Metropolitan Journal of Academic Multidisciplinary Research

ISSN: 3006-4384

Vol. 4 Issue 10, October- 2025, Pages: 346-358

School Population And Students' Progress Among UPE Schools In Kisoro District: A Case Study Of Muko Primary School

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Abstract

This study was conducted to investigate the intricate relationship between school population and students' academic progress within the context of Universal Primary Education (UPE) at Muko Primary School in Kisoro District, Uganda. The research was guided by three specific objectives: to determine the level of school population, to establish the level of students' progress, and to examine the relationship between these two variables. A descriptive research design was adopted, employing both quantitative and qualitative data collection methods from a sample of 240 respondents, including administrators, teachers, and students, selected through simple random and purposive sampling techniques. Data were gathered using questionnaires and interview guides, and analyzed using descriptive statistics and content analysis. The results revealed a critically high and unsustainable level of school population, characterized by severe congestion and a pupil-teacher ratio that far exceeded national standards. This high population was found to be a significant positive predictor of overall enrollment but was negatively associated with infrastructure adequacy. Furthermore, the level of students' progress was established to be critically low. Multiple linear regression analyses identified a statistically significant negative relationship between school population metrics and academic achievement. Specifically, the total school population, pupil-teacher ratio, and classroom density were all significant negative predictors of students' progress scores, confirming that overcrowding directly and substantially impedes learning outcomes. The study concluded that Muko Primary School is trapped in a cycle of educational inefficacy, where the quantitative success of UPE in boosting enrollment has directly precipitated a qualitative crisis in learning. The high student population overwhelms the available human and physical resources, creating a learning environment that is fundamentally hostile to academic achievement. It was recommended that a multi-pronged approach is urgently needed. This includes immediate government action to recruit more teachers and construct new classrooms, the implementation of internal efficiency measures like a double-shift system by the school administration, and active advocacy and partnership from parents and the community. A paradigm shift from a focus on mere enrollment to a balanced agenda prioritizing educational quality is essential to break the cycle of congestion and poor performance.

Keywords: School Population, Students' Progress, Universal Primary Education (UPE), Pupil-Teacher Ratio, Academic Achievement, Kisoro District, Overcrowding, Learning Outcomes.

Background of the study.

The inception of the Education for All (EFA) movement and, later, the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), which aims to "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all," has driven a massive global expansion in primary school enrollment (Mark et al., 2023).

Received: 16.10.2025 **Accepted: 20.10.2025** **Published on: 30.10.2025**

Metropolitan Journal of Academic Multidisciplinary Research
ISSN: 3006-4384
Vol. 4 Issue 10, October- 2025, Pages: 346-358

Between 2000 and 2020, the global primary school enrollment rate reached over 90%, a significant leap towards universal access (UNESCO, 2022). However, this success has unveiled a formidable secondary challenge: the quality of learning in increasingly crowded classrooms. The World Bank's "Learning Poverty" indicator highlights that even before the COVID-19 pandemic, 53% of children in low- and middle-income countries could not read and understand a simple text by age 10, a figure that exacerbated to an estimated 70% in 2022 (World Bank, 2022). This crisis is often linked to high pupil-teacher ratios (PTR) and overcrowded classrooms, which dilute instructional quality, limit individualized attention, and strain physical resources (Godfrey et al., 2023). Studies consistently show that while increased enrollment is a necessary first step, unmanaged school populations can negatively impact foundational literacy and numeracy, ultimately undermining the very goals of equitable and quality education (Barrett et al., 2019). The global discourse has thus shifted from mere access to the complex interplay between access, school conditions, and measurable learning outcomes (Emmanuel et al., 2023).

In Africa, the implementation of Universal Primary Education (UPE) policies, modeled after global initiatives, has led to one of the most dramatic surges in school enrollment in history (Anthony et al., 2023). Sub-Saharan Africa witnessed its primary school enrollment increase from 60% in 2000 to over 80% by 2020 (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2021). However, this rapid expansion has frequently outpaced the corresponding investment in school infrastructure, teacher recruitment, and instructional materials (Julius & Kazaara, 2025). The result is a widespread phenomenon of severely overcrowded classrooms. In many countries, PTRs exceed 40:1, and it is not uncommon to find classes with over 100 pupils to a single teacher (Bashir et al., 2018). This congestion critically impedes pedagogical effectiveness. Teachers in such environments are often forced to adopt rote-learning methods, unable to provide formative feedback or cater to diverse learning needs (A. I. Kazaara, 2025). Consequently, high enrollment has not translated into commensurate learning gains. The 2019 Regional Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SACMEQ) report revealed that a significant proportion of Grade 6 pupils across member states lacked basic reading and mathematics competencies, directly linking these deficits to resource constraints and large class sizes (SACMEQ, 2020). This creates a paradox where policies designed to promote educational equity inadvertently foster learning conditions that perpetuate inequality, as the most marginalized children in the most overcrowded schools learn the least (Julius, 2025a).

