

LESEDI PRIMARY SCHOOL

January 2017

I am writing this whilst sitting at Johannesburg airport returning from 9 days in Zimbabwe with Benson. The main aim of the trip was to spend some quality time getting involved with the school and helping out where possible. My last visit was in May 2016 and although Benson and I communicate regularly about progress, nothing beats being there in person.

Since my last visit, Benson has worked extremely hard on various construction projects. Like you I have seen the photos he posts on the project's Facebook page. None of them do the progress justice. In May last year the first classroom block was nearing completion. There was no kitchen or dining area, so cooking and eating was outdoors regardless of the weather.

Thanks to your wonderful support the school is now transformed. If you have followed Benson's updates you will know that we now have a teacher's cottage which will accommodate up to three teachers, a kitchen rondavel, covered cooking area and dining gazebo. In addition, the land around the school building has been fenced to provide security for the children. The biggest project has been construction of a second classroom block, to accommodate our increasing student numbers. The new block is already being used for classes and will soon be plastered and painted.



Teacher's cottage nearing completion. Our new Grade 1 teacher, Miss Ncube, will stay here. It will also be available for volunteer teachers to use.



Kitchen rondavel and cooking area



Front gate and fence around school



Second classroom block, already in use for Grade 1

This busy (and expensive) few months means that the school is transformed in appearance and functionality. However talking about the nice new buildings would be missing the point. The point is – as always – providing an education for the children, nurturing hope and ambition and providing role models for the future.

I hadn't thought there would be a huge change in the school since my last visit, other than the new buildings and an increase in student numbers but how wrong I was. The reputation of the school is spreading fast and there is a buzz around town as parents recommend Lesedi to friends and family. A genuine excitement that at last there is an affordable option that is striving for excellence.

I was checking out of Ilala Lodge in town this morning and the front office manager Ivy asked how my stay was. I explained that I had been visiting the school that Benson had established (everyone knows Benson!) and she was vaguely interested. Then I mentioned Lesedi and she exclaimed...oh LESEDI. A friend had just recommended Lesedi to her and she was planning to withdraw her Grade 3 son from school in town to enrol him at Lesedi. I said that we had an excellent and very passionate teacher for Grade 3, Mrs Mutori. Ivy was thrilled as she knows of Mrs Mutori by reputation and couldn't believe she is now at Lesedi. Word is getting around that our teachers have a passionate ambition for the children, so unusual at non-private schools in present day Zimbabwe. I was amazed to learn that Ivy pays US\$300 per term for schooling for her son (this is the normal cost at a non-government school) and she was equally amazed to hear the fees at Lesedi are a nominal US\$10 per term. With problems mounting in Zimbabwe, this will make a huge difference to the family finances.

During my time at Lesedi, I spent a morning wandering between the various classes with my camera, sitting in on lessons. I was truly blown away by this experience. The two ECD classes were having great fun in their lessons. In ECD "A" class with Ms Mpofu we learnt

how to put on a sweater and zip up our tops...ensuring our collars are folded over nicely. We also had a singalong and worked off our excess energy in the playground.

