Platforms for Hope Summer Report for 2013

Platforms would like to say Siyabonga (‘Thank You’ in siSwati) to the Middlebury Center for Social Entrepreneurship, the High School for the Deaf in Mpaka, our MiddSTART sponsors, Samaritan’s Purse and to the wonderful people of Swaziland and Mozambique for welcoming our work with such warm hands.

This summer, amongst the group of 6 who constitute the Platforms for Hope family (PFH), I received the opportunity to go back to Swaziland and work on PFH’s lap desk project, whose aim is to provide portable desks to students in schools lacking or without desks. This report is divided into two topics, namely: Swaziland and Mozambique. The Swaziland part focuses on PFH within the Free Primary Education (FPE) policy and our pilot program in Malindza Primary School. The Mozambique part focuses on working with EPC de Chibembe in Inhambane.

Swaziland

The Kingdom of Swaziland, a country of 1.2 million citizens situated between South Africa and Mozambique, is an absolute monarchy and a generally homogenous situation, consisting mainly of ethnic Swazis. In 2010, the government announced the beginning of the Free Primary Education policy, which, as the name implies, sought to make primary education accessible to all Swazi children despite whatever socio-economic hindrances had made this previously impossible. As part of this policy, the first to the fourth grade fees were cancelled out between 2010 and 2013. Public schools since then have been increasingly inundated with students, and the government funds to cushion these costs have been insufficient. To keep the program alive, many schools have had to make sacrifices, and unfortunately class furniture, rationalized as being less important than kids having books, notebooks and pencils, has not received much investment.

PFH stumbled upon Malindza Primary School in Mpaka, central Swaziland in the summer of 2012. I was travelling with co-founder Jane Huber when we went to pitch the idea of portable desks to the school’s principal. Luckily, he thought the idea was relevant for his school, and he agreed to Malinda Primary being our first pilot school. In June 2012, the first grade at Malindza Primary had 68 students. In June 2012, that number had jumped to 98. The classroom had not been extended nor the quantity of desks and chairs increased. Thus, desks that were meant for two kids were now accommodating three kids. Below is a picture of a section of the first grade classroom (some were absent that day):
Seeing this reality was hard-hitting and spoke to the urgency necessary to address the furniture problem in Swazi schools. When PFH came to life, it was because we believed that every student is entitled, by the very virtue of their willingness to commit time to getting an education, to a conducive learning environment, and a lack of desks hindered that experience. The main goal was to provide an affordable, portable desk that kids could use both at school and at home. To help PFH fulfill its summer pilot objective, we recruited Themba Shongwe (UWC USA ’14) and Lungelo Tsabedze (Mahindra UWC India ’13). Our main goal for the summer was to give the desks to students and have them use it for at least a month. From that experience, we hoped to have the opportunity to evaluate the lap desks’ impact in as far as performance in the classroom and attendance was concerned.

At Malindza Primary School, we had initially planned to provide 68 desks (given June 2012’s data), and now that number had jumped to 98. When July rolled around, we had only just started production, since the month of June had gone to finalizing our contract with the High School for the Deaf and Malindza Primary School. At the High School for the Deaf, Mr. Hlawe helped us recruit four students (all above age 20) to be in charge of producing the lap desks. One of the students, Mabaso, was particularly lazy and we had to let him go. That slowed down our production rate per day. Trying to make ends meet, we thought we would use the lap desks we already had and use those for evaluation. The principal of the school told us that he felt it would make much more sense if the desks in the first grade were used to meet the shortages in the upper grades, and all the students used lap desks instead. Thus, we could only deliver the desks once we had reached 98. Producing 98 lap desks took up the bulk of our summer; by the time we were done, it was mid-August. Schools across the country were already halfway done with exams and would be closed within a week. We felt it better to postpone the delivery of the desks to the students until the beginning of the third term.

