

Leadership in Action Project:
Teaching at Star Top Community School
Lusaka, Zambia

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Facilitated by Mercy and Isaac Sakala, Star Top Community School



Project Overview

Between Sunday the 15th of June and Thursday the 31st of July, I lived in Zambia's capital of Lusaka to teach in the Star Top Community School of Ng'ombe Compound. Star Top is a primary school which teaches from baby class to grade 7 (ages 3- 12).

I was the 3rd Laidlaw scholar to reside with the kind and hardworking family of the headteacher (Mercy Sakala). The first scholar arrived in the summer of 2024. He did not come over to teach, but to help with the school's internet presence- putting the school on google maps and creating the school's website. The second scholar arrived in May 2025. She came to teach a variety of subjects while funding and overseeing the construction of a classroom for the baby class (ages 3-4). My arrival in Lusaka was on the same day she left but my goals were similar to hers- to work as a primary school teacher while to funding and overseeing the construction of the school library. Before the scholars arrived, Star Top school was functioning without outside help, but only barely. Before the first scholar, it was impossible to find the school even existed online. If no scholars arrived this year, the school would have no classroom for the baby class, no library and be short-staffed for an entire term.

Mery and her husband (assistant headteacher Isaac Sakala) told me that, in the long term, they want the school to run independently but to do that they need outside help. That is why each scholar who has lived with the Sakala family has tried to leave behind something that lasts, whether that be a website, a classroom, or a library. While I had two concrete objectives, my overall goal was to help the school grow and sustain itself in the long run. So, if you are a first year Laidlaw scholar thinking about where to go for your LIA project, please consider going to the Star Top Community School. You can make a real difference there.

General Primary School Teaching

Of my three goals, this is what I spent the majority of my time doing, teaching the children, and planning lessons. I taught each grade from baby class to grade 7 at least once per week. I was assigned four subjects: English, Sports, Creative and Technology Studies (CTS) and Expressive Arts. CTS is an interesting mix of arts and crafts, sports activities, computer studies, and practical skills for children such as cooking and safety in the home. Expressive Arts is a similar subject to CTS but with less of an emphasis on practical skills and more of an emphasis on arts, computer studies and, surprisingly, mathematics.

While I taught every grade sport, I only taught the baby class, middle grade, and grade 1 once per week and these were sports lessons. They were also the most difficult lessons, partly due to the excitable nature of young children, and partly because the children did not see me as an authority figure at first. The reasons for this numbered at three- all the other teachers were Zambian, the previous scholars were non-white, and the children found my British accent rather humorous. Putting all that together meant I was seen as more of a funny character who happened to be telling them to do star-jumps rather than an actual teacher. This came to a head during my second week of teaching when I had to cut my sports lesson with the grade ones short due to exceptionally poor behaviour. I turned to Mercy

and Isaac for advice after this incident and they recommended I split the class into groups and take each group out for sports one at a time. Upon taking this advice, sports lessons with the younger children became much easier manage and I was able to complete full lesson plans with them. I also noticed that the children are less likely to misbehave when exercising. So, for the younger children, I put a greater emphasis group activities and simpler tasks which improved their engagement. Despite these improvements, it took the children a long time to get used to me and it was not until my second last week of teaching that the younger pupils saw me as an authority figure. While the sports lessons were difficult at first, with the younger students especially, the children really did seem to enjoy them. Each time I walked through the playground at least two children would say to me "Sir, sir, are we doing the sport today?" which was very adorable. Furthermore, Isaac said to me that since the previous scholar and I had been teaching sports, he noticed fewer incidents of sickness among the students.

Other than sports, the subject I taught most frequently was English- a subject I exclusively taught the grade twos. When I first arrived, the majority of grade two students (ages 6-7) had recently moved from more overcrowded schools to Star Top and were therefore unable to read out words more than one syllable long nor understand basic phonetics. The students were over a year behind the level they should have been at. Consequently, I had to stop following the curriculum and go back to basics. We spent many lessons going over "th," "sh" and "ch" sounds with English lessons essentially turning into phonics lessons. Compounding these difficulties was the fact that even the grade twos took a long time to see me as an authority figure, and I had become reliant on screaming quite ferociously at the poor children to maintain their attention. I did not take pleasure in these shouting episodes and asked multiple teachers, multiple times on how else to maintain class control but they were unable to advise me. That said, it seemed as if the English lessons were going well, with students being able to complete the written tasks I set on the chalkboard correctly. Due to, what I thought, was good progress I set the children a tricky reading comprehension task during my fifth week at Star Top. However, I had overestimated the children's reading ability, with most words in the comprehension task being meaningless to the pupils. They did not even understand how to sound out words. It turns out that, while their phonics had improved, the students had been mindlessly completing the tasks I set for them without understanding what the words they wrote out meant. So, I turned to Mercy, who provided truly excellent advice on how to better control the class and focus on the individual needs of each child. With new knowledge at hand, I refocused my English lessons on sounding out and breaking down individual words. This worked very well, my reliance on raising my voice decreased significantly and by the end of my last English lesson, every pupil in grade two could (to one extent or another) sound out words they had never seen before.

