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Educational Leadership and Success in National Examinations of Burundi: A Case of Kinama II and Saint Basile Schools

Etienne Katabirora*, Augustin Ndikuriyo, Innocent Ntwari, Kavira Kamundu Semerita, Josias Ndikumasabo, Desiré Mizero, Reverien Nshimirimana

Doctoral School - Hope Africa University (HAU), Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, University of Burundi, Bujumbura, Burundi

*Corresponding Author Email: etiennekata@gmail.com

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Abstract

This study examines factors associated with low achievement among ninth-grade students in the National Examinations, with particular attention to the role of educational leadership in improving teaching and learning conditions. The study was conducted at Kinama II Fundamental School, a public school, and Saint Basile Technical High School, a private school, in Ntahangwa Municipality, Bujumbura. The study population consisted of 204 individuals: 188 ninth-grade students, 12 teachers, and the school director and head of studies. Data were collected through questionnaires, interviews, and documentary analysis and were analysed using qualitative interpretation and descriptive quantitative procedures. Findings indicate that overcrowded classrooms, insufficient or inadequately qualified teachers, shortages of teaching materials, unfavourable working conditions, difficulties in individualizing instruction, and limited assessment practices are major barriers to student achievement. The study concludes that educational leadership can improve achievement through pedagogical monitoring, classroom supervision, professional development, resource mobilization, strengthened assessment, and student support. However, leadership alone cannot overcome structural constraints related to class size, infrastructure and educational resources.

Keywords: *Educational leadership, National examinations, Examination success, School leadership, Academic achievement, Teacher support, Educational management, Burundi*

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1. Introduction

Education constitutes an essential lever for social, economic, and human development. In the Burundian context, basic education reforms have sought to improve access, quality, and continuity of learning. The introduction of fundamental education in 2013 strengthened the importance of the fourth cycle, corresponding to Grades 7, 8, and 9, with Grade 9 representing a decisive stage before entry into post-basic education. The National Examinations therefore play an important role in ninth-grade students' educational trajectory, as they determine their orientation toward post-basic education.

Success in these examinations, however, cannot be reduced to students' individual abilities alone. It also depends on how teaching is organized, teacher qualifications, available resources, assessment practices, classroom management, and the role of school leaders. This article begins

by observing that national examination results remain unsatisfactory in some schools and seeks to understand the factors contributing to this situation in two schools in Bujumbura: Kinama II Fundamental School and Saint Basile Technical High School. The source document emphasizes that educational stakeholders should collectively support pedagogical initiatives, coordinated by the school principal (Gauthier, 2016).

In this perspective, educational leadership is understood not simply as administrative authority, but as the ability to create and coordinate conditions that are conducive to teaching and learning. School leaders are expected to monitor pedagogy, identify difficulties, mobilize resources, support teachers, and assist students. This conception is particularly important in contexts where structural constraints may limit the effectiveness of pedagogical practices.

The present study has both scientific and practical significance. Scientifically, it documents, from a local case study, the interaction between leadership, school conditions and achievement in a national examination. Practically, it identifies potential areas of action for school principals, teachers and educational authorities. The study does not claim to establish a statistical causal relationship between leadership and achievement; rather, it synthesizes stakeholders' perceptions and observations to identify factors that appear to influence performance and areas where leadership can intervene.

1.1. Problem Statement

The problem investigated is set in a context where African education systems face unequal learning outcomes and significant operational constraints. This article draws particularly on the findings of ADEA (2006) and the World Bank (2007) to highlight challenges related to the effectiveness of the education system. In the two schools investigated, stakeholders associate academic performance with several interrelated factors, including large class sizes, insufficient teaching materials, difficulties in individualized monitoring, unequal teacher qualifications, and limited opportunities for regular assessment.

The central research problem can therefore be formulated as follows:

To what extent can educational leadership practices reduce the pedagogical and organizational obstacles affecting ninth-grade students' success in the National Examinations?

