

CSC Evaluation and Monitoring Programme

## Bridging Zambia's Learning Gap through Innovation and Inclusion

**Charles Zulu**



**Zambia's education system has made significant strides in expanding access to schooling, yet a persistent challenge remains: too many children complete the early grades of primary school without mastering basic literacy and numeracy skills. In 2018 World Development Report the World Bank estimated that around 55% of Zambian children in Grade 2 could not read in their local language, while the 2021 National Assessment Survey reported that only about 4% of Grade 2 learners met the government's minimum reading proficiency standard and less than 40% of learners can read in their own languages by Grade 5. This learning gap has long-term consequences, limiting opportunities for young people and undermining progress toward national development goals and Sustainable Development Goal 4 - Quality Education.**

The problem is compounded by Zambia's digital divide. According to the Zambia Information and Communications Technology Authority (ZICTA), only 31% of Zambians use the internet, with rural households far less likely to have access to digital devices or internet connectivity. These gaps threaten to widen inequalities, leaving millions of learners without the skills needed to thrive in a rapidly changing world.

Against this backdrop, Charles William Zulu—a seasoned educator from Zambia's Eastern Province—has dedicated his career to closing these gaps. His journey from classroom teacher to Provincial Resource Centre Coordinator, and now Education Advisor for Cross-Cutting Projects at VVOB in Zambia, illustrates the transformative power of international scholarships to build local capacity

and foster innovation. Through a Commonwealth Distance Learning Scholarship, Charles gained advanced expertise in online and distance education, enabling him to support the design and scaling of interventions that have reached hundreds of thousands of learners. His story is one of resilience, partnership, and a relentless focus on outcomes for Zambia's most marginalised learners.



Charles showcasing the Digital School Project for out-of-school adolescents during International Literacy Day Advocacy Week, September 2025.

After nearly two decades working in Zambia's public education system, Charles William Zulu's career took a transformative turn in 2018 when he was awarded a Commonwealth Distance Learning Scholarship to pursue a Master of Arts in Online and Distance Education at The Open University (UK). The programme's focus on access, inclusion, and opportunity aligned with his ambition to use technology and innovative pedagogy to reach vulnerable learners.

Balancing full-time work with part-time study, Charles excelled in the programme, gaining advanced expertise in instructional design, digital learning tools, and educational research. Equally important, he joined a global network of practitioners and researchers in education innovation, broadening his perspective beyond Zambia.

## A System Under Strain: Barriers to Learning in Zambia

When Charles began his scholarship journey, Zambia's education system was grappling with a persistent and deeply rooted challenge: low foundational learning outcomes among primary school pupils. Zambia's national learning assessments showed that literacy challenges extend across the whole of primary education. In the early grades, only a small fraction of learners were meeting the government's minimum reading benchmark, and many pupils could not yet read a simple text. By Grade 5, national assessments showed that this foundational literacy crisis persisted, with most pupils still falling short of the desired level of reading proficiency in their own language.

The problem was systemic. Classrooms were overcrowded, especially in rural areas, and teachers faced the daunting task of supporting learners with widely varying abilities. Many relied on old-fashioned, recitation-based pedagogy, lacking training in differentiated instruction. Remedial education, where it existed, was fragmented and ad hoc—typically confined to small NGO-led projects that reached only a fraction of schools.

The scale of the challenge was immense. According to the World Bank, Zambia's learning poverty rate—the share of 10-year-olds unable to read and understand a simple text—stood at over 70%. These gaps were compounded by a growing digital divide, with rural households far less likely to have access to devices or connectivity. The COVID-19 pandemic further exposed weaknesses in digital infrastructure and highlighted the urgent need for flexible, technology-enabled learning solutions.

Charles understood that addressing these challenges required more than isolated interventions. It demanded systemic change—embedding remedial education into national policy, strengthening teacher capacity, and leveraging technology to reach learners both in and out of school. This vision set the stage for his pursuit of advanced study through a Commonwealth Scholarship.

## Gaining Tools for Transformation

In 2018, Charles was awarded a Commonwealth Distance Learning Scholarship to pursue a Master of Arts in Online and Distance Education at The Open University. For Charles, this was a turning point—a chance to gain the knowledge and tools needed to tackle Zambia's learning crisis at scale.

**'Receiving the Commonwealth Distance Learning Scholarship enabled me to pursue a Master of Arts in Online and Distance Education at The Open University (UK), significantly enriching both my professional practice and strategic influence within Zambia's education sector.'**

The programme equipped Charles with advanced expertise in instructional design, digital learning tools, and open and distance learning methodologies. He learned how to create engaging content for teachers and learners in low-resource settings, and how to integrate technology into professional development frameworks.

Beyond technical skills, the Commonwealth Scholarship strengthened Charles's strategic leadership capacity. He gained confidence to advocate for evidence-based approaches within Zambia's Ministry of Education and among international partners.

