

Is that nursery school giving you your money's worth?

BY BILLY RWOTHUNGEYO

Back in the day, a typical nursery school consisted of a solitary classroom block, with a playground, dotted with battered old tyres for pupils to play with.

The pupils lived near the school so, they did not need a school bus to pick and drop them or their parents to drive them to and from there.

They simply packed their two small exercise books and a snack container with left-over food from the supper of the previous night. The little one would then run to school through footpaths or banana plantations to school.

On the contrary, today, it is quite difficult to find an accurate description of a typical nursery school. Like clothes, they now come in different designs and sizes.

The 'new breed' of nursery schools is targeting Uganda's rising middle class who want exquisite service.

Instead of old tyres as play objects, the schools have imported toys and modern carousels (merry-go-rounds) in their play areas, with smartly clad attendants waiting on the children.

Many also have swimming pools, manicured compounds, tiled buildings and elegantly furnished administration offices and classrooms.

In the mornings, neat men and women pleasantly welcome the pupils to school at the gate and usher them into their classrooms. The pupils do not carry left-overs to school, as there is a sumptuous breakfast awaiting them. They are living the bourgeois life.

School fees vs services

The fees at the different nursery schools vary, depending on its location, facilities, human resource, ownership and services offered. Since there are no government-owned nursery schools, the cost of nursery schools is high and parents have a limited range of choices.

While a traditional upcountry nursery school charges fees ranging from sh50,000 to sh500,000, their fancier counterparts in Kampala, charge between sh500,000 and sh1m or more.

Are nursery schools that charge over sh1m necessarily better in academics than those that charge sh100,000? Does one get any more value for money in plush schools?

According to Paul Masaba, an early childhood learning expert, it is not necessarily true that the child in an expensive school has an academic advantage over the one in a cheaper one. He says luxurious schools spend much of the money on the logistics of running the school, as opposed to the actual learning of the pupils.

"The maintenance cost of high-cost nursery schools is usually high. For instance, swimming pools mean high water bills, in addition to costs for maintenance personnel and instructors," Masaba reasons.

However, researchers say there are intellectual benefits to swimming.

Aquatics instructor Saunte Bruton says: "Swimming teaches pupils another way of dealing with being afraid of things and it also teaches them the concept of doing more than one thing at a time," said Bruton.

Swimming has been scientifically linked to better academic performance. Studies have found that children who swam during their development years achieved several physical



Upscale schools incur higher maintenance costs compared to most traditional ones. It is such expenses that may translate into high school fees. Therefore, not every coin paid in school dues necessarily translates into improved academic performance



Many nursery schools nowadays have luxurious amenities, such as swimming pools. Researchers have linked swimming to better academic performance

and mental milestones faster than their non-swimming counterparts.

Researchers found that the type of instruction and sensory learning which children are exposed to in swimming lessons translates almost seamlessly into how they learn in the classroom.

A four-year study reveals the younger the children are when they start swimming, the smarter their intellectual and social skills develop.

"Some of the schools have CCTV cameras and employ graduate teachers who they have to pay higher salaries than those that would be paid to diploma and certificate holders," he adds.

Schools also make uniforms for children, unlike back in the day when a parent had to hunt for the village tailor.

Some of them employ nutritionists to work with the kitchen staff at the school to

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ensure that the right meals are prepared for children.

"If you go to a nursery school that charges sh150,000 fees, you do not expect that your child will be given sausages every day at break," Masaba says.

However, if a parent cannot afford sh1m for school, there is no need to worry. One can still get a good nursery education for one's child in a less expensive school.

There are the basics to look out for in any school you choose, however. You cannot compromise on the curriculum and qualification of teachers, for instance.

The bottom line is that when a parent goes to a nursery school, whether it charges sh100,000 or sh1.5m, he should ask the administration why they charge that amount. Many are usually willing to break down the cost for the parents.

The decision on whether the fee is a representation of value for money will then come down to you.