# Our education system is what we need to examine, not the learners

Thursday, February 09, 2023



**Author:**Daniel K Kalinaki. PHOTO/FILE.

By [Daniel K. Kalinaki](https://www.monitor.co.ug/uganda/daniel-k-kalinaki-1935906)

## What you need to know:

* Why pay millions for a degree only to end up riding a boda boda when you could have started riding after primary seven? What has your A in Divinity or General Paper done for you lately?

Like most parents, the first thing I did whenever the kids came home at the end of the school term was to rush for the report cards. Over time I noticed that, almost instinctively, my eyes often glazed over the positive bits in search of the areas of weak performance.

The report might have three As but my eyes would be drawn to the C or D and the attendant note from the teacher calling for socks to be pulled up, parents to be called, or more concentration to be paid.

Parents are hard-wired to want their offspring to be better. And finding fault is the primordial state, upon which words of encouragement or punishment for failure are premised. It is how we were raised, and it is how we are conditioned to raise our kids.

Then I had what would eventually come to feel like an epiphany. First, I stopped looking at the report card as soon as it came in. I’d give it a few days or weeks, then come to it with expectations in check and words of rebuke repressed.

I found that managing my own expectations allowed me to measure the kids’ academic performance by how much effort they put in, and how much enthusiasm they showed, not just the outcome of one bad exam or a difficult term. It did not mean that they were okay to slack off and turn in Fs. We agreed that as long as they did their best and left it all out on the field, we would accept whatever grade they got or find ways to improve it, without blame – and without wrapping my belt around them.

Dear Reader, I don’t know if this is the right thing for every parent to do. We all learn on the job. And there must be some merit in pushing kids to get straight As or top the class. To each their own. But I am old enough to know that academic performance alone is not the ticket to a successful life, whichever parameters one uses to define “success”. Old enough to know that buying good grades by taking kids to schools with institutionalized cheating is parental idiocy.

Ergo, the recommendation from the National Planning Authority for primary leaving examinations to be scrapped made interesting reading. The planners say asking kids to memorise stuff over seven years then regurgitate it over two tension-filled days unfairly keeps many kids from advancing to secondary school. I agree, but only to a point. There must be a way to measure basic literacy and numeracy skills along the way to avoid the make-or-break bottleneck of exams. But this is only part of the problem. Some pupils drop out of the education system because they do not have the grades to get into secondary school. But many others drop out before they get to the exams, or walk away even if they qualify to go farther.

This is mostly a matter of affordability. They can’t pay the direct fees and other dues that private schools demand. Others look at what passes for government-aided schools and their excuse of an education and decide that the opportunity cost of not getting an early start in farming, business, or marriage is just too high. The core problem is value, not price. The quality of public education has deteriorated to the point where the marginal return on investment in school fees is low or negative, especially where the prize at the end of two decades is a long, soul-crushing search for a non-existent job. Why pay millions for a degree only to end up riding a boda boda when you could have started riding after primary seven? What has your A in Divinity or General Paper done for you lately?

The solution lies in more than scrapping the exams. It lies in rebuilding the curriculum for a world in which knowing the right questions to ask is more important than remembering the right answers. It lies in investing in teaching quality and learning outcomes aligned to the logic of seeing human capital development as a key ingredient and enabler of social-economic transformation.

Good grades are great, and I love to see them, but what our kids need is grit, critical thinking, confidence, respect, networking skills, empathy and emotional intelligence. They don’t teach any of this in school. Our education system is what needs to be examined, not the learners.

***Mr Kalinaki is a journalist and  poor man’s freedom fighter.***

***write2kalinaki@gmail.com***

***Twitter: @Kalinaki***