

Working paper

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**“A Complete Education?”
Observations about the State of
Primary Education in Tanzania in 2005**

John Benson



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“...the education given in our primary schools must be a complete education in itself”
- Mwalimu Julius K. Nyerere in *Education for Self-Reliance* (1967)

1. Introduction

Tanzania, more than any other country in the world, has depended on its primary schools to educate its people. It has one of the lowest percentages of people who have attended secondary school (7%) of any nation. In *Education for Self-Reliance*, Julius Nyerere stated that it was possible for Tanzanians to gain a complete education in the nation’s primary schools. Likewise, the current government of Tanzania has emphasized primary education in its attempt to achieve universal primary education through its Primary Education Development Plan (2002-2006).

This research looked at the impact of these two presidential programs on the primary schools of current day Tanzania, but also asked two related questions for Tanzania’s population: (1) Was a primary education a complete enough education for the nation’s adults? and (2) Will a primary education be enough for Tanzania’s children?

For most of my career, I have been involved in primary education, either as a primary school teacher, or as a professor training students to be primary school teachers. Like many who will read this article, I am also a child of Tanzania, though I am an American citizen and have only attended American or international schools. I grew up in the country and was influenced by Mwalimu Julius Nyerere’s sense of service to the people of Tanzania. I was impressed by his attempts to provide basic services for his country, while many other African presidents were only working on enriching themselves. I have returned several times to do research on the provision of basic services, most recently in 1993 for my doctoral work in geography, where I examined the provision of primary health care in Arusha and Arumeru Districts, the districts where I spent most of my childhood years.

I returned in January 2005 to this same area to examine primary schools in six wards of these two districts. I chose to study schools in two urban (Levolosi and Daraja Mbili wards in Arusha District), two mixed (Akeri and Olturoto wards in Arumeru District), and two rural wards (Mlangarini and Musa wards in Arumeru District). I based my choices on the results of the 2004 Primary School Leaving Exam results, the physical locations of these wards, and their cultural settings.

In doing this work, I observed a full day of classes in seventeen of eighteen primary schools; conducted meetings with teachers in all eighteen primary schools; met with parents in seventeen of eighteen primary schools; conferred with government leaders in all fourteen of the Arumeru villages and the two urban Arusha wards; and interviewed from four to sixteen people in each ward about their own individual educational histories. I did not interview any children in primary

¹ Dr. John Benson grew up in Tanzania and teaches at Minnesota State University in the USA. This paper represents his personal observations and reflections based on visits to schools in Arusha region in 2005.

schools about their perceptions of their schools, but I experienced what it was like to sit through their classes.

2. Nyerere – Education for Self-Reliance (ESR)

Education for Self-Reliance appears to be the primary document that has influenced the curriculum of Tanzanian primary schools. In the document, Mwalimu Nyerere proposed a comprehensive vision for Tanzanian primary schools. What remains of this vision now?

I will use quotes from *Education for Self-Reliance* to bring out what Julius Nyerere felt were most important for Tanzanian primary schools to stress. He began by stating that:

...the educational system of Tanzania must emphasize co-operative endeavour, not individual advancement; it must stress concepts of equality and the responsibility to give service which goes with any special ability, whether it be in carpentry, in animal husbandry, or in academic pursuits. And in particular, our education must counteract the temptation to intellectual arrogance (p. 7)

In all the schools where I observed, each classroom reflected the communal nature of Tanzania in contrast to the individualistic natures of the American classrooms I am used to observing. Students began the day cleaning the school together before they took part in the morning parade at which they all sang and recited in unison. Whenever I arrived in a classroom, all students stood up to greet me. In most classrooms, students replied to teachers' questions in unison. Students shared books and desks. All aspects of the day were done communally. Students, as they would at home, respected elders and gave service to them. I could not carry a chair from one classroom to another without a student asking to carry it. Service was a major focus of the school, as it is in all of Tanzania's villages. In combating intellectual arrogance, Tanzanian teachers seldom praised the students on their own but asked the whole community to praise the students by the variety of "*koofi*"s that they gave each student.

...It must also prepare young people for the work they will be called upon to do in the society which exists in Tanzania—a rural society where improvement will depend largely upon the efforts of people in agriculture and village development...it must produce good farmers; it has also to prepare people for their responsibilities as free workers and citizens in a free and democratic society, albeit a largely rural society...must therefore encourage the development in each citizen of three things: an enquiring mind; an ability to learn from what others do and reject or adapt it to his own needs; and a basic confidence in his own position as a free and equal member of the society, who values others and is valued by them for what he does and not for what he obtains (p. 8)

In contrast to the Tanzanian schools positive work on communalism, service and equality, I do not feel that they prepare students adequately for today's society. The school farm is no longer an integral part of the curriculum. The *Stadi za Kazi* course tries to help students with occupational choices but teachers have not been taught how to teach it, nor are they given the supplies to teach it correctly. While the science curriculum in Tanzania is much more of a practical course than an American science course, most of the curriculum only prepares students for secondary education. The curriculum no longer teaches the students to be good farmers, nor does it help with skills needed in the current globalized Tanzania.

