

Talking

Principal required to lead primary school: 126 students, one classroom, seven grades and three teachers (on a good day). Any takers?

Heads

Balancing the budget, raising funds, maintaining standards, motivating staff, negotiating local and national politics and, of course, making a difference to the lives of children; it's all in a day's work for a headteacher – wherever you are, as it turns out. The fine details of the job description, however, can vary immensely according to geographical and social influences. *New Primary Leaders* (Continuum, 2011) is a collection of lively and revealing interviews with novice principals in primary schools across five continents. Together, and along with a comparative overview in the final chapter, these provide a

fascinating snapshot of the perception and experience of academic leadership at the beginning of the 21st century. Dominick Tupa Lugendo is headteacher of Mandizini School, in a remote part of the Morogoro region of Tanzania, where the main economic activity is banana farming. He was promoted and transferred to this hilly and isolated part of the country without applying for it. He has a wife and several children. ▶



"I love my work and have been trained for it. I attribute my vast experience to having worked for 28 years. Before I became a headteacher, I had been an assistant headteacher for 12 years; I have been a headteacher for only one year.

In most cases, to become a headteacher you do not apply for it. You are just appointed. Leadership is a blame game, a problem. If we were to apply, then many people would not go for it. It is a job you are given after the officials recognise that you have the ability to do it. You take it up and if you do not make it, then you get back to your teaching position. The challenge for me was that my station was very accessible and well established, and then on appointment I was posted to a remote area far up the hills. You ask yourself whether you will survive the harsh conditions; then you just decide to go and do your best.

After appointment, there was no training apart from the experience I had. I did not know the culture of the new place I was posted to. I had never lived there. I had to do my own research to understand the place before I could go. How are the people? How is the place? How do they behave? I got to know who the school committee chairman was, the local elected leader. I spoke to people who come from the place and even to the headteacher I was taking over from.

It is my intention to do my best as a headteacher. I have to

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involve stakeholders in everything. The school community is very powerful. The parents have a lot of say and they are listened to a lot by the government. So if I just arrived at the school and told everyone to change position because I had arrived, it could not work. For example, there is a banana plantation in school and when I sought to find out how it is managed, I was informed that the community is the one that takes care of the school property and if you get involved, they will let the property be stolen. They also do not trust teachers that much who are outsiders in their community. So I agreed with this position since I could not change everything immediately.

However, when I met with the chairman I asked him how much money he had from the farm sales and how much he sells the bananas for, then we agreed that I provide a book for keeping the records. I decided that on most of

the decisions we would work together and that I would give the community the chance to participate but monitor the activities. It should not be a case of, 'now that I have taken over, I will do everything.'

My leadership style is participatory. For example, I work very closely with the school committee. In fact, I have been letting the school committee deal with most of the responsibilities. The problem is that my school has no teachers. We have three teachers in all, but one is rarely in school. With only two of us in school, there is no reason for me to be throwing my weight around. The former headteacher who I took over from is still there so I give him space so that he can feel comfortable that he still has power. When he is at school, he has no problems working with me. However, the reason why he was demoted is that he drinks alcohol a lot, so most of the time

he is not in school. Towards the end of the month, he can take two weeks without coming in. When he reports after two weeks, then this other teacher goes for two weeks. It's very disappointing and that is the problem I have.

The school has 126 enrolled students, from grade one to grade seven. There is only one classroom, though, which is why we have to construct more. When I arrived, there were no learning materials. The school funds provided by the government remained in the account, yet there were no books. The first task I embarked on was to work on the release of the funds by the bank so that we could buy some of the learning materials required.

I work very well with the teachers. We discuss issues and agree on the way forward. The major problem we have is their attendance. Most of the hard work done by teachers in the urban places is not reflected in remote places at all. When I reported to this school I was confused and wondered how I would survive in such an environment. I was used to doing things with urgency. It is like having been a driver of a Scania bus and then you transfer to drive a tractor. That is a problem for us but I am doing my best in the circumstances.

I have not had any sign to show that the community does not accept me as the headteacher. We're working well with the community. But there

126

enrolled students, from *grade one to grade seven*. There is only one classroom, though, which is why we have to *construct* more

are challenges; for example, pupil attendance is dictated by the prevailing economic activities. During the planting season the students believe that they have the freedom to be away attending to farming activities. On specific days like Friday some children stay away from school to engage in transporting bananas to the market. To them it is normal and so school programmes can wait. I have to do quite a lot of work to get them to understand the need for regular attendance. There are other challenges, such as traditional practices and customs. The girl child, for example, gets married while still in school. We have to really fight off such practices.

I have made a number of changes in the one year I have been heading the school. Nearly all the school programmes had come to a standstill, including construction of classrooms. However, over the period I have been there we have worked with the community; they have bought construction materials and raised money and begun construction. The other issue is

about the school compound, which is not large enough. The community have looked for land and found a school expansion site. We are now in the process of acquiring the land, and people are aware that the school will move to a new site. The changes are there and can be seen by the people.

My satisfaction is when I see the fruits of my effort. For example, this year we have seventh-grade students who will be sitting for their national examinations and we are currently working to ensure that we prepare them for the examinations. Even now the schools are on holiday, but there is one teacher teaching these students. We look forward to the examination results, as they will indicate to us what we need to do in the future.

One of the discouraging things is the working conditions. The place where the school is located is a hardship area. I go up and down very steep hills to get to school and there are no classrooms or teachers' houses. What discourages me so much is that I cannot live there. In the

rainy season there is a river that floods and forces me to miss school for three days. It is a hardship area for sure.

One needs to be very keen on the job, especially concerning cases of student misbehaviour. I am at times required to refer some cases to the law enforcement agencies, and this being a remote and rural place, there is need to be cautious. In most cases it is better to involve the community elders, the school committee and other groups. There are very few families in that place and they are all related in some way. They can easily isolate you.

My position as headteacher has had impacts on my life. For example, I spend a long time away from my family. I leave very early and come back very late and am tired so there is no time for the family. On the other hand, since I started walking up the steep slopes, my body is in better shape. I had previously been advised to reduce my weight, so I think this has helped me.

I agree with those who say that a headteacher's role is difficult. As a teacher, your major role is to teach. As a headteacher you have more responsibilities. Apart from teaching, you are also in charge of other people. Second you have to take charge of other

roles, such as construction. You also involve so many people in your work through consultation. You hold many meetings with ward officials and district officials and this is more work. You are also in charge of school accounts. In some of these responsibilities you are forced to spend your own funds. For example, you might be invited for a meeting in Morogoro and it is up to you to get funds and go, then get back and implement the instructions. As a teacher you have no idea about these responsibilities.

Over the next five years, my goal is to ensure that the school is the best with results in all aspects, including academic achievement, school buildings, learning materials and co-curricular activities. I would like the school to be a model school, to be an attractive, self-sustaining school that people can reckon with. I am not able to predict my future, because I do not determine where I will be myself. I hope to continue with my work; if my leaders decide that I am still able to serve as head teacher from one school to another, it will be okay with me. If they decide that I should revert to my role as a classroom teacher, I will also accept that."

Thanks to Musa Mohammed for help with translation.

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