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CASE STUDY

Field testing: essential in authorship of learning materials



Mrs Aida Kasiya, a standard 1 teacher at a school in Zomba conducting a field pre-testing of a book. The feedback generated from here will be given to the author as part of the process

“Believe it or not, field testing is the hallmark of this whole project because if wrong material was produced the whole project would be in vain. It’s like pilot project. It does not matter how long you have authored books, I have learned one lesson; the material must be tested by the authors before actual printing.”

—Henri Chilora, a former Principal Curriculum Specialist in Malawi

Telling Our Story

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UNITED STATES AGENCY for International Development (USAID)’s impact through Read Malawi program in aiding literacy is phenomenal and can be attributed to many factors ranging from a thorough process of developing learning materials to the utilization of such learning materials. But, if truth be told, the systematic authorship of reading materials produced for the Read Malawi programme has won many plaudits. When asked to coordinate the production of literacy material to be used at primary schools and reading centres, Mr Henri Chilora, former Principal Curriculum Specialist in Malawi, never imagined what a huge difference the field testing of those materials would make. “It has revolutionized the production of reading material for young and beginning readers,” he says.

Mr Chilora coordinated various aspects such as conceptualization, desk topping, proof reading, editing, monitoring illustrations and finalizing all the books before they were sent for printing. So, he read all the books. All the books were done in English and translated into Chichewa. One step he had not anticipated was the idea of the authors taking the books to the intended readers [the children] for evaluation in what was called ‘Field Testing’. The idea, he says, was to ensure reading materials were developed for the intended audience. Authors took the books to children so that one observed the reactions of the children while the other facilitated the pretesting. The books were tested to see if the children could read the words, understand the structure of the story and discuss the images. The authors gathered data and then made appropriate changes to their books.

Asked if the trouble was necessary, Chilora says: “Believe it or not, field testing was the hallmark of this whole project because if wrong materials were produced the whole project would be in vain. It does not matter how long you have authored books, I have learned one lesson: the material must be tested by the authors before actual printing.”

The material developed included Read Aloud books, some of which were folktales. It also included Guided Reading books children read with the teacher’s support. The field testing had to evaluate both types to ensure that the books were suitable for children. Chilora, described the experience as an eye opener. He advised that book production must involve real children and should be done in the field together with the author to observe and obtain feedback.

“Get it from me, authorship of learning materials for children leads to quality materials when a process for development is followed,” says Mr Chilora.