



THE TOA NAFASI PROJECT

providing chances, promoting children



Providing chances Promoting children

The Toa Nafasi Project is an educational program (not a separate center or school) working within the existing public (government) school system in Tanzania, where the majority of children are enrolled. Our three-tiered system provides a unique and innovative approach to support the needs of students who are in danger of being marginalized due to their learning difficulties.

We strive to improve learning outcomes for all students in Standards One and Two but our focus is on the most vulnerable learners in the classroom. We do not deviate from the national syllabi mandated by the Ministry of Education but rather ensure that everyone in the class has an equal opportunity to learn regardless of their learning style.

Currently The Project works in four schools in Moshi (the capital city of Kilimanjaro region) and we expect to expand to an additional five schools in 2019.

Our program is designed so that it can be introduced into any public primary school in the country. Ultimately, the goal is to be in all Tanzanian public primary schools so students who need assistance can easily access it and will not have to travel long distances to do so.

Who we are

The Toa Nafasi Project works with teachers and parents to identify which students are struggling, what the cause might be, and how best to help them. If the problem is medical or psychosocial, we have developed a referral system. If it is scholastic, The Project provides a “pull-out program” in which flagging students are removed daily from their regular classes for short one-on-one or small group sessions with our trained staff.

Our tutors are young women from the village who have struggled to find gainful employment but who have committed to working with The Project. Through in-service training, they are taught a few simple yet effective teaching methodologies for children with learning difficulties by our international education consultants, and then gain their experience in the classroom.

Employment opportunities like these are an additional benefit of The Project for the local community. They empower the young women tutors, and enable them to become productive, contributing members for their families and communities.



What we do

The Toa Nafasi Project’s three-tiered approach of assessment, referral, and curriculum modification or “pull-out program” has enabled significant development in students found to be struggling in the early grades of primary school.

Assessment—Each year our staff, with the permission and cooperation of school administrators, take a census of all the students newly enrolled in Standard One. We observe each student for social behaviors, adaptive abilities, and motor skills as well as test them for literacy, numeracy, and cognitive skills in order to establish their baseline aptitude.

Our specially designed test is based on the American Brigance modules with variations that are socially relevant and culturally sensitive. It has been modified by our international education specialists who possess a thorough knowledge of both special education and Tanzanian culture. This assessment is designed to identify those students who are struggling academically and those who might have non-scholastic aptitudes that can be fostered in other settings such as in music, art, or sport.

Referral—As there are many reasons why a student might under-perform in the classroom, The Project has a referral system of health professionals to treat those pupils who are struggling due to medical or psychosocial issues.

We have assisted students with adenoid and tonsil surgeries, and with complaints ranging from mild medical conditions to vision and hearing impairment; supported the rehabilitation of those suffering from sexual abuse trauma; and found proper boarding school facilities for those who cannot succeed in the inclusive classroom, due to, for example, autism or fetal alcohol spectrum disorder.

Curriculum modification (“pull-out program”)—The Project works with the remaining students who are still struggling to help them complete the standard Tanzanian curriculum in a modified context. Because the Tanzanian educational system requires that students sit for periodic national examinations, the national curriculum must be adhered to but the syllabus and/or teaching methodology can be readily adjusted for students with special needs with more time spent on each lesson, one-on-one time with the tutor and hands-on work.



Such pedagogical methods as Teaching with Visualizations, Jigsaw Lessons, and Total Physical Response can all be employed to help young students grasp subject material more easily. We aim to assist all students in the “pull-out program” over the course of the Standard One and Two years; however, should they continue to need our support, even in Standard Three, we continue to work with them until they are able to succeed on their own.

Why we do it

Toa nafasi means “provide a chance” in Kiswahili and The Toa Nafasi Project does this for two distinct but interrelated populations. Firstly, we support students in their early education years who are experiencing difficulty learning and who, under the current Tanzanian education system, are unable to achieve their full potential. Secondly, we employ and train a previously unemployed, untapped workforce of local women as tutors for the program, thereby providing jobs and perpetuating a sense of empowerment and professionalism for these women where none existed before.

Children with Learning Difficulties

The education sector in Tanzania is not equipped to accommodate the individual learning needs of each student and, as a consequence, students with learning difficulties are often unable to fully participate in and benefit from their education, entering into a lifetime of marginalization and exclusion.

There are very limited resources for students with special needs, particularly those with needs as subtle and complex as learning difficulties. While overt physical and mental disabilities are starting to receive recognition, less quantifiable impediments remain unidentified and unaddressed. Such students are often perceived as disobedient, lazy, or stupid rather than as having an actual learning difficulty.



Specific statistics regarding students with learning difficulties do not exist in Tanzania making the magnitude of the problem hard to quantify. This is further complicated by the fact that there is no generally accepted definition of disability or learning difficulties along with little understanding and few resources for addressing such needs.

Dr. Okechukwa Abosi, University of Botswana, estimates that 8% of students in any given African classroom have a learning difficulty and that the number of failing students grows when considering other factors responsible for a student's poor academic performance such as physical ailment or psychological trauma (Abosi, 2007).

By applying Dr. Abosi's theory to Tanzania, it could be inferred that around 1.3 million children out of just over 17 million (aged 5 to 19 years—based on the 2012 census) are experiencing learning difficulties (Mwambene, et al, 2012). In a class of 50 students, there may be as many as four in need of additional support.

According to Tanzania's 2009 National Strategy on Inclusive Education 2009-2017, fewer than 1% of teachers have any knowledge of special educational needs. Such needs are addressed by requiring prospective teachers to attend one of a very few special education teacher training colleges. A 2005 study found that only 821 teachers had credentials to teach students with special needs.

The former Regional Education Officer of Kilimanjaro, Mr. Theodore Massawe, stated that no program is in place to either support students with learning difficulties or to increase the understanding and expertise of teachers. Most classrooms in Tanzania are overcrowded; teachers are generally undertrained and/or underpaid; and teaching methodologies are routine and outdated. "Talk and teach" methods and rote memorization do not test comprehension and there is little recognition that each student may learn in a different way.

Although teachers have the choice to adapt the curriculum according to the needs of learners, they lack the skills to do so. There is also insufficient individual student-teacher or student-student interaction (pair work, group work, or after-school projects) to inject new life into lessons and make them more appealing.

All of these factors create an unfriendly learning environment for typically developed students but for struggling learners and students in distress, it is prohibitive. The Toa Nafasi Project seeks to rectify this situation by using its public-private partnership with the Tanzanian government and local communities to provide support for struggling students, their parents and families, and the teachers and administrators within the public school system.



Economic Empowerment of Women

Inequality in Tanzania has grown over the last decade with women being a long way from realizing their potential in most sectors of society. They face a range of challenges that undermine their ability to make the most of opportunities including: lack of economic and educational options, poverty, early pregnancy, and child marriage, all of which are reinforced by gender inequality and discrimination.

Although almost as many Tanzanian women as men participate in the labor force, they are less likely to earn as much as men and more likely to work in the informal sector. Economic independence is a key determinant of a girl's safety, personal development, empowerment, and future potential. Women in stable and secure employment, who become contributing members of society, are key to social and economic development in Tanzanian communities.

The Toa Nafasi Project recognizes the disadvantage that women face by not having full access to education and employment opportunities. Consequently, The Project seeks to empower its tutors economically and personally through employment, training, building leadership skills, and social security contributions. The advantage is felt individually, economically, and culturally; it provides direct benefits to women, changes community perceptions, and contributes to the growth of families, communities, and wider society.