

Education is not just school attendance; it is the process through which a nation's human resource, whether formal or informal, is nurtured.

BY ISHARAZA AVELINO

The Psalmist in Psalm 130:3 asks, "If You, O Lord, were to mark our guilt, Lord, who would survive?" These words come to mind as we reflect on the crisis we have carelessly nurtured and presided over, until it is too late for us to make a comeback.

Education is not just school attendance; it is the process through which a nation's human resource, whether formal or informal, is nurtured.

It addresses the cognitive needs of the learner, shaping career aspirations; the affective domain, which molds character, patience, and resilience even in the face of adversity; and the psychomotor domain, which perfects skill and talent. That is what education does for a nation, it is the goose that lays the golden egg.

Show me a nation with a strong education system, and I will show you a wealthy, self-reliant people who do not lose sleep over foreign aid cuts or wars abroad.

But show me a nation with a shambolic education system, and I will show you a people who willingly engage in modern-day slave trade, panic at the slightest political disruption, and whose internal systems - transport, healthcare, housing - are hanging by a thread. All these depend on their mother system - education.

Old good days

From colonial times, Uganda had a fairly stable system. We were the envy of our neighbours, especially in East Africa, producing the best human resource across the region.

But recent trends have left our education system at the mercy of God, and I doubt even He might save us.

The call for refurbishing our education system began in the late 1990s with the introduction of Universal Primary Education, followed by Universal Secondary Education in the early 2000s.

While this was a step in the right direction, politics poisoned the well. Public schools lost morale, private schools surged, and traditional institutions became shadows of their former selves, academic museums where alumni now return as tourists.

Take Kashenyi Model School in Bushenyi District, once the envy of every child in the 1990s.

It celebrated 100 years of existence two years ago, yet barely had a single student in first grade in the latest Primary Leaving Examinations. Many schools across our communities share this fate.

Then came something more sinister, the lower secondary competence-based curriculum. From its inception in 2020, it was hailed as a bright innovation.

But politics in its implementation turned promise into peril.

Learners were promised dual certification by Senior Three, yet midway, a circular suspended the initiative, citing "ill preparedness." The

Why new curriculum needs serious saviour



Projects, though a wonderful initiative which improves cognitive abilities, they were rolled out without basic training. PHOTO/GEOF-REYMU TUMBA

pioneers are now in Senior Six, and no one even asks about the certificates anymore.

Come end-of-cycle assessment, the drama was worse. What the National Curriculum Development Centre (NCDC) had in its academic materials - whether authored by *New Vision*, *Baroque*, *Fountain Publishers*, or others - was far removed from what Uganda National Examinations Board (Uneb) was assessing.

To this day, if you rely on the new curriculum materials for teaching, you know what your grades look like. Truthfully, NCDC created a market for publishing houses, injected public resources, and attracted development partners, but the content delivered was irrelevant to Uneb's demands.

Mind-boggling abstract terms like "bases," "items of construct," and "activities of integration" were thrown around, leaving scorers scratching their heads. Worst of all, every subject has a "specialist" - a god of sorts - whose directives, right or wrong, are final. As the saying goes, too many cooks spoil the broth.

Projects, though a wonderful initiative to give the psychomotor domain purpose, were rolled out without basic training. New compulsory subjects like Kiswahili and Physical Education - brilliant ideas for national integration and talent development - were abandoned after Senior Two.

Less than five percent of learners embrace them, not by choice but because the jungle of subjects leaves them cornered.

Assessment itself became a dog's breakfast. Grades A, B, C, D, E were rebranded, but the descriptors blurred excellence with mediocrity.

Imagine: a learner with nine straight As and another with two Ds plus a project pass both end up with the same "Result 1."

When Uneb announces that 99.5 percent of candidates "passed," it is smoke and mirrors. Investors, administrators, and media collude to keep parents in the dark, while

incompetence hides under the blanket of "success."

Now, for one to get Result 1, they only need two Ds and at least a D in the project, even if the rest are Es. Imagine this: a learner who earns nine straight As plus an A in the project ends up with the same descriptor as the "legend" who scraped by with two Ds and a project D. That's comparing chalk and cheese, yet Uneb insists they are equal.

When Uneb releases results and proudly declares that 99.5 percent of candidates "passed," this is the shaky foundation of their statistics. The painful truth is that school investors, directors, and administrators have colluded with the media to push a narrative that leaves parents at the mercy of a veil of ignorance.

When they trumpet that "all our children passed in Grade 1," when in reality it is merely Result 1, incompetence and underperformance are swept under the rug.

Discussion that did not bud

Parliament tried to raise its voice, inviting the Minister of Education to explain. But whether the explanation was satisfactory or not, it was just another ritual - we raised it on the floor of Parliament - and the matter was left to gather dust.

The A-Level curriculum drama is even more dramatic than drama itself. At the start, NCDC admitted they hadn't prepared for the Advanced Level competence-based curriculum, yet learners were already enrolled. They fell back on an abridged version of the old curriculum.

Just seven months before candidates sat their final exams, NCDC began virtual trainings for teachers on what they should have been teaching since last year.

With our patchy internet coverage, one wonders: what is the plight of the teacher in hard-to-reach areas, and the learners under their care?

Once again, constructs, bases, and core competencies are paraded on their lips. Same old dogs, yet we all know how

hard it is for them to learn new tricks.

This time, development partners haven't cashed in much, so publishers like *New Vision*, *Baroque*, and *Fountain* seem less interested; there's no gravy train to ride.

They speak of projects under General Paper, but no theme has been set, and whether it will be assessed as another section remains a mystery. They say the paper will be one, yet also talk of it accommodating projects. It's a case of the left hand not knowing what the right hand is doing.

Is it any wonder then that parents are rushing to international curricula at A-Level? Those systems appear more believable, stable, and trustworthy compared to NCDC's, which looks like a ship without a captain or radar, drifting on autopilot.

What makes this even more intriguing is that almost all the curriculum developers have their own children either abroad or in international schools. If you prepare food for a feast but order yours and your bride's from Serena, how should your guests feel confident to dine?

If your factory produces only for export, what guarantees that the product is fit for local consumption?

Meanwhile, the Parliament remains tight-lipped, yet to set pre-tests that would guide teachers on paper structure. It's a tall order, because they are unsure whether to stick to the old grading system or embrace the one used at O-Level.

University dilemma

Should they choose the latter, brace yourselves for tougher times, universities will have to tailor their cut-off points to the new requirements.

What worries most is that universities, the very sources of human resource for schools, haven't changed their curricula at all. One wonders who they are training these teachers for.

In a recent discussion with a top consultant on the competence-based curriculum, he assured me that plans were underway to increase every university course by an extra year, to compensate for the shallow preparation seen from NCDC and Uneb. This cost trickles down to parents, who are left as passive cheerleaders on the sidelines.

During research on the right to play in one municipality, I was directed to a school supposedly two kilometres away. On arrival, I found a coffee factory; the school had shifted, and not just location, but even municipality. If that is how supervisors of the competence-based curriculum operate, it is wrong to conclude that the framers were incompetent, the supervisors equally so, and the teachers left to carry the can?

The learners, the consumers of this content, are being sacrificed at the altar of politics and sheer disinterest. Soon, we will wring our hands at skyrocketing statistics of drug misuse, rising mental health cases, and escalating crime, forgetting that we sowed these seeds ourselves.

Education is more than buildings, more than teachers, it is the backbone of society.

Everyone should take an interest in who our next lawyers, bankers, doctors, architects, and teachers will be.

They won't fall from the sky; they must come from our education system. And that system must be trusted.

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