

# CELEBRATING THE POWER OF LITERATURE AND LITERACY: THE CHIKUMBUSO WOMEN AND ORPHANS PROJECT SCHOOL LIBRARY

Maureen Rust<sup>1</sup>, Carly Barozi<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Central Washington University, Washington, USA, [mrust@cwu.edu](mailto:mrust@cwu.edu)

<sup>2</sup>North Stonington Elementary School, Connecticut, USA, [carly.buehler@gmail.com](mailto:carly.buehler@gmail.com)

**ABSTRACT:** *How do you launch a library literacy programme to inspire and empower a community of HIV/AIDS survivors in an inner-city slum in sub-Saharan Africa? This is exactly what the founder and citizens of the Chikumbuso Women and Orphans project in Ng'ombe compound, Lusaka, Zambia have achieved and continue to refine and grow. This paper focusses on the continuing development of the Chikumbuso library programme. In addition to providing resources for the school faculty and classroom curriculum, the Chikumbuso library has developed extracurricular programmes including a young adult book club, cultural awareness events, and technology trainings. The evolution of the library book discussion programme is the main topic of this paper. It also provides ideas and suggestions for other libraries wishing to implement a similar programme.*

**KEYWORDS:** *information literacy, sub-Saharan Africa, school libraries, book discussions.*

## INTRODUCTION

The focus of this paper is on a school library programme in Ng'ombe compound, Lusaka, Zambia. The authors demonstrate how this programme has benefitted its users by teaching and reinforcing literacy skills for not only the students at the school, but also the teachers and other members of the project. This paper highlights the development and literacy benefits of the library, including its young adult book club.

The benefits of access to literature and libraries are undisputed. UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) recommended developing rich literate environments in its 2006 Global Monitoring Report on Education for All: *Literacy for Life* UNESCO (2006). According to Easton (2009, 311-312), a literate environment is one that provides access to reading materials, and availability of formal or non-formal continuing education. Shrestha and Krolak (2014) argue that once literacy skills are obtained, they must be supported by a literature-rich environment or they are in danger of being lost (p. 402). Providing a community with a well-stocked and staffed library helps to reinforce the reading and critical thinking skills that students learn from an early age (IFLA n.d.). Access to reading materials and literacy instruction provide students who have limited resources the ability to learn about other cultures and places, giving them a global perspective and the tools to be a more productive member of their own society Anderson and Matthews (2006, 577-578); Dent (2010, 7-8).

This paper is a case study of a successful school library in Zambia, located within a women's and orphans' project. Special attention is focussed on the secondary student book club and its impact on the participating students. The creation and evolution of the book club serves as a model for other public and school libraries wishing to reinforce the literacy skills of their young adults and nurture a life-long love of reading. This paper provides an overview of the community project, the development of the school and library, and the creation of activities for the book club. The authors also look ahead to the future of the project and the library.

## CONTEXTUALISATION

The Chikumbuso Women and Orphans Project is a grassroots project that was launched in 2005 in Lusaka, Zambia, initially as a micro-enterprise to give widows in the Ng'ombe compound community training and a means to support themselves. The project grew, eventually incorporating a free K-7 school, meals for students, an after-school programme, support for students from grade 8 through college, a gap-year programme, an emergency safe haven for girls, job placements, healthy life skills training, and a school library, which is the subject of this paper. Chikumbuso also provides food and supplies for families, including the elderly in the community.

## THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE CHIKUMBUSO LIBRARY PROGRAMME

### *Establishment*

The library programme at Chikumbuso was established in 2011. An empty classroom at the Chikumbuso site was dedicated to house the library. It was painted in bright colours, shelves were installed against three walls, and tables, chairs, and comfortable reading spaces were created using *chitenge*-covered cushions and mats. A school in the United States donated a collection of 3,000 books. This original collection of gently used books consisted of fiction and nonfiction, suitable for reading levels Pre-K through 8<sup>th</sup> grade, and they were primarily in the English language.

The collection is used to supplement classroom lessons about subjects such as weather, history, geography, and biology, in addition to literature. All classes visit the library weekly to explore the stories and information there, and to receive information literacy lessons from the librarian. The physical space is also used after school by the older students who have graduated and now attend local secondary schools.

The library also benefits the women of Chikumbuso by providing technology training and reading materials to increase their literacy. The Chikumbuso librarians are recruited from the community, often being graduated students from the programme. This training and employment have resulted in empowering the librarians with the skills, knowledge, and a sense of pride and accomplishment, as well as providing a means to support their families. In addition to their in-house training, the librarians are given paid time and funds to travel to a nearby Lubuto library where they are mentored by a certified Zambian librarian.

