

WHY READING IS AN ESSENTIAL PRECURSOR TO FORMAL LEARNING AND EDUCATIONAL SUCCESS: THE STORY OF HOW MIREMBE WORDS OF WISDOM GOT INVOLVED.

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Abstract.

A child's capacity to read, comprehend, and be able to explain what is read is essential to educational success. A universal experience for low-income countries such as Uganda, and especially in rural communities, is that a child's access to reading is not uniformly assured. This is especially true in rural communities where economic, developmental, and educational opportunities are very limited. This report will explain a special intervention by a group of volunteers, determined to make a difference by introducing extra reading support as a gateway to knowledge acquisition, community engagement, and character development of children in specific rural communities in the Central regions of Uganda.

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1. DESCRIPTION OF THE PROBLEM AND BACKGROUND.

About 7 years ago, in the course of routine voluntary activities, this author and family members visited Lawrence Kaweesi Memorial Secondary School located in Kitongo, a subdistrict of Mityana. The secondary school had been built with our material support, in response to the need to improve access to higher education in this rural community. On one of the many visits this author along with other volunteers, observed that while the early Secondary school students were highly motivated to go to school, their educational pathway was hampered by difficulties in understanding English, which then impacted their capacity to comprehend the subject matter, and thus affected their capacity to pass exams at an expected

level. Thus, in addition to the high level of motivation to help the Kitongo region and its people develop a competitive secondary education, it was determined that remedial reading had to be part of helping these secondary students right away. The need to also address the problem much earlier in the child's development was identified. Hence the birth and intervention of remedial reading, at a very early age, so that the next generation of students would have a better chance of being prepared for higher education.

Mirembe Words of Wisdom, a voluntary organization, was established to respond to this identified educational challenge. Our program was not a scientific intervention, but a humanitarian intervention with a focus on education.

The mission was identified as:

To create a culture of reading that advances the education, health, literacy, and well-being of children in rural villages in Uganda by providing donated books to schools and access to libraries.

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The vision was also identified as:

Through this action, Literacy motivates a desire for education, which promotes preparedness for school and sustains the energy necessary to improve educational outcomes for the individual child, the parents, and the supporting and surrounding communities.

The activities to intervene and answer the problem included the following: How to secure early education reading materials, share and distribute them for free to the communities identified; obtaining volunteers that would engage in these activities, and engaging the local communities and schools to appreciate and be part of this intervention in a meaningful way. This is a narrative history of a program intervention NOT an experimental intervention study.

This author along with friends and family utilized the contacts that we have in the community we live in the United States, to collect books that were age-appropriate and intended to teach reading and transported them to Uganda. To achieve this, it meant that we had to engage friends and contacts on the ground in the community in the State of Wisconsin, collect the books, store them, and find a way of transporting them to Uganda in an affordable and managed way.

Initially, this was done by packing books, as part of the suitcases intended for travel. This would mean also that friends and relatives traveling to Uganda were asked to take books. A major change in this effort happened in January 2018, when a large group of students and professionals, coming for a medical camp in Uganda, consisting of 25 people, were able to bring 25 suitcases of 50 pounds each, full of small and thin books. This made it possible to have close to 4,000 books, made available to the community targeted in Uganda. Other means of collecting, storing, and transporting books were creatively developed and utilized over the years.

At the beginning of this intervention, books were distributed by teachers of Lawrence Kaweesi Memorial Secondary School to the neighboring houses and communities. More and more children and their parents welcomed this idea and wanted to have books to read. It quickly became clear

that this method had to be changed as there were not enough books to distribute and make available to all children interested in the reading exercise. Hence, the methodology of book distribution changed from making a book available for keeps to each child in the community to storing the books at a central storage place, and distributing the books to the schools in the neighborhood communities that were interested in this activity. A rural small library was thus created. The books were transported by volunteers of the program by “boda boda,” motorcycles used for public transportation. Quickly, the community engagement was very successful within the first year and the number of local schools that were welcoming this approach increased from 3 to 10. Fast forward, to the writing of this report, in July 2023, the program has now expanded to other regions within Mityana District and beyond. There are now 40 schools, all primary level, spread to districts of Mityana, Kassanda, Biika, Masaka and Luweero.

The cumulative capacity of the library, which is still essentially mobile, involves about 30,000 books that are distributed by the methodology explained, and that covers kindergarten through to primary seven.

