeting *agogo* and child headed households. This has already begun, as *mizu* teachers have assessed seven villages, and food has been distributed to OVC in six of them. The teachers, accompanied by the chief, have taken the initiative. Another potential outcome is integration of health services, nutrition and parenting messages, and agricultural interventions. This has already begun with a local doctor providing de-worming and other medications; and an agricultural NGO providing mango seedlings to plant. The Christian community has provided spiritually and physically. As in the
Pilipino COLF project, an effective early childhood initiative offers a natural entry point for integrated services (Bautista, 2002).

Longer term results from the project objectives could potentially include children’s retention in school and less repetition, thus granting a better educated rural population. This could build social capital for the nation and provide better socio-economic status for the present subsistent farmers that make up a majority of the rural population. Poverty alleviation can begin with ECD where children receive care and psycho-social stimulation promoting creativity and initiative.

The community involvement in Makungula project presents a challenge to parents and caregivers as to their role in child-rearing in the present less “traditional” community which is being impacted by globalization. Important cultural mores include respect for elders and parents. This was an important segment in the *Mphanje* daily schedule. In Malawi, character attributes are considered essential for children to develop. The focus of exploratory learning proposed as foundational for the Makungula project promoted social interaction and lessons in respect to develop. Parents worldwide want good things for their children. The challenge to us as ECD educators is to help that happen. This project may play a small part for rural Malawi children and parents.
A natural progression from the Makungula Village ECD project is toward a more integrated approach to early childhood developmental (IECD) issues. The focus could be at the rural household level, using the Mizu teachers to continue assessing the needs, noting needs of the 0-3 year olds. In addition to an integrated plan of action, as teachers, they would have background knowledge for their work with the 3-6 year olds in the Mphanje preschool.

An IECD approach would include nutrition and food preparation, possibly introducing solar cooking methods; primary health care; water and sanitation issues. As this paper has alluded to in previous chapters, the psychosocial needs of children have been marginalized. A strong recommendation is to address these needs, in a clear and understandable way, contextually, using the vernacular, building on traditional and spiritual values held by the community. This could be accomplished in parent and community fora.

Outcomes of IECD programming would benefit the child in improved cognitive, social and emotional development in addition to improved health and physical conditions. This emphasis is strongly recommended to help children’s maturation and matriculation, reversing the present mortality, morbidity, school dropout, repetitive rates, and ensuring continued education. The children are benefited by educating the community on health and HIV/AIDS prevention, providing a possible reversal from a population of dying parents and toward positive change in the OVC crisis. Associated emerging societal issues such as Mother-To-Child Transmission (MTCT) and Voluntary Counselling and Testing (VCT) are recommended as an outgrowth of this project.
According to Evans et al. (2000), IECD interventions that are recommended here and will benefit the community and society will include changed attitudes and relationships among parents and caregivers, greater participation and respect for women, greater efficiency and coverage in health, nutrition and sanitation. With recommendation and implementation of IECD, the rural society would have a healthier and more literate population, improved labour force, reduced fertility, lower delinquency and social inequities (Evans et al., 2000).

A strong emphasis on building capacity within the parents is recommended. One of the key issues the Malawian team pinpointed at the inception of the ECDVU program was, “Strengthening the Malawian Family” (Malawi Country Report, 2001). To quote James Grant from his address to the executive board of Unesco, “There is a new and growing capacity to empower persons everywhere with the knowledge to protect and provide for their families and, in particular, to care for and nurture their children” (1988). With the impacts of AIDS, globalization and media being felt in rural Malawi and posing negative impacts on the family, it is recommended that the Mphanje be an entry point for parent/caregiver discussions in the village. A strong family can be a deterrent to early sexual activity by children, offering protection from HIV infection. In rural Zomba, the present HIV/AIDS infection rate is one of the highest in Malawi with between 20 and 30 percent estimated sero-positive.

Since children are especially vulnerable emotionally, it is recommended that the community learn how to handle children’s grief. A series of village meetings, offering knowledge and skills for helping children through the grieving process would have positive results in the lives of children. At the same time, ailing parents plus caregivers
could be encouraged to make “memory books” with their children, ensuring that those parents who are sick would leave a positive legacy for their offspring. All parents and children would benefit in that the project would not only build memories for the future, but relationships in the present.