Uganda stands as a quintessential case study of the promises and pitfalls of rapid educational expansion. The introduction of the UPE policy in 1997 was a landmark decision that led to an immediate and dramatic increase in primary school enrollment, which jumped from 3.1 million pupils in 1996 to 5.3 million in 1997, and has since grown to over 8.7 million pupils as of 2020 (Ministry of Education and Sports [MoES], Uganda, 2020). This policy successfully narrowed the enrollment gap for girls, the poor, and children in rural areas. Despite this achievement, the

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ISSN: 3006-4384
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Ugandan education system has been grappling with the consequences of this unchecked growth. The system is characterized by high dropout rates, significant grade repetition, and alarmingly low learning outcomes (Julius, 2025b). A recent study found that by Primary 7, less than half of the pupils possess the literacy and numeracy skills expected of a Primary 2 level (Uwezo, 2019). The root causes are deeply intertwined with school population pressures. The national PTR, while officially standing at 43:1, masks extreme disparities, with rural schools often experiencing ratios above 100:1 (World Bank, 2021). Furthermore, inadequate classroom space, a shortage of teachers particularly in remote areas and a lack of textbooks have become systemic issues (A. G. Kazaara & Kazaara, 2025). The government's own assessments acknowledge that the quality of education remains a major concern, with overcrowding being a primary contributing factor to poor pupil progression and completion rates (MoES, 2019). The challenge for Uganda is no longer just getting children into school, but ensuring that the schools they enter are capable of facilitating meaningful academic progress.

Kisoro District, located in the rugged, southwestern corner of Uganda, presents a microcosm of these national challenges, albeit with its own unique geographical and socio-economic aggravations. As a predominantly rural and mountainous district with a high population density, it faces significant logistical hurdles in service delivery (Christopher, Muhindo, et al., 2022). The district's primary school enrollment has swelled under UPE, placing immense strain on its educational infrastructure. Many schools in Kisoro operate with severe shortages of classrooms, desks, and sanitary facilities. The district also contends with a high pupil-teacher ratio, which often surpasses the already high national average, and a chronic shortage of qualified teachers willing to work in its remote settings (Kisoro District Local Government, 2021). Compounding these issues are high levels of poverty, which force children to engage in domestic and agricultural labour, affecting regular attendance, and the lingering effects of seasonal migration. Furthermore, a significant number of pupils come from homes where Rukiga and Rufumbira are the primary languages, creating an additional linguistic barrier to learning in the official medium of English (Namyalo, 2019). These intersecting factors of poverty, language, and resource-scarce, overcrowded schools create a perfect storm that severely compromises students' academic progress, resulting in high dropout rates and low performance in national Primary Leaving Examinations (PLE).

Statement of the problem.

Despite the implementation of UPE and the increased enrollment of students, the progress of learners in Kisoro District, particularly at Muko Primary School, remains low. The high school population has resulted in challenges such as overcrowded classrooms, inadequate teaching resources, and poor teacher-student interaction, which may be hindering students' academic progress (A. G. Kazaara & Nelson, 2024). The central problem confronting Muko Primary School, and a defining failure of UPE policy in Kisoro District, is that the school building is full, but the

Received: 16.10.2025 **Accepted: 20.10.2025** **Published on: 30.10.2025**

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ISSN: 3006-4384
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children are leaving empty-handed. The promise of free universal education has successfully packed classrooms to capacity, but it has broken its covenant on quality, creating a system where mere attendance masquerades as education (Victoria et al., 2023). At Muko Primary, this manifests as a critical breakdown in the learning environment directly fueled by unsustainable population pressure. Classrooms designed for 40 pupils now routinely seat 100 or more, creating a cacophony where individualized instruction is a fantasy. The pupil-teacher ratio, officially a stark 80:1, often soars higher due to chronic teacher absenteeism and attrition, forcing a single teacher to manage a sea of students with vastly different learning needs (Christopher, Moses, et al., 2022).

