

Inspiring. Two former pupils of St Theresa Bujuni Boys Primary School are currently offering services at the facility.

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KIBAALÉ. On a cloudy Monday morning, I arrive at St Theresa Bujuni Boys Primary School which has a section of children with special learning needs.

Located in Kibaale Town Council, Kibaale District, the school welcomes one with a sight of pupils crawling on arms and others walking with crutches in the compound.

With the school motto inscribed on the main administration block: "We struggle for a better future", the institution indeed is struggling with more than 120 children of special learning needs with various disabilities.

After exchanging a few pleasantries, Mr Kenneth Mugisa, the school deputy head teacher, who is also the officer-in-charge of the children with special needs, reveals that they have more than 120 children with disabilities, among whom 14 are deaf, 11 blind, seven with retarded mental growth and several others with autism, also known as down syndrome. Other children suffer from dyslexia (eye problems) which need to be corrected.

He says the pupils hail from Kagadi, Kibaale, Nkoko, Kakumiro, Kyegegwa and Mpeefu areas.

"Most of these children are orphans, some are neglected by their parents, for example, if a parent gives birth to a child with disability, a father abandons him/her to the mother. Some of the children are even dropped at the school gate by their parents and don't even surface again. We just pick and start looking after them," Mr Mugisa says.

He adds: "Parents and the community have a negative attitude towards disabled children because they have no hope in them. Some of these parents are poor and the conditions in their homes are alarming."

Government is mandated under the National Policy on Disability to promote and protect the rights of the persons with disabilities.

Some of the disabilities include difficulty in seeing, hearing, speech, moving and learning.

Bottlenecks

At the school, Mr Mugisa says parents are mandated to provide 25 kilograms of maize and 13 kilograms of beans, groundnuts and salt for the welfare of the children under boarding facility but some do not even bother to do so.

"There is a 10 per cent of funds deducted from the UPE capitation grant as a government policy to cater for children with special learning needs but it is not enough," he adds.

The school has only four teachers, two blind, one deaf and the deputy head teacher who trained in special needs education. These are supposed to exclusively handle the more than 120 enrolled children with disabilities.

One of the blind teachers, Mr Geresome Asaba, who is the only senior teacher trained in braille (tactile writing system used by people who are visually impaired) says there is need for government to consider the special needs teachers by increasing their salaries and improving their welfare.

Blind teachers showing the way to blind pupils



Vulnerable. Some of the children with disabilities and their teachers at St. Theresa Bujuni Primary School in Kibaale District last week. PHOTO BY ALEX TUMUHIMBISE

"Of course there is need for us to be catered for in a special way because this job is demanding. It requires creativity and concentration to make sure that we make these children learn. Imagine we have blind teachers teaching blind children," Mr Asaba says.

He adds that the government has provided helpful devices such as the braille materials, slates and stylus pens for the blind which has enabled some pupils to complete the primary cycle and enrol in vocational institutions.

Despite all these challenges, Mr Asaba who walks to the school on a daily basis with a white cane is proud that one of the blind pupils he taught is also a teacher at the school.

"First of all, it is my call and even when I was studying, I was taught the braille type of writing by a blind teacher and this is the job which feeds me. I am always energised by the fact that when a blind pupil is taught, his future can be bright and promising. I don't regret at all," Mr Asaba said.

Mr Peter Kyaligonza, another blind teacher, completed Primary Seven from this school in 2007. He went for

secondary education at St Francis Madera School for the Blind, in Soroti before he joined St Augustine's College Butiti, in Kyenjojo District for Grade III teacher training. Upon completing his studies, Mr Kyaligonza returned to St Theresa Bujuni Boys Primary School to teach the blind children.

"I feel alright, I studied here from 2001 to 2007. I never knew that I would be here again. I feel happy that I am also teaching the blind pupils," he says.

Computer literacy

During my short stay at this school, I got an opportunity to attend one of the classes of the blind where I observed that teaching blind pupils is not that simple. It requires passion and patience.

Mr Asaba, who is the only computer literate blind teacher, strongly believes that blind pupils can also learn and use the computer.

"These children are supposed to be learning computer and you should know that a blind person can use a computer like any other person. A blind person cannot use an ordinary computer like other people, he or she needs a computer with an NVDU system which means a None Visual Desktop Access software which has got speech support facility to help them communicate with the computer system," Asaba says.

However, the challenge is the school has one computer of a kind.

"We teach these pupils to make them self-reliant, reducing on accidents and disability occurrence and giving them social ability because they need to know how to relate with others at school. We have a problem of understaffing. I need someone who knows braille but who is not blind

because a blind teacher cannot go an extra mile in teaching the blind children," he says.

Mr Asaba adds: "We need assistance in form of treatment, many visually impaired pupils lack treatment to correct their disorders. For example, there is a boy in Primary Five who is very bright but he reads from the black board letter by letter. The doctor said that he can be operated on but we cannot afford the costs."

Daily Monitor also observed that the whole school has no single wheelchair and yet there are many children crawling in the school compound.

THE LAW

Rights Article 30 of the 1995

Constitution states that all persons have a right to education, but several children with disabilities in rural villages are being denied this right because of the negative attitude of their parents.

The blind teachers and pupils have no white canes used as walking sticks. One white cane costs between Shs150,000 and Shs200,000 in Kampala-based shops.

The Kibaale District education officer, Mr John Kyabona, admits that there is a problem of understaffing in the special needs children sector.

"It has remained a challenge for a number of years because the teachers offering subjects such as sign language and braille writing for the blind are few and some of them are being employed in other areas and not schools," he says.

Mr Silvestor Muwonge, an education officer in Kakumiro District, says there is a need for change of attitude towards children with disabilities because a one can be disabled any time.

brief

Food shortage

KASESE: Ugandans attached to Kas Station, the headquarter of the East regional police, depending on food from the institution, have for been starving. The weekend told that they had spent five "We have been taking and super from here week, we have been stomachs without our bosses" the police officer-in-charge Rwenzori regional Omugetum, confirmed but did not give [Enid Ninsima]

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