Although this meant we had missed our main objective of the summer, it has been a blessing in disguise in three ways. By extending the pilot period to three months (late September– mid December), we would give students and teachers enough time to get used to the desks, and this in turn would help in collecting reliable data, rather than what the Deputy Principal at Malindza...
termed as ‘rushed’ statistics. The second blessing has been working with the Qiniso, Vilankhulu and Mangaliso (the three students we employed from the High School). They taught us a lot of Swazi Sign Language as well as wood-work skills. I became particularly aware of what it meant to them to have the opportunity to work on giving back to the Swazi community. Deaf students are marginalized in the country, and some parents even keep them from going to school. Working on PFH as producers of the lap desks is a message to all who have always doubted their ability to be useful. As they like to put it, it shows that “the Deaf Can.”

The other advantage that came with this extended time period is that Lungelo, our pilot phase intern, would have more time to do outreach on behalf of PFH in Swaziland, and really work on identifying where opportunities for growth lie in as far as selling the lap desks as a merchandise, and how these could be pursued. Essentially, our eyes on the ground now have an ‘extended’ stay.

As of the 25th of September, 98 desks were delivered to Malindza Primary School. According to Lungelo, the event was attended by Mr. Hlawe (production supervisor at the High School for the Deaf) as well as the pupils of Malindza Primary and their teachers. Lungelo gave a brief presentation in which he explained to the first grade why they were receiving their lap desks, as well as their teachers’ expectations for these lap desks. In his preliminary report from the 5th of October, Lungelo mentioned that the teachers thought having the lap desks “provide order [in the classroom sitting setup], and offer less of an obstruction between them [teachers and the students].” Lungelo felt it was still too early for results concerning attendance to have any real
meaning for the purposes of PFH, and that is why those results are not in this report. As of the 5th of October, PFH has produced an additional 114 lap desks through our partnership with the High School for the Deaf.

Our operations in Swaziland are still ongoing, and we will be publishing a more comprehensive report in mid-December, which will address our pilot phase and its outcomes. Currently, Lungelo is working on spreading awareness not only to schools, but to parents as well, about the possible benefits our lap desks can have for the education of Swazi kids.

Mozambique

Through the kindness of Samaritan’s Purse – Mozambique, I was able to visit the organization’s worksites in the provinces of Inhambane, Gaza and Maputo in the Republic of Mozambique. I was hosted by a fellow Midd alum by the name of Cara Myers (from Washington state). You know you’re going to an international school when your American friend hosts you in a country that is not their own. And yes, the irony of an American hosting an African student in a Mozambique is too funny to overlook.

Samaritan’s Purse opened its doors and provided me with access to a community Zavala in the province of Inhambane. During my time there, I got an opportunity to see two schools in the area. One school I saw as we headed into our campsite, and from the open doors in the classroom, all the kids neither had chairs nor desks. A walking distance from our camp site was Escola Primaria Completa de Chibembe (Chibembe Complete Primary School), and the principal of the school, who referred to herself as Diretor Marta, took us on a tour of the classrooms. Now, the upper grades (grade 3 and higher) had run-down desks, but the first and second grade had no desks no chairs.
What this encounter proved to me is that the shortage of appropriate classroom furniture is not just a Swazi problem, but also a Mozambican problem, and possibly a Southern Africa problem. Desmond Tutu has even gone on to say it is an African problem, but I refrain from using such language, given my limited travel across different regions of the continent\(^1\).

Conclusion

Thus, given the Swazi and Mozambique contexts, it is important for PFH to shift its language from desk-centric to a focus on a shortage of classroom furniture, especially desks and chairs. Lap desks have always been just the tip of the iceberg, and it is now time to start examining the larger part of the iceberg. Our goal is to make sure we focus first on our project in Swaziland, and get that one right. However, we need to remain vigilant of the larger Southern African context and start generating ideas about how, if indeed our organization meets the most urgent needs of schools, can be replicated and scaled beyond the Kingdom of Swaziland.

\(^1\) [http://tutudesk.org/](http://tutudesk.org/)