I also found that the school was doing little to emphasize the citizenship requirements that Nyerere felt were very important. I was frustrated in observing in classrooms that students were not called on to think very much. Students either copied what their teachers were saying or wrote

down what their teachers wrote on the board in their notebooks, but seldom were they called on to take ideas and “*changanya*” them in their minds and in this way learn from these ideas. While the supplies are minimal in each classroom, teaching children to think does not involve any more supplies than are currently available in bare Tanzanian classrooms—four walls, notebooks, desks, and a blackboard.

In meeting with adults in Tanzania, I was impressed by how thoughtful their responses were to all of my questions, but I kept wondering what made them such thoughtful people when their primary education did so little to promote it. I should state that I observed teaching in two of the teacher training colleges in Arusha Region (Monduli and Patandi) and feel that they are using methods that make the students think and this eventually will be translated down into the Tanzanian primary classrooms.

...the education given in our primary schools must be a complete education in itself. It must not continue to be simply a preparation for secondary school. Instead of the primary school activities being geared to the competitive examination which will select the few that will go on to secondary school, they must be a preparation for life which the majority of the children will lead. (p. 15)

Nyerere wrote extensively in *Education for Self-Reliance* about the need to combat the emphasis on testing and getting into secondary school as the major focus of the school. Unfortunately, this was a major focus of all the primary schools I visited. When I stopped observing in schools at the end of the first term and the beginning of the long June-July vacation, the schools did not close down. All Standard four and seven students were to come every day to prepare for their exams. As one Head Teacher told me, “If we did not do this, we would not have anyone pass the exam.” It would seem that students should know the material for the test from having studied these concepts in their classes, but I do not think the teachers, students, or parents see that the material in the class is connected to the material in these exams.

Teachers had mixed feelings in discussing whether the primary school curriculum helped prepare students for life or for secondary school. Some listed many of the practical elements of the curriculum, but many felt ill-prepared to teach the main vocational *Stadi za Kazi* course. Examples were given about how they could teach lessons on radio technology when no radios were available and they had no idea themselves about how to fix a radio. One group of teachers felt that parents were not that interested in the practical curriculum, only in getting their children into secondary school.

I asked parents whether it was possible to get a complete education in primary schools from when they were children to now. Some felt that it had been accurate in the past because when Nyerere wrote the document most of Tanzania was “ignorant” and needed people with any education to help the new country. People who finished primary schools in those days could find work. No group with which I spoke felt that it was possible to get a complete education in a primary school now. Some groups felt that it had never been true. Now, it was seen as more important than ever to enter the wage economy and this was not possible without a secondary education.

As I visited these urban and rural communities, the work I saw people doing seemed to be the same as when I was a child in Tanzania—“*biashara ndogo ndogo*”, farming, and herding—so I would ask local government leaders if they felt that the community children needed to be educated beyond the primary level. All government officials that I spoke with felt that it was necessary for people in their ward or village to go beyond primary school. The world was coming to their village and they needed more schooling.

...For the majority of our people the thing which matters is that they should be able to read and write fluently in Swahili, that they should have the ability to do arithmetic, and that they should know something of the history, values, and workings of the country and their Government, and that they should acquire the skills necessary to earn their living....But most important of all is that our primary school graduates should be able to fit into, and to serve, the communities from which they come (p. 24)

When I met with parents, I began by asking them about how much their education had helped them with life. Most stated that primary schools had taught them to read and write, learn computational skills, and gave them additional background to help them on the farm. I believe they did learn the basic reading and writing skills, but today with the lack of books available in the classroom and no supplementary material, it seems that many could fall through the cracks and not learn to read.

However on the last point, few people believed that the skills learned in primary school today helped students with any skills necessary for life. Most rural parents that I spoke with did not want their children to stay in their communities, as there was no land left to give them. They wanted their children to learn skills that took them beyond the community and no one I spoke with felt that the primary schools could provide these skills. Urban parents did not feel that the schools were teaching any of the skills needed in an urban setting. They pointed out that while rural parents could teach farming skills at home if the schools did nothing about it, they themselves could not teach the children the occupational skills necessary in the city and they would like the schools to help teach them.

