

A day in the life of a nursery teacher

From 6am alarms to late evening preparations, a nursery school teacher's day is a non-stop cycle of lesson planning, play-based learning, emotional labour, and constant vigilance as she manages 45 young children, revealing the hidden demands behind early childhood education.

BY PROMISE TWINAMUKYE

By 6am, Brenda Atuheire's day has already begun.

Her alarm goes off and within 30 minutes, she is ready and mentally preparing for a day that demands patience, energy and constant alertness. By 7am, she must be at school. When she is the teacher on duty, she arrives even earlier, at 6.40am.

"I do not ease into the day. The moment I step into class, my work starts," she says.

Atuheire is a nursery school teacher at Marigolds Christian School, where she works under the British curriculum. Now in her sixth year of teaching, her journey began even before she graduated from Makerere University, where she studied a Bachelor of Arts in Education, majoring in History.

Although she was trained to teach older students, her passion drew her to early childhood education, a path she has never left.

"I just loved the little ones. My first boss even sponsored me for an early years certificate because she saw my passion," she says.

A classroom that starts before class

Her day at school begins with preparation. Before the children arrive, Atuheire organises materials for the day's lessons, sometimes as simple as tomatoes and cabbage for counting exercises. By 7.15am, the children start coming in.

"I welcome them, help them settle down, and give them activities such as Play dough, threading and sorting, just to engage them as we wait for classes to start," she says.

At 8am, the class gathers for "circle time", a structured session similar to assembly in traditional schools. Each day has a theme, sharing weekend news, Bible stories, songs, or life lessons such as kindness and generosity. This requires careful preparation.

But even in this structured moment, unpredictability rules.

"A child wants to use the washroom, another is crying, and another needs attention. You are always on your feet," she says.

Learning through play

By 8.30am, formal learning begins. For nursery-level children, the focus is mainly on phonics and numeracy, taught within broader areas of early childhood development. Atuheire teaches from the carpet, seated in a circle with her pupils and assistants. "You have to make it lively, with

songs, repetition and movement, because that is how they understand," she explains.

Lessons run until around 10am, followed by snack time, outdoor play, and another learning session. The activities are very hands-on and include baking, counting objects, and exploring themes such

as healthy and unhealthy foods. "It is not just about teaching; it involves careful planning and preparation to ensure every child understands in a way that suits them."

No real break

Lunch is not exactly a break.

"You try to eat, but it is almost im-

possible. Someone needs help feeding, another is too slow, another has spilled something," she says.

After lunch, the children take an afternoon nap. This is when Atuheire and her assistants finally multitask; eating, marking books, organising materials, and planning for the next day.

"You cannot just sit and eat. You are always doing something."

By 3pm, the children are awake again. The afternoon is filled with lighter activities, revision, and play as parents begin picking them up.

Her official day may end at 5.30pm, but it often stretches much longer. At home, the work continues.

"I still have to print materials for the next day. Sometimes the printer jams, or the power goes out, so it can take even longer," she says.

45 children, one teacher

Atuheire's class has 45 children.

To manage them, she divides the class into smaller groups based on ability and works with three assistants assigned to support learning.

"You have to track every child. At the end of each week, I write individual reports; how they behaved, how they ate, what they learnt and what they did not," she says.

It is a demanding system, but one that allows close monitoring of progress.

What makes it worthwhile

Despite the long hours and constant pressure, some moments remind her why she chose this path.

"The best feeling is hearing a child teach another child something. When one says, 'This is the sound...' I feel proud," she says.

She also treasures feedback from parents. "They tell me, 'My child sounded out a word at home,' and I feel like my work is not in vain," she says, beaming as she recalls those moments.

One defining moment came early in her career. "My employer once increased my salary without my knowledge. They told me I was doing a great job. That is when I knew I was meant for this."

Through teaching, she has also achieved personal milestones such as buying land and starting a small business selling children's clothes and bedding.

Challenges

Yet the job comes with unique pressures. "The biggest one is that everyone is your boss. You never know who is watching you; it could be a parent or a future employer," she says.

This means constantly being mindful of how she dresses, speaks, and behaves, even outside school.

"I used to love swimming, but now I think twice before going out. A child might say, 'I saw my teacher at the pool,' and you wonder how that might be perceived."

Another challenge is dealing with parents' expectations.

"Sometimes a child arrives from home already sick, but the teacher is the one who gets blamed," she explains.

She recalls an incident in which a child's dirty bottle was mistaken for poor hygiene at school.

"I took the bottle to the administrators. Sometimes you have to defend yourself with evidence," she says.

To handle such situations, she keeps proper records and prefers to communicate through official school channels.



A calling

By the time Atuheire finally rests, her day has stretched far beyond the classroom. On duty days, she can leave school as late as 9pm. Yet she remains committed.

"These children are young. They are learning everything for the first time. You have to be patient. You have to care," she says. For Atuheire, teaching is not just a profession, but a calling shaped by long hours, small victories, and the joy of watching young minds grow.

Brenda Atuheire in her element, guiding, nurturing and keeping pace with the boundless energy of her nursery class. PHOTO/PROMISE TWINAMUKYE