

Project Title: **Education Meheba – Experiential STEM and Tertiary Education Support for Refugee Children in Zambia**

Country: **Zambia**

Nominating University: **Worcester Polytechnic Institute, Worcester, MA**

Project Leader: **Martin Thulani Milanzi**, Home Country: **Zambia**

College: **Worcester Polytechnic Institute**

Part A. Narrative Report

Summary

This initiative advanced the education and career prospects for grade 12 children in the helped Meheba Refugee Settlement in Zambia. It enabled the students to conduct science experiments in physics, chemistry, and biology while holistically developing their skills as young leaders, and it helped them find and apply for scholarships to tertiary education.

Description

Having attended high school at the Pestalozzi Education Centre, which mixed students from the Meheba settlement and others from Lusaka, I interacted and learned with young people from Meheba through my school mates. As part of its social responsibility mission, Pestalozzi recruited children from rural areas and refugee camps in Zambia to offer them better education on full scholarships. As a scholarship recipient myself, though not from a refugee background I was drawn to the narratives that children from the camp told of their struggles. While I came from the rundowns in the capital, interacting with the refugee students broadened my perspective on the challenges people in this region faced and how African conflicts continue to devastate innocent people years after they occur. Additionally, it made me aware of what privilege I held as Zambian citizen. When I graduated from high school in 2017, I watched as my best friend Vianne, a top achieving student and well-rounded person, was denied a scholarship to pursue his studies in Zambia through the government because he was a refugee. Devastated, he lost hope of pursuing his academic dreams, while I had multiple offers for college in Zambia and had the chance to pursue my ambitions.

In 2019, I attended the Ashinaga Africa Initiative (AAI) leadership training boot camp in Uganda for six months. There, I grew my understanding of what it entails to be a business leader in modern Africa and how I can use technology to support social development. Through AAI, I was challenged to have conversations that typical classroom settings in Zambia do not have. For example, we once spoke about how Africa sees western social, political, and economic ideologies as utopian systems that have no flaws, and we try to mimic them. This highlighted how we have disregarded our identity and values as a people to embrace foreign thinking, keeping us mentally colonized. I was dumfounded!

In 2020, due to COVID, I volunteered to work for a non-profit organization, Kucetekela Foundation (KF), where I offered to mentor their students and prepare them for SATs and college applications. Through KF, I had a chance to work with students on various aspects of writing and college expectations that help make students outstanding for admissions teams. Working with the students at KF was a major steppingstone in my experience developing young leaders as I began to expand my mentorship beyond college applications to careers and life in general. Later in the same year, I was tasked with helping KF identify community service project centers for their students. I chose the Meheba Refugee Settlement, because after having so many important friendships with people from the camp, I was curious to know what it looked or felt like to live there, and to contribute to this community if I could. For a month I lived in Meheba identifying project opportunities. What caught my attention was how much little of the outside world students knew existed. Furthermore, the schools around the camp had no science lab or proper

equipment to have the children receive the best support. Remembering my best friend Vianne, I finally understood the trauma that a child from the camp underwent when they could not go beyond high school with their education. From my experience with the children in the camp, I marveled at how ambitious they were despite their circumstances and unguaranteed aid from the state. Therefore, with this opportunity from the Davis Projects for Peace program, I aimed to build on my relationship with Vianne, my leadership development training I had at Ashinaga, and the short-term experiences I had working with young people in Meheba. This Davis supported program centered around a three-week program at the refugee camp on Experiential STEM and Support for Tertiary Education. The program aimed to tackle the following initiatives topics:

1. Science Experiments and Careers Associated with them
2. Applying for college scholarships abroad
3. Writing College Essays
4. How to get jobs when you graduate high school: CVs and Cover Letters
5. How to use technology to improve inter-personal skills
6. Growing as a leader in Africa
7. Creating a peaceful community
8. Mental Health in the Refugee environment

To implement these goals for the project, I first ensured to develop an open dialogue environment where students were free to express themselves and ask questions freely. Because the Zambian education still embraces a teacher centered education, I tried to make a distinction with this project to the students to let them know it was a safe space. Through my WPI and Ashinaga career development materials, I provided students with resources on how to craft resumes and CVs. Further, I held a critiquing session where each student presented a sample resume, and I offered them feedback. When working on application essays, we used the school IT lab to have the students type their essays and share them with me via Google Drive to acquaint them with digital platforms and software for essay editing. One approach that I implemented when running this project was to have the student's alternate roles when doing science experiments, to ensure that shy or reserved students had an opportunity to take an active role in titrating or mixing the chemicals. In this way, every child had an opportunity to touch lab equipment and run a full experiment on their own with support from their peers.