Many of Nyerere's ideas still influence Tanzanian primary schools to this day, but the practical emphasis of his vision has been lost by a desire for students to pass the Primary School Leaving Examinations and go on to secondary school. Primary schools in Tanzania are currently seen only as "foundational" (*shule ya msingi*) and not as "complete" (*shule kamili*). Some of the people I spoke with felt there was a time when it was possible to receive an education that was complete in the primary schools, but now no one believes this to be true, though for many Tanzanian children this will be the only education they will receive, at least for the time being.

3. Mkapa – Primary Education Development Program

The Ministry responsible for Education under President Benjamin Mkapa began the *Primary Education Development Plan* in 2002. The plan is an outgrowth of both the international Education for All or Universal Primary Education movement and the Poverty Reduction Strategies that are taking place within Tanzania. I was interested in how well this Plan was working at the village and ward levels in Tanzania. The document has four major parts: (1) enrolment expansion; (2) quality improvement; (3) capacity building; and (4) to make stronger institutional arrangements to support schools. I will not be able to comment on each of these areas fully, but I was able to get a sense of the parts that were working very well and those that still needed improvement.

The first section of the document calls for enrolment expansion through abolishment of school fees, recruiting and motivating teachers, constructing classrooms and teachers' homes, and helping out-of-school children and youth (I did not observe anything to do with this last program so cannot comment on it). The abolishment of school fees was readily apparent in the numbers of children in each classroom. It had made a big difference in all the schools. As can be seen in the chart below from Olturoto Primary School in Olturoto Ward, the numbers soared after the lifting of school fees in 2001:

OLTUROTO PRIMARY SCHOOL CENSUS (1995-2004)										
YEARS	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004
BOYS	283	279	266	240	245	248	292	337	416	465
GIRLS	291	277	254	254	247	252	275	343	429	462
TOTAL	574	556	520	494	492	500	567	680	845	927

I asked two fathers of children at Olturoto PS to tell me what this lifting of school fees had meant for them monetarily. Adding the school fees plus additional contributions together, they figured the cost per child at approximately \$20 per child before PEDP. Now, these fathers figured their school costs came to about \$10 per pupil per year with the cost born primarily by uniforms and extra notebooks. This amount, which may seem rather small, was a huge savings for these families and they felt it was all more affordable.

The recruitment and motivation of teachers is an area where PEDP has not been successful at all. When I met with teachers at each of these schools, my first question to them was “What gives you joy in this work?” I almost always was met with silence, until I asked about the hardships involved in teaching. Most would then open up to describe salaries that they could not live on, but that they had to as the demands of teaching prevented them from earning any extra income. Most felt that they could not enjoy this work because their basic needs were not being met. I later asked if PEDP was better for students or teachers. In all schools, the teachers felt that PEDP had been helpful for students but done nothing, or close to nothing, for teachers. The program has been seen as one that would help teachers but up till now few teachers felt that PEDP had done anything for them.

New classrooms were being built at seventeen of the eighteen schools I visited. Teachers’ homes were being built slowly in at least half of the villages where I observed, but the lack of new homes at many schools was something many teachers cited as a reason they felt that PEDP had not supported them fully.

In the area of Enrolment Expansion, the government has been successful in bringing in new students and constructing and reconstructing classrooms for them, but unsuccessful in recruiting new teachers and supporting the work of the current teachers.

The second part of the document called for improving the human resources of the educational system and providing more teaching and learning resources. The human resources component included improving the teaching skills of teachers, enabling teachers to get more education, and providing support for teachers from educational support staff to improve the quality of instruction.

Most of the teaching in classrooms was through rote memorization, copying the teacher, and copying material from the blackboard into notebooks. Teachers were receiving some training at cluster settings, but most felt it was piecemeal and did not address the major issues they were confronting at the moment—how to teach new courses like *Stadi za Kazi* and work with this many new students. One teacher in Mlangarini Primary School told of how hard it was for them as rural teachers to improve their knowledge and teaching skills.

The second sub-area called for providing more books and supplies to the schools through decentralized programs, providing enough material for each class, and creating classrooms and physical environments that improved learning. I saw no extra supplementary reading materials in each of the schools and parents at several schools listed it as a need. In observing textbook use in

classrooms, most classes I observed had much less than one book for every two or three students. Often these books were not spread equally around the room. In some areas of the room every second or third child was sharing a book, while in others ten children were sharing a book. The lessons were often very text-based but the lack of books in the classes hurt the lessons. No supplies seemed to be available to teach the Stadi za Kazi course.

