

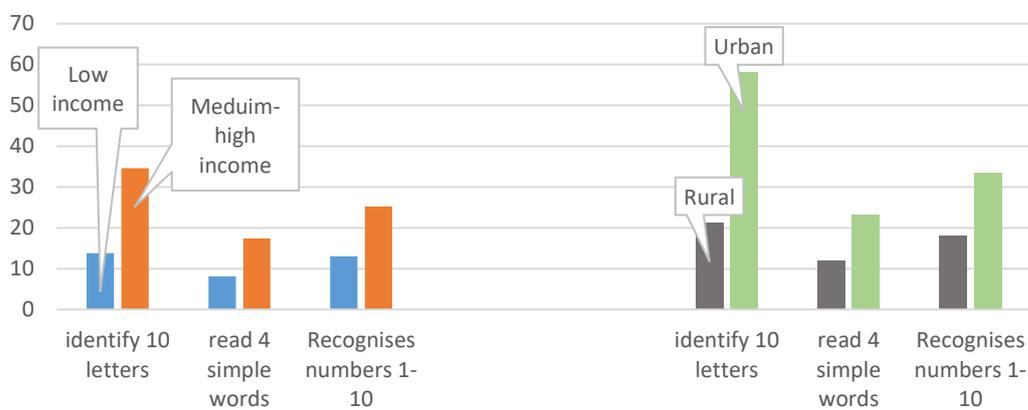
# Closing the Inequality Gap in Children's Educational Attainment in Malawi- A research brief

Dr Edward Sosu (lead)<sup>1</sup>, Dr Peter Mtika<sup>2</sup>, Dr Felix Maulidi<sup>3</sup>, Ms Sofia Pimenta<sup>1</sup>, Dr Claire Wilson<sup>4</sup>  
<sup>1</sup>University of Strathclyde, UK; <sup>2</sup>University of Aberdeen, UK; <sup>3</sup>LUANAR, Malawi; <sup>4</sup>UWS, UK

## Inequality in Access to Quality Education

**Preschool:** Our analysis of UNICEF's Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS) data on Malawi shows inequalities in school readiness skills among 3-5 year olds (Figure 1). For instance, children from middle-high income households are about 2.5 times more likely to identify 10 letters of the alphabets compared to low income peers, while those in urban areas are about 3 times more likely to demonstrate this skill compared to their rural peers. These early inequalities are likely to lead to further disadvantages once children start formal schooling.

Figure 1: Proportion of preschool children (3-5 years) showing readiness in specific skills



**Primary school:** In both rural and urban areas, there are schools serving children from disadvantaged backgrounds fewer to none of the children progress to national, conventional or community day secondary schools at the end of the Primary School Leaving Certificate examinations. These schools tend to have low secondary school transition, high standard eight repetition rates and dropout. Evidence from 2007 SACMEQ results indicate that a **higher proportion of children from wealthy backgrounds (73%)** achieve minimum standards in reading in standard Six compared to those from **poor backgrounds (58%)**. Overall, recent primary school achievement data looking at socioeconomic inequalities in Malawi is not readily accessible. This school achievement data is required to better guide policymaking.

Many children in Malawi face challenges of access to quality education. There are also significant inequalities in the education system with children from more disadvantaged backgrounds (e.g., low-income, rural) performing well below those from better-off backgrounds (e.g., high income, urban). This brief report summarises findings from our research into the nature of educational inequalities from preschool to the end of primary school, and examines the key reasons for this gap in attainment.

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### Further Information

[Dr Edward Sosu](#)

School of Education, University of Strathclyde, Glasgow, UK

Email:

[edward.sosu@strath.ac.uk](mailto:edward.sosu@strath.ac.uk)

