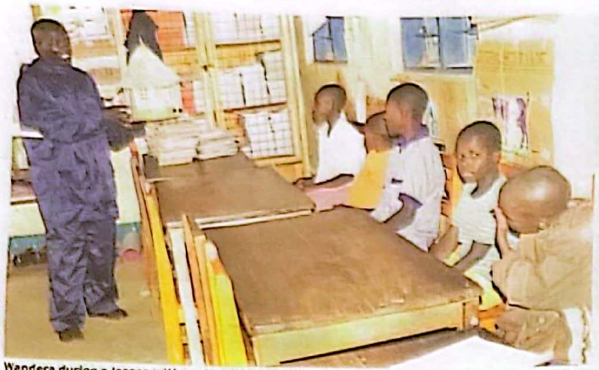


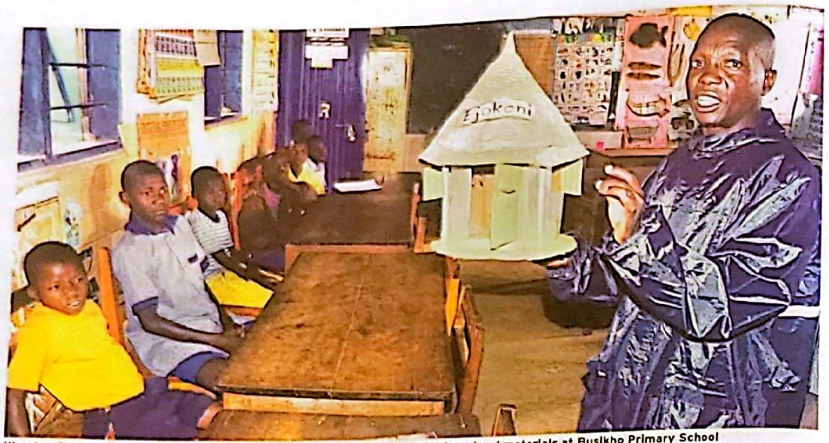
Wandera during a lesson with pupils with disabilities at Busikho Primary School in Busia district

A touch-lite number indicating Primary One E

Teachers Making a Difference
New Vision | Irish Aid
TravelCare | Trocaire

Wandera breaking barriers

New Vision in partnership with the Irish Embassy, Travelcare and Trocaire is searching for Uganda's most innovative teacher. Every Wednesday, we shall profile some of the nominated teachers until August when a panel of judges shall select the best. A total of top 12 teachers will each win sh1.5m. The five most outstanding teachers will enjoy an all-expenses paid study trip to Ireland early next year. Today, Daniel Edyegu brings you James Wandera, who is bringing hope to children with disabilities.



Wandera instructing pupils with disabilities using a model kitchen crafted from local materials at Busikho Primary School

A neat stretch of grass-thatched huts stood in silence, forming a rectangular shape with a vast enclosure in the middle for a compound. All doors to the huts were closed.

From the bushes behind one of the huts, a young girl emerged with a boy walking side-by-side.

"Daphne," James Wandera called out.

She grinned and flurry her arm across her face in shyness. However, a close look at her gait revealed a peculiar pattern of movement.

Nekesa, for that is her surname, moved with an awkward gait. She was knock-kneed; with the right leg seemingly longer than the left. She waddled slowly; her left arm angled close to her chest.

"How do you feel now?" Wandera asked.

Nekesa quickly clasped her face with the right hand and grinned.

"Doctors told us if we had delayed, this girl would never have walked. Nekesa underwent corrective surgery for clubfoot on both feet at Comprehensive Rehabilitation Services in Uganda, Kampala last year. She is still undergoing review," Wandera narrated.

Helping the disabled

In an era where children with disability cannot cope with their folks both at home and school, Wandera, 49, a teacher at Busikho Primary School in Masinya sub-county, Busia district, has taken it upon himself to lessen this burden.

From using available local materials to mould instructional tools for children with disability at school to seeking them out from their homes for treatment, Wandera views his task as a divine calling to respond to the needs of children with disabilities.

Parents and children with disabilities have found hope through his efforts. In fact, Kangina Namulisa, the mother to five-year-old Nekesa, called Wandera on phone.

"Wandera built wooden parallel bars for Nekesa to support herself as she learns to walk. She could not stand on her own. He told me that he would seek help for my daughter. Even after surgery, he would come back to train her to walk. She is now in middle class at Gateway Nursery and Primary School," Namulisa says.

Clubfoot, a disability whose cause in unknown, manifests in children with the top of the foot twisted downward and inward, increasing the arch and turning the heel inward. The foot may be turned so severely that it looks as if it is upside down.

Due to the overwhelming demand from parents for Wandera's services, Busia district local government has created for him an office within its premises. He serves as the district co-ordinator for children with disabilities.

"I was destined to be a priest. After my O' level at Mbale Secondary School in 1990, I served as a lay reader in Masaba Church of Uganda in Busia district until 1996. I used to read the scriptures to the congregation on how Jesus used to help the helpless and feed the hungry…"

"Have you ever imagined not being able to see like other people – always living in darkness; or not being able to walk like the rest? I asked myself what I could do to change the lives of the children with disabilities," he said.

His eyes turned red. The Adam's apple darted up and down his throat as he swallowed. A rivulet of tears was welling on his lower eyelids.

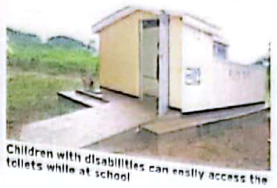
"Sorry Daniel." "Sorry," he muttered. He took out a fairly clean cream-coloured hankie and wiped his face of sweat and tears.

