



# Head Teacher's COVID-Induced Headache or When the Government Abdicates Its Responsibilities

By Betty Guchu



The head teacher of our local primary school reminds me of Mr. Musili, who ran the primary school I attended in downtown Nairobi back when Kenya was newly independent. He was greatly respected, little feared, and much loved by the pupils, as is the head teacher of our local primary school.

The school is old, built in 1947 by the colonial administration and, up until very recently, had pit latrines that were prone to flooding every time it rained. Kids barely out of their nappies would chase after Head Teacher across the quadrangle, "Teacher! Teacher! *Choo zimejaa!*", and off he would go to call the exhauster, throwing 52,000 shillings down the toilet with each exhauster visit.

Head Teacher's budget for running the school is meager; he receives each year - in three tranches - the grand sum of 335 shillings for each of the 846 pupils that are enrolled at the school. With that sum, Head Teacher must pay the electricity and water bills, buy firewood for the kitchen, maintain the school in a proper state of repair and generally keep everything ticking nicely. Luckily, his financial management skills are peerless; each of the 335 shillings is milked for all its worth and, somehow, the 11 shillings per year that the government deems sufficient for the purchase of sanitary towels for each pubescent girl suffice.

The fees paid by the parents of the 297 pupils that board at the school (26,500 shillings per student per year) are crucial to Head Teacher's budget, bridging the gap between the government's disbursements and paying the salary of the groundsman (who also takes care of the two cows that provide the milk for the morning tea), as well as the salaries of nine other support staff. That money also covers the cost of all meals and the sorghum, millet and maize flour *uji* the boarding pupils enjoy during the mid-morning break.

Head Teacher is a true educator; his is a calling driven by a passion to mould young minds and bring the best out of each of his charges. And so, despite the challenges and the lack of resources, our local primary school has built itself a reputation, drawing pupils from as far away as Nairobi, and attracting pupils away from local private schools.

Now the coronavirus has come to put a spanner in the smooth workings of Head Teacher's finely calibrated budget, with the government placing squarely in his lap the responsibility of ensuring that the school is COVID-prepared when pupils return next year. Head Teacher has been advised by the education ministry that he will have to find ways to ensure that handwashing facilities are placed outside each classroom and office, outside the dorms and the kitchen, by the door of the school hall, in the toilets, at the gate and in the playing fields. Liquid hand soap must be provided, and a thermo gun foreseen, as well as hand and surface sanitisers.

A sick bay must also be established and a qualified nurse engaged. The non-teaching staff will need to be equipped with personal protective gear and the cooks in the kitchen will require food-handling certificates. The government doesn't say where the money for all this is to come from, or indeed how adequate water supplies will be maintained come the dry season when water is prone to rationing.

To adhere to the one-metre social distancing rule, the school would need 48 classrooms. But a sudden increase in classroom space is unlikely to happen in an institution where the number of classrooms has risen from one, when the school was established in 1947, to 24 today. The Education Cabinet Secretary, George Magoha, has proposed the installation of temporary tents and the use of teleconferencing by teachers to ease congestion.

Well, as far as computer technology is concerned, Head Teacher is in possession of exactly one projector (without a screen) which was supplied by the government, together with the tablets that now lie gathering dust in their purpose-built strongroom for want of material that is suited to the recently introduced competency-based curriculum. In any case, the school only has five teachers who have received basic two-day computer-skills training as part of the government's now collapsed Digital Literacy Programme. So CS Magoha's proposal is moot.

The government also says that pupils found sharing textbooks shall be considered to have committed an offence. Well, at our local primary school, a textbook is, of necessity, shared between two pupils and so, based on that threat alone, the school will not be able to reopen. It used to be that the government would allocate a budget for books according to the size of the school population. With his usual careful use of resources, and zero tolerance for loss or damage of learning materials—and by organising book harvesting events—Head Teacher had managed to bring the number of pupils sharing a textbook down from one book for every ten pupils in 2013 to one book for every two pupils within five years. Then in 2018 the government decided to take over the supply of books to schools, but even today, in half the classes, one textbook is still shared between two pupils.

It is also highly unlikely that the boarding facilities will be expanded in time to meet the social distancing requirements and so, either the number of boarding students will have to be drastically reduced or the section will have to be closed down altogether; in either case, Head Teacher's finely tuned budget will take a direct hit.

And as if the headache of ensuring that the school will be COVID-ready when classes recommence is not bad enough, Head Teacher has also been given the responsibility of “ensuring access to education [through] guidance and counseling” for those pupils who have fallen pregnant or have been caught up in drugs and alcohol abuse during the long COVID-induced break. Needless to say, even if Head Teacher were in a position to discover which among his pupils have been whiling away the time indulging in alcohol and drugs, there is not one trained counsellor on his staff to deal with the problem, even though the education ministry’s directive asks Head Teacher to “strengthen the guidance and counselling departments to help pupils and staff deal with the psychosocial issues in the wake of corona pandemic [and] prevent stigmatisation and hysteria in case of a detected case”.

The coronavirus has laid bare the government’s failings in the education sector over the last 60 years. That a school established over 70 years ago only recently managed to raise enough funds to build modern eco-friendly, wheelchair-friendly toilets is a clear indicator of the government’s neglect. It took the inventiveness of Head Teacher and his management board, the collaboration of parents and the support of the old students’ network to come up with a solution to save the 160,000 shillings lost annually to pit latrine exhaust services. And so, the toilet ratio of one urinal for every 30 boys and one toilet for every 25 girls is the one requirement that the school will be able to respect when schools reopen.

Still, something good for Kenya’s pupils might yet come out of this coronavirus pandemic; the government is reportedly considering moving the preference to day-schooling, with boarding schools reserved for pupils who must of necessity travel long distances to get to a school. This, in my view, is as it should be. Head Teacher should not have to confront an irate parent, fed up with having to deal with a troubled youth at home, or the complaint that the food budget has gone through the roof because the school holidays have been too long.

We Kenyans have long abdicated our responsibilities towards our youth, abandoning even the raising of our children to teachers, thus unwittingly widening the emotional gulf between children and parents and creating intergenerational alienation even as the government criminalises the youth, and issues edicts laced with threats each time it is confronted with a problem affecting them.

As [Wandia Njoya](#) says, “We have to grow up and think maturely about solutions such as restructuring our education system, revisiting the question of boarding schools, and treating adults who abuse the children they are supposed to take care of as criminals. Portraying youth as cheats and criminals, while failing to provide the education and social institutions they need to be functional adults, is irresponsible and an abdication of our responsibility as adults to care for the young. And we must care, not just as individual parents of nuclear families, as the evangelical narratives driven by the churches tell us to do. Instead, we must demand, collectively as voters, better political decisions that nurture our youth.”

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