Twaleta Mwasoma Literacy Project
Project Location: Nairobi, Kenya
Nominating College: Whitman College
Project Leader: Wamuchii Mwangi, Kenya, Whitman College

Summary

Twaleta Mwasoma is a literacy project in which mobile libraries were created at four low-income private primary schools in Kiambu and Nairobi, Kenya. In an effort to support literacy programs, this initiative resourced schools that did not have the existing funds to set up libraries on their own.

Project Description

How did you decide what issue(s) you wanted to address, and what approach(es) or strategies you chose to implement in your project?

I chose this project after an experience working with an NGO in alternative primary schools in Nairobi. Working with these schools made me aware of the unique challenges they face and how the schools miss out on funding opportunities since they are not public schools. Despite having limited resources, these schools are extremely important in the communities they serve. My interest in literacy programs among primary school-aged children led me to combine the two subjects and design a project that advances literacy in alternative primary schools in Nairobi. The idea of building mobile libraries arose as the best solution to the issue, because I would be offering resources to these schools while working to support the schools’ existing literacy programs.

Why did you choose your host site? In what ways did local relationships support you or contribute to the project?

Using my relationship with PACEMaker International, an organization with which I had previously worked, I was able to select schools that had a good record of working with the affiliate organization. My connection with PACEMaker International proved to be useful when I needed on-the-ground advice while conducting my project.

What changes or adjustments did you make to your original plans, and why?

I had initially planned to work in the informal settlement of Mathare, but I ended up working in Kiambu and Nairobi. This was because the schools in Mathare were not strong PACE partner schools, and it was important for me to work with schools that were active in the PACE program. In addition, I was working to prevent ‘shelving,’ a phenomenon where schools receive book donations but end up placing them in storage, never for the students to effectively use. By working with schools that are active in the PACE program, I could build accountability systems and track program progress consistently. This decision was made by looking at each school’s attendance at core PACE Partner school meetings, as well as by reviewing progress reports and having discussions with school headteachers about how they would participate in the program.

Did other fundraising efforts contribute to your project? What were they?

Working with Moran Publishers enabled me to get a book donation worth $700 USD toward the end of my program. This donation was unexpected, and as such, it was not used in the implementation of this project. However, these books were taken to Kilifi County, a new region into which PACE is expanding their work with high-need schools. I was pleased to be able to pass the donation I received on to PACE to support the first school that they will be working with in Kilifi County.

Are there opportunities for continuing your work on this issue? If so, please describe.
The donation through Moran Publishers opened me up to the possibility of working on literacy efforts in high-need areas in the country. I realized that students in Kilifi do not have opportunities similar to those of their counterparts in Nairobi, and these high-need areas require more attention if we are to level the playing field across the country. I am now interested in working in literacy projects in these high-need areas, namely Kilifi, Samburu, and Turkana Counties.

Reflection

How do you define peace?

I define peace as having equal access to resources and, in this case, reading materials.

In what ways might your project contribute to peace? What changes occurred? Short-term? Long-term?

By providing access to reading materials, I supported literacy programs in the short term and literacy independence for pupils in the long term.

What did you learn about the dilemmas, challenges, or conflicts that underlie the targeted issues or utilized approaches/strategies?

While conducting this project, I witnessed inequity in resource distribution and saw how it inhibits the freedoms of pupils, since their ability to succeed in school is tied to whether they can read and write. I also learned that understaffing in schools is directly linked to lower literacy levels, which can be a problem in Alternative Providers for Basic Education and Training (APBET) schools, which do not receive additional support from NGOs.

Has your project changed the way you think about the world? How has the project changed, challenged, or inspired you?

My project has changed how I think about the teachers in these schools. I have a greater appreciation for their ongoing commitment, which does not waver when levels of compensation and appreciation are low or even absent. The teachers’ perseverance and commitment have inspired me, and this project has challenged me to channel my skills, resources, and interests to work on the things that I deeply care about. After this experience, I am considering exploring my interest in being a children’s book author, focusing on the intersection between indigenous knowledge and science in Kenyan tribes.

Personal Statement

This project has made me appreciate the work of teachers in APBET schools. Their resilience, commitment and determination is something we all could learn from. They are the real heroes. – Wamuchii Mwangi