Two research questions guided the investigation: (1) What are the causes of the low success rate of ninth-grade students in the National Examinations in the two schools studied? (2) What are the consequences of this low level of achievement and the conditions associated with it?

1.2 Objectives of the Study

The general objective was to contribute to improving the quality of teaching, learning and academic performance of ninth-grade students in the National Examinations.

The specific objectives were: (1) To identify the causes of the low success rate in the two schools. (2) To determine the main consequences associated with this situation.

The hypotheses formulated state that high student numbers, insufficient teacher qualifications and a lack of teaching materials are major causes of the low success rate. They also suggest that low academic performance may be associated with grade repetition, school dropout, examination-related fear and student stress.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

The literature review emphasizes four closely related dimensions: school enrolment, material conditions, learning assessment and teacher training. These dimensions relate to educational leadership and academic achievement. This organization makes it possible to understand achievement as the outcome of several interacting factors rather than as the consequence of a single variable.

2.1.1. Educational Leadership and School Improvement

Within this study, educational leadership refers to the actions through which school leaders identify, coordinate, and use the human, material, and cultural resources necessary for teaching and learning. This approach aligns with the idea that stakeholders should share pedagogical initiatives and the school principal should coordinate them. Leadership is therefore directly related to the quality of supervision, work organization, teacher support and the creation of an environment conducive to learning.

According to Aldridge and McLure (2023), in a school facing overcrowded classrooms, effective leadership can act on dimensions within its capacity, including group organization, student monitoring, classroom observation, encouragement of formative assessment, rational use of available materials, teacher support and mobilization of additional resources. The dissertation data indicate that the leaders interviewed proposed reinforcement sessions, classroom visits and increased assessment activities as concrete responses to the situation.

2.1.2. Overcrowded Classrooms and Learning

The literature review indicates that increasing student numbers make it difficult for teachers to know learners individually, monitor their strengths and weaknesses, encourage active participation, and conduct regular assessments. Goble (1996) and Mialaret (1977) emphasize the importance of teachers knowing learners and adapting their actions to their needs. In very large classes, individualization becomes difficult, and teachers may be forced to prioritize curriculum completion at the expense of monitoring learning.

Large classes may also affect discipline, participation and time management. This study indicates that active and participatory methods become difficult when space is insufficient and student numbers are high. Material conditions, including desks, ventilation, circulation space and access to learning resources, therefore indirectly affect teaching quality.

2.1.3. Teaching Materials and Learning Conditions

Mullens and Hoffman (2023) explain that teaching materials constitute another important determinant. Insufficient textbooks force students to share books in groups and limit each student's opportunity to use or consult learning resources. This reduces effective learning time and may widen gaps between students. Material resources are therefore not merely accessory tools; they affect the ability to implement active and participatory teaching approaches.

2.1.4. Assessment and Academic Achievement

Assessment is presented as a mechanism for verifying learning, identifying gaps and adapting instruction. De Ketele (1993) considers assessment a process of collecting relevant and reliable information in order to make decisions.

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In overcrowded classrooms, however, correcting large numbers of assignments can become burdensome and may reduce assessment frequency or lead to reliance on rapid forms of testing. Insufficient assessment consequently limits opportunities for remediation before the national examinations.

2.1.5. Teacher Training and Performance

Teacher training also appears to be essential. A sufficiently trained teacher should be able to plan learning activities, vary teaching methods, diagnose difficulties, and use assessment to regulate instruction, as Sims, Fletcher-Wood, O'Mara-Eves, Cottingham, Stansfield, Goodrich, Van Perween, & Anders (2025) note.

The study nevertheless identifies unequal qualifications among the teachers surveyed. This situation increases the responsibility of educational leadership regarding professional development, continuous training, and pedagogical supervision.

3. Methodology

The study adopted a descriptive approach with a qualitative orientation, complemented by simple quantitative analysis. It was based on a case study conducted in two schools in Ntahangwa Municipality, Bujumbura: Kinama II Fundamental School, a public institution and Saint Basile Technical High School, a private institution. Selecting these two schools enabled a comparative analysis across different institutional contexts while keeping the same educational level, namely Grade 9 of fundamental education.