Equally transformative were the networks Charles built through the programme. Studying alongside peers from across Africa and beyond, he joined a global community of practice in education innovation. These connections opened doors for collaboration and knowledge exchange, from presenting Zambia's experience at the Pan-Commonwealth Forum (PCF9) to contributing to research published by the Commonwealth of Learning.



Charles presenting a paper on Technology-Enhanced Learning at the Ninth Pan-Commonwealth Forum (PCF9), 2019.

By the time Charles completed his Master's in 2021, he had evolved from a local implementer into a scholar-practitioner with the credentials, confidence, and creative ideas to influence education at national and international levels. This transformation laid the foundation for the systemic impact he would soon achieve.

## From Learning to Action – Pathway After the Scholarship

Completing his Master's in late 2021 marked a turning point for Charles. Armed with advanced knowledge in online and distance education, he transitioned from his government role to join VVOB Zambia, an international education for development organisation, as a District Cluster Coordinator for the Catch Up programme. This initiative, based on the Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL) approach, was designed to help learners in Grades 3–5 acquire foundational literacy and numeracy skills through targeted instruction.

The impact of his studies was evident almost immediately. He applied his new skills in instructional design and digital learning to strengthen teacher training frameworks, introducing technology-enhanced materials such as classroom videos and interactive modules. These resources were integrated into Continuing Professional Development (CPD) for teachers, ensuring that remedial strategies were not only effective but scalable.



Charles leading the development of digital materials for Catch Up Continuing Professional Development.

By early 2022, Charles had served as Education Advisor for Content, Learning and Innovation, and later as Cross-cutting Education Advisor for Curriculum Adaptation. In these roles, he became a key liaison between VVOB and the Ministry of Education, guiding curriculum alignment and embedding remedial practices into Zambia's evolving education system.

A pivotal moment came in 2023 when Zambia undertook a major curriculum reform, shifting from an outcomes-based model to a competency-based curriculum (CBC). Recognising Charles's unique blend of field experience and newly acquired expertise, the Ministry invited him to contribute to the review and validation of the curriculum framework.

Charles worked on scope and sequence mapping of the new curriculum, Lower Primary Syllabuses development and ensuring that foundational literacy and numeracy were strongly embedded. He also advised on integrating digital skills and cross-cutting themes such as climate change and gender equity, aligning Zambia's education system with global priorities for 21st-century learning.

Today, Charles's role spans multiple initiatives: the nationwide Catch Up programme, the Closing the Learning Gap pilot for Grade 2 learners, and the Digital School Project for out-of-school youth. His progression from district-level coordinator to national advisor underscores how effectively he leveraged his scholarship experience to influence systemic change.

## Transforming Zambia's Education Landscape

The impact of Charles's work is visible across Zambia's education system—in classrooms, teacher training colleges, and even parliamentary discussions. His contributions have helped institutionalise remedial education, strengthen teacher development, and promote digital inclusion for vulnerable learners.

One of his foremost achievements is turning the Catch Up programme from a time-bound project into an integral part of Zambia's education framework. Initially piloted in 80 schools in 2016, Catch Up has now reached 958,134 learners in Grades 3–5 across 6,254 schools in nine out of ten provinces.

**'I have played a pivotal role in shaping sustainable education interventions by leveraging insights from my postgraduate training, including tools like the Scalability Checklist and Sustainability Planning Matrix. These contributions have enhanced systemic integration of remedial practices and improved programme fidelity.'**

Charles also championed government ownership, ensuring that remedial activities are included in official budgets and monitored through existing Ministry structures. His advocacy efforts have even led to Members of Parliament being appointed as Catch Up champions, reinforcing political support for foundational learning.

At the heart of this transformation are teachers. Charles has overseen the training of thousands of educators in evidence-based pedagogy, shifting practice from rote teaching to interactive, learner-centred methods. Initially, resistance was common since teachers were attached to the traditional way of teaching. But as results emerged, attitudes changed; many school leaders have seen the importance of the programme because learners were now able to read, write and numerate.

Internal monitoring reports show that over 60% of previously struggling learners advanced by at least one proficiency level in a single term after receiving Catch Up support. Charles supports and promotes the use of learning management systems and digital monitoring tools such as the TaRL Web Portal and the Prevail Electronic Monitoring Tool which VVOB and TaRL Africa uses, enabling data-driven decision-making and targeted coaching, mentoring, and monitoring, even in resource-constrained settings.

Beyond formal schools, Charles extended his impact to out-of-school youth through the Digital School Project, which provides adolescents with tablet computers pre-loaded with the full curriculum. So far, over 2,000 learners have participated in the pilot, many preparing to re-enter formal education or pursue vocational training. This initiative not only promotes equal access for vulnerable groups but also addresses Zambia's digital divide.



Charles and fellow members of the Catch Up Coordinating Committee (CUCC) during a joint monitoring visit in Sesheke, Zambia.

Charles's influence extends beyond Zambia. He has presented at international forums such as the Pan-Commonwealth Forum (PCF9), sharing lessons on scaling remedial education and digital inclusion. His work contributes to global knowledge on effective, scalable approaches to foundational learning, aligning with SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals).