### *Organisation*

A team of librarians from the American Friends of Kenya ([www.afkinc.org](http://www.afkinc.org)) visited the project in the summer of 2011 to assist with organising the newly arrived collections. A member of the Chikumbuso community was hired to be the first librarian and was also involved in the sorting of library materials. Many of the Chikumbuso students arrived every morning to help apply barcodes and spine labels, making it a true community project. Initially the library subscribed to the cloud-based library automation system, the Library World ([www.libraryworld.com](http://www.libraryworld.com)), to establish a database of titles with the ability of managing circulation electronically. Eventually this subscription was discontinued due to unreliable internet connectivity, costs, and lack of use for circulation. The books were classified by the Dewey Decimal Classification System, and the team of librarians used resources such as the *Sears List of Subject Headings* Sears and Miller (1997) and a Dewey Decimal Classification Chart OCLC (2003) downloaded from the internet. They had also brought a supply of spine labels and markers. These were used to create spine labels for each book to assist with organising the books on the shelf. As the books were classified, they were placed on the designated shelves. The categories used for shelving the books were: picture books; I Can Read, fiction, nonfiction and reference. Laura Wendell's (2011) seminal publication *Libraries for all: How to start and run a basic library* was also referred to when setting up the Chikumbuso library. These resource materials were left behind by the visiting team of librarians for use by the Chikumbuso librarian.

### Staffing and Training

The first librarian at the Chikumbuso library was a community member Finety Muntango. She worked with the visiting librarian team to learn how to classify, label, and shelve materials, and how to circulate the books. Because of the unreliable internet connection, the automated Library World circulation system was bypassed, and circulation information was (and still is) kept in a journal. The visiting librarians also worked with Muntango on ways to promote the collection using displays and providing classroom teachers with resources that reinforced classroom subjects (for instance, weather). Within a year, Muntango was offered a job as a classroom teacher, and another member of the Chikumbuso community was selected to take on the librarian position. Training for incoming librarians is provided by the outgoing librarian and visiting volunteer librarians when they are available. In 2015 a group of Chikumbuso teachers and the librarian visited the Ngwerere Lubuto Library ([www.lubuto.org/ngwerere](http://www.lubuto.org/ngwerere)) to observe their community library programme. The Ngwerere Lubuto librarian, Givenchy Besa, who has a library science degree from the University of Zambia, offered to mentor the Chikumbuso librarians. Accordingly, the Chikumbuso librarians are given paid time and transportation fare to visit the Ngwerere Lubuto library for ongoing mentoring and training, thereby reinforcing their growing library management skills.

### Chikumbuso Book Club

Each of the K – 7th grade classes at Chikumbuso visit the library once a week. During their visits, the librarian reads aloud to the younger grades and assists the older students in selecting books for school and recreational reading. Students attending grades 8 – 12 at the local public schools frequently return to Chikumbuso before or after school and use the library as a quiet place to study. In 2014, a visiting school librarian from the United States brought several copies of the young adult book, *A Long Walk to Water Parks* (2010). Simultaneously the Chikumbuso teacher-trainer identified several secondary school students to participate in an after-school book discussion group. This was the pilot group for the Chikumbuso Book Club. Since then, book club members have read and discussed titles such as *A Long Walk to Water Park* (2010), *The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind* Kamkwamba, Mealer, and Zunon (2012), *The Heaven Shop* Ellis (2005), *Waiting for the Rain* Gordon (1997), *I am Malala* Yousafzai and McCormick (2016), and *Thunder Cave* Smith (1997), to name just a few. Often the discussions are accompanied by related experiences. For instance, after reading *A Long Walk to Water*, the students had an on-line discussion with American students who had also read the book at a secondary school in Connecticut. After reading *Waiting for the Rain*, a story set in South Africa that deals with prejudice, the students watched the movie *Mandela* Menell et al. (2006) and had in-depth conversations about the complexities of apartheid and civil rights. Following the reading of *Thunder Cave*, the students were able to have a Skype conversation with the author, Roland Smith, to learn about the craft of writing. Being able to read and discuss these ideas and stories has expanded the students' global exposure.

The book discussion groups are typically made up of six to ten secondary school students and they span a two-week period. Each weekday, the students meet with the discussion facilitator (the librarian) to discuss the previous evening's readings and they start the next section. When the book is finished, a concluding discussion is held and there is usually some sort of activity related to the readings. The books are selected not only for their availability (as several copies are needed to accommodate the club members), but more importantly for their subject relevance. The book club has discussed books dealing with AIDS/HIV Ellis (2005), apartheid Gordon (1997), resource scarcity Kamkwamba et al. (2012); Park (2010), elephant poaching Smith (1997) and bravery and human rights Yousafzai and McCormick (2016).

