From The Field

Cascading Positive Change in Teachers
Active Teaching and Learning in Schools, in Zambia

JESSI HANSON-JAVIER AND MIRELLISE VAZQUEZ, CHILDFUND INTERNATIONAL

Mrs. Ngulube from the rural primary school of Nangoma, in Zambia, had little teaching preparation before agreeing to be one of the first teachers to participate in a new teacher training program implemented by ChildFund-International. Like many teachers in her region of Mumbwa, her classes have 70 to 110 students in a single session. Students vie for spots on the floor, often sharing textbooks and pencil stumps. She has limited hours to teach the standardized curriculum, and until now she has relied on didactic, teacher-centered instruction, where the teacher talks and the students simply listen. This tactic is more difficult in that many of the students are hard to keep engaged due to low energy; most walk nearly ten kilometers to reach their school and eat as little as once a day. Mrs. Ngulube is proud of her profession, but her and her colleagues suffer from lack of support and low morale. For them, it is all about just getting through another school day and hoping that the students are learning. ChildFund is working to change this.

In April 2008, 12 Zambian teachers from three schools were invited by ChildFund to participate in the Active Learning and Teaching in Schools (ATLAS) program. In partnership with ChildFund-Zambia and the International Reading Association (IRA), the program seeks to improve the quality of education by targeting the quality of teaching and learning through the effective use of active, participatory instruction and learning methodologies. Instead of using rote teacher-centered approaches, ATLAS empowers educators to rely on student-centered learning activities, where children are given the space to actively participate. They are encouraged to talk about, question, explore, evaluate and debate what they learn, all in a supportive and friendly environment.

The teacher participants, along with participation from the schools’ directors and local representatives of the Ministry of Education, go through in-service training workshops spanning over 12 months, facilitated by IRA Education Specialist Phyllis Hildebrandt. This in-service training includes learning about child-centered teaching methodologies.
and using developed materials that focus on participatory and active learning, which in turn turn the teachers practice applying within the classroom.

ATLAS is based on the belief that both theory and hands-on practice of proven methodologies are more effective than theoretical training alone in supporting change. In order to make substantial inroads with teachers when it comes to implementing participatory, child-centered classroom practices, an influx of essential materials and continuous and intensive technical training, coaching, and supervision are essential. For these reasons ATLAS not only proposes to help teachers develop and use materials, but also to learn, observe and integrate knowledge and practice, recognize and diagnose problems, and consider and apply alternative solutions through an iterative process that includes continuous supervision, feedback, and coaching.

One focus of the training sessions are on developing age-appropriate, learner centered practices. Participant training covers core content such as language and math instruction, and research-based practices that support early grade learning. Another key aspect to training success lies in giving teachers the opportunity to participate meaningfully in processes that recognize and value their intellectual capacity, experience, and resourcefulness. When teachers themselves are purposefully involved in the process of improving teaching and learning conditions, they are generally more motivated and willing to put what they learn into practice. Thus in addition to providing continuous in-service training, ATLAS will also establish and support a teacher quality circle (TQC) to ensure teacher-directed learning and instructional behavior changes happen.

In order to foster an ongoing culture of reflective teaching and professional development, TQC members meet regularly to monitor, share, discuss, and solve classroom issues related to the implementation of new teaching practices as well as develop/create/improvise/procure and use essential teaching materials, as needed. Furthermore, the TQC is responsible for stepping down training for non-TQC teachers at the three schools in order to begin the work of creating child-friendly model schools. The 12 initial teachers become mentors to their fellow education peers, cascading their knowledge to others who will also go on to share this vital training and experience.

Throughout a year-long process of training, potential master teachers within the TQC are identified, developed, and supported to ultimately facilitate additional TQCs in the subsequent scale up of the program beyond the implementation period of ATLAS. Teacher training and TQCs are key features of ChildFund’s child friendly school model, called CLASSE, a whole-school reform initiative that focuses on building quality in the areas of quality content, student health, teaching and learning processes, children’s rights, and holistic learning environment.

In 2008 and 2009, a number of the teacher participants had the added opportunity to participate in a teacher exchange program with New Zealand teachers, funded by ChildFund-New Zealand. The Zambian teachers visited New Zealand schools, in order to learn more about active and participatory methodologies in the classroom and teacher-quality circles. Afterwards, the teachers from New Zealand were able to visit the Zambian schools to see the conditions that their international peers struggle with everyday. The exchange worked to bring teachers and their classmates together to achieve cross-cultural understanding, professional motivation, skills development, and, ultimately, improvements in the quality of education learners receive.

Through the two-way exchanges between Zambian and New Zealand teachers as well as intensive in-service training, the program hopes not only to motivate teachers and build cross-cultural understanding through the development of global support networks but also to help teachers apply effective classroom practices for quality improvement in education.

“Soon after the first workshop, [our school’s teachers] started implementing the new strategies, and training other teachers in these practices. In my class, I have many at-risk learners. And after I implemented the new methods, I was so happy to see that the learners in my class started learning better,” commented Mrs. Ngulube. She has demonstrated one of the greatest advancements in her teaching instruction. On a given day, you can find her students working well together in group activities, giving presentations to the class, or playing learning games. Mrs. Ngulube walks around monitoring their progress and engaging them in time-on-task learning. She has a sense of control within her classroom for the first time in many years, and the genuine opportunity to make a difference to her students’ education despite the obstacles that face them all.

Jessi Hanson-Javier has over 7 years experience working in the field of public and international education. As Education Associate at ChildFund International, her focus is towards Program Quality. Ed. M International Education Policy from the Harvard Graduate School of Education; B.A. Secondary English Education-Teaching License

Mirellise Vazquez has over ten years of professional experience in the field of international development. During her four years with ChildFund, Mirellise has held several posts, which included conducting advocacy on Capitol Hill in Washington D.C. and the United Nations on behalf of the world’s deprived, excluded, and vulnerable children, as well as serving as ChildFund’s first Foundation’s Officer. Prior to joining ChildFund, Mirellise worked at the United States Department of Labor’s Bureau of International Labor Affairs, where she focused on child labor and education technical assistance programs, research, and policy. Master’s Degree in Public Policy & International Affairs from the University of Pittsburgh; Bachelor’s Degree in Government from Franklin and Marshall College.