

Mkombozi shows MEMKWA's potential to meet the learning needs of vulnerable children

By Tanja Kisslinger, Mkombozi Communications

According to the Ministry of Education, MEMKWA (Mpango kwa Elimu Maalum kwa Watoto waliokosa) is intended to increase the national literacy level by 20%, decrease the backlog of out-of-school children, and ensure that children, youth, and illiterate adults have access to high-quality learning opportunities. The Mkombozi Centre for Street Children - one of the first NGOs to be registered as a MEMKWA provider - has been actively engaged in the application and assessment of Government MEMKWA. Findings to date suggest that the focus on increasing children's **access** to education is important, but problematically, it is resulting in a parallel neglect of the **quality** of education.

Mkombozi's field research has found that many education actors (teachers, district officers, NGOs) assume that "inclusive education" means standardised education - "one-size-fits-all". There is little recognition that different children have different educational needs and that an inclusive system must respond to these needs. In practice, many formal MEMKWA teaching methodologies are irrelevant to certain groups of children - especially vulnerable, out-of-school children. For instance, during trainings of MEMKWA facilitators held by the Ministry of Education in Moshi Urban (2004), skills development for educators focussed on the fact that children would eventually be mainstreamed into formal schools and needed to be capacitated to cope in that environment. There was no discussion of what makes certain children vulnerable and how this vulnerability manifests in their behaviour and in their specific emotional and learning needs.

In effect, despite MEMKWA's aims to enable "individuals and communities to solve their own problems", it is currently being used to speed out-of-school children through the formal school system. MEMKWA centres are becoming alternate locales for primary education, rather than an alternative form of education. In fact, Mandela MEMKWA Centre students in Pasua, Kilimanjaro have recently been integrated into the formal school system because there was no MEMKWA teacher at the Centre.

Given its work with vulnerable, out-of-school street children with special emotional and behavioural needs, Mkombozi is using its status as a MEMKWA provider to harness the potential of the programme to build students who are articulate, self-aware, competent decision-makers, and to pilot a more relationship-oriented and transformative education that can be scaled up through the primary school system. Mkombozi's MEMKWA programme primarily seeks to provide vulnerable children with a foundation to learn how to live with others, to develop ethical behaviour, and to build the characteristics of enquiring learners.

Mkombozi has identified a particular set of skills, attitudes and behaviours considered to be essential assets for youth who will become self-reliant, productive members of society. The Mkombozi MEMKWA "Student Profile" is key to the MEMKWA programme at Mkombozi because it represents the objectives, it drives the curriculum, and it determines the process of assessment. Additionally, by first identifying the characteristics and behaviours to be built in their students, Mkombozi's MEMKWA can selectively employ the teaching approaches that will meet learner's needs and facilitate skill development most appropriately.

In fact, Mkombozi uses a range of activities outside of the classroom to develop youth according to the student profile, including: extra-curricular clubs; morning assembly led by the children and educators; study tours to local businesses and community groups; youth-run art and drama groups. Inside the classroom, Mkombozi educators use games and story-telling, they coach the children individually, and they facilitate peer support when appropriate. Mkombozi's experience has shown that, in practice, effective MEMKWA programming employs topic-based (rather than subject-based) learning, differentiation with the classroom, individualised learning goals for each child, and the direct involvement of students in the community.

District Education Office staff in Kilimanjaro, who frequently visit the Mkombozi's MEMKWA programme, note that the key to its success is the quality of relationship between the educator and child - from this foundation Mkombozi works toward transforming the child's knowledge, attitudes and behaviour.

*For more information: <http://www.mkombozi.org/pdf/200511memkwa.pdf>

