HARVARD
GRADUATE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

Basic Education for All:

The Politics of Implementing 100% Transition from Primary School to Secondary School in Kenya

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The Public Policy and Basic Education Act of 2013 rendered basic education in Kenya both compulsory and a right, but the secondary school Net Enrollment Rate (NER) still sat at only 53.2% by 2018.

The Kenyan public school system is nationally governed and in January 2020, the Government decreed that it would be enforcing 100% transition from primary school to secondary school with immediate effect without exemption, requiring government officials to comply and threatening to penalise parents who did not. By this policy the government was newly determined to ensure that every child received 12 years of basic education which entailed ensuring that all learners transitioned from their eight-year stint in primary school into secondary school.

This would be no mean feat. The rollout of Free Primary Education in 2003 had succeeded in increasing primary school enrollment so that the NER had risen to 92.4% by 2018. This in turn had led to an increase in the number of students ready to transition into high school. The problem was that there were not enough secondary school places for all those who completed primary school to be absorbed comfortably.

For example, in 2016 there were 33,223 primary schools with an average class size[1] of 309 and 9,966 secondary schools with an average class size of 273. School leaders found themselves grappling with the challenges of welcoming an influx of new students into their schools.

Setting	
Kimila Girls' Secondary School (ages 14-17) in Kenya	
Primary Characters	
Rayhab Kieti: Principal of Kilima Girls' Secondary School **Isaiah Koech**: Principal of Kilima Boys' Secondary School	**Peter Makau**: Head of Kilima Primary School **Eliud Ndambuki**: Undersecretary in the Ministry of Education's Directorate of Secondary and Tertiary Education

[1] Class size here is a reference to the total number of students in a particular grade or level, not the number of students in a classroom. A class in this respect might consist of anywhere between 1 to 5 different streams depending on the size of the school.

Hearing laughter outside her office, Rayhab Kieti knew what it signified. Isaiah Koech, Principal of Kilima Boy's Secondary School, was here. She rose to her feet as he pushed open her door, poked his torso in and announced: "We are here."

"Karibu[2]!" she chirped, to match his flamboyant personality. Then she craned her neck to peer beyond him, asking, "Who is 'we'?"

"The indomitable Mwalimu[3] Peter Makau, of course," Isaiah boomed, throwing the door open to reveal the stocky man behind him.

"Karibu," Rayhab said, to the head of Kilima Primary School, a school strategically situated between Kilima Girls' Secondary School, which she helmed, and Isaiah's school. "Please, take a seat," she invited, gesturing at the two seats arranged in front of her desk, "and tell me, to what do I owe this pleasure?"

Peter, already seated, chuckled. "This one," he said, pointing at Isaiah, who was squirming in his seat in search of the perfect position, "came and dragged me out of my office. I suspect he has something to get off his chest and he needs me here as referee." Rayhab shook her head, laughing. Everyone knew Peter was not easily derailed—if he was there, it was because he wanted to be.

They both turned to Isaiah expectantly.

"Referee?" Isaiah scoffed. "I do not need a referee. But we all know you have the ear of senior people at the Ministry. You are here because I want them to know what we really think, even though Rayhab and I might disagree."

Rayhab propped her elbows on the desk,perching her chin on her clasped hands.

"Disagree about what, Isaiah?" she asked, although she had a fairly good idea what he was animated about.

The previous day, in response to pushback at a press conference about the impracticality of enforcing the government's 100% transition rule, the Cabinet Secretary for Education had defiantly declared: "It is better to have a child in school under a tree than have him or her loitering at home." That juicy soundbite had played on the evening news across multiple TV and Radio channels.

"About what the Secretary said yesterday, of course," Isaiah confirmed. "Learning under trees? Is that what you people call access? Is this your equity?"[4]

"Well," Rayhab said, calmly. "Learning under a tree is the lesser of two evils—surely you must see that. If this is what it takes to achieve 100% transition today, then so be it. Leaving any child behind is a far worse proposition than teaching under trees, especially because, as you well know, it is the poorest and most marginalised children who are likely to be left behind."

Isaiah turned to Peter and sighed, as though to say 'I told you.' Peter shook his head and smiled, politely refusing to be reeled into the conversation until he was right and ready.

"Are you really surprised that I'm defending 100% transition?" Rayhab pressed. "Of course I am. The more pertinent question, Mwalimu Isaiah, is, why won't you?"

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[2] Karibu means Welcome in Kiswahili

[3] Mwalimu means Teacher in Kiswahili

[4] Education CS https://allafrica.com/stories/202002180116.html

“This is not about not supporting 100% transition and you know it, Rayhab,” Isaiah pushed back. “It is about *not* supporting this shoddy implementation. There are just not enough places to accommodate 100% transition, and it is extremely irresponsible of this government to attempt to push it through. You can’t snap your fingers and manufacture almost 500,000 new secondary school places by the power of positive thinking. I hardly have room for the 320 students I have been forced to accommodate these past three years. Now the ministry has notified me that I must somehow accommodate 450. How?” As a sign of his growing agitation, the pitch of Isaiah’s voice rose as he spoke.

