

# MANALIMU

SCHOOLS

## EARLY FRUITS OF THE NEW CURRICULUM

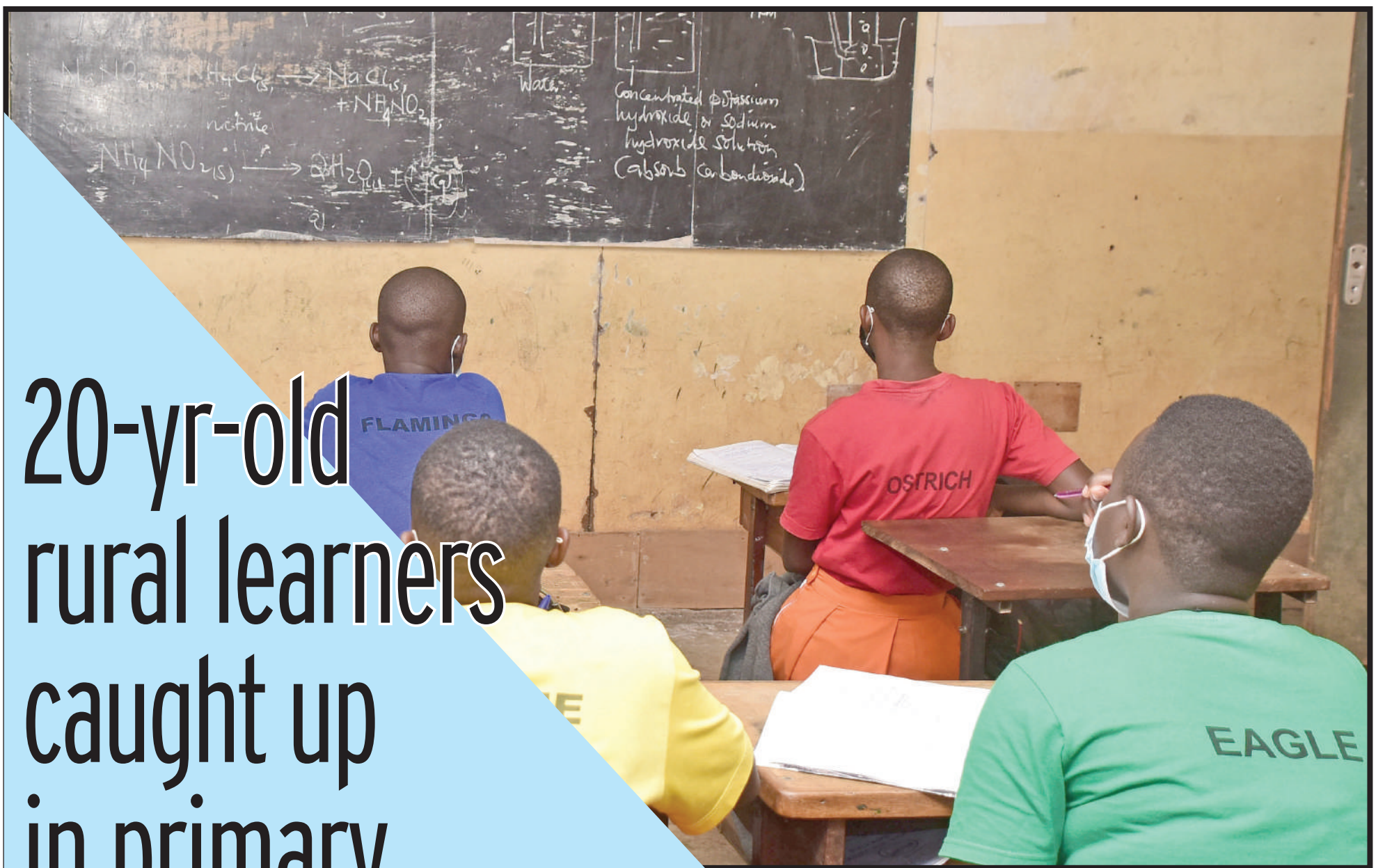
page 25



## KITEBI SS GETS SH150M WATER PROJECT

page 24

UTILITIES



# 20-yr-old rural learners caught up in primary

A significant number of Ugandan children are starting primary aged 13 years and above. Many of these are not completing this level of education as they feel out of place in a system that expects primary schoolchildren to be aged between six and 12 years, writes **Pascal Kwesiga**