A recommendation in parent emphasis would include the topic of “play,” so that parents do not see it as “just play,” but as an avenue to children’s learning. Parents and children will be encouraged to make toys and games together from locally available materials. They will then be able to show others how to make them and encourage each other to play games together, thus strengthening family relationships. This emphasis on the importance of play would help the parents and Mizu teachers to cooperate for the improvement of the children’s development. Such a focus is a natural follow-up to this major project which focussed on exploratory play.

The Right to Play in CRC gives the community the responsibility as “duty bearers” to provide opportunities of growth and development through play. This accent on the importance of play would have an inter-generational effect, preserving traditional games and stories.

A recommendation emanating from this project is an ECD manual for rural teachers, written in Chichewa, with many ideas and instructions for making teaching and learning aids for exploratory play. In addition, the Caregivers’ Guide drafted by members of the ECDVU team on “Key Developmental Practices” (KDPs) needs to be translated, printed and circulated. It is recommended that, nationally, IECD be looked at contextually, with appropriate considerations for a rural, less educated population. Kenya’s positive effects on ECD in that country considered the differences in language
and socio-economic status (SES) in successful approaches to ECD policy (Swadner et al.).

A kit of teaching and learning aids was designed for and tested in a rural setting. The success and cost-effectiveness of this tool proves that it is a valid recommendation for all rural Malawian preschools. It is recommended that workshops be set up in each of the districts of Malawi where construction of kits be done, providing District Social Welfare Officers (DSWO) and their networking colleagues with teaching and learning resources for promotion of experiential learning, which may provide increased cognitive development in children. In addition, pedagogy and theory of experiential, child-centered learning can be disseminated.

The recommendation needs to include the trained Mizu teachers of Makungula who have made and used the kit resources, thus a “teacher-to-teacher” multiplication effect. These trained and experienced village teachers are ready for a Trainer of Trainers (TOTs) workshop. Following the workshop, they can be deployed to train other rural teachers in organizing and implementing informal ECD projects and IECD rural workshops.

The importance of “scaffolding” cannot be overlooked in recommendations. Segall et al. (1999, p.191) describe scaffolding as the “procedure of a gradual or systematic increase in responsibilities or tasks in accordance with the learner’s skills.” In this project, one of the keys to success was “scaffolding” that took place in the lives of the Mizu. This recommendation is foundational to other recommendations. The importance of communicating and practicing “scaffolding” to the parents, caregivers,
leaders and other duty bearers within the community is vital for the children of rural Malawi and to the future rural ECD.

My personal follow-up would be writing a proposal for funding for a TOTs workshop for the teachers trained in this project, thus preparing them for their role as trainers. The workshop would include emphasis on experiential learning for early brain development and an integrated approach to the needs of rural children. I would network with Unesco and/or Unicef, local NGOs, MOGCS social welfare, MOH and faith community networks in Zomba. The newly constructed shelter would be used for the TOTs and ECD training, and for disseminating IECD information to the community, targeting the household level.

I would be available to visit district offices and groups which work with young children to encourage them to make kits out of locally available resources for greater emphasis on exploratory play. A workshop for targeted ECD workers could produce sample kits for each participant, plus knowledge of how to make the resources enabling them to teach other workers, parents, and caregivers. This would provide advocacy and resources for dissemination of the experiential learning component that has been central to this project.
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APPENDIX I: EXCERPTS OF INTERVIEW WITH VILLAGE CHIEF

Excerpts from the two hour interview with Group Village Headman, Chief Makungula

The “interviewing” was mixed with lots of dialogue. I hesitated in taking notes, but he assured me it was fine. He knew that I was coming with thoughts about working with the mothers and very young children in his village. Seated on the porch of the chief’s house with children playing around, it was a pleasant, comfortable time for all.

