

## LITERACY LEADERS PROJECT REPORT – JANUARY 2020

The Literacy Leaders Project continues to make a great difference in the lives of pupils of Salima District in Malawi, particularly those of Ngolowindo zone. The project, which was rolled out in 2017, has seen tremendous change as far as English language speaking and teaching by the participating teachers is concerned. The end result has been the improvement in the service delivery of the teachers across all subjects and subsequently an overwhelming improvement in learners' performance in examinations.

### **2019 ACTIVITIES AND SUCCESSES**

The Literacy Leaders Project achieved success in a number of activities it undertook in the year 2019.

#### **a. Lesson Observations**

Lesson observation is one form of activity which was a success in the year 2019. Literacy leaders observe their colleagues teaching in order to identify strengths and challenges, before giving constructive feedback including suggestions as to what might further improve the lessons. Literacy leaders sometimes observe in pairs, alongside the project officer or the project manager in order to ensure consistent quality in the feedback given. This has found to be the case.

In October 2019 the literacy leaders themselves were observed teaching in order to ascertain the progress in their own teaching skills. During observations, leaders' skills in pedagogy, vocabulary, grammar, phonics and general classroom management were evaluated. It is pleasing to note that the literacy leaders have tremendously improved in all these areas. Previous targets are now becoming strengths as they develop their teaching practice, meaning they can now focus on more advanced skills. This is a clear indication that the project is making a positive impact.

#### **b. Session Preparations**

At the onset of the project, sessions to support literacy leaders' skills were being held every weekend. The initial strategic plan of the project entailed gradually reducing the frequency of these meetings to ensure sustainability in the long-term and sufficient intervals in which to put new ideas into practice and prepare for the next session.



During the period of weekly meetings, it was Rachel (a British teacher and the founder of the project) who was doing much of the planning and delivery of these sessions as the literacy leaders did not feel confident to do so. However, now the sessions are conducted once every 3 weeks with literacy leaders doing much of the planning. Rachel sends session outlines for leaders to prepare the sessions from in more detail, as Jean coordinates the smooth delivery of the same.

***Above: Esnarth delivering part of the literacy leaders' session she had planned***

### c. Examination progress

The positive impact that The Literacy Leaders Project is making in the schools within Ngolowindo zone cannot be overlooked. Schools are now boasting of sending learners to the more coveted conventional secondary schools as well as community day secondary schools, which was not the case in the past. We are still waiting for results to be analysed by two of the schools in the project, but here are examples of examination results for the three schools we do have, namely Ngolowindo, Lifuwu and Demera.

