



En Classe

Improving schools. Building futures.



**Digital reading
program in the DRC**

Foreword

During the first six years of its existence, En Classe has primarily invested in the infrastructure of school buildings, classrooms and the safety of the children at school. But in order to create real chances for a better future for them, we also need to invest in a better education. The teachers' training is at a low level and there are hardly any course materials available. As a consequence, the majority of the children in grade 5 of the Congolese state schools still can't read. From a reading assessment that we conducted in 2014, it appears that only 17% of the kids in grade 7 is able to read and comprehend a paragraph.

Reading is very important for the development of a child. Therefore, starting in 2014, En Classe has made enormous efforts to provide the children in Congo with books.

However, we did not invest in traditional paper copies of books but in a digital library instead, the very first one in Congo! Our goal is to provide each school with 40 tablets, the maximum number of children in one class. Every day each class reads with the tablet for half an hour. Once that time is up, the tablets are collected in a plastic container and transferred to the next class.

On 25 March 2015, we officially introduced this program in our first school. It was a very special and successful day, attended by several important guests.

This report describes how the "digital reading program", as it is officially called, came about, and who our partners are.

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co-founder and president
En Classe the Netherlands and En Classe USA



Table of contents

Preparation	4
Implementation	8
Official launch	9
Future	10



Preparation

In a country where people are not very used to reading, books and e-readers, the implementation of a digital library can be quite a challenge. In order to succeed, preparation is key.

It was obvious from the beginning that we would need partners to implement such a large and innovative program. But even more important was the support and enthusiasm of the school, the director, the teachers, the children and their parents. Without the support and backing of the local community, a program like this is likely to fail. The local team of En Classe (Kerstin, Vivian, Anne-Marie, Giovanni and Michiel) was crucial during the preparatory phase since they did all the field work and (preliminary) research. And last but not least, funds were needed to get a pilot off the ground.

We subdivided the entire preparatory phase in seven different activities:

1. Development of the application.
2. Title selection of the digital library.
3. Acquisition of the tablets.
4. Selection and preparation of the school.
5. Preparation of the teachers.
6. Test to assess the reading level of the children.
7. Stimulate a positive attitude towards reading.



1) Development of the application.

Our partner Library for All (LFA) is responsible for developing the application. LFA is a New York foundation, whose goal is to teach five million children in developing countries how to read in five years - with the help of the LFA-app. The app provides almost free access to hundreds of books. In every country where the app is launched the LFA seeks out a local partner to help with the implementation of the app. En Classe was selected to do this for Congo, which, after Haiti, will be the second country where the app was launched. En Classe has also invested in the development of the app, so that the app is now *custom-made* for Congo. The development of the app is a work in progress. Every couple of weeks LFA comes up with further enhancements and updates for the app.

2) Title selection of the digital library.

In cooperation with LFA, En Classe started the selection process of the right books for the Congolese children. Important factors were: the language (mainly French and a bit of Lingala), the way Congolese children with their experiences will relate to the story (a tale concerning the subway in Paris would be hard to relate to) and the difficulty level of reading. We have developed our own reading materials for the very young (alphabet and vowels/consonants). We have also digitized books with approval of the author or editor. LFA addressed the legal aspects. The content of the digital library remains an ongoing process.

3) Acquisition of the tablets.

It soon became obvious that the tablets needed to be obtained in the Congo. Importing tablets was too risky and too complicated. Currently, the largest and most commonly used brand in Kinshasa is Samsung. That is also the only company that operates a service center. All along, Samsung has been very interested in digital reading program. The first 40 tablets were purchased at a discount, and Samsung has since then fully embraced the project and is sponsoring the further extension by providing free tablets and technical support. The tablet that we selected is very sturdy, colorful and appealing to children.



4) Selection and preparation of the school.

En Classe has 14 schools in its network which were all considered to become the first school for the launch of the pilot project "digital reading". Based on the size of the school, the relationship with the director and the location of the school, Reverend Kapini was selected. Since the very beginning in 2010, the relationship with the school has been really good. Principal "Papa Bena" has always shown a lot of initiative and responsibility and, with its seven classrooms, the school is the perfect size. We had detailed discussions with the school and the teachers regarding their contribution and responsibilities. To make the project possible, we had electricity installed and classrooms were further improved. We also provided a metal closet with electrical outlets and a stabilizer so the tablets can be charged safely every night.

5) Preparation of the teachers.

