



Uganda Humanist Schools Trust

Kanungu Humanist Primary School

July 2022



Kanungu children modelling Ugandan clothes for different occasions

Background

Kanungu Humanist Primary School opened fully in January 2020. It is the newest Humanist school and one that UHST adopted without first visiting to assess its potential. The school came recommended by the World Humanist Charity, which provided seed corn funding.

Our trustees were moved by the back story of the school. Its founder, Robert Magara, was inspired to start the school to help his local community following a dreadful cult massacre. 800 men, women and children were burnt to death in the year 2000, after being locked in a

church by a preacher they had come to trust. Robert lost close family members in the tragedy, and he vowed to do something to make things better. Inspired by reading about Humanism, he decided to establish a school that challenged superstition and promoted rational scientific thinking and inclusive human values.

His first school, built on a steep exposed hillside, was damaged by a heavy rainstorm, and had to be abandoned.



First school destroyed in rainstorm

Robert's father gave him a more suitable plot of land for the new school. It is relatively flat and beside a main road into Kanungu town, 2 km away.



Robert with proud parents who gave land for the school

From 2020, UHST has sent Robert small amounts of money in instalments, and we have been impressed by the progress he has made at each stage. Working with two friends with building skills, Robert has constructed good quality buildings and kept to a tight budget. By the end of 2021, we had helped him to complete 10 classrooms providing for kindergarten, nursery and primary aged children. He already had staffrooms on the site, but we added toilets and a cook house with efficient wood-burning stoves. In January the school opened fully to children from age 3 up to Primary 6, aged 11. Next year his top class will become Primary 7, when they will take their Primary Leaving Examination.

So far recruitment has reached 135 children. When the school opened, most local children had already been enrolled in other schools. We

have subsequently learned that there are two government primary schools within walking distance of Kanungu Humanist Primary School. Government schools tend to have very large classes (as many as 150) and are poorly resourced. However, they are largely free of charge.

The school faces resistance from the local Christian community. A preacher in the main church in Kanungu has urged families from the pulpit to boycott the godless school run by Humanists who, he maintains, promote homosexuality (!?) The latter charge follows the International Humanist campaign against the proposed punitive laws against homosexuality proposed by a Uganda Member of Parliament, but later rejected by the High Court.

Robert challenged the preacher to a debate on local radio, but he refused to appear. Robert took his case to the District Education Commissioner, where he countered the claims being made and explained the inclusive nature of Humanist philosophy. Hilary and I visited the education offices to show our support for Robert. We spoke with the Commissioner and school inspectors about the success of earlier Humanist schools which are inclusive and educate children from all religions. We left feeling that the inspectors were very happy with what they had seen at Kanungu Humanist Primary School, and that they would support the school in its efforts to win over the community.

There was scepticism from elements of the local communities around other Humanist schools in their early years. Each school has largely dispelled the concerns by working hard to demonstrate that they do a good job for local children, achieving high standards of education and welfare in a happy atmosphere.

As Kanungu will not get its first published examination results until January 2024, it will need to drive recruitment through the positive endorsement of the school by current children and their teachers.

Around the school

The school is in an imposing position along a main road into Kanungu town. It is fronted by an attractive border of succulents and trees, which give a good first impression.



Once inside the school compound, visitors find themselves in a green environment with lawns, flowers and fruiting and flowering trees and shrubs. The school buildings are attractively arranged and well finished and painted.



Parents enjoy the school grounds at open day



Children at ease in their green environment

The school is a friendly place. Teachers and children seem to be happy and purposeful. We moved from class to class, introducing ourselves and interacting with the children in their lessons. Class sizes are small, so each child

has plenty of opportunity to be noticed and to participate fully.

Children are taught in English from the first class. Small children in the kindergarten were delighted to be learning new words by chanting together. It was evident that learning was fun and a great adventure.