Books clubs give young adults a social interaction forum in which to hone their critical thinking skills and develop a strong sense of self (Appleman, 6). When asked how participating in the book club impacted his studies and future, former Chikumbuso student Teddy Nosiku noted:

Reading and writing has always played a vital part in my life. However, even though it significantly helped, schooling was not what influenced me to continue developing those skills. It was the book club and the library at Chikumbuso that sharpened the person I am today. Believe it or not reading in the developing world like Zambia where I come from, reading is not for everyone. This is not because they don't like reading, it's because they don't have an opportunity to do so. Lucky me, the book club gave me that opportunity, that opportunity to comprehend the world beyond the one I knew. It developed positive thinking and gave me a better perspective of life, enhanced my knowledge, improved my concentration and made me more confident and debate ready ... Reading is one of the most important and beneficial activities I have ever engaged in. The pleasure and rewards I got from the book club is immeasurable. Reading is the kind of exercise that kept my mind engaged, active and healthy from all the toxic activities that was going around me and in my community. Reading has benefited me not only for the sake of knowledge but also for personal growth and development. All that thanks to the book club and that library (Teddy Nosiku, email to author, September 26, 2019).

Former Chikumbuso student Aaron Nyambe added:

It [the book club] has impacted my life in so many ways. Such as being able to analyse or understand what I am reading in a different perspective. Like, learning about different cultures, and about life through reading nonfictions from different authors. The book club has helped me to be where I am today. It's where I was meeting friends and sharing ideas as well as interacting through discussions about the book we would read. Schools would have been boring without libraries (Aaron Nyambe, email to author, September 26, 2019).

## **OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES**

The library recently celebrated its eighth anniversary. Nearly a decade after their establishment, the Chikumbuso School and library are now realising several cohorts of graduates who are moving on to higher education and training. In 2018, 47 high school graduates from the programme were attending trade schools, colleges, and other forms of post-secondary training (Chikumbuso 2019). Seventeen 2019 graduates are currently being placed in a wide variety of post-secondary training programmes, including nursing, electrical engineering, teaching, economics, environmental health, pharmacy, and computer studies (Mishek Mvula, email to author, August 18, 2019). While difficult to quantify, the authors draw a direct correlation between the library programme and these student achievements. The positive reaction to and strong participation in the book club supports its continuance. The biggest challenge is to secure multiple copies of selected titles for student distribution. One possible solution is to plan the titles well in advance and work with Lusaka bookstores on discounted prices.

Library use at Chikumbuso has evolved as community needs make themselves apparent. Instruction at Chikumbuso is delivered in English, and by the time the students are in the second grade, they are fluent. However, it was recognised that providing materials in the local languages would also be beneficial, and the original collection has been supplemented with books in the local languages of Bemba and Nyanja. Retention of the librarian has also been an ongoing challenge. Identifying an individual with high interest in the library programme and who recognises the benefits of information literacy has sometimes been difficult, often with the person in the position leaving for personal reasons. Fortunately, having a strong training protocol in place has helped in onboarding new librarians. Additionally, the librarian is now compensated at the same rate as the classroom teachers to demonstrate equity and recognition of her contributions to the students and the teachers.

The strength and responsible management of Chikumbuso and its library programme has resulted in increased support from a wide range of donors. An American Rotary club has funded new furniture, books, and teaching materials to the programme. A cohort of American and Zambian Rotary clubs provided funding for the recently completed computer lab, which will play a significant role in preparing the students and community of Chikumbuso with the knowledge to succeed in a technological and information-rich global

society. The Chikumbuso project, including the school and library, is funded in part by proceeds from the micro-enterprise projects. The project relies heavily on grants, donations, and volunteerism to support the programme. For security reasons, the library at Chikumbuso is accessible to members of the Chikumbuso community, but not to unaffiliated citizens of Ng'ombe. This restriction limits funding opportunities available to public libraries in the region.

The word Chikumbuso comes from the Bemba term for "Remembrance." Members of the community are encouraged to "Remember those who have died, where we have come from, and to do for others" (<https://www.chikumbuso.com/>). To retain sustainability for the project, students who have graduated and receive professional training are expected to "remember" by giving back to the project that gave them their future. The base of support for the project grows as more students graduate from the programme and return as professional and financial supporters.