Grades 3-7 took to seeing me as an authority figure far sooner than the younger pupils, so I seldom had to raise my voice towards them. I taught the older years a greater variety of subjects than the younger ones, from CTS to Expressive Arts to Sports. The grades 3 and 4 always seemed to enjoy our CTS lessons as we would often be learning through drawing cartoons or teaching them using my laptop which they had great fun using. I also taught the grade 5s and 7s (there were no grade 6 students) with my laptop, more so after the library was built. At first, all grades from 3- 7 struggled with the laptop. It would take most students a minute and a half to find the "file-> save as" icon in word documents and five minutes to type out "My name is >insert name here<." As time progressed, however, the children grew more competent and would find the "file-> save as" icons in mere seconds and the time they took to type out their names "My name is >insert name here<" was reduced to two minutes. We also

had good fun learning how to use Microsoft paint 3D, with the children quickly becoming adept in all its major features. I could be a bit more creative with my sports lessons with the older children as well. The grade 3s and 4s learned how to compete in races with obscure rules which I made up while the grade 5s and 7s mastered an obstacle course we made from old tyres and playground equipment. I also ended up teaching the grade 5s and 7s some basic geometry, specifically how to draw 2D shapes with a compass. This, they struggled with slightly, every now and then we would need to revisit a lesson but most of the time they would answer the practice questions correctly. If they did not during the first lesson, they would after we went over the topic again.

Library Construction and Use

This was perhaps the most important part of this LIA as the addition of a library means that Star Top School can now better teach their pupils how to read by using storybooks and library resources. Construction started a week later than we would have liked as, sadly, I encountered unforeseen difficulties in transferring funds into Isaac's bank account. Once this was sorted, however, things quickly got underway. And it had to be quick since we only had electricity for 5 hours each day meaning the builders could only use their tools for 5 hours a day. During the week of the library's construction, myself, Mercy and Isaac would rush into the town centre in the morning to purchase the materials the builders would need to start work in the late afternoon when electricity came. It was a true race against time as the schedule for our electricity changed every week. Therefore, if the work was not completed within a week, there was a real chance that next week's schedule would only provide electricity in the dead of night if at all. Thankfully, we were not starting from scratch, the room adjacent to the school office was disused and could be renovated into a library. As a structure was already in place, it only took a week and a half to finish building the library. Only a week of that time required electricity to weld tall, strong metal bars together to construct sturdy shelves- able to withstand sneaky children hanging off them when the teacher is not looking. The builders spent rest of the time painting the library walls and putting down a permanent carpet. Just so I do not take undue credit, I did not build the library, the builder built the library, I do not know how to build a library. My contribution to its construction was assisting Isaac and Mercy in installing the carpet as well as a donation of books. It was the funding from my Laidlaw bursary which facilitated the library's construction rather than my labour. Nonetheless, the library was indeed built halfway through my third week in Lusaka.

Luckily for me, the week after this was mid-term holiday meaning I had a whole week to concentrate on getting the library ready for the children. Over the years, Mercy had amassed a sizeable collection of donated books from various sources, including the scholars before me and the very generous donations from Catriona Wilson of the Royal Scottish Forestry Society. All of these needed to be registered via stamping, catalogued and sorted into the correct section- a series of tasks which took me 5 days to complete.

After its completion, I started to take the baby class, middle grade, and grade 1 to the library rather than have our sports lessons. This was because, for many of the children, it was the first time they ever got to visit a school library, and they loved the opportunity to go in and have me read stories to them. Pupils from all grades found it very exciting to use the library and it quickly became more common for children to ask when we would next be in the library rather than when we would next do sport. Grade

2s and above I had performing whole class readings in the library, though I would also read out more advanced books to the older grades as well. For these older children, rather than replacing sports lessons with library time I could replace CTS lessons with library time as I taught these grades more frequently. As well as books, the library had a variety of learning resources which I utilized with the grades 3 and 4 in particular. I split their library lessons into two parts, for the first half of the lesson each pupil would be given a flashcard with a long and tricky word on it. If the student correctly pronounced the word and placed it in the context of a sentence, they would be rewarded with praise. If not, we would write the word on the whiteboard (the only one in the school), break it down and sound it out. The second half of the lesson would involve each child reading out at least one page of a short children's story. If they were especially good, I would also let them use the min-whiteboard and magnetic letters to make big words. The regular teacher for the grades 3 and 4 classes (they shared one teacher), also, made full use of the library resources. She did so spectacularly well, elevating the grade 3s from barely being able to read out the level 4 flashcards to pronouncing the words on the level 5 flashcards perfectly. I gave my lessons to the grade 5s and 7s in a similar way to the grade 3s and 4s but allowed them to use the other resources more frequently due their older age. Moreover, the library was an ideal space for teaching the grade 5s and 7s how to use my laptop. Gathering around the screen on the carpet proved easier than having to hold up my laptop in the front of the class due to the lack of projectors.

Outcomes

While this project did not go perfectly, I genuinely believe that it went as well as it possibly could have and that all outcomes were positive.

I certainly did make mistakes whilst teaching the children but overall, I believe that I enhanced their learning experience. The increased number of sports lessons provided to the children improved their overall health and happiness. The grade 2s learned how to correctly pronounce English phonetics and sound out unfamiliar words, skills they will require to grow their vocabulary and reading skills. Grades 3-7 got the chance to learn basic computer skills, including how to type out a sentence, how to save a file and the grade 5s and 7s specifically learned how to create art in Microsoft paint 3D. The older children even learned basic geometry skills.

Perhaps the most important outcome was the completion of the school library. As was mentioned previously, the library is a permanent structure that will last as long as the school does. Its significance lies in the fact that it accelerates the pupil's ability to read engaging resources and stories. Moreover, due to the limited resources at Star Top school, every class expect one must share a classroom with one or more grade. This can be disruptive to teachers and students alike and negatively impacts learning. The library, however, acts as a private space for lessons where one grade at a time can learn undisturbed.

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