3.1. Population and Sample

The study population consists of 188 ninth-grade students, twelve teachers, the school director, and the head of studies, for a total of 204 individuals. Kinama II Fundamental School had 98 ninth-grade students, including 53 girls and 45 boys, whereas Saint Basile Technical High School had 90 students, including 64 girls and 26 boys. The total number of students was therefore 188, comprising 117 girls and 71 boys.

The methodology indicates a sample of 28 participants per school, for a total of 56 participants. The results section also refers to a subsample of 20 students (10 girls and 10 boys), six teachers, the school director, and the head of studies, for a total of 28 participants.

Table 1: Distribution of Ninth-Grade Students by School and Gender

School	Girls	Boys	Total
Kinama II Fundamental School	53	45	98
Saint Basile Technical High School	64	26	90
Total	117	71	188

The 188 students in the two ninth-grade classes comprised 62.23% girls and 37.77% boys.

3.2. Data Collection Techniques and Instruments

Three data collection techniques were used: documentary analysis, questionnaires and interviews. Documentary analysis allowed the researcher to consult school reports and examine data on enrolment and school functioning. The questionnaire contained both closed-ended and open-ended questions and was administered to students, teachers and school leaders. The

researcher conducted interviews with teachers and school leaders using a previously prepared interview guide.

3.3. Data Processing and Analysis

The researcher grouped qualitative data into themes and categories, while presenting quantitative responses using frequencies and percentages. This combination allowed comparison of the perceptions of students, teachers, and school leaders. The study is therefore essentially descriptive: percentages were used to highlight observed trends without claiming to establish causal relationships or conduct inferential statistical tests.

3.4. Validity and Limitations

The study collected data after contacting school authorities and obtaining permission to access relevant resources. The main limitations reported concern the availability of school leaders, time, financial resources and transportation. Additional limitations arise from the case-study design, which involved only two schools. Consequently, the findings cannot automatically be generalized to all fundamental schools in Burundi.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. General Characteristics of the Schools

The first finding concerns class size. The two ninth-grade classes had 98 and 90 students, respectively, giving an average of 94 students per class. The students generally sit three or four to a desk, although the desks were originally designed for two students. Access to textbooks is also limited. These findings provide an initial indication of the pressure exerted on teaching and learning conditions.

4.2. Material Conditions and Student Comfort

Students' responses reveal a largely unfavourable perception of their learning conditions. Among the 20 students questioned about learning conditions, 65% reported that understanding lessons is not easy in an overcrowded classroom; 85% reported that textbooks are insufficient, and 80% reported that they do not sit comfortably. These results suggest that physical classroom conditions may hinder attention and understanding.

4.3. Teachers' and School Leaders' Perceptions

All teachers interviewed considered teaching and learning in an overcrowded classroom difficult. They also agreed that overcrowded and moderately sized classes differ significantly and that student participation decreases as class size increases.

School leaders confirmed the existence of overcrowded classrooms: all six respondents said their schools experience this problem. Identified consequences included classroom disruption, classroom management difficulties, insufficient teaching materials, difficulty identifying individual weaknesses, and reduced assessment opportunities.

4.4. Staff Qualification and Availability

The study indicates that only three of the six teachers included in the teacher-related data were considered qualified. All school leaders interviewed considered student performance insufficient and stated that the number of teachers was inadequate. Only half of the respondents considered the teachers' level of training sufficient, while all respondents reported unfavourable working conditions.

4.5. Insufficient Teaching Materials

The data consistently showed a lack of teaching materials. All six teachers interviewed stated that the available materials were insufficient. To address this shortage, all teachers reported forming small groups so that students could share and manipulate the available resources.

Among students: 85% reported that their corrected assignments were not returned quickly; 100% reported that they did not take textbooks home every day for homework; 90% reported sharing one textbook among three students and 10% reported sharing one textbook among four students. The same proportions were reported concerning the number of students sharing a desk.

