



The best underdog story I've ever lived
Steve Vinton, September 27, 2007

I was recently given a rather astounding article to read which talks about a new study that is turning upside down people's thoughts about education in Africa. Much to the shock and disbelief almost of a lot of "experts", it seems that they're finding out that schools in the developing world for poor kids – those in the villages and those in the slums – are consistently out-performing all those nicely-built and nicely-staffed government schools! I couldn't help smiling as I read through the article, thinking of my own students over the years, all of the years I worked with my grandfather in Congo, and now all of these schools we're building here in Tanzania. After decades at this, I might not have an authoritative study to prove it, but Susan and I sure have enough anecdotal evidence in the lives of our students to have suspected all along what this study has just now shown! Susan and I have a number of theories for trying to explain why it is that these schools in villages, where we take in the poorest of the poor, the orphans, the kids who have spent their whole lives being hungry, missing days of school because they were sick when no one had money for medicine for them, who never had enough notebooks, who came to school without shoes, who studied by kerosene lamps at night on the nights when they were lucky enough to have kerosene for their lamps – and yet they seem to outperform all of the other schools. How after all is it possible that the government schools take only the best of the best – the A students – put them in boarding schools where they are fed three meals a day, have teachers who have all been to college, have the nice buildings with the electricity and the running water – and we take in the kids who weren't chosen by the government, those who went to the worst primary schools, the kids whose parents are

desperately poor, and more often than not, whose parents have already died – and yet somehow our kids manage to excel?

Well my friends, when you've got a moment, read slowly through this email that one of our teachers here in Tanzania just sent out to her friends and family and people in her church who have helped make it possible for her to live in the little village of Sawala and to work with the kids there.

From: Tamara Fuchs
Subject: The Unchosen

If you have ever looked at the statistics regarding education in the United States, you know that when children come from poor backgrounds, or they have lost one or both parents, or they are hungry, can't afford shoes or books, and study in classrooms with an 80-1 ratio of students to teachers, the results are not usually positive. And who can blame those kids? Since coming to Tanzania, I've asked myself again and again, "If I were born here, would I have made it?" Would I have gone to school in the wind and the cold without a sweater or jacket, wearing a cast-off button up shirt and shoes that my toes poked through? Would I have been able to concentrate sitting three to a desk while my stomach rumbled with hunger? Would I have gone home and studied when, in order for me to eat, I had to go work at my family's farm after a long day at school? My honest answer is always: I don't think so. I don't think I could have done it.

And yet, these kids are doing it. In Sawala, about 75% of our kids are orphans. They live with a grandmother or an aunt in a tiny house. They come to school in patched skirts and

trousers, their much-outgrown shoes polished to a shine. And despite having every possible element going against them, they study, they learn, and they are happy.

Recently, our Form Two students took a district mock exam to prepare them for the real national exam in November. Every registered school in the district participated, and the students spent the week taking tests in nine different subjects. It is generally expected that the government school students will do well; after all the government chooses a very small percentage of primary school kids every year for their outstanding test scores, and they continue on in the public education system. The kids who aren't chosen -- the unchosen -- well, those are our kids.

We were all waiting anxiously for the results. As a teacher here, I know that the only way for my students to succeed in life here is for them to continue with their education. If they don't pass these exams, they can't continue onto Form Three. We are all very aware of the importance of them passing the national exam. Needless to say, the students and the teachers were eager to receive the results from this trial run.

The results took our collective breath away. VST schools out-scored almost every school in our district. Our unchosen, our kids who were passed over by the government, our kids who are orphans, are hungry, are poor, did better than almost all the kids who had the outstanding scores in primary school.

What I've come to understand is that the reason our students do better than those in the government schools is because they have to. They have to succeed in school, or else they will repeat the cycle of poverty they see around them every day. Nothing could be a better motivator.

So, here at Sawala, Maggie and I feel like proud parents. Our kids are doing it. They are succeeding. This is the best underdog story I've ever lived.

What I love so much in reading Tamara's letter is her last statement – “This is the best underdog story I've ever lived”. You see for Tamara, this is not the best underdog story she's ever seen, or the best underdog story she's ever heard, this is the best underdog story she's ever lived. Because she's made the little village of Sawala her life and she's allowed her life to be woven into the fabric of the life of her students. But what I also love about what Tamara wrote is that she is so in awe of the wonder of her students that her focus is all on them, so much so that dear, wonderful, sweet Tamara never even got around to mentioning the fact that no small part of the incredible success of these kids at the bottom, these kids who have never had a lucky break in their whole lives, is Tamara herself. And the other teachers who are with her. Because there is no salary big enough to have lured Tamara away from her life in America to come to the little village of Sawala and to teach those kids. Part of the reason these kids do so well is because they simply have the best teachers that money can't buy.

This last weekend we took another 12 missionary teachers to begin their lives in five more villages here in Tanzania. To all of you who helped buy their airplane tickets to get here, on this joyful occasion of our students shocking everyone in the government offices with their wonderful results, let me thank you for partnering not just with the Tamara's of this world who have come to serve here in Africa, but let me also thank you for partnering in an incredible way with these kids in these villages who are doing all that they can against incredible odds to get an education. Thanks.