

The Hillz Project: Improving The Quality Of Education Through Developing A Reading Culture And Computer Literacy at Chilukusha Primary School, Luangwa District, Zambia

Cornell University, Ithaca, New York

Andrew Phiri, 25/ ap829@cornell.edu / +1 (607) 220-4102

1. Introduction

The United Nations (UN) fifth Millennium Development Goal (MDGs) aimed at ensuring all students in developing countries, regardless of gender, complete free primary (Grade 1-7) and secondary (Grade 8-12) education. Currently, Zambia is one of the few African countries to have attained a free education from Grade 1-12. However, even with a “free” primary-secondary education, the biggest question is its quality. Although access has significantly improved with the introduction of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2012, the quality of education remains poor, particularly in rural areas, leading to retarded intellectual development and performance; that calls for the adoption of educational models which go beyond access to ensure no one is left behind.

Schools in rural areas face many challenges, including inadequate access to basic learning/teaching materials such as books and computers. As a result, pupils graduate with poor results and lack the discipline, motivation, curiosity, and interest to pursue their academic dreams, increasing pupil-drop out cases. Growing up in the village and experiencing a rural education, I faced similar challenges; luckily, conditions improved after moving to the city. However, most of my childhood friends did not have the opportunity to complete their education. Some have fallen victims of early marriages, with families they can barely manage to support, and the circle of poverty continues. How much potential goes unrealized through such experiences remains food for thought. On the other hand, it is an inspiration to implement actions that give new hope to a few.

Beyond taking children to school, we need to create environments to support and encourage their learning. To establish such a strong intellectual foundation, we can do the following: 1. Promote a reading culture among learners at an early stage, and 2. Introduce computer literacy at the primary level. These skills and knowledge would not only provide a smooth transition to secondary education, where English becomes the primary language of instruction, and all students are required to take a computer studies course but are also valuable tools to becoming a life-long learner, broaden one's knowledge, and enhance the level of creativity.

Chilukusha Primary School, located in the Lungwa Valley, an area with one of the most extreme weather conditions in Zambia, is at the heart of the Chilukusha village population, whose livelihood is largely dependent on seasonal fishing. It has more than 750 students, with a higher girl: boys ratio (according to the school's Headteacher: Mr. Kandamba). However, the school only has three classroom blocks (1x2). Already that means accommodating over 125 pupils per class. As a result, forcing some students to attend afternoon lessons - averaging over 50 per class (more than double the recommended size of 17) - to compensate for the overcrowding. That creates various learning barriers because teachers are supposed to handle large classes, significantly impacting pupil performance. Worse, Chilukusha Primary School does not have basic infrastructure such as a library. It also lacks adequate learning materials: books and computers. Luckily, it has enough land and expects that it will be connected to the national power grid by March this year. The availability of an energy source is an opportunity to improve the current learning standards by introducing computer usage. Equally, a library would be a conducive place for students to study and do extra work during the evenings as most come from homes that do not have electricity. Therefore, this project proposes a basic yet robust solution.

2. Project Aims

- (i) Help Grade 1-7 learners at Chilukusha Primary School cultivate a reading culture to improve their reading and vocabulary skills, thereby providing a stronger foundation and transition from primary to secondary school as English becomes the primary language of instruction.
- (ii) Enable access to IT technology (computers) to rural learners to help them develop basic digital skills vital in the technologically evolving world.
- (iii) Create a learning environment at Chilukusha Primary School that encourages and supports learners' academic enhancement, ignites their curiosity, unleashes their full potential, and becomes life-long learners.
- (iv) Promote and bring awareness to Chilukusha Primary School on the importance of developing a strong reading culture and computer literacy at an early stage of one's education through training and mentorship.
- (v) Ensure availability of learning/teaching resources at Chilukusha Primary School, pupils develop reading habits, and are computer literate by 2025.

3. Timeline and Implementation

Upon being awarded, the project is expected to begin mid-May through mid-August 2022. It will be implemented onsite while working hand-in-hand with the school administration, who wholeheartedly welcomed and supported the initiative. The following table shows the estimated financial requirements (note: all estimates calculated in the Zambia Kwacha (ZMK) and the equivalent US Dollar (USD) adjusted to updated exchange rates):

Title	Description	Cost (ZMK)	Cost (USD)
Library	Construct an 11x11 m library block (space allocated by school administration); Design and install bookshelves (by local carpenter).	84,200.00	4867.00
Books	Secure at least 300 copies for all grades subjects (more expected through free online sources and partnerships & donations such as ntlbookpro.org).	17,300.00	1000.00
IT	Purchase 15 desktop computers & 2 Mifis for internet access (all to be sourced in Zambia) additions expected through donations upon implementation.	45,000.00	2,600.00
Miscellaneous	Pay 2 bricklayers & 1 carpenter; cover any other expenses: travel, transportation of materials, etc.	26,250.00	1500.00

4. Conclusion

A good education bears hope and confidence; increased knowledge gives one a sense of assurance to succeed, hence continuing the pursuit of their dreams regardless of the circumstances. Indeed, an educated citizens can make the right choices and understand their rights. This also calls for the need to appreciate one's civic, social, and environmental roles/obligations. Therefore, this project believes that improving the standard of education will create responsible citizens, which acts as a catalyst in promoting peace critical for the economic, social, and environmental prosperity of any citizen, country, and the world. As the world is becoming more technologically advanced than ever, there is a need to impart the right skills, create mindsets to take advantage of such innovations, and positively contribute to their respective communities.

Reference: Mr. Kandamba, Headteacher/Chilukusha Primary School/ +260 974666251 (WhatsApp)