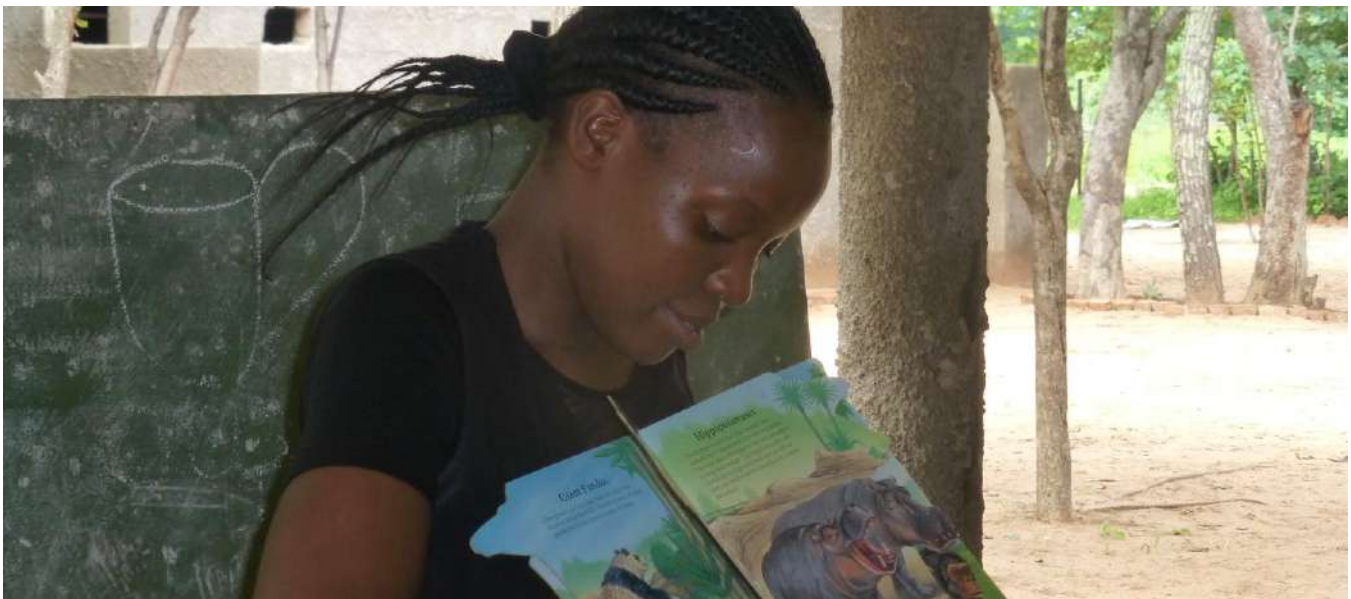


Learning to dress properly



Playtime for Miss Mpofu's ECD "A" pupils

In ECD "B" the three-year olds enthusiastically and noisily sang a song incorporating various animal noises and screeches ably performed by their teacher Miss Ngwenya, before settling down to identify various animals from picture book.



Miss Ngwenya – ECD "B" teacher

We also enjoyed a music lesson, which again seemed to involve making as much noise as possible.



Part way through the morning we all stopped for breakfast. The children formed an orderly queue at the new kitchen, where porridge had been prepared for the 130 kids plus the teachers. The porridge mixture is now being supplied by World Vision and is full of nutrients, so it is heartening to know that the children are getting such a good nourishing meal each day.





The youngest children sit together in the new gazebo, whilst the older kids cram together on the bench or sit on the ground. We will need to either extend the gazebo or perhaps supply more benches in due course.



After breakfast classes resume. Whilst most of the teachers at the school are still funded directly by our charitable trust, we have been allocated two government employed teachers for Grade 1 and Computer classes. Grade 1 is being taught by Miss Ncube whilst Miss Sibanda teaches computer lessons to all the classes except ECD "B".