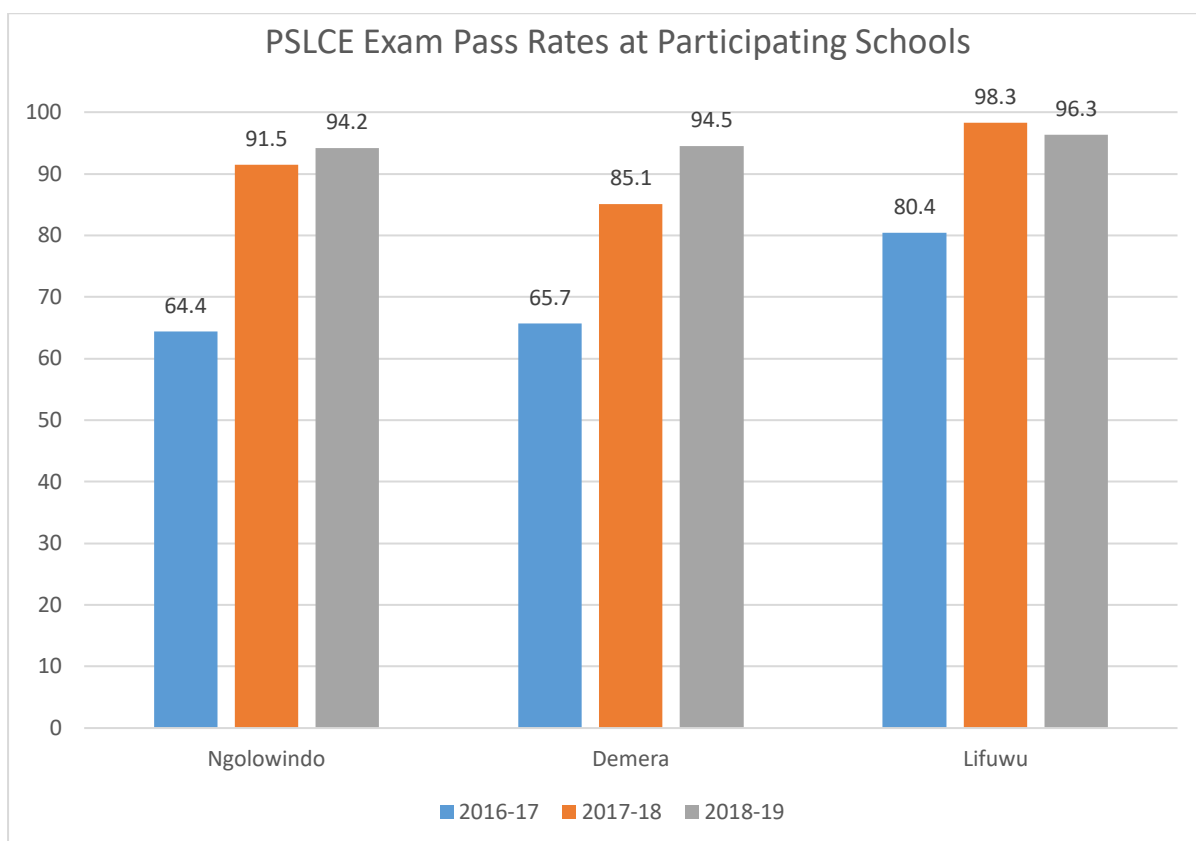
In the academic year 2018/2019, Ngolowindo primary school scooped first position out of 17 schools within Ngolowindo zone in the Zone Mock Examinations with a pass rate of 94%. During the same year, 69 learners of Ngolowindo primary School sat for the Malawi National Examinations and out of these, 65 passed (94.2%) and 4 failed. Of those who passed, 9 got selected to conventional secondary schools of Chipoka and Salima respectively, and 18 went to Parachute Battalion community day secondary school. This shows the school has continued to build this year on the dramatic improvements seen in the first year of the project. In the academic year 2017/18, 59 learners sat for the national examinations at standard 8. 54 of these passed and 5 failed representing 91.5%. The 2016/17 academic year, prior to the project starting, saw 59 learners again sitting for standard 8 examinations. Of these, 38 passed and 21 failed representing only a 64.4% pass rate and only 7 children selected for secondary school.

We saw a similar pattern in Demera School: The 2018/19 school year had 37 learners who sat for standard 8 examinations. Out of these, 35 passed and 2 failed representing 94.5%. In 2017/18 academic year, 47 sat for the examinations and 40 passed while 7 failed representing 85.1% in the first year of the project. 2016/17 academic year had 35 learners who sat for the exams and 23 passed while 12 failed with a pass rate of 65.7% prior to the project starting.

Lifuwu Primary School had 54 learners who sat for the national exams in the year 2018/19. 52 of these passed and 2 failed representing a pass rate of 96.3%. Whilst this is a marginal decrease from the first year of the project, in which the pass rate was 98.3% (59 sat for the exams, 58 passed and 1 failed) the raw difference is only 1 learner, and of those who passed in 2018/19, more learners were selected to secondary schools, including a greater percentage of more coveted schools: 21 (1 was selected to a national secondary school, 7 to conventional secondary schools and 13 were selected to community day secondary schools) as opposed to 14 the previous year (3 conventional schools, 11 community day schools). In 2016/17, 56 learners sat standard 8 exams. Out of these, 45 passed and 11 failed representing a lower 80.4% pass rate prior to the project.

