

Visiting Opportunity Education Schools in Uganda

by Mary Pleiss

The mathematics are simple--and devastating. Look around your own classroom. Double, then triple, the number of students who come to that room every day. Divide your teaching time among all of them, without the benefit of a teacher's aide. Subtract half the desks, most of the books, and all of the computers, science equipment, math manipulatives, free lunches, running water, and reliable electricity. Finally, to all the normal issues teachers deal with, add extreme poverty, refugees, and AIDS (not AIDS education, but the disease itself). If you can imagine that, you might have a glimmer of what it's like to be a teacher in Uganda.

That's only a glimmer. I can barely begin to tell you what it's really like in the schools Opportunity Education reaches. My visit to some of our Ugandan schools in the summer of 2006 opened my eyes to what life is like for teachers who are doing the best work they can in conditions that most U.S. teachers would find appalling. We visited several schools every day for a week. Some were rural schools, accessible only via deeply pitted dirt roads. Others were in the city of Kampala, where they were surrounded by roadside stalls that serve as shops, and the air is clogged with diesel fumes.

In every school, we found overwhelming need. Pieces of the chalkboards are broken off the wall, and there isn't always chalk with which to write on them. Libraries, where they exist, consist of a handful of books, most of them decades old. Some of the students we met walked around at recess clutching pencils and exercise books. These were the fortunate students who could afford those luxuries; the rest of their classmates

had to learn without even those basic tools.

All of this would be enough to make most of us throw up our hands and say, "Impossible!" And it is...except.

Except for the teachers, who take what little they're given and teach these children to read and write--often in more than one language. They also lead classes in mathematics, science, social studies, agriculture, and music, creating their own posters and flashcards from scrap paper and transforming bottle caps into math manipulatives and musical instruments. They are eager for help, for any new methods and materials they can find.

Except for the parents, who scrape every cent they can to send their children to school and provide uniforms, lunches, and yes, even pencils. They have so little, but they desperately want their children to have more.

Except for the children themselves, who are open, interested, and thrilled to meet new people. At every school we visited, there were shy smiles and tentative handshakes at first. By the time we left, though, there were happy giggles and hugs. The children talked to us, sang for us, and showed off the mathematics and reading skills they'd learned from the Opportunity Education curriculum.

It came to me when we were driving through Kampala, after I'd met hundreds of smiling, singing, children, and dozens of caring, capable teachers: the country, in many ways, is broken. Poverty, war, disease, and corruption have taken their grinding toll. But the people of Uganda are not broken. They have hope for the future, and the motivation and perseverance needed to make their lives better through education.

The materials provided by Opportunity Education are making a difference. We

spoke with many teachers who use the lessons and manipulatives we've sent. These teachers have also adapted their teaching in other subjects because they've learned new methods from our DVDs and teacher's guides. What they asked us for most often, though, wasn't more books, or more DVDs, or more manipulatives. The most common request I heard was for pen pals from other countries their students can write to. Their students' exposure to the world outside their villages and cities is extremely limited. Having a pen pal will help them to practice their English skills and give them a chance to learn about new cultures while sharing their own. Most importantly, having pen pals lets the students in our schools know that there are people here who care about them and sending them good wishes. When so much of what they see is broken, a few words from a friend, however far away, can make all the difference.

Mary Pleiss develops curriculum and related materials for Opportunity Education. She has a teaching degree from the University of Nebraska/Lincoln and a master's degree in gifted education from Purdue University; she taught full time for thirteen years before joining the Opportunity Education team.