2. METHODOLOGY.

2.1. How It Was.

The discovery of additional activities intended to enhance the love for reading extended to include other child development core activities. At the request of the schools, headmasters, administrators, teachers, children, and parents in the communities, it became quickly apparent that the reading program which involved all the classrooms in all the volunteer schools was indeed making a difference. The difference was notable in the children’s motivation to come to school, to participate and engage in reading. Additionally, all parties involved appreciated the addition of other core education activities that looked at utilizing the content of the books to promote topics such as gardening, vegetables, social and civic responsibilities, leadership, character building, and sports. To be involved in these additional activities, it

was a requirement for participating schools to enroll students in the reading activities, as a condition of being engaged in all other activities.

2.2. Leadership and character-building.

The special attention provided to reading by the teachers, and the volunteers in each school enabled the administrators and teachers to also introduce key concepts of what it means to be a good leader, a good classmate, a member of the school, and to show pride in caring to treat peers and adults respectfully. This resulted in the establishment of a practice where students of each class would identify as the students of the month, whose character of leadership and courtesy identified them as the students of the month. This also meant that there were also reading competitions in each class to identify achievers in reading. Such achievers are also identified and honored.

2.3. Using reading to increase appreciation of the environment through vegetable gardening.

To advance an improved understanding of the connection between reading content and nutritional health as well as the health of the environment, the participants were introduced to the idea of planting vegetables such as cabbage, collards, and others that are easy to take care of. This meant that each classroom, at each school, had its own garden that they tended by taking turns every week. By the time of that harvest, each class celebrated and enjoyed the fruits of their sweat by having a meal together. This created an environment of community, purpose, and focus.

2.4. Reading and sports for boys and girls.

Gradually, as these activities have expanded through the reading lens, sports of soccer for boys and netball for girls have been added at the local school level, but also competitively within the schools that are involved in the programs. In 2022 and recently, these sports activities have led to competitive games which included engagement with peer schools in the program and galvanized community support. A sports cup is given out to

boys for soccer as well as to girls for netball. A unique award is given out to the winners and the 2nd and 3rd runner-ups.

2.5. Reading Competition.

At the request of the school administrators, the students, and parents, a reading competition started in 2018 and has now been added for all the schools that are involved in the reading development program. Like sports, reading competitions are a source of pride and joy but also a commitment to the activities. The reading competitions also identify and honor winners of each school and each region. It is important to note that during the full 2 years of school shutdowns, the reading program did not stop. This was very helpful to many boys and girls.

2.6. Appreciating the involvement of communities, families, and schools.

In a space of 7 years, this initial idea has taken root and became a source of pride and joy, not only to the parents but the local communities where those schools are located and the regions that are host to these series of activities. At each of the schools identified, and in the unique classrooms of those schools, a considerable level of improvement in reading has been marked for all students involved. This has improved my motivation to go to school daily and consistently. Additionally, teachers and administrators of these schools have also reported significant excitement about their work. Consequently, this program has been a good intervention and continues to be sought after by many communities in these rural areas.

3. CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION.

In a space of 7 years, the total number of students involved has moved from a few tens to hundreds and now thousands. As of this report, there are over 10,000 students enrolled in close to 40 primary schools across 3 major districts of Mityana, Luweero, and Masaka. The level of satisfaction and voluntary engagement at the classroom, school, community, and family levels remains phenomenal. Manifestations of this appreciation are evidenced by the level of turnout of

the communities at these competitive activities. This is true for the reading competitions, for the sports, soccer, and netball competitions as well as the gardening competitions, and in the choice of the leader of the month outcomes. This has meant that for each of the 7 classes every month, there are 7 leaders identified for the duration of the school year. There are 845 students, 50 honored at each school. Additionally, for soccer, 4 annual competitive cups have been awarded with the winning team also getting a goat to share and celebrate at the school level. The same level of engagement is also shown for other activities as described above.

3.1. *What Are the Next Steps?*

This intervention deserves a formal study to evaluate its activities at different levels.

1. A formal study to evaluate the impact at the schools involved and those in the same geographical space, with similar students, and demographics is important. Challenges of funding and resources remain high but the program itself has concrete touchable outcomes. It is anticipated that as Mirembe Words of Wisdom continues to work with UBHA, University of Kisubi (UniK), as we go forward, we will secure more partners to come to the table and improve evaluations of these activities. What is clear is that indeed the love for reading has expanded and has set ablaze an excitement for books as a fundamental component of learning.
2. Continued implementation of this intervention in the current schools.

We look forward to feedback, suggestions, and most importantly financial contributions and sponsorships to hold steady the current activities and expand them. The story of MWow is unique and an opportunity to work, serve, and learn together. We are grateful to the staff team of MWow, who include: Godfrey Busekerwa, Prossy Nakisinde,

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