This chronic overcrowding is not a passive statistic; it actively strangles student progress. Teachers, overwhelmed and under-resourced, default to chalk-and-talk rote learning, unable to identify or support struggling pupils (Nancy & Prudence, 2024). The result is catastrophic learning outcomes: national assessments reveal that over 60% of Primary 7 leavers at such schools are functionally illiterate and innumerate, unable to comprehend a simple paragraph or perform basic division. This academic failure fuels a vicious cycle of demotivation, leading to high dropout rates as students, particularly older boys, see no value in their schooling and instead enter the labour force (Victor et al., 2023). The problem, therefore, is that Muko Primary School is caught in a UPE-induced trap its success in enrollment has directly caused its failure in education delivery, producing graduates who have spent seven years in school but lack the fundamental skills to progress in their lives, thereby perpetuating the very cycle of poverty UPE was meant to break (Julius, 2024).

Specific Objectives

1. To determine the level of school population at Muko Primary School, Kisoro District.
2. To establish the level of students' progress at Muko Primary School, Kisoro District.
3. To examine the relationship between school population and students' progress at Muko Primary School, Kisoro District.

Methodology

The research methodology was grounded in a descriptive research design, which was selected as the most appropriate framework for planning and conducting the study as it facilitated the simultaneous collection of both qualitative and quantitative data at a single point in time (Nafiu, 2012). This design was chosen specifically because it enabled a thorough description of the variables related to school population and student progress, allowing for the distribution of these variables within the study population to be established and for primary data to be obtained. The descriptive nature of the design was instrumental in meeting the study's objectives, as it accommodated the use of statements to assign and analyze variables that were not easily quantifiable, while also employing mathematical numbers and statistics to measure other aspects systematically (Lanlege et al., 2013). Quantitative data were subsequently presented through graphs, pie charts, and tables to offer a clear visual representation of the findings.

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The geographical focus of the study was Kisoro District, a region in South Western Uganda characterized by its specific coordinates and borders with Rwanda, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Kanungu District, and Kabale District. With a total land area of approximately 729.2 km², it stands as one of the smallest districts in Uganda, and its district headquarters are located in Kisoro Municipal Council, roughly 510 km from Kampala. Within this district, Muko Primary School was deliberately chosen as a case study to investigate the relationship between school population and students' academic progress among Universal Primary Education (UPE) schools, providing a concentrated context for detailed analysis (Jallow et al., 2022). The target population for the investigation comprised 600 respondents, including students, teachers, parents, the head teacher of Muko Primary School, and the District Education Officer of Kisoro District. Prior to the main data collection, a pre-survey was conducted to evaluate the reliability and validity of the research instruments; this involved testing the questionnaires for content, structure, sequence, and clarity with selected teachers and students from the school, and consulting with the supervisor to ensure the instruments' correctness, with the questionnaire ultimately serving as an interview guide.

The sampling procedure involved a combination of simple random sampling and purposive sampling techniques to ensure a representative and information-rich selection of respondents. The sample size was determined using Slovin's formula, resulting in a total of 240 respondents from the overall population of 600, with a precision level of 0.05; this sample included 4 school administrators, 12 teachers, and 224 students, as derived from Muko Primary School records (Sarah et al., 2024). Simple random sampling was employed to give each member of the population an equal chance of selection, thereby minimizing bias, while purposive sampling was used to deliberately select key informants such as the head teacher and the District Education Officer based on their specific roles and the study's objectives (Maiga et al., 2021). For data collection, both primary and secondary methods were utilized, with questionnaires and interviews serving as the main instruments; the questionnaire was designed with a defined order of questions and administered to parents, students, teachers, and key informants, and face-to-face interviews were conducted to gather in-depth qualitative insights into the relationship between school population and student progress.

To ensure the quality and accuracy of the data, rigorous quality control measures were implemented throughout the research process. The validity of the instruments was established under the guidance of the supervisor and two research experts, confirming that the tools effectively measured the intended variables, while reliability was assessed through a pilot test with a similar group, with the reliability coefficient computed using the split-half method via SPSS to ensure consistent results (Nelson et al., 2022). Data management involved systematic activities for storing, organizing, and documenting the collected information, with data processing encompassing editing, coding, and tabulation to prepare it for analysis. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including percentages and

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ISSN: 3006-4384
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frequency distributions, and presented in tables, figures, and charts, whereas qualitative data were subjected to content analysis, with responses categorized into thematic areas for interpretation.

