

Kasungu Schools
by Judy Macdonald

I was fortunate to be able to visit several schools during my visit to Malawi. The dedication of the administration and the teachers in the face of overwhelming difficulties, especially in the community schools, was heart-wrenching.

Kasungu Teachers' Training College

This College was established in 1998 with 390 males and 150 female students. Today the student population has grown to 690 with 390 males and 300 females. The administration includes a principal and 1 vice-principal. Originally there was a faculty of 37 but this number is now reduced and the college is lacking teachers. When Malawi's President brought in universal primary education, suddenly 22,000 primary teachers were required. A crash program was required and this Teachers' Training College was one consequence of this policy.

The College is housed in an impressive complex of buildings some kilometres north of Kasungu. However, according to Principal, Mr. M. H. Magelegele, it faces numerous challenges. There must be extensive investment in the infrastructure of the college complex. Basics as wiring and plumbing need attention. Other areas also require attention. Staff development is a priority. As Mr. Magelegele stressed, there is a need for well-trained teachers and so staff development is important. The effective delivery of materials is a priority as well as a curriculum that focuses on learning as well as excellent teaching. Mr. Magelegele said that he looked to countries like Canada for good classroom practices. In terms of technology, computer skills are required, as are computers for student use. The College has entered into a partnership with 2 Norwegian schools which have donated computers and have assisted with the orphans registered with the College. The Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) has donated textbooks, a much needed resource. In general, materials – library books and learner-focused materials for classrooms – are a scarce resource. Looking at other student needs, Mr. Magelegele pointed out that basics such as a well-balanced diet with sufficient protein were missing for the boarding students. Recreational resources such as a sporting field and sports equipment were also lacking.

Kasungu Demonstration School

This primary school is part of the Kasungu Teachers' Training College. Students at the College are able to observe classes in action as part of their training. I was warmly welcomed into one of the classrooms of the school by teachers Gloria Chipaka (Mrs. Chinamule) and Mrs. Dorothy Magelegele where I was able to observe the children over the course of a morning.



While I later realized how fortunate this school is compared to the community schools, my first reaction was one of dismay when I saw well over 50 students crowded into the classroom. What was particularly dismaying was the lack of textbooks. When the children were asked to read either together or on their own, groups of 5 to 8 children had to share perhaps 2 books. It was obvious that a number of students couldn't follow along or participate

at all, as much as they wanted to. I later asked why materials simply weren't copied; the answer revealed my naivety. There simply wasn't the funding to cover such additional costs, no matter how small they might seem to be.

Chilanga Sighted School (Primary level)

I visited this school on several occasions and was most hospitably greeted by the headmaster and by the assistant headmistress. I quickly learned of the challenges facing this school. Because it is a community school, and the community is poor, funding for all the needs – infrastructure, support for students, etc. – is sorely lacking. A tour of the classrooms immediately revealed the lack of electricity, desks, chairs, and school supplies; textbooks, paper, and pens were in short supply. While the students are extremely enthusiastic and appear to desperately want to learn, the obstacles to their learning are daunting. Some 80 children are



crowded into a room; without electricity, visibility is poor; writing on the blackboard is difficult; it is difficult, if not impossible, to see what is written; without textbooks, learning is limited. The administration told me of their long list of needs: additional classrooms, electricity (the poles are there but not the wiring), teachers' accommodations (transport throughout Malawi is difficult, particularly so in the rural areas so teachers have to live at the school), bicycles for staff to do simple errands for the school, a play area for the children, all teaching supplies (The school was given a radio by the United States, but now there are no batteries) – and this is just the short list.

Chilanga Secondary School

Several visits were made to this school both by different members of our group. Our requests to visit classrooms and to greet the students were graciously accommodated. The Headmaster, Mr. E.N.D. Katengeza, gave a comprehensive picture of the needs of the school. Like the Chilanga Sighted School (Primary level), this community school relies on funding from both the Malawi government for salaries and from the community for almost everything else.



