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Why we built a school in Tanzania

Timothy Coday | Mar. 27, 2009

A kindergarten classroom in St. Gasper Primary School in Dodoma, Tanzania. (Kathleen Coday)

When I came to Tanzania 25 years ago, primary education was mandatory for all school-age children. The schools, though tuition-free, were not well attended in the central part of the country where I was stationed.

Government officials would visit the schools to check their enrollment rosters. They would levy fines against the parents of children who were listed on the roster but not attending the school. To counter this, the parents would bribe the headmasters to have their children's names stricken from the roster. That way the children could be kept at home to tend the cattle and work in the fields.

People here are cattle herders; wealth and prestige are determined by the size of their herds. Education was not highly valued then.

Time passed. Improvements in infrastructure allowed better and more frequent interaction between those in rural and urban areas. This with more and better access to the printed word sparked an interest in young people. They wanted to learn to read and write. They wanted an education.

I was in the office of the mission one day, and a young woman, 15 years old, came in crying. After she calmed down, she told me that she wanted to go to school but her father would not let her. I went with her to see her father. He said he did not want his daughter to go to school because she would see and learn about things outside the village. He said, "She'll come home from school and ask me, 'Why don't we have a cement floor and metal sheets for a roof?' She would demand these things. I would have to sell off cattle. My herd would decrease, and then where would I be?" I don't know if that girl ever made it to school.

Another young woman, 16 years old, came to me. She was crying and obviously scared. She wanted to go to school, but her father had arranged a marriage for her. The bride price the groom's family would pay would give the father more cattle. The young woman wanted no part of marriage, because it would end her education. I got this settled, but it happened again. By the time I heard of the new marriage, the father had already accepted the cattle from the groom's family, which meant his daughter was already part of the other family. Only by threatening the father with jail time could I get him to give the cows back and get his daughter back. After this happened a third time, I arranged for the young woman to go to boarding school. Today she is a Montessori

kindergarten teacher. She is a proud wife and mother of one.

This period caused hurtful divisions in families. Rifts developed between parents and children. One generation wanted to keep things the way they "had always been," and the other generation longed for change.

Now, the children who fought with their parents are parents themselves. They have experienced the fruits of education -- things like the ability to read a contract, skills to find a salaried job, a chance for higher education -- and they want those things for their children.

Tanzania, however, was not ready for this change. There were not enough schools. Some schools were so overcrowded that they started teaching half days, with one group of students studying in the morning and a second group studying in the afternoon. Still some schools had close to 200 students per classroom.

The national government started a program in 2000 to build a secondary school in each township. In 2004 a nationwide program was started to increase the number of primary schools. Parents were enlisted to help in the construction. They carried water to the construction site, collected sand and rocks and contributed financially.

This eased the situation but did not resolve it. Having more schools did not solve another major problem: poverty. Schools are tuition-free, but students must come to school in uniform and with supplies. These are simple things, but beyond the means of many families.

Poverty does not decrease the desire for a good education for one's children. This is why we -- a mission project founded to drill water wells -- built a school.

We began with a two-year kindergarten program to prepare students for primary school. From the very beginning all classes are taught in English. Swahili is the national language, but English is the language of instruction. We provide uniforms and have a hot-meal program. For some of our students, the meal they get at school is the only meal they get in a day. We limit the number of students per classroom to 30.

The first year, many parents thought the school was free and were taken aback that we charged moderate tuition. Knowing there was no way they could pay, these families sold the names of their children, and the buyer then got the child's reserved spot in our school. When we learned this, we got the word out that no child would be refused because of money. We developed a work program so the parents of the students who cannot pay can work off the tuition.

Last year, we announced that registration for a new class would begin Nov. 28. The night before, at 10:30, our guards came and said that a woman and her child were at the gate of the school. She was sleeping outside the gate with her child to be the first in line to register. Registration was set for 7 a.m. By 5 a.m. we had more than 200 people at the gate. At registration time there were more than 500 people. We had places for 90 students. We had to turn away 410.

Twenty-five years ago, parents would dodge the law and bribe officials to keep their children at home. Now they will sleep outdoors with the child at the gate of the school to make sure they have a place.

We built our school for people who want a good education for their children but cannot afford it. The gap between the haves and the have-nots is growing. We want to aid in lessening this gap.

Fr. Timothy Coday is a Missionary of the Precious Blood. He directs a program that digs wells and supplies water to villages in central Tanzania.

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