Primary 4 children standing to greet their visitors



Showing children on a map where we had come from

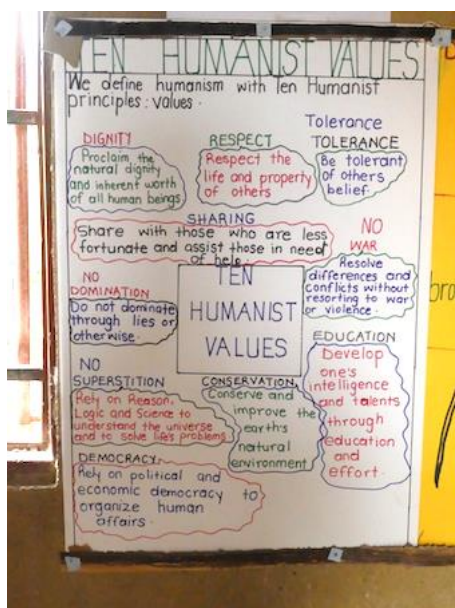


Kindergarten children at the beginning of their learning adventure

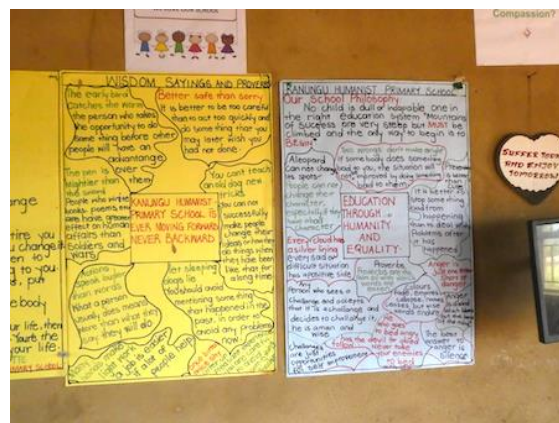
Teachers have made every classroom a stimulating environment for the children. Walls are festooned with attractive and informative posters.



Common diseases: signs & symptoms



Hand-made poster of Humanist values



Staffroom posters extolling school philosophy

The pictures below show the children sitting together at break time. As soon as the school bell rings, they rush to line up for their next class.



Little ones together at break time



Music, Dance and Drama

In anticipation of our first visit to Kanungu the children had been working hard on a music, dance and drama presentation. Ugandan children are very talented and outgoing and love an opportunity to perform. Every class had its own party piece to present, which they had practiced with their inspirational music and dance teacher, Justine Ainembabazi.



Teacher Justine leads children in singing and dance



Baby class enjoy first public performance



Parading Ugandan clothes for all occasions



Head boy gives speech on school's achievements



Children perform a play about the impact of Covid

As a reward for their efforts, the children and staff were treated to beef stew with matoke (green bananas) for lunch. This made a change from the standard daily diet of posho (maize dough) and beans.



Cooks prepare special meal of matoke & beef stew



Firing up the stoves for cooking



School Director & Headteacher in discussion



A satisfying lunch in the shade



Teachers at Kanungu

Meeting Teachers

In the afternoon we had a long and very productive meeting with the teachers. Being a new school with limited income, Robert had found it challenging to pay salaries on time each month. This has been a source of anxiety for teachers and has meant that some teachers have quit the school at short notice. Since the start of the year, UHST has been sending the school additional money every month to enable Robert to pay his teachers. This has produced some stability in staffing. Though teachers do wonder how long we and the school will be able to go on paying them, and their pay levels remain very low.

We did our best to reassure the teachers, explaining that maintaining good conditions for teachers was top priority for the school and for UHST. UHST would also work with Robert to ensure that books and other learning resources were adequate. We expressed our confidence that as standards of education and welfare improved and became known in the area, then recruitment would rise. It should be possible to gradually raise fee income and to progressively improve pay and conditions for teachers. They seemed relieved to hear this and moved on to other matters.

Teachers took turns to talk about their experience in the school and to identify how they would like to see things improve. There were requests for specific books for different classes, for uniforms for the teachers so they could have greater pride in association with the school. Justine, the music teacher, requested uniforms for the choir and there was a general request for more materials for play-based learning. Many of the issues raised by teachers

were taken up in the Annual General Meeting of the school board, held later that evening.