✓ Inside the Primary One classroom with a concrete floor that has cracked and peeled off in many parts, Leah Aluya sits on the edge of a wooden desk. She shares the desk with three girls at Kidula Primary School in Luwero district. Her bony frame is swamped by her loose black dress, which is covered in food stains. The veins on the back of her palms have popped out. Her heels and the lower parts of her legs, between the ankles and knees, have been colonised by cracks, spreading out like lines in a broken mirror.

Her grim, pale face is framed by sparse, uncombed hair. Whether standing or seated, Aluya towers over many of her peers in this unplastered brick-walled classroom. Aluya, 11, enrolled in school for the first time last month. She is five years older than the girls she shares a desk with, but she is not the only one older than 10 years in her class and, generally, which has children aged between six and 10 years in its nursery section.

Continued on page 16

# CRISIS AS 20-YEAR-OLD RURAL LEARNERS

From page 15

**W**hile writing a name is one of the things a child is expected to be able to perform in their first days in school, Aluya has not even started taking baby steps in that direction. When this writer holds out to her a notebook to write her name, Aluya says: “*Sisobola kuliwandiika*”, meaning I cannot write it, lifting her head from the notepad and locking eyes with the writer.

“I have only attended Sunday school service at a church near home,” Aluya, a third-born in a family of eight, says. “I did not start school early because I was babysitting my siblings.”

If she persists to Primary Seven without repeating a class, she will be 17 years old.

Aluya is among thousands of children who start school late in Uganda and drop out before completing primary, especially in government schools implementing free education.

Starting school late might be rarely talked about in conversations about Uganda’s high drop-out rates at primary, but it is actually one of the factors driving many learners out of school. Children who are above the age of 12 years – the age when learners who enter primary aged six years normally complete this level of education – feel out of place in school.

Francis Muhumuza (not real name), 16, a pupil at Bwikya Muslim Primary School in Hoima town, is one such student. The school has refused to promote him to Primary Seven this year, due to his poor performance.

Muhumuza who repeated Primary Three was in Primary Five in 2020 when the COVID-19 pandemic caused school closure for two years. He moved to Primary Six when schools reopened last year, but did not pass the end-of-year exams.

Rather than repeating, he wants his parents to take him to another school which can promote him to Primary Seven, lest he drops out.

“The children I started school with are now in Senior Three and it is frustrating,” he says.

But his teachers say he cannot even correctly copy notes from the blackboard, and cannot pass the Primary Leaving Exams (PLE) administered at the end of Primary Seven. “We sometimes have PLE candidates aged between 17 and 21 years,” one of the teachers, says.

## LATE SCHOOL START

Statistics from the education ministry show that between 70,000 and 80,000 of the learners who enrolled for Primary One from 2012 to 2017 were aged between 10 and 13 years and above, each year. Close to two million children enrolled in Primary One in each of these years.

The children who enrolled aged between 10 and 13 years and above, accounted for nearly 5% of the overall enrolment. Between 300,000 and 400,000 children, which is roughly 20% of the total enrolment, started primary school aged between eight and nine years.

This implies that around 25% of the children started primary school aged over six years old, which is the recommended age for beginning this level of education. While nearly half the children enter primary school aged six years, nearly a quarter, which is roughly 500,000, begin at seven.

A 2017 study involving Uganda and Bangladesh – two developing countries in Africa and Asia implementing free education – linked dropout to starting school late and repetition of classes.

The research which was funded by the World Innovation Summit for Education (WISE), an organisation which researches education, investigated the primary school dropout rates and failure to transition to secondary.

