

Early education in Kenya

The Kenyan government has ambitious plans for its schools system, despite the many shortages that are currently hampering the drive; now a growing private early years sector is springing up in response.

KENYA HAS frequently been in the news due to the ongoing tensions with the Islamic militant group, Al Shabab. The latest horrific attacks at Girissa University, which has a large Faculty of Education, resulted in many fatalities, many of whom would have been the country's future teachers. Despite this, the Kenyans remain positive, with the need to educate their children high on the agenda.

At 87.4 percent, Kenya has one of the highest literacy rates in Africa. This is an amazing accomplishment considering the country has a population of 41 million people and 42 percent of them are under the age of 15.

Government schools organisation and structure

Government schools currently follow the 8:4:4 system, which provides children with eight years of primary school, starting in 'standard one', aged six-years-old, followed by four years of secondary school and then four years of university.

In 2003, it was announced that primary education would be free under the Free Primary Education Policy. This policy abolished school fees and other levies, thereby creating an opportunity for 1.5 million previously out-of-school children to access education. This has consequently put a huge strain on schools. It is common to see 50 to 70 children per class jam-packed, shoulder-to-shoulder on old rickety, wooden benches.

To support the schools, parents are expected to provide their children's books and uniforms as well as paying for extra curricula activities.

All teachers are qualified and deliver the government's prescriptive curriculum, in English, using traditional teaching methods.

Recently, however, the government has placed a significant emphasis on trying to develop an effective modern education system. Their vision is to catapult their schools into the 21st century by fulfilling the political pledge of providing 1.3 million standard one children with laptops in 22,000 government primary schools.

In reality, this has created many challenges, not only with the training of teachers but primarily in providing basic power connection to each school!

Two years of early years, or pre-primary education as it is termed, is now compulsory for children aged

three to six-years-old; but only around 50 percent of children attend. This is largely due to many schools not having the funding to build the necessary extra classrooms. Schools lucky enough to have pre-primary classrooms frequently lack teachers, as well as basic teaching resources, running water and mains power. In spite of all this, an early years curriculum of sorts is taking place.

The government advocates learning through physical, spiritual, social and mental growth. But in reality, teachers mainly focus on teaching the children the English language, letters, numbers, shapes and colours. For many of the children, this is taught by rote, but things are beginning to change and some teachers are attempting to make their lessons more practical.

In a couple of pre-primary classrooms I visited on a recent trip, children were sitting in groups and involved in hands-on activities. The teacher had written letters and numbers on the back of old cereal packets, cut them up and had the children sorting those letters and numbers and then making sums, words and sentences.

In another school, children were sorting real objects by colour and even had a role-play shop set up in their classroom. All the classrooms visited showed impeccably behaved children, who were inquisitive and eager to learn.

Private settings

There is a huge range of private early years settings in the country that suit every parent's budget, from the smallest to the largest. Standards vary enormously from basic to outstanding. There is also a wide choice of international curricula available, such as Montessori, *Early Years Foundation Stage* (EYFS), Dutch, Japanese and the Rudolf Steiner approach.

For the last couple of years I have been voluntarily supporting the Upper Hill Nursery School, Naro Mora, situated on the foothills of Mount Kenya; it was set up by a qualified teacher, Jane. Her aim is to provide an education for the local children of the area without them having to walk an hour and a half to the nearest school. She rents a poorly built wooden building with a mud floor, and makes use of furniture made of recycled building off-cuts.

Jane charges a minimal fee of Khs 300 (£2) per month and started with just a handful of children, two of them being her own. In line with the



Clair Watson

lives in the Seychelles and is an experienced and sought-after early years consultant and trainer. She has worked extensively across the UAE and Kenya. Visit www.clair-watson.com for more information about her work.

government system, the children range from three to six-years-old. At the last count, the nursery school now has 67 children on role.

Learning and development

Jane has a daily routine and the children spend time both inside and outside. Inside the classroom, Jane and the children sing songs in Kiswahili and English, many of them action songs. She uses a chalkboard, some handmade posters, paper and a few pencils to support learning.

Over the years I have provided Jane with additional sheets of card, pegs, a washing line, glue, marker pens and scissors, plus other basic stationery items, and taught her how to make resources to actively involve the children in their learning.

