

Education: So much can change in 10 years

Uganda has largely succeeded in getting children into school. The harder question today is whether they are learning.

Each morning, more than 10 million children walk into primary school classrooms across the country. Thanks to policies such as Universal Primary Education, primary school enrolment now stands at about 95 to 96 percent (Unesco Institute for Statistics). This progress represents one of Uganda's most significant development achievements over the past two decades.

But access alone does not guarantee learning. Evidence from national and regional assessments shows that many children still struggle with basic reading and numeracy. According to Uwezo Uganda's learning assessments, less than half of Primary Three pupils can read a Primary Two level English story, and many cannot solve basic arithmetic expected at the lower primary level.

The challenge is not unique to Uganda. The World Bank and Unesco estimate that about 83 percent of children in Sub-Saharan Africa cannot read and understand a simple text by age 10, a condition described as learning poverty (World Bank, Learning Poverty Update). These statistics raise an urgent question: What truly changes education systems? Is it curriculum reform? Infrastructure? Technology?

All of these play a role. Yet over the past

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decade, one lesson has become increasingly clear: the quality of an education system ultimately depends on the teachers and leaders who shape learning every day.

Ten years ago, Teach For Uganda, a non-profit organisation founded in 2016, began with that belief. At the time, the idea seemed ambitious. There was no office and no funding, only a conviction that if we could develop a new generation of leaders committed to serving in classrooms and communities, we could begin transforming education from the inside out.

Many people doubted it would work. Some believed graduates would never commit two years to teaching in rural schools. Others felt educational inequality was too complex and deeply rooted to meaningfully address.

But clearly, belief combined with leadership and collective effort, can spark mean-

ingful progress.

Within classrooms, the focus has been on strengthening foundational learning. Through various approaches, encouraging improvements are beginning to emerge.

In the past year alone, literacy outcomes improved from two percent at baseline to seven percent at endline, while numeracy increased from 3.5 percent to 18 percent.

Behind these numbers are real stories: Children discovering confidence in reading for the first time, teachers rediscovering purpose in their work, and communities beginning to see how education can break cycles of poverty.

Over the years, my own understanding of leadership has also evolved. When this journey began, I believed leadership was defined by position or authority. Today, I see it differently. Leadership is choosing not to look away from a problem. It is taking responsibility and acting with courage even when resources are limited and challenges feel overwhelming.

As Uganda looks ahead, the next decade will demand even more from our education system. The conversation must now move beyond access toward quality and equity. Children must not only be in school; they must be learning.

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