Teachers in Congo are not used to teach with support materials, let alone tablets. In order to ensure that the teachers of Kapini would feel comfortable with the tablets, we developed a training program for them, including a course book. On six Saturdays, the teachers attended three hour sessions in which they were instructed on how to use a tablet during class, but they also received tips on how to prevent damage, loss or theft. We found out that some teachers weren't able to read very well themselves, and it took them some time getting used to swiping *and* clicking. But during the final lesson, a role play in which the teachers had to teach other teachers, we were astonished by the end result! Everybody was able to look up a book and read it with the rest of "the class" in an interactive way.

6) Testing the reading level of the children.

In order to prove that reading leads to better results you must assess the base line. Our partner in the field of reading tests is the worldwide NGO World Vision. In October, specially trained proctors tested more than 200 children in nine schools.



The results were very disappointing. Only 2% of the children in grade 5 were able to read and understand a paragraph. In grade 7, this percentage was 17%. All nine schools will be tested again at the end of 2016. The hope is of course, that the children at the schools with the tablets will be reading significantly better than the children at the control schools. We are convinced we will achieve a positive outcome, but the numbers tell the tale, which is why we are also taking this component very seriously.

7) Stimulate a positive attitude towards reading.

Congo has a verbal culture. Reading is not popular and the children who do read, are sometimes called names like "nerd", or "Mfumu Buku" in the local language Lingala. They don't really know how to read for pleasure, probably because of the lack of books. This is why we decided to produce an entertaining play for the children, their parents and the teachers, to show them how fun reading can be. In cooperation with a local organization "Art and Action", a very interactive play was produced, complete with a song and a dance. It was big success! The children loved it!



La fondation En Classe présente:

“Mfumu Buku”
une pièce de théâtre de Diemba.



Joins-toi à nous et...

...tu découvriras aussi
le grand plaisir de lire!

La représentation aura lieu dans ton école le:

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Implementation

After all the rigorous preparations, in February 2015 all tablets were finally equipped with the latest versions of the app, and were tested and retested. The metal closet was delivered, electricity was installed and surveyed, the teachers were prepared, the children were thrilled to start and the parents were proud that their kids' school had been selected for the introduction of the digital library. On February 24, in the church that sits on the school grounds, the play "Mfumu Buku" was performed for hundred of parents and other guests.

In the following month, each day the kids were reading at Kapini. It took a little getting used to: the special containers in which the tablets were transferred to the class rooms, the collection and recharging of the tablets at night, the maintenance of the tablets and of course the actual reading on the tablets. The Congolese children learned very quickly how to swipe and click and how to find a book. It was an amazing experience. Oftentimes, the children spontaneously started singing the song from the play. And almost everyday, En Classe volunteers were there to assist if necessary. After four weeks, everything was ready for the big launch.



Official launch

It was important to have a big official launch because we wanted to show the digital reading program to the press. We wanted to show the other organizations and the Congolese government the possibilities. The first digital library of Congo is big news. It is a huge leap forward and probably the only way for the Congolese to catch up. By enabling them to skip some of the steps that the people in developed countries took.

Thanks to the partnership with Samsung we had access to the contacts at the Congolese Ministry of Education. The media was informed, there were many officials, all partners were represented, parents, children, teachers, hundreds of people once again came together in the church.

There were speeches by representatives of En Classe, Samsung and by the minister of Education of Kinshasa. Everybody emphasized the importance of reading. The children showed how well they were already able to handle the tablets. They sang the Mfumu Buku song again.

In the subsequent days, the launch was announced on Congolese television, in the newspapers and on Internet. Everybody was proud and delighted with this very promising start!



The minister of Education of Kinshasa is impressed



Future

But of course this is only the beginning. To provide one school with tablets to read is a good start, but eventually that won't make too much of a difference. Our goal is that many more schools in Congo will start reading with tablets. En Classe will, with its own financial resources and with the support of Samsung, World Vision and Library for All in 2015, introduce the digital reading program in three other schools. Based on the expected positive results of the reading assessment, a recommendation will be prepared for the Congolese government and the World Bank. Under the adagio: "count it, change it, scale it", En Classe would love to support the initiative to roll out the digital reading program even further by bringing large parties together. And therefore, a small organization such as En Classe can really make a difference.

The plan is that, by the end of 2016, the app can be downloaded on a simple telephone, so that it can also be used by adults and children at home. The app will probably cost about 2 to 3 dollars per year and will give access to hundreds of books. There will be no additional charges per book.

Everything that we have developed so far is publicly available and can serve as a blueprint for future partners of Library for All in other countries. In addition, every other organization or private school in Congo is free to use the app, the teacher training that has been developed and the play.