The washing line has been a hit with the children! They order number cards, find the missing number, count forwards and backwards and a whole host of other activities. We have made cards with pictures and a set of letters so that the children can match the initial sounds.

The children have collected bottle tops so they can count, add, subtract, sort and build towers. We have created pattern cards so the children can match and continue patterns with their multi-coloured bottle tops. The children's favourite resources are the number fans. Jane was amazed at how many different

questions and activities could be done with them.

With the additional stationery resources, Jane is now able to support the children's creativity by making collage pictures using natural resources they collect, such as beans, seeds, leaves and twigs.

Outside playtimes are a daily occurrence where children run after old wheels with a stick and play with their homemade pull along cars, made from recycled materials and bottle top wheels. They also play clapping games and run around playing tag and catch.

Health and wellbeing

Jane ensures every child has good hygiene and that they wash their hands and face before and after snacks. To ensure the availability of water, the children take it in turns to bring a jerry can of water to school, which is shared with the other children. She encourages the children and parents to have a healthy snack and discourages chocolate and sweets.

Parents and partners

Sand and cement was bought with additional funds that had been raised and the local community gave up their time for free to help in the mixing and laying of a concrete boundary to prevent the water running through the classroom during the rainy season. Later, the parents put in an outside toilet for the children.



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All of the classrooms showed impeccably behaved children, who were inquisitive and eager to learn, but money for buying resources is tight

The nursery still has a long way to go, but three years on from inception, Jane now has 35 children and has taken on a second teacher. It is a long cry from what our early years settings in first world countries provide but it is making a huge difference to the 35 children that otherwise would be at home, or walking over three hours a day to and from school.

Unique child

In contrast, I have also been supporting a private school group, Braeburn Schools, with their early years settings. Each of the nine settings is different – each catering for the different needs of the children and their families, but their vision is the same: ‘Every student to be a successful learner, a confident individual and a respectful citizen.’

The teachers are a mixture of Kenyans and expatriates, and the schools expect the highest standards. Being outside of the UK has enabled the schools to deliver a bespoke curriculum, which not only follows the *Early Years Foundation Stage* but also reflects the unique geographical environment of each school.

We had great fun in a training session a few years ago changing words of well-known songs and adding actions to make them unique to their school environment. Themes chosen are required to be exciting, and different, and they must reflect children’s interests and their local area.

Learning environment

Braeburn puts a great emphasis on the natural world and children using natural materials. Children are frequently seen outside experimenting in mud kitchens, pouring water down bamboo shoots, balancing on old car tyres, clambering over wooden climbing frames and are encouraged to take risks. Sand trays are full of soil, real leaves and flowers. Boxes of off-cuts of local fabric encourage children to think creatively – they are used in 101 different ways.

For those children who want quiet time or simply to have a chat with friends, the opportunity to sit around their campfire on wooden logs, or in caves and huts quietly reading, is provided.

The natural world continues inside as children in the home corner use real fruit and vegetables and sprinkle on real spices to give their concoctions a spicy aroma and a tasty flavour!

Leadership and management

More recently, I was involved in training the senior management team to enable them to have a deeper understanding of early years and the best way to appraise their early years teams. We had them revisiting their childhood roots as they delved into icy water, shaving foam, and a gloopy mess, and hunted for insects in the garden with magnifying glasses.

This certainly put a different angle on the early years and the amount of learning that takes



Upper Hill Nursery School, Naro Mora, situated on the foothills of Mount Kenya

place when children are provided with natural, stimulating, exciting resources.

Conclusion

Early years education is a learning journey, not just for children but for the adults involved too. By providing practical learning opportunities, children are enabled to be inquisitive, imaginative and creative. You do not always need the newest and best resources produced – what you find in the natural local environment is not only a cheaper option but often the most inspiring!

Last word

I have seen some of the most amazing, dynamic, stimulating and engaging lessons, literally delivered under a mango tree!

eye

Key points

- Kenya has one of the highest literacy rates in Africa. The government has placed a significant emphasis on trying to develop an effective modern education system. Its vision is to catapult schools into the 21st century
- In reality, this has created many challenges, not only with the training of teachers but primarily in providing basic power connection to each school
- Two years of early years, or pre-primary education as it is termed, is now compulsory for children aged three to six-years-old; but only around 50 percent of children attend