“My dormitories are already congested. I have to squeeze eight students into a space better suited for four. Now I’m somehow supposed to cram twelve students into the same space? Have we all forgotten the school safety guidelines imposed on us because of the fires? Do those building new safety codes no longer matter?”

Rayhab cocked her head slightly in surprise. Isaiah had been exasperated at the building safety codes imposed on boarding schools by the government after a series of fires had plagued them in 2016. He had dismissed the codes as superficial—a face-saving exercise. It was instructive that he was bringing them up now. She let it pass for the moment and listened to him rage on.

“Do we just take up these additional students when we know that it increases the safety risk for everyone? What about classrooms? Do they want me to squeeze seventy students into a classroom now? How do they imagine that my teachers will teach? Do you actually believe there will be any meaningful learning achieved at all?”

While he ranted, Rayhab had gradually leaned back, folding her arms across her chest, instinctively bracing herself against the onslaught. She understood that Isaiah was not attacking her personally—he just needed to vent—but his frustration was palpable.

They had met as bachelor of education students at Kenyatta University. Rayhab had always been passionate about teaching. Her mother was a teacher, and she had grown up hearing from strangers how much her mother had positively impacted their lives. Isaiah, on the other hand, had stumbled into education as a stopgap measure while he decided what to do with himself. After graduation they had been posted to schools in different parts of the country and had lost touch until six years previously when Rayhab had transferred to Kilima Girls as Deputy Principal and discovered that Isaiah was Principal of Kilima Boys. She was surprised. He hadn’t seemed the type who would last in the teaching profession and yet there he was, occupying a coveted perch in a national school.

They had rekindled their friendship easily and when Rayhab rose to the role of Principal, he had taken to visiting her office regularly to debate matters of education. Sometimes, as today, he dragged along Peter Makau, headmaster at Kilima Primary School. Isaiah was flamboyant and forceful and most people were intimidated by him, but Rayhab and Peter weren’t. Rayhab was cool headed and firm, and while Isaiah might consider her a tad naive for assuming that most people had the best intentions, he appreciated that she took his larger-than-life personality in stride.

“Look,” Rayhab was saying now, “I get your frustration with all of this. You know I have room for only 60 incoming students and yet they’re sending me 94. But tell me, what’s the alternative? What happens if we don’t find places for all these students? The lives of the half a million kids who didn’t transition into secondary school last year are almost certainly irreparably compromised. They will only ever be qualified for lower order, lower paying jobs. We have condemned them to a life at the margins. Not just them but their children too, probably. These are the children of the poorest and most marginalised Kenyans

among us. Where is our sense of justice? How can we not do everything we can to make room for them?"

"But how?" Isaiah countered. "Tell me how exactly I'm supposed to make room? I understand justice, but do you understand pragmatism?"

Rayhab glanced over at Peter, who had been sitting quietly, listening. She wondered what he was thinking. A few years older than Rayhab and Isaiah, he was usually content to serve as an audience of one as they volleyed arguments back and forth. He had led Kilima Primary School for twenty-six years, had a strong network nationally and was well-respected within the local community.

"Mwalimu Peter, what do you think?" Rayhab prompted.

"It's difficult but not impossible," he began, attempting as he sometimes did to straddle the line between Isaiah and Rayhab.

"I know many parents at my school who would agree with you, Rayhab. They had despaired that they would not be able to afford their children's secondary school education—despite the fact that the government has committed to covering the cost of tuition through the Free Day Secondary Schools[5] policy, schools are still not free—many administrators are charging exorbitant fees for infrastructure projects which they cannot afford. Now that the government has announced that secondary school is compulsory and that parents cannot be forced to pay for these infrastructure projects, they are happy to send their children to school and their children are happy to have the opportunity to go. You have to give the government credit for trying to fulfil its obligation."

Rayhab's frame was angled towards Peter but through the corner of her eye she could see Isaiah crossing, uncrossing and recrossing his legs, obviously itching to interject.

"The thing is, though,," Peter continued, "where's the funding?"

At the mention of funding, Isaiah jumped in eagerly: "Yes, where's the funding? Have you received anywhere near enough funds to do even a fraction of what you need to do to prepare for the influx? To buy new beds, and new desks? To build new dormitories, new classrooms, new toilets, new labs? To hire new teachers? It's one thing for the Secretary to declare that they can learn under trees but who will teach them? And where will they sleep at night? The government is sending me 22,000 Ksh[6] per student for a whole year. How am I supposed to run an entire school on that?"

