

I-House Berkeley
Oluwagbemisola Deborah Akinsipe
The Hope Project
Nigeria

Many times, hopelessness and not anger is the perfect precursor to violence. I spent the bulk of the year 2018 teaching mathematics to a group of students from low-income families in Port-Harcourt and one thing that became obvious early on were the limited opportunities they had. The teachers in their schools were not very motivated, they had limited access to textbooks and computers, they had family situations that were particularly difficult for young students to navigate, they had been poorly taught and were likely to fail the competitive exams to get higher education slots, to name a few. For example, one of my students, Helen, had to miss school ever so often because her mum had to travel to purchase goods and she had to stay home to take care of her siblings. In class, many of them lost interest quickly because they could not see the point of education or what it could lead to. The girls were separated from all the work and movements that were fighting for equal rights and education.

When one comes from such a place, violence can look very attractive. When it feels like you have nothing to lose, you can risk it all. It is therefore no surprise, that Port-Harcourt is filled with young militants and kidnappers. I strongly believe that if students in such situations are empowered to think that they are valuable, that they have a lot to contribute, that they can make it out, that people care about their progress and that there are opportunities beyond their immediate circumstances, they can be saved from turning to violence which has somewhat become the most lucrative business opportunity in these areas. I hope to intercept the flow from hopelessness to violence, even if just for a few students, with this project.

That year, I taught in a school called Army Day Secondary School in the Bori Military Camp in Port-Harcourt and I would like to return there to carry out this project which I have tagged "The Hope Project". There are about 40 students in every class, there are three grades in the senior arm and about 6 classes per grade. This gives a total of about 720 students. My plan is to, with the help of my colleagues from university, hold daily 30-minute sessions (Monday-Friday) for about 2-3

weeks on topics ranging from personal values to goal-setting and crafting individual stories and scholarship essays particularly for students in the higher classes. I also intend to collate a list of prominent needs which I will forward to other NGOs and the government. At the end, I hope that all the students would draw up vision boards and write closing out essays on what they learned. I intend to gift all the students with much needed school supplies namely school bags and notebooks. To encourage the most committed participants, cash prizes would also be awarded to them, to the tune of \$1000 in total (this would be sufficient to give at least 21 students 15,000 naira which is a significant amount in such low-income areas). Also, I plan to seek out internship opportunities in tech and entertainment fields for students that show interest. The impact of this project would be measured via reports on the students' commitment to their academics in the following session. I do expect that beyond school attendance, the effect of the project would remain in the lives of the students for even longer and be more extensive.

Beyond the tangible outcomes, I expect that the students would be more hopeful and committed to impactful futures after the project. In my opinion, there are few things as life-changing as giving people a sense of purpose and direction. That is what I hope to do for these students via this project. I intend to keep in touch with the students by visiting afterwards and running a Facebook group. Going forward, I hope the project can be scaled up to other schools and I intend to have students from the original group facilitate such programs in coming years. I want the students to know that they can make something out of their lives and that they do not have to be consumed by the tides of violence. I want them to know that they are important and that people are willing to come alongside them to give them the help they need. I have chosen a class-based, two-week-long project versus just one big event because I think in matters like this, closer, repeated contact is more important.