

## WEEK 2: WEDNESDAY MAY 21<sup>ST</sup>, 2014 – TUESDAY MAY 27<sup>TH</sup>, 2014

I woke up on Wednesday feeling very excited because it was my first day visiting the primary schools. I spent the day with Peter, my Masindi boss, and Emmanuel, a school inspector, monitoring four Masindi government run primary schools as they embarked on their second term of teaching. The school year in Uganda runs from February until November and it is in November that the Primary 7 class sits their Primary Leaving Exam, which will determine if a child has passed primary school and has attained the qualifications required to enter secondary school.

As we drove to the schools I spoke to Peter and Emmanuel about what schools we would be visiting and how we would conduct the monitoring. Essentially we were looking at the preparedness of the head teacher and teachers, the conditions of the classrooms and school facilities, and the attendance of both teachers and pupils. It was the first week of term and both students and teachers were still adjusting into the routine of being back at school. One of the first things I noticed was that the schools were surrounded by endless fields of maize and each staff member that I spoke to at the four schools explained to me that the majority of the students at these schools come from a farming background. Therefore, some students were absent from school because they were still busy helping their families to plant and weed the maize.



Head teachers and classroom teachers noted that the challenges for their schools were:

- Teacher and pupil absenteeism
- Inadequate or no staff housing
- A lack of lunch provided for staff and students
- The need for a night watchman since vandalism of schools in Masindi was prevalent
- No parental or community support of the school
- The Universal Primary Education funds granted by the Ugandan government were coming very late or not at all
- Children coming to school without pens or workbooks
- A lack of scholastic materials including textbooks, visual aids, workbooks, and writing utensils
- And not enough desks for children

## Blog Post #2

Honestly, I left the schools feeling rather discouraged by what I had witnessed. There were high rates of teacher and pupil absenteeism, which meant that there were children sitting alone in a classroom because the teacher had not showed up to school for the day. Furthermore, dozens of students were sitting on the floor because there were too few desks and the class sizes in the lower primary levels ranged from between 120-172 students. Additionally, within these large classes there would only be one or two teachers provided to educate all of those students. The classrooms were also quite run down and lacked windows and doors in some cases and the latrines were often too few or sinking into the ground. I was very shocked by all of this and could not help but feel guilty about how fortunate I was to have the educational background that I do. I went to bed that night thinking of the eager faces of the children I had seen and the challenges they faced in obtaining a quality education.

Thursday was a similar experience. I visited four more schools, three government and one private. I was impressed by one of the government schools and it just so happened that a female head teacher ran the school. The other government schools I had visited had male head teachers. I do not want to generalise and state that schools that have a female head teacher perform better than those with a male head teacher, but I must admit that I was very pleased with the way the female head teacher was managing her school. All of the teachers were present, had thorough schemes of work, and detailed lesson plans. Furthermore, the head teacher actively engages with the community on a weekly basis. She speaks to the pupil's parents at church and encourages them to come and regularly visit the school to see how their child is progressing. Moreover, she convinced the parents of the importance of providing lunch for their children. Consequently, each pupil contributes 10kg of maize every term, which is then ground and made into porridge at lunchtime for the teachers and students, helping to keep the teachers and students focused throughout the day. It was so nice to see a head teacher that was working hard to improve the quality of her school and ensure that the students were learning and the community was involved in supporting the school.



After leaving the previous school I headed to a private school. The private school was a stark contrast to the government schools I had seen. Each pupil has to pay 250,000 Ugandan shillings per term, which is spent on scholastic materials, daily meals, on-site accommodation, teacher's salaries, a security guard, as and the general upkeep of the school. The buildings were in good condition and the teachers were engaging the students in the curriculum. There were enough desks and scholastic materials for the children and all of the students seemed alert and focused on their lesson. The dormitories where the children boarded were well maintained but lacked a homey atmosphere. The academic performance was impressive. All of the children were in division 1 or 2 when they completed their Primary Leaving Exam and every one of them went on to secondary school. I enjoyed my time at the private school but I felt a bit disheartened that in order to receive the opportunity to attend this school a child's family would have to pay 750,000 Ugandan shillings per year, roughly 175 pounds, which I realise does not sound like a lot to us living in the UK but to a family here living

## Blog Post #2

in rural Uganda 750,000 Ugandan shillings is a large expense especially if you have several children attending school.

After spending two days visiting schools in Masindi I spent Friday in Hoima, which is a neighbouring district to Masindi. Hoima is very similar to Masindi, except that the main crop found alongside the road is sugarcane instead of maize. Sugarcane produces more money than maize but over a longer period of time. It takes 18 months for sugarcane to mature before it is ready to harvest. Peter mentioned that this becomes an issue for families who use all of their land to produce sugarcane and leave too little land to plant maize, potatoes, and other crops to gain nourishment from. Therefore, there are issues of sugarcane farmers stealing from neighbouring plots of land growing maize, onions, tomatoes, potatoes, etc. to sustain their families while the sugarcane matures.