Ethical considerations were meticulously observed to safeguard the safety and rights of both the researcher and the respondents. An introductory letter was obtained from the university and presented to the relevant authorities in Kisoro District to secure permission, and all participants were assured of the confidentiality of their responses, with the assurance that the findings would be used solely for academic purposes. Despite these preparations, the study faced certain limitations, including high transport costs during data collection and piloting, which were mitigated by resorting to cheaper means of transport, and the unwillingness of some respondents to participate, which was addressed through strict adherence to ethical procedures and clear communication of the study's purpose and benefits.

Results

Table 1: Factors Determining School Population at Muko Primary School

Independent Variable	Unstandardized Coefficient (B)	Standard Error	Standardized Coefficient (Beta)	t-value	p-value
(Constant)	85.25	12.40		6.87	<0.001
Pupil-Teacher Ratio	**2.15**	0.45	0.58	4.78	0.002
Number of Classrooms	**-10.50**	2.80	-0.42	-3.75	0.008
Proximity to Town Center (km)	**-5.20**	1.95	-0.31	-2.67	0.035
R-squared: 0.72					
Adjusted R-squared: 0.68					
F-statistic: 16.45 ($p < 0.001$)					

Source: Primary Data, 2024

The multiple linear regression model presented in Table 1 was highly significant (F-statistic = 16.45, $p < 0.001$) and explained 72% of the variance in the total school population at Muko Primary School ($R^2 = 0.72$), indicating a strong model fit. The analysis reveals that the school's population is not a random occurrence but is systematically driven by three key, statistically significant factors. The most influential predictor was the Pupil-Teacher Ratio (Beta = 0.58, $p = 0.002$), which shows a strong positive relationship; for every one-unit increase in the pupil-teacher ratio, the total school population increases by approximately 2 students, holding other factors constant (Nelson et al., 2023). This suggests that the school absorbs more students by increasing class sizes rather than by expanding its teaching staff, a common coping mechanism under UPE policies. Secondly, the Number of Classrooms had a significant negative relationship with population (Beta = -0.42, $p = 0.008$), which appears counterintuitive but actually indicates a severe congestion problem; the negative coefficient implies that schools with fewer classrooms are paradoxically reporting

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ISSN: 3006-4384

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higher total enrollments, meaning that existing classrooms are being packed far beyond their capacity. Finally, the Proximity to the Town Center was also a significant negative predictor (Beta = -0.31, p = 0.035), indicating that the farther a student lives from the school, the less likely they are to enroll, likely due to transportation barriers and the associated costs. In essence, Muko Primary School's high population level is characterized by extreme congestion within limited physical infrastructure, driven by a strategy of accommodating all children at the expense of teacher attention and classroom comfort.

Table 2: Factors Influencing Students' Progress at Muko Primary School

Variable	Unstandardized Coefficient (B)	Standard Error	Standardized Coefficient (Beta)	t-value	p-value
(Constant)	75.80	5.20		14.58	<0.001
Pupil-Teacher Ratio	-1.85	0.38	-0.62	-4.87	0.001
Textbook-to-Student Ratio	15.30	4.10	0.45	3.73	0.009
Average Teacher Experience (yrs)	0.95	0.35	0.28	2.71	0.030
R-squared: 0.65					
Adjusted R-squared: 0.60					
F-statistic: 12.89 (p < 0.001)					

Source: Primary Data, 2024

The regression model for students' progress was statistically significant (F-statistic = 12.89, p < 0.001) and accounted for 65% of the variance in the composite progress score, pointing to several critical determinants of academic success at Muko Primary School. The most powerful predictor was, again, the Pupil-Teacher Ratio, but this time it exhibited a strong and significant negative relationship with progress (Beta = -0.62, p = 0.001). This means that for every additional student added to a teacher's average class size, the overall student progress score decreases by 1.85 points, underscoring the detrimental impact of overcrowding on the quality of teaching and learning. Conversely, the Textbook-to-Student Ratio showed a significant positive relationship (Beta = 0.45, p = 0.009), indicating that improved access to core learning materials is a major facilitator of academic achievement. A one-unit increase in the textbook ratio corresponded to a 15.3-point increase in the progress score, highlighting the fundamental importance of basic resources. Furthermore, Average Teacher Experience was a positive and significant predictor (Beta = 0.28, p = 0.030), suggesting that each additional year of teacher experience contributes nearly a full point to the progress score, likely due to more seasoned educators possessing better pedagogical skills and classroom management techniques. Collectively, these results establish that the level of students' progress at Muko Primary School is critically

Received: 16.10.2025 **Accepted: 20.10.2025** **Published on: 30.10.2025**

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ISSN: 3006-4384

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compromised by high pupil-teacher ratios but can be positively influenced by the provision of essential learning materials and the retention of experienced teaching staff.

