

LESEDI PRIMARY SCHOOL

June 2017

I have just said my sad farewells to Benson at Vic Falls Airport, having spent a week working with him on various projects at Lesedi Primary School. Yet again my respect for Benson increases as I have another taste of his incredible commitment to Lesedi and the pressure he deals with day in day out.

In my last trip report earlier in the year, I wrote that 2017 was to be a year of consolidation at Lesedi, without any major construction projects. However, we soon reversed this decision after the President's Road Scholar group travelling with Benson in March committed to fund a new classroom block. Our youngest kids are still using the original open structure which is very cold in the winter months, so we decided to begin construction of Classroom Block III without delay. The builders have made good progress and Benson is now sourcing the roofing materials so that the roofer can begin work while Benson is on his next safari.



I also mentioned in the same report that we were considering the possibility of connecting the school to electricity. After researching the costs further, we almost ruled this out as too expensive but a very generous pledge to cover half the cost encouraged us to start fund raising. Remarkably our target was met within hours and the project is now well-underway. The work to install the pylons went well and the electricity supplier will soon be shutting down electricity in the area to connect the new supply to the grid. Then we need to fit the transformer and take the power lines up to the school buildings (probably underground). Once this is done we will appoint a local electrician to wire the existing buildings and install sockets and lighting.

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Following my last visit to the school in January, I returned home incredibly excited by the progress and with the realisation that our small project had turned into a “proper” school. I did have concerns, however, that we still needed to find ways to bring the community on this journey with us.

Returning from this trip, I am left reeling from the pure energy radiating from the school. The kids are transformed from the shy, unsmiling children of just a couple of years ago. They are now confident, vibrant, energetic and noisy. They love singing and dancing and the joy is evident all around. You can feel the positivity emanating from both the school and the community, who are now solidly behind the project.



The grasp of English has improved dramatically and it is now possible to chat to most of the children. They are inquisitive and fascinated by my white skin, straight hair and mostly by my camera. Having taken so many photos I thought it only fair to put together a movie for the kids, showing many of the photos I had taken over the past couple of years. We gathered the whole school into one classroom and set up the projector. The movie was 20 minutes long and I was concerned that the kids would lose concentration very quickly. However, as they began to recognise themselves in the photos the atmosphere became electric as they enthusiastically shouted out the name of every face that appeared. They were beyond themselves with

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excitement and at that moment it really hit me how we are changing lives and the responsibility we now have for these children.



We had interrupted lessons for the movie show and I assumed with all that excitement the teachers would find it difficult to regain the attention of their pupils. However, I walked past the classes a few minutes later and the attention to the teachers was absolute. These kids are so eager to learn and to grasp the opportunities we are giving them.

Some of you may remember the young lad I wrote about in my January report. He had grabbed my hand and was very distressed when I left for town. He had only just started at the school and didn't have any English...but he managed to establish that I was "backering" (our new word for "coming back"). I was upset to learn that this very sweet little boy has some sort of learning issues. Maybe he is dyslexic but the teachers at his previous school apparently claimed he could not be taught anything. He is in Grade 3 with the fabulous Mrs Mutori but she was struggling as he can't grasp what she is teaching and even trying to get him to draw a circle is beyond him. She is trying lots of different teaching methods for him as otherwise he seems bright and really has such a lovely nature. We would so love to get a dedicated special needs teacher and become a centre of excellence to take kids who are neglected by the mainstream schools. One of the reasons I mention this little lad is the response of all the other kids when his photo came up on my movie. This little boy who perhaps would be bullied at a school in the "developed" world got the loudest and most enthusiastic response from the rest of the school when his photo appeared. The other children are clearly very fond of him, which is heart-warming.

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Chatting to the teachers over the past week has given me a far greater understanding of various issues. Since our official recognition as a school in May 2016, I have been frustrated by the lack of government teachers that have been supplied. We only have two government teachers, both of whom requested a transfer to Lesedi. Our teachers for ECD "A", ECD "B", Grade 2, Grade 3 and our headmaster are all employed on a private basis and our total salary cost is over US\$1500 per month. Many of the donations we receive are for specific projects and knowing that we need over US\$18,000 a year for the teachers' salaries alone is a constant worry, particularly as we will continue to add a teacher each year as we progress through Grades 4-7. We also have an issue that two of our private teachers took very significant pay cuts to come to Lesedi and there is pressure to improve salaries at the school. Even though our teachers are keen to share this journey with us, they have their own financial pressures to deal with.

My frustration over the Ministry of Education's inability to send us our allocation of teachers has been somewhat tempered over the past week. A shortage of money in the country has resulted in a freeze on recruiting new teachers. Many schools have a severe shortage of teachers – the secondary school we visited during my stay should have had 9 teachers but were 5 short. Some schools only have 1 teacher! So understandably Lesedi is not a priority.

The determining factor in recruiting and retaining good teachers (whether private or government) is often the quality of the teachers' accommodation, particularly in the rural areas. Whenever Benson mentions that we need more teachers' cottages I groan at the additional expense. However, I now appreciate the importance of decent accommodation for the teachers. Our first cottage is already fully utilised so our next project will probably be to build more cottages, when funding permits.