Twitter: @emsosu

### Funders and partners

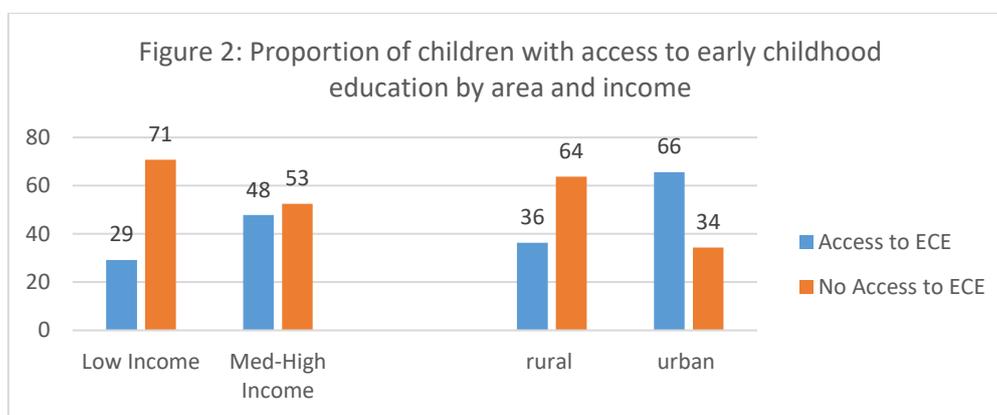


## Why are there Inequality in educational Outcome?

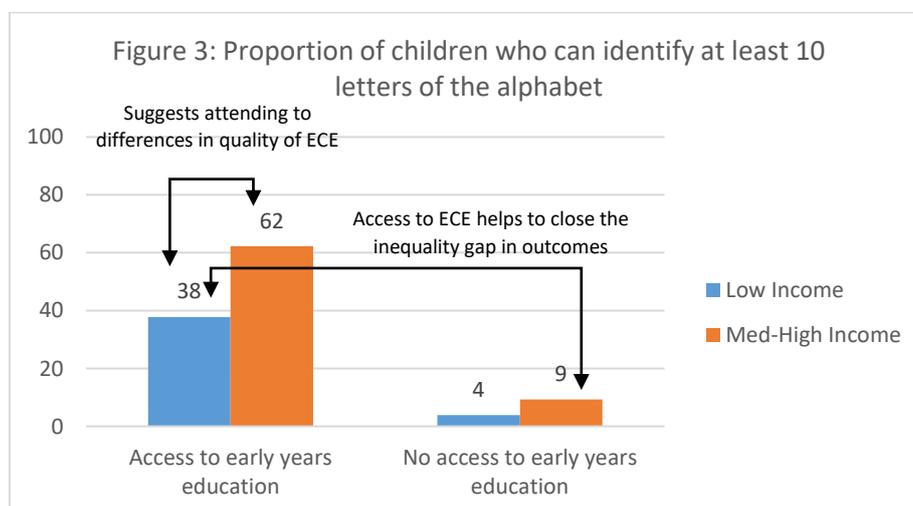
To understand the reasons behind inequalities at preschool we drew on UNICEF’s MICS data. For primary school, we undertook multiple stakeholder interviews (n=62) involving children, parents, teachers, headteachers and primary education advisors.

**Access and Quality of Early Childhood Education:** Access to early years plays an important role in getting children ready for formal schooling. Our findings suggest that the gap in preschool attainment between children from advantaged and disadvantaged backgrounds can be attributed to two key factors: **a) inequality in access to early childhood education**, and **b) possible differences in the quality of early childhood education experienced** by children from different socioeconomic backgrounds.

As shown in Figure 2 a larger proportion of children from high income backgrounds (48%) had access to early childhood education (ECE) compared to those from low-income backgrounds (30%). Similar differences in access are found between children in urban (66%) and rural areas (36%).

