CHAPTER 6

CENTRAL BOYS SECONDARY SCHOOL

National Curriculum and Natural Science Education in Urban Kenya

Situated on the edge of the Great Rift Valley at 5,400 thousand feet above sea level, Nairobi is in many ways a place of transition and change for Kenyans. Geographically, Nairobi is in close proximity to the thorny bush-land of Kenya’s central plains and the lush agricultural land of the northern Rift Valley highlands. The area’s historical inhabitants, the Maasai tribe, referred to the lands as ewaso nyirobi, which is translated as “cool waters” due to the confluence of the Nairobi River and its northern tributaries (Gatheru, 2005). Nairobi’s unique location offers residents reliable access to abundant agricultural products grown in Western and Central Provinces and provides visitors opportunities for nearby game viewing and other ecotourism activities.

Kenyans have seen Nairobi grow from a simple town at a railroad junction to the commercial and cultural hub of East and Southeastern Africa. In and around the city, there is an impressive international presence with dozens of international governmental and nongovernmental organizations maintaining offices there, including the world headquarters for the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), among others. In addition, many European and Asian countries have official missions in Nairobi, with some using their Kenyan offices as the hub for regional and continental diplomatic activities.

Nairobi also has tremendous cultural diversity; individuals from most (if not all) of Kenya’s estimated seventy distinct ethnic groups live or work in or around Nairobi’s central business district or its sprawling suburban areas and slums. Kenyans of Indian and Middle Eastern descent have strong representations in the city’s business community, and in recent years the numbers of people from the Horn of Africa, particularly Ethiopians and Somalis, have swelled as political strife and ethnic conflict has persisted in that region. The greater Nairobi area also hosts a sizable expatriate community and the number of international residents continues to grow as the city becomes increasingly important for regional trade, diplomacy, and communications.

Yet amid the contemporary and modern feel of Nairobi is the abject poverty and desolation that characterizes many of Sub-Saharan Africa’s rapidly growing urban areas. The city and its suburban and slum areas lie within Nairobi Province, the smallest of the country’s seven administrative provinces at 696 square kilometers (432 square miles). During the past decade, it is estimated that the population of Nairobi Province jumped an alarming twenty-five percent to reach nearly four million
people. As more and more people pile into the area, shoddy housing developments and an expanse of slums have been erected to accommodate the growth. Africa’s largest slum, Kibera, is home to an estimated one million people and lies just six kilometers (3.75 miles) from Nairobi’s skyscrapers, movie theaters, and trendy restaurants. Accompanying such rampant growth has been the intensification of the HIV/AIDS pandemic in low-income areas and a dramatic increase in the amount of violent crime and drug use. These and other demographic and cultural transitions continue to spur Nairobi’s chaotic and frenzied atmosphere.

The capital is where the wealthiest and most influential Kenyans reside, are employed, and attend movies, restaurants, and nightclubs—all within close proximity to the deprivation of the surrounding slums. There are exclusive private and selected government (public) schools that cater to this segment of Kenyan society. There are also schools for members of Kenya’s middle class, and students attending such schools have parents or other caregivers who are employed in managerial or professional positions and who are able to afford the relatively expensive tuitions charged by the institutions. They live in single-family homes on the outskirts of town or in tasteful apartments in generally safe areas.

Central Boys Secondary School, safely described as a school for Kenya’s middle class, was located in a hilly area approximately eight kilometers (five miles) from Nairobi’s central business district. When the school was established in 1969, this area