**'My Commonwealth Scholarship empowered me to lead a change process that transformed how Zambia supports its most vulnerable learners, advancing equity, inclusion, and systemic sustainability in education at both national and international levels.'**

## Most Significant Outcomes for Communities

For Charles, the most profound transformation has been the shift from fragmented remedial education to a nationally scaled, structured, and sustainable model. Before this change, a child in Grade 4 who could not read had few options. Teachers lacked tools, and interventions were sporadic, often dependent on short-term donor projects.



Charles (in grey suit) coordinating the Catch Up Investment Case meeting with partners and donors.

Today, that reality has changed. Through his leadership and collaboration with the Ministry of Education and partners, Zambia's Catch Up programme has reached over 958,000 learners across 6,254 schools. Teachers now use structured pedagogy and formative assessments to identify and support struggling learners. Digital tools such as the TaRL

Web Portal and Prevail Electronic Monitoring Tool enable real-time tracking of progress, even in remote areas. Social media platforms, such as WhatsApp, are used to support teachers and community practices remotely.

This systemic change has ripple effects beyond classrooms. Parents see children once regarded as underperforming now thriving, restoring trust in the education system. At a national level, Zambia's ability to meet its development goals improves when its young population is better educated. Charles emphasises that this change aligns with SDG 4 (Quality Education) by improving learning outcomes and equity.

**Charles reflects that the most significant change in his community as a result of the Commonwealth Scholarship has been the transformation of remedial education practices in Zambia.**

*'It is the most significant because it has closed critical learning gaps, enabled thousands of learners to catch up, and institutionalised a sustainable model for foundational education across the country.'*

## Individual Transformation and Learning

On a personal level, the Commonwealth Scholarship catalysed a profound shift in Charles's professional identity. Before his Master's, Charles worked mainly at district and provincial levels, managing programmes and training teachers. Today, he shapes national policy, advises on curriculum reform, and represents Zambia at international forums. He has become a mentor and thought leader, guiding colleagues and influencing education strategies across Africa.

This evolution is not just about career progression; it reflects a deeper alignment between Charles's values and his work. His journey illustrates how a scholarship can unlock latent potential, enabling one individual to catalyse systemic change.

**Charles reflects that as a result of the Commonwealth Scholarship, the most significant change to him has been the transformation of his professional identity from an education programme implementer to a strategic thinker and leader influencing systemic change.**

*'This change was significant because it expanded both my reach/exposure and confidence, enabling me to champion inclusive and technology-enhanced education for all. It aligned my personal growth with national development goals and positioned me to make lasting contributions to Zambia and Africa's education systems and the global education community.'*

## Lessons and Looking Ahead

Reflecting on his journey, Charles highlights a key lesson: transformative change in education requires continuous learning and adaptation—from individuals and systems alike.

When teachers initially resisted new methods, Charles understood it was because they needed time and support to learn. He fostered a culture of iterative improvement, where educators could experiment, learn from mistakes, and gradually adopt child-centred approaches.

Another lesson is the importance of early wins and evidence. Demonstrating measurable improvements in learner performance helped convert sceptics and secure government buy-in. This evidence-based approach has been critical in institutionalising remedial education within Zambia's policy framework.

Looking ahead, Charles is committed to lifelong learning. He has already been accepted into a local PhD programme and plans to research emerging issues such as AI in education and data-driven personalised learning. His vision is to harness technology to close learning gaps even further, ensuring no child is left behind.

Charles is also supporting the pilots of new initiatives, including the Closing the Learning Gap project for Grade 2 learners and a bilingual education approach called Language Learning from Familiar to Formal (L2F2). These innovations aim to prevent learning deficits early and ease language transitions in Zambia's evolving curriculum.

His commitment extends beyond Zambia. As a TaRL Africa Fellow and Education Consultant, Charles is sharing Zambia's experience with other countries. In Senegal, he presented on Assessment Data Collection and Its Role in Decision Making at the Conference of Ministers of Education of French-Speaking States and Governments (CONFEMEN). In Ethiopia, he recently helped train TaRL Master Trainers in a program supported by UNICEF, Imagine One Day, and TaRL Africa. This underscores another lesson: partnerships amplify impact. By collaborating with government, NGOs, and international networks, Charles has ensured that innovations are not isolated experiments but part of a systemic transformation.



Charles speaking at a panel on evidence-based decision-making to enhance foundational learning outcomes at the CONFEMEN, 11 April 2025.

In essence, Charles's story is a testament to the power of passion aligned with purpose—and the catalytic role of a Commonwealth Scholarship in turning vision into reality.

### More about Charles Zulu:

[ResearchGate Profile](#)

[VVOB Catch Up Programme Zambia](#)

[Teaching at the Right Level \(TaRL\) – TaRL Africa](#)

[Zambia Learning Poverty Brief – World Bank](#)

[Zambia ICT Access Survey – ZICTA](#)

[UNICEF summary of the 2021 National Assessment Survey](#)

[World Bank World Development Report 2018](#)

[Association for the Development of Education in Africa](#)

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