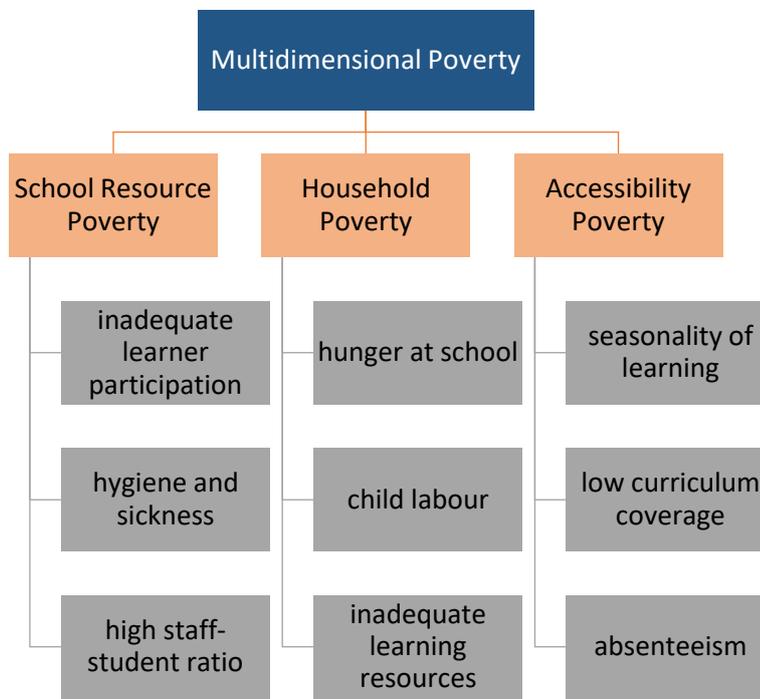


As shown in Figure 3, children from disadvantaged backgrounds who have access to ECE show greater school readiness than peers who do not have access to ECE. However, differences in the quality of early ECE received may explain the significant differences in school readiness skills observed between low and high income children who access ECE.



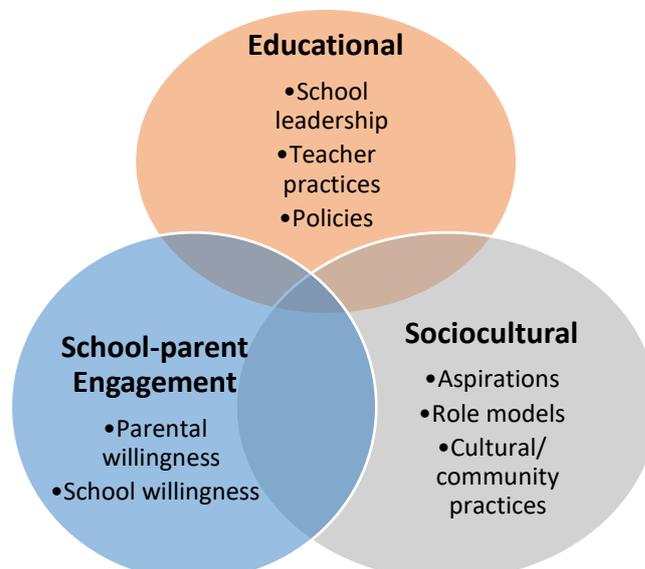
## Multidimensional Poverty

At primary school level, we found that poor educational outcomes were due to effects of multidimensional poverty. Analysis of participants' responses revealed that **household Poverty**, **Accessibility Poverty** and **School Resource Poverty** hinder access to quality education and affect children's educational attainment (See Figure 4)



## Beyond Resources: social, educational, and policy

Apart from effects of poverty, we also found other sociocultural, educational and policy practices that affect access to quality education and children's educational attainment. Within these, Sociocultural, Educational and School-parent Engagement are key influencers of access to quality education. We argue that strengthening positive practices and addressing undesirable ones can enhance access to quality education (Figure 5).



## Issues for Reflection

- Current education data provides useful context on inequality. However, there is need for education data from multiple sources (e.g., EMIS, SACMEQ, MANEB) to clearly highlight inequalities in learning outcomes. This will help raise the issues of educational inequality within the policy agenda and also evaluate progress in reducing inequality across time.
- Inequalities in learning outcomes begin at preschool and widens as children go through the education system. Closing the gap requires effort at all levels of the education system.
- Multi-sectorial approach is required to address inequalities in learning outcomes given that these inequalities are due to the effects of multidimensional poverty.
- Apart from poverty, there are sociocultural, educational and policy practices that influence learning outcomes. Existing positive practices need to be harnessed while negative ones need to be addressed.
- There is need for an active network of key stakeholders necessary for enabling research evidence into policy and practice.