4.6. Effects of Overcrowding on Teaching and Assessment

School leaders identified several direct consequences of overcrowding. All respondents reported that teachers give few quizzes and assignments and cannot adequately monitor all students. All respondents also reported teacher fatigue. Half of the school leaders mentioned demotivation and difficulties correcting assignments.

4.7. Language of Instruction and Performance Level

The school leaders interviewed unanimously reported that students' performance levels were insufficient. They also indicated that working conditions were unfavourable, particularly because of high student numbers, insufficient textbooks, and the fact that three or four students share the same desk.

4.8. Strategies Proposed by Stakeholders

Teachers proposed several measures. Reducing class size and increasing the number of textbooks each student received 100% of responses. Other proposals included building additional infrastructure; recruiting sufficient, qualified staff; training teachers when curricula change; providing teacher refresher training; improving teacher motivation; developing school libraries; and extending lesson time.

School leaders, for their part, identified actions directly related to leadership. Organizing reinforcement sessions, monitoring students, conducting classroom visits, and asking teachers to increase assessment activities were each mentioned by 100% of the relevant respondents. Other proposed actions included preserving teaching materials and infrastructure, encouraging reading, and organizing public-speaking competitions.

4.9. Discussion

The findings indicate that low achievement in the National Examinations is embedded in a system of mutually reinforcing constraints. The first mechanism concerns class size. When nearly one hundred students are placed in a single classroom, teachers have less time to observe individual learners, correct mistakes individually, and organize participatory activities. This finding is consistent with analyses by Goble (1996) and Mialaret (1977), which argue that understanding learners' individual needs is an important condition for effective educational action.

The second mechanism concerns resources. Sharing textbooks among three or four students, or more according to observations in the dissertation, reduces opportunities for individual work and limits continuity of learning at home. Available resources therefore influence pedagogical practices. In a system based on active student participation, shortages of learning materials may lead teachers to adopt more theoretical and less interactive practices.

The third mechanism concerns assessment. The respondents report that overcrowded classrooms lead to fewer quizzes and assignments and make correction more difficult. Effective preparation for the National Examinations requires regular monitoring that can identify learning gaps and organize remediation. Educational leadership is particularly important here. Even when a school principal cannot immediately increase available resources, the principal can organize a monitoring schedule, encourage common assessments, promote collaborative marking, and support teachers in remediation.

The fourth mechanism relates to teachers' professional capacity. The findings indicate unequal qualifications. In this context, continuous professional development, mentoring, and classroom observation can constitute important leadership strategies. Pedagogical support enables the school principal to become a learning leader rather than merely an administrative manager.

The fifth mechanism concerns working conditions and the school climate. Students report significant physical discomfort, while school leaders mention teacher fatigue and demotivation. Material conditions therefore cannot be separated from the pedagogical climate. An overcrowded classroom may make discipline, participation, and communication more difficult. Dottrens (1964) and other works cited in the dissertation have already emphasized the relationship between comfort, attention, and participation.

The findings therefore support the general hypothesis that high student numbers, insufficient teacher qualifications, and inadequate teaching materials constitute major obstacles to achievement. They also align with the hypothesis on consequences, including reduced assessment, difficulties in monitoring students, grade repetition, and dropout, mentioned in the dissertation's synthesis.

However, the study does not statistically show that leadership alone directly causes success or failure. Instead, educational leadership appears to be an organizational variable that can moderate the effects of structural constraints.

This distinction is important. A school principal can organize classroom visits, motivate teachers, monitor students, and mobilize available resources, but cannot independently eliminate a national shortage of textbooks or reduce a class of 98 students to 40. Educational leadership must therefore be connected to public policies, financing, teacher recruitment, and infrastructure development.

Finally, the strategies proposed by stakeholders are consistent with the findings. Reducing class size directly addresses overcrowding; increasing textbooks addresses resource shortages; continuous training addresses professional gaps; classroom visits and reinforcement sessions represent pedagogical leadership; and increasing assessments addresses difficulties in monitoring learning. Academic achievement therefore appears to result from coordinated action at several levels.