The study included 136 schools and close to 2,000 students who completed primary level between 2014 and 2015, as well as parents or caregivers across Uganda. Results indicated that failure to transition grew significantly with the increase in the learner’s age and the number of years repeated at the primary level.



The recommended age for beginning primary school is six years



**The education ministry statistics show there are over 10 million children in primary and close to three million in secondary.**

### DROPOUT, TRANSITION FAILURE

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The study included 136 schools and close to 2,000 students who completed primary level between 2014 and 2015, as well as parents or caregivers across Uganda. Results indicated that failure to transition grew significantly with increase in the learner’s age and the number of years repeated at the primary level. The study found that the ages of Primary Seven learners in Uganda varied from 12 to 22.

Around 86.4% of the respondents were aged between 14 and 18 years. It explains that 11.9% of the respondents aged between 12-15 years failed to make the transition to secondary, while 21% of those aged 16-17 years and 40% aged between 18 years and above also failed, without significant gender differences.

The transition failure rate was lower among learners aged between 12 and 15. Overall, 21.4% of primary school graduates did not progress to secondary.

**Repeat**

## HIGH REPETITION RATE

The WISE study indicates that the repetition rate at

the primary level was 51.8% in Uganda – meaning that a significant portion of learners repeated more than once.

In the 2017 statistical abstract, the education ministry notes that, despite the existence of the automatic promotion policy in government-aided primary schools, some learners fail to advance to the next levels and repeat.

It shows that nearly 700,000 students repeated various classes in government schools in 2017. Close to 90,000 repeated classes in private schools in the same year.

Primary Four and Five had the highest number of repeaters – 134,000 and 112,000 respectively – in government schools. The private schools had the highest number of repeaters in Primary Two, Three and Four.

Dr Cleophas Mugenyi, the commissioner for basic education, says the automatic promotion policy was informed by the desire for the Government to spend its capitation grant on a child only once in a single

class. “It means that a child does not consume the money that would have been consumed by others,” Mugenyi adds.

Dr Grace Nakabugo, the executive director of UWEZO Uganda, an organisation that researches on education-related issues says, usually children who repeat a class lack a strong foundation.

“Government is not funding preschool education and it is assumed that, by the time children enrol for primary, they are prepared for school, yet they are not,” she adds. “In the absence of preschool, the primary should help these children get the foundation.”

Repetition of classes does not help children without a strong foundation, Nakabugo says.

Ideally, the children who have not attended preschool should be treated as preschoolers in the first two or three years of primary, and this, too, goes for those who begin school late, according to Nakabugo.

“These children did not get an opportunity to learn to read and write and count or start at the right time, the system should accept them. The automatic policy fails because you are sending a Primary Two-level child to Primary Five.”

# ARE CAUGHT UP IN PRIMARY SCHOOL

“Late start means children hit puberty while in school and that means we need to put in place proper sanitary facilities for girls and retool teachers who are used to teaching young children to handle these as well,” Modern Karema, the country leader for STIR (Schools and Teachers Innovating for Results) Education Uganda, an international organisation, says.

Regionally, the transition failure rate was highest in northern Uganda, followed by the central region (excluding Kampala), eastern and western. It was lowest in Kampala, which was treated as a region for this study.

“It means we need to rethink our education financing,” Karema says. “The parents and children who start school late have realised that it was a mistake to stay at home and they need support systems to remain in school. This is an equity challenge. Because schools are far, in some places, children have to grow to 10 years to walk a 10km distance to and from school.”

The Government wants a primary and secondary school per parish and sub-county, respectively. Unfortunately, many of these sub-counties still do not have these schools.

In the current circumstances, it is unlikely that Uganda will achieve Sustainable Development Goal number four, which is about ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting life-long learning opportunities for all by 2030.

The education ministry statistics show there are over 10 million children in primary and close to three million in secondary.

Charlotte Iraguha, the executive director of Teach for Uganda, a non-governmental organisation that trains university graduates of various humanities and science courses and deploys them in classrooms in understaffed schools through its fellowship scheme, says older primary schoolchildren feel unwelcome at school.

