

Children in Malawi have been making fantastic progress using a new maths app. This could be very positive for the future of one of the world's poorest countries.

Eurotalk is a London-based company that makes language-learning software. Recently, their Onebillion project has been in the news, especially since their maths learning app for children in Malawi was shown to improve learning. Dr Nicola Pitchford, a psychologist from the University of Nottingham, found that children using the app tripled their knowledge of maths in just eight weeks.

The name 'Onebillion' comes from the 'goal of reaching one billion children'. This is more or less the number of children who don't have the opportunity to learn basic skills, says Andrew Ashe, who started Eurotalk. Primary education has been free in Malawi since 1994, and the one million increase in student enrolment has put pressure on teachers, classrooms and resources. Educating children in developing countries has many great benefits. For example, explains Ashe, 'there is very strong evidence that if you can get the basic skills right at primary level for girls, they have fewer children, healthier children, and more likely to be part of the economy. An average girl in Malawi will have 5.9 children and it's unsustainable at the moment.'

Virtual teacher

Jamie Stuart, Chief Technology Officer of Onebillion, explains that 'children are put in groups of 30 or even 60 and taken to a special classroom to spend 30 minutes every other day with the device.' One tablet device can be used by ten or twelve children each day. Each Oneclass is managed by an international volunteer and there is a virtual teacher guiding the student through the app. 'All of the children in Oneclass are learning at their own pace,' says Stuart, 'every child is going at their own speed.'

The apps are designed to be as culturally friendly as possible, and they promote a positive image of girls. The project works closely with the education ministry in Malawi to make sure there are no cultural misunderstandings. As Andrew Ashe points out, the success of the project depends on the project 'working with existing structures. One of the things we are most happy about is that they do see it as their project.'

The project is funded by people in wealthier countries who buy their own language version of the app. 'Every single penny that we earn from selling those apps goes towards developing our literacy material in Malawi,' says Stuart. The key to the success of the app is how it takes advantage of the enthusiasm of young children to learn. 'The children are so engaged and able to progress at their own pace,' says Ashe. 'They are like sponges, they absorb so much information at this age and we think this is why we are getting such a good learning result.'

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