

Rewriting the story of global literacy

By Scott Walter

When he visited Monrovia, Liberia, in November 2016, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau left a Grade 5 class with this thought: “Everyone has their tools — a painter has brushes; a cook has pots. Students have their tools, too. They need pens, books, notes and one more thing they need to help them learn... fun.”

CODE, (formerly the Canadian Organization for Development through Education) has been getting children the “right tools” to get ahead in the world for more than 55 years. *The Rice Bird* book, a colourful tale from CODE’s Reading Liberia series, is one such tool made even more relevant when brought to life by an enthusiastic and skilled teacher — someone such as Trudeau.

The shelves in the Grade 5 classroom in which the prime minister guest-taught were lined with Reading Liberia books produced by CODE and its local NGO partner, WE-CARE. The books are special because they were all written and illustrated by budding and now-celebrated local authors and illustrators such as Watchen Babaola and Chase Walker who, a few years earlier, had taken part in CODE’s writing and illustration workshops taught by a group of international expert volunteers.

This new wave of writers and artists, deeply affected by years of civil war are, through their books, giving a new generation of girls and boys stories of their own; stories that inspire and motivate them to continue learning.

In 2014, young Liberians faced another interruption in their education when President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf ordered the closing of all schools to limit the spread of the Ebola virus. Schools would not reopen for seven months. During this time, WE-CARE distributed Kits of Hope filled with pencils, paper and Reading Liberia books to thousands of isolated and traumatized children forced into quarantine.

“I grew up in Liberia while my country was at war,” recalls Chase Walker, a Reading Liberia illustrator. “Sitting under a tree, I would draw stories in the dirt. This was my way of bringing my ideas to life and expressing myself. I would draw to escape my reality, much like reading a book, but there were no books around.”



Prime Minister Justin Trudeau chose to visit Slip Way Municipal School in Monrovia, where CODE delivers programming with its partner, the WE-CARE Foundation. CODE was one of two NGOs whose work he witnessed on his first trip to Africa last November.

Expert writing and illustration workshops are just one part of CODE’s comprehensive readership initiative known as Reading CODE. It is designed to instill in children a love of reading so they can grow into independent learners and problem-solving adults who can navigate the world around them.

The learning journey begins with equipping children with books written in their own language, set in their contexts and starring protagonists with whom they relate; not extraordinary heroes, but regular, identifiable characters who take chances, work hard, stand up for what they believe in and overcome obstacles.

Accompanying children along the way are teachers and librarians with the skills to bring these books to life. These are teachers who invite young readers to unpack the hows, whys and what-ifs of these books, laying the groundwork for them to think critically, problem-solve and open doors for themselves.

The Reading CODE initiative last year resulted in the creation and distribution of more than 300,000 children’s books in 17 languages to libraries and schools in six African countries. Volunteer experts also trained 613 teachers across Ghana,

Mali and Ethiopia in child-centred teaching methodologies, tablet training use and community librarian management.

CODE started out as a used book donation program in a Toronto church basement and has evolved into an Ottawa-based, UNESCO award-winning, literacy-focused development organization working in six African countries. It also offers “Burt Awards” in young adult literature programming in Africa, the Caribbean and among Canada’s First Nations, Inuit and Métis communities.

Over the years, the places in which CODE works have changed. Governments have transitioned, wars have broken out and natural catastrophes have dismantled infrastructure. Along the way, CODE has done its best to be there, adapting its programs and rising to the occasion, always firm in its belief that education offers the promise of a brighter tomorrow.

Perhaps Ban Ki-moon said it best: “Education is a fundamental right and the basis for progress in every country.”

Scott Walter is executive director of CODE (www.code.ngo). Email Swalter@code.ngo to reach him.