"When I told my then church leader, the Rev. Samson Padere, about my intention to enroll for priesthood at Bishop Tucker Theological College in the current Uganda Christian University (UCU) in Mukono, he had a different view. He told me not to be 'single-legged' (serving only as a priest) like him. So I enrolled for a Grade Three teaching certificate at Busikho Teacher's College from 1996 to 1998," Wandera continues.

ABOUT WANDERA

- **Wandera is married to Sylvia Akumu, with whom they have seven children.**
- **After completing his grade three certificate at Busikho Teachers' College in 1998, he joined Uganda National Institute of Special Needs Education (UNISE) in 2000 and graduated with a diploma in special needs education in 2003.**

Wandera holding a locally made toilet seat he made for boys with disabilities in Budandu village, Masafu sub-county



Children with disabilities can easily access the toilets while at school

The crafted chicken in Wandera's office

Wandera displays instructional materials. Photos by Daniel Edyegu

for children with disability

His list of accolades in the field of working with children with disability is long. A pile of certificates of recognition is stashed inside his office drawer. Since he started out in 2002, Wandera has served 8,093 children with disabilities, ranging from those with hydrocephalus, cerebral palsy, hearing and visual impairment and physical disability. He co-ordinates these activities with the district community development office.

He either seeks placement in schools or treatment from 'good Samaritans' for children. With the help of school administrations, he has also built playgrounds for children with disabilities in over 10 primary schools in Busia.

In 2006, his team of pupils with disabilities from Busikho Primary School won the national goalball trophy.

"If you cannot do great things, you do small things in a great way," Wandera stresses.

At Busikho Primary School, he has turned a classroom block into a resource centre for children with disabilities. Each of the classroom blocks in the school has a touch-lite symbol at the door. The blocks also have a guiding rail and a rough-tailored doorstep to guide the visually-impaired, a ramp and support rails in the pit-latrines for disabled pupils.

"I come to the resource centre to read books. The environment is conducive," says Eugene Odongo, a Primary Six pupil.

Challenge

The major challenge Wandera faces, however, is the lack of transport means to link him to the communities.

Barnabas Muniala

Status quo

The Busia district education officer, Rev. Barnabas Muniala, says Wandera is spearheading a campaign to ensure that all children with disabilities are in school.

"There is a stereotype in our communities that even if such children study to whatever level, they cannot get gainful employment. That is one thing Wandera is demystifying through sensitising parents," Muniala says.

Out of a primary enrolment of 84,000 pupils in Busia district, Muniala explains that 1,987 have disabilities. While each primary school requires at least two qualified teachers in special needs education to attend to pupils with disabilities, Muniala says Busia has only 52 teachers of this calibre, who cannot proportionately be distributed in the 124 government-aided schools and over 100 private primary schools.

WHAT OTHERS SAY...

Florence Nyaketcho, the headteacher Busikho Primary School

Wandera has aided learning of pupils with disability. Out of the 1,600 pupils in the school, 31 have disabilities. For the first time in the history of the school, a blind pupil, Levis Wandera, passed in Division Two in last year's Primary Leaving Examinations. Levis is now at Madera School for the Blind in Soroti district.

Aseri Wandera rolls Timothy Buyinza on a wheelchair down a ramp that Wandera put in place

INNOVATION

Resource centre from local materials

The dingy office, measuring about 10x15 feet, also serves as a resource centre. Close to the door, an old red Honda XL motorcycle without hind tyres squats.

A table sits in the middle of the room, at the extreme right is another long table with locally made instruction materials. These include a cock, grass-thatched hut, white cane, corrugated sheet 'permanent house,' kitchen and bathroom. Bottle tops litter the table. Chairs of various heights and sizes sit in the room. A bookshelf with materials for persons with disability leans on the wall. A thin layer of dust covers the furniture.

"These items are made from locally available material, except for a few items such as braille," Wandera quips.

"When one needs to explain to a blind person about a permanent house with corrugated iron sheets, one should not merely tell it to them. They have to feel it and differentiate it from a grass-thatched one," Wandera says.

People with visual impairment are trained to have a high sense of touch to detect objects around them."

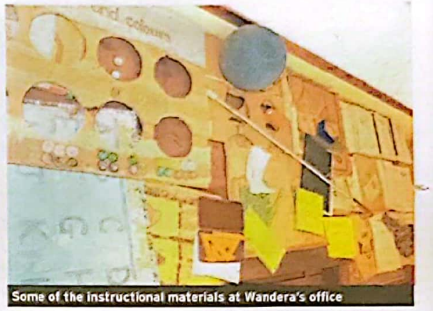
"That is why we improvise this corrugation from the cardboard, cut out windows and doors in the box and use grass for the grass-thatched house. That cock is moulded from clay and chicken feathers stuck on its body with glue and wild seeds for eyes. This resource centre also serves as a training venue for teachers in special needs education," Wandera adds.

The passion for the wellbeing and education of children with disability has taken Wandera all over the country and within East Africa, spreading the message at different workshops. Civil Society Organisations serving in this field often hire him to carry out assessment on children with disability to ascertain appropriate interventions.

To get most of the 'raw material' he uses to make instructional material, Wandera has had to ditch diplomacy at certain moments.

"At workshops, when guests have finished taking sodas, I move around the venue picking bottle tops. I also collect boxes, markers, waste paper during the meeting. This is what I use to make these instructional materials," Wandera explains.

The subject of his passionate desire in serving children with disability has an emotional tinge of sensitivity to it.



Some of the instructional materials at Wandera's office

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