



FROM PERFORMANCE TO WELL-BEING: REFRAMING SCHOOL LEADERSHIP TO MITIGATE EDUCATIONAL STRESS IN UGANDA

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ABSTRACT

Educational stress has emerged as a global pivotal fear affecting students academic performance and psychosocial wellbeing, particularly in performance driven systems like Uganda. This paper examines how leadership can be reframed to mitigate educational stress and promote student wellbeing within the environment of performance oriented education system in Uganda. Depicting on documentary analysis of recent studies, policy reports, and empirical research between 2020 and 2025, the article scrutinizes the sources, impacts, and mitigation of educational stress as well as the role of school leadership in promoting students wellbeing. Findings indicated performance pressure, high stakes examinations, socioeconomic challenges, and institutional practices contribute significantly to student stress. Available evidence exhibited that stress negatively impacts students mental health, engagement, and social relationships as most school leadership remained focused on performance outcomes other than student wellbeing. The paper revealed urgent need for a paradigm shift from performance oriented leadership to holistic leadership that integrates psychosocial support, inclusive policies, and student centred leadership practices. It recommends strengthening leadership capacity, entrenching wellbeing structures in school leadership, and promoting supportive learning environments. The study concluded by drawing attention on the core values of school leadership in balancing academic excellence with student wellbeing in Uganda.

Keywords: School Leadership, Student Wellbeing, Educational Stress, Uganda, Performance.

INTRODUCTION

Internationally, educational systems are gaining recognition that academic success alone is insufficient without attention to students' mental, emotional and social wellbeing. However, in many countries schooling remains heavily performance oriented with strong emphasis placed on examinations, grade and measurable outcomes. This trend is particularly evident in Uganda, where the education system is largely driven by high stakes national examinations such as the Primary Leaving

Examination (PLE), Uganda Certificate of Education (UCE), and Uganda Advanced Certificate of Education (UACE). While these assessments play a critical role in determining students' academic progression such as promotion to the next level, admission into colleges or universities, award of scholarships, certification or graduation among others, they also contribute to heightened levels of educational stress among learners (Esaku and Mugoda, 2025). Educational stress, characterized by anxiety, pressure, and emotional strain arising from academic demands, has become a growing concern in Ugandan schools. Students are often required to cope with heavy workloads, frequent testing, and high expectations from teachers, parents, and society. Evidence indicates that such pressures can negatively affect students' mental health, academic engagement, and overall wellbeing, leading to issues such as anxiety, burnout, and behavioural challenges (Ampaire, et al., 2025). These kinds of stress have been linked to negative outcomes including anxiety, low self-esteem, disengagement, and poor academic performance. Although school leaders play a critical role in shaping institutional culture, policies, and practices that influence student wellbeing, less attention has been paid to it. Therefore, there is a need to reframe school leadership to prioritize not only academic outcomes but also holistic development of students entrusted in their hands.

Statement of the Problem

Educational stress is an increasing global concern, particularly in examination driven education systems where academic performance is highly prioritized. The pressure associated with high stakes national examinations such as the Primary Leaving Examination (PLE) and Uganda Certificate of Education (UCE) has intensified stress among students in Uganda. Evidence indicates that a significant proportion of adolescents' experience psychological distress linked to academic performance demands, hence rising levels of anxiety and depression among learners (Ssenyonga et al., 2023; UNICEF, 2021). Additionally, school leadership in Uganda remains focused on academic performance outcomes and accountability, with

limited integration of student wellbeing into leadership practices (Caroline, 2026). This has created gaps in addressing students' wellbeing, leading to disengagement, behavioural problems, and poor learning outcomes. Therefore, this study seeks to explore how leadership can be transformed to mitigate educational stress and promote student wellbeing in Uganda.

Purpose of the Study

This study aims to examine how school leadership can be reframed to mitigate educational stress and promote student wellbeing in a performance oriented education system of Uganda.

Specific Objectives

1. To examine the sources of educational stress among students in Uganda.
2. To find out the impact of educational stress on students' wellbeing and learning outcomes.
3. To determine the role of school leadership in promoting wellbeing and mitigating student' educational stress.