Objectives of the visit:

• Get his personal background
• Important moments/events in his life that have influenced his present role
• His vision for his villages
• Status of children; schools; orphans in the village
• Possibility of a partnership for the well-being of children
• Formation of a group of village of elders, parents for the well-being of the children

Group Village Headman, Chief Makungula gave background to the village, “The village takes in the one runway of the Air Wing, the Malawi Air Force base and borders large tobacco estates. Most farmers are subsistence farmers, but the cash crops grown are maize for sale and tobacco for export. All the villagers try to have a successful garden, so they can dry the maize and live off it throughout the year”

“The faith community of the village consists of Muslim and Christian. The Yao tribe settled mainly along the Lake Malawi shore and on up to Zomba.” He then immediately started talking about how “knowing God” gave him “confidence,” saying he
“discovered himself.” He continued to say that he now “cherished his own culture more.”

He said he became “aware of his ‘Africaness,’ as an ‘African Christian’.”

He then referred to his musical and artistic talents, well known throughout Malawi. “I made a study of traditional homemade instruments and no one in this generation knows ethnic music as I do.” He seems to have had a new energy for the creativity that he was designed for. He spoke of his art talents that led him to pursue painting, with acclaim, “I exhibited at the French Cultural Center in Blantyre and in the capital, Lilongwe.” He also had a showing in New York City, sponsored by the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

On Makungula’s vision for his village:

He wants to see it develop; to generate its own income. He spoke of wanting a “Skills Development Center” to help young people have marketable skills. He spoke of “teaching batiking, using African symbols which used to be prevalent in scarification; and are dying out now.” He spoke of the importance of income generating activities (IGA) to keep youth busy and build community spirit and “give back self-esteem to the people.”

He became animated when he continued, “What is ruining Malawi is the “paper credentials.” He voiced a concern that the hardworking spirit of Malawians is being lost. “I will not accept all that ‘others’ brought into Malawi.”

The way forward for children of the village:

I asked about elders and other respected members of the village who would be interested in the well-being of young children. Makungula wanted them (the community) to help design something of benefit to the mothers, fathers, caregivers, and the children.
He wanted a forum to discuss “what they want for their children, what values are being lost that they desire to protect,” etc.

When I inquired about orphans, he quickly said that they were “being cared for by the families.” He does not believe in “orphanages,” but would “like to see some help for the caregivers.” He felt strongly about not separating the orphans from the other children, as they would feel stigmatized.

The interview concluded with setting a date for a meeting of parents, children and elders, where he would introduce me and some of the Chancellor College students. We would be sensitive in facilitating an “appreciative inquiry,” on a capacity-building philosophy rather than a needs-based one. We would use visuals, a PRA, group singing and discussion from all, including the children.
APPENDIX II: PARENTS’ MEETING

Chief Makungula set a date and time for parents, children and neighbouring chiefs to assemble. He spoke to them as their Group Village Headman, then after singing and prayer by the Chancellor College students, he introduced me as a friend and ECD educator. I asked, through a translator, what the parents and caregivers wanted for their children. The response was they wanted them to be well fed, clothed and to stay in school. We proceeded with a Participatory Learning Activity (PLA) using the analogy of a maize garden. From this relevant object lesson came the needs of the children, then the capacities to meet the stated needs. Elders said they would tell traditional stories, younger women would teach numbers and letters. Other would contribute teaching of manners and respect. Children participated saying they wanted to sing and dance.
APPENDIX III: WORKSHOP SCHEDULE FOR FIRST TEACHER TRAINING

MAKUNGULA AND SURROUNDING VILLAGE TEACHERS’ TRAINING FOR COMMUNITY CHILD CARE (CCC)

Venue: Chancellor College, Home Economics Department

Charlotte Day: Organizer; Facilitated by Charlotte Day, Mary Phiri,

Week One:

- Overview of status of children in Malawi; Group interaction
- Introduction to child development
  - Four domains: Physical, Cognitive, Social, Emotional
- Child Development in a cultural context; Group interaction
- Video: The Early Years
- The “Importance of Play”; Group interaction
- Exploratory learning: the use of activity centers in preschool
  - Visit to Chirunga Early Childhood Center
- Lesson planning with themes —“webbing”; Group work
- Making of teaching aids from “throwaways” and environmental