Pupils from the new Grade 1 intake taught by Ms Ncube

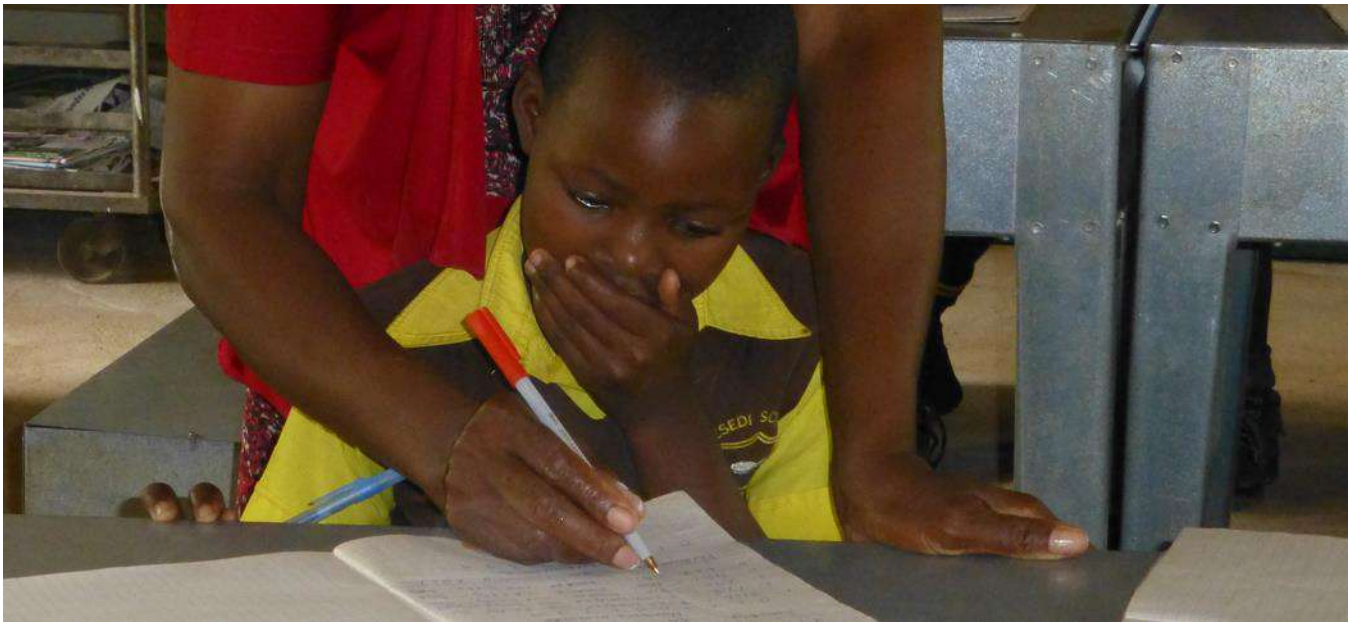
The Grade 2 class with Mr Ndlovu was very high energy. Many of you will have seen the kids performing the cookie song ("who stole the cookie"), either in person or on one of our Facebook video clips. I was impressed to see that the class was being taught the meaning of the song and this led to a discussion of the difference between something being true or false. Of course this couldn't be managed without some enthusiastic renditions of the song with much hilarity from both the children and Mr Ndlovu. I was thrilled to see that what the kids perform during the village tours is something they clearly find so much fun.



Mr Ndlovu teaching Grade 2 about the cookie song

The most advanced work was going on in the Grade 3 class, taught (and nurtured) by Mrs Mutori. The teaching was focussed, absorbing and participatory. I was hoping to answer a question just to get the round of applause for each correct answer but the competition was too fierce! Later in the day I popped back to the class while they were studying mathematics – the concentration was intense and I was impressed by their beautifully handwritten exercise books.





An old truck rim wheel hanging in a tree is used as a school gong to signal the end of classes at 12 noon. Then lunch is served. The students gather in the dining area and receive their second hot meal of the day.



I had assumed that after lunch teachers and pupils all go home. Wrong again. Lesson planning and marking is generally done after school and many of the children were still

at Lesedi until late afternoon. Mrs Mutori explained that she likes to have the children with her when she is marking their work, so that she can discuss any mistakes with them in person. Some of the Grade 2 class helped by sweeping their classroom. The playground kept many of the other children busy, accompanied by shrieks of joy and much laughter.

My presence at the school didn't cause as much disruption to the classes as I'd feared. Most of the children have seen me several times now so I have become familiar to them, although still fascinating. Each of them finds a reason to touch my hand as they walk by – I think they are trying to discover if my white skin is real! They all love the camera and are desperate to have their photos taken, striking up all sorts of poses to attract my attention.



