

Graduates get down to rural UPE schools

By Denis Nsubuga

As many graduates shun volunteering or low paying jobs until they get white collar ones, a non-governmental organisation is picking the top performing graduates to work and help inspire children in rural UPE schools on voluntary basis.

The good news in our public primary schools is that the enrolment is high, now at 8.4 million pupils. But the worry is that there is a high dropout rate and low competency level of learners.

It is one thing for a child to start schooling and another to complete Primary Seven, or even understand what he is being taught.

It is estimated that only 33% of the pupils in any given class make it to Primary Seven. Of these only 20% can solve all numeracy and literacy test of Primary Two level, with ease; based on Uwezo studies.

Data from the education ministry (2014) reported that the percentage of Primary Six pupils rated proficient in numeracy and literacy was 40.15% and 41.4% in 2013. This implies that more than half of the pupils in Primary Six can neither count nor read and write simple sentences.

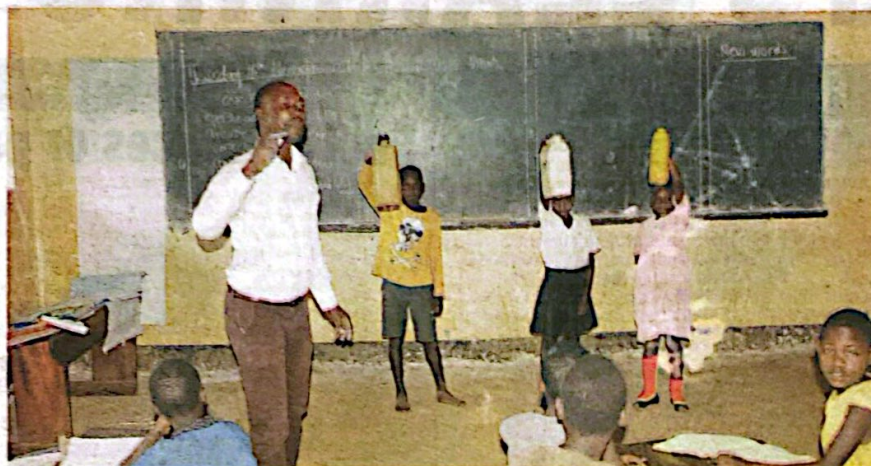
But, James Kassaga Arinaitwe, an education advocate with Teach For Uganda, says some of the challenges originate from lack of inspiration and failure to mentor or monitor pupils' learning process. "Perhaps many of the children or their parents do not know why they are in school," Arinaitwe says.

His view is confirmed by a 2015 study by the National Planning Authority (NPA), which reveals that the main factor that accounts for high dropout is the lack of interest by learners (45%). "This implies that the current school environment is not interesting to many pupils (probably as a result of high pupil-teacher ratios and poor teaching methodologies)," the study found.

Teach For Uganda is an education organisation in Uganda leveraging on graduates and young professionals to transform the learning outcomes of underprivileged students through "teaching as leadership" fellowship programme. This organisation's main aim is to prevent dropout in rural primary schools; by inspiring and mentoring learners.

The fellows teach English and mathematics in universal primary schools in rural areas, which Arinaitwe believes have a high demand for good teachers to mentor and inspire learners.

"Teaching as leadership", Arinaitwe says: "goes beyond classroom teaching to mentoring, monitoring



Desmond Wandera, a fellow (graduate of education from Makerere University) teaching at Kyambogo Mixed Primary School

and motivating the children to show them the value of education".

How programme works

Teach For Uganda recruits university graduates, trains them pedagogy and leadership and places them in underserved public schools. Dubbed fellows or volunteer teachers, these trained professionals support teachers in the schools.

"They also work with the school leadership, management committees, parents, local leaders to ensure that the children who are likely to drop out of school get to stay," Arinaitwe says.

They recruit graduates with a no less than 3.0 Grade Point Average (GPA). After proving their academic excellence, leadership qualities and passion; they are hired as volunteers.

A total of 17 potential fellows were selected for this year. According to Arinaitwe, they were selected from a pool of 600 applicants to the programme, through a series of interviews.

After selection, they were taken through a six-week training session. They are in Butuntumula sub-county, Luwero district, for the practical classroom training, which started on November 7 and ends on December 15.