Knowing that conflicts are bound to happen in a group, we held discussions on peace and mental health. We had the students randomly split into teams of five and had them try the "Marshmallow Challenge." Given the difficulty and constant communication this entailed, it helped us trigger a sense of leadership and togetherness among the learners as they competed for a grand prize – a full bag of marshmallows and clear bags. With violin covers of popular hip-hop songs playing in the background, watching the students argue and resolve their conflicts on how best to build the sturdiest and longest spaghetti tower was thrilling. Amid the chaos, one group caught my attention as they did what most had not done. They split their work evenly and drafted their stand idea on paper before engaging with the marshmallow and spaghetti. Throughout their construction, one person led their material addition and moved around to grab them equipment -- an outstanding demonstration of leadership and teamwork. After the challenge, I sat to talk with the students on what the challenge had taught them individually and how it applied in their individual lives. Furthermore, I used this as an opportunity to hone their understanding of peace and how to efficiently resolve conflicts in their community by being mediators for dialogue and negotiations. Some students reflected on how best they can pay-it-forward to the next generation by leading discussions on peace as they want no other child to go through similar circumstances.

I chose to work in the Meheba community because the number of children missing global opportunities is high. Unlike other children in Zambia, Meheba students have zero access to support resources beyond their refugee camp. Thus, they had a far greater need for this project. Having worked in Meheba before, knowing people such as the Refugee Officer in the camp made accepting my idea easy. Further, when it came to sharing my project or aiding the cause on social media, many people brought in scholarships that

the students could now apply for going forward. I was especially grateful that my friend Vianne could participate in this project as a project assistant. Because he continues to live in the Meheba camp, I have on the ground support to help me stay connected with the students via Zoom as we work to submit their tertiary applications to multiple opportunities available in December.

Altogether, this project was entirely funded by the Davis Projects for Peace and no other external grant. As an ongoing initiative, I hope to soon register this initiative as a non-profit to continue developing leaders and providing career opportunities for the children in the camp.

Reflection

Broadly, I defined peace as a complete absence of physical, emotional, and psychological turmoil in a community and an individual. Peace is a when there is safety and friendship between members of the community in the absence of violence.

This project has given 100 refugee children an opportunity to see their life beyond the struggles they face because of war. Supporting this new generation of young people, this project is creating global leaders that have been for a long time overlooked in Zambia due to their nationality status. Instead of allowing them to stay angry at their predicament, this initiative showed them how to use that situation to win scholarships and represent their community. Further, because the project was centered around dialogue and deliberate efforts to resolve conflicts calmly around STEM, it has empowered 100 children with negotiation skills and change making capacity beyond their environment. As a core element of our agenda, introducing mental health to the students has helped raise their awareness on how best they can support each other and help resolve wars within themselves that could harm their community. Short-term, it made refugee children have an opportunity to discuss their day to day lives with their peers. Long-term, it has made them aware of the massive resources available for them globally. Furthermore, by bringing a close example, such as myself and Vianne, it has helped reshape their understanding of limitations and opportunities.

Personal Statement

Overall, this project has made me realize a key element of my life that I had ignored. While I grew up unhappy at my family's financial situation, I never realized how better off I was when compared to people within the same country. I can easily get a passport and travel around the globe because I am a Zambian citizen; however, refugees cannot. They do not have this right due to "security concerns" by states around the world. From a leadership and inter-personal point of view, this project has helped grow my planning and communication skills as I worked with a diverse group. Working with students between 17-22 years old, this project has helped me give advice to a possible younger version of me who saw it impossible to pursue my academic dream because I felt too disadvantaged to dream. From a professional scope, this project has inspired me to think of other initiatives that I could take to improve the lives of young people in Zambia.