



Dr Samuel Andema argues that in many classrooms, literacy is still taught in narrow terms, reduced to reading passages, writing answers, and passing examinations.

In many African communities, a simple morning question carries lessons our classrooms cannot afford to ignore. If you walk through a village or town in many parts of Africa at daybreak, you will notice something striking. People do not simply say "good morning." They ask: "Did you sleep well?"

In Lugbarati, one might say "Mi afu ngoni?" "Ila ngoni?" or "Iko u'du ngoni?" These are not empty pleasantries. What may appear like a small cultural habit is, in fact, a window into how life, relationships, and community are understood.

This pattern is not confined to one language. In Luganda, the greeting "Wasuze otya nno?" literally asks, "How was your night?" In Kiswahili, while "Habari za asubuhi?" or "Umeamkaje?" may be used for "good morning," they often carry the sense of asking about one's state or condition upon waking. In Zulu, expressions such as "Sawubona" ("I see you") and "Unjani?" ("How are you?") go beyond marking the time of day.

Across these languages, a consistent logic emerges: greeting is not about the morning. It is about the human being standing before you.

In many African contexts, greeting is not a formality to be rushed through. When you ask, "Did you sleep well?" you

# Why African greetings start with 'how did you sleep?'



A teacher attends to Primary One pupils at Karintuma Primary School in Isingiro District on May 1, 2023. PHOTO/FILE

are not simply asking about sleep. You are acknowledging that life is not automatic. You are recognising human vulnerability and the fragility of life. You are affirming presence. You are, in effect, saying: I see you. You are here. And that matters.

This is where the deeper lesson lies, and where we must turn our attention to education.

Across Uganda and much of East Africa, education systems have embraced competence-based curricula, promising to develop learners who can think critically, communicate effectively, and engage meaningfully with society. Yet, in many classrooms, literacy is still taught in narrow terms, reduced to reading passages, writing answers, and passing



## Justification.

At a time when education is increasingly driven by efficiency, competition, and measurable outcomes, we risk producing learners who can read texts but cannot read people; who can write answers but cannot sustain relationships.

examinations.

In the process, something important is lost. Learners do not come to school empty. They come with language. They come with culture. Yet these everyday practices—how they greet, inquire, listen, and respond—are rarely recog-

nised as part of learning.

If we are serious about competence-based education, then we must take seriously the forms of literacy that already exist in learners' lives. A simple greeting offers a powerful place to begin.

Imagine a lesson where learners compare how morning greetings are expressed in Luganda, Kiswahili, Lugbarati, or their own home languages. What do these greetings emphasise—time, well-being, respect, recognition? What do they reveal about how different communities understand human relationships?

Or imagine beginning the school day with structured greeting exchanges that encourage learners not just to respond,

but to listen, to ask follow-up questions, and to reflect. A question like "How did you sleep?" can open space for meaningful speaking, attentive listening, and thoughtful engagement.

Learners could go further. They could document greeting practices in their communities, analyse their meanings, and present their findings. In doing so, they would be developing research skills, communication skills, and cultural awareness—all at once.

This is what competence-based education should look like: learning that connects to life.

More importantly, it is learning that builds character. Because at its heart, the African greeting teaches something we rarely assess but deeply need—it teaches attention to others. It teaches empathy. It teaches responsibility. It teaches that to live well is to live in relation with others.

These are not secondary skills. They are foundational.

To ask, "How did you sleep?" is, therefore, not a small thing. It is a way of knowing. It is a way of relating. It is a way of sustaining community.

At a time when education is increasingly driven by efficiency, competition, and measurable outcomes, we risk producing learners who can read texts but cannot read people; who can write answers but cannot sustain relationships.

Some of the most important lessons for our classrooms are already present in our everyday lives. They are in our languages, in our greetings, and in our ways of being with one another.

The task of education is not to replace these practices, but to recognise them, refine them, and build on them.

Because sometimes, the simplest question—"How did you sleep?"—reveals the deepest truth about who we are.

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