Need and Significance of the Study

The increasing rate of educational stress among students in Uganda necessitates quick response for intervention at the institutional level. Mitigation of educational stress affecting students' mental health, psychosocial wellbeing, reduced participation in school activities and strained relationships. Overcoming structural challenges, like large class sizes, limited resources, performance oriented, and teacher workload issues which have limit the capacity of schools to provide adequate support constitute the needs for this study.

Significant of the Study

1. Bridges the gap between student wellbeing and school leadership.
2. Provides insights for policy formulation and school leadership practices.
3. Contributes to academic performance research on leadership and student mental health.
4. Supports the development of holistic education systems in Uganda.

Definitions of Keywords

Educational Stress: refers to the pressure and mental strain students experience due to performance, expectations, examinations, and school demands.

School Leadership: refers to the process by which headteachers and school leaders guide, manage, and influence teaching, learning, and the overall school environment.

Student Wellbeing: refers to the overall mental, emotional, social, and physical health of students that enables them to learn and function positively in school.

Uganda: refers to one of the East African countries which lies between; Latitudes: 4°12' North and 1°29' South and Longitudes: 29°34' East and 35° 0' East where the education system is largely performance driven by high stakes national examinations.

Performance: refers to level of students' achievement as measured by examinations, grades, test scores, and school results.

Literature Review: Educational Stress and Its Determinants

Educational stress refers to the psychological strain experienced by students as a result of academic demands, performance expectations, and institutional pressures. Such competitive and performance oriented nature of Uganda's education system intensifies pressure on learners to achieve high academic outcomes, often leading to heightened anxiety and emotional distress, thus obstacles to students wellbeing. In Uganda, educational stress is largely driven by multiple interrelated factors, including high stakes national examinations, heavy academic workload, limited learning resources, and socio economic challenges. Students are often required to cope with frequent assessments and demanding curricula, parental expectations, and societal emphasis on academic success compound this pressure, creating a fear of failure among learners. Empirical studies indicate that students frequently experience anxiety related to performance expectations, fear of poor grades, and uncertainty

about future educational opportunities. According to Ssenyonga et al., (2023) performance related stress is prevalent among secondary school students in Uganda and is closely associated with depressive symptoms and reduced academic engagement. Similarly, Musiimenta et al., (2021) found that socio economic constraints, including financial hardship and lack of scholastic materials, significantly contribute to stress levels among learners. Furthermore, global evidence supports these findings, highlighting that educational stress is often worsened by rigid educational systems and limited psychosocial support structures. A report by UNESCO (2022) emphasizes that education systems overly focused on testing and performance tend to neglect students' emotional needs, thereby increasing vulnerability to stress and anxiety.

Overall, educational stress in Uganda is a complicated issue shaped by structural, institutional, and individual factors which requires a holistic approach, psychosocial interventions and responsive school leadership.

Impact of Educational Stress on Students

Research consistently shows that educational stress has far-reaching effects on students' mental health, behaviour, and academic outcomes. Prolonged exposure to academic pressure contributes to anxiety, depression, and emotional exhaustion, which in turn reduce students' concentration, motivation, and overall engagement in learning activities (UNESCO, 2022; World Bank, 2020). In the Ugandan context, heightened examination pressure has been linked to increased psychological distress among learners (Ssenyonga et al., 2023). Students display maladaptive coping mechanisms such as social withdrawal, aggression, or disengagement from school activities (Musiimenta et al., 2021). Furthermore, stress negatively affects students' social relationships, leading to peer conflicts, isolation, and diminished self-esteem, which ultimately limit their active participation in school life and holistic development (OECD, 2021; UNICEF, 2021).