I was particularly touched by one new boy who has just started in Grade 3. I genuinely don't think he had seen a white person "up close" before and during breakfast and lunch he fervently held my hand and was trying to drag me away somewhere – Benson thinks he wanted to show me off to his family.



The poor chap was desperately trying to communicate through sign language but didn't yet have any English so understanding was a challenge. He was mortified when Benson and I headed into town to pick up supplies for the school. He kept asking Benson whether I was coming back and then managed to ask in faltering English if I was "backering". What a super word and one I will certainly use in future!

My experience with the children and teachers left me both humbled and brimming with optimism. Benson has spoken many times about the school becoming a centre of excellence and I now endorse this ambition wholeheartedly. I am returning home full of ideas and have to keep reminding myself that we are limited by finances. However, given the amazing support we have received so far, I am confident that given enough time all will be achievable.

The most exciting news is that it may be possible to connect the school to mains electricity and to the internet. The nearest electricity supply is at a veterinary station 1.8km from the school. Benson has had tentative discussions and they may be willing to allow us to connect to their supply, subject to us contributing to their own connection costs. Internet could be connected by satellite dish, although the basic package has very slow speeds. The best option would be to get fibre installed and I believe this could be possible – subject to affordability – although this will probably require us to have mains electricity. Benson is investigating this and getting quotes. Fingers crossed that we can find an affordable solution as this would transform the educational opportunities at Lesedi. We would be the only countryside school with internet service. What an achievement if we can make it happen!

I realise this update has turned into a bit of an epic but it would be remiss of me not to mention Benson. For the past week I have had a taste of Benson's life when he isn't on safari. We have started early each day and finished late, absolutely exhausted. Our week started with heavy duty pruning/hacking of the trees around the school with some of the kids helping us clear up the branches at the end.





We have driven back and forth from the school to town, keeping the builders supplied with cement and bricks. In town, we chased around placing orders for materials, tracking down workmen to make payments, endeavouring to get receipts and chasing up orders or work that was overdue. Rarely was even a short drive completed without being flagged down to give someone a lift or being stopped for inspection at one of the many, painfully annoying police roadblocks. To keep costs to a minimum Benson uses his own vehicle to transport all the materials, so he is constantly loading and unloading...bricks, fence posts, cement, glazing, quarry stone...the list is endless. It is exhausting, time consuming and stressful. For me it was a fantastic adventure and I loved every minute but I only had one week and wanted to cram as much in as possible. I also had Benson for company. For Benson, this lifestyle is constant and he is mostly shouldering the pressure alone. So please keep up the positive feedback, comments and encouragement so that we can let Benson know how proud he should be of what he is achieving.

One day Benson took me to meet the Chief at his homestead in a beautiful but extremely remote area about 40km from the school. This visit left a deep impression on me. The

Chief has a strong belief in improving education and health and because of his excellent leadership the community has managed to build both a clinic and a senior school. The clinic was funded by the district council and is almost complete but they have run out of bricks, so the building is not yet functional (it did occur to me that if they had constructed a slightly smaller building there would have been enough bricks!). I hope this is just a temporary pause in activity as this area sorely needs a medical clinic.



Our local Chief at the new (almost completed) medical clinic

The senior school opened about two years ago, and now has around 150 pupils in two classroom blocks. My understanding is that the funding came from a single donor. We met two of the five government teachers, all of whom share one very small teachers' cottage. The school is fortunate in that electricity cables already run across the school grounds, just metres away from the school building and teachers' cottage. Everything is ready to be connected, but connection costs around \$500...funds that the community and school doesn't have. Other than desks and chalkboards the school appeared poorly equipped and the concrete floor in the classrooms is breaking up, raising questions over the construction quality. We immediately wondered if there is any way we can help, but at this stage our assistance is limited to perhaps providing some bricks. Lesedi has several boxes of books donated by the Zambezi Schoolbook Project which are too advanced for our students and we are also hoping that we can send these books to the senior school.