The drive to Hoima was very bumpy and we had to leave at 6am because the road running between Masindi and Hoima is filled with deep potholes, causing a one-hour journey to take two hours. I did not mind too much about the length of the journey because the scenery along the way was beautiful. The morning sky was full of sunshine, the birds were chirping, and the mountains in the distance were covered in dense sweeping forests. The purpose of my visit to Hoima was for the LCDI led teacher training workshop for primary 1,2, and 3 teachers on the importance of effectively teaching literacy. The eight LCDI sponsored Hoima schools are working to increase the literacy performance of their pupils. The teachers aim to learn new methods of teaching to support the students in bettering their reading and writing. The workshop proved a success and the teachers realised the importance of putting children into groups to engage with one another instead of the previously used row system where the child is more isolated and likely to fall behind on their studies. Additionally, the teachers learned how to correctly use phonetics and assist students in knowing the sounds of each letter to then help them make words and in time sentences. I really enjoyed the workshop and the teachers seemed eager to practice these new methodologies of teaching literacy. Next week, Peter and I will be visiting the same teachers at their respective schools in Hoima to see how they are managing with the new methods and offering them support and guidance to increase their confidence in teaching literacy.

On our drive back from the training workshop on Friday Peter informed me that on Monday and Tuesday we would be visiting a former LCDI school in Masindi and the Masindi Centre for the Handicapped. I was really pleased by this news and was looking forward to our trip. During the weekend I enjoyed the Masindi sunshine and walked around the market stalls in the centre of the town. There were a variety of shops selling items such as fresh produce, phone credit, beautiful patterns of cloth, and a host of other items. Really anything you needed for your time spent in Masindi can be found amongst the market stalls in the town centre. Moreover, the vendors are always very polite and I appreciate that everything has a slight reddish hue to it from the dust kicked up by vehicles as they trundle past on the red dirt roads.



## Blog Post #2

Finally the day arrived and I was able to visit a former LCDI school. It was an all girls primary school located on the road between Masindi and Hoima. As we approached the school I noticed how well maintained it was, the buildings looked in good condition and the grounds were very presentable. I could even hear the students answering questions in the classrooms displaying how engaged they were in their studies. I approached the head teacher's office and was greeted by a very enthusiastic female head teacher who has been overseeing the management of the school since 2005. I instantly noticed the passion for education in her voice as she spoke about the current school improvement plan and the challenges her school faces. She was also very quick to show me the data on the pupil's academic performance over the last 3 years. I thoroughly enjoyed talking to her but I must admit the best part of the visit was when I entered the classrooms.

The students work was displayed on the walls, teachers had handmade visual aids hanging from clothespins, which were at the child's height and accessible for them to use. There were crafts projects out of banana leaves, plastic bottles, and cardboard boxes. The creativity of the teachers and students was on display and you could tell that they had made the classroom their own. Each classroom was conducive to learning and all of the teachers were well prepared and followed their lesson plans and timetables. The highlight of my experience at the school was when I entered the primary 1 class and the students spelled and sounded out words for me as well as read small passages from their books. I found this to be an emotionally overwhelming experience because the primary 1 classes I had visited at the other schools were nowhere near as advanced as this class. I was so proud of the teacher and students in that moment and I really had to restrain myself to not hug the teacher and thank her for her creativity and enthusiasm towards learning. The students in that class were truly fortunate to have such a phenomenal teacher. I enjoyed my experience at the school so much that I am going back on Friday to sit in on the primary 1,2, and 3 classes to learn how the teachers are conducting their literacy lessons. Then when I visit the LCDI schools in Hoima next week I am able to share my experiences with the teachers in Hoima who are working towards improving their literacy teaching skills.



After an inspiring experience at the all girls school my week concluded with a visit to the Masindi Centre for the Handicapped, which is a school for the mentally and physically disabled children in Masindi and its neighbouring districts. The school is situated high up in the hills and has beautiful views of the neighbouring mountains and fields of maize below. Like the private school I visited, children at the Masindi Centre for the Handicapped have to pay tuition each semester, 150,000 Ugandan shillings, and the students

## Blog Post #2

live on-site with the school providing all of their meals. The school buildings are very well maintained and I enjoyed speaking to the female head teacher who kindly showed me around all of the classrooms. The set up of the handicapped school is very different to any of the other schools I've been to. There are a variety of classes catered to the children's physical and mental capabilities. There are the primary 1 to primary 7 classes that are just like the government and private schools but there are also vocational courses in tailoring, carpentry, and leatherworks if a child is unable to complete a primary 7 level education. Furthermore, if a pupil is unable to do the academic or vocational courses there are classes on life skills, crafts, and drawing where they help the student to increase their attention span and focus on activities that will engage them in learning but at an attainable level. When I was entering the classrooms I noticed the abundance of teacher's patience and their caring demeanour. Additionally, the student's work was displayed on the classroom walls and in their dormitories decorations handmade hung from the ceiling making it feel very homey. The majority of the teachers who work at the school have degrees or diplomas in teaching special needs children and truly seem to love their job. I was very impressed with the Masindi Centre for the Handicapped and I greatly admire the work that the teachers are doing there.