Visual aids were starting to be apparent at many schools. In one meeting with parents at Levulosi Primary School in February, I spoke about how helpful it was to put up visual aids for students to learn from and I gave examples from my own time as a primary school teacher. When I returned in May, the parents' committee had hired a painter to paint maps, diagrams of the human body, and math formulas on their outside walls. About one-quarter of the schools I visited had teaching aids painted on their walls. In speaking with one of the painters, he spoke about how PEDP had been very helpful for him in his livelihood.

This area of Quality Improvement is the weakest area of PEDP that I observed. Based on my observations at these schools, I saw no subcategories in this area with which I would say there was a strong positive response. This is the area that primarily is involved with the lives of the teachers and as they told me they feel let down by PEDP. It has not helped them.

The Capacity Building part of the document speaks about improving pre-service teacher training, the governance and management of schools, and the financial management in the schools, and developing educational management information systems. While I can not speak about the last area, I can address the other areas.

As I have said before, PEDP has been seen by most teachers as doing very little to motivate them, but the training program for new teachers while considerably shorter than before seems to be moving in a positive direction. I was impressed how within the training schools, with classrooms that were as bare bones as the regular primary classrooms, the instructors taught in ways that engaged the students and pushed them to think. I think teaching in this way fits the Tanzanian culture much more than the top down approach that has been used in the past.

School management committees in almost every village spoke of how grateful they were for the training they had received. At the end of my time in Tanzania, my wife and I gave a small donation to every school which I had observed. I asked that the committee meet and discuss how they wanted to use the \$50 donation we were giving. All met and discussed how they would use it. When I made the donations, I almost always had the head teacher and *mwenyekiti* of the school committee present and I was given a receipt for the school's individual bank account. Both the management of the school committees seemed strong and the school's financial management was set within each school.

The Capacity Building area, from what I observed and heard, appears to be quite strong. Appreciation was expressed by many for the changes made in this area.

The final area of Strengthening Institutional Arrangements deals with how the schools would be governed from the central government down to the village level. My work was at the grassroots level so I cannot say how well the national level institutions are working but I will comment on what I heard or saw at the village and ward levels.

In each ward that I studied, I began my work with the Ward Educational Officer. I usually asked them to take me to each of the schools and introduce me to all the Head Teachers. I found all of them to be very thoughtful and hard-working people. Most of them cover their wards, two of

which are around 150 square kilometers, on foot or on bicycle. In addition, many have to take numerous trips each month into the district headquarters near Arusha. Some wards, such as Akeri ward, which is small in area, all the schools seemed to share a similar level of educational quality. The Ward Coordinator (*mratibu*) was very concerned about this quality and often asked me questions about my impressions of the schools.

In some of the wards, the schools were all very different showing the varying strengths of the Head Teachers. The Head Teacher at Akeri Primary School spoke about how he used a week of the Christmas vacation to work his teachers so they would use participatory methods in their teaching. One Head Teacher spent most of the day I was in the school observing with me. He told me he does this often to help teachers improve the quality of their teaching. Others improved the working conditions of their teachers by making sure the money was used wisely and for the right things.

At the village level, the addition of the village councils into the running of schools has been seen both positively and negatively. Several schools had other governmental affiliations—Nengung’u with the Monduli Army Training School and Tengeru with the government agricultural institutes—and this hurt these schools in that the villages often felt that the other governmental body would give the schools a lot of support. In Nengung’u, the Army had helped with personnel and provided housing for teachers, but very little had been built as the village did not push for help from the District Council. Tengeru is the second school in Patandi village and the Head Teacher felt that the other school was supported more by the village council than her school. Other village councils worked closely with the schools to improve the schools as was clearly visible in Likamba village in Musa ward. Many new classrooms had been built since PEDP had started with the support of the village.

In sum, the areas that I feel are the most successful for PEDP were in increasing the number of students in the classroom, providing money for refurbishing and building new classrooms, developing stronger local control and training for those people, and setting up better financial systems. The areas where PEDP seems to be really failing are those that have to do with the support of the nation’s teachers. Teachers feel left out of the PEDP process. They felt unmotivated and did not see that the government had taken their needs into consideration as they increased access to education. It is something that they, and I, feel really needs to be addressed if PEDP is to really succeed. My own belief is that the heart of a good quality education is not a new classroom; it is a well-educated and supported teacher who can motivate the students to learn. The new classroom will not do that, but the teacher can. The priorities need to be placed on the teachers for education to improve.