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As with all schools, our teachers are vital to what we are trying to achieve. I was privileged to spend time in the Grade 2 and 3 classes, taught by Mr Ndlovu and Mrs Mutori. Both were inspiring, with the pupils totally engaged and learning whilst also having fun. The kids encourage each other and even my disruptive influence didn't stop the enthusiastic waving of arms to be chosen to answer a question.



The new curriculum encourages more interactive and outdoor learning than before and Mr Ndlovu was often on the playing field organising games and exercise.



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The one word I have kept using over the past week is “energy”. The kids are relentless in their high energy levels and enthusiasm. Benson commented that the nutritious meals they receive at school each day has made a huge difference. In classes, they are attentive and engaged. Out of classes they play long after school has finished. I would often see them spontaneously break out into song or dance.

Computer classes are going well and all ages apart from the youngest in ECD “A” are now gaining valuable exposure to computers. We are still investigating options for getting internet at the school. None of the suppliers can offer fibre in the area yet and VSat is going to be too slow. We are currently in discussions with Telco about a WiMAX option that could be a good solution if we can persuade them to put a new tower near the school rather than by the airport as planned. We will continue our discussions and hopefully we will eventually find a solution that works.



In my last report, I mentioned that some pupils from Vic Falls town were being enrolled at Lesedi because of the strong reputation it was gaining. This was benefiting our existing pupils, exposing them to different experiences, and raising standards. I did have concerns, however, that the pupils from town were being switched from private schools to take advantage of our lower fees and that they would otherwise have still got a good education. I now appreciate that this isn't the case at all. Living in town is expensive and salaries are generally very low. Government schools aren't an option if you want your child to have a good education and yet most families struggle to pay the school fees at even the cheapest private schools. The low fees charged at Lesedi offer a lifeline, even to those living in town.

Since my last visit, Benson has built a football/soccer pitch on land adjacent to the school. We have a school team and I was also impressed to see that some of the young men in the community have established a team and are playing in the local league. Their coach is one of our builders and he was alternating between laying bricks for the new classroom and shouting instructions to the players as they trained. It is great to see Lesedi being adopted as an integral part of community life.

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One of the highlights of the past week was meeting a lovely gentle Zimbabwean-born artist/musician, Nicholas Marco, whose family originated from Angola. Benson had persuaded the Dulux shop in Vic Falls to donate paints for our two new road signs for Lesedi. They recommended Marco as a sign writer. He has done a fantastic job and we are now all firm friends. Marco is in the process of decorating the outside of our kindergarten with paintings of cartoon characters and wild animals. Next will be the main classroom blocks which are likely to be adorned with at least a couple of dung beetles...loyal to the Ngoko theme. Excitingly he has offered to come and teach the kids some traditional music, which I am sure they will adore.



In addition to our regular school classes, Lesedi continues to offer adult education and literacy classes in the afternoons after school has finished for the day so that more senior members of the community can also benefit from the facilities.

I am sure that I have already rambled on for too long but for those of you with the energy to keep reading, I thought I would focus a little on Benson and give a description of one of his typical days when managing a building project at the school (given this is normally during a short break between safaris).

The day starts early and the first job is generally to purchase either \$20 or \$40 of fuel, enough to last the day. Then much of the time is spent driving back and forth

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between the school and town, ensuring that the building team and any other contractors have all the materials they need so that work isn't delayed. Bricks are ordered the night before and delivered overnight by truck from Hwange. Sometimes the truck breaks down or the driver isn't willing to deliver to the school so a few thousand bricks are left at the side of the main road. Benson then uses his own truck to load up a few hundred bricks at a time and drive to the school and back. Cement is ordered in town and delivered by Benson to the school. Pit sand and River sand is delivered but Benson still needs to go in person to the supplier in town to order and pay. Often the suppliers can't be found so he drives around town and eventually tracks them down. Everything takes so much time! Each trip for supplies generally ends up with the vehicle overloaded and the risk of a police fine en-route to the school.



One thing I really noticed for the first time is how much of Benson's own personal cash he gets through on behalf of the school. This is a largely cash based society and although he can get receipts for most purchases of supplies, he is constantly handing over a few dollars to those helping him. He needs assistance to load up the vehicle...a couple of dollars each time. Help to move bricks...a few dollars. Repairing some damaged shelving he has scavenged for the school...another \$5. Buying airtime for all the school related phone calls...a few dollars each day. Benson doesn't have receipts for any of this and therefore incurs the cost himself. His Toyota Hilux has also been totally wrecked by all the ferrying of materials over the past couple of years and Benson bears the cost of the regular repairs. A new vehicle is now needed as the Toyota is no longer suitable for long road journeys. Benson bears all this extra financial pressure without complaint – he says it is his contribution to the school. However, I know it adds considerably to his financial pressures.