## CONCLUSION

The Chikumbuso library programme was founded in opportunity. It was established and has evolved due to the efforts of the project administration, its teachers and librarians, and the contribution of book donors, teacher-trainers, and discussion facilitators.

The impact of the library and book club at Chikumbuso is reflected in student outcomes. Every year the number of graduating students who go on to successful careers and/or higher education continues to grow. They leave Chikumbuso with an appreciation for the written word, the value of the knowledge they have obtained, a heightened global awareness, and the desire to give back to their society and their country.

The authors of this paper welcome inquiries regarding further information about the Chikumbuso School Library and book club.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Chikumbuso would not exist if not for its founder, Linda Wilkinson. It is hard to calculate the number of lives that have benefitted by participating in Chikumbuso, either as a widow, a student, a graduate, an employee, or a volunteer. Linda's decision to locate space and resources to create the Chikumbuso library has resulted in a backbone of literacy for the entire community. Thanks also go to Maggi Alexander and Carol MacArthur at Greely Middle School in North Yarmouth, Maine, for generously providing the Chikumbuso library's seed collection of 3,000 books. We would also like to thank Chikumbuso Women and Orphans Project director Gertrude Banda for her wise oversight and guidance. Givenchy Besa, librarian at the Ngwerere Lubuto Library has generously given her time and knowledge to mentor and train the Chikumbuso librarians, and we are grateful. Finally, we acknowledge the contributions of past and present project administrators, teachers, and librarians who have made this program what it is today.

## REFERENCES

- Anderson, J., and M. Paul. 2010. "A Malawian School Library: Culture, Literacy and Reader Development". *Aslib Proceedings* 62(6): 570-84.
- Appleman, D. 2006. *Reading for Themselves: How to Transform Adolescents into Lifelong Readers Through Out-of-Class Book Clubs*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Collins, K., and Wilkinson, L. 2019. *Chikumbuso 2018 Annual Report*.  
[https://www.chikumbuso.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Chikumbuso\\_Annual-Report\\_2018.pdf](https://www.chikumbuso.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Chikumbuso_Annual-Report_2018.pdf)
- Dent, V. F. 2006. Observations of School Library Impact at Two Rural Ugandan schools. *New Library World* 107(9/10): 403-421.

- Easton, P. B. 2014. "Developing Literate Environments: Fleshing Out the Demand Side of Education for All. *International Journal of Educational Development* 34(1): 3-10.
- Ellis, D. 2005. *The Heaven Shop*. Markham, Ont.: Fitzhenry & Whiteside.
- Gordon, S. 1997. *Waiting for the Rain: A Novel of South Africa*. Laurel-leaf Books. New York, NY: Bantam Doubleday Books for Young Readers.
- Kamkwamba, W., B. Mealer, and E. Zunon. 2012. *The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind*. New York, NY: Dial Books for Young Readers.
- IFLA International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions. n.d. *How Libraries for Children and Young Adults are Supporting Development by Providing Access to Information*. <https://www.ifla.org/files/assets/hq/topics/libraries-development/documents/libraries-for-children-and-young-adults.pdf>
- IFLA International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions. 2019. *IFLA Global Vision: 2018 Ideas for Actions*. IFLA Global Vision. <https://www.ifla.org/node/36891>.
- Menell, J., A. Gibson, J. Demme, E. Saxon, P. Shai, C. Samson, H. Masekela, and N. Mandela, 2006. *Island Pictures*. New York, NY: Clinica Estetico, Ltd and Palm Pictures.
- OCLC Online Computer Library Center. 2003. *Summaries DDC: Dewey Decimal Classification*. <https://www.oclc.org/content/dam/oclc/dewey/resources/summaries/deweysummaries.pdf>
- Park, L. S. 2010. *A Long Walk to Water*. Boston, MA: Clarion Books.
- Sears, M. E., and J. Miller. 1997. *Sears List of Subject Eeadings*. 16th ed) New York, NY: H.W. Wilson.
- Smith, R. 1997. *Thunder Cave*. New York, NY: Hyperion Books for Children.
- UNESCO. 2005.. *Literacy for life*. Education for All Global Monitoring Report 2006. Paris: UNESCO. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000141639>.
- Wendell, L. 2011. *Libraries for All!: How to Start and Run a Basic Library*. Washington, DC: Peace Corps, Information Collection and Exchange.
- Yousafzai, M., and P. McCormick. 2016. *I Am Malala: How One Girl Stood Up for Education and Changed the World*. New York, NY: Little, Brown and Company.