

## WEEK 3: WEDNESDAY MAY 28<sup>TH</sup>, 2014 – TUESDAY JUNE 3<sup>RD</sup>, 2014

This week I have decided to focus on the highlight of my week, which was getting to travel to Buliisa. Originally, we were planning on viewing the Link primary schools in the Hoima district but the Ministry of Education inspectors from Kampala were working in Buliisa and offered for Peter and I to join them on their primary school inspections. The aim was to visit three government schools, two of them being sponsored by Link.

We set off from Masindi at 7am to arrive at our first school by 8:30am, which is when the first lesson commences. The drive from Masindi to Buliisa was very beautiful; we drove through Budongo Forest and along the outskirts of Murchison Falls National Park. As we drove along the outer edges of Murchison Falls National Park we began to notice a plethora of baboons along the side of the road looking for food. Peter stopped the truck for a few moments so that I could have a close up view of the baboons. It was an incredible experience for me because I was able to be very close to them and I was even able to feed them some fresh maize.



Upon arriving to the schools I noticed that there was a range in student enrolment at each of the schools. There were between 400-1,000 children enrolled at each of the schools but very few teachers and students were present the day we visited. I was able to speak to the head teacher at the non-Link school; however, at the Link schools the head teacher was absent so I held a focus group with the teachers to speak to them about the challenges they are currently facing in being able to offer quality education to their students. Unfortunately, Buliisa is one of the lowest performing districts in Uganda in terms of academic performance and is really struggling to improve on this ranking.

A common challenge for the primary schools was the lack of parental support but yet the two Link schools had yet to hold a PTA meeting since the beginning of the school year and did not send out invitations to the parents to participate in activities that the school was hosting. Furthermore, the Ministry of Education official suggested sending out an end of term newsletter to the parents so that they know what events are coming up next term, when the PTA meeting will be held, and when the

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pupils should report back to school. I thought this was a very good idea and could also help to curb the issue of absenteeism because there is a clear start date noted in the newsletter, which eliminates the element of speculation as to when the children must report back to school.

The issue of parental support was brought up at all three of the Buliisa schools we visited, but again there was a common theme of the schools lacking to engage with the parents or notify them of PTA meetings or events that were taking place at the school. Therefore, the schools can only expect the parents and community to engage with them in a reciprocal manner. If the school is not informing the parents or community of activities it makes it more difficult to build a sustainable supportive relationship between all parties involved.

Another universal concern was a lack of scholastic materials, especially textbooks. However, I did notice while sitting in the head teacher's office at the non-Link school that there were at least 150 textbooks stacked on the shelves of his office covering a variety of topics including, Mathematics, Science, English, and History. Furthermore, most of the textbooks looked brand new. I have encountered this occurrence at several of the schools I have visited in both Masindi and now Buliisa. The response I often receive when I ask why the textbooks are not in the classrooms include: the children will not care for them properly, or the textbooks do get used just not at the moment, or the school needs additional textbooks so that every child can have one before they distribute the current ones. There were roughly 1,000 children at the non-Link school and Buliisa and I can understand that a school of 1,000 pupils would need more textbooks than they currently have; yet, I cannot understand as to why they feel they do not need to use the ones that are already available.



At the Link schools in Buliisa I was unable to see the head teacher's office because they were absent and the office was locked but I did notice that there was a lack of textbooks and other scholastic materials available to students when I visited the classrooms. However, a positive aspect was that the teachers at the Link schools were regularly checking the pupil's work in their personal workbooks. I

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was pleased to see this but I did notice that it was simply putting a checkmark or an x next to the work without giving feedback as to why the work was particularly good or why the child got the answer incorrect and what the correct answer was. I mentioned this to a few of the teachers and they said that they would try to begin giving a bit of short feedback to the children either in person or in their individual workbooks.

I greatly enjoyed my visit to the Buliisa primary schools but I think that the most difficult aspect for me personally was witnessing the caning of students. Officially, caning is illegal in Uganda and the Ministry of Education official who I was with did confirm that teachers are not allowed to cane students. However, in Buliisa the teachers have got around this illegality by having the class monitors and prefects carry the canes and be the ones to administer the canings to their peers. Unfortunately, at both of the Link schools we visited we had to go around the classrooms collecting the canes and breaking them and subsequently explained to the teachers why implementing guidance and counselling and forms of positive behavioural methods within the classroom were far better methods of curbing disciplinary issues within their school.

After a long day of visiting the Buliisa schools we drove down to the shores of Lake Albert. Peter knows how much I love the water so offered to let me sit for a few moments on the beach and relax a bit on the sandy shore while he and one of the Ministry of Education employees bought fresh Nile perch from local fisherwoman who happened to be passing as we were enjoying the scenery. I really felt at peace sitting on the shores of Lake Albert and it is beautiful to look across the water and see the large mountain ranges of the Democratic Republic of Congo in the distance.



Upon leaving Lake Albert we began our journey back to Masindi. As we passed through Budongo Forest some of the school children I had met that day stood alongside the road shouting “Hello, Jennifer!” and it made me smile because they had remembered my name and I cheerfully said hello and waved to them as we headed towards Masindi. One thing I will forever remember about my

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time living in Uganda will be how curious and friendly the children I have encountered are and how kindly they have treated me.

I am really looking forward to next week because I will be attending teacher training workshops for p3 and p4 teachers run by an organisation called Red Earth, which focuses on improving the quality of education in rural Uganda, and I will be focusing specifically on their literacy programme within the Masindi school district. I will also be conducting a follow up visit to the all girls primary school in Masindi, who are sponsored by Red Earth, and learning from the lower primary level teachers on how best to teach literacy so that Peter and I can then impart the knowledge we learn to the Link teachers in Hoima and Buliisa the following week.