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POLICY/PRACTICE

ESSENTIALS AND ALTERNATIVE IDEAS

Do pupils need all those books daily?

It is becoming common practice for pupils to carry heavily-loaded bags to and from school daily. Ordinarily primary schools have four main subjects. Must the other additional subjects necessarily be studied everyday?

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When 10-year-old Regina Nyannok leaves her home in Busega, a Kampala suburb, she carries along a dozen counter books on average daily. The Primary Four Queen of Peace Primary School pupil starts her journey at 5am walking with her friends to Lubaga where the school is located. During the tumultuous trek to school, Nyannok hustles with the book load on her back in a heavily loaded bag.

But with only four primary school subjects, one wonders why a child should carry such a load to school daily.

One subject many books

Nyannok says she has three to four books per subject; morning prep, revision, class work and homework. Since these subjects are handled hastily by teachers who want to complete the syllabus, Hasifah Nakalule, says the teachers sometimes skip a topic and ask pupils to bring a new book for it to avoid confusion.

Nyannok and Nakalule go to the same school. The Primary Seven pupil recounts how the teacher asked them to get a different book for interdependence while abandoning the skeletal system topic.

"We studied the skeletal system up to the eye. We had not yet completed the topic but teacher wanted to start on interdependence so we got another book. When you add this to the weekend books, you find you have more than five books for one subject," Nakalule reveals.

At Sir Apollo Kaggwa Primary School in Mengo, pupils have close to 36 books for only four subjects (English, Social Studies, Science and Mathematics).

They include English Grammar, Comprehension, Composition, Junior English, morning work, lunch hour (book for spellings), revision work, homework and mixed work (weekend take home work). Maths



A pupil walks to school in Kampala recently. Carrying heavy school bags is said to be potentially dangerous to school children. PHOTO BY ALEX ESAGALA

has an added graph and geometry book.

Justification

But Rebecca Batemye, a Primary teacher of English at Sir Apollo Kaggwa School in Mengo, attests that those books are necessary since different work calls for a different book for easy access during revision. "Evening take home assignments leave no option for children but to carry the books since they need to consult from their classwork during Uganda's continuous assessment system," she says.

Students challenge

Daniella Kabarazi, a Primary Six pupil at Shalom International Primary School, says she detests the need to carry a heavy bag but has no way out. Even though she carries snacks, she says it is textbooks that make her bag heavy.

However, Batemye says some children like carrying heavy bags as a sign of prestige. "Some children even when told to keep the books on shelves at school, insist on carrying them back and forth," she observes.

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THE STANDARD SUBJECTS
PRIMARY SCHOOL PUPILS
MUST STUDY

Parents' take

Rose Kikome, a parent at Queen of Peace Primary School, says the bags look heavy for the children but if they can carry them without a problem, it means they can handle. "A patient cries and speaks out to get a cure otherwise we can never know," she says.

But Sarah Pukamuranzya, a parent at Shalom International, differs saying some books are not always relevant. "These book burden children. I think for some schools it is a culture to carry all those books. The children have bent backs as if they have hunchbacks. I recommend that policy makers come with a better curriculum to integrate some subjects. We have literacy 1 and 2. I think soon we will have 3. It is unrealistic" she says.

Solution

Carrying a book becomes more tedious when a child needs to carry four 98-page books for one subject. To curtail constant binding of small capacity books, students are encouraged to buy big counter books (black books) at least four quires, to enable them use one book for an entire school term. Some schools have lockers or shelves where pupils are meant to leave their books overnight and only retrieve them when in class.

MEDICAL IMPLICATION

Carrying heavy material can leave a mark on a person of all ages. Putting into consideration the development of children's young bones, regularly carrying heavy materials on their backs could have an even more detrimental effect because it can leave a permanent scar.

According to Dr Sabrina Kitaka,

Paediatric & Adolescent Health Specialist at Makerere University College of Health and Sciences, as long as the weight of a bag is no more than 10 per cent of a child's weight, it is fine. "The challenge is that the bags are getting heavier and heavier by the day and this could injure the children. The injuries may go up to the spine which is the main support of our skeleton, hence resulting in poor standing posture and severe back pain."

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