Table 3: Relationship Between School Population and Students' Progress

Variable	Unstandardized Coefficient (B)	Standard Error	Standardized Coefficient (Beta)	t-value	p-value
(Constant)	82.15	6.50		12.64	<0.001
Total School Population	-0.18	0.05	-0.41	-3.60	0.012
Pupil-Teacher Ratio	-1.45	0.42	-0.49	-3.45	0.015
Classroom Density (students/sq. m)	-2.10	0.75	-0.33	-2.80	0.032
R-squared: 0.69					
Adjusted R-squared: 0.64					
F-statistic: 14.12 ($p < 0.001$)					

Source: Primary Data, 2024

The final regression model, designed to directly examine the relationship between school population and students' progress, was highly significant (F-statistic = 14.12, $p < 0.001$) and explained 69% of the variance in academic progress. This model provides the most direct evidence for the study's core hypothesis, revealing a significant and negative relationship between school population metrics and student achievement. Specifically, the Total School Population itself was a significant negative predictor (Beta = -0.41, $p = 0.012$), indicating that as the absolute number of students in the school increases, the overall academic progress significantly declines. This direct relationship is mediated and intensified by two key population-driven factors. The Pupil-Teacher Ratio remained a strong, independent negative influence (Beta = -0.49, $p = 0.015$), confirming that the dilution of teacher attention is a primary mechanism through which large populations harm learning. Furthermore, Classroom Density emerged as a significant negative predictor (Beta = -0.33, $p = 0.032$), demonstrating that the physical overcrowding of students into limited space a direct consequence of high population further erodes academic performance, likely due to a disruptive learning environment, limited mobility, and increased health risks. The interpretation is clear: at Muko Primary School, there is a demonstrably negative and statistically significant relationship between school population and students' progress.

Conclusions

The study conclusively determined that the school population at Muko Primary School is at a critically high and unsustainable level. This is not merely a function of high enrollment numbers but is characterized by severe systemic congestion. The high population is intrinsically linked to a dangerously high Pupil-Teacher Ratio, which was identified as the strongest positive driver of total enrollment. This indicates a deliberate, though detrimental, strategy of accommodating more children by overburdening existing teachers rather than through proportional staff expansion.

Received: 16.10.2025 **Accepted: 20.10.2025** **Published on: 30.10.2025**

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ISSN: 3006-4384
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Furthermore, the population level is exacerbated by a critical shortage of physical infrastructure, as evidenced by the significant negative relationship with the Number of Classrooms. This paradoxical finding that fewer classrooms are associated with higher total enrollment confirms that classrooms are being packed far beyond their intended capacity. The population is also spatially constrained, with Proximity to School being a significant factor, limiting access for children in farther villages and concentrating the enrollment burden within a central zone. In essence, the school operates at a level of population that has overwhelmed its human and physical resource base.

The study concluded that the level of students' academic progress at Muko Primary School was critically low and fundamentally compromised by resource constraints. The analysis revealed that progress is not a random outcome but is systematically eroded by specific, measurable factors. The most devastating influence is the Pupil-Teacher Ratio, which demonstrated a powerful negative impact on academic achievement. This finding confirms that in overcrowded classrooms, teachers are unable to provide individualized attention, effectively manage classrooms, or implement participatory pedagogical methods, leading to poor learning outcomes. Conversely, progress was positively and significantly influenced by the availability of basic learning resources, specifically the Textbook-to-Student Ratio. This underscores that the chronic lack of instructional materials, a direct consequence of stretching limited supplies across a large population, starves students of the fundamental tools needed for learning. The positive contribution of Teacher Experience highlights that even in difficult conditions, veteran educators can make a difference, yet the overall progress remains low because these experienced teachers are stretched too thin. Therefore, the prevailing level of student progress is one of systemic underachievement, directly tied to the poor learning conditions.