Benson is overly conscious of his responsibility to our donors and works hard to maximise the value of all \$\$\$ spent. He scavenges constantly – during my visit we spent a huge amount of time at the construction site adjoining Vic Falls Airport. He charms the construction guys, jokes, negotiates, wears them down by his repeated

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visits and eventually they agree to part with some “scrap” timber, cables, metal etc. The vehicle gets loaded up and off we go. The timber is used to create much-needed shelving at the school, metal is ready to make a new, robust pot-stand for cooking school meals over the open fire. The cable is bought at cut price for the electrification of the school. We manage to “rescue” two sets of broken metal shelves that Benson has spotted at a couple of the builder merchants he uses...and there is a bar en-route to the school which has some unused shelving that Benson has his eye on and asks about each time he passes. Eventually they will no doubt give him the shelves just to shut him up...what they don't know is that he will then start on something else!



I know that Benson gets huge personal satisfaction from what we are achieving at the school and wouldn't have it any other way. However, he does feel the pressure and I would like to take this opportunity to say a huge THANK YOU on behalf of the school.

Sincere thanks also to our expanding network of donors and supporters. Without your support, very little of what we have achieved so far would have been possible.

I will leave you with one final thought...it is becoming increasingly obvious that “our” children at Lesedi are getting a special education. Both in terms of the standard of teaching, access to computers and their interaction with international visitors. Once primary school has finished, can we really leave these children to return to a standard secondary school? Personally, I think not. Benson finally admitted to me that he hopes to continue to build a secondary school after primary! I hope we get some government teachers allocated to us by then!!

To see the 20-minute “movie” I showed to the children please [click here](#) (the file is stored on OneDrive).

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Some additional photos:



Classroom Blocks I and II now joined by a library/office



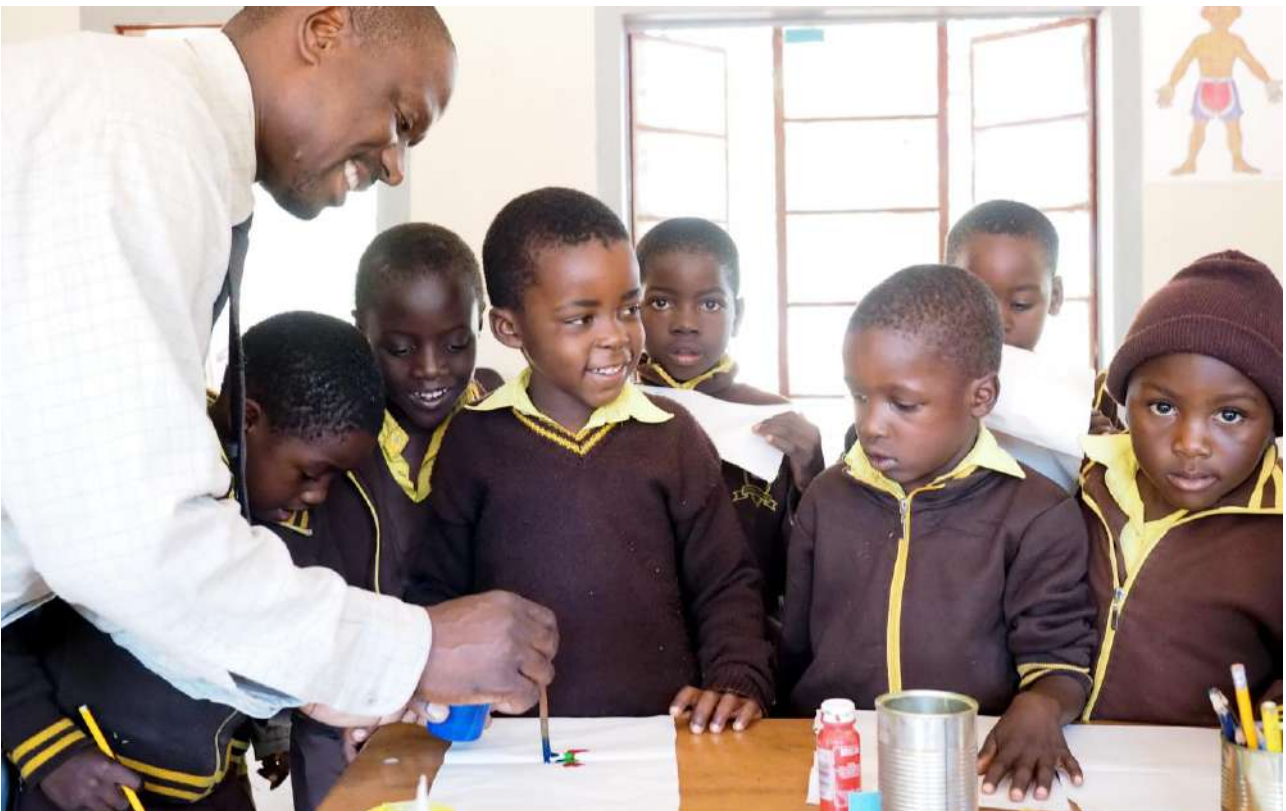
Happy kids after the arrival of more school books, kindly donated by the Zambezi Schoolbook Project

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Reading (English) out loud in Grade III



"Smudge" Painting with Mr Ndlovu

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Playtime



Looking cool in my sunglasses!