School Leadership and Student Wellbeing

School leadership plays a critical role in shaping the learning environment and influencing students' performance and psychosocial outcomes. Effective leadership involves creating supportive school climates, fostering positive teacher student relationships, and implementing inclusive policies that prioritize student wellbeing alongside academic achievement (UNESCO, 2022; OECD, 2021). Research indicates that school leaders who adopt transformational and instructional leadership practices are more likely to promote safe, engaging, and emotionally supportive learning environments (World Bank, 2020). Such environments contribute to reduced stress levels, improved students' engagement, and better academic outcomes. Moreover, leadership that emphasizes collaboration, communication, and student-centred approaches enhances learners' sense of belonging and self-worth, which are critical for mental health and resilience (UNICEF, 2021). However, in many Ugandan schools, leadership practices remain predominantly focused on performance, accountability measures, and examination results which hinders students' emotional and psychosocial needs.

Consequently, there is an urgent need to reorient school leadership towards a more holistic model that integrates student wellbeing into core administrative practices and decision making processes.

School Leadership and Educational Stress Mitigation

School Leadership involves the systematic planning, organization, and management of school resources to achieve institutional goals and improve student outcomes (World Bank, 2020; UNESCO, 2022). This mean leadership practices must promote development of clear policies that prioritize addressing students' psychosocial wellbeing, including stress mitigation.

Furthermore, effective leadership entails continuous training of teachers in school based counselling services, emotional intelligence, and classroom based stress management which are essential in supporting students experiencing

performance and personal challenges (OECD, 2021). Additionally, promoting student centred learning approaches helps reduce performance pressure by encouraging participation, flexibility, and individualized support. Such holistic administrative practices enhance both student wellbeing and academic performance success (UNESCO, 2022).

Theoretical Perspective

This study is informed by transformational leadership theory, originally advanced by James MacGregor Burns (1978) and further developed by Bernard M. Bass (1985). The theory emphasizes the role of leaders in inspiring, motivating, and supporting individuals to achieve their full potential by fostering commitment, trust, and shared vision. In the school leadership the theory can be useful in explaining how school leaders and teachers influence student achievement beyond academic outcomes. Thus, leaders who implement transformational practices create positive school climates, encourage collaboration, and respond to students' emotional and psychological needs (UNESCO, 2022; OECD, 2021). Such leadership fosters holistic development by balancing performance goals with students' social and emotional wellbeing. The theory therefore provides a useful lens for understanding how leadership practices can be redesigned to promote student wellbeing, reduce stress, and enhance overall learning outcomes in Ugandan performance oriented schools.

METHODS AND PROCEDURES

Research Design: The study utilized a qualitative documentary analysis design because it allows for a systematic examination and interpretation of existing documents to generate meaningful insights into a research problem (Braun & Clarke, 2021), through focusing on existing literature, policy documents, and research studies published between 2020 and 2025. This ensures that the analysis is grounded in recent and relevant evidence on educational stress and school leadership. This approach enables the researcher to identify trends, gaps, and best practices across multiple sources, thereby enhancing the depth and credibility of findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Data Sources

Data were obtained from:

Peer reviewed journal articles

These provide empirical and theoretical evidence on educational stress and leadership, for example, Ssenyonga et al. (2023); Musiimenta et al. (2021) and Esaku S. & Mugoda S. (2025).

Government reports and policy documents

These provide national level policy direction and contextual realities such as Government of Uganda (2026) which highlighted achievements and challenges in Uganda's education system; Ministry of Education and Sports Uganda: National policies on curriculum and student welfare, National Curriculum Development Centre Uganda: Guidance on curriculum implementation and learner support

International organization publications

These provide global frameworks and comparative insights from: UNESCO (2022); World Bank (2020); UNICEF (2021) and OECD (2021) which focus more on global issues affecting student wellbeing and school environments.

Data Analysis: Thematic analysis was employed to identify, code, and interpret patterns within documentary data, enabling meaningful categorization of issues related to educational stress and school leadership. This approach enhances analytical rigor and flexibility in qualitative research (Virginia Braun & Victoria Clarke, 2021; John W. Creswell & Cheryl N. Poth, 2018).

Trustworthiness: Credibility was ensured through triangulation of sources, while dependability was achieved through systematic analysis procedures.