The study provided a conclusive evidence of a statistically significant and negative relationship between school population and students' progress at Muko Primary School. This central finding confirms the core hypothesis that the large school population is a major determinant of poor academic performance. The relationship is not just a direct one; it is critically mediated through the degrading effects of overcrowding. The analysis demonstrates that an increase in the Total School Population directly predicts a decrease in academic scores. This relationship is powerfully channeled through two key mechanisms: the Pupil-Teacher Ratio and Classroom Density. As more students are enrolled, the teacher's attention is diluted, and students are physically crammed into inadequate space, creating an environment detrimental to learning. The high population strains resources, leading to a shortage of textbooks and excessive physical congestion, which in turn stifles pedagogical effectiveness and student engagement.

Recommendations

At the national and district level, the Ministry of Education and Sports and the Kisoro District Local Government must initiate a targeted resource infusion. The most critical intervention is the immediate recruitment and deployment of additional qualified teachers to Muko Primary School. The study has irrefutably identified the pupil-teacher ratio as

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ISSN: 3006-4384
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the primary mechanism through which overcrowding erodes educational quality; addressing this is non-negotiable. This should be part of a broader, equitable teacher distribution policy for the district, potentially incorporating financial or professional development incentives to attract and retain qualified educators in rural settings. Concurrently, accelerated infrastructure development is essential. This entails the construction of new, permanent classrooms and the renovation of dilapidated structures to directly combat the physical congestion measured by classroom density. This capital investment must be complemented by a systematic and reliable provision of learning materials. The government should ensure a specific, ring-fenced grant for textbooks calculated to achieve a minimum 1:1 ratio for core subjects, as the study confirmed the availability of such materials is a significant positive predictor of student progress. Furthermore, the District Education Office, in collaboration with School Management Committees, must develop and enforce realistic school capacity guidelines. This involves sensitizing communities about the detrimental effects of overcrowding and strategically managing student enrollment to direct pupils to less congested schools within the catchment area, thereby ensuring that population growth is managed sustainably.

The School Management Committee and administration of Muko Primary School itself must exercise agency by implementing robust internal efficiency measures. As an immediate and practical short-term strategy to alleviate classroom congestion, the school should seriously consider implementing a double-shift system. While not an ideal long-term solution, this approach would instantly halve the number of students in each classroom at any given time, allowing for more effective teacher-pupil interaction and better utilization of existing physical infrastructure. The administration must also optimize its human resources through strategic teacher timetabling, ensuring that the most experienced teachers are deployed where they are most needed, particularly for foundational literacy and numeracy skills in lower primary and critical examination classes in upper primary. Beyond internal management, the School Management Committee must spearhead a renewed community mobilization effort. This involves organizing community-driven projects where parents contribute local materials, such as bricks and sand, for classroom construction, thereby demonstrating local ownership and leveraging it to secure government support. The committee should also hold regular sensitization meetings to transparently share the study's findings with parents, building a shared understanding of how overcrowding directly harms their children's learning and fostering a coalition for change that can advocate effectively for better services.

Parents and the wider community have a pivotal role to play in this transformation. They must evolve from being passive recipients of a strained service to becoming active advocates and partners in educational quality. This can be operationalized through formal petitions to district leadership, channeled via local councilors, demanding the necessary teachers and infrastructure as a right for their children. While the government provides free tuition, parents have a complementary responsibility to ensure their children arrive at school prepared to learn. This means providing

Received: 16.10.2025 **Accepted: 20.10.2025** **Published on: 30.10.2025**

basic scholastic materials like pens and exercise books, reinforcing the importance of regular attendance and completion of homework, and actively participating in school governance through the Parent-Teacher Association. Finally, development partners and non-governmental organizations operating in Kisoro District should use this evidence-based study to design and deliver targeted interventions. Their support could be instrumental in bridging specific gaps, such as funding the construction of model classrooms or libraries, sponsoring ongoing professional development for teachers focused on pedagogies for large classes, or providing scholarships for high-performing, economically disadvantaged pupils to reduce dropout rates. In essence, breaking the cycle at Muko Primary requires a synchronized effort where the government leads with policy and resources, the school innovates in management and community engagement, and parents and partners provide the essential advocacy and support to create a learning environment where every child can truly progress.

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Received: 16.10.2025 **Accepted: 20.10.2025** **Published on: 30.10.2025**

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Received: 16.10.2025 **Accepted: 20.10.2025** **Published on: 30.10.2025**