The progress in these 3 schools during this period compares very favourably with the national average which has only changed from 75.8% in 2016-17 to 77.5% in 2018-19, according to the Nyasa Times newspaper.

**The graph below shows exam results for these schools prior to the project (blue) and in the first and second year of the project (orange and grey respectively).**



#### **e. Nursery Visits**

One core element of the project are the nursery visits that Literacy Leaders do. These have come about through the linkage of the project schools to nearby nurseries with an aim of sharing skills with nursery teachers - skills that are useful when teaching children particularly in areas of phonics and vocabulary. This was established as a result of observing difficulties that standard 1 learners meet in trying to assimilate the things they learn at nursery schools with those they learn at standard 1 in accordance with the Malawian standard one primary school syllabus. Literacy Leaders introduce the nursery teachers to the correlation of alphabet letters with the sounds they make, and to a phonics song for helping the children learn this. There are 5 nursery school coordinators for the project - one from each primary school. Several nursery school visits were made in the year 2019 to each of 13 nurseries schools within the impact area. Phonics posters were distributed to each nursery school as a resource to be used when learning and phonics cards were distributed to each child who attends the school for parents to support them at home. These were also shared with each learner in standard 1 of the primary schools.

#### **f. Nursery School Phonics Training**

In July 2019, The Literacy Leaders Project also conducted phonics training for nursery teachers at the local Teaching and Development Centre. The purpose for this training was to equip nursery teachers comprehensively in areas they were not previously familiar with. The training drew nursery teachers from all nursery schools within the impact area where the project works. 29 nursery teachers attended this training, which went into more depth and breadth than the support on the visits. In addition to phonics, this training covered vocabulary, grammar and pedagogy (teaching methodologies),



***Left: Literacy Leaders showcasing their skills during the phonics training***

The training revealed that most nurseries have previously taught children only letter names of the alphabet and not the sounds that the letters make. This makes it difficult for learners in standard 1 to read and understand, hence their common failure in exams. Most nursery school teachers were not themselves familiar with all the letter sounds (having relied entirely on sight recognition of whole words; important but inefficient as a sole strategy) except for the teachers of Glad Tidings Nursery who have been trained in the Montessori syllabus by British volunteer teachers from Starfish Malawi. The training also brought to attention that many nursery teachers possessed little or no knowledge at all (besides the new song) about strategies for teaching phonics or about the use of gestures when teaching. The nursery teachers welcomed the training as a new development to their skills. The training was commended as educative and participants pleaded for more of this training to be arranged periodically, as not all their colleagues could attend due to limited resources.

***Right: Literacy Leader Martha delivering a lesson during the phonics training***



## **LIMITATIONS**

### **a. Transfers of Literacy Leaders**

Though successes were registered in 2019, the project also met few setbacks. One of the notable ones is the transfer of Literacy Leaders to other schools outside Salima district (something the government does to manage the distribution of teachers across different districts). These leaders are those who were trained by Rachel when the project was first rolled out and have been replaced with teachers who are being trained now. This year, 3 Literacy Leaders got transferred; 2 from Lifuwu Primary and 1 from Maganga Primary schools and another one got selected to Domasi Collage of Education for further studies, a similar pattern to 2018. However, we hope that pupils at their new schools will benefit from the expertise they bring.

### **b. Loss and Damage of Phablets**

In the year 2018, Rachel fundraised for 5 phablets (tablet computers which function like phones) in the UK to be used as a resource for Literacy Leaders to be using when preparing for lessons and also seeking information useful for the project from the Internet. Each school was provided with a phablet. However, Demera School's phablet got stolen together with other items. Phablets for Lifuwu, Mikute and Ngolowindo primary schools got damaged and need repairing, which is relatively expensive in Malawi and it might be more cost-effective to replace these with other devices or means.

**Jean Chinsamba, Jan 2020**