

Education *Feature*

Finding bold solutions to teacher shortages in rural Kenya

//“The government must rescue our pupils,” says a parent in Garissa County. It is one voice among many, decrying the lack of teachers in insecure areas in Kenya.

Kenyan parents, teachers, and policy makers are united in their view that the education system is facing severe challenges. Of late, the major culprit is extremism.

The threat of terrorism in many areas has led to teachers feeling afraid to return to their postings. As a result, thousands of children are left without teachers.

Schools and policy makers are scrambling to find solutions for overcoming this teacher shortage. Across the country, 96 public schools have closed, leaving 28,000 children out of school. In Wajir County alone, of the 1,330 employed teachers, 312 are yet to report back to their stations this term.

One solution that has been proposed is to immediately hire local community residents as teaching staff, and train them through in-service in the future. The question then becomes: is it better to have an uncertified teacher or no teacher at all? Is it better to have children in class or have schools closed?

For a parent, the answer is obvious: children need to be in school and learning. They fear that without adequate schooling, their children will reach adulthood unable to read and write, leaving them excluded from the modern economy.

Recent reports on Marsabit County found that literacy levels are at just 20 per cent and poverty at 92 per cent. Less than 15 per cent of girls over the age of six have ever attended school, and of those who do, most end up dropping out.

Idleness and poverty make people vulnerable to extremist narratives that incite violent attack as a remedy to poverty. These parents know that the remedy to poverty is: keeping schools open and children learning.

Some schools are working with the community leaders and parents to keep children learning, despite the Teacher Service Commission (TSC) teacher shortage. One such group of schools is Bridge International Academies.

By recruiting directly from local communities Bridge is harnessing the power of committed local residents who have the qualifications to be a teacher, but never themselves had the ability to attend a teacher training college. These qualified but not yet certified teachers will ensure that these children in the

poorest region in the country have a future different from their present.

It is a bold solution, but the community wants Kenya to come together as a country to find solutions that are bold, practical and reasonable.

They want solutions to stop such cycles of poverty and isolation. One is to deploy teachers who may not be certified but have the passion and determination to succeed. One parent in Garissa wondered: “I am a mother and illiterate. I have never gone to school and am guiding my kids to be upright. What about a Form Four leaver who has been in school for all those years? What more qualifications are needed from him to become a teacher?”

If there were thousands upon thousands of TSC teachers willing to work in the cities of Garissa or Wajir, in Marsabit or Mandera, and in the villages of Garba Tula, or Wamba, then Kenya would not be facing this education crisis. But the situation today is stark. And it is not only due to recent insecurity.

Even before the insecurity began in 2011, it was difficult for schools to keep TSC teachers in the former Northeastern Province. At least 50 per cent of the teachers were brought in from other places. These teachers are then isolated from their families and communities and do not want to stay at their posts.

Why has it been difficult to source local TSC teachers in the North East? This area has the highest levels of poverty in the country. About 85 per cent of families live in poverty, according to the Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative’s 2013 Kenya Country Briefing. There are simply



Bridge International Academies students

not enough people with the resources to attend teacher-training colleges.

An alternate option is for TSC, the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MoEST), and the Kenyan National Examinations Council (KNEC) to join together to review alternative teaching preparation courses specifically designed to rapidly up-skill qualified young men and women to join the teaching ranks. This would create local employment in an area of desperate poverty, and also ensure that the next generation is educated to break this generational cycle of poor education and economic poverty.

Bridge International Academies uses one such programme to train local qualified but not yet certified adults to become teachers in their own communities where TSC teachers cannot be found.

Bridge provide candidates with 200 contact hours of induction training before the adult ever sees a classroom. Once assigned to the local school, the new teacher receives a review of their work every day, and a full lesson is observed each week, with detailed feedback.

Teachers meet in groups to discuss the days’ work and how to improve. Importantly, Bridge has long used the teacher support methods now being championed by the MoEST, where teachers are provided with teachers’ guides for every subject each day. This ensures that the teacher has a strong foundation in the content of the national syllabus and how to best teach these concepts and skills to children.

In-line with President Uhuru Kenyatta’s vision of a digital Kenya, technology can

also play a role in ensuring all teachers, those with a P1 and those without, have better access to tested content, and that the school has stronger management and accountability.

Every Bridge teacher has a tablet computer that has all the teachers’ guides, along with a library of other materials, in their hands. With the tablet, the school is able to track the teachers and pupils attendance and the pupils progress in their lessons. Using this system, if a child is absent for three days, the school sends the parents an SMS telling the parent of the absence and asking after the child’s health.

Recently Garissa Governor Nathif Jama argued that if the TSC continued to fail to help solve this crisis, the regional government would “train, employ and deploy teachers to the affected institutions.” Balambala MP Abdikadir Aden added that the region must “engage different stakeholders, and make sure the education sector in the region gets the serious attention it deserves.”

Rigorous evaluations of lightly trained teachers working with children in basic literacy and mathematics in India, Ghana, and Kenya have shown improvement in children’s learning.

Based on this evidence, the Presidency has initiated a prestigious national volunteer programme, implemented by MoEST, with support from KNUT, called G-United. Through this programme, university graduates are assigned to schools to support children with remedial maths and literacy. The President’s vision here is to build national cohesion, improve primary education outcomes, and create employment opportunities.

When there is a carefully thought out system that caters for the needs of every community, alternative mechanisms for education can work. Not every area of Kenya needs to follow the same process. Importantly, we need to acknowledge and work with particular circumstances when they arise.

Thanks to groups like Bridge working with local communities, thousands of children in the North East can remain in school. If we put children’s needs first and work to create an education system that tackles the reality of our teaching and learning challenges across the country, we will rescue a whole generation of children. When these children prosper, so will all of Kenya.

By Aden Golicha, Garissa

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