5. Conclusion

This study examined factors associated with the low achievement of ninth-grade students in the National Examinations in two schools in Bujumbura, while highlighting the potential contribution of educational leadership.

The findings show that the difficulties are multidimensional. They mainly concern overcrowded classrooms, insufficient teaching materials, unfavourable working conditions, unequal teacher qualifications, difficulties in individualizing instruction and reduced assessment practices.

Findings from students, teachers, and school leaders converge on several points. Classes are too large; textbooks are insufficient; students share desks and learning resources; individual monitoring is difficult; teachers experience fatigue; and assessment is less frequent or harder to mark. These factors create an unfavourable environment for preparing students for a demanding national examination.

Educational leadership appears to be an important lever, particularly in areas where schools have direct capacity for action, including student monitoring, classroom visits, organization of reinforcement sessions, teacher support, improvement of assessment and mobilization of available resources.

However, leadership effectiveness depends on policies and resources operating at higher levels. Therefore, it would be inappropriate to consider leadership an isolated solution to the problems affecting academic achievement.

Ultimately, improving National Examinations performance requires a systemic approach that combines pedagogical leadership, teacher professionalization, reduced class sizes, availability of textbooks, improved infrastructure, and strengthened formative assessment.

6. Recommendations

Based on the study's findings, the following recommendations are proposed for theory, practice, and policy.

6.1. Recommendations for Educational Theory

Educational leadership theories should give greater attention to the interaction between school leadership and structural conditions such as class size, teaching materials, teacher availability and infrastructure.

Leadership should be conceptualized not only as administrative management but also as pedagogical coordination, teacher support, student monitoring and resource mobilization.

Future theoretical models should recognize that leadership effectiveness may depend on the institutional and material environment in which school leaders operate.

6.2. Recommendations for School Practice

School principals should strengthen daily pedagogical leadership through regular classroom visits, pedagogical meetings, monitoring of learning outcomes and early identification of students experiencing difficulties.

Schools should establish systematic remediation programs: organize reinforcement sessions based on assessment results, with particular attention to students experiencing recurrent difficulties.

Schools should promote a culture of formative assessment: Increasing assessment should not simply mean administering more tests; it should involve rapid correction, analysis of errors and useful feedback to students.

School leaders should strengthen continuous professional development: curriculum changes should be accompanied by training sessions, experience-sharing activities, classroom observation and follow-up.

Teachers should be encouraged to use collaborative strategies to manage large classes and make better use of limited teaching resources.

Schools should encourage reading and independent learning through improved libraries, textbook access and extracurricular academic activities.

6.3. Recommendations for Educational Policy

The Ministry of Education and educational authorities should reduce overcrowding by constructing additional classrooms and expanding school infrastructure.

The Ministry should recruit more teachers, with particular attention to qualified teachers in schools experiencing significant staffing shortages.

Teaching materials and textbooks should be supplied adequately to ensure that students have reasonable individual access to learning resources.

Continuous teacher training should be institutionalized, particularly when curricula and teaching programs are changed.

Educational authorities should improve the working conditions of teachers, since teacher fatigue and unfavourable working conditions may affect instructional quality.

Leadership development programs should be strengthened so that school principals acquire the competencies required for instructional supervision, teacher support, assessment monitoring and resource mobilization.

Educational policies should recognize that school leadership cannot compensate for structural deficiencies alone. Sustainable improvement requires coordinated investment in leadership, teachers, infrastructure, learning materials and assessment systems.

7. Limitations and Perspectives for Future Research

The main limitation of this study lies in its local and descriptive nature. Only two schools were studied and the data relied largely on stakeholders' reports. In addition, some sections describe the sample differently. These factors require caution when generalizing the findings.

Future studies could compare a larger number of public and private schools, incorporate actual National Examinations results over several years and use quantitative models to examine relationships among educational leadership, school resources, pedagogical practices and student performance. Longitudinal studies would also help determine whether leadership interventions produce sustainable improvements in student achievement.

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