



Malawi Teachers Use Rainbows to Get Results

In 2002, Mr. Chalamba, a second grade teacher in the Ntcheu district of Malawi, had seventy-four second grade students, a bare classroom, and few books. Though a committed teacher, he faced a harsh reality year after year - the majority of his students cannot read and write by the third grade.

The problems of large classes and few resources are typical in Malawi's schools. More than 1.2 million additional children began attending school following the declaration of free primary education in 1994. Many more girls are now attending school, due in part to a USAID-supported campaign in the 1990's. But the system is ill-equipped to meet the needs of the students or teachers. A shortage of teachers is worsened by deaths due to HIV/AIDS, which has claimed at least one million lives in Malawi.

A solution for Mr. Chalamba came in the form of 'Rainbows and Coconuts', a locally developed teacher-training program that began in 1999. As a key strategy to improve educational quality in Malawi, USAID funded this program as a tool for "continuous assessments" in which teachers apply effective methods to promote student learning. The program is a collaboration among the Improving Educational Quality Project (IEQ), The Malawi Institute of Education, and Save the Children USA.



Photo: IEQ/Staff

A teacher in Malawi demonstrates the Rainbow, a method of 'continuous assessment' through which teachers track each student's progress in basic subjects.

USAID has emphasized wide discussions on using continuous assessments in the education system with teachers, university administrators, and regional education leaders. As a result of this process, the success of the pilot program has gained wide support.

Teachers in the program met for training and supervision, and together developed the methodology. Teachers learned to administer frequent and friendly individual student assessments. The results of their work with students are recorded on large, bright rainbow charts, with a sticker for each student based on his or her level of success.

"There were discussions in groups - pupils were able to ask the teacher questions. Gender bias was minimized. Even the deaf pupil is doing well."

- Mr. Chalamba, Ntcheu District Teacher

The program has demonstrated success in students' scores. In basic reading skills, the Ntcheu district students gained 54% in their scores, compared to only a 19% gain of a comparison group. In Mr. Chalamba's classroom of seventy-four students, the majority of students reached the top levels in basic subjects.

Intensive training is needed to help teachers carry out frequent individual assessments and keep careful records, with classes of up to 120 students. Yet as parents, teachers and even district administrators noticed the positive change, demand has increased from all levels for more sharing of 'Rainbows and Coconuts' techniques.