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CASE STUDY

High quality literacy materials -a sense of purpose

....to Promote a reading culture in Malawi schools



PHOTO: Zikani Kaunda, Courtesy of Mponda Primary School, Zomba

“These books are really helpful as they have brought me and my friends to where we are now. Most of us in this class can read and write except for a few friends.”

Above (R): Lucy Chamgwadira, and friend: Std. 3 learners at Mponda Primary School in Zomba

Below: Lucy pointing at an answer during a class ‘word wall’



PHOTO: Zikani Kaunda, Courtesy of Mponda Primary School, Zomba

Telling Our Story

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Lucy IS ONE among the many Standard 3 learners who delight in a new USAID innovation of improving a reading culture at Mponda Primary School in the heart of the old Capital, Zomba in Malawi. Born in July 9, 2000, Lucy Chamgwadira who now stays with her grannies in Ndola Township after losing both her parents some years ago has since experienced some tremendous improvements in her reading skills. Her guardians both work for government departments within the city of Zomba. When she began Std. 2, Lucy could not read let alone write as if fulfilling the literacy saying of ‘*what can be read can be written*’. Mponda like most schools in the land had very little or no reading culture among its learners including some teachers. Several factors attributed to this problem include; inadequate or low quality literacy materials and less effective teaching methods among others. As a result, learners get up to Std. 3 or 4 without acquiring any significant reading skills.

However, following the introduction of a USAID-funded literacy program campaign in some selected schools in Malawi in 2010 the situation has dramatically improved for the better. USAID, through the ‘read aloud’ initiative administered several high quality literacy materials in terms of books, posters and charts in order to promote a reading culture among learners. These are story-based books which arouse interest in learners. The approach allows learners to identify a story title of each book with its powerful graphic cover illustration. First, a teacher reads out aloud a story from a book while the learners follow it through illustrations page by page. In effect the learners quickly become more familiar with the stories as they are read again and again by the teacher. Usually the reading is done in well organized groups of about 8 to 10 learners each, labeled with animal names –ELEPHANTS, LIONS, ZEBRAS etc.

Every Tuesday teachers at Mponda School provide an opportunity for the learners to borrow books from their library for a period of seven days. This has enabled many pupils in junior classes to have more time with the books at home where they can also be assisted by their guardians. Lucy had this to say, “*When am at home I read aloud before my brothers whereas at school we read in groups. Apart from these supplementary books, I can also to read other class books and the Bible.*”

But how do the teachers assess the learners’ ability in reading? At the end of each reading session which normally lasts for 120 minutes, the teacher gives the learners an exercise to read aloud, answer questions and write them. To those with problems, the teacher assists them with special remedial action. Lucy’s class has over 80 learners who have come through this USAID program. 95% have mustered reading leaving the 5% still under remedial action. “*These books are really helpful as they have brought me and my friends to where we are now. Most of us in this class can read and write except for a few friends,*” said the soft spoken Lucy who now enjoys each and every moment of the reading sessions in class.

The program continues to complement all the efforts by other books already on the ground in many schools including the selected ones. The success of USAID’s approach to literacy development in Malawi primary schools has creative methodologies with a sense of purpose in promoting a reading culture which been a forgotten element among many learners. It is not surprising that many learners from upper classes are craving to read these high quality literacy books as they see the ability with which learners like Lucy read and write. Learners like Lucy exposed to such high quality literacy materials should continue to be encouraged both at school and home so that the reading culture is sustained at all levels in Malawi.