Week Two:

- Continuation of week one subjects and accompanying discussion
- Village mapping for assessing needs of children and households
- Questions and observations group work for household assessment
- Making of teaching aids with emphasis on exploratory learning
- Ideas for children’s experiential learning/discussion
- Plans for setting up rural preschool under the trees
APPENDIX IV: INITIAL QUESTIONNAIRE FOR TEACHERS

As an Early Childhood teacher, you have an important part to play in the development of the children you guide. This simple questionnaire is to help the ECDVU program to survey philosophy and teaching practices. Thank you for taking time to answer the following questions.

Directions: For questions 1—8, please tick only one option for each statement

Questionnaire

Child-centered play is letting the child choose his/her play activity.

Strongly agree (   )  Agree (   )  Disagree (   )  Strongly disagree (   )

Child centered learning is effective in promoting a child’s interest in art and creativity.

Strongly agree (   )  Agree (   )  Disagree (   )  Strongly disagree (   )

Local and environmental resources are as effective as store-purchased supplies for promoting a child’s interest in art and creativity.

Strongly agree (   )  Agree (   )  Disagree (   )  Strongly disagree (   )

Children are more interested in art and creativity if they can choose the type of art activity.

Strongly agree (   )  Agree (   )  Disagree (   )  Strongly disagree (   )

Using local and environmental resources for art is not much of a challenge to the teacher.

Strongly agree (   )  Agree (   )  Disagree (   )  Strongly disagree (   )

Teachers believe a child will learn more about art and creativity if he/she, as a teacher will direct the art activity.

Strongly agree (   )  Agree (   )  Disagree (   )  Strongly disagree (   )
Preschool teachers are more interested in the child finishing an art activity than in the child’s process of continuing to work on the activity.

Strongly agree (   ) Agree (   ) Disagree (   ) Strongly disagree (   )

Promoting children’s interest in art and creativity in early childhood helps a child to be successful later in school.

Strongly agree (   ) Agree (   ) Disagree (   ) Strongly disagree (   )
APPENDIX V: QUESTIONNAIRE ON EXPLORATORY LEARNING

A second survey was taken after more emphasis and discussion on play

Questionnaire for Mizu teachers, Makungula Village, 7 September, 2003

Children from 3 to 6 years are known as “preschoolers” in this survey.

Please tick only once for each question or statement.

1 Ways of teaching should be the same for preschool children and for primary school children
   Yes_______No_______

2 Preschool children learn best to count things by “saying” the numbers (“one, two, three, etc.”
   Yes_______No_______

3 Preschool children learn the letters of the alphabet best by repeating them after the teacher
   Yes_______No_______

4 It is more important for preschool children to learn sitting quietly than for them to learn by moving about
   Yes_______No_______

5 Children learn better by sitting quietly than looking at and playing with things
   Yes_______No_______

6 “Masanje” is a way of learning
   Yes_______No_______
7 “Masanje” should be played at home, not at preschool

Yes______ No______

8 Teacher-directed preschools are better than child-centered preschools

Yes______ No______
APPENDIX VI: DOCUMENTATION OF THE KIT OF PLAY MATERIALS

This photograph represents a sample of teaching and learning aids constructed of locally available materials. Materials such as flour bags, bamboo, sisal twine, and locally made baskets were used. A kit was assembled which could be replicated in a rural setting of Malawi; is cost effective, and one that would promote exploratory play.
APPENDIX VII: PICTORIAL DOCUMENTATION OF CONSTRUCTION