Peter chimed in: "The money is never enough. TSC[7] have asked for 15 billion shillings a year to train the additional 25,000 teachers they estimate will be required to support 100% transition. The government says it can only manage 2 billion shillings. The School Heads Association said they need 9 billion shillings a year in order to pull this off. The government says it can only give 1.5 billion shillings."

"Exactly!" exclaimed Isaiah, energised by the fact that Peter seemed to be fighting in his corner. "Plus: 100 transition means that everybody has a right to continue with their education no matter how poorly

[5] In 2008, former president Kibaki introduced a free [day] secondary school plan. Under it the government would only meet the cost of tuition, while parents footed the bill for boarding and uniform.

[6] Approximately 200 US dollars

[7] Teachers Service Commission

they performed in their exams.[8] That means teachers will not only have more students, but many of them will also be woefully unprepared for secondary school. Mwalimu Peter here says he knows parents and children who are happy that this new policy makes it possible for them to attend secondary school. Good for them. But what about those who qualified by working hard and passing their national exams? Those who earned their rightful place in a national school like Kilima Boys? Don't we care that this will compromise their learning? And this comes at a time when the World Bank is now breathing down our necks talking about a learning crisis and learning poverty and about how a majority of our students are not acquiring basic skills, and telling us to improve the quality of our education."

"Mwalimu Isaiah," Rayhab interjected, politely but firmly, leaning forward to make her point. "Unfortunately I do not have sway over the World Bank."

"They're right in one respect, though," Isaiah powered on, "being in school is not the same as learning, so 100% transition implemented in this rash way will not improve anybody's prospects. I'm sorry, but this is not what access for all should look like."

Then, as if he had suddenly run out of steam, he flopped back in his seat and said, "A gradual implementation I can deal with. This radical approach is untenable."

"So: just so I can make sure I understand, Mwalimu Isaiah," Rayhab challenged, "you're saying we should implement 100% transition slowly, over the next few years?"

"Absolutely. I don't see what the rush is."

This was just the kind of statement designed to get a rise out of Rayhab.

"The rush, Mwalimu, is the half a million students we are leaving behind every single year. The rush is the stunted productivity that that portends, the reduced income, the increased social inequality. The rush is that by denying these young people a basic education today we are adversely impacting the next eight decades of their lifetimes: socially, politically, and economically. The rush is that they have a constitutionally guaranteed right to an education and who are we to tell them to wait? That is the rush, Mwalimu."

Rayhab caught the quick look the men exchanged and brushed it aside. She understood that the circumstances were less than ideal. But whenever she considered the half a million children annually who would be left behind absent the implementation of 100% transition, she could not think of anything more unjust.

"I don't buy the argument that failing students being pushed through the system are going to unnecessarily burden it. If children are failing to learn in school, is it not the system that is failing them? Aren't we, as teachers and administrators, a critical cog in that system?

"Besides, everyone knows just how constrained for resources the government is right now—we're spending above the OECD average of GDP on education. The truth is, as the ministry is always happy to remind us, 75% of that spending is on recurrent expenditure, most of it on teachers' salaries. What is left is hardly enough to fund the capital investment in infrastructure that we desperately need. But we also

[8] All Kenyan students sit for a national exam, the Kenya Certificate of Primary Education at the end of Grade 8, which also marks the end of primary school. They are then posted to secondary schools based on their performance in these exams, with the best performing students able to access the top performing, best resourced public secondary schools.

know that the government is not doing absolutely nothing. Has it not built those low-cost boarding schools in arid and semi-arid areas and even set up some mobile schools?"

Peter leaned back in his seat and contemplated his two colleagues, both of whom he respected. Isaiah was right to be piqued that the government had made this sweeping decree when it was administrators on the ground who would have to grapple with the breadth of consequences—from overcrowded dorms and classrooms to an overworked and irate teaching force. Isaiah's tenure at Kilima Boys had seen a marked improvement in the school's academic performance in national rankings. It was clear that Isaiah feared that 100% transition implementation would compromise his commitment to academic excellence. Rayhab had a valid point, though. The Constitution of Kenya had declared Basic Education a right—that had to mean something. She was also right to be concerned that anything less than an unequivocal implementation of 100% transition would exacerbate the marginalisation of the most vulnerable communities.

His old friend Eliud Ndambuki who served as an Undersecretary in the Ministry of Education's Directorate of Secondary and Tertiary Education occasionally sought him out to get a sense of what was going on on the ground. Peter was due to have lunch with Ndambuki in Nairobi that Friday, as a matter of fact. While he understood and sympathised with both Isaiah and Rayhab's positions, he wondered which side he would take when the topic came up with Ndambuki, as it likely would. Should he support prioritising quality in order to stem the learning crisis, or prioritising access for all? Was it pragmatic or unjust to limit secondary school admissions to only the spaces currently available? Did the situation demand radical change or call for a gradual implementation?

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