Annual General Meeting

The school was established with two names on the company register: Robert Magara (Managing Director) and Steve Hurd (representing UHST). The Board's first decision was to expand membership to include: Kate Tamusime, a local graduate in Social Administration who works as Robert's Deputy; Moses Ambera, an experienced I.T. secondary teacher; Peter Kisirinya (Chair of Uganda Humanist Schools Association); and a member of the school's Parent Teachers' Association (to be identified).

The school accounts were received and approved. They had been audited by Dan Kasanda, a Ugandan public service accountant employed by UHST. They have also been examined by UHST's independent reviewer in the UK. The school is in a poor community and termly fees are set low at 95,000 Uganda shillings (£21). With only 63 children paying fees this yields an unsustainably low level of income. Robert felt it was too early to raise the fee level as it would simply raise the number of parents falling into arrears. He promised to try and persuade more parents to pay, though he was reluctant to send non-payers home because it might affect the reputation of the school in its first year. However, paying for food and firewood for children who don't pay could well lead to the closure of the school, and in this case all children would lose. So far this year, total fee income has been 6 million Uganda shillings (£1,304), but arrears of fees stand at 3.5 million shillings (£760).

The main school cost, after food and firewood, is teachers pay. Kanungu has 10 teachers and 5 ancillary staff. Teachers pay ranges from 200,000 (£43) to 350,000 (£76) per month, and fee income is insufficient to cover this.

It was agreed to digitise the accounts in 2023 using Quickbooks with cloud backup. This will simplify the production of annual accounts and the audit process. Monthly reconciliations of receipts and payments will also be facilitated. 2022 accounts will be complete by March 31st

2023. Mobile money payments of school fees will also be implemented.

Robert reported that monthly transfers from UHST of £650 had helped the school financially, but additional sums were needed to keep the school afloat. These additional demands on UHST were a problem because the sums sent had no matching regular income to the charity.

The school faced several challenges in 2022.

1. Covid had depressed family incomes and savings, so families found it a struggle to raise even the low level of fees charged by the school and ask for and are often granted discounts.
2. Families were finding it difficult to pay for school food and for uniforms.
3. Low levels of staff pay and uncertainty about the viability of the school were making it difficult to retain staff.
4. Teachers were asking for additional support with their housing costs or, preferably, to be housed on the school site.
5. It was hard for exam classes to study at home due to demands to carry out work tasks and the lack of light in hours of darkness. The school faces requests for boarding for, at least, Primary 6 and 7 children. Robert proposed building two more temporary classrooms from wood, so that existing P6 and P7 classrooms can be used as dormitories.
6. The local piped water supply keeps drying up so the school has to pay for water to be carried to the school from a source in the valley bottom.
7. If the school is to become a recognised Centre for the Primary Leaving Examination then it is required to have a hall, which can be used for exams and other purposes.
8. It was agreed that UHST would no longer expect supplementary funds to be used to provide discretionary help with school fees. Given the uniform poverty of the area, it was impossible to identify the

neediest. Helping a few children was discouraging equally needy parents from paying their school fees. In these circumstances partial scholarships did not improve overall cash flow.

Immediate Priorities

1. Closing the deficit on the school accounts by encouraging more parents to pay fees, possibly asking some children who do not contribute anything to leave the school (a very hard thing to do).
2. UHST will try to raise additional funds through an appeal to help all the Humanist primary schools, which face similar financial challenges.
3. More books of all kinds and learning and play materials, especially to support those children preparing for their Primary Leaving Examination.
4. More classroom furniture.
5. Lightning protection is essential.
6. Construct two temporary replacement wooden classrooms on a concrete base to enable later upgrading.
7. Create decent sleeping arrangements for P6 and P7 in converted classrooms equipped with beds and mosquito nets.

If you would like to help us to meet the urgent needs of Katumba and the other Humanist schools then please contact:

stevehurd@uhst.org (01782 750338).

Donation forms can be found at:

<https://ugandahumanistschoolstrust.org/donate/>