Part of the project was construction of a rural ECD shelter which would promote exploratory play, be contextual, community-driven, and replicable. This photo shows the shelter in the process of construction. Construction materials consisted of locally moulded bricks, local bamboo and blue gum poles for support, with local grass for thatching. The design is L-shaped for exploratory play areas, with open air for light and ventilation, without costs of electricity and windows.
## APPENDIX VIII: DOCUMENTATION OF CONSTRUCTION EXPENSES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Amount</th>
<th>Provider</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Transport for carrying bricks by lorry</td>
<td>29/8</td>
<td>K 500.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>River sand transport by wheel barrow</td>
<td>29/8</td>
<td>K1,000.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Repair of wheel barrow</td>
<td>1/9</td>
<td>450</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15,000 bricks @ MK900 per 1000</td>
<td>1/9</td>
<td>13,500.</td>
<td>T.Mwera</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 bags cement @ 960. per bag</td>
<td>5/9</td>
<td>3,84</td>
<td>Kamwaza</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 tons sand(105 wheel barrows@K25 ea)</td>
<td>5/9</td>
<td>2,650.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transport for 15,000 bricks</td>
<td>5/10</td>
<td>1,500.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grass</td>
<td>11/9</td>
<td>800.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>labor—builders</td>
<td>13/9</td>
<td>1,500.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grass</td>
<td>13/9</td>
<td>445.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grass transport—Machinga</td>
<td>14/9</td>
<td>11,000.</td>
<td>G.Mwera</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labor: 2 boys filling &amp; leveling</td>
<td>18/9</td>
<td>1,000.</td>
<td>Kamwaza</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chief Kamwaza</td>
<td>18/9</td>
<td>1,000.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loading bricks</td>
<td>18/9</td>
<td>450.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wages for 4</td>
<td>24/9</td>
<td>2,000.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 bags cement (2@990.,3@900.)</td>
<td>24/9</td>
<td>4,680.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 bags cement @ 990.</td>
<td>21/9</td>
<td>4,950.</td>
<td>G.Mwera</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 doors to be made</td>
<td>28/9</td>
<td>3,000.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1,000 bundles of grass@K15(to complt)</td>
<td>28/9</td>
<td>15,000.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transport for grass (2 trips)</td>
<td>28/9</td>
<td>6,000</td>
<td>G.Mwera</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sand to complete</td>
<td>28/9</td>
<td>5,400.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Date</td>
<td>Amount</td>
<td>Notes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------------</td>
<td>--------</td>
<td>--------</td>
<td>-------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food for 6 @K200.each per week</td>
<td>28/9</td>
<td>1,200.</td>
<td>“ “</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wages for 4 workers</td>
<td>28/9</td>
<td>2,000.</td>
<td>“ “</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wages for chief</td>
<td>28/9</td>
<td>2,000.</td>
<td>“ “</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 kgs-3” nails</td>
<td>28/9</td>
<td>1,000.</td>
<td>“ “</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wages for 4 workers</td>
<td>30/9</td>
<td>2,000.</td>
<td>“ “</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food for 6 workers</td>
<td>30/9</td>
<td>1,200</td>
<td>“ “</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22 bolts of twine @ K110. ea.</td>
<td>30/9</td>
<td>2,420.</td>
<td>“ “</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wages for 4 workers 12—19/10</td>
<td>7/10</td>
<td>2,000.</td>
<td>“ “</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food for 6 workers “ “</td>
<td>7/10</td>
<td>1,200.</td>
<td>“ “</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 bags of cement @ K990.ea.</td>
<td>7/10</td>
<td>6,000.</td>
<td>“ “</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32 mtrs. Chicken wire (1/2”)</td>
<td>28/9</td>
<td>6,240.</td>
<td>“ “</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gloria</td>
<td>7/10</td>
<td>1,000.</td>
<td>“ “</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cf. Kamwasa</td>
<td>7/10</td>
<td>1,000.</td>
<td>“ “</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gloria</td>
<td>12/10</td>
<td>1,000.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cf. Kamwaza</td>
<td>12/10</td>
<td>1,000.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food for 6 workers 12-19/10</td>
<td>12/10</td>
<td>1,200.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wages for 4 workers</td>
<td>12/10</td>
<td>2,000.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food for 6 workers 19-26/10-2/11</td>
<td>25/10</td>
<td>2,400.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wages for 4 workers “ “ “</td>
<td>25/10</td>
<td>4,000.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**TOTAL:** MK 124,325. OR US$ 1,142.
Children in Makungula Village project playing *masanje* in the pretend interest area of the rural preschool. Children are using items created locally from locally available resources, including the “house” made of maize bags.