

Shule Bora, Bora Shule?

On the second week of January 2019, Form 1 students reported to their various secondary schools. From news reports, a number arrived in high spirits, jovial and excited to be living their dream. But the faces of many more betrayed them - the students seemed tense and glum, their parents deflated and even angry.

Many of these anxiety-ridden parents and children were struggling with the 'disappointment' of being 'called' to a school that they thought was not up to their standard or expectation.

Most of us grew up with the idea of joining a national school or at least the big name (formerly) provincial schools. Ask any student getting to the end of primary school where they would like to go to high school, and the answers are usually the same; Alliance, Starehe, Kenya High...it's embedded so deep into our psyche that it seems nowhere else is good enough.

Our children live, breathe and eat 'Shule Bora' - a good school - and the disappointment when they don't make it either due to bogus placements or low scores is heartbreaking. Even a child whose average score is a respectable 340 - 350 out of 500 (a 70% average across all subjects) is pressured by parents, teachers, and society to work harder or they won't get into a 'good school.' We hope against reality that they will make it to a good school, even when their grades throughout primary school suggest that barring a miracle, they won't make the cut. So we pressure our children with tutoring, promises and threats to get those grades to a 90% average, waking children up at 4am to get cramming, do more test papers, because high marks are the most important thing. Critical thinking is never in the picture. And for those in private school, aren't we working so hard to pay private school fees to give them the best chance at a big name school?

I have been a tutor, and am not surprised when I see a student confidently give the answer to a certain question not because they understand it, but because they have seen it before in another exam paper. We know, and they know, that questions are always repeated, and this is what will give them that extra mark to get to Mang'u or Maseno. We all want to brag that our child is somewhere renowned.

Aged just 14 years on average, our children get into an exam room and take a test that will determine the course of their lives. If they get into a good school, we assume that the children will have a secured future. The reality of their future as frustrated and unemployed graduates is a hurdle to tackle when they get there, not right now. But what does a 'good school' mean? It seems our definition is a national school, with a long history, or that one which consistently performs well during KCSE, which produces many A grades, and facilities are good. Everything else like bullying, mental health, or the politics in the school doesn't matter as long as 'ni Shule Bora'.

The rest are 'Bora Shule', the type of schools that we have made our children believe are not worth it. Hearing of a student from a 'school we have never heard of' top the exams in Form Four is not enough motivation to appease parents to accept schools they have 'not heard of'. To place their faith in their children's abilities alone is never a good thing, children need the backing of the big name school, the Shule Bora type, to ensure proper success. We flippantly tend to say "*Kama mtoto ni bright, atapita tu wherever they go*" or "I know a girl who went to a *small name school* and she came out with an A" to soothe other parents, knowing quite well we ourselves would never take the 'Bora Shule' advice, because we know that where one goes in Form One matters. It matters because all the way back to the colonial period, this country has always excluded the majority and privileged a tiny elite. That is why we fight tooth and nail, paying bribes and trampling over each other to secure places for our children in the schools we want. Can you imagine how fat the pockets of many secondary school principals were this past festive season?

Sometimes, Nairobi middle-class parents have a prejudice about a school on account of its distance away from the city. I remember getting my form one acceptance letter and even though it was from an old colonial period national school, I was terrified because the school was not a national school located around Nairobi or at least Central Province. Those around me discouraged me from going there with remarks like "*utawezana huko?*" and "*haki ni mbali.*"

Coupled with the fact that I didn't get my top choice, these remarks fueled my dislike for my chosen school. I arrived in Form One bitter and distraught, and spent my first year hoping for a transfer simply because the school was far from the city, which made it a 'Bora Shule' or bad school in my eyes. What a shame, but I didn't know any better.

Take a moment and consider why we should be cautious over what we deem are good and bad schools. Imagine Child A goes to a 'good school' and the parents are happy, excited and proud. She is pleased to be in her dream school, but although they produce many doctors, lawyers, CEOs and engineers, the school has a reputation of hidden bullying. And I'm not talking about that hazing where Form Ones are told to sweet-talk a hockey stick or collect darkness in a cup. The kind of hazing here is so bad that many students develop anxiety, depression and all kinds of psychological disorders that go unaddressed. You hear news that a child has committed suicide, and when you go to the school, it is your own daughter who spent two terms in school dreading each opening day. You as a parent don't understand how this happened. You all worked so hard to get there. School fees was always paid, shopping was done, your child lacked nothing. The school is renowned, discipline is high, your child was doing fine academically and you were foreseeing another success at the end of high school. Suddenly this tragedy brings your lives to a halt.

Or consider Child B who goes to a 'bad school' where their parents spend their time complaining about everything (perhaps justifiably so), from the facilities to the performance. They are constantly looking to transfer their child, and Child B feels worthless and develops low self-esteem because he didn't get into a better school. They hate themselves, the school, and everyone. Tragedy strikes when Child B starts a fire in his dorm room and innocent students accompany him to his death. As the parents, you are told is how undisciplined your child was but it doesn't matter now because they are dead and gone. He seemed fine to you. You don't understand how it happened.

The point is, our reverence for national schools and the few non-national schools that perform well academically is so high that with our children absorbing everything we say about them, they develop the idea that they must go there or else their lives are over. The number of parents I have seen asking strangers online about schools their children have been called to is worrying. The questions are usually about the performance of the school and the location, accompanied by an anxious comment like "Now how is my daughter supposed to go to such a school." Judgment has already been passed about the school even before they get an answer to the question.

A few years ago, in an effort to increase the number of children going to national schools, the government increased the number of national schools from the

original 17 to over 100. When this move was announced, it came with the promise of millions of shillings to upgrade infrastructure. This was supposed to take care of the problem of the cut-throat competition in getting into a national school.

However, the bid to provide each child with a place in secondary school seems to be promoting the 'Bora Shule' idea. As long as your child has a place, what more could you want, the government seems to be asking. We have provided more national schools in the counties, what more do you want? We are turning all the Bora Shule into Shule Bora with these new classrooms and new perimeter walls, what more do you want? What is the difference between the old and new national schools, aren't they both national schools now? In response, parents are saying it's all right for each child to have a place but you can't fool us, we still want the Shule Bora. Sticking the name National to a school doesn't automatically turn it into one. Throwing money at them to improve facilities will not either.

Dear parents, if you are content with the school your son or daughter is in, you need to reflect on how your words influenced where your child is heading. Were you pestering them to make sure they get into that 'good' school? Are you certain that they will have a wholesome experience in secondary school or are you satisfied only because of the potential academic success? As you are out there hunting for a Shule Bora for your child for whatever reasons, you need to reflect too. You are searching high and low because you think your child deserves a better school, better than the Bora Shule they have been called to. What do you really know about the school you are fighting so hard to get for them? Or is there no time for that, you will let the kids figure it out later? And dear GoK officials, as you are re-branding schools as national schools, do it as if it was your own child who would be going there. We know you are doing it in a superficial manner because your own children will never set foot there. How shameful!