

LITERACY LEADERS 2020 PROJECT REPORT

The Literacy Leaders Project is a project that has had tremendous impact since it was rolled out in 2017. The project targets five schools within the Ngolowindo Zone in the Salima District of Malawi. The project has seen great change with regards to the language and teaching skills of the 15 participating teachers, titled Literacy Leaders, who have also reached out to share what they have learnt with their colleagues. The end result has been the improvement in the service delivery of the teachers and subsequently an overwhelming improvement in learners' performance in examinations.

2020 ACTIVITIES AND SUCCESSES

The Literacy Leaders Project was unable to implement the majority of its activities since the COVID 19 pandemic caused the government to close schools on 23rd March 2020. However, before the schools closure, the Literacy Leaders project achieved success in the activities it undertook in the year beginning 2020.

INTER-SCHOOL VISITS

Literacy Leaders started 2020 with inter-school visits. This entailed the Literacy Leaders visiting their counterparts in other participating schools in order to appreciate how they are implementing the skills gained from the Saturday sessions. During these visits, lesson observations were conducted and learner surveys were administered. The surveys were focused on observing how the teachers managed their classrooms and their relationship with learners. The activity was encouraging and very educative; a chance to learn from peers and to see things done in different ways.

STANDARD LESSON OBSERVATIONS

In normal circumstances, Literacy Leaders also observe colleagues from their own school, sometimes accompanied by the Project Officer, as a core activity in terms of gaining feedback on strengths and setting targets for development. Sadly, in the year 2020, few of these lesson observations were able to be completed before the school closures. However, Literacy Leaders' skills in pedagogy, vocabulary, grammar, phonics and general classroom management were seen to be developing up to this point; they exhibited improvement in their skills compared to previous lesson observations. Learners are more engaged and confident to ask questions too. This is a clear sign on how the project has been instrumental in shaping the skills of these teachers and learners, who are the direct beneficiaries. We hope to be able to resume these observations post-pandemic, and to engage more teachers in peer learning.

SESSION PREPARATIONS

Prior to the pandemic, the Literacy Leaders Project continued to focus on developing skills and knowledge through sessions conducted once every 3 weeks at the Ngolowindo Teachers' Development Centre (TDC). Rachel Ormrod, the Project Manager, was initially doing all the preparations for sessions, with Jean Chinsamba, the Project Officer, coordinating the delivery on Rachel's return to the UK. However, in line with the aims of the project to build capacity in a sustainable and empowering way, by 2020, the Literacy Leaders were themselves doing more of the preparation for the sessions. This included detailed planning of sessions and gathering materials, with Rachel providing only suggested session outlines and support to Jean who facilitates the sessions on the ground. When the project resumes, it will move into the next phase of this handover process.

COVID 19 SUPPORT

Schools in Malawi were closed on 23rd March following the State President's directive. This automatically led to the suspension of Literacy Leaders Project activities as their implementation totally depended on teaching in schools and meeting together on Saturdays which would not have been appropriate. The schools remained closed in Malawi for a period of seven months from 23rd March till 12th October.

As a response to the crisis, Starfish Malawi gained permission from regular sponsors to temporarily redirect - once any outstanding balance on the Literacy Leaders account was cleared - some funds towards the charity's sanitation project, providing handwashing stations in the villages. A donor also gifted MK4,000 (approx £4) to each Literacy Leader and to the Project Officer to purchase hand-soap for their households and a facemask for use in the markets / shops.

Schools were only open for certain classes, for a period of two months before being closed again on January 16, 2021. The second wave of the disease hit Malawi with revelations of a variant to the virus from South Africa. Testing is not widespread and official data on deaths is likely incomplete*¹ but is believed that the total number of deaths may have risen from 191 at the start of January this year to 1044 by the end of February*². The rapid rise in the death rate is not only very sad in itself but also indicates a rapid increase in cases which is particularly concerning in a country with extremely limited hospital care and which cannot support businesses financially to make lockdown a viable option.

ONLINE SCHOOL FOR JEAN

Rachel provided funding for Jean to study courses online in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) and Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) to enhance her capacity to provide advice and guidance to others in future. This is what has been keeping Jean busy throughout the period schools have been closed. The online school is to end in April when 6 modules are expected to be completed.

ONLINE MEETING

During the first re-opening, Rachel scheduled a zoom meeting with all Literacy Leaders on 25th October 2020, for the purpose of touching base on the progress of the project and also to discuss together how the project might move forward after schools were back in swing. Starfish Malawi provided internet data bundles to enable Literacy Leaders to attend this meeting. Unfortunately there were technical difficulties with connection in real time so discussions were instead held by exchanging voice recordings, with the data bundles still proving very useful for downloading these.

During the exchange, Rachel took the opportunity to ask the Literacy Leaders to consider afresh their individual commitments to the project, with recognition of the changes that the pandemic has meant for everyone's lives, and to consider the way the project is to function in the future. They have all expressed desire to continue with the project but with various ideas shared as to changing how and where session meetings are conducted.

Hereon, the Saturday instruction sessions will now will be conducted at each individual school level and incorporate additional teachers from that school. More experienced Literacy Leaders will plan and deliver a brief training session, which will be followed by a time for all teachers to collaborate in small groups to plan lessons. It will be a chance to see how skills and knowledge gained can be applied in the classroom, enhancing and enriching the material supplied in their basic Teacher's Guides. Rachel will be available via WhatsApp during these sessions to answer – as a native English speaker – any queries relating to matters such as English grammar and phonics. This will proceed as soon as schools re-open again, with strict observance of all Covid-19 precautionary measures.

We would like to thank you for your continued support.