4. A Comparison of ESR and PEDP

While thirty-five years separate the initiation of Nyerere’s *Education for Self-Reliance (ESR)* program and Mkapa’s *Primary Education Development Plan (PEDP)*, both carry an enormous influence in the primary schools of present day Tanzania. As I was writing this, I noticed that most of what I was writing about in reaction to ESR pertained to the interior of the classroom and the school grounds, while much of PEDP pertained to the outside of the classroom. The curriculum still bears much more of Nyerere’s imprint than it does Mkapa’s marks.

There was one question I asked both parents and village government leaders that brought about much discussion and this pertains partially to both programs. I would ask: “Are schools better now than they were in the past, or were they better in the past? Why?” Seven of the sixteen parents’ groups and three of the twelve local government councils that I asked this question felt

they were better now. Those who said now overwhelmingly spoke about how access to education had improved. More children could now get into primary schools and more students were passing into secondary school than in the past. One man at Loruvani Primary School (Olturoto Ward) spoke about how in the past the schools were dominated by boys and those who belonged to an organized religion, now all were able to go. One group felt that the teachers were currently much better trained than they had been in the past.

Three of the sixteen parents' groups and eight of the twelve governmental groups felt they were better in the past. The remaining groups (five parents groups and one governmental group) were divided on the issue. A statement I heard over and over in all the schools was that a Standard VII leaver knew far less English than a Standard IV leaver in earlier times. The point this group stressed was that the quality of the schools was much weaker than it had been before. Teachers, they said, had been much more focused on their work as teachers and saw it as a vocation. There was no need for "tuition" classes in the past. There were more supplies available for each classroom. Primary school leavers could find work when they were done with school. One group spoke about the higher esteem and connections that teachers had within their communities in the past. The number of children in the classroom was seen as a detriment to education. Those groups that were divided on the issue were not sure if it was more important to have access for everyone or a high quality education for those in school. It did not seem possible to have both.

While I did not ask specifically for these groups to compare education during each of these presidencies, their answers are instructive. Nyerere did increase access to primary education and many who had not been able to go before found they could attend school, but I do not think the increase in numbers is quite as much as has been achieved during PEDP. During Nyerere's years, access mainly had to do with access to primary education and that was seen as enough, but in the intervening years as Tanzanians became a more educated population, the barriers to secondary education have been seen as highly detrimental. Access to secondary schools has increased as well during the Mkapa years and parents see this in a positive light.

But the main differences seem to be that of quality versus access. As I wrote about Nyerere's work, most of the analysis took place on the school grounds and in the classroom because his issues were how to make the curriculum fit Tanzania and its rural population. PEDP stated that it was interested in improving both access to primary schools and their quality. More children do have access to education and the classrooms are overflowing with up to five children per desk in some schools. Almost all schools I was in had some brand new classrooms in them. Management systems that regulate schools are falling into place. There is more local control of the schools. However, the internal dynamics of the classroom which is where quality can really be measured have not been addressed fully by PEDP. The teachers see themselves as being left behind by PEDP. Their salaries remain low, few new homes have been built for them, and they have not been helped in teaching new areas of the curriculum.

Most of the teaching I observed was of a low quality. Those parents who are concerned about quality and who have the means moved their children to the private English-medium primary schools. I live in an area in the United States with very few private schools and this is because people in the area see the public school system as being a high quality system. PEDP states that it wants Tanzanian public primary schools to be high quality institutions but it has done little to support the internal workings of the classroom to make this succeed. This remains the key challenge for the coming years.

5. Conclusion

I asked several questions at the beginning of this paper. My first two questions were about how important primary education had been for the nation's adults and if primary education was seen as enough for today's children. The answer to both of these questions from the people I spoke with is that primary education was never enough for Tanzania's people and now more than ever, few see it as providing anything more than a foundational education.

The remaining areas of research had to do with the continuing influence of Nyerere's *Education and Self-Reliance* ideas in today's primary schools and how well the *Primary Education Development Plan* (PEDP) was working. Nyerere's program continues to influence Tanzanian primary education. Some of the parts of his document are clearly visible in today's schools, but in other areas only artifacts remain. The curriculum is no longer as practical as it once was and there is much more emphasis on getting into secondary school, and less on the schools as offering a complete education.

PEDP has been successful at increasing enrollments and providing grassroots management of the village primary schools. It has shortchanged the teachers and this hurts the quality of the education. Many Tanzanians were impressed with the new classrooms built during these last few years, but few felt that their children were receiving a very strong education. For them to receive this, they need strong and supported teachers, more than new buildings.

This was an exciting time to do observe schools in Tanzania. The Tanzanians that I spoke with were excited and concerned about the direction of education in the country. It was seen as the only way their children could succeed in the new Tanzania.

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