

## **What does a Director of Education do?**

**By Patti Davis, Director of Education for Opportunity Education**

I am one of the most fortunate teachers in the world! I say this not to boast or to arouse envy among my fellow teachers, but simply because it is true. As Director of Education for Opportunity Education, I am given the opportunity to follow my passion and make a difference in the lives of children. In this case, my classroom is global and involves students, teachers, and parents on three continents and eight countries.

The primary job of the DOE is to coordinate all the educational aspects of the program. This entails supervision of curriculum writing, DVD production, assessment, material acquisitions, correspondence, and training as well as a myriad of other duties. As Opportunity Education is exploring uncharted territories and growing in leaps and bounds, there are constantly new challenges and opportunities. Every day is different and that is what makes the job so exciting! One day might be spent researching Ugandan mathematics standards while the next day I may be meeting with the vice-president of a major educational publishing company, trying to secure a discounted rate. Other days might find me on the production set as we shoot new educational DVDs.

However, my favorite “work” days are those that I spend with the teachers and students in the developing countries. I have been very fortunate to visit many of our schools in Africa and Asia. It is on those trips where I can see the huge impact the program has on entire villages. I spend much time listening and learning about the needs of the teachers and students. I then bring back the new knowledge and work with our curriculum writers here in the United States to adapt specific lessons. For example, a few months ago I conducted a teacher training session in Sri Lanka. I encouraged teachers to ask questions and bring along any of the materials that they didn’t understand. One group of teachers brought along the sight word BINGO game that we include in the grade 1 reading kits. They were unfamiliar with BINGO and even reading the prepackaged directions did not help. Think about it – if you had never seen BINGO before, could you understand directions that told you, “The winner is the first to yell BINGO”? To solve the problem, Executive Director Alan Barkley and I played BINGO with a group of 75 Sri Lankan teachers. The modeling was effective, the teachers had a great time, and now thousands of Sri Lankan students are using sight word BINGO as a review in their reading classes. When I came back to the US, we wrote a new social studies DVD lesson that incorporated landform BINGO. Now teachers in the developing world can see how to use the game in their classroom.

While we try to anticipate cultural differences as lessons are written, we often take so much for granted as teachers in the United States. I have learned that we cannot assume anything when we are dealing with these very poor countries. We cannot assume that the children have pencils or paper. If an activity requires a certain material, we must send it with the Opportunity Education kits. Consequently, much of my time is spent previewing materials to find items that tie to our curriculum, are durable, and can be easily shipped. As I look at materials, I try to imagine how it will be used in classrooms that often have over 100 students per teacher. Are there enough pieces to go around? Will they need to be replenished annually? Will the teachers understand the instructions? Is this an object that can be obtained locally? A memorable example comes from Uganda. As I was packing for my visit, I impulsively threw in a dozen inflatable beach ball globes. Never did I anticipate what

a hit they would be among the students and teachers. Even the most experienced Ugandan teachers told me that they had never before seen a globe. Consequently, we now send inflatable globes with our social studies curriculum (traditional globes being too expensive to ship). In addition to selecting materials, much time is devoted to working out purchase agreements with various vendors. We have been very fortunate to secure sizeable discounts from vendors such as Scholastic and Harcourt (Rigby, Saxon, and Steck and Vaughn). Local vendors also work with us to offer the best possible discounts for materials that are going to the OE schools.

One of the biggest differences between classroom teaching and the DOE position is in the daily routine. No longer do I answer to school bells – instead I use a bank of world clocks on my office wall. With Opportunity Education staff spread around the world, I may receive emails at any time of the day or night. Technology, especially email, has made the world a very small place in some respects. Just today I received email requests from the U.K., Tanzania, Sri Lanka, and Uganda. Sometimes teachers have simple implementation questions. Other times I answer requests for materials or assistance in other forms. Every day is unique and I spend much of my day on the computer.

Opportunity Education is an incredible program! I feel so blessed to be involved with a program that is literally changing the world.



Using an inflatable globe in a remote Ugandan school



These Ugandan students have never seen the blonde hair of a muzungo (white person). They shriek with delight as they touch my hair and skin!