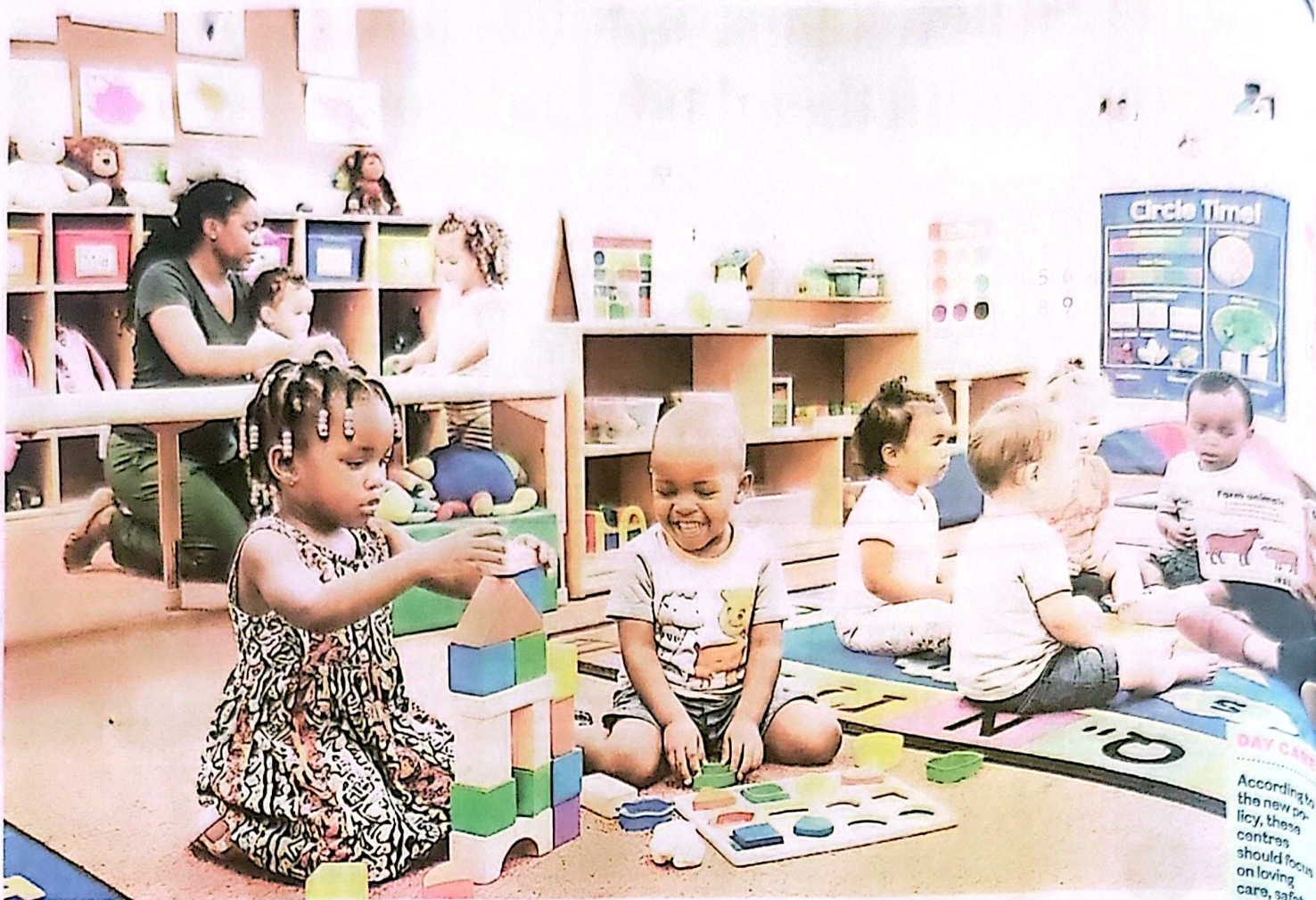




Is this the end of 'Baby Class' as we know it?

The old baby class is ending. For the 7.9 million children under five in Uganda, the next few years will determine whether this policy becomes a genuine transformation or another well-intentioned reform that fails on the classroom floor.

BY GEOFFREY OYET OKWERA

For Generation Z and Alpha parents, the term "Baby Class" comes as no surprise. But for older parents, it raises a natural question: Why are babies attending classes?

For the uninitiated, Baby Class is a preschool before preschool, where you send your barely toilet-trained toddler to "study." Do not let the name fool you: it's a real class, complete with a timetable, homework, and even exams. All of this for two- and three-year-olds.

Teachers defend the practice by saying it became necessary because education in Uganda is a sprint, children need to hit the ground running. There is simply no time to teach basics like reading and writing in kindergarten. To achieve

top marks at the primary level, children start preparing for final exams as early as primary three.

But now, authorities are pushing back, saying this approach is not right, and it has to change.

And that is why earlier last week, the government, through the Ministry of Education and Sports, unveiled a new Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) policy banning pre-primary schools, including nursery schools and kindergartens from operating day care centres.

The development has since thrown all operating day care centres and parents into panic, as they remain uncertain about what the future holds for the legal operation of the day care facilities. The new directive has left them wor-

ried about the sustainability of their businesses and the fate of the families that depend on their services.

But beneath the panic lies a deeper, more fundamental shift. For decades, the typical Ugandan "Baby Class" has been a miniature version of Primary One; rows of tiny desks, chanting of the alphabet, copying letters from a blackboard, homework for three-year-olds, and end-of-term exams complete with written reports. That model, educators now say, is ending. The new policy redefines what education for young children should look like. The formal, academic-driven nursery is being replaced by a play-based model.

The new policy clearly separates care from education by creating two different types of centres, each with its own rules and government oversight:

Pre-primary

These are nursery schools for children between three and six years and should focus on play-based learning

and getting children ready for primary school. They are overseen by the Ministry of Education and Sports.

The important rule, however, is that the same owner cannot run both a day care and a nursery school in one building under a single license. If they want to offer both, they must meet independent standards for each, for example, separate staff, separate entrances, and separate facilities.

Yet for most parents and teachers, the more immediate and confusing change is not about licenses or entrances, it is about what happens inside the classroom. Under the new policy, the traditional nursery school lesson is dead. No more morning drill of reciting the days of the week.

No more writing the letter 'A' 50 times in an exercise book. No more tests that sort two-year-olds into "clever" and "slow." Instead, teachers are expected to put away the chalk and bring out the blocks, the sand, the water trays, the dress-up clothes, and the building bricks. Children are to learn by touching, moving, pretending, and playing.

Policy worries parents, caretakers

Sarah Nambalirwa, a single mother with a two-year-old child, says she is worried about where her son will be cared for as she reports to work at the bank. Nambalirwa explains that her daycare facility in Namugongo, Wakiso District, at a nearby school has been taking very good care of her child, but she is now confused

According to the new policy, these centres should focus on loving care, safety, and basic stimulation for children between zero to three years old.

They are not allowed to teach formal lessons such as reading or writing. Staff must be trained caregivers.

Oversight is shared between the Ministry of Gender and local governments.