“First of all, these children started late, but are also not well taught,” she says. “Some teachers tell them they are wasting time, so they drop out.”

Iraguha explains that parental negative attitudes towards education and poverty – which are also cited by the WISE report – determine at what age a child begins school.

“Parents and teachers need to develop the philosophy



A teacher and pupils in class following the reopening of schools in 2022 in Uganda

that all children can learn, but we also need to think about the teachers teaching classes comprising 100 to 200 children.

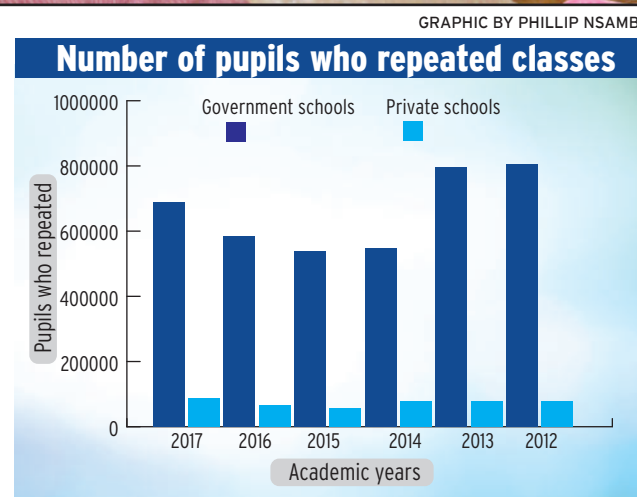
“These teachers cannot reach all these children, and these children get to the ages when they are also expected to contribute to the welfare of their families while still in school and drop out.”

If teaching a single child to read and write takes special attention across the school term, Dr Grace Nakabugo, the executive director of UWEZO Uganda, an organisation that researches education says, it is impossible for one teacher to give all 100 or 200 children these skills in a term or even a year.

Since more children repeated classes after losing two years to the COVID-19 pandemic, Nakabugo says the number of children dropping out after feeling out of place in school upon becoming adults could increase.

A report released by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation and its partners last month notes that 57% of schoolchildren in low and middle-income countries could not read a simple text by the age of 10 years.

This figure, the report says, grew to 70% after the



pandemic and calls for efforts to re-engage learners and help them recover from learning losses.

Stressing the relationship between late enrolment and dropout, the WISE study shows that a similar situation plays out in Bangladesh, albeit at the secondary level. While the transition from primary to secondary was high in Bangladesh at 94.5% with female learners ahead of their male counterparts, the dropout was 26.1% at the secondary level.

The students who enrolled in secondary at a later age after completing primary late were more likely to drop out, the study adds.

#### INTERVENTIONS

In some areas, especially in refugee-hosting communities and northern Uganda where a civil conflict kept children out of school for 20 years, the Government is implementing the accelerated education scheme. What this means, according to Dr Cleophas Mugenyi, the commissioner for basic education, the learning period for children aged seven and 12 or so who are in Primary One, Two or Three is shortened, and promotion to the next class occurs per term.

“It means that children go through three classes in one year,” he adds.

Another line of intervention is encouraging the teachers

to give such children extra support so they can catch up with their peers. The teachers are also encouraged to pair these children with their peers who are already competent in some areas, and support group-based learning.

“The late schooling start definitely results in dropping out, and we are asking schools to encourage these children to not worry about their age differences,” Mugenyi says.

“These children are starting late because parents and local leaders abandoned their responsibility of ensuring all seven-year-olds go to school.”

He adds that the presidential industrial hubs which have been established in various parts of the country form part of government’s strategy to skill dropouts.

Meanwhile, Aluya is the only one in her family attending school. Two of her siblings long dropped out and three have not started school. It is not clear how long it will take her to learn to read and write in this school where some teachers are Senior Four dropouts. But these are not her only problems.

“My father does not have money for scholastic materials, and I don’t have a uniform, yet the school leaders also need some money to run this school,” she adds.

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