When we visited Mbale SDA Primary School in Luwero, we found one of the fellows, Patricia Nakimbugwe (business administration graduate from Makerere University), conducting her lessons.

A team of education experts sat at the back of the class, to monitor the delivery of the lesson. The training is a deep immersion of the vision, the leadership skills, the pedagogy and challenges in teaching.



Molly Nabwami, a fellow (Social Sciences graduate from Makerere University), teaching at Mbale SDA Primary School

After the training, the 10 male and seven female volunteers will have a break. They will return in January to prepare for the academic year 2018 in February.

Two fellows – for English and Math – are placed to teach in each of the nine selected schools for the next two years. Selected schools include Mbale SDA Primary School, Butuntumula UMEA, Kyambogo Mixed CU and St Jude Muwangi Primary School. Others are St Kizito Primary School, Nabutaka Primary School, Lusenge Primary School, Kagalama Primary School, Kassiiso CU and Nalongo CU Primary School. Paid and facilitated by Teach of Uganda, the fellows will teach Primary Four and Five.

Charlotte Iraguha, the co-founder and programmes director, says Teach

For Uganda is a replica of the global network, Teach For All, operating in 46 countries worldwide. In Africa, it is in Ghana, Nigeria and Uganda.

They hope to hire every year. Arinaitwe says next year, they hope to enrol 30 fellows and work with 15 other schools.

"We would want to expand fast, but we are limited by resources," he says. He adds that the programme is mainly supported by donations from the US mission to Uganda.

With the current policy of eight teachers per school, Enock Kiyimba, the senior education officer for Luwero district, thinks having the extra two coming on board will close the gap.

"Sometimes teachers fall sick and are absent, so the presence of the fellows can help a lot," Kiyimba says.

The NPA study notes that the issue of teachers is critical because they play a pivotal role in improving the quality of primary education service delivery.

However, the pupil-teacher ratio in Uganda is 48:1, according to data from the education ministry, 2014. The study concludes that high pupil-teacher ratios lead to higher dropout rates and have a negative effect on learning.

Rosemary Nabaweesi, the deputy headteacher of Butuntumula UMEA, says: "I have been teaching four classes. But if the fellows take on some work, I will have time for administrative work."

Kiyimba argues that the fellows might not do much, pedagogy-wise because they are not professional teachers. "But as young professionals from different fields, their interaction with the learners can inspire and motivate them," he adds.

The fellows' assignment includes following up their pupils beyond the classroom.

"Our fellows will relate with each individual child and learn their challenges and dreams. They will then get ways of helping the children overcome the challenges," Arinaitwe says.

He says during trainings, the fellows are made conscious of the problems children in rural schools face, for instance, hunger, poverty and walking long distances.

Studies show teenage pregnancy, early marriages, child labour and poor sanitation facilities are also causes of dropouts. Many of these factors lie outside the direct influence of the school and education policy.

The director for basic and secondary education, Dr Robinson Nsumba-Lyazi, says he is aware of the team's work.

"We are interested in all good initiatives from various individuals and groups, who are interested in improving education. This organisation is doing a commendable job," he says.

Irene Ssenkima, headteacher of Kyambogo Mixed Primary School, admits that one of the problems children face in learning is inconsistency in attending school.

Iraguha says, "For a teacher to be transformative, they need to have a vision for their children. With a vision of where he wants his pupils at the end of seven years, a teacher can create a positive culture of achievement within the classroom."

After two years, the fellows can pursue their respective fields of choice. But they remain alumni of the global network of the Teach For All and are encouraged to be lifelong advocates of quality education.

What Stakeholders say



Irene Ssenkima, head teacher of Kyambogo Mixed Primary School
The fellows provide support to our staff and help to groom the children. The project will help us prevent absenteeism and dropping out of pupils. Their teaching style has also encouraged our teachers.



Rosemary Nabaweesi, deputy headteacher of Butuntumula UMEA
The workload each teacher carries has reduced following the recruitment of the fellows. It relieves the teachers and gives them time to research and prepare for lessons. I have been relieved by the fellows and can now do more administrative work.



Moses Ruharo, a fellow (Economics graduate)
I joined the programme to take part in alleviating the life of a child in the rural UPE school. It also re-wires their mindsets and makes them believe that they can overcome the challenges at school.