As with the primary school, infrastructure (classrooms, in particular) is desperately needed. Textbooks and other teaching materials are lacking; blackboards are in a poor state; accommodation is required for the teachers. I visited a biology class. The students were positive, the teacher was well-prepared, and discipline was good. The topic for the class was the digestive system. Lacking a textbook, the teacher asked a student to draw the digestive tract on the board, which the student was happy to do. Unfortunately, much of the class went by with the student still drawing. Finally he finished but his work could barely be seen by those not in the front rows. The blackboard just didn't display the diagram well enough for anyone else to make anything out. The school library was also sadly in need of assistance. The number of books either in Chichewa or in English was limited. The books I saw in English didn't seem very enticing to an African audience – dated texts from England or America.

I was particularly interested in trying to understand how and to what extent HIV/AIDS had affected the school system. Answers were soon forthcoming. Even as I sat at the back of one of the classrooms

observing the children, one of the teachers (there are two teachers assigned to a single classroom and they alternate teaching) volunteered her perspective. Later discussions and observations added to my understanding.

AIDS has unquestionably had a devastating impact on the education system. 8 teachers are missing in the Kasungu Teachers' Training College because of either deaths or illness associated with AIDS. The overcrowding I observed in the various schools I visited was in part due to this disease (lack of trained teachers, unavailability of accommodation for teachers, lack of funding for teachers' salaries also contribute to the problem.) The Chilanga schools, both primary and secondary, also suffer from overcrowding. The most heart-wrenching is the primary school where some 80 young children sat together on the floor in what could barely be called a classroom – no electricity, desks, chairs; certainly a fresh coat of paint hadn't been applied in years.

I very soon observed a second major consequence of AIDS, the staggering number of orphans at all levels of the school system. In the Kasungu Demonstration School, I observed the disparity of ages of the children in this lower primary class. There were obviously children of 10 or 11 included with 7 and 8 year olds. I was told these older children were orphans. In fact, approximately 20% of the children have lost at least one parent to this disease. Losing a parent can have a devastating impact on the child. One such child was pointed out to me. This boy had once been a promising student but when his mother died, he could no longer be sufficiently supported by his father; he was moved from one relative to the next; his mental suffering so affected him, he was unable to move ahead with his schooling and so is now several years behind. Even now it was apparent that he was barely participating in the class. At the Chilanga Sighted School (Primary level) it was reported that 230 children out of the school population of 1200 had no parents. Some of these 230 children had no proper accommodation; they lived in shacks here and there.

Later I learned how other children who had lost both parents suffered in other ways. Possibly they ended up living with relatives in other regions of the country whom they might not know. They could be seen as an additional source of labour around the home, removed from school entirely, or put to work to such an extent they could only come to school irregularly and when they did attend, they could be malnourished and tired. (Of course, these conditions could prevail anyway, due to the overwhelming poverty of much of the country where many homes enjoy meat, for example, only several times a year.)

Some children in schools already have acquired HIV at birth. Although now such mother-child transmission is more limited, there are still children in schools with HIV. The physical signs of the disease are apparent and so these children are singled out for particular shame and ostracism. Education under these distressing circumstances is obviously a severe challenge for such children.

Girls' lives become disproportionately blighted because of HIV/AIDS. I observed how the number of girls is severely reduced as children proceed through secondary school. This lack of female participation is partly due to poverty. Families can ill afford the luxury of sending girls to school; they are needed at home for domestic tasks. If there are some resources, it is the boys who are generally favoured for higher education. Girls will marry and will become part of the husbands' family. When then, some thinking goes, educate them? This kind of thinking is reinforced when HIV/AIDS comes into the family. Caregivers are needed at home and it is the girl that is removed from school to look after dying parents and siblings.

The schools have tried to meet the challenge of educating children of the dangers of HIV/AIDS. Indeed leaders like the Hon. Justin Malawezi points to the education of youth as one of the hopes of the country in overcoming the pandemic. All new textbooks contain pages stressing the importance of protecting oneself against HIV. Also, the education system tries to address the pervasive problem of the stigma experienced by those with AIDS. Textbooks include stories that illustrate the need to include those children suffering with AIDS. Classes are held that focus on HIV/AIDS prevention. The problem with these responses is that by secondary school, many students have dropped out, girls in particular, for reasons explained above. In fact, this population is exactly the one that needs to be targeted. Teenage girls are the most vulnerable to infection, as the country's statistics illustrate.

One can only hope that for the sake of the eager children involved that solutions can be found.