Discussion of the Study: Sources of Educational Stress

The documentary analysis revealed that major sources of educational stress include:

- Examination pressure,
- Academic workload and drills,
- Socio economic challenges,.
- Institutional expectations,

These findings concur with Ssenyonga et al.,

(2023) who affirmed that examination pressure remains a dominant stressor in Uganda's education system, where high stakes assessments significantly influence learners' academic progression. In addition to that, UNESCO, (2022) also put forward that heavy academic workload and continuous assessments have been linked to increased anxiety and emotional strain among students. Again, Musiimenta, et al., (2021) advanced that socioeconomic challenges such as poverty and limited access to learning resources, further heighten stress levels, as students struggle to meet performance demands under constrained conditions. Similarly, Caroline, (2026) also reported clearly that institutional expectations, particularly the emphasis on high performance and accountability, contribute to a culture of pressure within schools.

Effects of Stress on Student Well-being

The documentary analysis discovered that educational stress negatively affects students:

- Mental health leading to anxiety, depression and emotional distress,
- Academic engagement leading to reduced motivation, poor concentration, indiscipline and disengagement from learning activities,
- Social relationships leading to peer conflicts, isolation, and reduced self-esteem.

In support, Ssenyonga et al., (2023) and UNICEF, (2021) observed that educational stress significantly affects students' mental health, contributing to anxiety, depression, and emotional distress. These psychological challenges often interfere with students' ability to concentrate and perform effectively in school. In terms of academic engagement, UNESCO, (2022) and OECD, (2021) asserted that high stress levels among students have been linked to reduced motivation, poor concentration, and disengagement from learning activities. Hence, students experiencing stress are more likely to lose interest in schoolwork and exhibit declining academic performance. In the same vain, Musiimenta et al., (2021) discovered that stress negatively impacts on students' social relationships, leading to peer conflicts, isolation, and reduced

self-esteem. Implying that, students under high stress may withdraw socially or display behavioural challenges, like aggression or indiscipline, which further disrupt their learning and development of learners in Ugandan schools.

Role of School Leadership: The documentary analysis revealed that: -

- School leadership influences how stress is managed within institutions in Uganda;
- Current practices in Uganda emphasize academic performance over student wellbeing;
- There is a gap in addressing psychosocial challenges in Uganda's educational settings.

In supports, UNESCO (2022) advocates leadership's role in fostering supportive learning environments, while OECD (2021) links leadership practices to student outcomes beyond performance. Additionally, Caroline, (2026) highlights performance driven priorities in Ugandan schools. These findings reflected that in Uganda, leadership has not fully evolved to integrate student wellbeing, underscoring the need for more holistic, responsive educational administration in addressing emerging psychosocial challenges.

Need for Leadership Reframing

The documentary analysis highlighted the needs in two folds, notably;

- To shift from performance oriented leadership to embrace holistic leadership,
- To shift from authoritative leadership to supportive leadership.

This is also similar to the findings by UNESCO (2022) which advocates for learner centred systems that integrate wellbeing, while OECD (2021) emphasizes supportive school climates. Additionally, UNICEF (2021) underscores the importance of nurturing environments. These findings justify reframing leadership to promote balanced, inclusive, and student focused educational practices. All in all, educational leaders must prioritize student wellbeing alongside performance achievement.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study recommends that policy makers, school leaders, and teachers among others should;

- Integrate student wellbeing into school policies and leadership frameworks.
- Provide training for school leaders on stress mitigation and emotional intelligence.
- Establish counselling and psychosocial support services in schools.
- Reduce excessive performance workload and promote balanced learning.
- Encourage participatory and student centred leadership approaches.

Implications

- **Policy:** Need for national policies that integrate mental health into education systems
- **Practice:** School leaders must adopt inclusive and supportive management practices
- **Research:** Further empirical studies are needed on leadership and student wellbeing outcomes

CONCLUSION

Educational stress is a critical challenge in Uganda's performance driven education system. While performance achievement remains important, it should not come at the expense of student wellbeing. This article also observes that effective school leadership plays a central role in mitigating educational stress among students. Reframing school leadership to prioritize holistic development is essential for students wellbeing and creating supportive learning environments. Therefore, through integrating wellbeing into school leadership, Uganda can achieve a more conducive, balanced and effective education system.

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