Meeting the Chief and seeing the clinic and school really brought home to me the immense challenges faced by rural communities. Through Benson's incredible vision and hard work, along with the generosity of our supporters, Lesedi should enjoy a bright future. The school is located close enough to the main road for tourists to visit, providing valuable income and support. For those communities without a link to tourism - and without a "Benson" - the situation is very different. Enthusiasm and inspired leadership just aren't enough. Maybe one day we will be able to do more but as Benson has often told me it

isn't possible for any of us to save the world, we can only try to do our bit to make a difference.

Another big project for us during the past week has been to go through each receipt and invoice that Benson has collected since the project started and match them up with my spreadsheets of expenses. We will soon be preparing our 2016 Financial Statements for the UK charity which will be reviewed by our accountant and this was the ideal opportunity to collect all the paperwork from Benson. Benson has historically tried to avoid dealing with figures and finances so the responsibility of spending large amounts of charity funds has weighed heavily on him. To Benson's immense credit (and relief) his financial records were immaculate and every dollar spent had a matching receipt or invoice (although sometimes it took a while to find it!). I now have a new appreciation of how difficult (and time consuming) it is to collect receipts in a largely cash based society.

During a long car journey to Bulawayo to buy provisions for the school, not available locally, Benson and I chatted about our plans for the year ahead at Lesedi. We decided on a year of consolidation, ensuring the construction projects so far are fully completed and focussing on equipping the school. But then we agreed that internet and electricity supply were really priorities and It would be worthwhile seeking quotes. Then Benson reminded me of his idea to utilise the gap between the two main classroom blocks, basically joining the blocks together for minimal cost and providing a small room suitable for computer classes.



A simple structure is also needed to house the generator, which is currently only covered by plastic sheeting. We need to build a stand for the water tank and ideally want to add guttering to the buildings and purchase smaller tanks to collect rainwater and feed the main tank. Plumbing is still required for the ablution block. The long track leading to the school needs work to ensure that buses bringing in tourist groups don't get stuck, something that can easily be a problem on the sandy track. Adding gravel will solve this but a lot is required. Although the school property has been fenced we need to add

more fence poles for support. Then the rest of the school land needs a perimeter fence urgently. Benson is keen to convert some of the land to a sports pitch, adding goal posts. So, another busy year after all! That is before we consider the proposed clinic, which is waiting for approval from the District Council.

The good news is that while we are covering construction and other one off costs, along with the bulk of teachers' salaries, the school is largely self-financing in terms of day to day activity and the school committee is successfully managing the income from village tours and school fees. A donation was recently received from UNICEF, with stringent conditions for how it can be spent. The committee decided to spend part of the donation on school desks and are planning to use the rest to purchase text books for the new curriculum that has just been introduced. Benson and I must have been to every bookshop in Bulawayo looking for the new books - all schools should now be using them but only a few are in circulation. We eventually found three books to buy as examples for the teachers - two Grade 1 subjects and one Grade 3 subject. The Grade 3 book was US\$24 per copy, and with 11 subjects each parent should purchase 11 different books per child. How on earth any rural schools will manage this expense is beyond me.

As I finish my rambling notes the plane is flying over Algeria en-route to the UK. It has been more difficult than usual to say farewell to the school and to Benson as I would love to stay and help for longer but I have no doubt I'll be planning a return visit very soon.

For those of you who have persevered to the end of this update, I send a huge thank you for all the support you have given to make this dream a reality. Without your incredible donations, I would be writing a very different progress report! Mr Ndebele, our head teacher, and Mrs Mutori have asked me to pass on their immense gratitude for what is being achieved. The kids say a resounding THANK YOU!!!!



I can't resist adding a final photo of Benson with his wonderful 93-year old mom, who used to be a teacher at the rural school where Benson started his education.

